The Ascent From Darkness:
An American-Japanese Boy Growing Up in Japan

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SENIOR HONORS THESIS
Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Program
North Central College

May 26, 2011

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Foreword

Freshman year when I first started working on this project, it was going to be about a boy who moved to Japan with his father and had to adjust to the language and culture, working through his culture shock. I was going to base it on my own experiences Sophomore year when I went on the China/Japan trip. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), I experienced absolutely no culture shock, so there went that idea.

However, while I was abroad, I met a student named Naoto. I remember when I first met him, I thought that he was another exchange student. I felt so bad when I found out that he was British-Japanese. I felt even worse when I discovered that other Japanese made the same mistake that I had. I was with Naoto and another American friend one night, waiting for a train back to Kyoto from Osaka, and we were speaking in English because our other friend was just learning Japanese. An adorable old lady came up to us and told us that she had taught herself English and would like to practice. We spoke for a short while, and she asked us if we were all Americans. Naoto laughed and said “yes.” It never seemed to bother him, being mistaken for an outsider, but I’m sure it must have been difficult at times. Naoto was my inspiration for my main character, Akira.

When I returned to America, I immediately began my research and story outline. It was a lot less complex back then. The story was supposed to illustrate the difficulties of being different in a culture that is so uniform while showing off different cultural and linguistic aspects. I felt sorry for poor, friendless Akira, so I invented Tachibana, the spoiled little rich punk, to keep him company. Tachibana kind of hijacked the plot, and the simple story of boy meets girl, gains confidence, and goes to America turned into a story exploring Japanese interpersonal relationships, friendships, family dynamics, educational system, social pressure, and views on homosexuality. Something that was supposed to be 150 pages tops turned into a whopping 280 page text, affectionately called “The Little Monster.”

It was stressful, and sometimes I wanted to throw things indiscriminately about the room, but I really did enjoy this project. I learned a great deal from it, and I know my senior year will be easier now that I have this completed early. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Brodhead and Matsubara-Sensei for seeing this thing through with me from beginning to end. I also appreciate Professor Hamalis’s patience and encouragement. Thanks also go out to Mary Caron for reading it before my advisers, assuring me that it didn’t suck, always being excited for the next chapter, motivating me to keep going, and inspiring me to create the character Tsubasa, among other things. I am obligated to thank my parents for bringing me into the world and paying to let me travel it. I thank them for supporting me and accepting me for who I am, as strange as I may be. I also thank my brother Jordan who is always on my side unless I’m making the internet lag. And, of course, finally, I’d like to thank all of my Japanese friends for their help, especially Naoto Nishitani and Toshiaki (Shadow) Kagei. Without everyone’s help and support, I would have driven myself nuts by now. You have my gratitude.

-Kara Hoover
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The Ascent From Darkness:
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Part I:
Chapter One: The Beginning (Hajime)

I met Tachibana on the day I had planned to be the last of my life. It was the end of February just a few days before junior high entrance exams, and I was at my limit. I had studied for hours without end for the past few years. I studied with an open textbook during my walk to and from school every day, and I did my homework as soon as I got home. Then I cracked open the entrance exam practice books and studied until dinner. After dinner I went to cram school for two hours, only to return home exhausted at nine-thirty. I immediately went to bed only to wake up at seven to perform the same ridiculous dance all over again.

I had lived that way for years as most other children did, going to extremes to obtain good grades. Unfortunately, while this method seemed to work for the majority, all of my hard work seemed to go to waste. I was ranked only number 223 out of 400 in my class. No matter how hard the information was drilled into me, my mind always went blank during tests and mock exams. I was cursed with test anxiety in a country where exams controlled one’s fate.

It didn’t matter that I was a good person. So what if I tried hard? No one cares that you have a great personality if you don’t score well on exams. That’s what my grandmother always told me whenever I dared to argue with her about my less than satisfactory scores. Sadly, the rest of Japan agreed with her.

I was trapped. In less than seventy-two hours I would walk into that classroom with its unforgiving white walls. I would sit in that uncomfortable desk and fiddle with my pencils until the proctor set down the dreaded Herculean task. And then my mind would conveniently find itself empty of all of the knowledge it had possessed minutes before. I would fail miserably and be doomed to start some sort of career training program or to go to a special school for students

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1 The Japanese school year begins in April and goes until March with about ten weeks of vacations throughout every year. School entrance exams are taken by seniors the last few weeks of February and the first few weeks in March.
2 The Japanese go to elementary school until sixth grade. Seventh through ninth grade is junior high, and tenth through twelfth grade is high school.
3 The Japanese take grueling entrance exams to enter junior high, high school, and university. The exams grill students on sheer memorization of large quantities of information, testing knowledge of English, Japanese, and general subjects like history, math, and science.
4 Some students attend extra lessons in the evenings at cram schools in order to review and prepare for exams.
no other schools would take. My mother would be disappointed, and, worst of all, my grandmother would disown me.

All of this was running through my head as I gazed over the edge of the school’s roof. Why even bother taking the test? My life was over anyway. There was no point in going on. What was I living for? Shame when the scores were posted. Guilt for not studying harder and remembering what I had learned. Stress from the lousy job I would most certainly hate if I ever managed to secure employment. It was hopeless, and there was nothing to look forward to.

I slipped off my shoes, setting them down next to the fence around the edge of the rooftop. I carefully straightened them a second time and then a third before sliding a note to my mother into the right shoe. I took a deep breath and swung my left leg over the fence. I paused to take another deep inhale before my right leg followed the left. I held on to the metal coils as I turned and took one last look at the ground four stories below me.

The frigid wind blew softly, ruffling my mocha-colored locks. It sent a chill through my body, and then, strangely, I felt at peace. This was it. I was done. No more worries. No more stress. No more grandma always nagging and chastising. No more bullying and teasing because of my half-blood heritage. Only calm and quiet. I closed my eyes, and my fingers slowly began to uncurl, letting go of my lifeline.

“Do you mind?” a young, male voice called out to me, sounding rather miffed.

I turned slowly to see a boy about my age with fair skin and hair dyed orange. His uniform was a bit disheveled, and he held a lit cigarette in his left hand.

He rolled his eyes and slowly approached me. “Geez, can’t a guy smoke in peace? Why do you think I went to the trouble of coming up to the roof anyway? It wasn’t so that I could call the police and give my statement regarding your death. If you’re going to jump, do it somewhere else like a bridge or someplace. Now, get down from there. What are you trying to do? Traumatize me?”

I blinked. “S-s-sorry. I apologize for inconveniencing you.” I hastily climbed back over the fence and put my shoes back on. I bowed from the waist and begged for forgiveness. “I truly am sorry. Please forgive me.”

“God, are you old fashioned. We’re the same age; why are you acting so polite?”

5 Some Japanese schools have flat roofs that are accessible, even though the door is often locked. Students sometimes go up to the roof to eat lunch, smoke, skip class, confess their love to a prospective boyfriend/girlfriend, or commit suicide (in extreme cases).

6 After exams are taken, students are ranked by their scores. It is common for ranks and scores to be posted for all to see after midterms and exams.
strange boy laughed, herding me farther away from the edge. “You’re Kimura from the moon class, aren’t you? What’s your first name?”

“My given name is Akira,” I responded timidly, very confused. “I’m sorry. Do I know you? We’re not in the same class, are we?”

“Nah.” He gave another light, hearty laugh. “I’m in the star group. Tachibana Hajime. Yoroshiku, I guess. I only know you because you kind of stand out. No offense. Are you very sensitive about it?”

He was referring to the fact that I was only half Japanese, since my mother was American. Unfortunately it was easy to tell since I had light hair and one blue eye. I stuck out like a nail that needed to be hammered down in homogenous Japan where dark hair and dark eyes were the norm.


“Hey, how’s about I take you out for sushi? There’s a great kaiten place at Kyoto Station. Or, if you’d rather, they have a food court on—I think—the tenth floor that we could check out. They’ve got some noodle places, a takoyaki stand, and a Log Kit. I’ve got a friend who works at Log Kit, so I get free fries every now and then. What do you think? I’ll buy,” my new acquaintance offered jovially, tugging me towards the door leading to the stairwell.

“I’m…not sure.” I resisted weakly as he pulled me along like a rag doll. “I should probably get home. My grandmother will kill me if I’m late, and my mother will worry.”

The young hooligan paused and smirked at me. “It didn’t look to me like you were planning on going home anytime soon. The way I see it, if you go with me, you’ll get home a lot sooner than you would have if I’d let you be. Don’t you think?”

I blinked. This bad influence’s logic made sense. “O-okay.” I gulped and consented to be led along.

We walked in relative silence from our school to Nishiouji Station and then took the train

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7 In Japanese schools, classes are broken up into homerooms that are usually numbered or given a group name.
8 In Japan, the family name comes before the given name, so Tachibana’s first name is Hajime.
9 The full phrase “Douzo yoroshiku onegaishimasu” is used when meeting someone. It carries the sentiments of “I hope we work well together.”, “I’m new, so please take care of me.”, and “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Tachibana uses the short, informal form while Akira replies politely with the whole phrase.
10 There are some sushi restaurants that have conveyor belts that pass by every table. Pieces of sushi are placed on plates (the color or style of the plate indicates the price) and sent around the restaurant for patrons to choose from. Usually the quality of the sushi is lower than at other sushi restaurants because cheaper ingredients are substituted for the more expensive ones. Sushi can cost anywhere from 100-500 yen (roughly $1-5) per piece.
11 Takoyaki are fried balls of dough with small pieces of octopus inside. Usually toppings like cheese, salt, soy sauce, and others are added as well.
to Kyoto Station.

I hated trains. Everyone always stared, but they did it surreptitiously because to stare outright would be rude. They kept up the pretense of reading manga or newspapers, all the while glancing over the tops of the pages to gawk. They sneaked furtive, fleeting peeks when they thought I wasn’t looking. Even if I couldn’t always see the perpetrator, I felt eyes on me at all times whenever I took the train.

To see a non-Japanese was relatively rare, so I was a spectacle because of my uncommon appearance. I was looked upon as a foreigner even though I had lived all of my life in Japan.

Thankfully the train ride was a short one, and we arrived at Kyoto Station within five minutes. The train doors opened, and we walked out onto the platform and up the stairs amid the throng of other commuters.

“So what’ll it be, Akira-kun? Sushi? Noodles? Takoyaki?” My acquaintance chattered brightly as he pulled me merrily behind him. He paused and turned when I didn’t answer. He seemed to find the astonished look on my face amusing, for he began to laugh that airy chuckle of his. “What’s the matter? I can call you ‘Akira-kun,’ can’t I? I am your benefactor after all.”

“S-sure…Tachibana-san.” I blinked. I had just met this strange fellow, and already he was talking to me as if we had been friends for years.

“Just Tachibana is fine.” The rebel shrugged. “I guess you can call me Hajime, if you’d like, though I hate my name. So…sushi, noodles, takoyaki, or Log Kit?”

“Sushi will be fine,” I mumbled. I was not calling him Hajime. Where was this boy’s

12 Log Kit is a fast food chain with items like burgers, fries, and sandwiches.
13 Manga are Japanese comic books. They differ from their American counterpart in that they are read from right to left because of the way Japanese is written (up and down starting from the right and moving left). Manga are also unlike American comics in that they are not just about superheroes. There are all different types of manga featuring stories about everyday life, friendship, love, and adventure. Japanese comics also tend to focus more on relationships and character development than American comics. Additionally, where comic books generally target teenage boys and men into their thirties, there are a wide variety of manga for men and women of all ages from cradle to grave.
14 In Japan, honorifics are added to the end of a person’s name to show respect. Usually only family members or very close friends leave off honorifics. -kun is an honorific for boys or young men used by family and friends. It can also be used by someone older to refer to someone younger. Someone older can also use -kun with a girl’s last name. -chan is another honorific that is more informal. It is usually used between female friends and by older individuals to refer to a younger girl. -chan can also be used with boy’s names as a cutey nickname. -san is the most standard honorific. It can be thought of as the Japanese equivalent of Mr. or Mrs., though it is much more frequently used than Mr. or Mrs./Ms. in English. Classmates, coworkers, acquaintances, and people who have just met refer to each other as -san.
15 Akira is shocked because Tachibana is using his first name and a fairly informal honorific. Tachibana is talking to Akira as if they have good friends and have known each other a long time. It would be more typical for Tachibana to call Akira by his last name with the honorific –kun, though Akira uses –san with Tachibana because he does not have much experience with other children his age and is usually too polite.
sense of social order?

We took a seat at the counter at the kaiten zushi place and poured ourselves some hot tea.

“Get whatever you want since I’m treating,” Tachibana urged when he noticed I was only choosing the one hundred yen\textsuperscript{16} plates. “I’m not hurting for pocket change.” He opened his wallet and flashed three ten thousand yen\textsuperscript{17} bills.

My mouth dropped, and I thought, ‘What did you do? Mug someone?’

“I’m the son of the head of the Tachibana Group,” he explained with an embarrassed grin. “My mom’s the CEO. We make electronics.”

I took a good look at his unkempt attire and dyed hair. This punk was a corporate heir? Knock me over with a feather. “Oh.” I cleared my throat and reached for a five hundred yen\textsuperscript{18} plate. “My mother teaches English.”

“Cool.” He smiled a dorky little grin that said he actually did think my mom’s job was cool. “Maybe I can come over some time and she can help me. I suck at English, but I really need to do well since the company has branches in America. What’s your dad do? Mine helps manage the company.”

I looked down at the tamago zushi\textsuperscript{19} on my plate. “He was a salaryman\textsuperscript{20} at a car company. He worked in America for a while before I was born. That’s how he met my mom. I don’t remember him much…because he died in an accident when I was three.”

“Sorry,” my exuberant companion quietly mumbled, for once losing his bounce.

I shrugged. “You didn’t know. It doesn’t bother me really. I don’t even remember the guy, so it’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Somehow this blithe young man was full of insight. “It must have impacted you in some way, his absence. There must be times when it bothers you not to have what everyone always takes for granted. But, we don’t have to talk about this now, if you don’t want to.”

I nodded and grabbed a plate with a nice piece of otoro maki\textsuperscript{21} on it.

It was awkwardly quiet as we sat there eating our respective sushi and listening to the soft murmur of the other customers against the backdrop of clinking plates being stacked one on top

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\textsuperscript{16} Roughly one US dollar.

\textsuperscript{17} About three hundred fifty dollars.

\textsuperscript{18} Around six dollars.

\textsuperscript{19} A kind of sushi with a piece of very sweet fried egg on a bed of rice tied together with a piece of dried seaweed.

\textsuperscript{20} A salaryman is a Japanese businessman. They generally work long hours and have very stressful jobs.

\textsuperscript{21} Otoro is fatty tuna, and maki is a sushi roll. In other words, a sushi roll filled with fatty tuna.
of the last as innumerable pieces of sushi were consumed.

“Akira-kun, I wanted to ask you,” Tachibana finally broke the silence, “why were you going to jump?”

I sighed and set down my chopsticks. “Entrance exams are in a few days, and I have to get into a really good junior high so that I can go to an excellent high school so that I can get into Todai. My grandma wants me to go to Nada Junior High in Kobe so that I’ll automatically be able to go to Nada High. Their students have a fifty-fifty chance of being accepted to Tokyo University, so I just have to get in.” Tears started welling up in the corners of my eyes, so I let them fall quietly.

My dining companion stared open-mouthed at me, a piece of inari zushi halfway from his plate to his mouth. His mahogany eyes were wide as he gaped. “Dude. Nada? That all-boys prep school? They only accept two hundred kids a year, and the entrance exam is said to be pure evil. And then you want to get into Todai? It’s impossible! You’d have to be a super brain to even do just okay on that test! People kill themselves from the sheer stress that comes from studying for those exams!” He paused as though something had occurred to him. “Oh. Sorry. That’s probably a sore subject, isn’t it?”

I was silent as I stared down at my empty stack of plates. I wasn’t hungry anymore. My thoughts again began to revolve around my upcoming trial and execution.

“I guess you’re not a super brain, then, are you?” Tachibana chuckled uncomfortably.

“No. I’m not,” I admitted, thoroughly disheartened. “My grades and class rank are only mediocre. I really have to do well on the exam this week for them to even consider me. Unfortunately I have test anxiety. I’m so afraid of forgetting everything and failing that I forget everything and fail every single time. And so I’m doomed.” I moaned in despair and let my face rest in the palms of my hands. “I’m never going to get into Nada, and my grandma’s going to be furious with me.”

“Hey, Akira-kun?” Tachibana’s cheerful voice drew me from my depressing spiral of thoughts. “You don’t really want to go to Nada, do you?”

“Of course I do!” I almost shouted at him. Hadn’t he been listening? The entire rest of my

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22 Todai is short for Tokyo Daigaku (Tokyo University). It is one of the top universities in Japan with one of the hardest entrance exams. A degree from Todai almost always assures success. A large number of company presidents and government officials are graduates of Tokyo University.

23 Kobe is a port city located south of Kyoto and west of Osaka. It’s known for its atmosphere and excellent beef.


25 Inari is the name of the god of the harvest, and her messengers are fox spirits. Foxes are said to love inari zushi.
life depended on my getting into Nada. “If I don’t, my grandmother will disown me!”

“Then your grandma should take the test for you if she wants you to go there so badly.” My new friend grabbed a plate of *ebi zushi* and set it down before me. “Tell me. Is there any reason other than having a better shot at Todai why you want to get into Nada so bad?”

“What other reasons are there?” I found myself staring blankly into his reddish-brown eyes.

“Uh…well…let me think.” He rolled those henna eyes and laughed. “You could pick a school that’s close or affordable. You could also choose a school because a friend’s going or someone famous graduated from there. There are also sports and culture clubs to think about. Heck, you could just like the campus, or the teachers could be really great. Akira-kun, there’s a lot more than reputation to think about when deciding on a school. So…why do you want to go to Nada?”

I glared down at the shrimp on my plate. “I don’t.” I stuffed the whole thing into my mouth and reached for another *tamago zushi* plate. “I’m sick of jumping through hoops backwards to please that woman! I’m fed up with studying hours on end! I just want to go to a regular school and join a club like normal kids. I hate having to go to cram school all the time instead of hanging out with friends that I don’t even have!”

I calmed down a little after that and began to chuckle sadly. “That’s how I really feel, but I could never bring myself to disobey my grandma or even just tell her how unhappy I am. I’m not a very strong person.”

Tachibana bit his lip in contemplation for a solid minute before turning back to me. “You know, you could always go to a good school that’s a lot easier to get into. Nada isn’t your only option for a promising future.”

“Do you have any prestigious schools with easy entrance exams in mind? Because I can’t think of any.” Another pathetic sigh escaped my lips.

“Seiya Academy,” he quickly responded.

“That’s a private school.” I shook my head slowly, picking up my now cool cup of tea. “I couldn’t afford to go there, and don’t you have to have a strong letter of recommendation?”

“My aunt is on the board.” The corporate heir/punk sniggered. “I’d have to beg, but I’m sure she could manage something for a buddy of mine. As for the money, you could get a scholarship.”

cooked rice and sometimes vegetables in a pouch of fried tofu.
“I can’t get a scholarship.” I gave an ironic snort and sipped my cold tea.

“Don’t you have any talents?” He returned my volley.

I shook my head.

“Is there anything you’re particularly good at?”

“Nope.” It was hopeless, and I knew it.

“There must be at least one subject in school that you do well in.” Tachibana continued his relentless efforts to find something that didn’t exist.

I was about to deny him a third time when I paused. “English,” I whispered. “I can speak English. I can read and write too. I’m pretty fluent since I learned it right alongside Japanese growing up.”

My new friend smirked toothily. “There’s definitely a scholarship for that. Could you tutor?”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“Give me a minute then.” He pulled out his cell phone, laden with at least ten different straps27 from various anime and assorted temples. “Hey, Auntie Sonoko. It’s me, Hajime. How are you doing? …I’m glad to hear that. I’m well, thank you. I actually have a bit of a favor I’d like to ask you, if it’s okay, that is. …You see, I have this friend with terrible test anxiety even though he’s pretty bright. He studies all the time and is fluent in English and Japanese. Do you think you could write a letter of recommendation for him? I could give you more details later and you can meet him sometime, if you want. I’m sorry to ask this of you; would it be too much trouble? …No? …Really? You’re the greatest, Auntie Sonoko! Oh, one more thing I almost forgot. Since his dad died when he was young, he’s only got his mom, so money’s a little tight for them. You don’t think he could get a scholarship or something, do you? Maybe something having to do with tutoring English? …Really? …You’re amazing, Auntie Sonoko! I knew I could count on you. Thank you so very much. …Okay. …Tell Uncle Makoto I say hi. …All right. …Bye!

“And scene28.” The Tachibana Group’s heir smirked like a cat with a canary in its mouth.

“All you have to do is take the exam and you’re in.”

I blinked. “Really?”

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26 A piece of shrimp on a bed of rice.

27 Cell phone straps are very popular in Asia, especially in Japan. People often attach a lot of different straps featuring anything from anime characters or animals to gem stones and miniature inanimate objects.

28 An expression used by theatre people to signify the end of a dramatic monologue.
“Yeah.” My savior chortled at the flummoxed look on my face. “And the best part is that Seiya’s got a nice elevator system\(^{29}\), so you don’t have to stress out over high school entrance exams since you’ll already be automatically eligible to go to Seiya Academy’s High School.”

I suddenly felt a wave of relief wash over me. Everything was taken care of. No more stress. No more worries. All I could do was laugh, and I laughed so hard that I began to cry tears of absolute joy. “Thank you,” I wept, feeling infinitely grateful.

“Don’t mention it.” My benefactor shrugged indifferently. “I’m glad I could help.”

After we finished our meal and Tachibana paid, we took a train back to Nishiouji Station. As we parted ways at the top of the stairs of the overhead walkway, I bowed deeply to him in gratitude. “Thank you again, Tachibana-san. You have no idea how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me. I swear to repay your kindness in the future.”

“Again with the bowing and the formality.” My companion chuckled as he fondly rolled his umber orbs. “You can drop the *keigo* and the humble expressions\(^{30}\), you know. You don’t even have to speak politely. Just use plain form\(^{31}\) for crying out loud, geez.”

“Maybe…eventually, Tachibana…-san.” I grinned nervously and bowed again.

He shook his head and waved over his shoulder as he turned. “Check ya later, Akira-kun.”

“Good night, Tachibana-san.” I smiled brightly as I walked, passing the bookstore and the suit shop. I took a right across the street from the cleaners and crossed the bridge. I continued walking past the clinic and a neat row of vending machines\(^{32}\). I looked both ways before crossing the street and came to a stop in front of my canary yellow house.

I unlocked the door and put my shoes in the closet, sliding my feet into my waiting

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\(^{29}\) Schools with elevator systems usually have both a high school and a junior high or a high school and a college (sometimes they have all three, and occasionally there is a kindergarten and an elementary school as well). Once a student is accepted into one, they are automatically eligible to attend the next level without having to go through entrance exams once more.

\(^{30}\) *Keigo* is super-polite honorific language used in Japanese when speaking to or about someone who should be shown respect. It is often used when speaking with professors or one’s boss. It is also used with people higher in the social hierarchy than oneself and people one does not know well. Humble expressions and extra-modest language are, in turn, used when talking about oneself or one’s own actions in order to be polite and show respect to the person one is talking to.

\(^{31}\) In Japanese, verbs can either be conjugated in long form or plain form (also known as short form). Plain form is used in several grammatical constructions as well as in casual conversations. Short form is often only used with good friends or family members to show intimacy, but it can be used with children too.

\(^{32}\) Vending machines are everywhere in Japan, and one can buy a wide variety of things from them. Most vending machines sell drink—both hot and cold—, but one can also buy food (again, hot and cold), cigarettes, and alcohol from them. It is even said that there is a vending machine in Tokyo that sells underwear. Nearly everything can be
slippers. “Tadaima!” I called as I strode confidently down the hallway and into the small, yet cozy, kitchen/dining room.

“Welcome home, honey,” my mother replied in English from her post at the stove. She was preparing a Japanese style meal. “Did you have a good day? You seem…happy.”

I smiled and began setting the table before tentatively replying in English. “I made a friend.”

“Why are you so late?” My grandmother, a very small but powerful matriarch, barked in her usual, severe tone. She was an extremely traditional woman with a stern expression. She refused to adapt to modern times, and so she always dressed in a kimono. Today she was wearing subdued blue and green layers for winter. Her hair was tied tightly in her signature bun. I sometimes mused that the hair in the bun was pulled too taut and that that was the reason she was always so cross.

I bowed shallowly, lowering my head out of respect, and returned to speaking in my much-too-polite Japanese. “Tadaima, Obaasan. You look well today. Please excuse my tardiness even though there is no excuse.” I feared her wrath above all else.

She snorted lightly and took her seat at the table. “Okaerinasai.”

My mother, Carol, set the remainder of the dishes down before joining us.

Tonight we were having tempura shrimp and vegetables, white rice, miso soup, and Beijing cucumbers.

My grandmother complained throughout the entire meal. The vegetables had been fried too long, and the miso was too watery. The rice was too salty—the rice was always too salty because stupid Americans always thought that they needed to add salt—and why in heaven’s name would my mother serve Beijing cucumbers during a traditional Japanese meal? “Are you found in Japanese vending machines.

33 The Japanese always take off their shoes when entering a house. The outdoors shoes are stored in a cabinet or on a shelf by the door. Indoors slippers are kept just inside so that they are easily accessible. Families often keep a few extra pairs for guests.

34 Tadaima literally means “just now”. It is used whenever a person returns to their house or home base. The stock phrase uttered by people already at home is okaerinasai, which means “welcome home”.

35 A traditional Japanese meal consists of a lot of small dishes. White rice is the main component, and there is usually a soup of some kind. There is a dish of fish, meat, or beans for protein and, typically, a vegetable dish. This is the most basic format, and other small dishes are usually served as well.

36 Literally “grandmother”, but it can also be used to respectfully refer to older women.

37 Many types of seafood, meat, and vegetables are fried in this light batter.

38 Miso soup is made of soybean paste and dashi stock. Other ingredients such as green onions, tofu, and seaweed are usually added as well.

39 Sliced long-ways and marinated in a semi-spicy vinaigrette, Beijing cucumbers are a very popular snack in China.
stupid?! Where is your sense of aesthetics? You Americans have no sense of taste!”

Mom remained deaf to Grandma Ayame’s high-pitched, rapid string of insults. Carol Kimura smiled and enjoyed her meal in peace. After fourteen years, she had learned to tune out her mother-in-law’s complaints. It also helped that my mom didn’t always understand Japanese when it was spoken at lightning speed. I had to wonder how much of what my grandmother said my mother understood.

I understood it all, though, and it pained me. I felt my ears burn with shame. When I was little I remember wishing with all my heart, “Please, make my mom and me Japanese so that grandma will accept us.”

“She’s raving about my cooking again, isn’t she?” My young mother turned to me and laughed with an earnest smile. She was a strong woman.

“She doesn’t like it when we speak in English,” I whispered nervously, praying to whatever higher being that might have been listening. “Please don’t let her yell at me. Don’t let her get angry.”

Thankfully, when my mother opened her mouth, out came Japanese with a pretty Tokyo accent. “Akira was telling me that he made a friend today. Were you out with your new friend, Akira? Is that why you were so late coming home?”

I sighed in relief. I had my chance to tell them about my plans for school. “Yes. We met at school today. He’s from a different class, but we went for a snack at Kyoto Station together.”

“And what kind of hooligan have you befriended?” Grandma Ayame snapped, hitting the nail on the head. “You don’t have time for friends, you stupid boy. You should be home studying. How do you expect to get into Nada if you slack off all the time?”

“Mother, Akira works very hard every day,” the rebellious daughter-in-law cut in in her soft, flowery Japanese. “I think that it’s not a bad idea if he goes out with friends sometimes.”

“That is a stupid American idea. It has no place here in Japan,” the strict dictator of the house decreed. “If he wants to follow silly foreigner logic, he can go to America and never return. He doesn’t belong here in the first place. My son never should have—”

“—His name is Tachibana Hajime.” I ignored my grandmother’s harsh words and cut into the conversation. It was a bold move. I was never bold, so I had everyone’s attention as they both stared at me, shocked. “He’s the heir to the Tachibana Group, and he told me that he’s going to be attending Seiya Academy. His aunt is on the board, and she’s going to write a strong letter of recommendation for me. If I choose to go there, I will also receive a large scholarship to pay for the cost. If you would allow me, I would like to request permission to attend Seiya.”
“That sounds great, Akira!” my mom exploded in a great fit of English and excitement. I turned to my grandmother for the final say.

She glared pensively at me as she weighed the advantages that could be gained through a friendship with a corporate heir. “Many wealthy children attend this school, right? And the teachers are very good, yes?”

“Yes, Obaasan.” I gulped, holding my breath for her reply.

She nodded. “I suppose Seiya Academy will be satisfactory. It would have been expensive to ship you off to Kobe for school if you went to Nada. Perhaps this is better.”

I sighed softly in relief, but not loud enough for her to hear me. A lead weight had been lifted off my shoulders. My shackles had been unlocked. I was free.

“Akira,” my jailor barked.

I was greatly confused since my grandmother sounded angry.

“You are running late. Hurry up and eat so that you can go to cram school. You’re such an idiot that you’ll never pass the exam to Seiya unless you study.”

I nodded and started shoveling food into my mouth. It seemed that my torment was not yet over, but at least it was a good day to be alive.

That Saturday, I took the train to Kyoto Station and walked to Seiya Academy. I gulped as I looked up at the imposing institution that loomed in front of me.

There was a wall of dark, orangey-red bricks around the grounds, broken only by the four gates—one in each cardinal direction. They were made of thick, black wrought iron bars. The plaque to the right side of the main gate bore the appellation of the establishment in large black characters.

I entered and stared at the giant, manicured topiary statues and foliage lining the sides of the walkways. I was out of my element.

The campus was divided into a high school on the east side and a junior high on the west. If cut right down the middle, the school grounds would be completely symmetrical. Both the junior high and the high school looked exactly the same, with three-story high main buildings and little wings off to the side, housing the gym, storage, club rooms, and assorted specialized classrooms. The buildings made a peninsula out of the sports field in the middle of the individual campuses, surrounding the large dirt rectangle on three of its four sides.

I made my way to the main building of the junior high campus and found my assigned classroom. I took my seat and neatly positioned my pencils and eraser on the desk in front of me.
I fidgeted as I waited for the moment of truth to arrive, readjusting the spacing between my pencils three times.

Five minutes before the exam was scheduled to start, in walked a familiar-looking, orange-haired hooligan. Tachibana took his seat next to me and grinned. “Ohayou⁴⁰, Akira-kun. Fancy running into you here.”

“Ohayou gozaimasu, Tachibana-san.” I nodded politely in place of a bow. “If I may ask, how can you be so calm? You’re taking a test to decide the course of your life, after all.”

The nonchalant fellow shrugged flippantly. “It’s nothing to have a panic attack over. It’s practically in the bag. Taking the test is just a formality.” He then added after observing my stressed state: “For you too. Don’t worry about it; you’re already in.” He smiled at me and winked. “Besides, even if you weren’t, you’ve got this. All you ever do is study, so this will be a breeze for you.”

“But I have test anxiety. I’ll forget how to write my own name as soon as I look at the exam.” I protested weakly.

“There aren’t that many different ways to write ‘Akira,’” he teased.

“I can think of ten.” I sighed.

“Then pick a couple and maybe one of them will be right.” My new friend laughed. “And as far as the test answers go, it doesn’t matter, so you don’t have to be nervous. You could just pick C and still get in, so chill. Like I said, you’ve got this.” He winked and got out his own writing utensils.

I was about to open my mouth to argue, but the proctor called for attention and started handing out the tests.

“Sooo, how do you think you did?” Tachibana shoved me playfully after our day of test-taking was over.

“Not terrible.” I smiled in relief. “I should thank you. What you said before calmed me down quite a bit, so I could actually remember some of the stuff I’ve been studying furiously the past seven years of my life.”

“Man, I bet you aced it, Akira-kun.” My rebellious punk of a friend chuckled his bright, clear laugh. “I shouldn’t’ve encouraged you. We are competing for test ranks after all. You probably wiped the floor with me.”

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⁴⁰ Ohayou (pronounced like “Ohio”, but the final o is elongated) means “good morning”. Tachibana uses the more
“I doubt it.” I found myself able to laugh freely.

“Hey, you got a cell?” He paused at the front gate and pulled out his own phone with many dangling charms. “We should switch digits, if you do. I’d like to hang out more.”

“Grandma says I’m only supposed to use it for emergencies.” I shifted uncomfortably, weighing the pros and the cons. “But, you know, my mom is the one who pays the bills, so grandma really doesn’t have to know.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tachibana urged, popping a piece of gum into his mouth as we exchanged information. “Say, which characters do you use for your name? Kimura is written with ‘tree’ and ‘village,’ right?”

“Yeah. Akira is with the character for ‘bright.’ It’s Tachibana like the citrus fruit, right? And is your first name written like ‘begin’?” I picked out the characters from the pull-up menu in my phone.

“Actually, it’s written with the first character in ‘energetic,’ even though they’re pronounced differently. It means ‘origin.’” I could tell he didn’t like his name from the tone of his voice.

As I was finishing typing in his number, I noticed that Tachibana seemed to be looking at something over my shoulder.

“Hey, do you have some time to hang out now, or do you have to head home?”

“I have a little time.” I blinked. “Why?”

“I want to introduce you to some of my friends.” He waved enthusiastically at the approaching group of people.

There was a girl with long, dark hair down to her shoulder blades. She wore a serious expression and the school uniform from “The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya” complete with orange ribbons.

casual form, and Akira sticks with the longer, more formal greeting.

41 Japanese is written with a mix of traditional Chinese characters, some original Japanese symbols, and two different systems of characters that stand for syllables. The two different syllable systems are called katakana (used mostly for foreign words) and hiragana (used for Japanese words and particles). Kanji are the complex characters taken from traditional Chinese or made up by the Japanese. Kanji are often mixed with hiragana to form nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. Japanese names are also made up of kanji. Since a single kanji can literally have six different readings, it is often very difficult to choose which reading is correct. When telling other people which characters make up their names, the Japanese often say, “It’s written with kara from karate.” for example.

42 “The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya” is a cult classic anime about a girl searching for mysteries and the supernatural. She starts a club to aid her search and unknowingly gathers together an alien, an esper, a time traveler, and an ordinary high school boy who just happened to get sucked into Haruhi’s world. Haruhi always wears her trademark orange ribbons, one on each side of her head.
“The girl is Shihoudani Kasumi. She’s an avid cosplayer\(^{43}\), if you hadn’t noticed,” Tachibana informed me as the pack slowly made their way over to us.

To the right of the Haruhi impersonator was a boy with black hair and a thoughtful grin. He was wearing regular clothes, but he somehow looked extremely similar to the Shihoudani girl. Their eyebrows arched in exactly the same manner.

“The guy next to Kasumi-chan is her younger twin brother, Shihoudani Kazuki. He’s in the chess club at their school. Apparently he’s really good, but I don’t know anything about chess, so I couldn’t tell you.”

There was one more boy with them who looked rather scary. He had his hair bleached blonde, and he was really tan. He glared intensely, eyes in little slits.

“The scary one is Nikaidou Shigeki. He plays soccer. I know he looks frightening, but that’s only because he’s got his game face on. He’s actually a really fun guy once you get to know him.”

I nodded, still extremely intimidated.

“Yo, Tachibana.” The daunting Nikaidou Shigeki grinned like a man-eating shark. His teeth were very white and pointy. He looked like a vampire. “Who’s the foreigner?”

“Hello!” The male Shihoudani twin started speaking to me in broken English. “My name Kazuki. Naisu to meet yu.”

“My name is Kasumi.” The serious-looking girl smiled delicately. She spoke a lot more fluently than her brother, even though her inflection was weird. “Do…you eat sushi?”

“Yes, I do.” I smiled and replied politely in my soft, formal Japanese. “Quite often, actually. My favorite is \textit{ika}^{44} \textit{nigiri} \text{ style}^{45}, though, I like \textit{maki} \text{ rolls too}.”

At this they all gave a start.

“His Japanese is pretty good.” Nikaidou nodded in approval before addressing me. “How long you been studying?”

“Guys!” Tachibana sighed in embarrassment at his friends. “He’s not a foreigner. He’s Japanese just like any of you. This is Kimura Akira. We go to the same school.”

Hearing this revelation, the Shihoudani twins were quite embarrassed, but Nikaidou seemed unaffected.

\(^{43}\) Cosplay (short for costume play) is the act of dressing up as a character from an anime, manga, game, band, etc.

\(^{44}\) \textit{Ika} is squid.

\(^{45}\) \textit{Nigiri} style is the fish on a bed of rice, while \textit{maki} style is the ingredients wrapped inside a roll of seaweed and rice.
“It’s okay.” I blushed as I fended off the twins’ apologies. “I’m quite used to it. I’m only half Japanese, so I get this a lot.”

“A haafu46, huh?” Nikaidou’s black eyes bore holes through me as he stared in open interest. “I’ve never seen one up close before.”

“He’s not an animal,” Tachibana scoffed, pushing his friend away as he stepped protectively in front of me.

“We should all go get burgers! How’s that sound? We could go to the McDonald’s at Kyoto Station.” Kasumi tried to clear the air, tugging her brother’s sleeve to make him follow her lead.

“Yeah!” Kazuki quickly responded to his sister’s cue with much enthusiasm. “Do you like burgers, Kimura-kun?”

“I could go for a milkshake.” I shrugged, looking over at Tachibana to see if it was okay.

“That’s a great idea, Kasumi-chan.” The corporate heir praised the cosplayer’s quick thinking. “What better way to get acquainted than to go devour the flesh of dead animals deep-fried in grease?”

“That’s gross, Hajime-kun.” Kasumi turned on her heel and started dragging her brother behind as she forged the path to McDonald’s.

“She’s a vegetarian,” Tachibana explained with a smirk.

I nodded and began to follow after the others.

“So you’re really Japanese, huh?” The white-haired soccer star fell in step beside me and began an onslaught of questions purely out of curiosity.

“Shigeki!” My protector glared down his insensitive friend. “You’re being rude.”

“It’s all right.” I smiled sheepishly. “I don’t mind. I’m sure he doesn’t mean any harm.”

Tachibana pursed his lips and scrunched up his brow. “If you’re sure.” I could tell he detested the way I was being treated.

I was used to it, though. I was always treated as a foreigner, so I wasn’t particularly uncomfortable answering questions about my heritage and upbringing as we sat together in a booth at McDonald’s.

“So you’ve really lived here all of your life?” Shigeki asked for a third time as he stuffed a Mega Mac47 into his mouth.

“I’ve never left the country.” I shrugged, sipping at my banana milkshake.

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46 Haafu, taken from the English word ‘half’, is the term used for someone who is half Japanese.
“That’s really interesting.” The quirky Kasumi cocked her head to the side as she munched on her sweet corn and side salad. “I’ve never really thought about international marriage before, though it’s getting to be more common nowadays. How did your parents meet?”

“My mom worked as a translator for this company in America that my dad got transferred to. They met through work.” I took a bite of my apple pie.

“I’d like to marry a foreigner,” Tachibana commented through a mouthful of teriyaki burger. “An American model or actress or something. My parents would never let me, though.”

“Yeah.” Kazuki laughed, nearly choking on his Ebi Fillet-O48. “You’ll be stuck sorting through mountains of portfolios, slowly wading through the pictures and resumes49 of every eligible, well-bred, high class young lady in Japan.”

At this, the boy with looks reminiscent of a ganguro50 snorted. “Think of all the miai51 he’ll have to attend! I don’t envy you, Tachibana.”

“They say it’s best to marry a Kyoto girl.” The female Shihoudani interjected. “I’m a Kyoto girl born and raised. You should marry me, Hajime-kun.”

“He’s way out of your league.” The twin brother snickered and was promptly smacked upside the head.

“I would, except I was kind of already planning on marrying Akira,” My hooligan of a benefactor announced in a voice that was completely serious.

I had been sipping slowly at my shake at the time, listening to the amusing discussion. Then I found myself suddenly choking, doing my best not to spit regurgitated, liquefied bananas and ice cream into Kazuki’s face.

My name had lost its honorific. I was now as good as this Tachibana’s own brother, friend from the cradle years, or, maybe in this case, lover. And we were getting married. How nice.

I wasn’t quite sure how my grandmother would react to this news. She could either be thrilled that I was marrying a corporate heir, or she could be disgusted that I was marrying a man. Perhaps there was a third option where she was disgusted, glad to be rid of me, and thrilled

47 Like a Big Mac, but double the size and meat.
48 Shrimp sandwich.
49 For an arranged marriage in Japan, perspective mates are sent a portfolio containing a picture and a resume consisting of things like age, height, occupation, and an extremely detailed family background.
50 Ganguro is a type of fashion in Japan. Girls tan their skin and dye their hair white or orange. They wear a lot of really flashy clothes and makeup.
51 A miai is a marriage interview. It is an arranged meeting between potential mates so that the parents and couple can meet and get to know one another.
that my husband was rich. I was betting on door number three.

I then noticed that the others were staring at me. I blinked and looked down, shrinking into a tiny little Akira ball. I hated being stared at.

“I’m joking.” The ringleader laughed, trying to encourage the others to do so as well. “It’s a joke.”

“Oh!” Kasumi giggled awkwardly, obviously faking it. “You just sounded so serious.”

The other two offered weak chuckles and forced grins.

“So, is Seiya Academy your first choice school?” I broke the uncomfortable silence, stealing one of my punk companion’s fries.

“My parents want me to go. I’m getting a scholarship for soccer, and they have a pretty good team.” Nikaidou shrugged, slipping back into his easy-going mood.

“They have a great chess team.” The male Shihoudani remarked, quickly jumping into the conversation. “I’m not getting a scholarship or anything, but I really wanted a school with good chess opportunities.”

“I’m not particular.” Kasumi tilted her head to the side like a puppy as she considered: which to eat first? The last bite of sweet corn or the last bite of side salad? “I’ll go where Kazuki goes. It’ll be easier to go to school and walk home together that way. Anywhere is fine.”

“It won’t be fine when I have a girlfriend to walk home with.” The younger twin pouted, sticking out his bottom lip like a foot waiting to trip an unsuspecting passerby. “I won’t have you butting in.”

“You won’t have a girlfriend,” the older sister stated flatly. Then she paused and looked curiously at me. “You don’t have a girlfriend yet, do you, Kimura-kun?” She batted her long eyelashes twice. And then her lips parted in a Cheshire Cat grin.

I looked away, unable to look at her as she gazed so intensely at me. I whispered, “No, but I think I’m engaged to Tachibana-san.”

This time they laughed. All but Kasumi. She just smiled, making me feel like a canary about to be eaten by that grinning feline.
Chapter Two: For the First Time (Hajimete)

To tell the truth, junior high was probably one of the happiest times of my life. My grandmother wasn’t as harsh with me, and she let me hang out with Tachibana twice during the school week and once on the weekends. Of course, there were conditions. I had to have my homework completed, and I wasn’t allowed to miss cram school.

Most of it’s a blur, but a few things do stand out in the misty fog of my memories. I was bullied at first. I was different, so I was a prime target for their tortures. I don’t think they personally had anything against me. They did it to fit in. Most of them were so afraid that they would be singled out, ostracized, and subjected to cruel pranks that they bullied me instead. They did it just to escape being the outlet for everyone else’s pre-teen angst.

It wasn’t anything too horrible—just the usual. They put flowers on my desk, left nasty notes, and hid my things. They once put thumbtacks in my shoes, and I had to explain to Tachibana why I was limping. That was the end of the bullying.

He was so mad. I had never seen my happy-go-lucky friend so angry before. He made me give him a list of names, and he proceeded to beat the stuffing out of each and every bully until they kneeled before me and begged for forgiveness.

I was incredibly embarrassed as they all groveled, noses bleeding and tears streaming down their cheeks. I nodded awkwardly, scratching nervously at the back of my neck. I forgave them in a tiny, far-too-polite voice.

After that, I was like royalty. If I were home sick, they took meticulous notes for me. They volunteered themselves to run errands in my place and offered their lunches like sacrifices to a great Aztec god. They feared the wrath of Tachibana almost as much as I feared the disapproving gaze of my grandmother.

It was good to be revered, though it came at the cost of making friends. Everyone was afraid, so no one tried to get close to me. They suffocated me with their flattery, but we shared no genuine intimacy.

I found myself constantly lonely whenever Tachibana and the gang weren’t around. Thankfully, after the first term, we switched homerooms, and I ended up in the star class with Kasumi and Tachibana. The first trimester had been rough, but everything was better after that.

My grades even improved drastically. I seemed to be cured of my test anxiety, now that I

52 Flowers are placed on the desks of students who pass away.
didn’t have to worry about high school entrance exams. I was free to truly enjoy junior high, experiencing life to the fullest.

My three years in the junior high section of Seiya Academy were full of firsts. Some were scary and others funny. There were many happy memories made along with some sad ones. All were important in my gradual ascent into life. It all slowly helped me to experience living as I never had before.

The first big first was bringing home a friend. It was the week after the start of classes in April. Tachibana had been begging to meet my family and see my house, so I finally made arrangements for him to stay the night that Saturday.

I was so nervous as we walked from Nishiouji Station to my canary yellow abode. I took deep breaths and forced myself to remain calm as we passed the bookshop and the pharmacy.

“What’s the matter, Akira-kun?” My friend with polychromatic hair pinched my cheek as we crossed the bridge.

I stopped and sighed, looking over the side of the bridge at the little stream of water barely trickling down below. “It’s not very big…my house.”

He shrugged with all the nonchalance of a lion threatened by a Chihuahua. “I like small houses.”

I fiddled with the hem of my shirt. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m sure that your house is a lot better, so…”

“Akira-kun, you live with your grandma and mom, right?” Suddenly those burnt sienna eyes were staring at me ever so seriously. “And they love you, right?”

I shifted awkwardly. “It’s true that I live with them, but I don’t think that my grandmother loves me—‘Tolerates occasionally’ is a better description.”

“Still, they greet you when you come home, right?”

“Yes.” I responded simply, waiting for the moral of the story.

He turned away, looking at the towering buildings far in the distance. “When I get home, a fleet of maids and my golden retriever Antoinette greet me.”

I blinked. It didn’t sound like he was bragging. His voice had a sad echo to it. “That…might be nice.” I bit my lip and replied off-handedly.

The corporate heir shook his sandy locks and turned to keep walking. “The size of a house isn’t the most important thing. Better to have a small, cramped house with a loving—or at least occasionally tolerant—family than to have a large, empty place that’s called ‘home’ for lack of a better word.”
“Are you lonely often?” I quietly fell into step beside him. “If so, you’re really good at hiding it.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice.” The rebellious youth slightly raised and dropped his left shoulder.

I chewed thoughtfully on my cheek before opening my mouth and whispering, “If you’d like…that is, if you like it at my house…I’m sure you could come over sometimes. My grandmother approves of your social status, so she won’t kick you out…despite the fact that you look like a punk.”

“Akira-kun, I am a punk.” Finally his smile came out from behind the clouds, and he laughed, shoving me playfully. “And I appreciate your offer.”

I returned the smile bashfully, bowing slightly. “It would be an honor to have you visit.”

This elicited an amused chuckle and an eye roll from my new friend. “You’re so Japanese.”

“I am Japanese.” I blinked, a little confused.

“You’re like a little old Japanese man,” he elaborated, shaking his head fondly. “Kids in our generation aren’t that polite anymore.”

“If you don’t like how I speak and act in Japanese, learn to speak English with me. I’m a completely different person.” I recommended quietly, afraid of sounding too forward.

“Like, what kind of different?” His left eyebrow arched in curiosity.

“We’re here.” I stopped suddenly, putting a halt to further conversation. I had been wrapped up in the discussion and had almost walked past my own home.

My guest chuckled. “It’s really cute. I like the cheery yellow color.”

I nodded my thanks and opened the door with a gulp. I then got out a pair of guest slippers from the cabinet to the left and put them on the floor in front of him. “Tadaima!”

“Ojamashimasu,” Tachibana called out, storing his outside shoes in the cubbyhole and putting on a pair of house slippers.

“Welcome home, Darling!” my mother greeted, throwing her arms around me upon my arrival in the kitchen. “How was your day?”

“It was okay,” I replied in Japanese, even though the question had been posed in English. “This is Tachibana Hajime-san. Tachibana-san, this is my mother, Kimura Carol.”

“You can just call me Carol, Tachibana-kun. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Mother added.

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53 A standard phrase guests say upon entering someone else’s house. It literally means, “I will intrude”, but it
with a short bow.

“The pleasure is all mine, Carol-san.” I watched as my friend kissed the back of my mother’s hand like some kind of debonair prince. “I hear from Akira-kun that you teach English. I would be honored if you could find time to be my private tutor. I can promise a fair salary.”

The princess treatment caused my mother to giggle and blush. “You’re quite the charmer, aren’t you? All right. We’ll see if we can find a time that works for the both of us. Why the interest in learning English?”

“The family business has some branches over in America, so it’d be useful to know English,” Tachibana explained as he had told me before, but then he added: “Also, Akira-kun says that he’s a completely different person in English than he is in Japanese. I’d really like to get to know this English-speaking Akira.” He smiled that airy, mischievous grin at me.

“Is Grandmother home?” I looked away, changing the topic.

The call of “tadaima” from the doorway answered my question.

“Okaerinasai,” my mother and I responded.

“Ojamashiteimasu.” Tachibana bowed respectfully as Grandma Ayame entered the kitchen from the hallway.

“And who is this ruffian you’ve brought home?” My grandmother’s dark eyes narrowed like a hawk when she surveyed Tachibana’s dyed hair and rumpled clothes.

“Tachibana Hajime of the Tachibana Group,” the hooligan introduced himself, bowing and smiling amicably. “It’s nice to meet you.”

The great matriarch blinked twice and conceded a small bow. “Kimura Ayame. Thank you for befriending my useless grandson.”

“I beg your pardon, Madam, but I think your grandson is far from useless.” My jaw dropped as Tachibana boldly stood up to my grandmother. There was something decidedly un-Japanese about the way he naturally stated his own opinion without censure or fear of repercussions.

The tyrant of the house paused, snorted, and replied calmly. “Everyone is entitled to their opinion nowadays, aren’t they?”

“Why don’t you boys go on up to your room, Akira? I’ll call you down when dinner’s ready.” Mother placed a hand on my shoulder and nudged me towards the stairs. “Do you like...”

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54 A phrase used by visitors already present in the house when an occupant returns.
"tonkatsu"[^55], Tachibana-kun?"

“But of course, Carol-san.” The corporate heir laid the compliments on thick. “I’d like just about anything, as long as you made it.”

“Akira, you’ve made such a charming friend!” Carol Kimura continued to swoon over the boy less than half her age. “Tachibana-kun, shall I bring up some tea and snacks for the two of you?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to trouble you,” Tachibana gave the expected response[^56].

“Are you sure?” my mother asked again.

“Of course, please don’t go to the trouble for my sake.” He smiled gratefully and held up his hands in polite protest.

“Now you’ll have to excuse me, but since we don’t get too many Japanese guests, I’m not quite sure how many times I’m supposed to ask you if you want something. Please feel free to just let me know if you really want anything or not.” The mid-western woman confessed to her ignorance with a smile—a grin that was returned by my new friend.

“Thanks for asking, but I really don’t feel like tea and snacks just now. I’m saving room for the delicious tonkatsu you’re bound to make, Carol-san.”

There was more blushing and smiling done by both parties. Then, thankfully, that was the end of that, and we headed upstairs as my mother had suggested.

“You were flirting with my mother,” I stated as we climbed the staircase to my humble living space.

“Your mom’s a hottie.” He offered his excuse with a shrug of the shoulders, showing little remorse for his outlandish behavior.

“She’s thirty-five,” I informed him, opening my door and inviting him in.

“Really? I can never tell with gaijin[^57]. I thought she was older. She was young when she had you, wasn’t she?” Tachibana made himself at home, plopping down on the floor with his back against my platform bed.

“I’d prefer if you used ‘gaikokujin’ instead,” I whispered.

“Sure. Sorry.”

[^55]: Pork cutlet fried in a crispy batter of flour and breadcrumbs. It is usually served with a special dipping sauce.
[^56]: It is considered polite in Japan to decline an offer a few times before accepting anything from a host.
[^57]: From kanji characters literally meaning “outside” and “person,” gaijin means “foreigner.” Gaikokujin is the more polite way to say “foreigner,” because it also contains the kanji for country. This implies that the person is from an outside country, whereas gaijin seems to say that the person her- or him- self is an outsider.
“It’s not your fault. Some people are okay with it, but I’m…actually a lot more sensitive than I let on.” I mumbled my words, looking down at the floor.

“Don’t worry about it.” The hooligan smiled warmly, slowly changing my prejudices against people with dyed hair and multiple piercings. “I’ll try not to be so insensitive in the future.”

There was a short pause of grateful silence before I remembered to be embarrassed about my little habitat.

“Sorry that my room’s so small and that there’s not much to do.” I shifted nervously as his eyes glanced around the tiny space with its utilitarian furniture. The room only contained a bed, a bookshelf, a desk, and a twelve-inch television set. The décor was very homely.

The rebel gently shrugged his right shoulder. “You don’t have to apologize for every little thing, Akira-kun. It doesn’t matter. Sure it’s small, but most houses in Japan are like that. Only the rich and those that live in the country have the luxury of space. Besides, I like your house. It’s really quaint.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, head lowered. I was embarrassed at how nice he was. I finally gathered the courage then to ask him why. Why had he saved me? Why had he gone out of his way for a perfect stranger? Why was he so kind?

“I’ll tell you tonight,” he promised with a wink, getting up and going over to the bookshelf. “Got any CD’s? Ah. Here they are.”

“Wait!” I forced myself between my friend and the bookshelf, blocking his view. “Don’t look!”

“Why not?” I was clearly amusing him greatly.

“It’s embarrassing…some of the things I listen to.” I avoided eye contact at all costs in case he could tell from the look on my face that I listened to Hamasaki Ayumi.  

“It can’t be half as bad as me listening to BECCA and Utada Hikaru.” He snorted, scooting me out of the way.

“I like Utada Hikaru too,” I whispered, hoping he wasn’t just lying to make me feel better.

“What’s your favorite song of hers? I like ‘Easy Breezy’ and ‘Tokyo Nights’.” He

58 Hamasaki Ayumi is an extremely popular singer-songwriter who debuted in 1999. She holds several records, such as, the first artist to have a number one album for twelve years in a row.
59 Rebecca Hollcraft is an American singer-songwriter whose songs have been used in several games and anime.
60 Utada Hikaru is a very popular American-born singer-songwriter. She sings in both English and Japanese.
smirked as he browsed my music selection.

“I like ‘Hikari’⁶¹ and ‘Beautiful World.’” I took a seat on my bed and watched him explore my room. “What other bands do you listen to?”

“I like FLOW and Orange Range a lot. Upbeat stuff. You got a favorite band or singer?”

“In Japanese?” I bit my lip as I tried to decide. “UVERworld.”

“Never heard of them.” The goofball shrugged. “They really good?”

“Yeah. Some of the songs have really sad lyrics, but the music is pretty upbeat, and they always leave you with a ‘don’t give up’ message.” I got up and fetched one of their CD’s from the shelf. “Borrow this.”

“‘Bugright’?” His brow developed three small trenches as he sounded out the name in awkward English.

“You’ll like it,” I promised.

“Thanks.” His crisp chuckle cut through the air as he picked another CD off of the shelf.

“What’s this band? ‘Faru Aoto Boi’?”

“Close. ‘Fall Out Boy,’” I corrected gently. “They’re American.”

He nodded, trying to decipher the song titles on the back of the CD case.

“You can borrow that one too, if you like. They’re my favorite in English.”

“I’ll have to bring you over to my house sometime to browse my collection.” Tachibana slipped the two discs into his bag. He then paused, and his forehead creased. “On second thought…maybe not. My house is embarrassing and kind of boring.”

“Why?” I motioned for him to sit next to me on the bed.

“I come from a really inhospitable environment. I wouldn’t want you to feel uncomfortable with all the maids and butlers. My house is a big, empty space. It’s not somewhere I’d want to bring people.”

I nodded, trying to be understanding of his situation. “Like I said before, you can always come over here. If you truly don’t mind the cramped space and my grandmother, that is.”

“The space issue is no problem, but it’ll take awhile to get used to the insufferable old bat. Sorry, that’s really rude, but I don’t think I’ll ever get to like her.” My companion tried to subdue a fit of giggles.

“It’s not necessary that you like her.” I found myself smiling, even though I knew it was wrong to speak ill of Grandma Ayame. “Only occasional tolerance is required.”

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⁶¹ Hikari means “light”. It is written with the same kanji as Hikaru in Utada Hikaru’s name.
At this we could no longer hold in our laughter, and we were still chuckling as we made our way downstairs for dinner.

The meal itself was a fairly quiet affair. My family asked questions of Tachibana, and our guest responded, making small talk. He flirted openly with my mom (which she enjoyed a little too much) and wasn’t afraid to contradict my grandmother.

I finished the meal with a newfound awe and respect for my friend. He had enough courage to stand up for what he believed in and enough self-confidence to court a woman twenty years his senior.

“I should have given this to you when I arrived, but I didn’t really have enough time,” Tachibana explained after the plates had been emptied of tonkatsu. Out of his bag he produced a perfect honeydew melon in a wooden box “It’s not much, but I hope you like it.62 If you’d like, we can cut it now and have it for dessert, or you can save it for some other time.”

Our eyes opened wide at the costly, flawless fruit.

Grandma Ayame nodded, impressed. Her eyes seemed to say, “Well, he has manners and money. Perhaps his appearance and occasional insubordination can be overlooked after all.” She then replied in the standard fashion. “This is far too expensive. I’m afraid that we cannot accept such a wonderful gift.”

“This is but a trifle.” Tachibana grinned and insisted. “I am very grateful to you all for welcoming me into your home.”

The dance went on as custom dictated, and then, in the end, we finally ate the delectable, costly fruit.

After we consumed the melon and helped Mother with the dishes, we retired to my room to play video games.

“My mom bought me these a few years ago, but I’ve never played them before,” I commented as I took Mario out of the box for the first time.

“Why not?” Tachibana asked with a laugh, as if there were no acceptable reason for not having played video games that had been sitting around for years.

“I never had time to play before.” I shrugged indifferently. “All I really did before I met you was study.”

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62 It is customary to give a small gift when visiting another’s house in Japan. There are a few standard phrases one says when presenting a gift like “It is but a trifle” or “It is not much, but I hope you like it”. If the gift is too expensive or otherwise valuable, it is common to refuse at first.
“Did you not have a childhood?” My benefactor blinked, eyes wide in shock. I shrugged again. “Who’s to say? I was a child once.”

“You’re still a child.” He nudged me with his foot. “I’ll make sure you have a full and meaningful childhood from now on.”

“And what does a childhood consist of?” I was a little doubtful.

“Hand-made bentou\(^{63}\) lunches with apples cut like rabbits and hotdog pieces shaped like octopuses, playing in the park in the sandbox and doing flips on the horizontal bars, going to the beach during the summer to play with sparklers and eat watermelon\(^{64}\), doing the test of courage\(^{65}\) with some cute girl in the autumn, and building snowmen in the winter when the snow is fluffy and good for packing. That’s a childhood.”

“I can’t say that I’ve experienced any of that.” I blinked, just then realizing how deprived I was. It was as if I had been dead up until meeting Tachibana.

“Seriously? But those are the most common things!” I was apparently perplexing my friend.

“I make lunch for Mom and myself, since she takes so long to get ready in the mornings. She has a longer commute than I do, so she’s more pressed for time. I never make them very fancy.” I explained. “I had to study in my free time, so I never really played in parks or out in the snow. My family is small, and my grandmother doesn’t like the beach, so we never had enough people to break and eat a whole watermelon. Also, I never really had any female friends to do a test of courage with.”

Tachibana clicked his tongue and shook his head. “I’m going to make you a bentou on Tuesday, so don’t bring one. Also, one day this week, we’re going to go do flips on the horizontal bar in the park. During summer vacation, I’m taking you to Okinawa\(^{66}\) with the gang to stay in my villa and have an authentic beach experience. Then, in the fall, we’re going to find you a girl so that you can do the test of courage together, and, in winter if there’s enough snow, we’re building a snowman in the park. Understood?”

I just nodded, still unable to understand why he would go out of his way like that for me.

\(^{63}\) Bentou are lunch boxes usually prepared by parents or significant others in the morning. They consist of many things— usually rice, veggies, and some sort of meat or protein. Bentou can be considered works of art in their own right because great care is typically taken arranging all the different foods so that they look attractive.

\(^{64}\) Eating watermelon at the beach is a common summer-time activity in Japan. Chilled watermelons are treated like piñatas and are burst open with sticks by blindfolded participants.

\(^{65}\) It is common for Japanese teenagers to go to a graveyard or otherwise spooky place or to set up a haunted house-like course for participants to walk through, usually in boy-girl pairs. It typically ends with one or the other of the pair getting scared and holding tightly to his or her partner’s arm or hand.
“It sounds wonderful.”

“Oh, it will be.” He snickered, kicking my character, Samus, off of the cliff in Super Smash Brothers\(^{67}\) with his character, Fox.

“No fair taking advantage while I was distracted,” I whined, waiting for Samus to reappear at the top of the screen.

“All’s fair in love and war, Sweetheart.” The sniggering continued.

Tachibana took his bath first, and then Grandma Ayame took hers. Next, my mother showered, and, finally, I was allowed my bath. The water was generally cold by the time my turn came, but I was used to it\(^{68}\).

“You can take my bed,” I offered, rolling out the spare futon\(^{69}\) on the floor. “The futon’s very comfortable, but I’d be ashamed to let a guest sleep on the floor while I slept in a bed.”

“You keep the bed. I want to try sleeping on a futon. My bed at home is western style.”

The bad influence with a good heart moved me out of the way and climbed into the futon.

I tried to argue, but I found it to be a fruitless effort.

When the light was out and we were settled into our respective sleeping arrangements, I found the courage to ask Tachibana about the questions I had posed to him earlier: Why? Why help? Why me?

“I kind of fibbed when we met on the roof.” The dark hid his blush from my eyes. “We’ve met before. It was just a few times in non-memorable instances, but I didn’t just know your name in passing, I asked around for it.”

“Why?” I blinked, searching my memories for his face. I came up blank. “When have we met before?”

“The first time was at school three years ago.” He rolled over onto his side to talk to me in whispers. “I was checking everyone’s test scores out in the hall when there was some

\(^{66}\) An island in the south of Japan with beautiful, sandy beaches and a brilliant green ocean.

\(^{67}\) A video game, originally for the Nintendo 64, where players pick characters from a variety of different games and fight each other. Some characters featured include: Link (Legend of Zelda), Mario (Super Mario), Fox (Star Fox), DK (Donkey Kong), Ness (Earthbound, AKA: Mother 2), Pikachu (Pokémon), and Samus (Metroid).

\(^{68}\) In Japan, family members generally bathe using the same water. Bathing in Japan is very different from in the United States, though, so the water is not as dirty as it would be here. The Japanese clean themselves off before getting in the bath. The tub itself is used mainly for soaking, not for cleaning as is done in the US. Guests bathe first, and then, usually, the rest of the household goes in order from oldest to youngest.

\(^{69}\) Very different from the American futon, a Japanese futon is a pad laid on the floor and slept upon. They are surprisingly comfortable. The comforter is soft and warm, though Japanese pillows can occasionally be a little small and flat compared to their American counterparts.
commotion. A small pack of older students had run into a younger student, knocking him down and spilling his books everywhere. They threatened to beat him up, if he didn’t apologize. I went over and helped him pick up his things once the bullies had left. I remember he looked up at me, shocked, but only for a split second. Then he buried his eyes in the tile floor and muttered a very polite ‘Thank you very much.’ I helped him up, but he rushed off before I could ask any questions.”

“That was you?” I remembered that day in particular because it was the first time that anyone had stopped to help. “Sorry for darting off like that…I was a really timid kid. I was probably afraid you were going to ask for some sort of compensation for bothering to help me.”

“I just wanted your name.” He chuckled his blindingly bright laugh as quietly as he could.

“What made you want it? I can’t understand what lasting impact those few seconds had on you.” Plenty of kids got pushed around by bullies. I was no different.

“Your eyes.”

“It’s not unheard of to have two different colored eyes.” I absentmindedly touched my fingers to my right eyelid where the blue orb resided.

“Not the colors, silly.” I managed to make him chuckle at every turn. “The look in your eyes. During that brief instant when our eyes met, I could tell you were miserable, just like me.”

“Like you?” I still had trouble imagining this bocchama70 as having troubles great enough to cause misery.

“I didn’t always handle things as well as I do now.” He bit his lip as he poured his secrets out to me. “I was a brat when I was little, always vying for my parents’ attentions. No matter what I did, the only ones that ever responded were the nannies or the maids or the butlers. Sure, I got to do pretty much whatever I wanted, but I never really experienced the love of my parents. They were always so busy with the company. It seemed to me that the company was more important than their own son, so I was often depressed. I’ve come to understand that it’s not that they don’t love me, it’s that they truly are busy running an empire out there, but…still…” There was a long pause before he continued. “I want to be loved before I have to take over the stupid company and bury myself in work like my parents. It’s as good as being dead.”

“What do you want to do with your life?” I softly inquired, worried that my voice would break the spell cast over the both of us by his sad tale.

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70 A respectful way to refer to a rich young man. It is something like “Young Master” in English.
“I want to run away with a foreigner and become a musician. Maybe in Canada,” he confessed.

I nodded. The idea suited him. “Do you play any instruments?”

“Piano and violin. I had private lessons from the time I was little. Apparently, every civilized young man needs to know how to play violin and piano.” He rolled his eyes and snorted lightly. “I’m learning to play the guitar at the moment, and I can sing too. I don’t know why I’m bothering, though. It’s not like anything’s ever going to come of it, even if I do learn.”

“You’re still miserable, aren’t you?” My stomach tightened, feeling his sorrow.

“Not as miserable.” I was surprised that Tachibana was able to laugh at this. “I took up smoking for whenever I get really down. It helps a little.”

“It’s bad for your health.” I resisted the urge to nag. I was worried about him, but it would be rude.

“Then I’ll stop.” His ability to shrug off even the most serious things was mind-boggling to me. “However, in return, you have to let me call and talk to you whenever I’m really down in the dumps, okay?”

“Sounds fair.” I easily agreed, feeling that he had more than earned the right to share his problems with me.

“I always wanted to talk to you, you know? To commiserate,” my friend continued with his explanation. “There was never really a good occasion for me to introduce myself, though…until that day on the roof. I don’t know if you could tell, but I was really freaked out when I saw you getting ready to jump. For how long had you been thinking about suicide?”

“It’s hard to say, exactly. Maybe a long time. I think it started when Grandmother decided I needed to study more for exams. Every day was a chore, and then I started wondering if it wouldn’t be better if it were just all over and done with. I’m not a very optimistic person, so I always tend to imagine the worst. Then the worst possible outcome usually occurs. Self-fulfilling prophecy, probably. The stress and fear of failure got to be too much, I think, and I just gave up. I’m glad you saved me, though.”

“Me too.” He let a quiet chuckle eep out, and we both smiled warmly, though neither could see the other’s face. “I had wanted to meet you for so long, and I saw my chance almost taken away before my very eyes. I’m glad I summoned up the courage to talk you down.”

“Order me down, more like it,” I muttered just loud enough for him to hear.

“Whatever. The important thing is that we met and are friends presently. I think we’ll be good together. We can lick each other’s wounds.” I could feel the warmth of his ironic grin in the
“That sounds like a magnificent proposition, but I’d hate to trouble you all the time. I feel like you’d be doing most of the licking. I’ve got a lot of festering sores.” I bit my lip and confessed to my doubts.

“You’d be surprised.” He flipped open his cell phone for light and showed me his right wrist. There was a short, thin scratch just barely visible. “Though, I have had a history of self-loathing and bitterness, this was more of a cry for attention. I didn’t even have to go to the hospital. It hurt too much, and I got scared when I saw blood, so I stopped. I was only nine or ten.”

Tears came to my eyes as I took his wrist in my hands and brought it to my lips, kissing the tiny scratch.

“Don’t cry for my sake.” Tachibana gently wiped away my tears, still able to chuckle. “I’m a lot better nowadays, now that I’m grown up a little and understand things better. I haven’t thought about it again since then.”

I nodded in the dim, blue light of the phone, my face looking wane and ashen like a ghost’s. My hands shook. He was not the person he seemed to be. How could one so cheerful have such a sad, lonely past?

“Cheer up,” my dear friend urged with his sunny grin. “Even though our pasts might have been a little dreary, there’s always tomorrow, right? We’re young. We’ve got futures ahead of us full of bunnies and sunshine. We’ll have some fun tomorrow at the park, so chin up. I didn’t pour my heart out to you to make you feel depressed. Give me a smile.”

I obliged, unable to resist his charisma.

“Oyasumi71, Akira-kun,” Tachibana whispered, shutting his phone and curling up under the comforter.

“Oyasumi nasai…Tachibana-kun.” After our shared confidence, I could no longer pretend that we were merely acquaintances. That was the first time I had ever expressed intimacy with someone outside of my family. It felt liberating.

As I said before, my junior high years were full of firsts. Tachibana taught me how to do flips on the horizontal bar at the park the following day. It was fun, even though I was laughably bad at anything that required physical strength or coordination. He laughed with me, though, not

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71 The full phrase oyasumi nasai means “please rest,” but it is used as “good night.”
at me like the other children during Physical Education class.

Tachibana also kept his promise to hand-make a *bentou* for me that Tuesday. He admitted that his cook had done most of the work, since he was a sad excuse for a chef. However, he had picked out the recipes and arranged everything in the box, so we both decided that it counted.

That summer, we went with the Shihoudani twins and Nikaidou-san to the beach in Okinawa. We played in the waves, splashing each other and hitting a tri-colored beach ball back and forth. We built gigantic sandcastles and played soccer with some other kids, also there for summer vacation. We broke open a chilled watermelon with a stick while blindfolded and ate it during the heat of the day. It was juicy and extremely refreshing. Nikaidou and the male Shihoudani made a sport of spitting seeds as far as they could. Kasumi showed off her new bikini, and we played with sparklers after the sun had set.

In the fall, Tachibana invited the entire star group (plus Nikaidou from the sun class and Kazuki of the moon group) to come to one of his beachside villas for a weekend of bonding activities—one of which was the test of courage for Halloween, carried out in a cave full of scary decorations that just happened to be on his property. I got paired with a girl everyone called Momo-chan because of her peach-shaped face and rosy pink cheeks. She was fairly pretty and very nice, popular with girls and boys alike. Kasumi pouted because she was paired with her twin, through some cosmic joke, and not with the charming Tachibana Hajime or myself.

When the snow came, the gang met up in the park to build miniature snowmen and have snowball fights. It was frigid chaos, but I loved it, even though I had lost feeling in my face and hands by the end of the day. My friends came back to my house for hot chocolate afterwards.

During that time, I was so grateful to be alive. I shuddered when I thought of all the amazing experiences of which I had almost robbed myself. I had friends now, even if I wasn’t as intimate with all of them as I was with Tachibana. I had a future. I had something to look forward to, a reason to get out of bed each day.

I had all of these great first experiences and the knowledge that more would come. There were bound to be more in the next year, because I had already experienced so much in just this first year of knowing Tachibana: my first friend, my first sleepover, my first beach trip, my first visit to the aquarium, my first day at the zoo, my first Christmas with friends, my first Halloween party, my first snowball fight, my first time playing in the leaves, and my first crush.

Perhaps I should just leave that last one to your imagination, but I think it was different

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72 *Momo* means “peach.”
for me than for most people. It was a crush, but it wasn’t a crush. I wasn’t interested in holding hands or hugging or kissing. I wasn’t physically attracted, though I knew he was good-looking.

I formed a strong, instant bond with Tachibana, and he was precious to me. I always wanted to be with him, and his smile could brighten even the worst of my days. In that way it was like a crush, but our relationship transcended the physical. We had a meeting of minds, a relationship of trust, shared experiences, disclosed secrets, and confided sorrows.

I told him how I felt the spring before we entered high school, when we were fifteen.

He smiled like a sunset and laughed that airy chuckle of his. “That’s because we’re soulmates—we were made to be friends.” And then he tossed my character, Ness, off of the cliff using Captain Falcon.

I sighed. “‘All’s fair in love and war’?”

“You got it, Sugar.” He winked, smirking facetiously.
Chapter Three: Wings and Mist (Tsubasa to Kasumi)

If I remember correctly, the conversation started abruptly with: “Kasumi-chan’s kind of cute. What do you think?”

“I think you have a girlfriend, Tachibana,” I replied simply, licking at the melting drops of green tea ice cream slowly trickling down the side of my cone. It was during summer vacation of our first year of high school, and we were hanging out in the food court of Kyoto Station.

His umber eyes rolled fondly at me. “I know that, Akira. I’m not interested in dating her; I just want to know what you think of her. So?”

“She’s pretty, I guess.” I shrugged indifferently, a little reluctant to give my opinion so bluntly. “She’s nice.” I got along fine with Kasumi most of the time, though there were occasions when she made me feel uncomfortable with her intense gaze and flirtatiousness.

“I think you two would make a cute couple,” my un-Japanese friend came right out and stated his opinion.

This brought a smile to my face, and I couldn’t help but chortle softly. “Perhaps, but it kind of seems to me that she’s not really interested in me like that. We’re just friends.”

“You’re wrong,” my best friend answered in English.

I blinked, still speaking in Japanese. “What would make you say that?”

“Bekasu.” The way he said ‘because’ was slightly accented. “I know that she rikes you.”

“Likes,” I gently corrected.

“Rlikes.” This time it came out halfway between an l and an r.73

“Touch the tip of your tongue to the back of your front teeth. La.” I demonstrated.

“La.” He imitated me, always determined to learn. “Likes.”

“Good,” I praised.

“I know that she likes you,” my friend continued on in English.

I persisted to speak in Japanese. “It’s possible that you’re correct, but I feel that it could also be that—”

The punk corporate heir sighed and interrupted me in frustrated Japanese. “—Hey, Akira? Can you just talk in English? I really don’t feel like having a vague, roundabout discussion in which nothing gets accomplished today.”

“What makes you think Kasumi-san likes me?” I obediently acquiesced to his request.

73 There is no ‘l’ in Japanese, but the ‘r’ is pronounced halfway between an ‘r’ and an ‘l’, so some Japanese have trouble pronouncing ‘l’s at first.
“The way she rooks at you.” He shrugged.

“La. Looks.” I paused to let him repeat it until he got it right. “She looks at you the same way.”

“Bekasu she likes me.” My friend and confidant smiled victoriously.

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed openly.

“‘Ridiculous’?” He hadn’t learned that word yet.

“Silly,” I amended.

“Ridiculous. Ridiculous.” The eager student chanted, trying to commit this new gem of vocabulary to memory. “It’s not ridiculous,” he countered once he was done rolling the word over his tongue for practice. “She told me that she rikes—likes you.”

I blinked and blushed an impressive vermilion color. “Really? Why? What does she like about me?”

Tachibana’s brow crinkled as he tried to translate what Kasumi had said into English. “She said that you’re a kind person. You’re very interesting, and she likes the way you look because you’re…” Suddenly the words failed him. “…different?” Three deep trenches furrowed their way across his forehead as he strained to remember. “Damn, what’s that word Carol-san just taught me the other day? It was a good one too…unique!” He then resumed speaking in English. “Kasumi-chan thinks that you’re unique.”

“She likes that I’m exotic.” I snorted softly. I was something different, something foreign, and that sparked many a girl’s interest. Unfortunately, most of the time I was viewed simply as a novelty. They didn’t usually care to get to know the real me. Having a haafu boyfriend was a status symbol, and I was sick of being treated as an object, an accessory to make them look better.

“‘Exotic’? Another new word for Tachibana.

“Something different, rare, or unusual,” I explained in Japanese. “Like a colorful parrot kept in a cage for show. Exotic.”

“I’m sure she has more regard for you than that.” He tried to comfort me, sensing my acute distress.

“She looks at me like a cat would a canary.” I offered up what I had felt on multiple occasions when I had caught her staring at me.

He gave a quick nod and smirked. “You know, you can say ‘not interested.’ I won’t take offense.”

“Not interested, Tachibana,” I replied curtly in English.
“Okay then.” The young ruffian pantomimed picking up a box and setting it to the side. 

“In other news, I had something that I really wanted to talk to you about.” His face had become very serious, leading me to believe that this was going to be a rather solemn conversation.

“What is it?” I cocked my head to the side after finishing off my ice cream cone.

He averted his mahogany eyes and bit his lip. “My little sister’s coming to live with me.”

“Little sister?” I blinked, my mouth hanging open slightly. Tachibana had a little sister?

He nodded, eyes still focusing on the table instead of on my face. “Her name is Suzuki Tsubasa. She’s ten years old and was living with her dad until he died in an accident a few weeks ago. She’s with her grandparents now, but they’re too old and frail to be taking care of an energetic ten year-old. My mother wants to take her in and add her to the family registry.”

I was hesitant to say anything—it sounded like a really personal matter. “And…how do you feel about all this?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, sandy locks whipping back and forth. “Obviously, I’m upset. Furious, really. I mean…I know my parents don’t love me. They care about me, but I’m not precious to them like you are to your mom and, I’m sure, to your dad. But…it was kind of comforting to think that my parents loved each other.” He took a deep breath in and sighed. “Now I find out that my mother had an affair when I was five, and she either loved the guy a lot or was extremely careless to end up with his kid, right? I mean she would have gotten an abortion unless she wanted the baby.”

It was quiet as my sullen companion took a long sip of his melon flavored Calpis.

“And how do you feel about your sister coming to live with you?” I asked in a small voice, hesitant to interrupt him in his pensive state.

“I don’t want her to come,” Tachibana grunted.

“May I ask why not?”

It was then that he looked up at me with those clear, umber eyes. “Her family really cared about her, you know? She was truly loved by her dad—and even by her step-mom. My father won’t accept her, even if he does agree to the adoption, and although Mother may care for her,
she won’t have any more free time than she does now. I don’t foresee her making time to spend with Tsubasa. That kid’s gonna be alone all the time with only servants to take care of her. Plus, my grandparents are going to throw a fit when they find out that an illegitimate child—the result of an extramarital affair, no less—is going to be added to the official family registry. There’s not going to be anyone to love that kid, and that’s not what she needs now that she’s lost both her dad and step-mom at the same time. She should just stay with her grandparents. No matter how old and fragile they are, staying with them would be a hell of a lot better than joining the Tachibana family.”

“It’s really cute that you’re worried about her.” I couldn’t help but smile. Tachibana had a very kind heart even if he did act like a punk the majority of the time.

“What do you mean?” The big softie blinked.

“At first, when you said that you didn’t want her to come, I thought that it might be because her presence would be an inconvenience to you, but it was really because you were thinking about what would be best for your little sister.” My smile grew larger as I patted my friend on the shoulder. “You know, if you’re so worried about this poor girl being lonely and unloved, you could always be the one to love her.”

“Me?” His brow furrowed in confusion at my proposition.

I nodded encouragingly. “You are her big brother after all. You’re family. Now neither of you ever has to be alone again.”

He had clearly never thought of this before. He stared at me, dazed and a little shocked.

“I…don’t know how to be a big brother. What if I do it wrong?”

“The Almighty Tachibana-sama will figure something out, I’m sure.” I laughed openly at his unnecessary fears. “There’s no right or wrong way to be a big brother. Besides, I have a feeling that this is something that you’ll be good at.”

“Thanks, Aki.” I finally got one of those gorgeous smiles out of him.

I allowed myself a cheeky grin before replying in English. “You can buy me lunch sometime as thanks.”

“Like a date?” He teased in Japanese.

“You already have a girlfriend.” I switched back to Japanese, embarrassed at what my English-speaking self had started.

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-Sama is another honorific to be used following someone’s name. -Sama is used to show great respect towards someone considered high above oneself in society. It is not very common in everyday speech. -Sama is used when addressing letters or by fans when they speak of an actor or artist that they admire.
“We’ll probably break up soon, anyway.” The mischief-maker shrugged indifferently.

At this I gave a start. “Why?”

“I was only really dating her because I knew that my parents wouldn’t approve. I’m malicious like that.” He treated the subject so lightly. I could never enter into a relationship so haphazardly. “It’s the same reason as why I get piercings. Oh yeah. Did I show you the new one yet? I just got it yesterday.” He moved his dyed orange fluff out of the way so that I could see the new piece of metal he had had put through his ear. Piercing number three. “I’m thinking about getting an industrial piercing78 done next.”

“Please, for my sake, wait until you’re seventeen.” I sighed, shaking my head and rubbing my temples like a concerned parent.

“But I just turned sixteen last week! That’s a whole year!” he whined.

“I just want you to give it some thought before you go putting more holes in your head.” I explained.

“Okay. I’ll wait.” He had that cunning smirk on his face. “But you’ve got to do something for me too.”

“What is it?” I was a little hesitant in saying yes.

“Tsubasa’s coming on Tuesday. Will you come over to my house and meet her with me?” He waited nervously for my reply, fidgeting slightly in his seat.

“Of course I’ll come.” How could I deny him when he looked so serious? “Just tell me what time.”

“Great! Thank you!” Suddenly all of his worries melted away. “And hey, while we’re on the subject, there’s this girl I want to set you up with.”

“Girl?” Since when were we on the subject?

“Or would you rather I set you up with a guy?” This was one of Tachibana’s favorite games.

“What’s her name?” I knew that he probably already had the reservation made at the restaurant, so there was no choice but to play along. This wasn’t the first time that Tachibana had tried to set me up with someone.

“Are you free this Friday?” I was blatantly ignored.

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t seen that new vampire movie yet, have you?” I supposed that he had

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78 Two piercings connected by a straight metal bar usually done through the cartilage.
purchased the tickets in advance.

“No, I haven’t seen it yet.” I sighed, doomed to dance as my puppet master willed.

“Good. ‘Cause I was thinking you two could meet at the restaurant and have dinner—the reservation’s under my name. Then you could see the movie and walk around the park afterwards looking at the stars. What do you think? Super romantic, right?” He sounded as excited as if he were the one going on the date.

“Yeah.” I tried to muster up at least a little enthusiasm. “Super romantic.”

“Look, I think you’ll really like her, if you’d just give her a chance. Not every girl wants to date you just because of your ancestry, Akira.” His eyes bore through me like a drill. He acted like a big goofball most of the time, but he really did understand the way I thought and felt.

I nodded. “Okay, I’ll give her a chance, but at least let me pay for my own date this time.”

He shrugged me off with a snort and a shake of his head. “No way. That restaurant’s really expensive. Besides, I’m the one who’s forcing you to go on this date, so I’ll pay. I know how much you hate it when I do this to you, so why should you have to pay to do something that you don’t enjoy?”

“Fine,” I sighed, knowing that I could never win. “But if you know I hate it so much, why do you keep forcing me into situations like this?”

“’Cause you’d never date if it were up to you,” he decreed with a smirk. “As your best friend, it is my duty to break you out of your shell and insure that you don’t end up forty and single.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, not really caring one way or the other.

“Besides, we can’t double date if you don’t have a girlfriend.” His true motive was made clear.

“We can always do that group date thing when we’re a little older,” I suggested, chewing on my bottom lip.

“But I want to go on a date with you now!” Tachibana’s childish side was showing. This young master was used to getting his way.

“If everything goes well with this girl on Friday, we can do a double date next week.” I sighed and gave in, knowing that I wouldn’t hear the end of it if I didn’t.

“And if it doesn’t go well, we can do a group date instead.” My scheming companion

79 Compa or goukon are group dating parties organized by a guy and girl that both agree to bring 3 or 4 single
smirked.

“Sure.” I sighed.

That Tuesday I arrived at the Tachibana manor promptly at ten o’clock. It was a charming, old wooden house on Kujodori across the street from the movie theatre. The house had a wooden privacy fence that was almost as tall as the Japanese pines in the front yard. The groundskeeper had done wonders with the gorgeous Zen garden, complete with a bamboo fountain. The tiles on the roof of the house along with those on the garage were a light grey color that went surprising well with the dark wood of the building.

My friend greeted me at the gate, looking rather anxious. He had been pacing, awaiting my arrival. “Thanks again for coming.” He was in a cold sweat, fidgeting nervously.

“No problem.” I smiled, trying to be reassuring. “You know, it’s going to be fine. I’m sure she’ll love you.”

“Akira, I’m not ready to be a big brother yet.” Tachibana had resorted to chewing on his lip and occasionally his cuticles.

“You’re overreacting, Tachibana. Breathe.” I escorted him to the living room and forced him to sit down on the couch. “Seriously, like I said before, you’ll be just fine. If you ever have any problems, you can always call me, and we’ll try to work them out together, okay? Feel better?”

“A little.” He sighed. “It’s just that I know that she’ll really need someone to look after her now that she’s practically an orphan, and I don’t know if I’m ready to take responsibility for another person yet. I’m sixteen, for crying out loud. I’m not ready to be a parent!” The young heir got to his feet and started pacing again.

“Calm down,” I intoned firmly, pulling him back into his seat. “It’s not like you’re doing this alone. You’ve got the servants to help you out, and you know I’ll be behind you all the way, so just relax. It’s not like you’ve suddenly become a single parent at the tender age of sixteen. You’ve got backup.”

“Thanks, Aki. Really. I’d be climbing the walls without you around.” His smile contained a twinge of embarrassment and much gratitude.

“Well, we promised to always be there for each other, didn’t we? I’m just upholding my end of the bargain.” I chuckled softly as he rolled his eyes at me.
“Way to make our friendship sound like a business deal.”

“You know I wouldn’t be here helping you out if I didn’t like you, Tachi.” I teased, pinching his cheek.

He brushed my hand away and smirked. “You have the stupidest nicknames for me.”

“I could say the same of yours for me.” I shuddered at the thought of his floofy bastardizations of my name.

My great displeasure elicited a chuckle from my partner in crime. “I think ‘Kira-Kira-chan’ is pretty good. It’s witty.”

“I beg t—”

Suddenly our joviality was interrupted as the doorbell rang. We rose slowly, tossing confused glances to each other as we went to answer it. Guests were not common at the Tachibana manor.

Surprisingly, Tachibana’s mother, Midori, was standing on the doorstep, smiling in a mildly embarrassed manner. She placed a hand over her mouth and laughed, dipping her head to the side, when the door was opened. “Sorry. Forgot my key. Hello, Akira-kun. Hajime, this is Tsubasa.” Midori-san pushed a small, frightened child towards us. “Be a dear and take care of her. I’ve got to run. Ta-ta!” And she was gone without a backwards glance; in her wake, she left awkward silence.

We were left to stare in awe at each other, the poor child was wide-eyed and trembling. She was quite adorable with her straight, raven’s wing hair down to her shoulders, curled under at the ends. Her eyes were the same as Tachibana’s—clear brown pools with flakes of red. Her skin was pale, and her frame, slight. She was tiny for her age. I could tell she would turn out to be very lovely once she was older.

“Hajimemashite.” I initiated the conversation, since the other two were too stunned at Tsubasa’s sudden arrival to say anything. “I’m Kimura Akira, your brother’s friend. We attend the same high school. I hope we can get along well, Tsubasa-chan.”

The polite girl gave a start at suddenly being addressed, but then she bowed deeply and introduced herself in a shaking voice. “N-nice to meet you. I-I am Suzuki—I mean—Tachibana.

80 Kira-kira is the sound effect for sparkling or twinkling in Japanese. -Chan is an honorific usually used for kids and girls but sometimes combined with a boy’s name to make it sound cute. Tachibana thinks that his nickname for Akira is witty because the kanji for Akira’s name means bright, fitting with the twinkling, sparkling onomatopoeia.

81 A Japanese gesture of embarrassment, commonly used by women.

82 Hajimemashite is a greeting used when meeting someone for the first time. It is usually followed by some sort of introduction, ending in yoroshiku onegaishimasu (see footnote nine).
Tsubasa. Ten years old. Please take care of me.” Her lip trembled, and she began to cry silently, body still shaking.

Tachibana knelt down in front of his new little sister and smiled, wiping away her streaming tears. “Shh…it’s okay. I’m your big brother, Hajime, but you can call me Nii-chan\(^83\), okay? Don’t worry about a thing, ‘cause I’m gonna take care of you.” He wrapped his arms around the little twig and held her until she stopped crying. It was absolutely precious.

He then picked her up and turned to me. “Hey, Akira, you can cook a little, right?”

“Y-yes.” I was a little thrown at suddenly being included in the conversation after being caught up in the adorable brother-sister moment.

“Great. ‘Cause it’s the cook’s day off. Do you think you could make something for Tsubasa for lunch?” He then addressed the baby koala in his arms. “Are you hungry, Tsubasa?”

“A little,” the angel mumbled, still a little shy, as her big brother carried her to the kitchen.

I prepared *tamagoyaki*\(^84\), *onigiri*\(^85\), and some steamed vegetables while the new siblings got acquainted, sitting at the kitchen counter and chatting away.

“So what’s your favorite color, Tsubasa?”

I chuckled as my friend gushed over his new sister, stroking her face and pushing stray strands of black hair out of the way.

“I like blue best.” The little pixie grinned, readjusting herself on the barstool. “What about Onii-chan?”

“I like red a lot, but I’d have to say that my favorite color is blue as well. I really like blue the shade of Akira’s right eye.” He chuckled and showed her his thousand-watt grin. “Of course, I like the color of Tsubasa-chan’s eyes too. Do you have a favorite subject in school?”

Tsubasa’s legs swung back and forth, coming absolutely nowhere close to reaching the ground. “I’d have to say that English is my best subject, but we just started learning in my other school, so I’m a little worried that I’ll be behind once I transfer to Kisshouin in September.”

“You know, Akira could probably help you out. His mom’s an American, so his English

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\(^{83}\) *Onii-san* is a respectful way to refer to an older brother or a young man in his teens or twenties. Nii-chan is a variation of *onii-san*.

\(^{84}\) Literally “fried eggs”, *tamagoyaki* is prepared with a lot of sugar to produce a sweet taste. The egg mixture is poured into a pan and cooked. It is then rolled to one side, and the process is repeated, adding more and more layers of egg.

\(^{85}\) *Onigiri* are Japanese rice balls. They can be eaten plain or filled with various things such as fish, meat, or vegetables. *Onigiri* are usually served with an edible, dried seaweed strip wrapped around them to make the *onigiri* easier to hold.
is excellent.” Tachibana volunteered my assistance without asking. “If that’s okay with you, Akira,” he added only as an afterthought.

“I’d be happy to.” I set the meal on the counter before the doe-eyed girl.

She clapped her hands together in front of her chest, elbows out. She bowed her head and sang, “Itadakimaaasu” before digging in to the food I had prepared.

“Is it good?” I smiled sheepishly, taking a seat at the counter with the Tachibana siblings.

“It’s delicious!” The enthusiastic child grinned, stuffing another onigiri into her mouth.

“You’ll make a wonderful bride some day, Akira-niisan.”

“Thank you.” I blushed, lowering my gaze. I didn’t know how to respond to this. She had clearly meant it as a compliment, but I was far too used to hearing such things from Tachibana when he was teasing me.

“Of course he’s a good chef. I wouldn’t pick a bad cook for my future bride,” my smart aleck friend announced with a straight face.

“Oh. Is Akira-niisan Nii-chan’s boyfriend?” Little Tsubasa smiled brightly, readily embracing me as her future brother-in-law.

“We’re not official yet, but I plan on confessing to him next Valentine’s day.” The newfound big brother spewed absolute nonsense to his young charge.

“We’re never going to be official. He’s joking.” I frowned, enlightening the child. “He does this a lot, so pay him no mind. We’re just friends.”

“He’ll change his mind eventually.” Tachibana continued confidently, keeping up the farce.

“I will not,” I stated firmly, raising my voice a little too much. I cleared my throat and proceeded in my usual small, polite voice. “My grandmother would kill me.”

“Your grandma loves me.” The orange-haired menace sniggered with an annoying smirk.

“My grandmother hates you almost as much as you hate her,” I corrected. “The only thing she likes about you is your mother’s business empire.”

“Is that enough to be able to ask for your hand?” he pressed, but I was silent. “Do you think that’s enough to date you?”

I gave him no response, refusing to fan his flames.

“Is that enough to be able to get into your—”

“—HAJIME!” I snapped, slamming my palm down against the tabletop in front of him.

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86 Itadakimasu is a phrase meaning “I will now receive”. It is used before a meal in Japan.
Tachibana just stared at me, mouth slightly open in wonder. He was just about as shocked as I was at my actions.

I blushed and dropped my gaze. “Uh…there’s a child in the room,” I quietly added in explanation.

“R-right.” My friend nodded, still staring at me and blushing a little himself.

“Sorry.” I bowed slightly, wishing to sink into the ground. “That was a little over the top. I shouldn’t have shouted like that, and I’m sorry for using your first name without permission. I know how much you hate it. That was really rude of me.”

“It’s fine,” he mumbled, still in a bit of a state. “It’s my fault for making you so angry. E-excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

I sighed and sank down onto a barstool once he was out of the room. I took a deep breath and ran my fingers through my messy, light brown hair. I couldn’t believe that I had yelled at him like that. What was I thinking?

“Are you sure you two aren’t an item?” A sweet little voice startled me out of my thoughts.

I had forgotten that Tsubasa was still in the room.

“Because I think that you’d make a really cute couple,” she continued without waiting for my answer.

“What?” I blinked.

“I’m actually a big fan of *shounen ai*[^87], and I’ve seen this kind of thing a lot. It’s very common for childhood friends to fall in love with each other.” She looked like an innocent girl on the outside, but the words leaving her mouth led me to believe that she was more mature than I had originally thought.

“How old are you again?” I stared at her with a deadpan expression.

“Ten years old.” She replied with a charming smile. “I’ll be eleven in December.”

“You don’t read *yaoi*[^88], do you?”

“I’m not old enough to read *yaoi*…yet,” she responded, making big, innocent eyes at me. I would not be fooled ever again.

“Good.” I nodded, a little worried for the next generation.

Thankfully Tachibana returned before we could elaborate further upon this subject.

[^87]: *Shounen ai* (boy’s love) is a genre of manga and anime that centers on romantic relationships between boys or men. It is sometimes implied that things happen off-screen, but no explicit content beyond kissing is shown.

[^88]: *Yaoi* is like *shounen ai*, only with explicit content.
“Sorry about that. I’ll tone it down a bit, okay?”

“Sure,” I quickly agreed, wanting to put this all behind us.

“Great. Then let’s go to the park and get some ice cream as soon as Tsubasa finishes her lunch, okay?” As always, it amazed me at how rapidly Tachibana bounced back and was able to pretend that nothing was wrong. Perhaps it was a defense mechanism.

“A park?” the pixie cried with glee. “With a sandbox and a swing set and a slide too?”

“Sure. The one by my house has all those. I don’t really know of any other parks around here.” I spared her a small grin. It was relieving to see her acting her age again. Frankly, I had been a little freaked out by her earlier behavior. Kids should act like kids.

Things were still a little awkward between Tachibana and me on the way to the park, so the journey was passed in relative quiet, broken only by Tsubasa’s frequent questions and quirky comments. When we arrived at the park, Tachibana’s new little sister ran off to play with the other children, leaving us alone.

The resident punk smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “So…wanna get kakigoori\(^{89}\)? I’ll buy.”

“Sure. Thanks.” His grin was contagious.

We sat on one of the wooden benches on the outskirts of the park with our shaved ice treats, watching as Tsubasa scampered to and fro along with all the other munchkins. It was awkwardly silent again.

“Tachibana, I really am sorry for yelling like that. I overreacted.” I looked to the West at the mountains looming in the background of the city. I sighed and took a bite of my green tea-flavored kakigoori.

“I’m not mad, Akira.” He pressed his kakigoori container to my cheek, causing me to jump in surprise at the sudden cold. He seemed to get a kick out of my reaction.

“You’re not mad?” I repeated, pushing his hand away from my face.

“No.” He smiled as he wiped a syrup smudge from the corner of my mouth with his napkin. “I’m not mad at you. It’s my own fault for teasing you so much, anyway. I should know better after almost four years.” He sounded a little disheartened at this.

“You know, I don’t always mind so much,” I tried my best to comfort him, but I didn’t

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\(^{89}\) Japanese shaved ice flavored with syrup. Some of the most popular flavors are melon, grape, strawberry, lemon, cherry, and green tea. Traditionally, the ice was hand-shaved, but it is more common to use an electric shaver nowadays. Usually condensed milk is poured on top of the ice.
quite understand the problem. “but when you make jokes about me sleeping with you, that’s crossing a line.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The orange-haired rebel nodded with a hint of a grin. “Open your mouth.” He held out his spoon.

I obeyed without much thought, letting him feed me.

“What do you think?” Tachibana inquired.

“I prefer green tea to melon.” I shrugged.

“Let me have a taste,” he begged, so I gave him a spoonful of my own dessert. His nose crumbled up as soon as the bitter taste touched his tongue. “As I thought, melon is superior to green tea flavoring.”

“Says you.” I rolled my eyes and turned to watch Tsubasa-chan on the swings.

It was quiet for a moment as we both watched the energetic tyke. Then Tachibana broke the silence with: “Hey, that was our first indirect kiss, wasn’t it?”

I did a double take. “What?”

“Well, you used my spoon, and then I used yours. That’s an indirect kiss, isn’t it?” And then he smiled cutely.

“I wanted to wipe that innocent-looking grin right off his face. “That doesn’t count.”

“Why not? Saliva was exchanged by our mouths coming into contact with the same items. That’s as real as kisses get—I mean, unless I stick my tongue down your throat. But we were talking about indirect kisses, weren’t we? I guess I should have said that that’s as close to a real kiss as you can get. So...why doesn’t that count as an indirect kiss?”

I looked away, blushing. “Because we’re both boys.” I tried hard to remove the images that he had implanted in my head with his infernal babbling.

He just chuckled and patted me on the head. “Oh, sweet, innocent Akira. Biological sex doesn’t make one ounce of difference.”

“Speaking of Tsubasa-chan, what do you think of her?” I quickly changed the topic, feeling a little uncomfortable with his teasing and flirting.

The corporate heir shrugged and went with it. “I like her a lot. She’s a real sweetheart.”

“Good.” I smiled. “I’m glad. You two seem to get along well.”

“And what do you think?”

“Honestly, I’m a little worried that she’s so cheerful,” I replied truthfully. “If I had just lost my dad and step-mom in a violent car accident, I’d be a lot more shaken and distant. She seems normal for the most part.”
“She’s probably just not dealing with it.” Tachibana’s mahogany eyes shifted to his little sister, and he got that serious look on his face. “She probably feels that by pretending it never happened, things will be able to go back to normal.”

“You sound like you have some experience in these matters,” I quietly added.

“I’m a master of not dealing with things.”

“That can’t be healthy, Tachi.” At first I had thought that I was the one with the problems, but I had since learned that even though Tachibana seemed strong and cheerful, it was all an act.

“I know.” He gave an ironic chuckle. “But it’s okay, really. I’ve got you now, and I’ll be there for Tsubasa when she finally breaks down and needs someone to comfort her.”

“She’s lucky to have you.” With a small grin I finished off the last of my kakigoori.

“I hope I’m up to the task.” My dear friend chewed on the inside of his cheek nervously.

“You’ll do fine,” I assured him, and then I said something just to get him to smile: “You know, I forgot to tell you that the other day my grandmother asked about when you were coming over again. I think she may be starting to like you. Maybe you’ll be able to ask for my hand soon.”

This got a hardy laugh out of my companion.

I made time each day that week to go hang out with Tachibana and Tsubasa-chan. We saw movies at the theatre while munching on popcorn, went window-shopping around Kyoto Station, and visited some local temples and shrines. All in all, I’d have to say it went fairly well. The young Tsubasa thoroughly enjoyed herself, and Tachibana and I managed to have a decent time ourselves.

Of course, my grandmother was opposed to all the time I was spending outside of the house. She wanted to know why I wasn’t taking advantage of all my free time, using it to study for college entrance exams.

I then politely informed her that I was out with Tachibana, showing his little sister around Kyoto. This bit of news made her do a one-eighty. Tachibana had a sister? How old was she? Five years wasn’t such a big age gap. I should spend as much time as I could with this girl. Wouldn’t it be great if I could marry into the Tachibana Group?

I nodded and agreed to everything she said, not caring, for once, that she only saw my

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90 Temples are Buddhist places of worship while shrines are for Shinto, the indigenous folk religion of Japan.
friends as a means to the end of gaining social influence and wealth. I didn’t bother telling her that Tsubasa was more interested in playing outside than in boys. I also neglected to mention that I wasn’t a pedophile, so there was no way in hell that I was ever asking a ten-year-old out. No, I kept my mouth shut, smiled, and nodded, knowing that that was my ticket out of the house.

“I have a date tonight, so I won’t be eating dinner,” I announced to my family upon my return from my day out with the Tachibana siblings.

“How exciting!” Mother squealed, absolutely thrilled at the prospect of my getting a girlfriend. “What’s her name? How did you two meet?”

“I forbid you to go,” Grandma Ayame decreed. “I’ve allowed you to go out every day this week, Akira. Now, it’s time you do some studying.”

“But, **Obaasan**, it would be rude not to go after Tachibana went to the trouble of arranging everything for me. The restaurant reservation’s already been made, and the movie tickets have already been bought. It would be a shame to waste them, don’t you think? Also, I would hate to upset Tachibana’s friend that he set me up with by canceling on her at the last minute. Who knows? She could be somebody really important.” I had become uncommonly good at playing my cards right with my grandmother ever since I had met Tachibana.

“Well then, of course you can go,” the normally strict matriarch conceded, readjusting her dark blue summer **yukata**. “You should have told me that it was arranged by Tachibana-kun earlier. Be sure to make a good first impression.”

“So you don’t know the girl?” My mother nudged her way back into the conversation.

“No. He wouldn’t even tell me her name. I’m meeting her at the restaurant at four thirty.” I sighed, wishing I knew more. I hated blind dates more than anything.

“Which restaurant?” My well-meaning mother pried gently.

“Wakuden in Kyoto Station. It’s on the eleventh floor with the rest of the food court.” I took a seat at the counter, patiently answering all of her questions.

“That place can be awfully expensive at dinner time. Is Tachibana-kun paying again? He’s such an upstanding young man.” It was cute how excited she was.

“For a punk,” I replied in English, rolling my eyes fondly.

“What else are you doing for your date?” She looked like a puppy with her big blue eyes staring up at me. I was getting to be taller than she was.

“Tachibana wants me to take her shopping after dinner, and then we’re going to see a

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91 **Yukata** are summer-time kimonos. Instead of being made out of silk, they are usually made of cotton.
movie. I’ll probably walk her home if I can after that. If she lives too far, I’ll offer to get her a taxi, or she’ll take the train home or something.”

“Oh! I hope you get to walk her home!” my romantic of a mother cried in glee, clasping her hands together in front of her chest. “Then you’ll have to give her a good night kiss like we do in America.”

“It’s indecent to kiss someone you’ve only known for a few short hours,” Grandma Ayame graciously offered her opinion.

“I’m with her on this matter,” I stated plainly in English with a shrug of my shoulders. “You’re no fun.” Carol Kimura began to pout.

“So I’ve been told.” I stifled a laugh, trying not to be disrespectful but finding it hard to do considering the face she was making. “Well, I’ve got to go get ready. Please excuse me.”

“Come show us what you’re wearing before you leave!” my mother called after me, more enthusiastic for this date than I would ever be.

I ended up wearing a pair of tan slacks, a nice black shirt, and a white denim jacket. I combed my wild, coffee-colored locks until they agreed to lay somewhat flat, and I dabbed a bit of cologne on my wrists and collarbone before I headed downstairs to show off the finished product.

“You look adorable!” Mother shrieked, throwing her arms around me. “That girl’s not going to know what hit her when she sees you.”

Grandma Ayame only nodded, keeping a perfectly straight face.

I smiled softly, knowing that that was her nod of approval. “Wish me luck.” I grinned as I headed out the door. “Ittekimasu.”

“Itterasshai!” my family responded, my mother waving from the doorway with a grin.

The doorman informed me that I was the first of my party to arrive when I gave him the name the reservation was under.

I was escorted to a table for two by the window, which offered a spectacular view of Kyoto Tower just as the sun was descending behind the mountains. It really was a beautiful restaurant with its wood flooring, dim lighting, and elaborate centerpieces fashioned out of seasonal flowers.

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92 Literally meaning “I will go and come back”, ittekimasu is said when leaving the house.
93 Itterasshai, “Please go and come back”, is the response to ittekimasu, said by those remaining at home as the other person leaves.
“Konbanwa94, Akira-kun. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

I looked up to see the female Shihoudani standing beside me, looking nervous. She was dressed up as Misa from Death Note95, wearing a black dress with a corset-like bodice and ruffled skirt that stopped mid-thigh. Her black platform boots came to just above her knees, and her lacey, fingerless gloves stopped right above her elbows. Around her neck she wore a large, silver cross and a black, lace choker. Her lips were painted vermillion red, and she had a small section of her hair up in pigtails while the rest of it hung down in her face.

Why hadn’t I noticed how pretty she was before? “Uh…konbanwa, Kasumi-san.”

“You haven’t been waiting long, have you?” She looked away as she took her seat across from me.

“No. Not at all.” Then a thought occurred to me. “You’re my date?”

She nodded demurely, lacing her fingers together in her lap. “I’m sorry. I asked Hajime-kun not to tell you because I was afraid you wouldn’t come if you knew.” Kasumi was acting completely different from usual. Instead of the bold, confident girl I was used to, a shy, unsure girl was sitting before me. Could this possibly be the real Kasumi?

“Why do you say that?” Though, it was true that I would have been extremely reluctant to show up, if I had known that I would be spending an evening alone with Kasumi.

“Well,” She picked distractedly at the lace of her gloves. “and I could be wrong, but it sometimes seems to me that you don’t enjoy being around me very much. It kind of feels like you avoid me, so I thought that perhaps you don’t really like me.”

“I can assure you that that’s not true.” Now I felt guilty for thinking badly of her. “I’m very sorry if I ever hurt your feelings, Kasumi-san. It’s just that I’m very awkward around girls. They make me really nervous.”

“Oh.” She blinked her big, dark eyes, and a relieved smile bloomed upon her lips. “Thank you. I’m really happy that it’s not just me, Akira-kun.”

We made chitchat a little awkwardly as we waited for our food to arrive. Tachibana had insisted that we eat kaiseki96, ensuring that the meal would last at least an hour and a half—

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94 Konbanwa means “Good evening”.
95 Death Note is about a teenage boy named Light who finds a notebook with the power to kill whomever’s name is written in it, provided that the user knows what the person looks like. Light uses the Death Note to kill criminals, gaining media and police attention. Misa, another Death Note user, feels indebted to Kira (the name the police and media use to refer to the mysterious force killing criminals. It is perhaps a play on the English word “killer”) because he killed the man that murdered her family. Misa finds Light, and he agrees to become her boyfriend so that he can use her to evade the police and continue his crusade for justice.
96 A specialty of Kyoto, kaiseki is a traditional Japanese multi-course meal using fresh, seasonal ingredients. It
plenty of time to talk and get to know each other better.

The first dish was an appetizer of sesame tofu with black sesame miso paste. That was followed by steamed red sea bream and turnip soup with a dollop of wasabi on top. Next, we were served salmon sashimi cut into small triangles and arranged like a flower on the plate.

I looked up at my dining companion. “Do you eat fish, Kasumi-san?”

“I do,” She replied, delicately sipping at her tea. “Fish and seafood, but not when it has a head or tail or anything.”

I nodded, not really having much to say and feeling a little uneasy.

Fortunately, after the kabayaki-style97 eel had been served, Kasumi started up a conversation. “Have you ever seen Fullmetal Alchemist98, Akira-kun?”

“Actually, I have.” It was a really touching and thought-provoking story. “I read the manga and watched both anime. Why do you ask?”

“I thought that it would be better to ask than just sit here in uncomfortable silence.” She chuckled lightly. “Do you have a favorite character?”

“I really liked Greed,” I confessed. “Even though he wasn’t human, he was able to make friends that he truly cared about. I think he had a good heart despite his obvious character flaws. What about you, Kasumi-san?”

“I liked Lieutenant Hawkeye the best. She was always by Colonel Mustang’s side, supporting him no matter what. Even when her life was in danger, she continued helping him, acting as his spy. It was especially touching when she lay there dying, yet she told him not to try to resurrect her because it would put him in danger. She was really strong, and I admire that about her.”

I nodded in agreement as the next course arrived. The fried dish consisted of various tempura vegetables.

“So…Kasumi-san, do you have a favorite movie?” I felt that it was my turn to start a discussion, but movies were all that came to mind.

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usually consists of an appetizer, seasonal sashimi (slices of raw fish; like sushi, but without the rice), a simmered dish, a grilled dish, a steamed dish, a fried dish, a rice dish, a seasonal dessert, and whatever else the chef sees fit to serve.

97 Kabayaki–style eel is eel that has been deboned, filleted, and then covered in a very sweet sauce made of soy sauce, mirin (sweet rice wine used for cooking), and sugar.

98 Fullmetal Alchemist is a manga and two anime series about a pair of brothers, Edward and Alphonse, who try to bring their mother back from the dead using alchemy. In the process, Ed loses a leg and Al’s entire body is taken away. Ed sacrifices an arm to take back his brother’s soul, which he then binds to a suit of armor. Ed undergoes an operation to have his missing limbs replaced with metal automail appendages, and then the two boys set off on a quest to find the philosopher’s stone in order regain their original bodies.
“I enjoy Miyazaki Hayao movies.” She grinned prettily, getting excited just thinking about it. “I like Spirited Away best, but the rest of his movies are quite good too. Did you see My Neighbor Totoro?”

I bit my lip and decided to be honest. “I actually really hated that movie. The cat bus scared me as a kid, and I didn’t quite get the plot. I really liked Howl’s Moving Castle, though.”

“Are you kidding me?!”. Apparently I had committed the taboo of taboos. “How could anyone hate My Neighbor Totoro?! That movie was the best! I watched it over and over again when I was a kid. Kazuki and I used to do the dance in the movie, and we’d wait for the Totoro to come and play with us. How can you call yourself Japanese if you hate Totoro?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “So what did you watch when you were a kid if it wasn’t Totoro?”

I shrugged defensively. “Doraemon\textsuperscript{99}, just like everybody else.”

“I never liked Doraemon,” Kasumi announced as the assorted sushi and miso soup arrived, signaling the end of the meal. The waiter gave her a strange look, but Kasumi continued speaking regardless. “I found the premise a little silly. Why would a robot cat help a normal schoolboy? That show’s been on since the seventies; after forty years, I’d be sick of getting Nobita-kun out of every hole he dug himself into.”

“Why would giant, fuzzy forest spirits come take two little girls to see their mother in the hospital on a cat bus?” I returned under my breath.

“Because Miyazaki-sensei\textsuperscript{100} says so,” she countered, popping a kappa zushi\textsuperscript{101} into her mouth.

“Right.” I rolled my eyes, finishing off my miso soup. “Any other favorite movies?”

“The Death Note live action series. I haven’t seen the last one with L as the protagonist yet, but I hope to see it as soon as it comes out on video. Have you seen them? Thank you.” She smiled at the waiter as he set down a bowl of green tea ice cream in front of her. It was decorated with a thin wafer and a small maple leaf.

“I saw the first two. The L movie looked kind of weird, so I don’t know if I’ll see it or not.” I happily began devouring my favorite dessert. “I liked the ending better in the movies than in the manga.”

\textsuperscript{99} Doraemon is a robot cat from the future. He has tons of useful gadgets that he uses to help Nobita, a normal schoolboy.

\textsuperscript{100} Sensei is the word for teacher in Japanese. It can also be used with doctors, instructors, or anyone one considers a mentor. Manga artists are often called -sensei by their assistants and fans.

\textsuperscript{101} Kappa zushi is a piece of cucumber surrounded by rice and wrapped in seaweed. Kappa are spirits that feed on human entrails. It is said that if you carve your name into a cucumber and throw it into a river, the kappa will leave
“I did too.” Kasumi smiled, a small blush pooling in her cheeks. “Though, I feel that Light’s death had more dignity to it at the end of the manga. I was happy, though, with how things turned out at the end of the movie.”

After dinner we walked around the underground part of Kyoto Station, window-shopping and chatting some more. It was actually kind of fun talking to her, even if we only had a limited range of things to talk about. She mostly enjoyed discussing anime, manga, music, and fashion. She didn’t know much about culture, history, or politics, but we managed to have halfway decent conversations most of the time.

We walked south a few streets from Kyoto Station to get to Kujodori, the street Tachibana lived on. Across the street from his house was Kyoto Minami Kaikan where we had tickets to see the second movie in a popular vampire series.

I had not yet seen the first one, but Tsubasa-chan happened to be a huge fan, and she had explained the plot to me the previous day while we were at the park. Apparently, in the first movie, a telepath falls in love with a vampire, and they work together to solve a string of murders that appear to have been committed by another vampire but turn out to be a frame job. It sounded interesting enough for a vampire romance story.

The plot of the second movie centered on the couple helping another vampire to locate a really old vampire that had gone missing. It was okay, but, truth be told, I was more interested in the popcorn. The movie was a little too racy for my tastes—I made a mental note to tell Tachibana about what his little sister was watching.

I was further made uncomfortable when Kasumi’s knee brushed against mine. There was also an awkward incident when her hand “accidentally” touched mine on the armrest. I patiently endured it all for two hours, ridiculously happy when it ended and I was able to go home.

“So, what did you think, Akira-kun?” Kasumi inquired as I walked her home.

“The cinematography was very good, so I can appreciate it, but the movie wasn’t really my kind of film,” I sheepishly admitted. “Did you like it, Kasumi-san?”

“Un.” She nodded. “I liked the books more, but the film did a very good job staying true to the author’s original intent—more so than the TV series did.”

“Oh, so it was a book series?” I tried to keep her talking as long as possible, for I had nothing else to say after we finished with this topic.

you alone.
“Yeah. My big sister has all of them; I found them on the bookshelf in her room after she moved away for university. I liked them a lot because they had a good balance of action and romance.” My companion blushed as my hand bumped into hers.

“Sorry.” I bowed slightly, sticking my hand into my pocket to keep her from inferring that I wanted to hold her hand. “You have a big sister, Kasumi-san? How old is she?”

“Mitsuki-neechan is twenty. I also have a big brother, Tatsuki, who’s twenty-four. Do you have any siblings, Akira-kun?” She smiled fondly up at me, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

“Not unless you count Tachibana.” I chuckled, knowing how happy it would make him to know I considered him a brother. “I always wanted siblings, though. I never had friends growing up, so I was really lonely.”

“How sad…but you have friends now, right?” She grinned, trying to console me in her own way.

“Yeah. Thanks, Kasumi-san.” I paused as we came to her front gate.

“You can call me ‘Kasumi’, you know.” She giggled. Her offer meant that she wanted to be closer to me, on a more intimate level.

I was busy thinking of a good way to politely turn her down without hurting her feelings, so I didn’t realize immediately that she was leaning in to kiss me. As soon as I noticed her encroaching lips, I stepped back before I could stop myself, ruining my chance of politely declining her advances.

She looked hurt and a little disappointed at my outright rejection.

I bowed at the waist so that I wouldn’t have to see that wounded look in her eyes. “I’ll keep that in mind, Kasumi-san. Thank you very much. I had a wonderful time. Goodnight.” With that I turned on my heel and started speed walking home.

“Goodnight, Akira-kun.” I heard her faintly mumble to my retreating back.

I sighed, feeling like a total jerk. The right thing to have done would have been to let her kiss me on the cheek and then kiss her cheek too. I should have smiled and thanked her for the honor of calling her by her first name. I had totally blown it.

With another heavy exhale, I fished my cell phone out of my jacket pocket and pushed number one on my speed dial.

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102 “Un” is a sound of agreement or understanding. It is also an informal way of saying “yes.”
103 Oneesan is the word for big sister in Japanese. Like oniisan, it can be added as an honorific to someone’s name. It is used for an actual big sister or to refer to a young woman in her teens or twenties.
“Are you mad at me?” Tachibana picked up on the first ring.

“No. I’m not mad.” Even if I had been angry with him, it would have been impossible to hold a grudge against him for long.

“You sound upset. Did it not go well?” I could hear him plopping down on his bed.

“It was okay for the most part. Until the end,” I explained myself. “Dinner was delicious—thanks again. We didn’t have a whole lot to talk about, but we managed to hold at least a couple worthwhile discussions. She liked shopping—I didn’t—and she really liked the movie too.”

“Did you like the movie?” he teased. “All the blood and sex really sets the mood, don’t you think?”

“I do not.” I rolled my eyes at his crude thoughts.

“Really?” he gasped in total disbelief. “Man. What does it take to get you turned on? You don’t have some weird fetish, do you?”

“No weirder than you having a thing for westerners,” I returned his serve.

“Oh. Touché.”

“Did you know that your little sister’s seen those movies?” I veered the subject slightly to the left.

“The heck?! Dude, seriously?” Tachibana cried in a fit of paternal rage. “What kind of parents did that kid have before me? What kind of parents let their ten year-old watch that stuff?”

“Perhaps they didn’t keep very close tabs on her TV viewing habits? She also told me that she really likes shounen ai. She wants to start reading yaoi soon too, as soon as she’s a little older.”

“Hell no!” the new father shouted, almost taking my eardrum out. “There’s no way I’m letting her read that! Shounen ai’s just fine, but the majority of yaoi is just a bunch of pointless bedroom scenes in every chapter.”

“How would you know what the majority of yaoi is like?” I inquired, not meaning to be malicious.

There was silence on the other end of the line. “…or so I’ve heard.” There was another pause. “You know what? Don’t judge me. We were talking about your date. What happened after the raunchy movie that didn’t do it for you?”

I shrugged and went with it. “I walked her home, and we were standing at her gate when she told me to call her by her first name.”

“Oooh. Big step forward in the relationship.” He sounded just like a schoolgirl hearing
some juicy gossip. “Then what happened?”

“Well, I was thinking of some way I could politely decline. I know it shouldn’t be a big deal to just call her ‘Kasumi’ and let her call me ‘Akira’ in order to keep the peace and not make things awkward, but…it’s hard for me. Outside of my family, there’s no one that I’m on a just the name without the honorific basis with. I mean, besides you, but…you’re special.”

“Thanks, Aki, but since you don’t seem too keen to settle down with me and start a family, I’d suggest extending that honor to some females…or other males, if you’d rather.” I could tell he was smiling that cheeky, lopsided smirk of his. “Seriously, you’ve got to open up to someone besides me. I’ll always be there for you, Akira, but it’d be good to have someone else too. A backup plan never hurts.”

“It’s hard.” I sighed, sitting down on my front step and cupping my chin in my hand. “I don’t know why, but I’m always afraid of getting hurt.”

“It’s okay to be afraid sometimes,” His soothing voice comforted me. “but I think that you’re letting your fear get in your way. I don’t want you to miss out just because you’re afraid.”

“Yeah…I know.”

“Tell me what happened after Kasumi-chan said that you could use her first name,” he urged me to continue.

“She leaned in to kiss me, and—”

—WHAT?! I was promptly interrupted, and my eardrum shattered like a windowpane. “Seriously?! That was your first kiss, wasn’t it?! I can’t believe her! I explicitly told her no kissing! How dare she!? That’s it! Friendship over! I’m so going to—”

—Tachi! I didn’t kiss her!” I shouted to be heard over his angry monologue.

“What?” It took a minute for his brain to come out of ranting mode and interpret my message. “Oh. Good. Keep it that way. Kissing’s not that great, you know. Girls are icky. You should stay single for as long as you can.”

“You’re overreacting, Tachibana.” I shook my head and chuckled, well accustomed to his flair for the dramatic. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m not all that interested in girls yet, so you don’t have to worry about guarding my innocence. Maybe in a few years.”

“Good.” I could sense him nodding, immensely relieved at this revelation.

“Anyway, what I was trying to say was that I balked. I think I really hurt her feelings, and I’m not sure what to do to apologize properly to her. I feel really bad about it.” I sighed, running my fingers through my hair.

There was pensive silence on the other end. “You should just tell her how you feel.”

“Then tell me, and I’ll tell her for you,” my lifesaver offered.

“Thank you, Tachibana,” I whispered. “I want to tell her that I enjoy her company, and I want to be friends, but I’m really shy, and I’m not ready for a real relationship yet. Do you think that you could make it sound a little less lame?”

“If you allow me to take a few artistic liberties with your phrasing, I’m sure that I can make it sound cool.” My savior chuckled.

“Sure. Why not? You already take liberties left and right. Why not take some with my words as well?” I snorted lightly, only half joking.

“Must we talk with such a patronizing tone to the person who’s going to save our behind?”

“I beg for your forgiveness, O Great and Powerful Tachibana-sama. I am unworthy,” I continued sarcastically. “…I owe you.”

“Nah. Debt doesn’t exist between us.” He waved away my immense gratitude with a nonchalant flick of his wrist. “No one’s keeping score here, but, if you want to make me happy, you’ll come on a group date next Friday with the gang and some of my girlfriend’s friends. Shoko has some real babes hanging around her, so maybe you’ll find someone you get along with. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” I replied in a small voice, wishing I had better words to express my appreciation for all he did for me.

“No prob. I’ll talk to Kasumi-chan too as soon as we hang up, okay?”

“Really, Tachibana, thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Classic Tachibana—never taking into account the gravity of the situation. “Check ya later, Aki. Dream of me.”

“Oyasumi, Tachibana.” I sighed. He had to go and ruin the moment with his compulsive flirting. “See you tomorrow.”

“Ja ne.” There was a soft click as he disconnected.

I put my phone back into my pocket, exchanging it for my house key. I opened the door as quietly as possible and slipped on my house shoes.

The hardest part of the gauntlet came next—tiptoeing pass both Mother and Grandma

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104 Ja ne is an informal way of saying goodbye. It would be something like “Later” or “See ya” in English.
Ayame’s rooms to get to the stairway. My grandmother was like a bear when she had just woken up, so if she caught me sneaking in late, I would be a dead man.

I held my breath and moved ever so slowly, listening closely, straining my ears to hear the sounds of my family sleeping. Every little noise seemed to be amplified by a hundred whenever I was coming home late. The noises the house made when it settled were like the roars of hungry dinosaurs tearing through the jungle. The squeaks of the floorboards were the screams of innocents running for their lives. If a pen dropped, it sounded like a tree crashing against the forest floor.

Every time I heard such a sound, I paused, held my breath, and listened for the stirring of my grandmother. Every time my heart felt like it would burst forth from my chest, and the pounding in my ears seemed like tribal drummers.

Once I had made it through the kitchen and the living room, pass the other inhabitants’ bedrooms, it was a simple task, climbing the staircase. There were thirteen steps in total if you counted the landing on the second floor, and steps number four, five, eight, and eleven were the ones that squeaked.

In order to ascend without alerting the general populace, one had to step on the right side of steps five and four, to the left side of step eight, and directly in the middle of step eleven. If that was accomplished, one was home free, safe from the threat of being mauled by Grandma Ayame with her long hair wild from being confined in that cruelly tight bun and that green gook that she applied to her face before bed. I used to think that she looked like an alien at night when I was little.

After completing the very difficult task of sneaking into my house without waking anyone, I got ready for bed and then retired to my room. I sighed as my head hit the pillow. I was exhausted from my long day, but I was unable to get a restful sleep. My thoughts and dreams were plagued with Kasumi-san’s injured expression. I wondered if Tachibana really could perform a miracle and make her forgive me.
Chapter Four: Friendship (Yujou)

It was Friday of the second week of August—the day of the group date—and I was hanging out with Tsubasa-chan and Tachibana at Kyoto Station. My friend and I were seated on the giant staircase just outside the Isetan department store’s eleventh floor where the food court resided. Tsubasa was running up and down the stairs with some other children, and we were sharing some mitarashi dango\(^{105}\) and an order of takoyaki with melted cheese, mayonnaise, katsuobushi\(^{106}\), and green onions. It was a mess, but it tasted delicious.

I was wrapped up telling Tachibana about this book I had just finished, so it took me a good ten minutes to realize that he was being oddly quiet. I halted my detailed explanation and stared curiously at him, looking for some hint as to what the matter was.

“Why’d you stop?” He looked up from our shared snack, returning my gaze.

“What’s wrong? You’re not very talkative today.” I poked his cheek playfully.

The normally exuberant punk shrugged and looked away. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not ‘nothing,’” I stated firmly. “If it’s bothering you, it’s not ‘nothing.’”

“I’m just tired, Aki, and I’m in a bad mood.” He popped an entire ball of takoyaki into his mouth. “My father’s being a real jerk lately. He either ignores Tsubasa completely or picks on her. I really just wanna sock him one. I know he’s pissed that his wife cheated on him and that there’s nothing he can say about it since he married into the Tachibana family. It must be humiliating to have to grin and bare it, but that’s not Tsubasa’s fault. The other guy’s dead—there’s no reason to be jealous now. He doesn’t have to take it out on her. She’s done nothing wrong, and she’s going through a really hard time right now.”

“Is she finally coming to terms with what happened to her parents?” I gently urged him on after he had paused for a good minute.

“I think so.” He sighed, running a hand through his fluffy orange mess of hair. “She’s been having nightmares, so she comes and sleeps with me. My father found her curled up in my bed the other day, and he threw a fit about how it’s indecent for a man and a woman to share a bed. I don’t know what the hell his deal is, but she’s just sleeping there. What kind of sick pervert does he think I am? I’m just trying to help her out however I can; it’s not like he’s being supportive.”

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\(^{105}\) Dango are dumplings made from rice-flour. Mitarashi refers to a sauce made of sugar, starch, soy sauce, and mirin in which the dumplings are covered. Dango are usually served on a skewer with two or three other dango.

\(^{106}\) Katsuobushi are dried flakes of fish that are usually put on top of other foods to add flavor.
I nodded in agreement, putting my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry you’re having such a hard time of it. Is there anything I can do to help?”

He paused in thought but then nodded. “Yeah. I want to take Tsubasa to a temple for the festival tomorrow night to get her mind off things. Can you come with? She really likes spending time with you; I think she has a bit of a crush. Please?”

“You just want to see me in a yukata.” I rolled my eyes and teased.

“Caught red-handed.” My dear companion smirked, raising his hands in mock defeat. “You know me too well. I just thought that you’d look really handsome, and it’d be a lot of fun to take you out of it afterwards.”

“Remember that line we talked about not crossing with your teasing?” I raised an eyebrow at him, a semi-annoyed look on my face.

“Just because I’m taking your clothes off doesn’t necessarily mean we’re going all the way,” he reasoned. “We could just be making out, you know.”

“Tachibana, stop,” I commanded, biting my lip. “The dirty images you’re putting in my head are making me uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable in a ‘my pants are too tight’ kind of way?”

I wanted to wipe that smirk clean off his face. “Can’t we ever talk about normal things?”

“I’m sorry we’re not talking about normal things.” He gave me a quizzical look.

“I sighed, picking up a dango skewer and looking away. “I guess I’m sick, then…or just abnormal.”

“No, Aki, you’re fine.” My confidant playfully nudged my shoulder. “It’s just that our personalities are different. Everybody’s different. Give it a couple years. Once you find a girl that you really like, you’ll start thinking about those kinds of things too. Until then, please try to put up with my dirty mind. You were telling me about a book you’d been reading?”

“Do you actually care?” I had to wonder sometimes if I bored him.

“I care enough that I’m sitting here listening to you instead of flirting with that group of girls over there. Since it’s important to you, I care.” There was that playful grin of his again.

This time I returned his smile. He really was a sweet guy despite his raging hormones.

“Thank you, but in lieu of talking about that book, is it all right if we talk about girls?”

Tachibana blinked. “I thought this day would never come. All right! Let’s talk about girls!”

“I meant Shoko-san’s friends.” I blushed. “I wanted to ask you about the girls that are going to be at the gathering tonight. Do you know any of them? What are they like?”
“Oh. Well. Not exactly the conversation I thought we were going to have, but I guess we’re still talking about girls.” My rambunctious friend seemed a little disappointed. “Well, Shoko’s bringing three of her friends: Kyoko, Michiko, and Minami. Kyoko-san’s a little bit loose, so she’ll probably get along best with Shigeki or Kazuki. Michiko-san’s a bit of an airhead. She likes fashion and boy bands; I think she’s into a lot of Johnny’s\textsuperscript{107} bands. Minami-san you might like. Shoko says that she likes history and culture and stuff. You two should have something to talk about.”

“Is Kasumi-san coming?” There would be an odd number of guys versus girls.

“Yeah.” He shrugged, offering me the last piece of takoyaki. “She said she just wanted to come hang out. I offered to get a guy for her, but she wasn’t interested. I think she’s still got her eye on you.”

“No thank you.” I sighed, declining the takoyaki. “I kind of don’t foresee any kind of future for Kasumi-san and me. I sort of hope she meets someone else soon; otherwise, it’s going to be a little awkward. I don’t want to hurt her feelings, Tachibana. I’m bad enough at dealing with women under normal conditions. I can’t handle them when they’re crying or otherwise emotionally distressed.”

“Settle down, dork.” Tachibana chuckled, patting me on the head. “I can assure you that everything will be fine, so don’t worry about it.”

“If you’re sure.” I picked up the last skewer of dango and stared at it, deep in contemplation of my complicated love life.

“Nii-chan! I’m bored!” Tsubasa-chan raced up the stairs, coming to a halt in front of us.

“Do you want to go home?” The caring big brother smiled dashingly, smoothing his little sister’s flyaway hair.

“Let’s go to Akira-niisan’s house for tea and cookies!” The enthusiastic child shouted with glee. “Akira-niis’s okaasan\textsuperscript{108} was showing me how to make them last time, and she let me eat the dough!”

“That’s fine with me, but you can’t just invite yourself over to someone’s house, Tsubasa. You have to ask permission first.” Apparently Tsubasa’s recently deceased parents had spoiled their child and neglected to teach her manners befitting an upper-class lady, so Tachibana had taken it upon himself to be the girl’s cotillion instructor.

\textsuperscript{107} Johnny Kitagawa recruits cute boys and trains them to sing, act, and dance. He is famous for manufacturing popular boy bands.

\textsuperscript{108} A respectful term for “mother”, used when talking to one’s own mother or when referring to someone else’s
Tsubasa-chan turned to me with pouty lips and big doe eyes. “Akira-niisan, may I please come over to your house? Pretty please?” She then tilted her head to the side and chewed cutely on her bottom lip. Tachibana had evidently been teaching her the art of manipulation as well.

It then occurred to me that there would soon be two Tachibanas running around, pulling me along on a string behind them. But she was so cute! How could I help but bend to her will? “Of course you can come over, Tsubasa-chan. Want a dango?”

“Only if you feed it to me.” The little demon in disguise closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

I obediently indulged her.

“Thank you!” she sang sweetly.

“May I have one too?” The other sibling made eyes at me, feigning innocence. “Please?”

“Sure, but I’m not feeding you.” I held out the skewer for him to take.

At this, the sixteen year-old child began to pout. “You don’t love me anymore, do you? Ever since we got Tsubasa you’ve been favoring her all the time. You always give her special treatment, but you shun and spurn me. All the romance is gone now that we have a child. I can feel our love dying.”

I rolled my eyes at the drama queen. “Shut your eyes and open your mouth.”

“With pleasure,” he chuckled.

After that nonsense was over, Tachibana turned to his little sister. “You know, Tsubasa, you can’t just show up at someone’s house without a proper gift. What are you going to do?”

Tsubasa-chan’s brow furrowed at this troublesome revelation, making her look extremely adorable. Then it seemed that an idea had come to her. Her umber eyes lit up, and she smiled sweetly at her older brother. “Nii-chan, can we go into the department store and pick something up? Please? Please?”

“Of course we can, Sweetheart.” The elder sibling lightly kissed the younger on the top of her head. “How about you pick something out and I’ll pay for it? Sound good?”

“You’re the best, Nii-chan!” And with that, Tsubasa-chan raced down the massive staircase to the first floor of the Isetan department store.

We followed her to the basement floor to the section selling gifts, and Tachibana helped her pick out some seasonal wagashi\(^\text{109}\).

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\(^{109}\) *Wagashi* literally means “Japanese sweets” or “confections.” There are four types: jelly, sugar, baked, and rice cake. They are made out of natural ingredients like fruit, nuts, and sweet beans. Like most Japanese food,
Tsubasa-chan choose several sweets that were shaped like cherries, peaches, loquats, and even watermelon slices. There were some other treats in the shape of flowers like lotuses and hydrangeas. Tsubasa also picked out some jelly wagashi; one was made from some kind of fruit purée gel in the shape of a sunflower. The other was a little jelly ball with an edible goldfish inside.

Tachibana paid for the sweets, and we headed back to my house on foot.

“Tadaima!” I called as I slipped on my indoor shoes.

“Okaerinasai,” both my grandmother and mother responded from the living room.

“Ojamashimasu.” Tachibana announced his presence and then coaxed Tsubasa to do the same as he helped her with her guest slippers.

My mother came to the door to greet us with a huge smile on her face. “Welcome home, Akira. Tachibana-kun! Tsubasa-chan! It’s so good to see you.”

“Okaasama!” Little Tsubasa ran to my mother’s arms, receiving a warm hug. “Are you well, Okaasama?”

“I’m doing very well indeed, Tsubasa-chan. How are you, Darling?” Tsubasa was like the daughter my mother never had.

“I’m super! Can we make cookies and tea please?” The little fairy looked up at my mom with big, mahogany eyes.

“Yes. Of course, dear. Come into the kitchen and give me a hand.” Mother escorted the little bundle of energy into the main room. “And how are you doing, Tachibana-kun?” She inquired of my friend over her shoulder.

“Well enough, Carol-san. Thank you for asking. You look quite lovely today, by the way.” The flattery and flirting began.

“You’re such a charmer.” She blushed, waving away his advances. “You boys can take a seat at the table or on the couch while Tsubasa-chan and I whip up some cookies, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom.” I smiled, taking my place at the dining room table.

“Tsubasa, aren’t you forgetting something?” Tachibana indicated the box with the wagashi inside.

The little lightning bolt raced over to get the box and then slowly approached my grandmother. She bowed deeply and greeted the imposing matriarch, holding out the gift. “Good presentation is a big part of wagashi.
afternoon, Obaasama. I hope that you are well. Thank you very much for having me in your home. It’s not much, but I hope you enjoy this small token of my appreciation.”

“Thank you very much, Tsubasa-chan, but a gift is not necessary. You and your brother are always welcome here. You shouldn’t have gone to the trouble.” My grandmother smiled. She smiled and patted the young girl on the head.

Tsubasa-chan looked back at her brother, unsure of what to do next.

Tachibana mouthed the lines to her.

“It’s no trouble at all, Obaasama. This is but a trifle. Please do me the honor of accepting and opening it,” the angel repeated.

“Very well then.” Grandma Ayame nodded, taking the box from Tsubasa and setting it on the table. “Thank you very much, Tsubasa-chan.” She undid the ribbon and opened the box to survey the beautiful selection of traditional confections. “How very lovely.”

“I picked them out myself,” Tsubasa sang happily, trying to keep from squirming too much in front of my grandmother. “Nii-chan paid for them, though.”

“You chose very well, my dear.” Grandmother praised the child openly. If only she said such words of approval as easily to me. “You have a very good sense of aesthetics. If you learn to cook well, I’m sure that you will be a fine bride for my grandson when you’re older.”

“Un!” Tsubasa agreed eagerly with a wide grin before running off to help my mother in the kitchen.

I blushed as Tachibana sniggered at me. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” He cleared his throat. “She’s so cute. I told you that she had a crush on you. You two should get married, ’cause I don’t know where else you’ll find a girl that gets along with your grandmother.”

“Am I so difficult to get along with, you worthless punk?” Grandma Ayame and Tachibana had taken to blatantly insulting each other over the years. It was their way of dealing with one another.

“You bet you are, you grouchy biddy,” Tachibana returned with a laugh.

At first I was worried because they didn’t seem to be getting along, but as their verbal battles continued over the years, I noticed that they did it as a way of showing affection. I first realized what was going on one night when Tachibana was sleeping over because he had gotten into a fight with his parents about preparing to take over the company. At dinner, Grandma Ayame kept putting more of Tachibana’s favorite foods on his plate and harping at him to eat more, even though he was too upset to eat much. Then, at the end of the meal, she gave him her
share of flan, claiming that she didn’t feel like eating it, even though it was one of her favorite
desserts.

I came to the realization that Tachibana was secretly fond of my grandmother as well when
she had to be hospitalized for a respiratory infection. He was really worried about her, so
much so that he visited her every other day until she was released. He brought flowers and other
gifts and even sat by her beside and peeled apples for her, all the while lecturing her about taking
care of her health.

I then came to accept that they had some sort of weird understanding. The only time they
truly fought was when Grandma Ayame berated or insulted me. Grandmother was extremely
strict and demanding, and Tachibana defended me fiercely every time she said anything bad
about me.

“Be careful not to burn yourself, Tsubasa.” The newfound father fretted like a mother hen
as his precious younger sibling inserted the pan of cookies into the oven.

“You’re adorable, you know that? The way you fuss over her.” I chuckled softly,
elbowing him in the ribs.

“What am I supposed to do?” he huffed indignantly. “She’s my responsibility. I promised
to protect her.”

I could only roll my eyes fondly at him. “I can’t wait to see you when she starts dating.”
At this I received a death glare. “Dude, don’t even mention that around me. She’s not
dating.”

“Seriously, what are you going to do when she starts getting interested in boys?” I
inquired in earnest.

“Lock her in her room,” he growled.

“Tachi, she’s going to want to get married and start a family some day. You can’t just
keep her to yourself forever.” I tried to talk sense into him, but he was as stubborn as a cat
determined to lie in the sun all day.

“She’s not getting married,” the over-protective brother decreed. “I refuse to believe that
there’s a man out there worthy of my child.” Then his eyes fell on me, assessing my value.
“Except, maybe, for you…but only because I’m familiar with your personality, dating history,
family background, and deepest darkest secrets. You’d still have to get down on the ground and
beg, though, if you wanted to marry her. After that, I might consider letting you have her.
Maybe.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for whenever I become a pedophile.” I scoffed.
“After you’re both adults, a five-year age gap isn’t all that much.” Tachibana easily shrugged it off.

Further discussion was halted as Tsubasa-chan approached. “Nii-chan! The cookies will be ready in ten minutes.”

“Really? What kind are they?” Tachibana motioned for her to sit.

“Sugar,” the pixie announced proudly, taking her place between us.

“You’ll have to make them for Mother and Father sometime. I’m sure they’d be proud of your abilities,” the elder brother suggested, patting the little girl on the head.

“You think so?” Her burnt sienna eyes grew big as they filled with hope. “You think Father will really be proud of me?”

“Of course,” he assured with that dazzling grin of his. “And if he’s not, I’ll have to beat some sense into him. Any normal person would be proud to have such a charming, talented daughter. I don’t know what his problem is, but it’s not your fault, Tsubasa. You’re a good girl.” He kissed her softly on the forehead and mussed her midnight black hair.

My mother openly cooed at the precious sight.

I smiled gently, mentally cooing along with her. “Tachi, I don’t know what you were so worried about; you’re a great big brother. Actually, you seem like a pretty good father too.”

“Thanks a lot, Aki, but it’s only because Tsubasa’s such a lamb.” He openly displayed his mirthful, lop-side grin. “She makes my job easy.”

“It’s great that you get along so well, though,” Mother chimed in, bringing the cookies over on a plate. “They’re still very hot, so you have to wait for them to cool. Why don’t we all eat some wagashi while we wait? Tsubasa-chan, you can pick whichever ones you want.”

“You can have two,” Tachibana informed his charge. “The cook will kill me if I completely spoil your dinner with dango and cookies and tea and wagashi.”

“But they’re so little,” the dove whined, giving her brother the puppy dog eyes.

“You’ll have cookies too, so just two, Tsubasa-chan.” The elder Tachibana held firm.

“Yes, Nii-chan.” The little one sighed, picking her two sweets very carefully. In the end, she chose a watermelon slice and a wagashi with a jelly goldfish swimming inside.

After the little angel had finished her wagashi and eaten two sugar cookies besides, her older brother announced that it was time to go. “Akira and I have to get ready for our date tonight, so we have to head back home.”

“But I want to stay longer,” the imp pouted, “and I don’t want you to go on a date.”

“Don’t worry,” Tachibana reassured. “No matter how many girls I date, the only one for
me is you, Tsubasa, my love.” He placed a kiss on her cheek and led her to the door. “Thank you very much for having us in your home.” My friend bowed to my family.

“It’s always a pleasure, Tachibana-kun, Tsubasa-chan,” Mother reitered with a girlish grin.

“You are always welcome.” Grandmother nodded civilly.

“See you at five.” I waved them off from the doorway.

The gang met up outside of the restaurant called Aoi-Jaya at Kyoto Station at four forty-five. We requested a booth seat in the corner, away from the other customers, so that we could be loud without disturbing anyone. It was only Kazuki-san, Kasumi-san, Shigeki-san, and Tachibana at first because the girls were expected to come a little late for a group date. Kasumi-san was only there early because she had left the house with her brother.

“So, are you excited for this?” Shigeki-san smirked, elbowing Kazuki-san in the ribs.

“Duh. It isn’t every day you get to meet cute girls.” The younger Shihoudani twin chuckled in an almost conspiratorial manner. “I mean, hanging out with you losers is fun, but there’s always too much testosterone. You know what I mean?”

“I hear you.” Kasumi-san rolled her eyes, a snide grin on her lips. “We could use a few more girls in our group.”

Kasumi-san was acting normal for the most part, though, she didn’t make eye contact or speak directly to me, which could be signs that she was avoiding me. Perhaps it was for the best. At least things weren’t awkward between us.

At about a quarter after five, Shoko-san and her friends showed up. Tachibana’s girlfriend was a stylish, modern girl with large hoop earrings and her midriff exposed at all times, despite the weather. She was also about a year older than us—which Tachibana’s parents and I were thrilled about. She was too dumb for him, in my opinion.

I bit my lip and tried to keep from glaring as she kissed him full on the lips in front of everyone. I looked away, trying to contain my disgust and anger, but Nikaidou and Shihoudani making ‘woot-woo’ and ‘ow-ow’ noises did not help the situation in the least. To distract myself, I turned to admire Shoko-san’s band of friends.

Yamada Michiko was the first to introduce herself. She was indeed, as Tachibana had said, an airhead. She was pretty with her long, flowing hair; dark eyes; and brand name clothes, but I could tell that there wasn’t even one original thought in the space between her ears. She
reported her blood type\textsuperscript{110} as O and said that she had a thing for Gackt-sama\textsuperscript{111}. My question is: who doesn’t have a thing for Gackt-sama?

Tanaka Kyoko was next up to bat. Her face was attractive, but her hair was bleached a shade just above platinum blonde, and it looked unnatural with her eyebrows. Her clothes were a little too tight for my taste. This one told us that she was seventeen and loved to do karaoke with friends.

Satou Minami was the final contestant of the night. She wasn’t exactly beautiful, but that wasn’t to say she was altogether homely, either. She had a sweet-sounding voice, like caramel poured over ice cream, and I liked her warm, sincere smile. She listed studying and reading classic novels as her hobbies and mentioned that she enjoyed ikebana\textsuperscript{112} and tea ceremony\textsuperscript{113}. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Yamato Nadeshiko\textsuperscript{114}.

Once the girls had finished their self-introductions\textsuperscript{115}, each of the guys (and Kasumi-san) took a turn. Afterwards, we ordered plenty of food. There was chilled soba\textsuperscript{116}, vegetable and seafood tempura, various sashimi, a few different types of tofu, and seasonal vegetable dishes besides.

During the meal we sat girl, boy, girl, boy in order to facilitate mingling. I sat between Minami-san and Kyoko-san, across the table from Tachibana and Shoko-san. It was a fairly awkward experience seeing as Nikaidou was busy flirting with Kasumi-san, so Kyoko-san kept turning to her left to talk with me while I was trying to have an intelligent conversation with Minami-san.

\textsuperscript{110} In Japan, it is believed that blood type determines personality, so telling people your blood type in Japan is kind of like telling people what your astrological sign is in the West.

\textsuperscript{111} Singer, musician, and actor, Kamui Gakuto (Gackt) was the lead singer of Malice Mizer before he went solo in 1999.

\textsuperscript{112} Ikebana is the Japanese art of flower arrangement.

\textsuperscript{113} The Japanese tea ceremony is a very long, ritualistic process full of symbolic and purposeful actions. First, the guests are served a typical kaiseki meal. Then, there is a recess, during which the host cleans up and changes the tearoom decorations. After the break, the guests are served strong, bitter green tea, which the host prepares for them in the prescribed manner.

\textsuperscript{114} Yamato Nadeshiko is the ideal Japanese woman, well versed in many traditional and domestic arts.

\textsuperscript{115} The Japanese language has built-in levels of politeness. For example, you use different verbs and grammar structures to show the proper amount of respect. It is also important to address someone by the correct title, whether it be mister, miss, doctor, governor, etc. In order to determine what level of politeness needs to be used, Japanese people trade business cards and do self-introductions when they first meet. A self-introduction usually contains the person’s name, sometimes age, profession or field of study, marital status, and some other personal details such as a hobby or how many children she or he has. In this case, the participants in the group date are all about the same age, so they will speak to each other rather informally, but the self-introduction is still an important part of their initial interaction.

\textsuperscript{116} Buckwheat noodles served either hot in some sort of broth or cold with a dipping sauce. Hot soba is a traditional New Year’s Eve food in Japan.
Noticing what was going on, Tachibana barked at his two friends. “Hey, Kazuki, Shigeki, trade places, why don’t you?”

The soccer nerd and the chess star switched as their king had commanded, and the rest of the dinner was carried out in peace. Tachibana and his shrew made out, Kasumi-san and Shigeki-san flirted subtly, Minami-san and I had a nice chat, and Kazuki-san was left to openly court the two remaining women.

After the bill was paid, our party moved across the street to J.B. Karaoke Studio. All nine of us crammed ourselves into a small, rectangular room. The furnishings were sparse—a wrap-around couch, a table, a phone, and a monitor. You could order drinks or snacks, but since we had just eaten, we only got water and juice.

Tachibana picked up a song booklet and began quickly flipping through. “So, who’s going first?”

Answer came there none, so the hotshot hooligan was left to take up the mike himself. Once the voice-amplifying device was in his hand, it was hard to pry it away from the fledgling rock star. Singing came so naturally to him. He sang like a warbler, crooning enka ballads and belting when the occasion arose. He sang anything and everything from bouncy pop music by Berryz Koubou to hard-core rock by Dir En Grey. There was some sassy stuff mixed in too, like Lady Gaga, Morning Musume, and Ke$ha. He sung in Japanese, English, and even a little French. No matter what Tachibana was singing, he really gave it his all, putting his heart and soul into making the music come to life. He took every piece seriously.

Every once in a while, someone else would get up and sing a song just to give our fearless leader a break. Kazuki-san sang “Sakura Sake” by Arashi\(^{117}\). Shigeki-san then preformed “Koyoi Tsuki ga Miezu Tomo”\(^{118}\) by Porno Graffitti\(^{119}\).

At this point, Tachibana got his hands back on the mike, and it was another half hour before Kasumi-san got to sing “Ash Like Snow” by The Brilliant Green\(^{120}\). However, Kasumi’s victory was short-lived, and the spotlight was once again usurped by the Great and Powerful Tachibana-sama.

“He’s really on a roll, isn’t he?” The female Shihoudani twin came over to sit with me as Minami-san was forced into performing a duet.

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\(^{117}\) Arashi, managed by Johnny’s, is one of the most popular boy bands in Japan.

\(^{118}\) “Even if you can’t see the moon tonight”

\(^{119}\) Porno Graffitti is a rock band from Hiroshima that debuted in 1999.

\(^{120}\) The Brilliant Green became a husband and wife pop duo after their guitarist left in 2010. Vocalist Tomoko
“Yeah.” I shifted uncomfortably at her close proximity. I wasn’t quite sure if everything was all right between us yet. “He’s as happy as a seal with a ball, though it’d be nice if he let the rest of us sing a little. We’re all paying the same price per hour regardless of who sings and who doesn’t.”

“Would you like to sing, Akira-kun?” She batted her black eyes at me in curiosity.

“Not really. I just meant…you know…for the others.” And then there was nothing left to talk about, so we just watched in silence as Tachibana and Minami-san sang.

“Hajime-kun came and talked to me the other day,” the cosplayer stated abruptly.

“Oh?” I awkwardly replied.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed, looking anywhere but in my direction. “It’s just…you had been so nice all evening; it really looked like you were interested in me. I didn’t mean to be so forward, but…when I leaned in to kiss you, you didn’t seem to be resisting at all, so I thought that maybe you wanted to kiss me too.”

“Kasumi-san…” I bit my lip, gathered my courage, and just said it. “I’m not interested in you like that. I’m extremely sorry, but I’d rather just be friends. Please forgive me.”

“I know.” She sipped calmly at her water, still looking away. “It’s okay. Hajime-kun told me. Thank you for being honest with me, and don’t worry. I’ll keep your secret.”

I did a double take, finally turning to face her. “What secret?”

She too met my gaze. “That you and Hajime-kun are secretly an item. He told me that you were planning on eloping to America to get married when you’re both eighteen.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I seethed, glaring down my best friend.

He smiled brightly in return, continuing his solo without a care in the world.

Kasumi-san then began laughing, covering her mouth in embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, Akira-kun. Hajime-kun asked me to. He really did tell me what you said, and I do understand how you feel. Again, I’m very sorry. It was rude of me to mess with you like that.”

“It’s fine.” I sighed getting up to go to the bathroom. “Please excuse me.”

“Hey, Aki?” my annoying best friend called softly after me, peeking his head out the door.

“What do you want?” I turned around, waiting expectantly.

“I guess I’m the only one who thought that was funny, huh?” He snuck glances up at me through his eyelashes, playing submissive in order to get me to forgive him.
“No, I think Kasumi-san had a good laugh too.” I rolled my eyes, not falling for his manipulative tricks.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I’m not mad at you, Tachi, so cut out the apologetic puppy routine,” I snapped. “I’m just not in the mood for your antics at the moment, so go sing with the others. I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

“Un.” He nodded slightly, slinking back into the room with his tail limp between his legs.

I hid out in the bathroom for a good ten minutes, just trying to cool my head a bit. When I returned, I was surprised to find the room in silence, the mike unmanned. “No one’s singing?”

“Tachibana’s pouting because of your little lovers’ quarrel,” Kazuki informed me as he smirked.

“Shut the hell up.” A fuming Tachibana nearly took the younger Shihoudani out with one of the song booklets. He was clearly not in the mood for jokes.

“Sorry,” Kazuki-san mumbled, scrunching up his shoulders and lowering his gaze.

“Pick it up,” the alpha male ordered, holding out his hand.

“Yes, Sir,” the chess champ sniveled, retrieving the songbook.

Tachibana leafed through the pages until he found what his was looking for. “Shigeki, Kazuki, you ever heard ‘Barbie Girl’ by Aqua?”

The two cronies nodded.

“Then sing,” the king commanded, shoving the mikes into the plebeians’ hands.

And sing the goons did for fear that they would be castrated.

About halfway into the song, Shoko-san placed her hand on her boyfriend’s thigh, leaning in to whisper in his ear. “Come with me for a bit.”

“Not right now.” Tachibana removed the trespassing hand with a sigh.

The wily vixen then whispered something that I couldn’t hear.

“I—” My friend began to protest, but he bit his tongue and grunted. “Fine. Let’s go.”

“We’ll be back.” Shoko smirked, leading Tachibana away by the hand.

As soon as the two were out of the room, Shigeki-san stopped singing and turned on me. “What the hell did you say to him to make him that mad?”

I blinked. “I…I don’t remember. I told him to stop joking around with me…or something like that, I think. He’s probably just angry because you were teasing him.”

“He was pre-mad before that, Kimura,” The imposing shark snapped. “Good thing Shoko-san’s here, or else he’d’ve been taking it out on us all night.”
“Yeah.” Kazuki-san sighed in relief. “A little physical exertion will calm him down a bit.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t want to understand what he was saying.

“Come on, Kimura.” Nikaidou snorted, elbowing my arm. “You know as well as the rest of us what those two are doing.”

“You’re wrong,” I snapped, for a minute forgetting to restrain myself. “He doesn’t even like her! He told me he was going to break up with her! He wouldn’t—he wouldn’t—”

“—Kazuki, why don’t we sing a duet or something?” Kasumi-san grabbed her brother by the ear and hauled him over to the mike.

Shigeki-san and I sat back down awkwardly as the song began.

Tachibana and his slut girlfriend returned about twenty minutes later, clothes slightly rumpled. She wore a self-satisfied smirk, but he looked melancholy and slightly miffed.

Everyone but Tachibana and myself took turns singing, and they were all enthusiastic, but the fun atmosphere had died with our brave leader’s little outburst.

It was while the shrew and her two airheaded friends were singing something by the Beatles that Shigeki turned to Kazuki and started muttering. This went on for a while, so as not to escape the notice of the rest of the group.

Finally Shoko got fed up and demanded, “What the hell are you idiots whispering about?”

Shigeki smirked when someone finally took the bait. “We were talking about a song we wanted to hear. It’s called ‘Bad Apple.’ You know it?”

“I do.” Shoko rolled her mud-colored eyes. “Why don’t you sing it?”

“Way too high.” Nikaidou shrugged sadly. “It’s totally out of my range.”

“Maybe Tachibana could sing it,” Kazuki-san suggested helpfully.

“Nah. No way he could. It’s way too high for him too.” The dark-skinned boy laughed, immediately rejecting his friend’s idea.

“What do you think, Kimura?” Kazuki turned to me, drawing me into their scheme.

“I’m pretty sure he could,” I quietly replied, going along with it.

“Yeah right.” Shigeki continued to play the instigator. “His voice would crack. I bet you five hundred yen that your boyfriend can’t sing that high.”

“You’re on,” Tachibana growled, grabbing the mike and moving to the front. He took a deep breath, and the intro music started playing.

The room fell silent as he began to sing. Everyone became absorbed in his performance.
Everything about him was mesmerizing, from the way he let his bangs fall into his eyes to the minute, entrancing movements he made with his fingers and wrists. It was absolutely seductive.

To further draw his audience in, Tachibana would glance up coquettishly and make eye contact, but then his gaze would flicker coyly away to the side. He used his whole body to pull us in and express the deep feelings of sorrow and pain in the song.

If he ever made it into the music industry, surely millions of screaming fangirls would go wild over him. With a stage presence like that on top of his looks and voice, who could help but fall for him?

“Now…remind me. Who can’t sing that high?” The future pop star smirked, breaking the spell he had cast over us.

He picked up the five-hundred-yen coin that Shigeki had set on the table and pressed the cool metal into my palm, saying, “It’s a lot of fun. Ya wanna do it with me?”

“Sure,” I mumbled, still a little foggy. It took me a moment to realize to what that beautiful voice and sweet smile had tricked me into agreeing. “I’m not a very good singer, though.”

“I like your voice.” My best friend shrugged off my attempts to get out of public humiliation.

“What song did you want to sing?” I gulped, knowing I was trapped in his web.

“‘Total Eclipse of the Heart.’” My tormentor grinned toothily.

“I don’t really like that song.” I sank further and further into the warp-around couch.

“Then why do you sing it in the bath all the time when you think no one’s listening?”

“Because I thought no one was listening,” I mumbled sullenly. A last-ditch plan occurred to me in the form of a light bulb suddenly turning on above my head. “If I sing with you, then you have to sing’ something too.”

“If you had a request, you could have just said so.” He shrugged with a slight raise of the eyebrows.

“If I sing ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ with you, you have to sing ‘Mr. Wonderful.’” Surely he wouldn’t agree to such degrading terms. He had made it clear to me how much he hated that song.

I believed I had won as he scrunched up his nose in disgust, but after a moment’s thought, he shrugged and sighed, agreeing to my conditions.

I went to the chopping block, mike in hand. He made me sing the lead vocals while he
did backup until the second time the chorus came around. He then decided he wanted to sing the main part as well.

It sounded good, but it was embarrassing to no end, singing those kinds of things with him like needing him and “hold me tight” and the shadow of his love and all that.

Of course he got really into it—looking at me, smiling, and singing as if he actually meant it all.

I was just glad no one else spoke enough English to understand. I was also ecstatic when the music ended and I was allowed to slink red-faced back to my seat where everyone told me what a lovely voice I had. I politely declined their over-generous compliments.

I thought my torture session for the day was over, but what came next was beyond any embarrassment I had ever suffered before. It was wrong of me to make Tachibana sing ‘Mr. Wonderful,’ and karma came back and bit me in the bum for it.

As the music started up, my friend became possessed by the spirit of a burlesque queen. As payback for making him sing that accursed song, Tachibana decided to serenade me.

I found myself the slightly reluctant recipient of a free lap dance. There was much straddling, grinding, shimmying, and caressing of my hair, face, and body.

To top it off, he took this song just as seriously as all the others when it came to acting it out with facial expressions and body language. He almost made me believe him when he begged me to kiss him and touch him. What’s worse, he almost made me want to oblige him. I was thankful when it ended.

He mussed my hair as he dismounted and went back to his seat to a barrage of catcalls from the resident morons.

“God, Tachibana. I didn’t know you were such a slut,” Kazuki whistled.

“Can it be my turn next?” Shigeki chortled, opening his legs.

“Do I look like I’d swing that way for you?” Tachibana shrugged off their crude remarks with a snort and a flip of his hair.

Finding the self-confident punk to not be the easy target he was looking for, the younger Shihoudani twin turned to me. “Hey, Kimura. Your nose is bleeding121.”

I gasped softly, and my hand flew to my nose, only to find he had just been teasing. I wanted to disappear right then and there.

“Hey.” My ally slapped the offending clown hard to the back of the head. “You can joke

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121 Thought to be a sign of arousal.
around with me all you want, but don’t you dare mess with Akira.”

“Excuse me,” I tossed over my shoulder as I grabbed my things and made a break for the door, near tears.

“Aki!” my best friend called, chasing after me. “Wait up!”

“No!” I screamed in English as he grabbed my arm. “Don’t touch me!” I tore myself away from him with such force that I landed face down on the sidewalk.

“Are you okay?” Tachibana kneeled down to inspect me for wounds, but he found only tears spewing from my eyes like water from a fire hose. “Aki, they were just teasing. It’s all right. Nothing to get so upset about.” He moved to help me up, but I slapped his hand away.

“I said ‘Don’t touch me’!” I hiccupped. “I’m sorry that I made you sing that stupid song, but you didn’t have to go and punish me like that!”

“Aki, you’re talking too fast. My English isn’t *that* good yet.” Despite my resistance, he pulled me to my feet. “Shh. You’re making a scene.” He took out a tissue and wiped my dripping face.

“I don’t care.” I futilely batted his caring hands away. “You can’t treat me like this. I won’t let you.”

“Like what?” The punk continued working damage control even though more tears kept replacing the ones he wiped away.

“I’m not a toy,” I blubbered.

“No, you’re my friend.” His voice was soothing as he fought back the army of salt droplets and brushed my hair gently out of the way. “Are you mad at me?”

“Stop it! Just stop!” I turned and started walking home.

I hated him. He knew I couldn’t stay mad at him for long. He knew he was in the wrong, but he wouldn’t admit it. He wouldn’t apologize. He wanted me to yell at him, something I had such a hard time doing.

“Just tell me what you want me to stop.” I found myself being pursued.

“Stop following me,” I commanded. My arms shook as I wrapped them around myself.

“I’m walking you home. If something happened to you while you were walking home by yourself, I’d never be able to forgive myself. You’re too important to me. It’s my fault you stormed out of there, after all…isn’t it?”

I switched back to my soft, meek Japanese. “You know it is.” I weakly hurled those words at him like marshmallows.

“I was just teasing you. Does it really bother you so much…the thought of being in a
relationship with me?” His voice was steady, but I could hear the hurt hidden underneath his words.

I stopped with a sigh and sat on a bench outside a small grocery store. “I don’t mind so much when it’s just the two of us, as long as you don’t cross that line we were talking about, but you know what it is, don’t you? It’s the others. Tachibana, you’re in charge of our little group. You know that. Your word is law. Everyone bows to your whims. Do you know why Shigeki-san always bosses Kazuki-san around? Because you do. It’s like you implicitly give them permission to act that way because that’s the way you act. They always follow your example. They see the way you treat me, too, Tachi. You tease me like that, so they think it’s okay if they do it too. It hurts. They don’t respect me at all because you don’t. I have pride, you know, and it hurts to be picked on and teased by the people you call friends. I just want you all to respect me.”

The charming little rich brat was pensively silent for a minute as he sat down and wrapped his arms around me. “Sorry,” he whispered, lips brushing against my ear.

It was quiet again as he pulled out more tissues to contain the damage.

“I do respect you, and I don’t mean to wound your pride. I’ll be more careful about how I treat you in front of the others from now on too. If it’ll make you feel better, you could always tease and pick on me in front of them. I wouldn’t mind if it were you.” He pinched my cheek and grinned like a certain cat. “Will you smile for me now? Are things all right between us, or do I have to grovel more to earn your forgiveness?”

“I don’t really feel like smiling.” I shrugged, getting to my feet.

He caught my hand in his, threading his fingers through mine. “But you look so handsome when you smile; it makes my knees weak. Just one smile for my sake. Please?”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes and chuckling. “Sometimes you go a little far with your joking.”

“Oh how shocked you’re going to be when you finally realize that I’m completely serious three-fourths of the time that you think I’m joking.” My companion replied wryly.

“What’s...that supposed to mean?” He really did sound serious, and it was extremely confusing. He was usually very light-hearted. Seriousness meant trouble.

“You haven’t said that you forgive me yet, you know.” Tachibana pouted, still holding my hand captive. “We never did the part where I apologize for being an insensitive, clueless jerk either. So...I’m really sorry. I promise to never give you a lap dance again unless you ask for one or I’m drunk. Please forgive me. I’m unworthy of your friendship.”

“I forgive you, Tachi...and I’m lucky to have you as my friend.” I presented him with his
coveted smile.

“Nah, I’m the lucky one.” He got up and tugged me along gently. “Now, let’s get you home.”

“Umm…my hand.” I mumbled, looking down at the appendage.

“Oh. That? It’s mine now. At least for the next twenty minutes.” He grinned like a dork, swing our arms back and forth as we walked. “Little kids walk to school like this, don’t they?”

“Some of them.” My cheeks went up in flames as an old lady passing by raised her eyebrow at us.

“I wanted someone to walk like this with when I was little.” His smooth voice got that nostalgic tone to it.

“The Great Tachibana-sama didn’t have friends when he was a kid?” I wasn’t quite sure if I should be teasing about something like that.

“I had people to play with, but it was kind of how it is with Kazuki and Shigeki. They’re people I hang out with. They ask ‘how high?’ when I say ‘jump.’ We have fun together, but do you think they know anything about me? My favorite color? My favorite food? My birthday? Where this stupid scar on my wrist came from? What I want to do with my life? They don’t know any of that stuff, but you do, don’t you?”

“Red, sometimes blue, melon-flavored stuff, July twenty-seventh, you cut yourself when you were ten, and you want to marry a foreigner and become a rock star,” I recited. “Tachi, I think they at least know your birthday. You get presents, don’t you?”

“They probably have to check their calendars.” He shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong, I do like them and their company, but I can’t be me around them. I always have to put up this front with them. They’re not like you. You’re…really important to me. How would you say that in English?”

“They don’t have an exact expression for being someone’s ‘most important person.’ You could say ‘I love you,’” I suggested.

“But doesn’t that also mean ‘let’s take our clothes off’ and ‘let’s grow old together?’” He cocked his head to the side innocently, looking at me with those big, ruby eyes.

“You have an interesting perception of ‘love.’” I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“Well, what does love mean to you, then?” The faux-redhead scrunched up his brow, pouting because I had insulted his ideology when he had been completely serious.

“Well, the things you mentioned can come from love, but love is…” I took a deep breath and tried to put my thoughts into words. “It can mean a bunch of things. There’s ‘I love
“taiyaki”\(^{122}\) and ‘I love soccer’. People also say ‘I love the color yellow’, ‘I love rainy days’, and ‘I love Osaka’. There’s also ‘I love my family,’ ‘I love my friends,’ and even ‘I love you’.

“Love has a lot of meanings, but loving a person means being willing to sacrifice for them, thinking of them and smiling, worrying about them, being happy when something good happens to them, and sympathizing when they’re having a rough time. Loving someone takes a lot of work, but it’s worth it to be loved.”

“I like your definition,” Tachibana whispered, squeezing my hand. “Though, it makes me feel kind of lonely, too.”

“Why?” I squeezed back supportively.

“There aren’t all that many people that love me, and I love even fewer.” A forlorn expression settled onto his face. “Now I have Tsubasa, but until just a few weeks ago, I’d only ever loved you.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured. “There will be others. Someday you’ll have a wife and kids to love.”

“But what if I don’t?” He sounded almost panicked. “I mean, I know I have to get married and have kids and carry on the Tachibana line. I’m sure my family will find some well-bred young lady that I can’t stand, just like how they found my father for my mother. And I know I’ll have kids, but…I’m scared that I won’t love them, and they’ll be alone all the time.”

Tears slowly began to well in the corners of his eyes. “They’ll wonder why all the other kids have lunches that their parents made while they get bentou lunches from the chef. And everyone else’s parents will come on visit days, but they’ll just have one of my secretaries.” Hot tears started trickling down his face as he continued. “And they’ll never get to go on family vacations. And I’ll never go to their music or dance recitals or plays or school festivals or sporting events. We won’t have home videos or family picture albums. No one will ever be there to greet them when they come home. We’ll never have family meals. We’ll never take baths together, and I’ll never tell them stories or tuck them in at night.” At this point, the dam broke, and Tachibana began bawling. “They’ll spend all their time thinking: ‘What did I do wrong that my parents can’t even love me?’, ‘Why am I so un-loveable?’, ‘What’s wrong with me?’, ‘Why doesn’t anyone love me?’”

I pulled him into my arms, holding him so tightly I was afraid I’d crush him. “I love you, Tachi. You’re just misunderstood; there’s nothing wrong with you. Even if your parents don’t

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\(^{122}\) A fried pastry in the shape of a fish, usually filled with chocolate, cream, or sweet red bean paste.
appreciate you, I’m grateful to them for bringing you into this world. I’ll always love you.”

His sobs deteriorated into sniffles as he settled into my embrace. “All the pain goes away when you hold me like this. I’ve never been held before. My parents…the servants…my relatives…no one ever touches me. No one’s ever told me they love me before. I mean, I’ve gotten confessions from some people at school, but no one’s ever really meant it.” He looked up at me and smiled sheepishly, a wave of crimson spreading from his cheeks all the way to his ears. “I love you too, Akira.”

My face went red, and my body stiffened as he pressed his soft, warm lips to my cheek.

“Sorry for getting all weepy on you, Aki.” My friend’s seductively charming grin was made even more effective by the dim streetlamp’s glow reflected on his tear-stained face.

“Shh,” I whispered, placing my own lips onto his damp cheek. The salty-sweet taste was refreshing. “It’s okay. We’ve both kind of been emotional tonight. Besides, sometimes it’s okay to just cry. I want you to feel comfortable crying in front of me and talking to me about things. It’s okay to show me your true self. I won’t reject you.”

“As long as you feel the same way when you’re with me.” The sweetheart of a punk winked, stealing back my hand and tugging me along. “You know, I see girls doing this all the time, but guys hardly ever do it. I wonder why.”

“Because guys and girls are different.” I shrugged.

“What’s the difference? Besides reproductive roles, I mean. Is there a difference?” His henna eyes stared intensely at me.

I scrunched up my nose in thought, but I had no answer for him.

“I think we’re all the same.” He absentmindedly looked off in the distance. “I was reading something about it the other day—some research about how the brain works and everything. It said there wasn’t a difference.”

“There’s your answer then.”

“But if we’re all the same, why is it so bad for one guy to fall in love with another? Why is it so wrong? I don’t understand why everyone’s so against it.” He pondered like a small child. He was surprisingly innocent like that sometimes.

I paused a bit to reflect before answering. “I think it might have something to do with the declining birthrate. They want everyone to get married and have kids for the future of Japan, and only heterosexual couples are able to have babies. I don’t think they really have anything against homosexuals. In ancient times, love between men was actually considered more pure than heterosexual love because it was thought to transcend the bodily urge to mate to reproduce.
There are also some cultures that engage in homosexual acts as a part of coming of age rituals.”

“How do you know all that?” My friend gave me a quizzical look.

“All I ever did was read before I met you,” I offered in explanation. “…You seem kind of all over the place today, Tachi. Any reason why you’re so pensive all of a sudden?”

He bit his watermelon pink lips and tried to organize his thoughts before speaking. “I’m going through some stuff. Like…identity and self-concept stuff. I’ve been thinking about a bunch of things: the meaning of life, death, society’s expectations of me, gender roles, family, my responsibilities, my life goals, love, friendship, sex…sexual orientation. My head’s been really full lately, and I’ve been discovering some stuff about myself. I’m confused, and there are times when I’m disgusted with myself. I want to ask for help, but this is my battle, so I never said anything about it before.”

“I could kind of tell, though…even though you didn’t say anything. You’ve looked troubled lately. I’m sure your family hasn’t been very helpful either,” I sighed. “Just take things slowly. Deal with one problem at a time, and don’t brood too much. Let things resolve themselves over time, if you can. Don’t worry too much about what other people think. Liking yourself is what’s important.”

“What if I don’t?” he mumbled sullenly.

“Well, I like you.” I scowled, pinching his cheek hard. “So, learn to like yourself quick. The Tachibana that takes my breath away is strong and self-confident. It’s okay to be weak and to doubt yourself sometimes, but if the Tachibana I like stays away too long, he may lose me to Kasumi-san.” Saying such things was highly embarrassing for me, but I’d do anything to cheer up my friend.

“I like it when you tease me.” He admitted with a pleased smirk. “It makes me feel close to you.”

“Whatever it takes to make you smile.” I sighed, glad to see him a little less down in the dumps.

It was then that I became aware of our surroundings. We had just passed Fujita’s liquor store. “We passed my house,” I announced.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice.” Tachibana confessed. “I want to hang out some more. It was worth the lame date to be able to spend time with you like this.”

“Un.” I looked down at my watch, and my brow furrowed. It was really late. “Were you planning on walking back to the karaoke box?”

“Nah, I was going to go home. There’s no reason for me to go back now.” He shrugged
in such a carefree manner. “The only reason I organized this thing was so that I could spend time with you and maybe find you an acceptable girlfriend.”

I bit my lip, the lines in my forehead growing deeper. “I don’t really like the idea of you walking so far by yourself this late at night.”

He easily laughed away my concern. “Kyoto’s perfectly safe, Aki. No need to worry about me. I’ll call you when I get home. See you tomorrow, okay?” He chuckled, letting go of my hand.

“Wait.” I grabbed his wrist, giving him a pleading look. “Tachi, it’s two thirty in the morning. Could you please just stay the night for my sake? It’s my fault you had to walk me home, and I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.”

“I suppose I could sleep over.” He smirked. “I didn’t know you were so forward, though, inviting me home after only our first date. If I get pregnant, you better man up and marry me.”

I grimaced and rolled my eyes. “Fine. If you manage to get pregnant, we’ll get married. Just get inside, Tachibana.”

The next morning, Mother received a surprise when she came to wake me. Tachibana’s visit had not been planned, so no futon had been prepared for him. As a result, Mother found us snuggling together under my covers.

I explained the situation while Tachibana made jokes about getting lucky and really hitting it off on our group date.

My best friend helped my mother prepare breakfast, and once he had had his fill of pancakes and fruit, he was off, thanking us politely for the room and board.

Grandmother began harping at me as soon as she returned home from her trip to the fish shop down the street. Apparently I was misusing my summer vacation. I was wasting all my valuable study time dating. According to Grandma Ayame, there was no need to date when it was already decided that I would be pursuing Tsubasa-chan when she came of age.

I bit my tongue and sat down to work on summer homework until dusk came and I had to get ready for the Obon123 festival at the temple. I put on my silver yukata—the one with the dark grey swirls and small steel-colored flowers—but I had a little trouble tying the obi124, so I had my mom help.

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123 _Bon_ (the polite prefix _o_ can be added) is a late summer festival taking place in mid-August. This festival is when families welcome back the spirits of their dead relatives and ancestors. A lot of families go back to their ancestral hometowns for this celebration.
She cooed over me like usual as she straightened my attire. “You look so handsome, Akira! Are you sure that you didn’t meet any nice girls last night?”

“There was one that was nice, but not really interesting.” I smiled fondly at my bright-eyed mother. “Don’t worry. I’ll find someone eventually, and if all else fails, I could always marry Tachibana.” I winced when I realized what I had said. “He’s rubbing off on me.”

After assuring my mother that I had been joking, I headed over to the Tachibana’s residence. The building was a strange mix of east and west. The exterior was that of a very traditional Japanese house, but the inside had been redone in the western style.

I punched in the code to open the main gate and then proceeded to the front door where I rang the bell.

After a long wait, the door was finally opened by Tachibana (formerly Tenshimura) Haruka, Tachibana’s imposing father. “Oh. Kimura-kun. Please come in. You’re going with my willful son and that girl to the temple today, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.” I gulped, taking off my geta sandals as I entered the house. “Ojamashimasu.”

“I apologize sincerely for the wait, Kimura-kun. We fired a servant just the other day—the one in charge of the phone and the door. Everyone’s still getting used to life without him. He’ll have to be replaced soon. Would you like some tea while you wait?”

“No thank you, Sir. I’m fine.”

“I believe the girl to be ready, but my son fusses like a woman over his looks. He’ll be another fifteen minutes at least. He’s always fretting over his hair, fixing his makeup, and staring in the mirror at himself. There’s something wrong with a man who spends more time than a geisha on getting ready in the morning. Are you sure that you don’t want any tea?” He paused long enough in his critique of his son to politely extend the invitation again.

“No, really, it’s okay, Sir.” I recited my part, and then remembered to apologize for keeping my friend from going home last night. “I’m very sorry for any worry you were caused this morning.”

The intimidating man raised an eyebrow at me. “Whatever do you mean?”

I blinked. Hadn’t he been worried about his missing son? “After our group date last night, your son walked me home. It was very late, so I asked him to stay the night at my house. I thought you would be worried when you discovered that he hadn’t come home, since he didn’t call.”

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124 A belt-like sash worn around the waist to help hold kimono or yukata together.
“Oh. He was with you?” He hardly sounded concerned at all. “Hajime is a wild child; he runs off all the time. We thought he was spending the night with that girlfriend of his.”

I strongly resisted the urge to shake that insensitive man and yell at him to become a better father.

“It’s very warm out today. You must be thirsty, Kimura-kun. Please allow one of the servants to get you something to drink.” Tachibana-san offered again.

“Thank you. That’s very generous of you.” I politely replied.

My friend was nothing like his father. Tachibana Haruka was a tall, substantial man with sharp features and dull eyes. My Tachibana got his beauty from his mother. He was 171 centimeters tall—about average height—and slim, with very soft, expressive features. I sometimes wondered if Tachibana-san and my Tachibana were even related at all.

“Akira-niisan!” Tsubasa-chan squealed as she ran down the stairs towards me, breaking my train of thought. She was wearing a black yukata covered in pink and white flowers. There was even a bright pink, felt flower heavily bobby pinned into her up do. “Do you like my yukata?”

“You look gorgeous, Tsubasa-chan,” I praised her with a smile. “You’ll be the most beautiful person at the festival.”

“You haven’t seen Niii-chan yet,” she whispered with a giggle. “He’s been getting ready for hours.”

“You have to be more responsible, Hajime!” Midori-san’s harping voice echoed from the top of the stairs.

“I know, I know. God. Just shut up already. I’m sixteen years old! I’m not a child anymore, and you can’t tell me what to do!” Tachibana huffed, fleeing down the staircase.

“Hajime!” Midori-san screeched. “Come back here.”

“Hajime, you do not speak to your mother that way.” Tachibana-san joined his wife in scolding their wayward son. “Apologize this instant.”

“Buzz off, old man!” my friend snapped, but then his face lit up when he turned the corner and saw me. “Aki,” he breathed, rushing across the room to embrace me. “Let’s get out of here, okay?” He whispered in my ear, taking my hand and pulling me towards the door. “We’re leaving. I’ll bring Tsubasa back by nine, but I’m not coming home tonight.”

“Uh…sorry for intruding. Thank you very much for your hospitality.” I remembered to

125 About 5’7”.
say as I was yanked out the door.

“You okay, Tachi?” I inquired once we were outside, away from his oppressive parents. He exhaled slowly and smiled. “I am now. Sorry about that. They drive me nuts.”

“It’s all right.” I patted him lightly on the shoulder. “You can stay the night with me again, if you want.”

“Thank you.” My friend sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I just need to get away from that damn family of mine.”

“What about me?” Tsubasa-chan looked up at her beloved brother with big eyes as she stuck out her bottom lip.

“Not you, Sweetheart.” Tachibana cooed, bending down to hug his sister. “Just our insufferable parents.”

“Don’t you think Akira-niisan looks sexy in his yukata?” The little imp grinned, baiting her brother.

“Yeah. He really does.” Tachibana blushed, looking me over for the first time. “It looks really good with your hair, Aki.”

“Thanks. My mother picked it out. I think it’s a bit too flashy for me.” I was glad that he thought I looked good, but it was too embarrassing, accepting compliments.

“It suits you.” He smiled dashingy.

“You look better in yours,” I returned.

It was true. The hours he had spent getting ready were well worth the effect. He wore a black, pinstriped yukata that had probably been designed especially for him. It was tailored so that it hugged his body in the right places but was loose enough to show his neck and a bit of his shoulders. His accessories were all made of leather. He wore a braided choker, a cuff-like band on his right wrist, and a thin anklet on his left foot. His hair had just been dyed and styled, and he was wearing a bit of eye makeup. He smelled of lilacs.

“There’re going to be girls all over you…more so than usual.”

“I’ll just have to tell them I’m taken.” He shrugged. “What do you say? Wanna pretend to be my boyfriend? We can walk arm-in-arm and make goo-goo eyes at each other all night. That’ll keep them away.”

“If anything, two handsome guys hanging all over each other are bound to attract an even bigger crowd,” Tsubasa informed her caretaker.

“Oh well.” Tachibana took his little sister by the hand and linked his other arm with mine, pulling us both along.
The festival was wonderful; everything was vibrant and bright. Stalls and booths lined the walkways of the temple grounds, their vendors filling the air with shouts to the crowd. The dazzling colors and patterns of everyone’s *yukata* blurred together, and the multitude of scents from the various treats filled my nostrils.

Tachibana hauled our little group from one booth to the next. We got wispy cotton candy, *takoyaki* covered in cheese and three different sauces, *taiyaki* filled with red bean paste, and caramel apples covered in nuts.

We played all manner of games. There were games where you had to shoot the prize you wanted with a cork gun and games where you had to toss a ball at a prize and knock it over in order to win it. There was a dart throwing game and a goldfish scooping game. They gave you a little plastic scoop lined with paper, and you had to try to scoop up the goldfish without breaking the paper lining. There was another game where you tried to pick up water balloon yo-yos with a little paperclip contraption in order to win them.

Tachibana was pretty good, so we ended up going home with a bunch of junk. “This one’s for you.” He handed me a small stuffed fox with big, shiny button eyes. “I thought you might feel left out since I’m winning all this stuff for Tsubasa.”

“Thank you.” I grinned sheepishly. “It’s really cute.”

He must have seen me gazing longingly at it. He was very attentive.

“Let’s get crepes next!” Tsubasa-chan squealed, tugging on the hems of our *yukata*.

I ordered a simple crepe filled with bananas and strawberries. Tachibana went with the custard and chocolate crepe, while Tsubasa decided to feast on a strawberry cheesecake-filled crepe. After crepes came ice cream. I ordered green tea, Tachibana got melon, and Tsubasa-chan asked for strawberry.

The fairy child soon abandoned her ice cream in favor of joining in the dancing.

“I could hold everything if you wanted to dance too,” I offered.

“Nah, I’d be too embarrassed.” My companion shrugged.


“Shut up and help me eat her ice cream. It’s dripping.” The punk pouted, holding out the ice cream cone to me.

I shrugged and leaned in to lick the melting droplets away. I froze when I realized that Tachibana had leaned in to do damage control on the melting treat as well. Our lips were inches apart, and I could feel his breath on my face.
He looked at me, smiled, and went back to licking away at the ice cream cone.

“Are you two making out?” The doe-eyed elf appeared out of nowhere, startling the both of us.

We bumped heads, and Tachibana’s hand lurched, smearing ice cream all over my face.

“S-sorry,” he gasped, cheeks turning the color of apple peels.

“It’s okay,” I assured, turning to Tsubasa-chan. “Your ice cream cone was melting,” I offered in explanation, cleaning up the mess as best as I could.

“I can go dance some more if you two want to finish eating it in peace,” the precocious child proposed.

“That won’t be necessary,” my friend snapped, flustered at being caught in a compromising situation by his impressionable little sister. “We really were just eating your ice cream before it turned into a sticky puddle. I’ll go get some more napkins.”

“Tachi,” I called, catching his yukata sleeve.

“Hm?” He turned, blinking.

“You’ve got ice cream all over your face.” I grinned, wiping the smudges of strawberry away for him.

“So do you.” He smirked, catching me off guard and licking my cheek before dashing off in search of more napkins.

“You make him really happy.” Tsubasa took a seat on a nearby bench and beckoned me to sit next to her. “It’s cute…how in love he is. He came home in high spirits this morning. How far did you two go last night?”

“Ten year-olds should act like ten year-olds.” I sighed, sitting down. “Does your brother know you’re really like this?”

“Please don’t tell him,” she begged. “I want to be cute and sweet and innocent for him. It’s hard to keep this act up all the time, but…I want to be his pure baby sister. I like him a lot, Akira-san. He’s a good, honest man, but he’s also weak. He’s really human, you know? He tries so hard to make people believe he’s something he’s not just so that they’ll like him or fear him or respect him. I like him because he’s fake, like me.”

“I won’t tell him.” I shrugged, figuring it would be better for him in the long run. “It’d only upset him if he ever found out. Your dual personality will be our little secret.”

“Thank you for understanding, Akira-san.” She smirked like the little devil she was. “So…how far did you two go last night?”

“You’ve been reading too many shounen ai comics.” I snorted. “We’re just really close
friends. He clings to and flirts with me because he’s lonely. He just wants to be loved, but he has a hard time connecting with girls, and his parents aren’t supportive or loving. That’s why he acts out this whole fantasy of being in love with me. That’s why he flirts so much with everyone. He just craves human contact. He takes solace in me, but it’s not romantic love. Give your brother a hug and tell him you love him sometime; it’ll really make his day.”

“So you two didn’t sleep together last night?” The munchkin sounded disappointed.

“Not in the physical sense of the word. I yelled, I cried, we talked, he cried, there was some hugging and soul searching, some serious discussions occurred, and we slept in the same bed because the extra futon was stored in Grandma Ayame’s room, and neither of us was brave enough to go get it. That’s pretty much all that happened last night.” I suddenly remembered something, and my entire face went red.

“‘Pretty much,’ you say?” She smirked, noticing my rosy state. “I feel you’re leaving an important little morsel out.”

“He may have given me a lap dance,” I confessed.

“And it turned you on, didn’t it?” It wasn’t so much a question as a triumphant declaration.

“I’m not talking about this with a ten year-old.” I groaned, rubbing both of my temples.

“Sorry that I took so long.” Tachibana miraculously returned with the promised napkins.

“Nii-chan!” Tsubasa-chan squealed like a real ten year-old. “Let’s go float lanterns on the lake to guide my parents’ spirits back to the other world!”

And so we did as fireworks burst overhead. I sent out lanterns for Grandpa Akihito and my own father as well.

After that, Grandma Ayame put me under house arrest for the next four days, ordering me to get some studying done.

It was Thursday night just as we were finishing dinner that I got the call. I raced across the room to retrieve my cell from my bag, and I answered it on the next to last ring. “Hello? This is Kimura speaking.”

“Boku126 desu127,”128 A soft, trembling voice replied.

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126 In Japanese, there are many first person pronouns; the following are only a few examples. Watashi is a neutral way of saying ‘I’ used by both men and women. Boku is a soft, masculine way of saying ‘I’ that is also used by what can best be described in English as tomboys; Akira normally uses boku. Atashi is a super cute way of referring to oneself for females. Ore is a hyper-masculine way of referring to oneself; this is the pronoun that Tachibana usually uses.

127 In Japanese, the particle desu means ‘is’.

128 In Japanese, a person’s gender is not necessarily reflected in their pronouns, so it’s possible for someone to use a feminine pronoun (e.g., Watashi) even if they are male or non-binary. It’s also possible for someone to use a masculine pronoun (e.g., Boku) even if they are female or non-binary. The choice of pronoun can be influenced by a variety of factors, including their self-identification, societal norms, and individual preferences.
I blinked. Perhaps it was the yakuza\textsuperscript{129} trying to extort money. “I’m sorry. Who is this?”

“It’s Hajime,” The voice mumbled through tears.

“Who’s Hajime?” I blinked. It took a minute for it to hit me. “Tachibana? Tachi, is that you? Are you okay? What’s wrong?” He never used \textit{boku}, and why was he speaking so politely to me?

“Can I come over, please?” His words slurred together.

“Of course you can. Where are you? Do you need me to come get you?” Something was wrong. He wasn’t acting like himself.

“I’m sitting on your porch,” he responded slowly.

I rushed to the door, flinging it open.

He was sitting there crying, curled up in a little ball. He looked up at me with glazed, damp eyes.

“Come in.” I helped him up and ushered him into the house.

\textit{Ojamashimasu.}” He called as he stumbled inside.

I had to help him with his shoes, and I supported him as we walked into the living room.

“Whatever is the matter?” my mother cried, rushing to Tachibana’s side and mothering him to death.

“Are you hungry, you little punk?” Grandma Ayame postured as she gazed worriedly at my friend. “No use being polite. Let us know what you want, and we’ll fix something up for you.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” the normally enthusiastic thug muttered soullessly. “Thank you so much for your hospitality. I’m sorry I didn’t bring a gift. There’s no excuse.”

“It’s fine, darling,” Mother assured him, dabbing his cheeks with tissues. “Can you tell us what’s wrong, Sweetheart?”

He shook his head slowly, tears welling up.

“Mother, could you make some tea and snacks and take them upstairs? A glass of water too. Akira, take Tachibana-kun to your room. I’ll go prepare the extra futon.” Once she was done handing out assignments, Carol Kimura turned back to my despondent friend. “Sweetie, do your parents know where you are?”

\textsuperscript{127} In Japanese, there are varying levels of politeness as discussed in Footnotes 30 and 31. At this point in their relationship, Tachibana and Akira speak to each other using plain speech. This sentence is spoken in the polite form.

\textsuperscript{128} “It’s me.”

\textsuperscript{129} The \textit{yakuza} (Japanese mafia) often call pretending to be a family member in trouble, saying only “It’s me.” in a terrified voice before a gang member comes on the line asking for money to secure the safety of the family member.
He shook his head slowly.

“I’ll give them a call, then,” she promised, kissing the top of his head.

“T-thank you, Carol-san…everyone.”

I half carried my beloved companion up the steps, and then I made him sit on my bed while Mom and Grandmother arranged the bedding and brought up the snacks.

“Have him drink some water if you can, Akira,” Mother advised. “Tachibana-kun, let us know if you need anything. We’ll be right downstairs.”

“Here.” I offered him the glass of water.

His hand was shaking, so I helped him drink.

I bit my lip. “Have…you been drinking, Tachi? You smell like alcohol.”

He nodded, starting to cry anew.

“Are you drunk?”

He nodded.

“What’s the legal drinking age?”

“Twenty,” he choked.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” he mumbled.

“Tachi, why were you drinking? You know better.” I helped him take another sip of water.

“I broke up with Shoko,” my brother replied in a shaky voice, still using polite forms of speech.

“You didn’t even like Shoko,” I reminded him, rubbing his back in circles with my palm.

“You were going to break up with her anyway.”

“I was out today, and I saw her. I was going to shout out and say ‘hi’, but she was with somebody else,” he blubbered. “I marched right up to her and dumped her on the spot. I thought she’d be upset, but she just shrugged at me, like it didn’t matter. She said that I deserved to be cheated on because of the way I acted.”

“The way you acted?” I echoed, trying to understand.

“With you the other night. She thought I was running around with you behind her back. She didn’t like the way I was flirting with everybody.” He paused to take another sip of water. “I thought she’d be upset at least a little, but she wasn’t. She’d been cheating on me for a while. She never really cared about me at all.”

“Tachi, that’s not important.” I squeezed his hand gently, trying to comfort him. “She
doesn’t matter. Just let her go. Move on. Find a new girlfriend. Find someone who deserves you a little, okay?”

He shook his head slowly. “I can’t. It’s a big deal.”

“I swear to you, it won’t seem nearly as bad tomorrow morning.” I urged. “Forget about her. You won’t even remember her name in a couple weeks.”

“I can’t just forget.” He hiccupped, tears spilling from his eyes en masse. “She was… She and I… I thought that she… I can’t… I can’t!”

“Tachi… what’s wrong?” I whispered. This didn’t seem like the simple breakup it should have been.

“I can’t! You’ll hate me if I tell you,” he cried in a wild mess of tears. “Just hold me. Please, just hold me.”

I was knocked down onto the bed suddenly as he threw himself into my arms. “Shh…” I cooed, wrapping my arms around him. “Tachi, I’d never hate you. Just tell me what the matter is.”

“You’ll be mad. You’ll be disappointed.” He shook his head violently, thrashing from side to side.

“Tachi, I promise that for the next twenty-four hours I will not hold you accountable for anything you say or do. I can’t help you, if I don’t know what’s wrong. Please, just tell me.”

“Promise?” he sniffled.

“Promise,” I swore.

“I…” He shrunk, making himself as small as he could within my embrace. He buried his face into my neck and whispered, “I slept with her.” His whole body tensed as he awaited judgment.

I didn’t know what to say. I was hurt. Why hadn’t he told me before? Why had he done such a thing? Why with her? I was sad, angry, and disappointed all at once, but I tightened my hold on him and said, “Tachi, it’s okay. I still love you.”

“Thank god,” he gasped, his tears of misery turning to tears of joy. “I thought you’d hate me forever.”

“I could never hate you.” I sighed. “I just don’t understand why you would do something like that. You didn’t even like her. When we were seriously discussing it, didn’t you always say that you only wanted to have sex with someone you loved?”

“Ideally I’d be in love with them, but… I wanted to feel loved so badly. She… she said she loved me. She told me she wanted to do it with me, but I said I didn’t want to, so she started
teasing me. She said I wasn’t a real man. She said really terrible things to me. She started saying that I was probably gay or something, and then she made fun of me until I finally gave in to her.”

He was quiet for a minute as he sobbed into my shirt. “I hated it, Aki. It was terrible. I hate sex, and I hate myself. I’m an idiot. I let her trick me. I let her make a fool of me. I just wanted to feel what it was like to be loved. I just wanted someone to hold me. I let her bully me into it, and she didn’t even love me. She used me. I hate me.”

“Shh…don’t say that. She’s the one to blame. Hate her, not yourself,” I advised, thinking all manner of bad thoughts about that hateful woman. “Tachi, just because you got used once, it doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world. You’re sixteen years old. You’re supposed to screw up and learn from your mistakes and all that. And just because you had sex once, it doesn’t mean you have to do it again in your next relationship. Besides, there are other ways to feel loved. Just wait until you’re ready, okay? It’s going to be all right.”

“Un.” He closed his eyes and resituated himself on top of me, still sniffling and shaking slightly. He sighed as he wrapped his leg around mine. “I love you, Aki.”

“Shh…” I gently stroked his hair. “It’s okay. I love you too, Tachi.”

“Hajime,” he whispered.

“What?” ‘Begin what?’

“You…you can call me ‘Hajime,’” he mumbled. I could feel the heat from his cheeks on my chest as he blushed.

“Really?” I was floored. “But…you hate your first name.”

He shifted uncomfortably as he explained. “I don’t hate it in and of itself. I don’t like the way certain people say it. My parents…it’s always ‘Hajime do this.’ ‘Hajime do that.’ ‘You can’t do that, Hajime.’ ‘Hajime, apologize this instant.’ They never really use my name unless they’re scolding me or telling me what to do, so I’ve kind of come to associate hearing my name with being in trouble or being pushed around. I think…I could learn to like my name if it were you calling me ‘Hajime’. Is…that okay?”

“Yes. I’d…be honored…Hajime.” I couldn’t help but smile at his show of confidence in me. He’d truly let me past his thick outer walls and inside his inner sanctum. We’d really become close.

“Could you…tell me that you love me again, please?” He timidly requested, still speaking politely.

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130 Tachibana’s first name is also the informal command form of the verb ‘hajimeru’, which means ‘to begin’.
“Of course. I love you, Hajime.”

“Th-thank you,” he mumbled and began to sob again. “Thank you. Thank you.”

He cried himself to sleep, still clinging desperately to me.

Though we had shared a bed in the past, I had never slept with someone quite like that before, and I found it difficult to sleep with him glued to me, preventing me from rolling over. I didn’t dare move him, though, for fear I’d wake the poor sleeping beauty. He really needed his rest, so I stayed with him, drifting in and out of sleep, until around nine in the morning.

“Hajime,” I called, playing with his hair. “Hajime, time to wake up.”

The little punk was simply adorable when he slept, his orange locks falling in his face, moving with his breath. He looked innocent. Truthfully, I had found his vulnerable, submissive state last night to be endearing. He had never spoken politely to me before. He always spoke in a rough, informal way, so seeing his softer side was refreshing.

My bedmate’s eyes slowly flickered open, and he looked slightly disoriented as he took in his surroundings.

“Good morning.” I smiled brightly.

“Morning,” he mumbled, furrowing his brow.

“Do you remember what happened last night?” I inquired.

He blinked. “A little.” He was back to his normal way of speaking. “I found out that damn slut was cheating on me, broke up with her, drank an entire bottle of sake, got drunk, and came here.” He paused and tried to recall more with a slight wince. He must have had a hangover. “I remember us talking and you taking care of me. Did you take advantage of me in my drunken state to make me forget about uber-slut, or was that just a dream?”

“What do you think?” I sighed. He was all better. No need to worry.

“So you really did make love to me.” He smirked. “You’re really good. I hope the screaming didn’t keep your family up.”

“Hajime.” I rolled my eyes and got out of bed to get dressed and start the day. “You can borrow some of my clothes, so get up already.”

“I’ve decided I really like it when you call me that.” He came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my torso. “Thank you for last night, Aki,” he whispered as pressed his lips to my shoulder. “You always save me.”

“You saved me first.” I returned with a soft smile.
Chapter Five: Part One: The End of Summer
(Natsu no Owari)

It was the last week of summer of our final year of high school. Hajime had just turned eighteen, and my birthday was coming up on the twenty-fourth of September, so we had taken the whole gang to the beach in Okinawa to celebrate.

I was sitting under a beach umbrella, doing some quality studying while the rest of the group frolicked in the waves and sand.

“Aren’t you bored?” Our fearless leader had taken it upon himself to check up on me every ten minutes. “Don’t you want to come play with the others?”

“Sorry, Hajime. I have to study so that I can get into Tokyo University.” I read the same paragraph in my economics text for a third time, but I still didn’t understand it. I knew my situation to be futile.

My best friend only laughed. “Why study so hard when you know you’re going to fail? Don’t get me wrong, Aki. You’re really smart, but you still get freaked for tests. There’s no way either of us is going to Todai.”

“You could probably buy your way in.” I sighed, knowing he was right. My test anxiety had gotten better over the years, but I was still nowhere near good enough to get into the best school in the nation. “Where are you applying?”

“Wherever you apply.” He shrugged, taking a seat next to me on the beach towel.

“You should go where you want to go.” I chewed on my lip in worry. He shouldn’t waste his potential. “Don’t let me hold you back.”

He waved away my concerns nonchalantly, as per usual. “I don’t want to be anywhere you’re not. I’m doomed to take over my mom’s stupid company regardless of what university I attend. I’m sure we could find a nice, high-paying position for you within said company, so I’m not really sure why you’re stressing out so much. Let’s just go to a prestigious university in Kyoto with an easy entrance exam. Once we graduate, I’m sure my mother will put us to work. We’ll gain some experience, move up through the ranks, and when my mom retires, I’ll take over, and you can be my right-hand man. That’d make the old bat happy, wouldn’t it? There are some good schools in the area where you can study business management too. It’ll be perfect. Whadda ya say?”

“You still have to do some studying to get into a university regardless of whether the
exam is easy or not.” I shrugged. It sounded perfect.

“You’re such a killjoy lately, Aki.” My bosom buddy flopped over into my lap, obscuring my view of the unnecessarily complicated textbook. “You’ve been so busy all summer with your studies. We used to hang out all the time, but nowadays, it’s like pushing a boulder up a hill to get you to spend time with me.”

I sighed. “You think I want this? I miss you too, but it’s important that I study and get into a good university.”

“You think about the future too much.” I was confronted with the infamous Hajime pouty face. “Pay attention to me! I feel like a plant you forgot to water for a couple weeks. I can feel our friendship dying. You don’t love me anymore!”

“I love you,” I grumbled, slightly fed up with his selfishness. “There are just more important things in my life right now.”

“More important than me?” He snorted indignantly.

“That didn’t come out right.” I sighed, trying to think of a way to explain it so that he could understand. “My future isn’t set in stone like yours, so it’s important that I do as well as I can in order to secure a good future for myself and my future family. Hajime, if you’re not more understanding about this, I may have to break up with you,” I teased.

“Don’t even joke about that,” he whined, sitting up again.

“Why not? Us dating is just a joke anyway.” I smirked with a roll of my eyes. “Your girlfriend would flip if she heard us kidding around like this.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Natsuko’s been getting really clingy lately. She said she wants to take a trip with me for Christmas.” Hajime’s brow crinkled up in worry.

“Just the two of you?” My face mirrored his.

He nodded.

“She really likes you,” I replied hollowly. “She’s a nice girl. What do you think? Do you want to go on a trip with her?”

He shook his head vehemently.

“You don’t have to, Tachi. Tell her you’re not ready.” Trips usually meant sex. Hajime hated sex…unless he was joking about having it with me.

“I think I’m going to break up with her,” my friend announced for the nth time.

“Do it already.” I finally got frustrated and snapped at him. “You’ve been talking about breaking up with her for weeks. Stop stringing her along and break up with her already.”

“Kay,” he mumbled, fishing out his cell and typing ‘Sorry; it’s over. Thank you for
loving me. I hope you’ll be happy in the future.’

“You can’t break up with someone via text!” I hissed.

At least it had been a very nice text. He was normally severe and crude when breaking a young woman’s heart.

“You told me to do it now.” He scrunched up his eyebrows and gave me a perplexed look. “Are you mad at me?”

“You should consider other people’s feelings more often,” I lectured, beginning to hold a grudge against his parents for badly neglecting their child and his social education. “How do you think Natsuko-san will feel when she gets that message? How would you feel if someone you loved tossed you aside like that?”

“I’d kill myself.” He shrugged, always treating grave matters lightly.

“Hajime, don’t say things like that.” He was completely serious, and it scared me. “You don’t need to get so dramatic. Getting spurned by one person does not make it okay to commit suicide. Your life is worth more than that one person’s feelings towards you.”

“Okay.” He obviously disagreed, but he didn’t want to argue with me. “Oh. I have a surprise. You’re either going to hate it or love it.” He stood and began tugging down the band of his swimming trunks.

“Hajime!” I looked away, blushing.

“Serious, look.” He chuckled.

I then noticed the black ink that had been hidden under his clothes. From what I could see of it, it was a wispy design, like steam or some kind of henna art. I think my mouth fell open. The first thing I could think to say was “Is that real?”

“Yeah. I got it a month ago.” He smirked.

“What in the world possessed you to do such a stupid thing!?” I screeched.

“It’s cool.” Hajime began to pout. “I just felt like getting a tattoo.”

“Getting a tattoo isn’t the kind of thing you just feel like doing, Hajime!” I started preaching. “You’re stuck with that on your pelvis for the rest of your life. You have to get it removed. Only yakuza have tattoos.”

“Come on, Aki. People get tattoos in the west all the time. It’s cool. Besides, how many people are ever going to see it? It’s not in an area that’s exposed often. Clients aren’t going to see it unless we’re doing something more than business together, so it’s okay, right?” He stuck out his lip and made eyes at me.

“You’re such a hoodlum,” I sighed.
“Are you disappointed in me?” My beloved friend raised his shoulders and lowered his head, making himself seem to shrink. He cast his eyes downward before coyly looking up at me. “Are you mad, Aki?”

I knew better than to fall for his seductive little tricks, but he was somehow irresistible. I couldn’t help but forgive him. “I am disappointed, but…I suppose I could forgive you this once. If you ever mark up your body like that again, I won’t be so lenient, understand?”

He nodded with a grin, lying down on the towel beside me. “Don’t you want to go play with the others?” I blinked. “No. I want to stay here where I can have you all to myself.”

I rolled my eyes as he smirked and continued to distract me from my studies.

Summer was over too fast, and the new term started when August faded into September. The group was split up into different homerooms—not even the Shihoudani twins were together. Hajime wasn’t happy about it, but I looked at this as an opportunity to make new acquaintances before we all went our separate ways with the end of high school. I didn’t dream of making new friends.

Everyone knew better than to approach me. I was Tachibana’s. That’s what they said. Like I was his property and no one else could play with me. I was Tachibana’s.

I took it in stride, though. They were right, after all. I was his. For better or for worse, I was Hajime’s.

It was fine. I was content in this cozy little network of friends he had so graciously created for me. I wasn’t particularly close to the others like I was to him, but we all got along and managed to have a good time. I was happy. I didn’t need anyone besides him. Or so I thought.

There was a transfer student in our class. You could tell because everyone was whispering so loudly. She was from America, I heard. She was gorgeous, a guy who had seen her in the office was telling everyone. She probably had to move because of her family, reasoned a girl sitting in front of me. She had a tragic past, gossiped a girl wearing too much makeup.

The teacher came in and silenced us all with her presence. “We have a transfer student all the way from America. She just moved here last week because of her mother’s job. Everyone be nice to her and make sure she gets adjusted quickly. Come in and introduce yourself.”

A tall, black-haired girl with olive skin stepped into the room and stood in front of the class as the teacher wrote her name on the board. “I…I am Luna Nakamori…uh…Nakamori
Luna. P-pleased to meet you.” She looked back at the teacher, hoping Yamano-sensei\textsuperscript{131} would tell her what to do.

“There’s a seat in back by Kimura-san. He speaks English well. Kimura-san, please show Nakamori-san around.” Without further instruction, Yamano-sensei began to call roll.

“I’m Kimura Akira.” I smiled softly at my new classmate once she was seated next to me. “Your Japanese is pretty good, Nakamori-san. I hope we get along well. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you need anything.” I spoke in English to put her at ease.

“Thanks.” She returned my smile with a laugh. “I appreciate it. My Japanese is awful, though. I understand okay because my mom and dad always speak it to each other, but I can’t speak to save my life. Thanks for being polite. Oh, and you can call me ‘Luna.’ I’m so sick of all the formalities here. It’s so awkward!”

She was so strange. She was direct and opinionated. She looked slightly Japanese, but her speech and mannerisms were so…well…different. She was like Hajime in the way she just spoke her mind, but whereas Tachi had a refined air and layered personality, Luna was very much ‘what you see is what you get.’ I had never met anyone quite like that before. She was refreshing, enchanting, and captivating. I found myself intrigued by this stranger.

I showed her around during the breaks between classes, and I taught her how to order what she wanted from the cafeteria. She read simple kanji well enough, but she had a hard time speaking and grasping the different levels of politeness.

She smiled a lot. Unlike most Japanese, she freely expressed herself in public. She was clearly pleased, miffed, vexed, and bummed when she was experiencing the aforementioned emotions. She didn’t hold anything back.

Luna was beautiful. Her eyes were the lightest brown, and her hair was naturally curly. She was big, but not in a bad way. Luna was sturdy with wide hips, large breasts, and a little meat on her bones. I thought it made her very attractive.

I liked her. For the first time in my life, I honestly liked a girl. I liked the way she moved, talked, and carried herself.

Her laugh was like thunder, and her smiles like lighting.

She made my heart stop and my legs go rubbery. She made me feel good about myself when she actively listened and gave advice. She made me feel like I was important and capable when she asked me for help or made me explain something.

\textsuperscript{131} Sensei is the honorific for teacher or instructor.
I fell hard for her—so hard that I may have skipped cram school to hang out with her for just a few more hours. I neglected my studies and got into fights with Grandma Ayame. I realize now that I behaved like an irresponsible fool, but then I was in love—desperately so—and that love blinded me to everything else around me. All I could see was Luna, and I ended up neglecting my other friends. At the time I thought that I was right and everyone else was crazy. Only later did I come to regret it.
I was seriously pissed. It had been a bad day. An f-ing bad day. Not only had I been placed in a separate class from all my friends—though I was really only upset about being away from Akira—but now my absentee parents insisted that we were having a talk after dinner. That meant I got talked at with their “Hajime do this.” “Hajime do that.” bull. Meanwhile, I was expected to sit there and take it with my mouth shut.

I was in a bad mood, and if they preached at me, they were going to get an earful.

“Your father will be moving out,” Mother Dearest announced.

Tsubasa shot me a quizzical, sidelong glance.

I scrunched my brow and shrugged my shoulder. I didn’t know what this would mean for us any more than she did.

They explained that they were both cheating on each other and had become sick of this little ‘playing family’ routine. Tsubasa and I would stay in the house with Midori, and Haruka would go live with his young secretary. Mother’s boyfriend was going to move in. His name was Hideo, and we were to respect him as we would our father.

We didn’t quite understand. Tsubasa’s dad was long dead, and Haruka had never treated her as his daughter. As for me, that man had never been my father unless you counted impregnating my equally incompetent mother—the jury was still out on whether or not Tachibana Haruka had even done that.

Did that mean that we should treat Hideo-san in the same manner that we treated Haruka? Did that mean we should ignore this Hideo guy? Did it mean he would be largely missing from our lives? No skin off our backs. Just make him clean up in the bathroom after he’s done.

And that was it. That was the talk. My darling father said a stiff, obligatory goodbye, and he was gone.

“What does this mean?” My little sister looked up at me with big eyes. “Are we orphans now?”

“No,” I sighed. “Nothing’s changed. We only had each other from the beginning. We only have each other now. Go to bed, Sweetheart. You can have the bath first.”
Even though I had said that it didn’t matter, it still hurt. I knew my parents didn’t care about me. I knew they didn’t care too much for each other, either, but…no one else had known that. To any outsider, we would have seemed normal—privileged even. We had a nice house, nice cars, and nice clothes. We appeared to be a fully functional, two-parent household with a bright future. I knew it was a lie, but now everyone else would know too.

I had clung to that lie. I needed to play happy family just to keep it together. I needed something to grasp at, and appearances had always helped.

I went to my room and lay down on my bed. I felt crummy, so I picked up my cell and punched number one on the speed dial. Aki would make me feel better. All I wanted was to whine and bemoan my sad situation while lying in his arms, soaking up the sympathy and love.

It took forever for him to pick up. “Hello? This is Kimura.”
“Hey.” I smiled. Just hearing his voice made things a little brighter. “Can you talk?”
There was a pause. “Um…I’m actually out right now. Can I call you back later?”
“Out?” I blinked. But I was at home. “By yourself?”
“No.” He laughed. “I’m not that much of a loser.”
“If you’re out, and I’m not with you, does that mean you’re cheating on me, Aki?” I pretended to accuse him.
“I don’t know.” I could hear the bright smile in his voice. “Maybe. Actually, yes. I think I am cheating on you. I’m sorry. It looks like I’ve found someone new. Let’s break up.”

It had been a joke. I was teasing him, and he was teasing back. I loved it when he teased back. It gave me a little taste of a normal relationship. Yet, somehow, even though it was a joke, it wasn’t funny.

“What are you?” I softly inquired, the teasing tone gone from my voice. “Who are you with?”
“Kyoto Station with a girl that just transferred into my class today.” He sounded like he was having a lot of fun.

“Is that your girlfriend?” a jolly sounding voice in the background asked in English.
“Oh. No! It’s just my friend, but he’s really high-maintenance, so it’s kind of like having a girlfriend. I’m single, though,” he replied, stressing the ‘single’ part.

“Call me when you get done with your date, okay?” I sighed, making a mental note to look up ‘high-maintenance’ later.

“Sure. See ya, Hajime.” He sounded completely oblivious to my bad mood. He was probably having a lot of fun with his new friend.
I pouted for a while as I waited for him to call me back. As the hours stretched on I got bored, so I locked my door and got out a magazine from the top shelf of my closet. I sighed as I leafed through the pages. All the models were so handsome, but none of them seemed to be my type. They were all seducers—or at least they were good at pretending to be for the camera. I wanted a levelheaded, down to earth guy that I could lead astray. I wanted someone I had to seduce. What I wanted was for my best friend to wise up and realize that he was desperately in love with me, but Akira was dense—borderline emotionally retarded. He had a knack for being unable to decipher others’, let alone his own, feelings. I guess it was natural since he’d spent so many years alone with his books, away from people.

When eleven o’clock rolled around, I started to get worried since my friend had not yet returned my call. When I called him, I only got his voicemail, so I called again.

“H-hello?” he mumbled, sounding half asleep.

“Aki?”

“Tachi? What’s the matter? It’s late.”

“You never called me back,” I explained, feeling a little hurt that he was having so much fun with that girl that he had forgotten about my pain and suffering.

“Gosh, I’m really sorry.” At least he sounded sincere. “Can we talk tomorrow, or does it have to be now? I’m kind of in bed already.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I conceded, not wanting to bother him when he was tired.

“Good night, Tachi,” he yawned.

“Night, Aki,” I sighed, hanging up.

I looked back down at the model in the magazine. I wondered if he were actually gay or if he were just doing it for the money. I could pose seductively with my clothes falling off of me for money. I was damn sexy. Some people just hadn’t noticed yet.

The gang met in the quad for lunch like they always did. They flocked around me out of habit, even though I never really went out of my way to interact with them. They hung around me because their parents told them to.

I was restless. I hadn’t seen Aki in days (since yesterday morning when we discovered we were in different homerooms), so I wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation. I was acutely aware of Shigeki and Kasumi making eyes at each other while Kazuki babbled about something of little consequence. I only tuned in when I heard the younger Shihoudani say: “Who’s that girl with Akira-kun?”
She was plain and much bigger than any girl I’d ever seen—bulky but curvy with a bit of a thick waist. Her face was wrong. It had Japanese characteristics to it, but there were western characteristics too, and they did not mix well. She didn’t deserve to be standing next to my best friend.

“Hey guys,” Akira greeted as he approached. “This is Nakamori Luna. She just transferred here from the US.” He turned to his companion and spoke in English. “These are my friends. The twins are Shihoudani Kazuki-san and Kasumi-san. The guy with the tan skin is Nikaidou Shigeki-san. The handsome one is Tachibana Hajime, the one I was telling you about last night.”

“Do any of them speak English?” she inquired nervously.

I hopped down from the picnic table and stood tall in front of her. “The question isn’t whether we speak English, but rather whether you speak Japanese. Do you?”

“O-only a little,” she stammered, easily intimidated.

I smiled charmingly, taking her hand and kissing it. “I’m Hajime Tachibana. It’s nice to meet you. I hope we can be friends, Luna-san. It would be fun to practice English with you, and I can teach you some Japanese slang.”

“Thank you, Hajime-san.” She blushed. “I’d like that very much.”

I bit my lip to keep from grimacing when she used my first name. Didn’t she know anything about Japanese culture? “You can call me Tachibana-sama,” I instructed her with a smile that oozed charm.

“Hajime.” Akira furrowed his brow.

“Problem?” I smiled sweetly, still speaking in English.

“Can I talk to you?” He motioned me aside, leaving Luna to my pack of wolves.

“What is it?” I switched back to Japanese.

“Why are you bullying her?” He looked so serious.

“I’m being nice.” I pretended to look hurt.

“You’re pretending to be nice,” he corrected. “That’s the worst kind of bullying. Don’t pretend to be her friend and then talk behind her back. I don’t understand why you’re being such a jerk.”

I shrugged, giving up the façade. “I don’t like her.”

“You just met her.” My beloved rolled his eyes.

“And already I can tell she’s all wrong for you,” I huffed. I was insulted that he would forget to call me back because of her. “She doesn’t know our language, our customs, or our
manners. Plus, she’s not even pretty. She’s beneath you, and as your best friend it is my duty to protect you from yourself and tell you that she doesn’t deserve you.”

“Tachi, none of that matters.” He did his best to keep from shouting at me. “I like her, okay? So just deal with it. As my best friend, aren’t you supposed to be happy for me? What’s your problem?”

“Maybe I’m just pissed that you were too busy having fun with your slutty American girlfriend last night to bother calling me back when I really needed to talk to you!” I screamed, not caring who heard.

He slapped me. “Take that back!”

“Wh-what?” I blinked, not understanding what had happened at all. He slapped me? He slapped me! He slapped me!

“She’s not a slut, so take it back, you jerk!” He was angry with me. Over her? I’d never seen him so angry before. Akira was usually so reserved and calm.

I lowered my gaze and slouched to make myself smaller. I looked up at him hesitantly through my eyelashes and mumbled, “Are you mad at me, Aki?”

“Don’t try to pull that, Hajime,” he scolded. “You know I’m mad at you, so apologize for what you said!”

“I didn’t mean to make you angry,” I whispered, tilting my head to the side and gazing up at him.

“Stop playing all innocent and submissive,” he snapped, refusing to let his anger be quelled so easily.

“No.” I tried a different angle. “It hurt my feelings when you forgot about me because of her…and you hurt me when you hit me. Come after me when you’re ready to apologize first. Then I’ll take back what I said.” I turned on my heel and strode off. I stopped once I had turned the corner and was out of sight behind the old Home Ec building.

He’d run after me once he realized how he’d hurt me. He’d come and apologize, and then I could tell him about my parents separating. His brow would furrow in worry, and his lips would set into a thin line. He’d hold me and comfort me and say everything would be all right.

I waited five minutes before I started to get impatient.

He always came right away when I got angry and stormed off. What was taking him?

I waited another two minutes before peeking around the corner to see if he were coming.

He was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Luna. My minions were still seated at the picnic table, and no one was coming after me to see if I were okay.
I didn’t understand. Why did no one seem concerned? I went back around the corner and sat, waiting. Someone would come soon. Akira would feel bad about letting me storm off without apologizing to me. He would come if I waited.

I did my best to wait an additional ten minutes, but I only managed to wait eight before I texted him: “Aren’t you coming to apologize to me so that we can make up?”

I received: “Grow up.”

I didn’t understand. Maybe he’d meant to type something else. It happened all the time. The automated program filled in the wrong kanji all the time if you weren’t careful. He was probably on his way. He’d arrive any minute now and say how sorry he was.

I stubbornly waited three hours, convinced he would come for me eventually. The school bell rang to signal the end of classes, and still I waited. I sent another text: “I’m still waiting, Aki.”

“Stop being such a brat, Hajime. I’m not coming. I’m going out with Luna again. Stop pestering me.”

It hurt. Why would he say such a mean thing to me? “Don’t you want to make up?”

“I’ll make up with you when you stop being so childish and apologize.” He was so cold.

“I’m sorry,” I quickly replied, letting go of my pride. “Will you come for me now?”

“I’ll call you tonight,” he responded, but he never did.

I wondered if I were being punished.

I went to the quad for lunch the next day and listened half-heartedly to a discussion about which restaurant had the best takoyaki.

Akira and his American airhead came and sat with us, joining in the discussion. With Akira’s help, Bimbo managed to speak a little Japanese with a bad accent.

I was giving Aki the silent treatment. I had already used my childish pouting, playful submissiveness, and guilt-inducing ploys, so I was left with petty tactics. If that didn’t work, I would then move on to passive aggressiveness. Next I was planning on using a new girlfriend to make him jealous. If even that didn’t work, I would try pity-inducing schemes.

He’d be sorry. He’d beg for my forgiveness, showering me with apologies. He’d realize his foolishness.

I was ignored as I sat brooding and silent. Everyone was too wrapped up in their stupid discussion to notice that I was moping.

“Are you okay, Tachibana-san? You look upset.” Luna looked at me with a worried
expression on her face.

I blinked. Out of all of the people there—my closest friends—the outsider was the only one to notice something was wrong with me. I smiled and replied in English. “I’m fine, Luna-san. Thank you for asking. I’m gonna go for a short walk.” I rose and fled around the corner, behind the building where I had waited the day before. I sat with my back to the cold brick wall and sighed, resting my forehead on my knees.

Normally Aki was so attentive. He could pick up the slightest change in my mood because we were so in tune with each other. Now the man I loved had eyes only for someone else, and I was completely forgotten.

It hurt to be cast aside. It hurt to know he wouldn’t be coming for me.

He’d found someone else to lavish with his attentions.

I’d been replaced. So I cried.

“Hajime?”

I looked up to see my Prince Charming gazing down at me with a furrowed brow and mouth set in a line of worry. I looked away, playing hard to get. I’d make him grovel.

“Hajime, what’s wrong?” My love knelt beside me, placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on top of my head. “Why’d you rush off like that?”

I shook my head, refusing to speak to him. He’d have to earn my forgiveness, but as soon as he did, I was more than willing to kiss and make up.

“Hajime, talk to me. Please?” he begged, gorgeous eyes peering into mine.

“Oh, so you have time to talk to me now?” I snorted. “Thanks for penciling me in; I really appreciate it. I know you’d much rather be off making out with your new girlfriend.”

“I forgot to call you last night.” His eyes opened wide, and he covered his mouth in horror at what he had done. “Hajime, I am so sorry. I was out with Luna, and we were having a really great time, and it kind of slipped my mind.”

“Glad I mean so much to you.” I chuckled darkly, brushing him off and standing up to walk away.

“Tachi, wait!” he cried in a panic, grabbing my arm tightly.

“What do you want from me?” I glared right through him. “You’re sorry? Do you want me to say: ‘That’s okay, I forgive you for hitting me and ignoring me and hurting my feelings and being cruel and forgetting that I exist. All better now’? Is that what you want? You hurt me, Aki.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered meekly, not knowing what to do to make it better. “I was
wrong, Tachi. I’m sorry I hit you. I just got so mad when you talked bad about Luna. I kind of lost it. I’m sorry for how I talked to you. I didn’t mean what I said. I should never have treated you like that. I deeply apologize. You’re right to be angry.”

“So what are you going to do to make it up to me?” I smirked, done playing with his mind.

My beloved glared at me. “Jerk. You weren’t mad at all, were you?”

“Just sad.” I shrugged. “You really did hurt my feelings. Those tears were real.”

“I am sorry, Hajime. I like Luna a lot. Hanging out with her makes me happy, and I feel relaxed around her. I kind of got caught up in it. I’ll try not to let it happen again.” He sincerely apologized a second time.

“I really will get mad if you do it again,” I warned. “Now, how are you going to smooth my ruffled feathers? You seriously hurt my feelings.”

“Poor baby.” He sighed, pulling me into his arms and stroking my hair just how I liked it.

I melted like milk chocolate on a summer’s day when he held me. The heat from his body warmed mine to its very extremities. The scent of green tea from his shampoo made my mind fog over. My cheeks burned as I buried my face in his neck. He made me dizzy. His touch made my heart rate erratic. I wanted him bad.

“Better?” Aki whispered, giving me one last squeeze before releasing me. “Have you had enough physical human contact for the day?”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?” I pouted.

“Kiss you?” he echoed.

“You know, ‘kiss and make up’?” I batted my eyes prettily and puckered up.

He kissed me on the cheek. “Happy?” My oblivious little boy toy laughed, believing me to be joking.

“Happy enough,” I sighed, giving his left cheek a little peck.

“You’re so weird.” He smiled, and the heavens opened up. “One little hug can make or break your day.”

“It’s not weird.” I stuck out my lip at him in my signature pout.

“For a Japanese person, it’s weird. If you haven’t noticed, adults don’t hug all that much. Hugging is for kids.” He mussed my hair and started to walk away, back to the others.

“I am a kid” I huffed, falling in step beside him.

I’d be whatever he wanted me to be. I’d be anything as long as it kept him by my side.
Saturday morning at precisely ten o’clock, Hideo-san arrived. He was a severe looking man—intimidating at 189\textsuperscript{132} centimeters. He was big and burly and clearly the offspring of some massive European logger. His face had some features similar to Aki’s, but where Aki’s made him look dashing, Hideo’s only made him look scary.

I tried to hide my unease by putting on an indifferent mask as Mother introduced us. I stood with my hand on my hip as I slowly looked him up and down with uninterested eyes. I flipped my hair with my free hand and snorted quietly. I was the man of the house, and I wasn’t afraid of anything.

“Kids, this is Windom Hideo-san. Hideo-san, these are my children Hajime and Tsubasa. Say hello, kids,” Mother instructed with that “play nice” tone in her voice.

“Nice to meet you, Ojisan\textsuperscript{133}.” Tsubasa smiled and bowed like a good child.

I didn’t feel like play-acting. “You’re not our father, and you’re not welcome here,” I stated plainly, starring him straight in the eye.\textsuperscript{134}

“Hajime!” my mother screeched.

“No,” I snapped back at her. “It’s the truth. He’s not welcome, and he has no business being here. Keep your infidelity out of the house; I don’t want Tsubasa copying your bad example and ending up a whore too.”

Suddenly I found myself on the ground, the wind knocked out of me.

“You do not speak that way to your mother.” Hideo loomed over me, hand raised to strike me another blow. “Apologize.”

I slowly stumbled to my feet and glared up at him. “How dare you,” I began to fume. “How dare you come into my home and act like you own the place. This is my house, and you’re not welcome here, so get the hell out.”

He punched me this time, sending me flying into a potted plant. “Looks like no one ever taught you manners, little punk. We’ll soon break you of that attitude and teach you a little respect. Apologize to your mother and then to me.”

I shakily got back on my feet and spit in his face. “Blow me.” I was ready for his strike this time, so I managed to block it and get off a cheap kick to the nuts. I ran for the door as he went down, grabbing Tsubasa by the hand and dragging her along with me. “Come on.”

I scooped up our outdoor shoes as we burst through the door, but we kept running in our

\textsuperscript{132} Six foot three.

\textsuperscript{133} Ojisan means uncle, but it is used to refer to older males in Japan.

\textsuperscript{134} In Japan, it is rude and disrespectful to look a superior directly in the eye. It is also a sign of defiance.
house slippers for a few blocks, at least until the pagoda of Touji\textsuperscript{135} was obscured by the buildings. Once it was out of sight, I slowed our pace.

“Are you okay, Nii-chan?” My beloved sister sniffled as she sat to put on her shoes.

“I’m okay, Tsubasa. I’ll put some ice on my face when we get to Aki’s. God,” I huffed. “Doesn’t that bastard know not to hit someone as gorgeous as me in the face?”

“I hate him,” my darling hiccupped. “When he hurt you, I wanted to kill him!”

“Shh…” I smiled, kissing the top of her blessed little head. “It’s okay, Sweetheart. Your big brother is tough. He can defend himself, so you don’t have to worry. Besides, if you kill him, the police will take you away from me. You don’t want that to happen, do you?”

“No,” she mumbled as I dried her tears.

“Good girl. Leave the fighting to your nii-chan.”

I loved her. Even though she’d grown up and filled out a bit, at twelve years old, Tsubasa was still my baby. She had her grown-up moments, but she still acted childishly around me because she knew how much I loved her dependence on me. I loved being needed.

“We should call Akira-niisan’s house, shouldn’t we?” my baby stated logically. “To tell them that I’m coming as well…. And that we’re coming so early. You usually don’t go over until three or four.”

“Good idea.” I squeezed her hand as I fished out my cell.

“Hello? This is Kimura.” Aki was slow to respond.

“Hey. Got a minute?” I couldn’t wait to snuggle with him on his bed and tell him everything about my hellish week.

“Uh…I’m kind of out with Luna right now. Can I call you back later?” He quickly added: “I swear I’ll remember this time.”

“We can talk when you get home.” I tried to shrug it off. I hated Luna. I wanted to snuggle with my boyfriend now. “I was just calling to ask if it was okay if I came over early. Don’t worry about it. I can just call your mom and let her know.”

“Come early?” he echoed, surely blinking cutely in confusion. “Did we have plans tonight?”

Now it was my turn to blink. “Uh…yeah. This and every other Saturday night since middle school. I always spend the night on Saturday. Remember?”

“I’m sorry,” Akira replied awkwardly, probably feeling extremely foolish. “I forgot. It

\textsuperscript{135} The name literally means “East Temple”. The pagoda is the tallest wooden tower in Japan and dates back from
didn’t say anything in my planner, so I scheduled something with Luna. I kind of promised her the whole day.”

“Oh.” Luna Nakamori, this means war. Saturday was mine. Saturday was a day of Carol-san’s cooking, video games, late-night confidences, whispering under the covers, and wrestling matches that ended in tangled limbs and accidental groping.

“I’m really sorry,” Akira groveled.

“Don’t worry about it.” I bit my lip to keep from harping. “See ya when you get home.” I hung up before he could tell me something crazy like that he was spending the night at her place.

“You look kind of furious, Nii-chan.” Tsubasa gently squeezed my hand. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s this girl,” I growled and explained what had happened throughout the week. Even after Akira had promised to quit forgetting that I existed, he still couldn’t find time in his schedule for me. Every single day he had plans with Luna. It was frustrating to say the least.

“I’m so sorry that Akira’s out, Tachibana-kun,” Carol-san apologized as she ushered us into her home, handing us cups of tea and forcing snacks down our throats. She paused in her mothering for a moment when she happened to glance at my face. “Goodness!” she exclaimed in English before switching back into Japanese. “What in the world happened?! Let me get you some ice, Sweetheart.”

“This is nothing,” I nonchalantly shrugged off her concern, not wanting to worry her. “You should have seen the other guy.”

“Mother’s new boyfriend is a monster!” Tsubasa shrieked before I could stop her. “He was talking about how he was going to teach Nii-chan manners, and he started beating him up! I hate Hideo-san! How could Mother bring such a beast into our home?”

“What’s all this now?” My mother figure cocked her head to the side as she applied ice to my face.

“Father and Mother decided to separate,” Tsubasa explained. “Father left to go live with his girlfriend, and Hideo-san, Mother’s boyfriend, moved into the house with us. He’s terrifying, Okaasan.”

“Your mother’s boyfriend did this to you?” Carol-san gazed at me in shock with those clear blue eyes that reminded me of her son’s.
I looked away, nodding. “He didn’t like my attitude…said I needed to apologize to him and Mother. I backtalked him, so he hit me.”

“And where was your mother when this happened?” Carol-san inquired as she finished patching me up.

“She just watched!” my darling sister squealed in resentful outrage.

The westerner’s eyebrows knit together in deep concern. “What could Midori-san be thinking, bringing a man like that into the house?”

“That woman has no sense of propriety,” Grandma Ayame declared as she came into the living room. She looked at me and clicked her tongue in disapproval. “That brute Hideo-san has no sense, hitting you in the face like that. That pretty face of yours is your only redeeming quality, you little ruffian. It might be good to learn some manners, but beating them into you won’t do any good.”

I nodded, knowing her nagging to be signs of fondness. “It’ll be okay…probably. I’m tough. Mother will lose interest in a week or two, and he’ll be gone. I can stick it out. I’m just worried about Tsubasa.”

“Me?” My angel blinked slowly.

“I’m worried he’ll hurt you too, Tsubasa.” I looked up at the Kimura women with pleading eyes. “Would it be okay if she came and stayed here from time to time if I ever think she’s in any real danger?”

“Absolutely, Honey.” Carol-san placed a loving hand to my cheek and smiled sadly. “You two are practically family, and we Kimuras look out for our own.”

“Thank you very much.” I smiled, bowing slightly. “I’m in your debt.”

“Not a problem. We’ll definitely take care of our future daughter-in-law,” Grandma Ayame proclaimed with a straight face. She still held on to the hope that one day Akira would develop an interest in my sister.

I didn’t mind much. Akira would be a worthy husband for my treasure, if I weren’t already planning on making him mine.

“You’re welcome as well, Tachibana-kun. Any time,” she added with a rare half smile. It was so minuscule that I almost missed it.

“Truly, thank you.” I bowed again, feeling extremely lucky to have the Kimuras in my life.

“Not a problem,” she repeated before turning to her daughter-in-law. “Where is Akira? He hasn’t been home all day, and he needs to study.”
Carol-san bit her lip and sighed. “He’s out with that Nakamori girl again.”

This seemed to enrage the sage woman. “He’s out with that foreigner again? I told him he must study today, and he blatantly disobeyed me! She’s turned him against us.” Grandma Ayame turned to me to rant—not that I minded listening. “I forbade him from seeing her because he’s been neglecting his studies and spending all of his time with her. He even brought her home for dinner!”

“It was a bit of a disaster,” Carol-san admitted.

“She nearly came in with her shoes on!” the older woman cried out in indignation. “She didn’t bring a gift, either. No manners! Furthermore, when I offered her some tea, she right out said that she didn’t like tea, but she’d take some soda if we had any! Plus, she can barely use chopsticks. She must be an absolute embarrassment to her parents.”

“She can’t even speak Japanese properly,” I added while we were badmouthing my arch-nemesis. “She’s all wrong for Aki.”

“That’s exactly what I was telling him!” the furious grandmother huffed.

“I do feel sorry for her, though,” Carol-san spoke up. “She’s very American. She doesn’t belong here, so it must be hard for her, adjusting to all of this. I’m glad that Akira’s helping her out, but…he’s a little obsessed. She’s all he ever talks about when he’s not with her. I’m happy that he’s finally found someone he likes, but he’s taking it a little too far.” She knit her eyebrows together in concern and stood to return the first aid kit to the top of the fridge. “I wish he would spend some of his free time with you or his other friends.”

“Or studying,” Grandma Ayame added fervently. “At least he studied before when he spent all of his time with you. And we didn't have to worry about him as far as his virtue was concerned.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” I smiled, but didn’t say anything.

“So…we only have one spare futon.” Carol-san switched topics, not ready to contemplate her baby’s possible loss of innocence. “You two will have to fight over it.”

“Tsu can have it.” I shrugged, willing to give up the comfortable bed for my sister. “I’ll

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136 The Japanese clearly differentiate between outside and inside in respect to both physical indoors and outdoors and social in- and out-groups. The outside is considered to be dangerous and unclean. The Japanese take off their shoes in the doorway to avoid bringing the impurities of the outdoors (and actual dirt) into their homes. It is extremely rude and insulting to come into a Japanese person’s home with shoes on for this reason.

137 It is a common practice in Japan to decline an offer the first few times it is made as Akira does in chapter four when Hajime’s father offers him something to drink. Expressing one’s preference is also frowned upon if it has not been expressly requested. If one’s preference is asked, it is better to say that anything is fine in order to be polite and avoid embarrassing the host in case they do not have the preferred item.
sleep on the floor.”

“You could share Akira-niisan’s bed.” The little fairy smiled sweetly, secretly hoping that I would get laid. I had no idea what she was really like on the inside.

We spent the rest of the day chatting, watching TV with Grandma Ayame, and helping Carol-san cook. It was relaxing after such a hectic morning.

The old bat scolded me like usual at dinner. She harped at me about eating more as she forced more veggies and fish onto my plate. “You’re as thin as a girl!” she griped, filling my bowl with rice.

I pretended to bicker with her throughout the meal, but I was glad to know that someone cared about my well-being.

The matriarch retired to her bedroom at ten after her dramas had ended and we had finished our discussion about the actors. The rest of us took turns in the bath and then followed suit.

I loved sleeping in Akira’s bed. It wasn’t as comfortable as mine at home, but it was more relaxing for me because of its scent. My friend went to bed with his hair wet, so his pillow smelled exactly like his green tea shampoo while his sheets gave off the smell of his body wash. Lying in his bed was just like being enveloped in his embrace.

I lay on top of his covers, reveling in his scent as I waited for him to return home. It was about eleven thirty when I heard someone ascend the stairs and go into the bathroom. I waited in anticipation for a freshly showered Aki to snuggle with.

He quietly opened the door and came in on tiptoes so as not to disturb me. He chuckled when he noticed I was awake. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” I grinned at the sight of him in a towel, torso glittering with droplets of water.

“Do you mind if I change in front of you?” my love interest inquired as a formality before dropping the towel and fishing his pajamas out of his dresser.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before.” I shrugged enjoying the free show. Seeing him like that made my whole body ache. I wondered if he knew he was being a tease.

When he was unfortunately clothed again, he came over and straddled me, sitting on my stomach. “Today must be my lucky day. I got to spend the entire day with a cute girl, and now there’s a hott stud in my bed.”

“Take me; I’m yours.” I batted my eyes prettily at him, circling my arms around his neck. “I’ve never been with a man before, so be gentle with me.”
“Take a deep breath.” He smirked. “And prepare yourself. This is gonna hurt a little, but don’t scream too loudly.”

I did as he said, a little bit confused. Usually that was where our teasing stopped. He normally was uncomfortable taking it much further. It had taken years for him to accept any kind of sexual humor between us, and only recently had he started to instigate sexually charged teasing.

“Ready?” He leaned down and whispered into my ear.

“Y-yeah.” I gave an involuntary shudder as I felt his lips brush against my sensitive skin.

I gasped as he started tickling me. He knew all of the spots that made me wriggle and scream. He remembered them all: the small of my back, the crook of my neck, the backs of my knees, and even the spot on the ribs right under my chest. We had talked about ticklish spots several years ago on a camping trip, and now Akira was using my secrets against me.

He had me pinned down with his body, so there was no hope of escape. I was completely at his mercy, and all I could do was kick, laugh, and scream until he had had his way with me.

“Stop!” I begged between gasps. “God, please! Aki, you’re killing me! Aki, no! Please stop!”

“Shh…” My tormentor ceased his assault and put a hand to my mouth. “My family is going to think I’m killing you.”

“Or screwing my brains out,” I gasped, trying to catch my breath. “Man, Aki. I said to be gentle.”

“You know you like it rough,” he continued to tease as he ruffled my hair.

“What’s with all the flirting tonight? You trying to butter me up, Akira? Seduce me into forgetting about how you neglected me?” I gazed suspiciously up at him.

My darling smiled sheepishly. “Is it working?”

“Throw in a massage, and we’ll see if my memory gets any foggier.” Truthfully, I didn’t mind his abuse so much now that he was trying so hard to make up for it. I liked milking him for attention.

“Take off your shirt and roll over, then,” he instructed as he climbed off of me. “I’m really sorry about this week, Tachi,” he apologized as he started on my neck and shoulders. “I got kind of busy with Luna, and I completely forgot. That’s no excuse, though. It was wrong of me. After nearly six years, it shouldn’t have been something that slipped my mind so easily.”

“So you’re just calling her ‘Luna?’” It slightly irked me. “You’ve only known her a week, and you’re already on a first-name basis?”
“Honorifics make her uncomfortable,” he explained, biting his lip. “Things are a lot more informal in the US. She wants me to call her ‘Luna.’”

“I wanted you to call me Tachibana, but you insisted on honorifics for the longest time,” I grumbled. “Does she call you ‘Akira?’”

“Sometimes just ‘Aki,’” he mumbled, knowing that I wouldn’t be pleased.

“I thought you only let me call you ‘Aki.’” She was taking everything from me, and it was making it hard for me to enjoy my massage.

“She’s special,” he weakly defended.

“Oh.” I sighed. “Like how I’m special to you?”

“Kind of…” I could barely hear him. “She’s a little different.”

“Because we’re closer, so I’m more special.” I didn’t like this conversation. I wanted to go back to him flirting with me.

“Tachi, I think…I mean, I know…that I…I really…. Do you remember that one time when you were saying that one day, when I started liking girls, I would start thinking about certain things?”

“I don’t feel like talking about her anymore.” I quickly cut him off, not wanting to hear about how he was thinking about sex now that he’d met that rude American.

“I…I wanted to ask your advice.” He didn’t back off right away.

“I don’t want to talk about this.” I was thankful that he couldn’t see my tears.

“Tachi, I really like Luna. I want to be in a relationship with her.” He took a breath to gather his courage. “A physical relationship too.”

“R-rub harder. How am I supposed to forget what a jerk you are when this doesn’t feel good at all?”

Had he lost interest in me? Not three years ago he had confessed to me. He’d said he had a crush on me. After that, I had thought that we were unofficially together. Sure, there were times when it only seemed like a joke, but there were other times when it was all very real. Was this his way of breaking up with me? We had never really been a couple, but we were together, weren’t we?

Maybe this was my fault. I had dated other people to mess with my parents. He’d known that I wasn’t serious, hadn’t he? There was that one little slip up with what’s-her-face the uber-slut, but he’d said that he’d forgiven me. I’d thought that we were okay.

“Will you be serious for a second, please?” He sighed, and the back rub stopped. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but this is important. You might not want to hear it, but I’m
falling in love with Luna. I want to go out with her and kiss her and marry her and have sex and kids and stuff like that, so…you know more about relationships than I do, so I was hoping that you would coach me.”

That was that. He was dumping me now that he’d found something better.

“It’s really insensitive of you to ask a guy going through a tough breakup for relationship advice.” I sniffled, giving myself away.

“You never liked Natsuko-san.” My love blinked in confusion. “Tachi, why are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t wanna talk anymore. I didn’t come here to be made to feel worse.” I gave up the façade and started to cry without holding it back. “This week has been nothing but shit, and you’ve blown me off every time I’ve needed you because you’re too busy with that damn Nakamori girl. Do you know how it feels to be cast aside like that—for your best friend to act like you don’t matter? It’s not like I have other friends, Aki. I don’t have anyone to talk to, so I’ve just been bottling it all up, and it sucks. I can’t deal with any more crap right now, so just leave me alone. I can’t take any more. I’m going to sleep.” I crawled under the covers and curled up on my side, facing the wall.

“Sorry,” my beloved whispered as he wrapped his arms around me from behind. “You’re right. You’re always there for me when I’m freaking out for a test or having a fight with Grandma Ayame. You even listen to me complain about trivial things, but the first time you really needed me, I wasn’t there for you. I’m not being fair to you. You hardly ever complain, even though you’ve got it worse than I do. I’m sorry for taking you for granted.” He squeezed me tighter, nuzzling my shoulder and neck. “Just tell me what I can do to make it better. What’s wrong, Hajime?”

“I don’t really want to talk about it anymore,” I sighed, rolling over and snuggling into his chest. “Really bad family problems. There’s been some cheating, and it’s gotten pretty ugly. I picked a fight today with a giant and got my butt handed to me too. My face hurts, and my pride’s pretty sore. Plus, it really hurt me when you forgot to call me back and ignored me to go hang out with that girl. I’m jealous. I don’t want to lose you to her. You used to spend all of your free time with me, and now I feel like I’ve been left in the dust…like I don’t matter to you anymore.”

“Oh, Tachi.” My brown-haired beauty pressed his lips to my forehead. “God, I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel like that. I swear, from now on, I’ll save my Saturday nights for you, and I’ll definitely return your calls. I promise I won’t forget anymore. I’m not going to get
so busy with Luna that I forget to spend time with you. You’re my best friend, and you’re super important to me.”

“Tell me that you love me,” I pleaded.

“I love you, Hajime,” Akira acquiesced, willing to do anything to make up for his negligence.

“Again,” I childishy requested.

“I love you.” He patiently pandered to me.

“Now give me a kiss.” I decided to push my luck.

“Love you,” He whispered, kissing my neck. “Now what?”

“Now make love to me.” I knew he would say no, but it was worth a shot.

“Then take off your pants and spread your legs.” I received another soft kiss. My heart sped up. “R-really?”

“No. Sorry,” he laughed into my neck. “I don’t think we’re quite at that point in our relationship yet. I will give you that massage, though. Besides, you’re sex-o-phobic anyway. It’s a wonder that you make so many sexual jokes.”

“I think I’d like it if it were with you,” I replied honestly.

“Really? Perhaps one day, then. One day when we’re married or completely drunk or older or something.” He shrugged, rolling me onto my stomach.

I melted into the mattress as his fingers started on my back. “A little lower,” I sighed.

“Lower still…. A little bit more.”

“Tachi, if I go any lower, I’ll be groping you.” He rolled his polychromatic orbs at me.

“I don’t care. Haven’t you always wanted to feel me up?” I chuckled, thoroughly enjoying the art of giving him a hard time.

I was extremely surprised when he grabbed my butt and squeezed hard. I gasped. His hands on my flesh felt really good.

“It’s nice and firm,” he observed. “Are you happy now that you’ve been groped?”

“You could say that.” I tried to keep my breathing even. He was excellent with his hands. Despite being more or less dumped, I fell in love all over again that night.

The next morning, Carol-san woke us up at nine o’clock with a suspicious glance to the clothes and towel left unceremoniously scattered on the floor.

Akira explained that it had been very hot last night under the covers with us sleeping so close together, and I added some wild animal sex comments. My prince charming promptly
whacked me and instructed me to put some of his clothes on. I made a ‘getting into your pants’ joke and got thwacked again. Aki was obviously embarrassed by all the raunchy things he had said the night before when he had been trying to get back into my good graces.

Once we were both dressed and cleaned up, we headed downstairs where Tsubasa and Aki made waffles for breakfast. I chatted with Carol-san and the old bat while my best friend and my little sister discussed something in hushed tones—Tsubasa giggling while Akira turned strawberry red.

“Did you sleep well, Nii-chan?” My darling angel smiled sweetly as she set down a plate in front of me.

“Yeah, I did.” I kissed her forehead and mussed her hair. Even though she was older now, I still liked treating her like a little girl. “Thanks for asking. What about you?”

“The futon was very comfortable, thank you. I hope you and Akira-niisan weren’t too cramped.” My wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing of a sister took a seat across from me and grinned.

“We’re comfortable enough with each other that it doesn’t matter.” The love of my life shrugged as he set a plate before his grandmother.

“Are you and Tachibana-kun spending time together today?” the old biddy inquired of her grandson. “I was beginning to think that you had forgotten that he existed.”

I looked hopefully at my best friend.

“Actually, I’m meeting Luna at the station at ten thirty. I have to eat and run,” he explained without a hint of apology in his voice.

I sighed quietly, looking down into my pancakes in disappointment.

“And when are you going to study?” The stickler narrowed her eyes.

“I’ll study when I get back,” he assured.

“Akira, you won’t get into Tokyo University if you don’t take your studies seriously,” the crone warned, wanting a bright future for her only grandson.

Akira took a deep breath. “Obaasan, I’m not going to Tokyo University. I want to go to school in America with Luna. They don’t have such ridiculous exams there, so I don’t have to study so hard. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

There was shocked silence in which Carol-san, Tsubasa, and I tried to avoid staring open-mouthed. Aki took advantage of this moment of quiet confusion, grabbing a piece of fruit and heading for the door. “I’m going to head out now. I’ll see you later.”

“See ya,” I sighed. I’d gotten to spend two measly hours with him.

“That vile woman has bewitched him,” Grandma Ayame deduced.
“He’s a young man in love for the first time,” Carol-san offered in defense of her son.
“I’m sure he’ll return to his senses within a few weeks.”

“He’d better, or his grades will suffer,” the matriarch decreed. “If this continues, we’ll have to ground him.”

“Are you okay, Nii-chan?” Tsubasa quietly stirred me from my heavy thoughts.

“I’m just tired.” I tried my best to smile for my beloved sister. I looked back down at my plate. “Sorry. I’m not all that hungry. I kind of want to go back to sleep. Would it be okay if Tsubasa and I stayed a little longer? I’m really sorry for imposing on you. It’s terribly rude of me.”

“You’re welcome here,” Grandma Ayame reminded me, taking a slow sip of her tea.

“Are you afraid to go home?” Carol-san asked, looking my face over for bruises and swelling.

“No,” I lied. “I just don’t want Tsubasa to be around him if she doesn’t have to.”

“You’re such a good brother, Tachibana-kun,” they praised.

I thanked them profusely and went back up to Akira’s room. The bed was still warm.

Tsubasa and I returned home at around three o’clock, and as we stood outside the main gate, she tugged on my sleeve. “Nii-chan, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I forced myself to smile reassuringly. “Just tired, I guess. Akira hogs the covers, so I didn’t sleep as well as I normally do.”

“Nii-chan,” Her brow furrowed, and she looked up at me with serious eyes. “I’m not as sweet and naïve as I pretend to be.” She gulped and looked down. “I’m sorry for deceiving you all this time. I was never like that, but I wanted to be a cute little sister that you could accept and love. My parents loved me, but they weren’t very good at raising me. I can take care of myself to some extent. I did everything on my own until I became a Tachibana.”

“Wh-why are you telling me this now?” My mind was a little on the blank side after her confession. I was confused. Was she fed up with my babying her? Did she mean that she didn’t need me? Did she not want me anymore either?

“I want you to know that you don’t have to waste so much energy looking after me and protecting me from everything. You should look after yourself right now.” My angel looked up at me and smiled. “I know you’re going through some stuff right now, and you don’t have anyone to talk to about it. I want you to know that you can lean on me. I want to support you, Nii-chan. That’s what family’s for.”
“Th-thanks.” I smiled gratefully. “I…could really use someone right now, but…it’s kind of awkward.”

“I don’t mind talking about your sex life,” she stated bluntly. “You like guys, right? You have a thing going on with Akira-niisan, yeah?”

I blinked. Who was this girl standing in front of me? “Uh…I like girls too.” My mind was blown to pieces. “And…Aki dumped me. We were never official, but he told me he liked me three years ago, and since then I thought that we were unofficially official, you know?”

“But now he wants to go out with that Luna girl.” The umber-eyed imp nodded knowingly. “I’m sorry. That must be rough. When did he break up with you?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again, remembering what he had said at the beach jokingly about breaking up with me to study more. And then there was the joke just last week when he had first met Luna. I had asked if he were cheating on me, and he had jokingly said ‘let’s break up.’ “We officially broke up last night, but…now that I think about it, he’s probably been thinking about ending it for a while…even before Luna.”

“I’m sorry.” The pixie wrapped her arms around me, resting her head on my chest. “It’s okay, Nii-chan. You can win him back, and, if not, there are plenty of other people in this world. You’ll find someone else.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t bother telling her that it was hopeless. It was my duty to marry a well-bred young lady and to produce heirs to the Tachibana line. There would never be love. “Let’s go inside.”

Surprisingly enough, our mother was home and waiting. “There you are!” She rushed towards us, arms open and worry covering her face. “Thank God!”

Had she been worried about me? Was she going to hug me? Maybe she did care. Maybe after seeing me knocked senseless the previous day she had sent her boy toy packing. Maybe she had come to her senses and decided to love and care for her children. Maybe Father would come back and we could be a real family.

She ran right past me and threw her arms around my sister. “Tsubasa, Honey, I was so worried about you. Don’t ever scare your mother like that again.”

Then she turned to me.

Did I get a hug too? Was she going to apologize to me?

I stood there awkwardly, expectantly.

“Hajime, what were you thinking, running off like that after being so rude to Hideo-san?! And taking your sister too!” She slapped me. Not hard, but it stung thanks to the beating I had
received the day before. “How dare you?!”

How dare I even hope she would be kind and loving towards me?

I didn’t bother to say anything. I just turned and walked up the stairs to my room. I went into my bathroom, locked the door, and turned on the shower so that no one would hear me cry. Absolutely nothing was going my way, and I was frustrated and feeling helpless.

After I was done bawling and then cleaning up my face, I flopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. What was I going to do now? The way I saw it, I had a few choices: I could sabotage Luna and Akira’s relationship, I could try to win Aki back, I could put myself out of my misery, or I could find someone new. I decided to try option four first.

Now the questions were: did I want a girl or a guy, what kind of person was I looking for, and where would I find them?

If I wanted a girl, she would have to be pretty, but not as pretty as me. She’d have to be dumb and have a big chest. I also wanted someone who didn’t talk too much. Her voice shouldn’t be too annoying either.

I paused. That was my usual type. With a few exceptions, I had dated girls that I could use and lose. I wasn’t looking for a make-out partner this time. I was looking for someone to spend my life with. I needed someone I could stand to be with for decades, not weeks.

I tore up my mental list and started again. I wanted someone with a warm smile. I needed someone who would hold me and kiss me and tell me it was okay. I wanted someone strong and kind who would spoil me occasionally. I wanted someone that I could be the real me with.

I paused again. Would a woman really be comfortable doing that? Weren’t men the ones who were supposed to comfort and spoil their girlfriends? Would it be hard to find someone comfortable with reversing the stereotype?

Maybe I should try finding a guy? If you didn’t count Aki, I’d never tried dating a guy before. Maybe a man could make me happy where the women I had dated had failed. But, where did one meet other guys?

I got down some of my magazines and thumbed through them until I found the sections about cruising spots. I didn’t really like the idea of going to some park or bookstore and waiting to be picked up, though. I sighed and put the magazines back in my closet.

The next day at school, I suffered in silence as I watched Akira and Luna together during lunch. I had to admit that they were a cute couple—the way they laughed at each other’s jokes and smiled at each other. Did he ever look at me that way? I knew that that was the way I had
gazed at him, but had he ever returned my longing looks?

I felt isolated.

Aki and his American were off in their own world while the twins vied for Shigeki’s attention—pushing each other and climbing all over him. They all looked happy. They belonged with each other. They were actually friends.

I may have been the one that brought them together, but that didn’t mean I belonged with them. They were content with each other. They enjoyed each other’s company. I was only there because of my family’s status. They didn’t like me as a person—and who could blame them? My interpersonal skills kind of sucked. I had only ever been snooty, snotty, and high-handed with them, but they were obligated to be friends with the rich kid. I hated them, mocking me with their happiness.

I stood to leave. No one would miss me anyway.

“Tachibana-san?” Luna called after me in broken Japanese. “Where’re ya goin’ to?”

“I’m not feeling well.” I made up an excuse in English.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” She got the point and switched back to English. “Well, if you’re feeling better later, Aki and I are going to see a movie after school, if you want to come.” The silly girl smiled genuinely at me.

“Thank you. I’m not sure, but I’ll think about it,” I politely declined, though she probably thought that I had actually meant that I would think about it.

“No problem. I hope you can come. We don’t get to hang out much.” The fool grinned widely.

Sometimes I felt bad for her. Who invited their rival in love to their date? Did she even know that going to a dark movie theatre with a boy constituted a date?

I considered going and messing up the atmosphere, but I didn’t want my friend angry with me, and, besides, I already had after school plans.

After classes let out, I went to the bookstore where I usually bought magazines. I picked one off the shelves and stood, pretending to read it, while I scoped out the other customers.

There were older men, a few younger men, and some middle-aged men in suits who probably had wives and kids back home. Guys my age were few and far between, and none of them were attractive to me.

I left after I got hit on by one of the business-suited men. My venture had been a total bust, so, empty-handed, I returned home.

“You’re home late, Hajime.” My mother glared me down as I walked in the door. “Where
were you?”

“Why bother asking? You don’t care.” I rolled my eyes and headed to the dining room where Hideo-san and Tsubasa were seated.

“Midori-san, you mustn’t allow him to speak to you that way,” the mountain troll bellowed. “He’ll never respect you if you let him walk all over you like that.” His black eyes narrowed at me. “Hajime, you will tell your mother where you were.”

“Like hell I will,” I growled, a Chihuahua holding his ground against a Great Dane. “And who ever said you could call me by my first name? There is only one person who can call me Hajime. Get out of my house, home wrecker.”

“I am your father now, and you will do as I say,” Hideo decreed, frustration mounting as I defied him.

“I don’t know who my real father is, but you sure as hell ain’t him, Ugly.” I laughed in his face.

I should have guessed I’d end up on the floor for that.

My mother gasped, and Tsubasa screamed.

I could barely hear them; my ears were ringing. I felt myself being lifted and slung over Hideo-san’s shoulder. He lugged me to the front door and tossed me out, saying, “Stay out there until you can behave in a civilized manner, punk.”

Dizzy and in pain, I picked myself up and started walking. I was disoriented, so I got myself lost within fifteen minutes. I saw a park tucked between an industrial-looking building and a department store, so I crossed the street and took a seat on one of the park benches.

Thoughts of “now what?” crossed my mind. I could call Akira, but he might still be on his date. I could bother the Kimuras again, but I felt guilty always imposing on them. I could stay at a hotel if I needed to, but for now it would probably be best to find out where I was.

I looked around, but I didn’t recognize anything. My head hurt, and I was hungry. I buried my face in my hands and sighed. I didn’t really care anymore. I’d just sleep on the bench and worry in the morning. Maybe I’d get lucky and the cops would come take me home.

“Excuse me?” A sharp, clear voice interrupted my despair.

I looked up to see a handsome young man in tight black dress pants, a white long-sleeved shirt, and a silky black scarf. His hair was full with long bangs like mine, and he had dyed it mahogany. He was beautiful.

“Um…I know it’s none of my business, but are you okay?” He winced slightly at my forming bruises. “Do you need to go to the hospital, or would you like me to call a taxi or
“Uh…no,” I replied awkwardly, looking away. I was ashamed of my appearance. “I’ll be okay. I just got into a fight. Thank you very much for asking.”

“Oh, not at all.” He smiled sheepishly, not wanting to leave me alone, but not knowing what else to do. “You know, this area isn’t very safe after dark. You should probably head home soon.”

I looked curiously up at the good Samaritan. He didn’t look much older than I was. “If you don’t mind me asking, if it’s not safe, what are you doing here, Sir?”

He blushed, scratching the back of his neck. “Um…I was just…well…I meet clients here. You should really go home, young man.”

“I can’t,” I admitted quietly. “My mother’s boyfriend beat me up and literally threw me out. Besides, I’m lost.” I then thought about what I had said and apologized. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t bother a stranger with my family problems. I’m being terribly rude.”

My guardian angel fished in his bag for a business card and then handed it to me. “Now we’re not strangers.” He smiled.

“I’m sorry. I’m just a student, so I don’t have my own business cards yet,” I apologized for my negligence. “I’m Tachibana Hajime, a senior at Seiya Academy—eighteen years old. Nice to meet you…Matsuo Masashi-san.” The card stated his profession to be that of a private entertainer and escort. I was talking to a prostitute—a very attractive, kind one at that.

He blinked, face going bright red. “I’m terribly sorry. That’s the wrong one.” He handed me another card after searching through his bag.

“Matsumoto Akira-san?” This card said he was a medical student.

He chuckled in embarrassment. “You can call me ‘Akira-san’, if you’d like, Tachibana-kun.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

Akira-san awkwardly continued. “Uh…Tachibana-kun, like I said before, this place isn’t exactly safe. If you stay here too long, people might get the wrong idea, and they might start bothering you. They can be pretty aggressive, too. Is there anywhere else you can go?”

“Could I pay you to go on a date with me, Akira-san?” I whispered, looking down at my feet. “Go out to dinner with me, and then I’ll go home.”

“Tachibana-kun, you really shouldn’t be spending time with me.” He was reluctant to draw me any further into his world.

“I wouldn’t be spending time with Masashi-san, the host,” I sighed, just wanting him to
humor me. “I’d be hanging out with Akira-san, the med student. I’d just be paying for your time and dinner—nothing else. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“You shouldn’t have to pay someone to go out with you.” Three deep trenches marred his brow.

“Yeah, I know I’m a loser. Rub it in, why don’t you?” I grumbled, my cheeks heating up.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” my companion replied softly, trying to soothe my hurt feelings.

“The point is that I’ll pay you,” I stated bluntly. “You need the money, don’t you? Why else would you be here?”

He nodded solemnly. “My father left when I was young, and now Mom’s sick. I have a younger brother and sister to take care of as well while I attend school.”

“So go out with me,” I insisted. “We can go to a nice place, and you can take home something for your family too.”

“Okay,” Akira-san finally agreed. “I know a place that serves quality food for a fair price.” He paused as he took another look at my face. “You know, if you want, I have some makeup that would cover up those bruises.”

“Thank you.” I gave him a small smile of thanks. “I’m actually really vain. I can’t believe that bastard hit me in the face.”

“Poor thing,” he cooed, getting out his makeup kit and gently applying foundation to my skin.

“Why do you have a makeup kit with you?” I asked out of curiosity after he had finished and we were walking to the restaurant.

“Sometimes you get a little bruised in this line of work.” Akira-san shrugged, still wearing a smile.

“H-how long have you been…” I wasn’t sure how to politely finish that sentence.

“Four years,” he replied without a hint of embarrassment. “Ever since Mom got sick. It feels like forever ago.”

“It must be hard.” I replied awkwardly, feeling that I had just made an egregious understatement.

“We don’t have to talk about me, you know…if it makes you uncomfortable.” Akira-san smiled gently, probably not too keen to discuss personal issues either. “We can talk about whatever you want.”

“I’m not so sure what I want to talk about.” I buried my face in the menu.
“We don’t have to talk if you don’t want.” His smile was so kind and earnest. “Or you don’t have to talk. You could just listen. I could just listen.”

It was quiet until after we placed our orders.

“I’m in love with someone,” I confessed. “He’s my best friend… my only friend. We were kind of together, but not official, for three years, but there’s someone else in his life now, and he’s too busy with her to make time for me. It really hurts.” I glanced up, and our eyes met for an instant. I averted my gaze, embarrassed.

“Go on,” my hired companion encouraged. “I’m here to listen, not to judge.”

“I thought I’d find someone new, but I don’t know how to go about it.” I sighed.

“There are youth groups and support circles. There are cafés, bars, and clubs too. You could try local cruising spots, but some of them are seedy. There’s also the joining a club and making new friends approach.”

I nodded. “You know a lot about this.” I bit my lip. “Are you...?” I hesitated, feeling uncomfortable.

“You can ask me anything, Tachibana-kun,” my date assured with that genuine-looking grin.

“Are you actually gay, or are you just doing this for the money?” I let it all out in one breath.

He chuckled, highly amused with me. “Truthfully, I like girls more, but I’ve dated guys too. My clients aren’t really my type, though.”

“What is your type?” I let curiosity get the better of me. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is,” I quickly amended.

“I like younger guys with pretty faces,” he confidently stated. “I may act submissive when I’m working, but I’m actually more of the aggressive type. I mostly go for sweet, innocent, lost puppy types. Like you.”

“M-me?” I blinked, my heart beating twice as fast as normal. “I’m no lost puppy.” I shook off my momentary stupor. “I’m tough—a punk. I’m a rebel. You just got the wrong first impression of me. I’m a hardcore heartbreaker, and I’m always on top,” I stated it boldly even though it was a lie. I had always ended up on my back when I was with what’s her name the uber-slut.

“Really?” The host grinned like a self-satisfied cat. “You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not,” I sighed sadly. “I made some bad decisions a few years ago and got pressured into some stuff.”
“You’re young.” My conversation partner shrugged. “There’s plenty more sex to be had in your lifetime, Kiddo. Just because it was bad a couple times, doesn’t mean it’ll always be bad. It’s usually better with someone you care about, but it can be good with complete strangers too. Experiment a little, but ALWAYS use protection,” he added as an afterthought. “Understand?”

I nodded, feeling like a middle school student getting lectured.

“Good.” Akira-san smiled gently. “You don’t wanna pick up anything. I know some guys in my line of work that got sick and died. That’s why I always use protection and get testing regularly.”

It was quiet for a bit before I gathered up my courage and timidly asked, “Is there someone that you like, Akira-san?” I found myself wanting to know more and more about this strange character.

He grinned proudly. “Her name’s Akako; she’s studying to be a surgeon. I’m not really in much of a position to date right now, though, so I just buy her coffee every once in awhile. We talk about stuff like books we’ve read and various medical stuff. She’s a weird one—into the occult and new age stuff—but she’s sweet and kind.”

My heart ached as he talked about her. He was absolutely blissful. “I hope it works out between you.”

“Don’t sound so sad, Tachibana-kun.” My paid escort reached across the table and placed a hand on my head. “Don’t give up hope; you’ll find someone. Just keep an open mind and a weather eye.”

I nodded slowly. “But I need someone now. I need someone to help me steer through the wreckage of my life as it crumbles around me,” I pouted melodramatically.

“You have me,” he stated firmly, dark eyes staring right into my own. He smiled and lovingly patted my cheek. “As your honorary big brother, I will be there to guide you.”

“Why?” Why reach out to me when he had his own problems to deal with? “You don’t even know me.”

“I entered the medical field because I wanted to help people. I can’t ignore someone in need.” My new big brother tousled my hair playfully. “Besides, you’re cute.”

“I prefer to think of myself as ‘sexy.’” I scrunched up my nose in displeasure.

“You’re, what? Seventeen, was it?” he chortled to himself.

“I just turned eighteen, for your information,” I snorted, slightly enjoying his teasing.

“Whatever. You’re just a kid. You can’t be sexy until you’re at least legal.” He smiled as he rolled his eyes.
“I pride myself on being jailbait.” I stuck my tongue out, just proving his point.

“It’s time for all good jailbait to pay the bill and go home.” Akira-san waved to the waiter for the check. “I’ll get you a taxi. Do you have enough to pay for it?”

“Yeah,” I replied softly, not looking forward to my return to the Tachibana estate. I paid the bill, and Akira-san walked me to the curb. I handed him a wad of cash. “Is this enough?”

He blinked. “For what?”

“For you,” I replied with a ‘duh’ tone in my voice. “For your company.”

“Oh.” He blinked again. “We didn’t do enough for me to have earned even a fourth this much.”

“Take it,” I urged, forcing the money into his hands. “You missed out on higher paying customers because you were with me.”

“Tachibana-kun, I can’t,” he refused again.

“Fine,” I sighed, brushing my lips against his quickly. “There. Now I have to pay you.”

There was much shaking of the head, but Akira-san finally accepted half of what I had originally offered.

“Can I come see you again?” I asked hopefully as I got into the taxi.

He nodded, smiling warmly. “You have my number. Send me a text or something so that I’ll have yours.”

“Thank you,” I replied earnestly; glad to have met such a nice guy.

I did not receive a warm welcome when I returned home. I was battered with a barrage of questions and accusations. I walked right pass my absentee mother and her abusive boyfriend, heading straight to my room and locking the door behind me.

There was a tentative knock a short while later. “Can I come in, Nii-chan?”

My beloved sister gave me hug when I opened the door. “Are you okay?”

“More or less.” I patted her on the head to reassure her. “My head hurts like no one’s business, but I think I’m alright.”

“Where did you go? Are you hungry? Do you need me to sneak you some food?” my angel offered.

“I had dinner, thanks.” I smiled at her thoughtfulness. “I met this guy…Akira-san. He’s a med student. We went out to dinner and talked some.”

“Was he hott?” the imp inquired. “You look happy for someone going through multiple personal crises. I bet he was sexy.”
“He was.” I quietly admitted. “He’s got someone else, but he was really nice to me. We just talked, but…I think he gets me. He seemed to understand, and it really made me feel better. I want to see him again, even if we can only be friends.”

“Wheet-woo.” My not-so-innocent baby sister raised her eyebrows at me in a suggestive manner. “Nii-chan’s got a boyfriend.”

“Do not.” I shoved her playfully, trying to cover up my blushing. “He’s not interested in me like that.”

“Nii-chan’s got a crush,” she corrected, still using that inappropriate tone of voice. “You’ve got an Akira fetish, don’t you?”

“That is a coincidence.” It would take a very long time for me to get used to words like ‘hott’, ‘sexy’, and ‘fetish’ coming out of my sister’s mouth. “If you say so.” She shrugged, getting up to leave. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Tsubasa.” I was genuinely able to smile for her for the first time in a while.
Chapter Six: The Melancholy of Hajime Tachibana

(Tachibana Hajime no Yuutsu)

I called and texted Akira-san every day after that, but we didn’t meet again for about another week. Hideo-san had knocked me for a loop that morning for mouthing off to my mother, so I was in pain and rather grumpy that Friday at school.

“What happened to your face?” My best friend looked down at me in worry with those beautiful blue and brown eyes.

“I got in a fight,” I sighed, determined to finally tell him about Hideo-san and his abuse.

“Aki!” Luna came bouncing up to us and began chattering away in English so fast that I didn’t understand the majority of it. Then she turned to me and grinned dopily. “Would you like to go with us tonight, Tachibana-san?”

“I can’t.” I smiled pleasantly. “I have a hot date.” I’d been waiting to use that phrase since Carol-san had taught it to me.

“Ooooh,” she cooed, elbowing me in the ribs. “Go get ‘em, Tiger. Just don’t have too much fun.” Thankfully the lunatic then bounded off. Despite what she had said, she looked slightly miffed. Weirdo.

“Are you sleeping with someone?” Akira interrogated, looking concerned to the point of agitation.

Instead of going with my knee-jerk reaction of ‘No!’ I went with, “Are you jealous?”

“Be serious for two seconds. What the hell are you thinking, Hajime?” my love began to lecture. “I don’t know what’s been up with you lately, but you can’t solve your problems by jumping in bed with the first person to walk by.”

His words cut me. Did he really think I was like that?—that I was that easy?

“I thought you had already learned the hard way that physical relationships are serious matters; you can’t enter into them so lightly, Hajime.”

“I’m not sleeping with anyone,” I replied hollowly. “I’m in a serious relationship right now, but I’m not sleeping with anyone.”

“Oh.” He blinked and smiled sheepishly. “Good for you. Congrats.”

“Aren’t you jealous?” We’d been together for three years, but he took the news of my ‘serious relationship’ so easily. It had torn me apart to hear that he was serious about Luna. Didn’t he feel anything?
“Why would I be jealous? I’m happy for you. You’ve never had a serious relationship before, have you?” Either he was an excellent actor, or he was absolutely fine after our breakup.

Hadn’t our relationship been serious? “I thought I did, but I guess not,” I mumbled.

“Have you?”

“No. I’ve never been serious about anyone before Luna.” And then he smiled.

“Oh.” How could he be so callous? He’d just openly admitted that I’d meant nothing to him. “I gotta go.”

“Have a nice day.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Try not to pick so many fights.”

I went up to the roof and leaned against the railing, gazing down at the students scuttling below me. I took a deep breath and let the tears fall. I felt weak, crying all the time. I wanted to be tough—strong—but I’d been reduced to a helpless, sniveling brat.

I called Akira-san and asked to see him that night. I really needed someone.

We met at a Chinese restaurant halfway between my house and the park where he met clients, and we sat in comfortable silence until our food arrived.

His dark eyes watched me intently as I messed over my lo mein. “Bad day?”

“My ex-boyfriend’s a jerk,” I pouted.


“He’s so over me that it’s torturous.” My lip quivered slightly. I bit it to keep from crying in front of the man I respected. “It’s like he never had feelings for me at all.”

“Maybe you should move on too…if you can,” my mentor advised. “Meeting someone new should help.”

“How do you suddenly get over someone you’ve had a thing for for nine years?” My voice cracked, and I tried to swallow my tears.

“You don’t.” Akira-san reached across the table and lovingly patted my head. “It’s going to hurt for a while. You may never get over it.”

“You’re supposed to lie and say that you’ll make me forget about him,” I choked, unable to hold back the tears anymore. “That’s what always happens on TV. After the protagonist gets his heart shattered, there’s always a new love interest that comes and says ‘I’ll make you forget’ or something corny like that.”

“I’m sorry, Tachibana-kun.” He sighed, wiping away my tears with a napkin. “Do you want to go home?”

I shook my head. How could I go home red-eyed and puffy-faced? “I’ll pay you, so would you please say it?”
“Shh…If that’s what you want, I’ll make you forget about him,” Akira-san kindly repeated.

“I… I have a request,” I mumbled, my cheeks flushing.

“What is it, Tachibana-kun?” my purchased companion inquired, rubbing behind my ears all the while.

“Will you spend the night with me?” I whimpered. “I just want someone to hold me as I sleep. I’ll pay whatever it takes, so please…”

“Shh…okay. Whatever you need, Kiddo,” he readily agreed.

I paid for dinner and texted Tsubasa while Akira-san called his family to tell them he’d be out all night.

We got a room at a nearby hotel, and Akira-san held me as I cried softly, trying not to appear to be too much of a wuss. He listened attentively as I complained about everything going wrong in my life. He offered advice and comforted me whenever I stopped talking for too long.

“That Hideo-san of yours sounds like one of my customers—Yamada-san. Yamada-san hates young people. He thinks they’re losing touch with tradition and what it means to be Japanese. He always complains. He’s really rough with me too—it never feels good…always hurts. He’s got a rich girlfriend that gives him money. Bet she doesn’t know that she helps him pay for me. I’d like to meet her and tell her that her boyfriend buys me every week. I really hate Yamada-san.”

“He sounds like a jerk,” I mumbled into his collarbone, getting sleepy.

“Yeah. It’d be better if all of my clients were like you, Tachibana-kun. I think I wouldn’t mind it as much if I got to sleep with cuties like you. Sleazy older guys are gross.” My friend chuckled, playing with my hair.

“How are things going with you and Akako-san?” I asked to keep him talking. His voice was soothing.

“Ah, it’s fine. We had one of our coffee dates today.” I could hear the lovesick smile in his voice. “She got her hair cut. It’s only up to her chest now. Looks good on her.”

“I wish you could quit this job so that you two could be together.” I tightened my hold around his waist. “I wish that you could tell her how you feel.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I think she knows, though. She gives me handmade chocolates on Valentine’s Day, and I always get her jewelry for Christmas. She knits me gloves and scarves.”

“You two sound like a stupid-in-love couple.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you ever going to tell her about…your moonlighting activities?”
“I’m morally obligated to.” His lips tightened into a serious line. “Even though I don’t have any bugs, it’s still something that you have to tell someone you plan to spend your life with. You can’t have big secrets with someone like that.”

“How do you think she’ll react?” I whispered, hoping she wouldn’t reject him.

“She’ll probably understand, knowing the circumstances, but she won’t be happy about it. Hopefully she’ll love me enough that she’ll be able to overlook my past.”

“Yeah,” I agreed quietly.

He continued speaking in hushed tones until I fell asleep, and he was still there when I woke in the morning, arms wrapped around me, keeping me warm.

I bashfully expressed my thanks and surrendered my payment when he awoke.

“This is too much.” He politely declined half of what I offered.

“But you spent all night with me,” I insisted.

“Just sleeping.” My bedmate shrugged.

“Still…” I grumbled, wanting to pay what I thought I owed. I didn’t really know how much a prostitute cost.

“This is more than I usually make in a night.” He explained. “Even if I did work more hours, the amount of work I had to do was considerably less, so don’t worry about it, Tachibana-kun. This is enough.”

“Thank you.” I blushed as I prepared to head home.

He smiled and patted me on the head, seeing me off.

My mother and Hideo-san were sitting down to breakfast when I walked through the door. Midori pounced on me before I even had my shoes off. “What do you think you’re doing staying out all night?!!”

“I stayed the night with a friend.” I shrugged, standing my ground and seeing what she would make of it. “I texted Tsubasa. I guess she didn’t tell you.”

“What kind of friend? A girlfriend?” my mother continued to hiss like a startled cat.

“No. A guy,” I answered honestly.

“You’re lying,” she decided. “You were off sleeping with that sleazy girlfriend of yours!”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” I endured her wrath, not really caring at that particular moment. “I broke up with my last girlfriend a couple weeks ago. I was with Matsumoto Akira-san.” I pulled out his business card and showed it to her. “He’s a med student. We went out to dinner, and it got kind of late, so I stayed the night with him.”
“Oh.” The quick-to-judge spitfire’s flames of justified parental rage fizzled out.

“I’ll be at Aki’s house tonight. I think Tsu is coming with me. Okay?” I stepped past her and walked up the stairs in a dignified manner.

“That’s fine,” she huffed.

My little sister met me at the top of the stairs with a smug look on her face and cell phone in hand. “Sooo… ‘Spending the night with Akira-san; be home in the morning.’ How did that go?”

“It was fine.” I retreated into my room.

“Don’t be like that.” She followed, closing the door behind us. “I wanna hear all the details. Who was on top? That was your first time, wasn’t it? Did it hurt? Did you scream? How many times did you two—”

“—Tsubasa!” I put my hand over her mouth, not wanting to hear those kinds of things from my little sister. “Nothing happened. We just talked. He held me. We slept. That was it.”

“So you didn’t get laid?” She looked disappointed.

“No,” I sighed.

“I’m sorry.” Her sigh matched mine exactly.

“It’s okay. I don’t like sex anyway.” I cringed. “This is so weird, talking to you about all this. I… I like snuggling and kissing better. It’s more fulfilling.”

She nodded. “Whatever makes you happy, Nii-chan. Did I hear you say that I could come over to Akira-niisan’s house with you?”

“Yeah, I don’t think the Kimuras mind. Besides, I really don’t want you to be alone with Hideo-san.” I patted her gently on the head, still babying her despite her confession about being mature to the point of precocious.

“I doubt Mother would let him hurt me, but I don’t want to be alone with him either,” she agreed. “I’ll go get my stuff ready. Do you think that they’d let us come over this early?”

“Let’s wait an hour, and then I’ll call them,” I decided, not wanting to bother them too early. Plus, there was a good chance that Akira would be out with his girlfriend.

I discovered that my guess had been correct when Akira returned home at three o’clock with Miss Nakamori in tow.

“I hope you don’t mind,” my beloved explained. “Luna’s been saying that she wants to hang out with you more, so I brought her over.”

“Hey, Tachibana-san!” The airhead bounded over to where I was sitting at the table. She then remembered to greet the residents before turning back to me. “How’s it going?” She sat
down right next to me.

“Uh…fine, thanks,” I answered awkly. She was invading my personal space. “How are you Luna-san?”

“I’m doin’ great.” The little dope smiled. “Akira just took me to the museum today. It was pretty cool, but I don’t really get traditional Japanese art.”

“It’s different, isn’t it?” Carol-san smiled politely. “It’s about finding beauty in simplicity and appreciating nature, among other things.” She then turned and repeated the conversation in Japanese for the benefit of her mother-in-law and Tsubasa.

“Oh. That explains a lot.” The American in a Japanese’s clothing nodded. “I liked it at first, but everything started to look the same after a while.”

“Maybe we’ll go look at modern art next time.” Akira smiled, but I could tell he was disappointed that Luna hadn’t had a blast.

“You should come too, Tachibana-san.” The manner-less girl nudged my shoulder. “It’d be tons more fun if you came too. We never really get to spend time together.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. What was she thinking inviting me on their dates?

“Maybe the two of us could even do something together sometime,” she suggested and then held her breath while waiting to see how I would respond.

“That…might be fun.” I tried my best not to be rude, but she was getting on my nerves. Why was my rival in love trying to be all buddy-buddy with me? Did she think she had won—that Akira was hers? Was she trying to win me over because I was her boyfriend’s best friend? Or did she want to speak to me in private about how I should stay away from her man?

Before Luna could say any more, Tsubasa got up from her place beside Carol-san and squeezed herself between Luna-san and myself. She glared and said in heavily accented English, “Watot aru yoru intensionz towardo my broza?”

Luna blinked and then smiled, thoroughly charmed by my overprotective sister. “Well aren’t you the cutest thing? I’m Luna Nakamori, a friend of Akira and your brother’s.” She then leaned in and whispered something in Tsubasa’s ear.

The little imp snorted and reverted to Japanese. “I am Tachibana Tsubasa, of the Tachibana Group. I am twelve years old and a first year middle school student at Seiya Academy. Furthermore, my brother is going to marry Akira-niisan.”

The klutzy American turned to Akira. “What does ‘kekkon’ mean?”

“‘Kekkon suru’ is ‘to marry,’” he explained while blushing.

“Oh. I didn’t know that was legal here.” Luna wasn’t fazed in the least.
“It’s not.” I sighed.

“Oh.” Luna smiled stupidly, leaning back to see me around Tsubasa. “Tachibana-san, I heard that you really like music. Would you wanna go sing karaoke with the gang tonight?”

I cringed as she pronounced the sacred word ‘Carrie-oh-key’ instead of ‘Cara-okay.’

“Tsubasa-chan can come too,” the boyfriend-stealer added.

Tsubasa growled softly at being referred to so familiarly.

“It’s up to Aki.” I shrugged, just wanting her to go home so that I could have some alone time with the love of my life.

“Whadda ya say?” She looked expectantly at her man with big, starry eyes.

“Sure. That would be okay.” Akira smiled, but I could tell he didn’t want to go.

Though, Luna was far too dense to pick up on subtle social clues, so Shigeki and the twins were called, and we all went to do karaoke.

Luna grabbed the booklet and started searching for something she recognized. “Oh! ‘Love Machine’ by Morning Musume!”

I had forgotten that Akira had told me that she read much better than she spoke.

“Sing with me, Tsubasa-chan?” Luna tried conversing in Japanese with my sister. Her inflection was weird, but the sentence was understandable.

“Un.” Tsubasa nodded, going up to the front with her.

Luna was an okay singer, and she got most of the words right, though, you had to wonder if she knew what she was singing.

Tsubasa wasn’t the best either, but she took after me, really getting into the song and conveying the feelings through her movements.

“They’re quite a show,” Shigeki snickered, enjoying himself.

“Yeah, it’s been awhile since I’ve seen your sister, Tachibana,” Kazuki added. “She’s really filled out.”

I glared and threw the heavy song booklet into his lap, aiming for the genitals. I smiled as he howled in pain. “I’ll castrate you next time I catch you making lewd comments about or even just looking at my precious little sister.”

“You have been warned, loser.” The soccer star smirked at his best friend.

“Tsubasa-chan is too young for you anyway.” Kasumi laughed at her brother as she took a seat in-between her boyfriend’s legs. “What are you going to sing tonight, Tachibana?” She had finally stopped hitting on me and calling me Hajime after she started dating Shigeki.

“Anything and everything,” I shrugged, not really caring what I sang.
“Mind if Bozo and I sing something first?” The peculiar girl pulled her brother to the front as “Love Machine” ended.

“Go right ahead.” I grinned, putting on my cool and collected persona in front of them.

“I’m in no rush.”

After their number was over, Luna and Tsubasa both headed for the spot on the couch next to me. The girl with the longer legs won.

I was surprised that Luna hadn’t sat next to Akira.

“So, how was your date last night?” The annoying American tried to start up a conversation with me. “Get any action?”

I blinked. Did Americans really talk that way to one another? It was one thing for me to discuss my sex life with my sister or my best friend of many years, but I’d only known Luna a matter of weeks. Was it proper for members of the opposite sex to speak about such things?

“It wasn’t really a date,” I blushed.

“Akira-san’s a hott med student,” Tsubasa announced. “Nii-chan didn’t come home last night.”

I wasn’t sure how much Luna had understood, but the rest of the room was now staring at me.

“Banging older women now, are we?” Kazuki stopped singing in order to tease me.

“You are the man, Tachibana.”

“Is that true?” Aki looked at me with big, concerned eyes.

“Yes, but Akira-san’s a guy,” I explained.

There was silence.

“You shouldn’t seduce other men just to prove that you can do it,” Shigeki stated hesitantly.

“We were out together, and it got late, so I stayed with him instead of going home.” I sighed. “It wasn’t a date.”

There was a collective ‘Oh,’ and everyone went back to what they had been doing.

“So…you’re not seeing anyone? You don’t have a girlfriend?” Luna looked expectantly at me with an implicative smile.

“Oh…no.” I gulped, feeling uncomfortable. “I’m not dating anyone at the moment.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Akira raising an eyebrow at me.

Akira can also be a woman’s name.
“So you’re single.” The American girl smiled contently.

“Yes…. I’m going to go sing now.” I stood and went to the front as the Shihoudanis’ song conveniently ended.

I sang a seductive little number called “Taboo,” making full use of my body to draw in my audience. I made sure every smile, gesture, and eye movement was perfectly timed to both the rhythm and the lyrics. It worked as it usually did, casting a spell over my listeners. I delighted in listening to their praises afterwards.

Luna-san was especially entranced, never having heard me sing before. “That was amazing, Tachibana-san!” she cooed. “I could only understand a little bit of it, but it was seriously beautiful.”

“Uh…Thanks.” I faked a smile, feeling awkward as she ogled me. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.” I turned to the others. “It’s getting a little hot in here, so I’m gonna step out for a bit. Keep an eye on Tsubasa, will you?”

“Sure thing,” Kasumi assured, patting my sister on the head.

I slipped out into the hall and headed for the water fountain, only to realize that I was being followed. I turned to find the Nakamori girl right behind me. I gasped.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.” The airhead chuckled lightly.

“Just startled,” I laughed it off, hoping that she would go away soon.

“So, Tachibana-san, I wanted to ask you if you’d go with me to get okonomiyaki one day this week. Aki told me that there’s a really great okonomiyaki place by your house, and I really wanted to check it out.” She smiled amicably and batted her eyes.

“I’m a little busy this week,” I fibbed. “Why don’t you ask your boyfriend to go with you if you want okonomiyaki?”

“My boyfriend?” She blinked as if she had no clue what I was talking about. “Oooh.” She smiled suggestively, chewing on her bottom lip. “I get it. You only said that so that you could find out whether or not I’m single to know if you had a chance.”

Now it was my turn to be clueless. “Uh…no. Aren’t you dating Akira?”

“No,” she laughed. “We’re just friends, silly. I like you. Why would I want to date Aki?”

I could feel my blood boiling in my veins. I wanted to strangle her. “Why wouldn’t you want to date him?! He’s kind and understanding and funny and attentive and, God, are you

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139 Okonomiyaki, also called Japanese pancakes, are made of flour, cabbage, eggs, and other ingredients such as meat, fish, or vegetables. The batter and extra ingredients are cooked on a grill, and sauces are added after it is finished.
blind?! What’s wrong with him?!”

“N-nothing,” she mumbled, backing away slightly.

“Look, back off if you’re not head over heels in love with him, because I am, okay? I love him!” I shouted, trying to keep from crying in front of the enemy.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t know that you two were…. I’ll back off.”

“Really?” I blinked, surprised that she gave in so quickly.

“Yeah,” she shrugged. “I’ll stop hitting on you all the time. It was wrong of me to get between you. I’m sorry.”

“Uh…thanks. Me too…I’m sorry.” I bowed slightly, feeling a little foolish for the way I had acted towards her. “I hope we can still be friends.”

The bizarre girl nodded, smiling a little uncomfortably. “Yeah, I’m glad we got this misunderstanding taken care of. Let’s be friends.”

After awkwardly patching things up, we returned to the room and took seats on opposite sides of the couch.

Tsubasa raised an eyebrow at me, inquiring as to what had occurred between the foreign girl and myself out in the hall.

I grinned and waved away her concern.

“What was that about?” My best friend looked at me suspiciously.

“You mean out in the hall?” I chuckled. “Luna asked me out.”

“That’s not funny,” my love snorted.

“That’s okay. It wasn’t a joke.” I tussled his hair as I got up to sing again. It had turned out to be a good night after all.

The night only got better when we got home and prepared to take our baths, and I managed to convince the object of my affections to take a soak with me.

There was just enough room in the Kimuras’ tub for us to sit facing each other with our knees bent. I took great pleasure in tapping his foot with my own and brushing my knee against his while we chatted and flicked water droplets at each other. He mostly started the conversations while I instigated the mild horse play. Every once in a while he’d knock his heel against mine or press back with his knee in response to my brushes and taps. It made me absolutely giddy when he did.

While I was insanely happy to be bathing with my obsession, I was also frustrated beyond belief. He was not an arm’s length away—perfectly well within my reach—but I
couldn’t reach out and touch him the way I wanted to. All I could do was smile, laugh, chat, and hope that his responses to my touch meant ‘I know; I want you too.’

“What are you thinking about?” My bath-mate smiled lazily. He flicked his fingers, sending little drops of water into my face.

“Sex,” I shrugged, smiling innocently.

“You hate sex.” My slow companion chuckled wryly. “You have a phobia of it.”

“I don’t think it’d be so scary if I were doing it with the right person.” I splashed him back.

Suddenly my absentminded friend seemed to remember something. “I wanted to ask you. The other day when you said you had a date after school, you said you were in a serious relationship, but today you said it wasn’t a date, and you told Luna that you were single.” The implied question was: ‘What’s the truth, and why did you lie?’

“I might have fibbed a little.” I nervously swirled my finger around in the water.

“Why would you tell Luna that you’re single when you’re not?” There was a hint of accusation mixed in there.

“Luna’s not the one I fibbed to.” I still couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Why would you lie to me?” Now he just sounded hurt.

“I wanted to make you jealous,” I replied honestly. “With you being all serious about Luna and neglecting me, I felt jealous. I was mad because I’m…not good enough. I’m not someone that people get serious about unless they want my money or my body. I was upset because I can’t find anyone I want that wants me too.”

I paused and sighed, lowering my voice, ashamed. “I wanted you to grill me about my supposed date and say that they weren’t good enough for me. I was being childish.”

“You’re always childish.” My best friend chuckled and splashed me again. “I like that about you—your innocence and playfulness…. Don’t worry, Tachi, you’ll find Miss Right if you keep looking.”

I sighed and nodded slowly.

“Something wrong, Hajime?” He placed a concerned hand on my knee and squeezed lightly.

“What if…” I chanced a glance at his face. “it were a guy?”

He looked stunned.

I looked away, feeling miserable. I think we’d both just assumed that our attraction to males was limited to each other until then. I knew Aki didn’t really look at other guys that way. I
was special to him. Now he knew that I could swing that way for someone other than him, and he was probably disgusted.

“As long as they love you, Hajime.” He finally mustered up a response. “As long as they make you happy, it doesn’t matter.” He squeezed my knee harder.

I looked back up into those blue and brown eyes. “You don’t think it’s gross?—that I’m weird?”

He shook his head, cheeks turning cherry blossom pink. “Why would I? Until I met Luna, I kind of had a crush on you.”

“But…there’s a difference between us being attracted to each other and me wanting other guys to…you know.” My face turned a few shades darker than his.

“Yeah, there’s a difference on a couple different levels, but…it’s okay.” He smiled softly, looking at me with kind eyes. “You’ve had some bad experiences with girls…maybe dating a guy would be good for you.”

I nodded.

“Anything else you want to talk about?” my dearest friend inquired. “Like family stuff? Seems like you’ve been having some problems lately. You’re always in a bad mood, beat up, and crying. Wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Maybe some other time. I don’t really want to think about it. I need a break, you know?”

“I understand.” He nodded, respecting my wishes and not pushing any further. “Then, how about we get out of the bath? I’m getting all pruney.”

“Kay,” I easily agreed, following him back to his bedroom.

After clothes were regrettably donned, we curled up under the covers and whispered to each other. Tonight’s topic was psychology.

“I think you have an Oedipus complex,” Akira started off.


“Yeah, but you’ve got a thing for older women—women old enough to be your mother.”

“I don’t like them that old,” I huffed.

“Oh please.” Those gorgeous multicolored orbs rolled teasingly at me. “You liked our English teacher when we were in middle school—she was twenty-seven—and you like our English teacher now, and she’s at least thirty. Plus, you like my mom,” he whispered triumphantly, nose a few centimeters away from mine. “Come to think of it, you seem to have a thing for older western women.”
“Okay, fine,” I finally conceded. “Why do you think that is?”

“I read somewhere that children neglected by their mothers seek a replacement to provide the protection, nurturing, and love that they’ve been deprived of.”

“That makes sense,” I sighed.

Noting the depressed tone in my voice, he quickly changed topics. “I also read somewhere that people who received a hug lasting at least twenty seconds in the morning were better able to cope with stressful events later on in the day.”

“Really? Where’d you read that?” Perhaps that explained why I craved physical attention so much. It made me feel better and allowed me to ‘cope with stressful events’.

“Uh…some magazine of Mom’s. It was in English, so I started flipping through it. I think it was a childrearing magazine.” He smiled with a blush.

“What else have you read lately?” I loved hearing about his latest reads. He always seemed so excited to share the knowledge he had gleaned.

“I also read that Japanese mothers don’t hug their children,” he reported. “I noticed that other families don’t really hug one another; it’s more common to bow, but my Mom always hugs me. It’s a way for her to show that she loves me, and it’s also a great comforting technique. It’s most effective with children, but it works with adolescents and adults too. Is it true that mothers don’t hug their children here?”

I furrowed my brow, trying to think back to a time when my mother had hugged me. “Mother hugged Tsubasa the other day. It was when I brought her here without telling Mother. She had been really worried, so when we got home, she hugged Tsubasa. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen her hug.”

“What about when you were a child? Didn’t she hold you when you cried? When you were sick or hurt or scared?”

I thought hard, trying to remember. “No.”

“How about your dad? Was he the one who took care of you?”

“No,” I admitted. “The servants raised me. I had nannies, but they didn’t touch me unless they had to. They gave me things when I cried—food, toys…bandages if necessary. No one ever picked me up or held me. No one patted me on the head or hugged me or kissed me.” I felt pathetic, confessing this to a guy who was the center of his family’s universe.

“When Mother was home and saw that I was crying, she yelled at me. She said that good children didn’t cry, and she slapped me when I didn’t stop. That was the only time she ever touched me. I remember I started to do bad things so that she’d slap me. She stopped when she
realized what I was doing; she locked me in my room after that to punish me.

“"My father either ignored me or scolded me. Sometimes he hit me, but he never really paid me much mind. Neither did the servants—caring for me was just a job.” I stopped talking and sighed. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. My present is too depressing to be dredging up my tragic past.”

“It’s okay,” he replied softly, wrapping his arms around me. “You’re going to find a nice guy to settle down with, you’ll adopt some cute kids, and you’re going to have a wonderful, loving family, Tachi.”

“Yeah,” I sighed into his neck, knowing it’d never be. “Thanks, Aki.”

“You still sound depressed,” my attentive ex accused, picking up on the mirthless tint to my voice. “Is there anything I can do?”

I shook my head. Even if I did tell him about all of my problems, the only thing he could do was feel sorry for me. “Thanks. You’re always looking out for me, Aki.”

“Cause you’re important to me.” He kissed my forehead gently. “Though, I haven’t been doing a very good job of watching your back lately.”

“You’ve been distracted.” I sighed again, comforted only by the knowledge that Luna wasn’t interested in him.

“I’m a bad friend, letting a girl get between us like this.” He bit his lip and began running a hand from the crown of my head down my neck and spine.

“You’re not interested in me physically, are you?” I abruptly changed topics.

“Um…n-no. Just…your mind—though your body’s not bad—I mean, you’re very attractive. What I’m saying is that I love you as a person, not as someone I’d want to sleep with.” He finally blubbered out an answer.

“That’s what I thought.” I was the only one interested in a physical aspect to our relationship. “Then, why do you always touch me? Like, playing footsies with me in the bath, or when you straddled me in bed last weekend, and holding and hugging me, or kissing my cheek or forehead, and cuddling with me, or what you’re doing now…why do you do those things if you don’t want to screw me?”

He balked at my crude wording, but continued to stroke me as one would a cat. “Don’t you like this?”

“I do,” I confessed in a small voice.

“Then I don’t mind doing things like this.” He shrugged with a calm smile. “I like making you happy, and it’s not like I don’t enjoy this. I like your scent, the softness of your hair,
the way your body feels…it’s comforting. I like being close to another person like this.”

“Un,” I mumbled contentedly. “I feel the same way.”

Things were okay until Monday.

On Sunday, Luna invited me on a date that Akira had planned for just the two of them. She asked me to bring Tsubasa as well, so we all went on a trip to the history museum. We had a good time, and I found myself feeling better about the situation now that I knew it wasn’t really a date.

Sunday night, Mother and Hideo-san were out on a date, so I did not receive a beating for inconsequential things like throwing the intruder a dirty look, making snide remarks at my mother, or being ‘snippety’.

Monday, unfortunately, sucked. It started with a fight over breakfast. Ever since the hairy giant had come to stay with us, we had been having family meals. Funny how something I had longed for my entire life was turning into something I dreaded.

Hideo-san insisted that we have eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits, and pancakes every morning for breakfast. Occasionally there were omelets, ham, waffles, or toast subbed in, but the point is: that’s a lot of food, and we were expected to eat all of it.

“I can’t eat this.” Surprisingly, Tsubasa was the one to complain.

“What do you mean?” Hideo-san glared my beloved sibling down.

“I can’t eat this much so early in the morning,” she mumbled, shaking in fear. “It hurts my stomach.”

“We usually have miso, rice, and fish,” I informed our houseguest. “It’s hard for her to eat all that garbage first thing in the morning.”

“This is a traditional western breakfast,” the ogre roared.

“No wonder westerners are so fat.” Tsubasa made the unfortunate error of muttering to herself a bit too loudly.

“How dare you!” Hideo-san raised his arm in preparation to strike.

I flung my plate right at his face—probably breaking his nose—and I stood up straight, rising to my full height in order to look down on his seated form. I held the butter knife to his throat and stared him down with a crazed look. “You can bully me all you want, you slime—I’m a man; I can take it—but if you so much as touch my sister, I swear to you, I will cut off your balls and shove them down your throat. Are we absolutely clear?”

He nodded, holding his bleeding nose.
After the ruined meal concluded, Tsubasa and I walked to school.

“Thank you,” my darling mumbled, still in a bit of a state. “But…he’ll beat you for it later once he regains his composure.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I shrugged. “Let him. I don’t care.”

“But…” She pursed her lips and furrowed her brow.

“I may not be able to defend myself from him, but I swear to protect you Tsubasa. I’ll never let him hurt you.” I gave her my word as a man.

“But it hurts me when he hurts you, Nii-chan,” Tsubasa sighed.

“Then I’ll just have to do better. I’ll stand up to him. I won’t let him push me around anymore.”

“No! You’re too weak!” She grabbed my elbow, looking at me with pleading eyes. “He’ll kill you, so…maybe you should just do what he says?”

I nodded, thinking, “I’m not weak.”

I brooded through class, grateful when the lunch break finally came.

Akira met me at the door to my homeroom, looking around awkwardly. “Hey,” he greeted with a sheepish smile.

“What’s up?” He was acting strangely.

“I wanted to talk about something.” He looked around nervously again. “In private. I wanted your advice.”

He took me out to the courtyard and then to my usual hiding spot behind the old, redbrick building.

Once we’d arrived, my best bud looked awkwardly down at his feet. “I wanted to ask you about kissing.”

“Oh?” I blinked. “With Luna?” I did wonder how that was going to turn out with her not being interested in him and all.

“Un.” He blushed.

“What exactly did you need to ask me about kissing Luna?” I tried to keep my tone nonchalant.

“I’m…not very experienced in kissing, so I was wondering if you could offer me some tips.” He gulped. “I want our first kiss to be really spectacular, so… I’m not really sure about the techniques having to do with how you initiate a kiss o-or the mechanics of how you…um…help?”

“I guess I could give you some pointers.” I smirked, putting a hand to my hip. “I’ll be
your practice dummy. Why don’t you show me how you think you’re going to do this?”

“Kay,” he nodded, taking a deep breath. He then unceremoniously walked towards me and tried to put his arms around me.

I stepped back out of his reach with a startled and offended look on my face. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Akira blinked. “Uh…I was going to kiss you.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” I snorted, crossing my arms. “Just what are you trying to pull? I’m not just going to jump in bed with you, you egotistic jerk. I didn’t know you thought so little of me.”

“It would be a little weird for me to come right up and kiss her out of nowhere, wouldn’t it?” Akira caught on, biting his lip in thought.

“Yep. Try it again,” I instructed.

He took another breath, preparing himself before he looked me in the eyes. “Luna…” He made a face like he’d just tasted strawberry limeade. “I can’t look you in the eye and confess to her.”

I raised and dropped my left shoulder indifferently.

“Hajime,” he amended, “I… I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while now, but I couldn’t find the right time and place. I really like you.” He swallowed hard. “More than that… I’m in love with you. Since the first time I saw you, I knew that I wanted to be with you, so… please go out with me.”

“Me too.” My voice was sticking in my throat. Even though I knew those words weren’t really meant for me, they made me melt. My thoughts became slow as blood rushed to my head, coloring my face a brilliant scarlet. “I’ve always felt the same. Since the day we first met, I knew that I loved you.”

“You’re an excellent actor, Tachi.” My best friend was a complete emotional retard. He couldn’t read my feelings or the mood at all. “I guess this is the part where we kiss?”

“Y-yeah.” I made an effort to swallow to return some moisture to my throat. “Ahem. Let me show you.” I stepped forward and clumsily wrapped one arm around his torso with my palm on his back between his shoulder blades. I placed my other hand at the base of his skull, fingers weaving through his hair. It was a little different because of the height factor.

“When did you get taller than me?” I sighed.

“I’ve been taller for a long time,” he chuckled, trying to find something he could look at other than my super-close face.
“I guess that means you’re the seme$^{140}$,” I chuckled.

“Wh-wha…?” Akira blushed a beautiful fuchsia hue.

“The seme is always taller,” I informed. “You know, usually I prefer being on top, but I wouldn’t mind being the uke if it were with you.”

“Hajime, you know that line we used to talk about not crossing?” My love cleared his throat. “Um…where should my hands be?”

“Whatever’s comfortable—around my neck, around my waist, same as mine, or anywhere else they fit naturally.” It didn’t matter as long as he was touching me.

“Kay.” My shy but willing partner slowly slipped his arms around me.

“The trick is to draw out the moments before the kiss,” I coached partially for my own benefit. “Let the sexual tension build.”

“How do I do that?”

“It’s all in your micro expressions.” I’d read about that in a magazine somewhere. “Make eyes at me. Look into my eyes, and then sneak a peek at my lips. Lick your lips subconsciously, and look really aroused.”

“I’ve never been aroused before,” he fibbed. “How do I manage to look aroused?”

I stared incredulously at him. “You’ve never…You’ve never gotten a stiffy before?”

“Not a real one.” I could tell I was making him incredibly self-conscious. “Sometimes at night…and when it goes from being warm indoors to really cold outside, but…I’ve never gotten one that lasted more than a few seconds. I’ve never gotten one from looking at a girl.”

“How can you say you love her if she’s never made you hard before?” I had to resist the urge to march right up to Luna and demand my boyfriend back. She wasn’t fulfilling all of his needs properly.

The brunette shrugged apologetically.

“Fine.” I slipped my thigh in between his legs and moved it back and forth, slowly applying pressure.

“Oh.” He gasped, holding on to me for support.

I slowly backed him up against the wall and smiled at the thought that I was the first person to ever make him feel this way. “Try not to look so embarrassed, Aki. Enjoy it. You want more, right?”

“A-a little bit.” He endeavored to breath slowly, to calm himself down.

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$^{140}$ The dominant partner in a homosexual relationship. The passive partner is called the uke, from the verb ukeru
“Then look at me like you want me.” I pressed harder, moving my hands up and down his back. “The best kisses are always filled with lust.”

“Right,” my overwhelmed companion breathed. “I see what you’re talking about now with the sexual tension.” He looked down at my lips, licking his own. “Is that good?”

“Y-yeah.” He was making me want to pounce him. “Open your mouth a little bit.”

He followed my instructions without question. “How long am I supposed to draw this out for?”

“Usually until one or the other can’t stand it anymore.” I was getting to that point. “Then usually they say something sappy.”

“Like what?” he innocently inquired.

I couldn’t take it. He was right there, all hot and bothered for me because of me. His arms were tangled around my body, and our legs were intertwined. I firmly scolded myself, “No. He doesn’t want you. He only came to you for help with Luna.” Unfortunately, I couldn’t get my head out of my pants in time to stop myself from taking advantage.

“I love you.” I looked him in the eyes and confessed before forcing my lips on his. He froze, completely unprepared to have my tongue jammed down his throat.

I was a completely unrestrained mess after holding in my feelings for nine years. I let myself go—touching, groping, rubbing, and practically sucking his tonsils out of his mouth.

I wasn’t surprised to find him reluctant at first, but after the shock subsided, he slowly started to respond to my fervor. He slowed my pace and gradually took the lead, experimenting freely with me.

I was drowning in total pleasure, truly, perfectly happy. Then it stopped.

Akira pulled back and took a few deep breaths, all the while trying not to look directly at me. “Uh…thanks. I think I’ve got the hang of it now.” He gulped, probably swallowing equal parts my saliva and his. “Um…you’re a really good kisser.” His fingers rubbed his lips absentmindedly as he alternatingly licked and bit them.

“Thanks,” I responded awkwardly. “Though, usually after you kiss someone, you tell them how gorgeous they are and how much you love them. You’re kind of making me feel a little used.”

I knew it was my own fault for kissing him in the first place. I knew he didn’t have those kinds of feelings for me when I initiated the tonsil hockey match, but it had been so—to risk
sounding clichéd—magical for me. I’d thought it would be worth the pain afterwards to be able to finally touch him the way that I wanted, but now that my brief minutes of happiness were over, I’d have to go on with the hurt I’d caused myself for a long time. It’d meant so much to me—his lips melding together with mine—and I wanted it to mean something to him too, but it didn’t.

“So sorry,” he returned bashfully. “I wasn’t…I guess I was using you. B-but you’re the one who kissed me in the first place. I didn’t think we were actually going to… That was my first kiss.”

“I know it was,” I confessed. “I figured you would have told me about your first kiss, and knowing your record with girls…”

“You never told me about your first kiss.” He sounded almost accusing.

“I was eight or nine when I made out with an older girl in the locker room. It’s kind of embarrassing.” I’d been interested in her because she looked a little like my mother. I remembered seeing her and wanting her to hold me. I hadn’t understood at the time how messed up that was.

“Well, it’s not as bad as mine,” he sighed. “Making out with my best friend behind the old home economics building.”

“You can just pretend it never happened if it was that bad.” I detangled my limbs from his, my entire body filling with shame and regret. I should have known; I didn’t get to be happy.

Quickly sensing that he had done something wrong, he grabbed my arm and began apologizing. “I didn’t mean that it was bad. It was really good—I mean, I really enjoyed it—you’re a great kisser. God this is awkward. Hajime, I like you a lot. I don’t mind that my first kiss was with you, but it really wasn’t under the best conditions.” He continued babbling on, though it probably would have been better to stop. “If we were to kiss, I’d want it to be because we’d fallen in love, not because you were my practice dummy for Luna. I don’t want this to make things weird between us. Understand?”

“Sure,” I shrugged, thinking, “Just stop talking before you make me feel even worse. Though, I doubt it’s possible to make me feel like even more of a fool.”

“So we’re okay?” He was naïve.

“Yeah.” If he couldn’t pick up on the totally not okay undertones to my voice, he was a moron.

“Good.” He smiled. “I can’t wait to try out some of these moves on Luna. Thanks again for teaching me; I feel a lot more confident now.”
“Don’t be surprised if she rejects you,” I warned him coldly.

“W-what?” He blinked slowly, cocking his head to the side in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

“That girl you’re so crazy about? She doesn’t feel the same way about you.” I knew I was being cruel, but I wanted to hurt him like he had hurt me. It sucked being played with, and unrequited love was a bitch.

“Why would you say something like that?” My sudden icy demeanor puzzled him. “Of course she likes me. We go on dates all the time.”

“She doesn’t think of them as dates.” I told him the truth, being both cruel and kind. It was better for him to find out now before he got his hopes up. “Why do you think she always invites me along? I said no at first out of consideration for you, but after she confessed to me the other day, I figured that there wasn’t a point to it anymore. Why should I give up all my quality time with my best friend just so that he can hang out with a girl who doesn’t even like him?”

“Why are you lying to me?” He looked like he was about to cry.

“I’m not.” I pretended to be indifferent to his pain. “I told you before. Saturday at the karaoke studio, Luna confessed to me. She likes me, not you.”

“You don’t even like her,” he whimpered. “You’ve hardly even talked to her. I was the one who was nice to her and showed her around. You always dismissed her and teased her. Why would she like you?!”

“I didn’t ask her to fall for me; she just did. As your friend, I thought it was my responsibility to tell you that you’ve got an ice cube’s chance in hell before you got your hopes up only to get shot down.”

“You’re no friend of mine,” he hissed, tears of betrayal streaming freely down his cheeks. “A friend wouldn’t steal the only girl I’ve ever loved from me! A real friend wouldn’t stab me in the back like that!”

“Aki,” I sighed, starting to plead with him.

“No!” he shouted, in no mood to be reasoned with. “Just get the hell away from me.” He strode off without a glance back.

I assumed that he would cool off and forgive me in a day or two, but as two became three, and three became four, I started to think that I had a serious problem on my hands.

He ignored my calls, avoided me in the hallway, and even refused to eat lunch with me. He glared at me whenever our eyes met. He looked like he wanted to hurt me.
On day number four, I took my lunch up to the roof to eat alone. I picked at the rice the cook had made for me. It tasted bland. I nibbled on the teriyaki salmon. It was dry. I snacked on the pickled veggies, but they were tasteless as well. I wasn’t hungry anyway.

I looked over the edge of the roof and sighed. I was lonely. I thought of running away to a faraway city where no one knew me. I could make friends freely without worrying about their motives. I would find people who liked me despite my temper and childishness. I would fall in love with whomever I wished, and they would treasure me. I would be desired, loved, and cherished. I’d be dear to someone. I’d belong.

The bell signaling the end of lunch rang, pulling me out of my daydream.

I didn’t feel like going back to class, so I ignored it.

Once the last of the stragglers had cleared off the roof, I climbed over the fence to stand on the edge. Looking down at the very solid ground below me sent a shot of adrenaline through my veins. I chuckled softly as I thought of slipping and falling. What a way to go—accidentally falling off the roof.

Of course everyone would think that I had jumped.

Suddenly it wasn’t so funny anymore. Accidentally dying while trying to get an adrenaline rush didn’t seem worth it.

I climbed back over the fence and sighed.

Tsubasa would be upset if I died.

Saturday afternoon, I got into a fight with Hideo-san. Apparently my homeroom teacher had called to report that I had been skipping some of my classes recently.

I had been all defiant, standing up for myself. I said that I was practically an adult, and I could make my own decisions.

Hideo-san disagreed. Education was important. If I were going to be any kind of heir to the Tachibana family, I was going to have to shape up and start taking things seriously.

I said something to the effect of go suck your own dick, and he smacked me, following up with a kick to the ribs once I was on the ground.

He then picked me up, slung me over his shoulder, and threw me out of the house. He told me not to come back until I grew up.

I picked myself up out of the bushes and started walking towards Akira’s house. It was nearly three o’clock, the time when I usually went over, anyway. However, it occurred to me that he was probably out with Luna, so it might be better to call.
“What do you want?” my friend sighed, sounding rather impatient.

“I wasn’t sure if you were out with Luna or not, so I thought I’d call before I came over,” I explained.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave me the hell alone, Tachibana? I don’t want anything to do with you, so get lost. Don’t even bother coming over; we’re not friends anymore.” He hung up on me.

I didn’t understand. I hadn’t done anything wrong—besides kiss him, but that didn’t count. I called him back, but he didn’t answer. I sent him a text, but he didn’t respond.

I sat down on a bench outside of the supermarket and tried not to cry. Men didn’t cry at the drop of a hat. I was being ridiculous. I wasn’t a baby. I was a grownup. Grownups didn’t cry or show weakness.

I calmed down a bit and tried the Kimuras’ home number.

Carol-san reported that her son said that he wasn’t home, and he didn’t care if I were sorry. She apologized for his rude behavior and promised to talk to him for me.

Now where was I supposed to go? My only friend had dumped me, and my family had kicked me out. I was on my own, and I was miserable. I remembered once telling Akira that I couldn’t be his everything so he needed to make more friends. I was now wishing that I had followed my own advice. I wanted someone to lick my wounds and make them better. I wanted to be held while I cried.

I dialed Akira-san’s number and arranged to meet him an hour later at Kyoto Station.

“You look like hell,” my courtesan remarked when he saw me. “What happened?”

I shook my head, muttering that I would explain once we had our food.

“He’ll forgive you eventually,” Akira-san assured me after listening to the next installment in the Melancholy of Hajime Tachibana series. “He’s upset right now, and he needs someone to blame. I’m sure he’ll buy you flowers and chocolates—the whole nine yards—when he cools down a bit. First loves usually don’t last forever. He’ll realize that friendship is more important, and he’ll admit that he’s wronged you. You two will patch things up.”

“Are you sure? He said that we aren’t friends anymore.” I nibbled half-heartedly at my French fries.

“He’ll be begging for your forgiveness in a couple of weeks.” My honorary big brother patted me softly on the head. “Be patient.”

“It’s hard,” I grumbled, feeling like a child.

“You’re strong. You’ll make it.”

“Tell me about how it’s going with Akako-san.” I switched topics, hoping for some good
news to cheer me up.

“We kissed the other day,” he reported joyously. “We went out to dinner together to talk about some school stuff, so I walked her home. It was just like in a movie. I walked her to the door, and she said she’d had a wonderful time. Then she kissed me!”

“I’m happy for you,” I congratulated him. I really was happy even if I felt pangs of jealousy as well.

He seemed to pick up on my mixed emotions, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder. “It’s alright, Kiddo. There’s someone out there for you too. You’re young. Give it a few years.”

“What am I supposed to do with myself in the meantime?” I breathed a lead-laced sigh. “I’m so lonely.”

“Get a hobby.” The host pinched my cheek. “And smile. You look more attractive when you smile. Gotta look attractive to score a mate.”

I nodded. “Hey, Akira-san? Do you think you could spend the night with me again? I kind of got kicked out of my house, and since Aki’s not talking to me, I don’t really have anywhere to go.”

“Poor thing.” My escort smiled sympathetically. “I’ll stay with you through the night. Finish up your meal, and we’ll get a room at the New Miyako across the way. It’s a nice hotel. Ever been?”

I shook my head.

“There’s a restaurant on the ground floor. They have excellent montblancs,” he praised.

“Do you think we could get breakfast there?” I queried.

“I think so, but I’ve only ever been for dinner. They have good salads too, though their steaks are a little small for the price.”

After finishing up at Kyoto Station, we walked across the street to the New Miyako Hotel. The lobby was beautifully decorated with white marble floors and columns, and copies of impressive paintings were hung on the walls.

We checked in and rode the elevator up to our room—which was also quite lovely. I went to the window to check out the view of Kyoto Tower while Akira-san made himself comfortable on the bed, smiling as he watched me.

I let my hand fall away from the curtain and bit my lip as I slowly approached him. “May I kiss you, Akira-san?”

He nodded.

I straddled his thighs so that I was sitting on his lap. I blushed as I looked at him and
bashfully put my arms around his neck.

He chuckled as my lips pressed against his.

The vibration felt good.

The pro conceded to let me lead for a while, but after a minute or two, he lied back onto the bed, pulling me forward and on top of him. Then, he flipped me over so that he was the one on top. He did this thing with his tongue that made me melt, and I realized that I wasn’t the master of making out that I had thought I was. There were still tricks that I had yet to learn.

Akira-san was good, and I suddenly found myself insanely jealous of Akako-san.

“Will you make love to me?” I whispered when I was allowed to take a breath. Having him touching and kissing me made me feel less empty.

“Tachibana-kun.” Akira-san pursed his lips, knitting his eyebrows together. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“I don’t want to feel lonely anymore,” I rushed to explain. “Being with you makes me feel like I’m not so alone. I’ll pay you just like anybody else, so please?”

“Kiddo, it doesn’t work like that.” He sighed as he rolled off of me.

“Yes it does,” I insisted. “You’re a prostitute, aren’t you? I give you money, you give me sex. That’s how it works.”

“Tachibana-kun, you’re not in love with me.” He tried to pacify me.

“How do you know how I feel?” I started to cry as he got up off the bed and went to look out the window.

“Regardless, I’m not in love with you,” he added. “This isn’t a healthy way of dealing with your problems.”

“What’s wrong with me?” I sniffled. “Why doesn’t anyone want me? Why am I any different from your other customers?”

“Because I care about you, Kiddo.” He turned and gazed at me with a worried look in his eyes. “I care about your wellbeing, and I know it’s not healthy for you to project your feelings onto others. We can’t do this anymore.” He grabbed his coat jacket and prepared to leave.

“But…I need you!” I insisted. “You can’t just leave me!”

“Go to sleep.” My guardian angel came over and kissed me on the forehead. “Get some breakfast in the morning, and go home. Find yourself someone new—boyfriend, girlfriend, I don’t care—someone kind and caring who will take care of you. Call me when you need me, and we can always hang out and do lunch, but we can’t do this rent-a-boyfriend thing anymore. It’s not good for you.”
“Akira-san!” I needed him. He was all I had to hold onto.

“Shh…you’ll be okay.” He kissed my cheek and hugged me tight. “Take care of yourself, Kiddo.” And then he left me on my own.
Chapter Seven: The Disappearance of Hajime Tachibana (Tachibana Hajime no Shoushitsu)

I didn’t feel like myself anymore. I was just a shell of the former Tachibana Hajime that everyone feared and respected. People only pitied or despised me. He had been outgoing and charismatic—a leader and trendsetter always surrounded by adoring followers. I was alone, unable to even manage myself. Tachibana could protect people. He stood up for what he believed in, and he fought hard. He was strong. I couldn’t even protect myself. I let myself be walked all over because I was too weak to get up off the floor to fight.

After suffering the double blow of having Aki abandon me and Akira-san refuse to love me, I had become weak and pathetic. I didn’t even bother trying to pretend that things were okay anymore.

I slept and went to school, occasionally eating. I picked at my breakfast, so Hideo-san beat me up. I let him. I didn’t talk back to him. I didn’t try to defend myself. I just let it happen because I didn’t have the strength or will to fight back.

During lunch break I went to the roof to eat alone. I didn’t have the energy to put on an act. I didn’t feel like pretending to be Tachibana. I hid myself away on the roof, looking down at all the little people below. I thought about throwing things to see if I could hit them.

After school I went back up to the roof to kill time before heading home. One day I ran into a guy smoking.

“Can I have one?” I asked on a whim.

He shrugged and let me use his lighter.

I’d forgotten how good cigarettes tasted. They calmed you down and made you feel better too. I knew it was just some chemicals in my brain, but it felt good.

I picked up a pack from a vending machine on the way home, and I stopped by a FamilyMart to purchase a lighter. They were out, so I had to make a second trip to a 7-Eleven. Once I had obtained my lighter, I sat down and smoked another two cigarettes.

When I got home, I received a beating and an interrogation for smelling like smoke.

“You smoke, Nii-chan?” Tsubasa later inquired up in my room.

“I used to…when I was your age,” I confessed, ashamed that my little sister was seeing this side of me. “I didn’t really have anyone to talk to about my problems, so I used to go smoke
whenever I was really upset. Then I met Akira, and he told me to quit and to call him whenever I needed someone, but…now…”

“You have me, Nii-chan.” She sounded disappointed. I’d let her down.

“Thanks.” I tried to dredge up a smile, but I just couldn’t manage it. “I’m gonna shower and go to bed now, but thanks for worrying about me, Tsu.”

“It’s only six o’clock.” She blinked in surprise.

“I’m really tired.” I shrugged, trying my hand again at that ‘everything’s okay’ smile. It didn’t work much better than the first time.

“Goodnight, Nii-chan.” The doe-eyed girl frowned, still concerned, but she left anyway.

I passed entire weeks like that—sleeping, school, and smoking. I nibbled at my food, but it all tasted like rice gruel for some reason. I avoided other people, hiding on the roof whenever I got the opportunity. No one missed me. No one called. No one worried.

That’s what I thought until that one day during lunch about three weeks into my seclusion. On that day, I got a call from Akira. I was so happy I nearly cried. He was worried about me! He missed me, and he wanted to make up!

“Hello?” I tried to sound cool and collected. I wasn’t desperate. I was doing just fine on my own.

“Tachibana-san? This is Luna,” an unwelcome voice greeted my ears.

“Oh. Hey.” I dropped the nonchalant façade. Now I just sounded tired and gloomy.

“Are you alright? I haven’t seen you in weeks. Are you sick?” My arch-nemesis was the only one concerned about me.

“I’m fine. Aki’s mad at me because I told him you confessed to me. He told me to stay the hell away, so I’m staying the hell away.” My voice sounded so monotone—lifeless.

“So it’s my fault,” my opponent sighed. “Tachibana-san, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make trouble for you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I’d been having a hard time blaming her lately. This was Akira’s fault—mine also to a lesser extent.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” she promised. “Please take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, Luna.” I sighed as I hung up.

141 FamilyMart is a convenience store chain.
Week four into my seclusion, I got incredibly bored with the direction my life was going. I decided to take fate into my own hands and carve out a new destiny for myself. I was going to get a boyfriend, and that boyfriend was going to love and care for me. He’d kiss me and make everything better. He’d hold me and tell me I was cute. He’d beat up Akira for neglecting and mistreating me. He’d give my life meaning.

I started my boyfriend search in a little café that was known to attract homosexual males. I ordered a coffee, grabbed a magazine from the rack, and sat down at a table by the window, waiting to be hit on.

It actually didn’t take long before a middle-aged man in a suit approached me. “Are you here by yourself?”

“I’m waiting for someone,” I replied, mentally adding, “...who’s not you.”

The next three guys were total busts as well, but guy number four was around my age. He wasn’t attractive, but I didn’t particularly care at that point. He asked if he could sit with me, and I said yes. He told me his name—which I forgot within days—and I told him mine. We discussed hobbies and interests for a while, and then he asked me if I wanted to go with him to a love hotel.

I pretended to be shy and told him that I’d never been with a guy before.

He informed me that we didn’t have to go all the way.

It seemed to me that he was probably more likely to stick around and be the knight in shining armor I was looking for if I let him have some. I coquettishly agreed.

He paid for the room, and I suddenly found myself very uncomfortable now that I was obligated to actually do things with him.

I nearly panicked when he started to take my clothes off. I was scared. He wouldn’t take advantage of me would he? I hadn’t told anyone where I was going—moreover, no one cared where I was. No one would know if I disappeared. It wouldn’t be out of character for me to take off. No one would look for me. No one would know what happened. Only Tsubasa and maybe Luna would truly care, though, my mother would probably be upset that her replacement was gone.

“You okay?” What’s His Name inquired as he unzipped my pants. “You’ve really never done this before, have you?”

I shook my head.

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142 Love hotels are typically seedy places with hourly rates. People usually meet there for intercourse.
“Here.” He handed me a bottle of some clear liquid. “It’ll help you relax.”

I thought about it for a second and then decided that if horrible things were about to happen to me, I’d rather be totally wasted anyway. I downed it all in a few swallows.

I don’t remember everything that happened. I know there was nudity since I had woken up in my birthday suit, and I got the feeling I had acted like a total slut from the strange taste left in my mouth.

I felt ashamed of what I had done. Who’d go to a love hotel with someone they’d just met? Maybe I would have felt better if the guy I’d orally stimulated had been there when I woke up, but he was long gone without even leaving a note.

Apart from guilty, I felt dirty, so I stumbled to the bathroom, still a little drunk. I unwrapped the complimentary toothbrush and scrubbed out the inside of my mouth until I threw up. I rinsed out my mouth and took a scalding shower, desperate to get the imagined filth off of my skin.

I put my clothes back on after toweling off, and I took the walk of shame out the front door. I wondered around for a bit to sober up before I went home, not wanting Tsubasa to see me like this.

I was only slightly tipsy when I arrived at the place I had never felt I belonged, but Hideo-san said I reeked of alcohol. He announced that he could smell it on my breath. I was promptly beaten and sent to bed.

Tsubasa came to see me, looking worried. “Nii-chan, have you been drinking?”
“No, of course not.” I tried to laugh it off, but my acting skills had been deteriorating lately.
“You smell like alcohol.” Her eyes cut through me.
“I was with some friends who were drinking,” I fibbed without stopping to think that she knew I didn’t have any friends.
“Whatever you say, Nii-chan.” She sighed and looked disappointed as she walked away.
I’d let her down, and I hated myself for it.
I sighed. No more changing my destiny. I gave up. I was powerless to do anything, so I went back to sleeping, school, and smoking.

A few days later, Hideo-san beat me for being lazy, so I decided to give changing my destiny another go. I went to that café again after school, and I sat drinking coffee and reading a magazine until someone around my age propositioned me.

This one seemed really nice. He was handsome and charismatic to boot. He flirted
shamelessly with me, complimenting me in every other sentence.

I was weak and vulnerable, yearning for love and attention, so when he asked if he could
take me to a hotel, I forgot about my past experience and said yes.

We stopped at a vending machine first, per my request, to pick up some sake. I told him
that I was nervous and being a little tipsy would help me relax.

He seemed to have no qualms about getting me drunk, but somehow that didn’t register
on my ‘caution, nice guys don’t get their partners intoxicated!’ radar.

Once we were in the room with our clothes off, he kept urging me to drink more, even
though I already couldn’t sit up straight.

Warning bells only started ringing when he attempted to spread my legs. I started crying
and told him I didn’t want to sleep with him.

Of course, he was pissed, and he started asking how much he’d have to pay me. When it
became apparent that I wasn’t going to put out, he threatened to hurt me if I didn’t make it up to
him with my mouth. When I’d finished, he left.

I crawled to the bathroom to throw up and get the thick layer of psychological filth off of
my skin. Still drunk and unable to walk straight, I called a taxi home. I wanted to lie down in my
bed and sleep off my guilt, shame, and overall embarrassment. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen.

Mother scolded me for being blind drunk, and Hideo-san provided the beating.

Afterwards, I didn’t even have the strength to get up off the floor, so I lied there sobbing
to myself.

My mother rolled her eyes and muttered something along the lines of “shameful” and
“disgrace” before she ordered some of the servants to carry me to my room.

Tsubasa visited me, but she didn’t say much. “If you want to talk about it…”

It was a cycle. After my humiliating, utter failures, I would go back to sleeping, smoking,
and school. Then something would happen to make me think that I couldn’t go on living like that
anymore. I had to change my fate. I would get all optimistic, and I would go back to that café
again. I would wait for Mr. Right to come for me, go back to a hotel with him, get drunk, and
wake up alone. I then suffered through days of crippling depression and shame, feeling like a
useless slut who was only good at disappointing his sister. I would then fall back on the basics—
sleeping, school, and smoking. A few days later, I would suddenly be inspired to try again to
change my life for the better.

It was the first Wednesday in December when things started changing for me. On that
day my class and Shigeki’s were combined for PE. I waited until I was sure everyone had cleared out of the locker room before changing into my uniform. I was embarrassed of my bruises, and I didn’t want pity or questions.

“Tachibana?”

I jumped at the sound of Shigeki’s voice.

He stared at me.

I quickly pulled my gym shirt on, covering up all the yellow, green, purple, and blue splotches—hickeys and bruises…hand and teeth marks. “W-what?” I barked, trying to act tough.

I turned around, facing the lockers. I couldn’t keep a straight face; it was too hard not to cry. My body was shaking. “Don’t look at me,” I snapped.

“I know that I’m not Akira, but…we’re still friends, Tachibana, and you can talk to me.” He sounded serious. He was genuinely asking me to confide in him.

“Thank you,” I mumbled. “I don’t really have much to say, though.”

“If you change your mind, you have my number.” He turned and left.

The truth was that I had too much to say. I’d suffered for three months of pain, loneliness, hurt, depression, and rejection. I didn’t have words to explain what was happening to me. I didn’t understand it myself. All that I could say was I was a filthy, homo slut. People used me, abandoned me, and beat me. It was simple, but it didn’t convey all of my hurt—every time Mother had ignored me, Akira had dismissed me, Hideo-san had hit me, and Tsubasa had looked at me in disappointment. I didn’t even know where to begin.

After school, I went to the café to give it another go. I convinced myself that this time it would be different. Of course, that didn’t stop me from ending up at a love hotel, drunk and naked with some guy I didn’t know. It was only different this time because I’d stupidly agreed to be handcuffed to the headboard.

When he went to spread my legs, I quickly informed him that I really wasn’t comfortable going all the way with him. Usually they got angry and made me make up for it orally. Some of them simply said ‘Oh. Okay.’ and we continued on like before. This one just laughed. “You should have thought of that before you agreed to this then, shouldn’t you?”

I was rather confused to find myself flipped onto my stomach as he climbed on top of me. “Stop!” I shouted, struggling, trying to get him off of me, but I was a little limited what with the handcuffs and intoxicated state. “Please, stop! I don’t want this!”

All I could do was cry and scream, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

He just laughed, and he didn’t try to be gentle at all.
It hurt. I hated sex. I wanted it to be magical and fulfilling. I wanted it to make me feel whole and connected to the other person, but I only ever felt pain and emptiness—guilt and shame.

I stopped struggling after the first time. I learned that if I held still and let him do what he wanted, it’d only last a few minutes.

He unlocked the handcuffs after the third time, saying, “It’s your own fault, idiot. Who’d pay for a hotel if they weren’t planning on screwing you? Learn your lesson.”

I lied there for a while after he left, not particularly thinking about anything. I watched the clock on the nightstand, counting the sixty-second intervals. Moving hurt. I was cold, but I didn’t have the energy to move under the covers or get into the shower.

I kept thinking that I should do something. Get up. Get clean. Go home.

I blinked. I couldn’t go there. I couldn’t deal with home right now. I was a disgrace.

Call the police? No. I was a drunk minor. They’d call my parents, and I couldn’t go home right now. Besides, what would I tell the police? I came here of my own free will, knowingly got drunk, consensually engaged in homosexual activities with some guy I didn’t know, and now I was upset because I’d led him on and gotten raped. Maybe it wasn’t rape. He’d said it was my fault. Maybe it was. Maybe I wasn’t the victim after all.

I grabbed the phone off of the nightstand and dialed a number I had long ago memorized.

“Hello? This is Kimura.”

“Aki?” I called weakly, unsure of what I should say now that he’d actually picked up.

“Hajime?” My friend sounded equally uncertain. “…Are you okay?”

“I…agreed to fight this guy, and, you know, when you fight like that, there are some rules that both sides have to abide by.” Like obtaining consent and stopping when the other party screams and begs you to stop. “The other guy cheated, and I got hurt. I was wondering…whose fault is it?”

“Well, if the other guy cheated, it’s his fault for hurting you,” he surmised. “But…it’s your fault too. If you hadn’t agreed to fight in the first place, you wouldn’t have gotten hurt. You’re not entirely blameless.”

“Oh.” So it was my fault after all. “Thanks.”

“Look,” he sighed. “Are you okay? Do you need me to come and get you?”

“No.” I shook my head even though he couldn’t see it. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” I could tell that there was more that he wanted to say, but he didn’t know how to word it. “Call me when you get home, okay? And don’t get in fights anymore.”
“I won’t,” I promised, and he hung up.

That left me back where I had started with the deciding what I should do next. At least now I had settled on whom to place the blame.

I lay still for about half an hour more, weighing my options and sobering up. I finally managed to get up and limp to the bathroom. I found it hard to walk normally. When I was done puking and scrubbing the first few layers of my skin off, I toweled off, brushed my teeth again for good measure, and got dressed.

I limped out of the elevator and through the lobby with my head down in shame. It hurt so much—both physically and emotionally—I couldn’t help but whimper softly and brush away the tears. They clouded my vision so much so that I accidentally ran into someone coming in as I was going out. “I—I’m terribly sorry,” I mumbled, not even bothering to look up at the man I had nearly knocked over.

He grabbed my arm, making me gasp. “Kiddo? What are you doing in a place like this?”

I looked up to find Akira-san with a shocked expression on his face.

“I’ve been worried about you! You haven’t returned any of my calls for the past two months. I—”

Before he could say any more, I threw myself into his arms and began sobbing. “I-I-I was lonely, so I thought that if I had a boyf-friend everything would be better. I let them take me here because I wanted them to l-like me, and I told him that I didn’t want to, but he forced me even though I screamed and told him n-no. It h-hurt, and he wouldn’t stop even though I begged him. He just laughed and did it anyway. I was an idiot. It’s my own fault for being so stupid.”

“Shh…” He pulled me tight up against him and smoothed my hair lovingly. “Oh, Kiddo. No. This isn’t your fault.”

“Yes it is,” I insisted.

“Friend of yours, Masashi-kun?” The tall businessman standing next to Akira-san cleared his throat.

“My little brother,” the host fibbed. “I’m sorry, Tanaka-san. I’m going to take him to the hospital. I’d be honored if you would come see me some other time. I really am very sorry.”

The customer walked off, and my ‘big brother’ asked the front desk to call a cab before he turned back to me. “Oh, Tachibana-kun.”

“What should I do now? I can’t go home drunk like this; Hideo-san will beat me again,” I mumbled semi-coherently.

“I’m going to take you to the hospital to get you checked out. Then we’re going to talk to
the police. They’re going to catch the guy that did this to you.” He held me, stroking my hair while we waited for the taxi.

At the hospital they did some tests and patched me up. They took DNA evidence and questioned me about my bruises.

I told them I got in fights a lot.

The police came while they were still treating me, and they asked a lot of questions that I didn’t have answers to. They told me that it would be hard to catch my attacker with so little to go on. They also told me that making a false police report was a crime, and they asked me the same questions again to see if my story remained consistent.

I started crying, refusing to say any more.

They didn’t believe I couldn’t remember the guy’s name, height, build, or facial features. They thought that I was making it up, so there was no point.

Besides, I didn’t ever want to see that guy again. I didn’t want to tell my story to a jury or judge. I didn’t want to have to tell my parents. I didn’t care if he never paid for what he had done to me. I wanted to go home and pretend that it had never happened.

Akira-san stayed by my side, holding my hand or gently squeezing my shoulder or knee the entire time. Once they were done poking and prodding, accusing and interrogating, Akira-san paid for a taxi and rode home with me.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Kiddo?” he gazed at me in concern as he helped me to the front gate of my home.

I shrugged. “Thank you for everything, Akira-san, but I just need to go rest. I’ll keep you updated, and I swear I’ll answer your calls, so don’t worry.”

“Take care, Kiddo.” He patted me on the head and waved goodbye as the taxi drove off.

I sighed and limped inside.

Mother and Hideo-san were waiting for me, and they did not look happy.

“You’ve been acting strange lately, Hajime, so we hired a private detective,” Mother announced with a sour look on her face. “She reported back to us today, and do you know what she found out?” She waved a manila envelope back and forth in her left hand.

Hideo-san opened it and shoved picture after picture into my face. They were of me at the café and in front of the various love hotels with all of the different men I had fooled around with.

“We also found these in your room.” My magazines were thrown to the floor at my feet. “Care to explain?”

I shrugged, having no words with which to defend myself. “I’ve had a bad day. Can we
do this tomorrow?”

I received a hard smack to the face, sending me flying into the wall. I couldn’t get up. I had to lie there and suffer kicks to my ribs as Hideo-san screamed about what the media would do if they found out what a slut I was.

Mother joined in the slaughter, slapping me across the face when Hideo-san picked me up. “How dare you, Hajime!” She screamed something about how no son of hers was going to be a bloody faggot. She yelled about what a disgrace I was and how she wished I had never been born.

They beat me to a pulp both physically and psychologically, and they forbade me from leaving the house unless it was to go to school. My magazines were confiscated, and my credit and debit cards were taken away. There was more screaming and beating, and then the servants were instructed to carry me up to my room.

Tsubasa came to see me after things had quieted down. She stroked my hair and said kind words. She apologized for our parents’ narrow-mindedness and assured me that liking guys was completely normal. She told me that she loved me and accepted me for who I was, and she promised that everything was going to be okay.

I thanked her and hesitantly told her about what I had been doing with the guys I had met at the café. I then slowly pieced together words explaining what had happened to me earlier that day.

“God, you poor thing.” She laid her head on my pillow, gently touching her forehead to mine. “Nii-chan, what happened isn’t something you should blame yourself for. Obviously it was stupid for you to go with men you didn’t know, but it’s never anyone’s fault when they get raped. You said no, and you tried to fight him—that’s all that you could have done. It’s the other guy’s fault for forcing you, so don’t let me hear you blaming yourself again, understand?” I nodded. “Hey, Tsubasa?”

“Un?”

“Tomorrow…I’m running away to Osaka,” I whispered. “I’m going to try making it on my own as a musician there. I can’t stay here any longer. I can’t just keep letting all of this crap happen to me. I’m going to stop feeling sorry for myself, and I’m going to make things change. I’m going to become happy. Will you come with me?”

She kissed my cheek but shook her head. “I can survive here. I’m not necessarily happy, but I’m not miserable like you. If I go with you, I’ll only be a burden. Call me from time to time and let me know how you’re doing. I’ll prepare some stuff for you to take with you tomorrow.
Put it in a backpack, and pretend that you’re leaving for school. If you catch the express at Kyoto Station, you can be in Osaka in about forty minutes.”

“I’ll miss you,” I muttered, biting my lip.

“I know. Be strong. I’ll be a good girl, so don’t worry about me. I won’t give Hideo-san a reason to become displeased with me.” She smiled and kissed my cheek again.

“Take care of yourself.” I awkwardly hugged her with one-armed, still lying down in bed.

“You too, Nii-chan.” She went to get the backpack and supplies and dropped them off in my room before retiring to her own.

I sent Akira a text to let him know that I had safely made it home, and I texted Akira-san to tell him of my plans. Then, after packing some clothes, toiletries, and my guitar, I went to bed at nine o’clock.

The next morning, after walking Tsubasa to school and kissing her goodbye, I went to Kyoto Station and hopped on the first express train to Osaka.

I made my way to Osaka Castle Park by train and sat down with my guitar by the fountain. There were a lot of other musicians spread out along the path leading to the castle, but a fair amount of people stopped to listen to me. I happily did requests, charging one hundred yen143 per performance.

By lunch time I had brought in a fair amount and was feeling rather proud of myself. I treated myself to convenience store onigiri144 and privately gloated about how my luck was finally changing. No more stupid Akira and his stupid Luna. No more cruel, insensitive mother and her brain-dead, lumberjack boyfriend. No more pathetic doormat Hajime. My destiny was in my own hands, and I was making it just fine on my own.

I would have to budget, but if I spent the night in manga cafés145, washed my clothes at a local Laundromat, and got food at the supermarket at the end of the day when the fresh products tended to go on sale, I would stand a good chance of making it. At least until I got discovered by some record label, anyway.

I went back to the park to play some more after lunch, but it was getting colder as the sun

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143 A little bit more than a dollar.
144 Rice balls. See footnote 86.
145 Also called manga kissa (abbreviation of kissaten, Japanese for café), manga cafés are establishments where clients can rent small stalls in which they can use the internet, watch TV, play video games, read magazines or manga, or take naps. Most manga cafés have showers, a free drink bar, some kind of small restaurant, and often a few items such as food for sale. Manga cafés have a large selection of materials (games, movies, and books) that the
went down, and fewer people were stopping to listen.

When it was no longer profitable to sit out in the cold, I went to a ramen shop to get some dinner. I listened to some drunken businessmen talking loudly in one corner, and I watched a couple of friends eating yakitori\textsuperscript{146} and drinking sake at the other end of the counter. They all seemed to be having a lot of fun together drinking, eating, and laughing.

It made me feel lonely. I wanted someone to share this with. Feeling a little homesick—if only for my sister—I dug out my phone and gave her a call.

Unfortunately, Tsubasa was not the one who picked up.

“Hajime, where are you?!” Mother screamed on the other end.

I quickly hung up, deciding that maybe Akira-san would be a safer choice. I told him about my first day in Osaka and how well it was going for me.

He seemed happy to hear that I was doing better than I had been the day before. He wished me luck and told me to take care of myself. “And remember, you can always call me, Kiddo.”

I thanked him, hanging up and finishing my meal. I hung around the ramen shop until a little before ten o’clock watching all of the interesting people’s comings and goings. After asking around among the other patrons, I located a nearby manga café at which I could crash for the night.

I found my way to the seemingly little shop that actually spanned the second and third stories of the building as well. I signed up for a member’s card at the front desk and selected a stall with a mat for sleeping—lucky number seven. After dropping my stuff off at my compartment, I headed for the showers, paying for the towel, shampoo, conditioner, and soap. It wasn’t the best, but at least it was clean. At least I had the ability to shower.

After toweling off and changing into my pajamas, I curled up on my mat and set my phone alarm to the level just above vibrate. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but at least I had a warm, dry, safe place to sleep.

In the morning, to my horror, I discovered that it was raining hard. Unfortunately, the pleasant, cool rains of autumn had stopped weeks ago, and, now, only the frigid, bone chilling precipitation of winter fell. No one would be out in this weather unless they had to be. I could pretty much count on not making anything that day.

I grabbed a cup of coffee from the free drink bar before going to the front desk to pay my clients can use for an hourly (or half-hourly) fee.
tab—2,300 yen\textsuperscript{147} for ten hours. After I was all paid up, I headed to the 7-Eleven to scrounge up some breakfast and buy an umbrella. I headed to the train station near the park with my purchases, taking a seat on one of the benches inside. I ate my breakfast while contemplating my situation and taking stock of my inventory.

I had some snacks and a little first aid kit in my book-bag along with a few changes of clothes and a water bottle. I had my guitar, of course, a pad of paper, a pen, my lighter, and a pack of cigarettes.

Tsubasa had retrieved my credit and debit cards for me, so they were in there was well, but if I used them, my parents would be able to track the transaction and find my location. I would have to keep them in reserve if I ever was desperately in need of money.

I had some cash on me, but only enough to last me another day or so. I did the math in my head: I needed 2,300 yen for the manga café, 500 to 700 yen for breakfast, 1,000 to 1,500 yen for lunch, and about 2,000 yen for dinner. If you figured in an additional 1,000 to 1,200 yen for incidentals, that was 6,800 yen\textsuperscript{148} at least per day.

I sighed. I’d have a cigarette and a bottle of water for lunch to suppress my appetite and fill my stomach. I’d pick up something cheap for dinner too. I’d stop by the supermarket before it closed and pick up some of the cooked stuff in the deli that they made fresh every day. It’d be at least sixty percent off so that it’d have a better chance of selling before the end of the day.

I decided then that on days I couldn’t work, I didn’t get to eat as well. At least there were always the free drinks at the manga café. There were a couple different soups and some ice cream too. I could always live off of that. They only thing I had to worry about was making enough to secure a safe place to sleep and shower every day. I prayed for the icy rain to stop.

At ten o’clock on the dot I returned to the café, going to the front desk to get a stall.

“Would you like number seven again, Tachibana-san?” the friendly receptionist asked in a bright voice.

I blinked, looking at her for the first time. “Um, yeah.” I gave her a warm smile. “That’d be great; thanks…uh…” I searched for a nametag but didn’t find one.

“Ueda Rin,” she supplied. “I work here every night. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” She was actually kind of cute and very amiable. “I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other then.”

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\textsuperscript{146} Fried chicken skewers.
\textsuperscript{147} About twenty-eight dollars.
\textsuperscript{148} About eighty dollars.
“Will you be staying here for a while?” she made polite conversation, but actually did look interested in what I had to say.

“Yeah. Until I have enough to rent my own place. I’m a runaway trying to make it as a musician here in Osaka,” I explained.

“Why did you run away?” she inquired with wide eyes, but then remembered her manners. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is. Sorry for being so nosey.”

“That’s okay.” I truly didn’t mind because I really wanted to tell somebody. “I got my heart broken, and my mother and her boyfriend beat me. I was miserable there. I couldn’t stand living like that any longer, so I ran away.”

“They beat you?” The dark-eyed girl’s mouth dropped open in astonishment, and she looked as though it was too terrible for her to believe.

I turned around and lifted up my shirt so that she could see the purple and green handprints at the small of my back.

Rin gasped. “You should call the police!”

I shrugged. “I have some family members high up in the police back home. My mother could make the whole thing go away, so please don’t say that I’m here if anyone comes looking for me.” I smiled dashingly, happy to have someone care about my situation.

“How can you smile like that when you’re in such a mess?” The receptionist gazed at me in wonder.

“Because things are better now than they were before, and they’ll be better still once I get discovered and can afford to eat regularly.” I smiled again, chuckling softly. I had escaped my own personal hell of heartbreak and bodily injury; I could deal with a few hunger pangs.

“Have you had dinner yet?” the caring girl began to offer. “If not, I could get you something from the restaurant.”

“Thanks, Ueda-san, but I had some stuff that they had on sale at the grocery store. I really appreciate the offer, though. I might take you up on it someday when it’s slow at work.” I felt warm inside, knowing that there was someone who wanted to help me.

“Okay. Well, take care of yourself, Tachibana-san. Let me know if you’re ever hungry.”

I thanked her again and made my way to my stall.

The next day, despite being a Saturday, was a little slow. It was still a little damp and dreary, so not a lot of people were out walking through the park. I had picked the wrong time of year to run away from home.
I only made 4,437 yen\textsuperscript{149}, so I had to eat cheap again. My stomach was killing me. I didn’t understand how that was so seeing as I had eaten more in the past three days than I had in two months. I chugged a bottle of water to quiet down the gurgling sounds.

Rin was working the front desk when I returned to the manga café.

“Tadaima, Ueda-san,” I joked.

“Okaerinasai, Tachibana-san,” she smiled. “Room number seven?”

“Yes please.” I was beginning to like this place. It wasn’t the best or most comfortable, but it was worlds better than my life in Kyoto.

“Did you eat today?” she looked at me suspiciously.

“A little more than yesterday,” I fudged the truth a little.

I had decided to save a little of my earnings in case the next day didn’t pay off. I had to at least have enough for my lodgings. I wouldn’t make it out on the streets in the cold. It was only four degrees\textsuperscript{150} out, and I needed a shower and a bed.

My stomach let out a ‘guu’ sound, giving me away.

I smiled sheepishly.

“Let me buy you something.” She looked at me with pity in her onyx eyes.

“I couldn’t impose on you like that.” I didn’t exactly feel comfortable relying on a girl like that. Now, if she had been an equally attractive and kind young gentleman... Damn my sense of gender roles. I was hungry, and hadn’t I been searching for someone to dote on me a little? Who cared if it were a woman?

“Nonsense.” Rin’s bell-like voice cut through my conflicting thoughts. “You’ll bother the other customers if your stomach keeps making noise all night. Let me buy you some okonomiyaki. Osaka’s is the best. Okay?”

“Well, when you put it like that,” I grinned. “It’d be a disservice to my fellow patrons if I didn’t take you up on your offer.”

She put the order in to the kitchen, and we chatted while I ate. Rin wanted to open a small café in the area, so she was going to college for small business management. She was a year ahead of me and recommended her university’s music department if I ever got the opportunity to go.

Sunday was a pretty good business day. The rain had stopped, and the sun was out, but it was still a little nippy. An electronic sign outside of the bank informed me that it was seven

\textsuperscript{149} Fifty-four dollars.
degrees\textsuperscript{151} today. I was more of a ten degrees\textsuperscript{152} and above kind of guy, but I tried to think positively—it could definitely be worse.

I splurged and actually had food for lunch—just some onigiri from the FamilyMart, but better than cigarettes and water. I also picked up some pancakes with syrup and margarine\textsuperscript{153} for a snack later since they were only 220 yen.

I bought my own dinner at the manga café’s restaurant that night—udon noodles and tempura shrimp. It tasted good to finally have some protein. Fat and carbs were all well and good, but I really needed some protein and iron in my diet. A thrifty eating lifestyle wasn’t necessarily healthy. I needed some fruits and vegetables too, but buying fresh produce was expensive.

Monday was another day of going without. Hardly anyone passed by, and I found myself glad that I had thought to put aside money for the manga café that night.

Tuesday was as bad as Monday, so I had some melon pan\textsuperscript{154} for breakfast, three cigarettes for lunch, and four more for dinner with some water and rice as a side dish. If I didn’t do well on Wednesday, I’d be out on the street and still not have anything to eat.

Tuesday night I sat down on my mat and pulled out my notepad and pen. I took a deep breath and brainstormed all of my options. I could risk withdrawing money from an ATM if I really needed to. Osaka was big. I wouldn’t have to worry about them finding me if I took a train to the other side of the city, used the ATM, and came back. I’d only have to worry about the train fare. I might not be able to afford that.

Option number two was to stay for a shorter period of time at the café. I’d only be able to sleep a few hours, but then I could go hang out at a convenience store until it was time to go to the park. That would save some money.

I could always call Akira-san for help, but his financial situation wasn’t all that great either. He worked hard for his money, and it wouldn’t be fair for me to ask him to support me as well. I was an independent man now, and I needed to stand on my own two feet.

\textsuperscript{150} Around forty degrees.
\textsuperscript{151} About forty-five degrees.
\textsuperscript{152} Fifty degrees.
\textsuperscript{153} The snack Tachibana is talking about consists of two pancakes, each about the size of your palm, with a thick syrup that does not run and butter or margarine paste sandwiched between them. They also sell pancakes with honey between them.
\textsuperscript{154} Pan is bread in Japanese, but while it also denotes the loaves of bread we are used to in the west, it can refer to sweet bread and rolls with pastes and creams on the inside. Melon pan is a sweet, sugary bread with a design on top that looks similar to the outside of a honeydew melon.
I could call Aki…or not. Things were complicated between us, and there would be too much explaining to do. He’d yell at me for not telling him about what was happening in my life for the past three months. There was nothing he could do for me anyway.

There was always the option of giving up and going home like a dog with my tail between my legs. I put an x through the sentence as soon as it had been written down. I wouldn’t go back there. I wouldn’t let them beat me and use me again. Even if I were starving in a gutter, I’d rather die a free man than go back there and be their puppet again. I scratched a thick line through the words on the page just out of spite.

I had to make more money—and fast. I couldn’t be picky. I’d take whatever job I could get…but regular jobs didn’t pay all that much. I needed a lot of money. Perhaps I could be a host. Hosts got paid on commission for the drinks that their customers bought, right? I was perfectly capable of flirting with women of all ages, but I didn’t do so well with the whole holding my liquor thing. Hosts had to drink a lot if they wanted to make money. I turned into a simpering slut when drunk. Maybe I wasn’t host material.

That left more…unsavory kinds of jobs. I went ahead and wrote prostitution on my list. I’d had sex with a man already, so it wasn’t like I was saving my virginity for a certain oblivious jerk anymore. If I just lied still it’d be over in a few minutes. I was good with my mouth, and I was an excellent actor, so I was pretty sure I could make it work. The only problem would be taking my clothes off while sober. Plus, I wasn’t sure if I’d have terrifying flashbacks from being raped. Well, I was desperate. I’d find some way of dealing with it. I needed money.

I went up to the front desk and greeted Rin awkwardly. “Hey, Ueda-san, do you know where the red light distract in Osaka is?”

She blinked slowly, trying to discern if I were joking. “Why? Looking to buy?”

“Sell, actually.” I blushed, looking away. “Becoming a rock star is a little harder than I had originally anticipated, so it looks like I’m going to have to rely on other forms of employment until my career takes off.”

“Look, Tachibana-san, if you need the money—”

“—I couldn’t take money from you, Ueda-san, though, really, thank you so much for your offer. I truly appreciate your kindness, but I have to make it on my own.”

Wednesday was slow as well because it was cold, though, thankfully, I made enough for my lodgings. Food, however, was another story entirely. I lied on a park bench enjoying my
lunch of cigarettes, water, and the last of the shrimp chips\textsuperscript{155} Tsubasa had packed for me. I was dizzy. If things didn’t change soon, I wasn’t going to make it. I was no independent man. I was a sniveling brat trying to fake it. I’d been cocky and manipulative in the past, and I’d childishly made other people give me my way. I’d had an over-inflated ego, thinking myself to be high and mighty. Now I knew the truth: I was a naïve punk. I couldn’t make it on my own like I had thought.

I waved my self-deprecating thoughts away and took out my list. I sighed and circled prostitution. I’d set out to free myself from the chains that bound me to my family and former self, and I wasn’t going to give up. I’d do what I had to. That night, I’d go to the red light district and case the joint, learn the rules. I’d also decide on a price. It’d probably be best if I could find a pimp too. Prostitutes regularly got roughed up and cheated. I’d need a pimp for protection.

I sighed, letting my head thunk against the wood of the seat. I couldn’t believe I was actually going to do this. Then again, I was pretty desperate. The world was getting kind of blurry. Things may or may not have been spinning.

I put out my cigarette and dug out my cell.

He picked up on the third ring. “This is Kimura.”

“Hey, Aki. How’s it going?” I just wanted to hear his voice.

“I’m fine, but what about you? Have you been fighting again? You haven’t been at school since I talked to you last week. Did that guy really beat you up that badly? You should have said something, you idiot! I would have come and gotten you and taken you to a hospital!”

A small smile came to my lips as he scolded me lovingly. He still cared. “I didn’t think you’d go out of your way for someone you weren’t even friends with,” I baited.

“God, you ditz!” he seethed. “I was mad! You know I didn’t mean that.”

“Funny. It really sounded like you did.” I was so happy. He forgave me—rather, he’d gotten over his temper tantrum and realized he was being an idiot.

“Look, I don’t have a lot of time to talk right now because I’m out with Luna, but we have to talk. I’ve got a lot I need to apologize for…and maybe a little yelling to do too…and some begging for forgiveness that may come in the form of a backrub.” I could tell he was blushing by the undertones in his voice.

“I’ve got some things I need to tell you too. There’ll be a lot of explanations and some apologies, but mostly tears and invitations to shower sympathy upon me.”

\textsuperscript{155} Shrimp-flavored crackers.
“I’ll call you later, then,” he promised. “Feel better, Tachi.”

“See ya, Aki.” I closed my eyes and put away my phone. Maybe a little nap first. I’d sleep off the starvation.

I woke up to the sounds of machines beeping softly. I was lying in a bed in a white room with an IV in my arm.

“Nii-chan!” my sister’s voice called, and her face suddenly came in to view, hovering over me.

“Tsu?” My voice cracked. I thought that I must be hallucinating. “What are you doing here?”

“The hospital called us,” the little angel explained, lips pursed in agitation.

“Us?” I blinked, sitting up just in time to see Mother and her ape boyfriend burst through the door.

“Finally up, are you?” my mother’s voice grated against my eardrums. She was royally pissed. “Say thank you to the man that saved you.” She indicated the man sitting on the other side of my bed.

“Takahada Yusuke,” the kind looking gentleman introduced himself. “I found you passed out in the park.”

“Tachibana Hajime.” I nodded, bowing slightly. “I’m grateful to you for saving me, Takahada-san, but you should have let me die.”

“HAJIME!” Hideo-san screamed.

“I ran away for a reason!” I yelled back.

He slapped me so hard my nose started bleeding.

“I was doing just fine on my own!” I tried my hardest not to cry in front of them. I bit my lip and ignored the pain.

“And that’s why you ended up here in the hospital,” Mother remarked snidely, looking like she wanted to hit me herself. “Honestly, how could I have given birth to such a fool?”

“It’s not your fault, Midori-san.” Hideo-san gently comforted my mother before turning on me. “And what’s this, young man?” He threw my notepad down onto the bed.

“I was kind of hurting for cash, so I made a list of my options.” I avoided looking him in the eye.

“Mind telling me why going home is crossed out with a vengeance and prostitution is circled!?”
I received another harsh smack across the face.

“Hajime!” my mother gasped, face going white. “You didn’t!”

“I was going to.” I shrugged. “I’m willing to do what I have to to get away from you people.”

This time my mother slapped me.

I was allowed to give Takahada-san a note for Rin to tell her what had happened to me along with my address, but then I was dragged back to Kyoto. My phone, money, and credit and debit cards were taken from me.

I was grounded—trapped. I wasn’t even permitted to go to school until Friday. I was escorted to and from home by some buffoons my mother had hired, making me feel like even more of a prisoner.

Saturday morning I received a call from Akira on the home phone. I was permitted to talk for ten minutes.

“Why haven’t you been answering your cell?” was the first thing out of his mouth. He sounded peeved.

“I’m currently under house arrest,” I admitted in embarrassment. It wasn’t right for a grown man to be confined like that.

“Oh.” The anger melted from his voice. “Having problems with your parents again?”

“Something like that,” I sighed.

“So I guess you won’t be coming over tonight?”

“Most likely not.” I’d give anything to be able to curl up in his bed. “Can I meet you on the roof after school on Monday?”

“The roof?” He was surely blinking cutely in confusion. “Yeah. Sure. I can only talk for a little while, though, because I have plans with Luna.” Of course he did.

“That’s fine.” I tried not to sound snippy, but I was a little pissed. After three months of ignoring me, pushing me aside, and fighting, he didn’t deem it necessary to set aside a few hours of his precious time to spend with me.

“Oh, and who was that guy that answered the phone? I almost thought that I’d dialed the wrong number.”


“Oh. Okay. I’ll see you then, Tachi.”

“See ya, Aki.”
Just as I hung up, the beast himself walked into the room and announced that he needed to have a talk with me.

I braced myself for impact as he started talking about how I was an irresponsible disgrace to the woman he loved.

He started reminding me of my responsibilities such as getting married and producing heirs. He warned that fooling around with other men would not be tolerated. All of my future girlfriends would also be inspected. Punks and rejects like myself would not be allowed.

I was also to work harder in school—absences were unacceptable. I was to study every day to obtain better test scores, working towards the number one spot in my class.

I would dress in a manner fitting the future head of the Tachibana family. That meant that I was dying my hair black, getting it cut, and taking out all of the metal I had had shoved through my ears.

That was the final straw. All that bull before about whom I would date and what I would and would not do had made me angry, but messing with my look was going too far. I took great pride in my appearance, and no one was going to tell me how to dress.

“But, Hideo-san, this is my natural color. Want proof?” I lifted up shirt, tugging my waistband down and pretending to unzip my pants. I’d forgotten about my tattoo.

Seeing the top of it, Hideo-san pushed me to the ground and held me down while he pulled my boxers dangerously low.

I panicked, thinking back to the rape. I cried and started kicking and screaming, desperately trying to get him off of me.

He gave me a solid smack to the jaw to quiet me down before he let me go and started screaming and letting the punches fly.

“Okaasama!” I yelled for help as my mother walked past.

She blinked her mahogany eyes indifferently at me, and she sighed as if she were annoyed. “Oh, what’s the problem now?”

“He’s got a tattoo!” Hideo-san reported.

My mother narrowed her eyes at me. “God, Hajime. Why was I cursed with such a troublesome child? Hideo-san, can you take care of this?”

“Okaasama! Please don’t let him hurt me! Okaasama!” I finally resorted to pleading.

“Hajime, I don’t have time for you right now, so make an appointment. Now, stop crying and take it like a man,” she coldly tossed over her shoulder as she strolled out the door.

I suffered through the rest of my beating, cleaned myself up, and called my mother’s
secretary. I snuck out of the house and made my way on foot to my mother’s office building. Once there, the receptionist showed me into her office.

“Hajime,” she snapped when she saw me. “I told you that I didn’t have time for you. Go home. I have an appointment at ten o’clock.”

“I’m your ten o’clock,” I announced, taking a seat in one of the armchairs in front of her desk. “I called and made an appointment like you said to.”

She blinked. “What do you want?”

“I want you to break up with Hideo-san.” I stated my demands.

“Absolutely not.” She flatly rejected my proposal.

“How can you love a man like that?” I was absolutely flabbergasted. What was she thinking?

“He’s hell in bed,” she replied straight-faced. “I take it that’s something you know a little bit about?”

“The only man I’ve ever slept with raped me!” I screamed, unable to keep my temper under control.

She was silent, rethinking her harsh teasing.

“How can you sleep with a man who beats your child like that?! Doesn’t it bother you at all?” I played to her sense of human decency.

She sighed, placing her palm over her eyes as she squeezed the life out of the pen in her other hand. “Frankly, no. Sometimes I want to hit you myself, Hajime. You deserve it. You’re nothing but a thorn in my side. You were always a terrible child, and you’ve only gotten worse as you grew up. You’re uncontrollable, disrespectful, and entirely unsuited to be my replacement. I think Hideo-san has the right idea about how to handle you. That strong will of yours could stand to be broken.”

“Don’t you feel anything when you see him beat me like that?” I mumbled. Her words cut right through me. Akira was right—I had a bit of a Mommy complex. I just wanted her to love and accept me.

“Only pity. I know what it’s like to have your life dictated to you. I wanted to be a dancer, but when I was seventeen my mother had my ankle broken to keep me under control. I fell in love when I was in college—with Tsubasa’s father—but Mother arranged my marriage to Haruka, and I was forced to have you.”

“But…weren’t you glad once I was born? Didn’t it make you happy to hold me? Didn’t you love me once you saw me?” I held my breath, hoping for some story of how precious I had
been or how happy I’d made her.

She looked at me sadly. “I was happy to have you out of me. You always squirmed and kicked. I hated being pregnant. I really only held you when I was feeding you. I remember that it hurt. I didn’t—I don’t hate you, Hajime.”

“But you don’t love me.” At least she had tried to be kind.

“Hajime, I was practically raped. Who could love the child of someone they hated? I was forced to have you. I never wanted you. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth. I was the same way. My mother had me and my sisters to carry on the family line. At least I got lucky and had a boy first. My sisters all had three or four before they gave up and decided to adopt their oldest daughter’s husband into the family.”

“Did Father want me?” Maybe there was still hope.

“Of course he did.” She laughed that charming “ohoho” of hers. “He needed you to secure his place in the Tachibana family.”

“But he didn’t love me, did he?”

“No, Hajime,” she sighed, glancing at her clock. “I’m sorry.”

“But…you love Tsubasa, don’t you?”

She nodded, a guilty look building in the corners of her mouth. “She’s the daughter of my beloved. I wanted her. She’s my little angel—so well-behaved.”

I sighed and bobbed my head slightly. “So you won’t leave Hideo-san for my sake?”

“No.” She was firm in her decision. “It’s my turn to be happy now. You can do whatever you want when you’re the CEO and president. I suffered my entire life, and now I can do as I please. Hideo-san makes me happy, so he stays. I’m sorry, Hajime.”

“No…I understand. It’s not something I can blame you for.” I stood and bowed. “Thank you for your time, Okaasama.”

“I’m sorry. Just wait until you’re older,” she assured. “You’ll get your turn.”

I nodded and left, thinking that I wouldn’t last that long.

I spent the rest of the weekend in bed, thinking of escape plans. None of them seemed viable. I was trapped, and death was the only way out that I could see, but I wasn’t sure if I were that desperate yet or not.

As the weekend stretched on, death seemed like more and more of a good idea. The only thing keeping me hanging on was the prospect of making up with Akira. Periodic visits from my adorable little sister also didn’t hurt.
I finally managed to drag myself out of bed on Monday, and my bodyguards marched me off to school. It was hard to sit through class knowing that there was nothing for me to look forward to. Akira—though we may return to being best friends—would never be mine the way I wanted him to.

My acquaintances were to be inspected by my parents from here on out, so I could forgo my starry-eyed, romanticized delusions of meeting Prince or Princess Charming. There would be no more fraternizing or fornication of any kind in my future. The next time I got touched tenderly was going to be my wedding night with some prissy miss moneybags that Mommy and Daddy had chosen for me.

I had held on this long in order to find romance and love. I was a simple creature with simple needs. I wanted to sing, and I wanted to be held and kissed. Now I had to face a life where I didn’t get any of that.

They’d taken my guitars from me as well. Hideo-san said that they gave me hope and the courage to rebel. Goodness, we couldn’t have any hope running around.

After class was thankfully over for the day, I snuck up to the roof, peering over the edge and smoking a cigarette while I waited for Akira to come.

“Hajime?” My friend called out to me in an uncertain voice. It was almost as if he didn’t recognize me.

I turned and spared him a small smile. I’d missed him so much—his touch, his taste, his smell, his voice, his eyes, his face, and, oh, his body. “Hey,” I replied in a tiny voice, letting him make the first move.

“What happened to you?” He looked absolutely shocked at my appearance.

I blushed and turned away, gazing back at the ground below. “I…I look fine.” I looked good for the hell I was going through. I didn’t appreciate the ‘look what the cat dragged in’ stare.

“No. You don’t.” He sounded angry, accusatory. “Your coloring’s terrible, and you’ve lost a ton of weight. Hajime, you were too skinny before. Even I could snap you like a twig now. You look like a heroin addict, and Nikaidou said that you were covered in bruises last week. You haven’t been eating properly, have you?” He grabbed me, unbuttoning my shirt to see the bruises. “God, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s not my fault.” I tore myself away from him, ashamed and frightened. I was afraid that he would hit me. I knew Akira would never do that, but it was so deeply engrained in my body: shouting = being beat up. “It’s not my fault,” I repeated, fingers fumbling to light another cigarette.
He grabbed it from me, throwing it to the ground and stamping it out. “When did you start smoking again? Hajime, you know how bad that is for you!” He grabbed my bag and pulled out my pack of cigarettes. “When did you open this?”

“Y-yesterday,” I whimpered, waiting for him to raise his hand against me.

“There are only two left! Did you smoke that many in just two days?!” The yelling continued. Looking back, it was probably because he was worried sick about me and didn’t properly understand the situation, but at the time he sounded judgmental and accusatory.

“Y-yes,” I confessed in a small voice.

He took my cigarettes and my lighter away, tossing them into the garbage. “What’s the matter with you—agreeing to fight other guys, starving yourself, smoking, getting yourself beat up?!”

“It’s not my fault,” I trembled, trying to explain. “Last week—when I got hurt—that wasn’t my fault. They all said that it wasn’t my fault.”

“Well they were lying to make you feel better,” he bit savagely, enraged at what he thought I had done to myself.

“No!” I shouted, starting to cry. “I can explain.”

“Then whose fault is this, Hajime?”

“Luna—” I started but was quickly cut off.

“Hajime, don’t you dare try to blame this on her!” He had misunderstood and started yelling at me again. “You’re such a child! Just because I fall in love with someone and want to spend time with them doesn’t mean that we can’t be friends anymore. Contrary to public opinion, Hajime, I am not your private property. I can choose who I hang out with, and I can have other friends besides you! Don’t you dare try and tell me that Luna made you starve yourself and get in fights. I don’t have time for your childish excuses.” He sighed and shook his head, turning to walk away. “I’m sorry. Let’s have this conversation again when you grow up a little.”

“Wait!” I called after him. “I can explain!”

“Save it, Hajime,” he whispered sadly.

“Stop!” I shouted, slipping off my shoes and socks and climbing over the fence. “If you don’t listen to me, I’m going to jump!”

The man I loved was completely unfazed by the sight of me standing on the edge of the roof. “Hajime, I don’t have time to deal with your nonsense. Get down before you hurt yourself.”

“I’m serious!” I shouted, crying my eyes out. Why didn’t he care?
“I have to go meet Luna. I’m already late.” He didn’t believe me. “I’m going to call you in five minutes, and if you don’t pick up and tell me that you’ve given up on your stupid little game, I’m going to come back up here and beat the stuffing out of you myself, understand?”

“I swear! I’m really going to jump!” I yowled, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

He turned to go, tossing, “Grow up, Hajime.” over his shoulder.

“Akira!” I shouted after him. “AKI! Aki, come back! Come back. C—come back and let me talk. You didn’t let me talk, Aki.”

I turned around and looked down at the ground through my tear-blurred vision.

My heart had stopped when I saw him climbing over the rooftop fence. I’d barely even known him, and my stomach had lurched. Just seeing him standing there had been enough to send me into a panic. Why didn’t he feel anything when he saw his best friend standing out on that ledge?

Was it because he was convinced that I wouldn’t actually jump, or maybe his brain was too clouded with thoughts of his precious Luna to see me properly. He’d chosen her over me.

I sighed, trying to decide if I wanted to fall face first so that I could see the ground coming or if I wanted to watch the sky as I fell to my death. Decisions, decisions. After what seemed like minutes, I finally turned around so that I was facing the fence. The sky would be prettier to look at.

I took some deep breaths before slowly untangling my fingers from the fence. I was kind of glad that it would be over soon. I was bored, empty, and depressed. Life had been entirely disappointing, and it would continue to be disappointing. I would never get anything that I wanted. There was only more suffering ahead—beatings, an overbearing wife, a stressful job. Maybe there would be some cute kids that I could love and care for, but I wasn’t necessarily willing to wait that long to find happiness. I was very much an instant gratification kind of guy. I’d be reincarnated to a loving family, find a nice mate, have a fulfilling career, and start a loving family of my own. Just a few more seconds before my old life ended and my new one began.

I let go and started to lean backwards. As I began to fall, I reached out and grabbed the fence once more. “Shit.” Tsubasa. I couldn’t die like this. I couldn’t end up a smear on the pavement. My gorgeous face would be destroyed. If I were to kill myself, I’d have to do it in a cleaner manner. I wanted my baby sister to be able to look at my face once more before my casket was sealed and my body was cremated.

Additionally, it would be nice to be able to see Akira’s face as he gazed down at me one final time. I wanted him to be able to look at me and rue the day he left me standing on the edge
of a roof to go meet up with a girl who didn’t even like him!

I climbed back over the fence and sat down, sobbing bitterly. My life sucked.

A few minutes later, the deafening sounds of my sobs were drowned out by the sound of frantic footsteps racing up the stairs to the roof.

I looked up to see Akira gasping to catch his breath. “Why didn’t you answer your phone if you were safe!? You had me worried sick when I called you seven times and you didn’t pick up!”

“Oh so now you’re worried?” I barked back bitterly.

“Of course I was worried! You’re my best friend!” He looked like he had half a mind to slug me.

“You’re not my friend.” I snorted, wiping my tears on my shirt sleeve. “Friends don’t leave suicidal friends standing on the edges of roofs to go hang out with girls that don’t even like them!”

“Like you were really going to jump.” He rolled his eyes, getting annoyed with me again.

“And how would you know that?” He was really pissing me off. He had no right to treat me that way.

“I know you. You wouldn’t throw your life away over something so trivial.” He sounded so sure.

“You don’t know me at all,” I whispered dejectedly. “You don’t even know what’s going on. Akira, I’ve been coming up here for months now, and that’s not the first time I’ve ever climbed over that fence. It’s not even the fifth or even the eleventh, heck it’s not even the seventeenth time I’ve stood there and debated jumping. I only grabbed the fence at the last second today because I wanted you to be able to look at me lying in a coffin and beg for forgiveness for what you’ve done.”

My friend was completely floored by this revelation. “Wh-why? What’s the matter? I mean—what could be so bad that you would—”

“—You don’t get an explanation,” I snapped. “I don’t owe you anything.” I picked up my bag and stormed towards the door. “You lost that privilege the moment you chose her over me. You lost everything the moment you left me standing on that ledge.”

“Hajime!” he called, a look of horror on his face.

I turned slowly, glaring at him. “Do you honestly think you have the right to call me that? You’re not my friend. You don’t even know me, and I’m not important to you.”

“That’s not true!” He grabbed my arm, trying to keep me from leaving.
“Oh isn’t it? You chose to spend a few hours with that girl over my life—my life, Akira. You picked a girl you’ve known for three months over the six years we’ve been together. Don’t you dare forget that. Remember for the rest of your life what you did, because I am never—never—going to forgive you.” I took a deep breath and glared at him one final time. “Sayonara\textsuperscript{156}, Kimura-san.” I then turned and left.

Mother and Hideo-san were out on a date when I returned home. Only Tsubasa was there to greet me.

“Okae—What’s wrong, Nii-chan?” she skipped the normal greeting after getting a look at the expression on my face.

I pulled her into my arms and gave her a tight squeeze. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

“Of course, Nii-chan. I love you too. What happened?”

“I’ve always tried to be someone you could look up to. I’ve always tried to protect and love you, and I think I’ve done an okay job, haven’t I?”

“Of course you have, Nii-chan.” I was scaring her. “What’s going on?”

“Just listen,” I whispered into her ear. “When it comes to protecting and fighting for myself, I’ve discovered that I’m rather weak and undependable. I’m kind of ashamed of that. I’ve done some stupid things that I hope you won’t emulate. I want you to be a good girl, and I want you to be happy. I wanted to tell you that I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for me in the past. I made it this far because I had my beloved little sister to love, spoil, and worry about. I wanted to let you know that I love you more than anything, but I just can’t love myself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Nii-chan, but why are you telling me all this now?”

“Because sometimes you just have to tell people things while you have the chance. People don’t know how you feel sometimes unless you tell them. I wanted to tell you so that I didn’t regret it later. Now, go to your room and do your homework like a good girl. I love you, Tsubasa.” I gave her a giant kiss on the cheek and a big, happy grin. I wanted her to remember my smiling face.

“I love you too, Nii-chan.” She rolled her eyes and laughed at my seemingly random outburst of emotion.

\textsuperscript{156} Out of all the ways to say goodbye in Japanese, sayonara is the most final, permanent-sounding one, similar to
Once I heard the door to her room click shut behind her, I went to the kitchen and fished an exacto knife out of the drawer by the oven. I washed it in the sink with scalding water and took it upstairs. I changed into my favorite outfit and went to the bathroom to primp a little. Once I was certain that I looked my best, I got Mother’s bottle of sleeping pills out of the medicine cabinet and swallowed four while I filled the tub with warm water. I took some deep breaths and thought about anything I had forgotten. Suicide note. Duh. But as I thought about it some more, I realized that I didn’t really have anything to say to anyone else. I’d already said goodbye to Tsubasa. I suppose I should have written a little thank you note to the Kimuras for taking care of me for so many years, but it was a little late now.

I took the knife firmly in my left hand and pressed the blade to my right arm, starting at the wrist and carving all the way up to my elbow. I gasped in pain, thinking, “God, Hajime, you sure picked a way to go. Swallowing pills wasn’t enough—no! You had to slice up your arm and bleed to death.”

I plunged my arm into the water under the faucet and waited to pass out from either the pills or the blood loss. As I slowly slipped away, I found myself thinking that I should have kissed Akira one last time. Even though he was a jerk sometimes, I still loved him. I wanted to hear him call my name one last time.
Part III:

Chapter Eight: Family (Kazoku)

He’d never called me ‘Kimura-san’ before. Even when we’d first met, I’d been ‘Akira-kun’ right off the bat. He must hate me, and he had a good reason. Like he’d said—I’d left him standing on top of a roof to hang out with a girl who—admittedly—had told me that she didn’t feel for me what I did for her. I deserved his anger, and I could accept that, but had he really been serious about all that other stuff he’d said? Had he really intended to jump?

What had happened to my best friend while I had been out of the picture? He’d been getting into fights for some reason, and he’d been starving himself from the look of his dramatically skinny form. He’d said that he was under house arrest the other day when we had spoken on the phone, so that probably meant he was having family problems again. Maybe he’d been out fighting to let off some steam. Perhaps he had gone on a hunger strike against his parents.

He had most likely been overreacting with the threatening to jump—Hajime was a drama queen, after all. He’d probably go home and cool down some. He’d be pouting tomorrow for sure, and I’d be begging on my knees for his forgiveness for months to come.

Still, I was a little worried, so I called his cell to check up on him. I got his voicemail, so I tried the home phone.

Tsubasa picked up and reported that her brother had yet to return, but she told me that she would let him know that I’d called.

I’d apologize incessantly—as long as it took for him to forgive me…provided he would speak to me at all. I would understand if he gave me the silent treatment. After all, I had been a total jerk to him, leaving him like that. I knew that I was in the wrong, and I’d be beating myself up for my stupidity for a while.

Dinner was on the table when I arrived home, but I was in too much of a sour mood, too busy beating myself up to eat.

Mom instantly picked up on this anomaly. “Why aren’t you eating, Aki?” she inquired softly, tilted her head to the side.

“I got in a fight with Hajime today,” I confessed, letting out a regret-laced sigh. “I was mad…worried because he hasn’t been taking care of himself, and then he started acting really
childishly, so I said some mean stuff and was a real jerk to him. It was completely inexcusable, and he said he’d never forgive me. I feel really bad, and the more I think about it, the more I think that maybe this isn’t something that I can fix. He said that we weren’t friends anymore. I…I really hurt him this time.”

“Why don’t you go over there after dinner and tell him that you’re sorry,” my bubbly mother suggested with a smile. “Do you think you could cry? Tell him how much he means to you. Say that you can’t live without him. He’ll get a kick out of that. You two will be okay, Aki, I know it.”

“Can I go now?” I begged, looking at Grandma Ayame. I knew how strict she was with our dinner rules—no phones, video games, or books at the table, and no one got up until everyone had finished. “I have to go see him now. I have to tell him I’m sorry. Please?”

The matron sighed and gave me a knowing smile. She nodded.

“Thank you, Obaasan.” I jumped to my feet just as the phone rang.

We all paused and looked at it for a minute before Mother got to her feet and went to answer it. “This is the Kimura residence. Kimura Carol speaking…. Oh, Tsubasa-chan!”

I stopped in the doorway, poking my head back into the kitchen. I mouthed, ‘For me?’ but my mother wasn’t paying attention. She had her “I’m seriously concentrating because someone is speaking rapidly in Japanese” face on.

“Slow down, Honey.” My mother looked frightened. “Dear, you’re speaking too fast; I can’t understand you. What happened to your brother?” She paled. “S-say that again, Sweetheart?” Her eyes went out of focus and she just stood there licking her lips—something she did when she was too numb to do much else. She took a deep breath and put her game face on. “Tsubasa darling, everything is going to be okay. Which hospital are you at? …Okay. Sit tight, dear. We’ll be there in ten minutes. Take deep breaths. It’s going to be fine.”

I stared at her as she put down the receiver. “Wh-what…?”

“Get your shoes and get in the car. We’re going to the hospital,” she stated firmly.

Grandma Ayame and I didn’t ask questions, but Mom filled us in during the car ride.

My body was numb. “Is…is he going to be okay?”

“He’s in surgery right now. It’s pretty bad.” She didn’t even bother sugar-coating it. She was too stunned to lie.

“Oh, God,” I muttered over and over again. This was my fault. I had done this to him. I’d been insensitive and quick to judge. I hadn’t let him explain. I’d pushed him over the edge, and I hadn’t gotten to tell him how sorry I was.
We arrived at the hospital in six minutes because Mom might have broken the speed limit. Once there, we were ushered to the waiting area where we met up with a teary-eyed Tsubasa.

She ran to my mother, burying her face in her shirt. “He told me he loved me, and he sent me to do my homework in my room. I heard the tub running, and I remembered that Akira-niisan had told me to have him call, so I went and knocked on the door. He didn’t answer, so I opened it a crack, and there was all this bloody water on the floor, and he was just lying there, bleeding. I didn’t know what to do, so I dragged him out of the water and tied a towel around his arm really tight. I-I saw it on a drama. I called for an ambulance, and they took him away.” She gasped for air as she sobbed bitterly. There was blood all over her clothes.

“Tsubasa-chan, I am so sorry.” I wrapped my arms around her, beginning to cry myself. “This is all my fault.”

“No.” She shook her head. “You may have made it worse, but this is Hideo-san’s doing.”

“Hideo-san?” That was the second time that I had heard that name.

The doe-eyed creature looked up at me in surprise. “D-didn’t…Nii-chan tell you?”

I thought hard over the conversations I had had with Hajime the past three months. He’d tried to tell me something a number of times, but we’d always been interrupted. “No. Who’s Hideo-san?”

She sat me down in one of the waiting room chairs and told me everything that Hajime had been meaning to for months—sans the parts about being in love with me and our ‘breakup’ that I had known nothing about (that all came to light a few years later). She told me about the separation, the abuse, the heartbreak, the men, the rape, the loss of appetite, the loss of will, the escape to Osaka, the not-so-triumphant return to Kyoto, the truth about his parents’ feelings for him, and his final words about how he was too weak to go on living like that anymore.

I was speechless at how in the dark I had been. I thought that he was upset because he felt he was losing his best friend to a girl, but, as it turned out, that was only one of the trees in the forest of Hajime’s problems.

I placed my elbows on my knees and let my face drop into my hands. “Oh, God,” I mumbled. All the things I had said to him. I hadn’t understood a thing, and yet I had yelled and harped and scolded him. No wonder he’d looked so scared when I’d shouted at him. After being abused for months, he must have thought I was going to hurt him too. And the way I’d forced his shirt open to see the bruises. That’s something no one should ever do to a rape victim. I’d hurt him on so many different levels without even knowing.
I had no one but myself to blame for not knowing. He’d tried so hard to tell me, but I’d never been there for him. I whined and complained to him every time a test came around, and he always listened patiently, comforting me lovingly. All of this had happened to him on my watch, and he’d had to suffer through it alone. I was the worst best friend ever. I had utterly failed him.

Some amount of time passed—a few hours, forty minutes, maybe even a whole day—and then one of the doctors came out.

We all stood expectantly, like in the movies.

“Are you the family?”

“Yes,” we chorused.

The doctor came up to my mother and smiled. “Your son is going to be just fine. There will be some scarring, but we managed to patch him up pretty well considering the damage. I hope he’s left-handed, though. It may take some time before the right arm functions normally again.”

“He is.” I sighed in relief. “Oh. He plays the guitar; how long do you think it’ll take before he can play again?”

“It may be a little awkward with the bandages, but he should be able to move his wrist in a few days,” she assured with a smile. “You can go sit up in his room with him now. He could wake up at any time these next few days. The body usually takes a little while to recover from things like this.”

“Is there anything we can do to help him?” I needed to know that there was something I could do to make things better.

“You can talk to him, sing, hold his hand. Patients usually get better faster when loved ones talk to and touch them. Have a good night.”

We thanked the doctor profusely before heading up to Hajime’s room to wait. I took a seat by his side so that I could stroke his hair and hold his hand while talking to him quietly. Mom took Tsubasa to get a change of clothes, and Grandmother went to get food for us from the cafeteria.

She asked if I wanted to come with her.

I declined, saying, “I can’t leave him alone again. He’s like a little kid; he gets lonely when he’s on his own for too long.”

I woke up at one in the morning according to the clock above the hospital bed.

Tsubasa-chan and Mother were whispering quietly because Grandma Ayame was asleep.
“Did your mother say if she were coming by tonight?” my okaasan asked.

“Shoot. I…I never called.” Tsubasa chewed nervously on her lip. “With everything that happened… They’re probably frantic. No one cleaned up the blood.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call her,” Mom patted the young girl on the head before slipping out into the hall.

“They’re going to be furious with him,” Tsubasa sighed.

“I think they’ll be relieved that he’s okay,” I stated optimistically. From what I had heard of Hideo-san, Tachibana was in for a beating when he got home. I’d see to it that that didn’t happen.

“I’m not so sure.” She sighed again, placing her face in her palms.

I got up from my post beside my ward and went over to comfort his little sister. I knelt in front of her and wrapped my arms around her, resting her head on my shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Tsubasa-chan. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to your brother anymore.”

“I’ll leave him in your care,” she laughed, and I suddenly became aware of how much the precocious little girl I’d used to know had grown into a woman. Kazuki-san had been right; Tsubasa really had filled out. She was turning out to be just as pretty as her brother—who I acknowledged as gorgeous but was not interested in having sex with…probably not.

I blushed when I remembered how he’d made my stomach go all up in knots that one day behind the old Home Ec building. I reevaluated my sense of sexual orientation. Maybe I was just a little bit interested in him sexually. Maybe interested enough to try it once…or twice if he were half as good in bed as he was at kissing. Maybe twice with an option to buy.

I let go of the man’s baby sister and went back to his side. I was under a lot of mental pressure at the moment, and I wasn’t thinking straight. It was wrong of me to have such thoughts about the Tachibana siblings. Tsubasa was too young, and Hajime was too male. I silently pledged to not allow my newly awaken sexuality and raging hormones to steer. I would do my best to keep my brain in my head where it belonged.

“Your mother’s on her way, Tsubasa-chan,” Mother informed, quietly slinking back into the room. “She said she’d be ten to fifteen minutes.” She then turned to me and said gently, “Aki, we should probably go home once their family gets here. It’s past visiting hours, and only one person can stay overnight.”

“B-but—”

“—His mother will stay with him,” she cut me off, still with that coaxing tone to her voice. “Besides, you have school tomorrow, Akira, and your grandmother is tired.”
“But I want to be here with him. I want to stay by his side. I have to be here when he wakes up.” I was determined to stay. I needed to be able to look at him and see that he was alive and safe.

My mother seemed to sense this, for she stood and came to my side, placing a hand on my head. “Honey, his condition is stable. He’s fine, so you don’t have to worry. He probably won’t wake up for a few days, and when he does, he’ll be very weak. He won’t have the strength to deal with much excitement. It’d be better if you went home, got some proper rest, and came back tomorrow after school.”

“Kay,” I sighed. “But… I don’t want him to be alone.”

“You can spend all of tomorrow evening with him,” she patiently assured. “I’m sure that his parents will take turns staying with him, so you don’t have to worry. He’ll be well taken care of.”

I nodded reluctantly, taking my friend’s hand and weaving my fingers between his.

We sat in relative silence, waiting for the rest of the Tachibana family to arrive. Only Midori-san finally came—nearly an hour after she said she would.

“Tsubasa, honey, you must have been terrified.” The company president rushed to her daughter, taking her into her arms. It was the first time I had ever seen Midori-san act like a real mother. “Time to go home, Sweetheart.” She then turned to my mother without casting a glance at her comatose son. “Thank you so much for looking after her, Carol-san. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

“Not at all,” Okaasan placed a hand on Midori-san’s shoulder in condolence. “If there’s anything else that we can do to help, don’t hesitate to ask. Akira can walk with Tsubasa to school, and she can come stay at our house until you get home at night.”

“You’re too kind, Carol-san. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.” She put a hand on her daughter’s back, escorting the small slip of a girl out into the hall.

“Would you like us to wait with Hajime until you get back?” I called after her.

The umber-eyed woman turned slowly and blinked once. “Come back?”

“You are staying the night with your son, aren’t you, Midori-san?” my mother inquired softly.

The corporate giant blinked twice. “I…had not planned on it. I was going to take Tsubasa home and see about getting someone to get the blood out of everything before it seeps in for good. I’m sure the doctors will call if he wakes up.”

“B-but…aren’t you worried about him? Don’t you think you should be with him?” I had
to bite my lip to keep from shouting at her. What was she thinking? Her only son was lying in a hospital bed, and she was more worried about his blood leaving stains.

“The doctor said that his condition was stable and that he won’t wake up for a couple of days. I’ll deal with my son when he’s conscious enough to be lectured.” She turned again to leave.

“Aren’t you even concerned? Your son tried to kill himself! Aren’t you even curious why?” I’d always thought that Hajime had been exaggerating—that his mother had shown her affection in some subtle way that he’d missed—but now I was beginning to believe that she really did have no feelings towards him at all.

“I know why he did it,” she stated with certainty. “I considered suicide many times when I was his age. He thought that he could escape. He did it because he’s weak.”

I shot up out of my seat and got ready to give her a piece of my mind.

“Akira, why don’t you stay here with Hajime tonight?” Mother cut me off before I could say anything disrespectful.

“Yeah,” I sighed, sitting back down.

I stayed at the hospital over the next few days. I went home to shower and change, but other than that, I stayed by his side until he awoke.

Tsubasa came after school every day, and she sat and chatted with me, occasionally doing homework, until visiting hours ended.

Midori-san sent servants to pick Tsubasa up. The busy company president couldn’t be bothered to come herself.

Tachibana’s AWOL father was, similarly, a no-show.

My family, however, came every day.

Grandma Ayame would sit for hours folding paper cranes. Even though her fingers were slightly stiff, she diligently folded on. She made cranes of all colors and sizes—the smallest being the size of my pinkie fingernail.

Mother would arrive shortly after school let out. She graded papers or read poetry to take her mind off things.

It was that Thursday when we were all sitting around, waiting like usual, trying to keep busy, when he woke up.

157 It is said that whoever folds a thousand paper cranes will have one wish granted. Cranes are regularly folded for
He inhaled deeply and slowly opened his eyes. He blinked a few times as he looked around without moving his head. Then, his eyes met mine, and he smiled. “Hn. An angel. I guess that makes this paradise?”

I burst into tears, throwing my arms around him. “Hajime! You’re still alive, you idiot. Thank God.” My body shook as I buried my face in his auburn hair.

“So I’m back in hell, then,” he sighed.

“Tachi, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I blubbered, going on and on. “Please, please tell me next time. Make me listen to you. Don’t ever let me push us apart again. I swear I’ll never abandon you again, so please tell me next time. Let me help you. Let me protect you. Please, please don’t ever leave me. I want you by my side. Please let me be close to you again. I’m so, so sorry. I know what I did was unforgivable, but please take me back. Let me make up for it for the rest of my life.”

“Aki, you sound like you belong in a manga,” he chuckled as he put a hand on my back.

“Slow down and breathe before you start hyperventilating.”

“B-but… I… you… what I did… what you tried to do…” I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to swear I would protect him from his family, to tell him that everything would be okay, and to apologize for everything I had done.

I wanted him to smile and say “Okay. All better now.” I wanted things to be simple, but I knew he wouldn’t forgive me automatically. I’d broken something—a one-of-a-kind item—that could never go back to the way it was before.

I also knew that my friend wouldn’t magically get un-depressed just because his first suicide attempt had failed. He was a time bomb, and I didn’t know how to defuse him. I didn’t even know how much time I had left. Nothing had been solved, and I could still lose him.

“How long have I been here?” He slowly pulled himself up to a seated position, stretching his stiff muscles.

“Few days. It’s Thursday now.” I gulped, just waiting for him to bring down the ax. He was going to tell me he still hated my guts. He was going to say that we’d never be friends again.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since Monday night.” I looked down, unable to meet his gaze. “I was going to go over to your house and apologize when Tsubasa called us. I’ve been here pretty much ever since then. I didn’t want to leave you alone.”
“Thank you.” He smiled softly before a serious look took over his face. “But…you know that I don’t forgive you, right? I don’t care if you were worried about me; you were a total jerk, yelling at me, making assumptions, and not allowing me to explain.”

“I…I understand that now,” I mumbled, staring at the floor. “I was wrong, and I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“I may not forgive you, but…I’ll let you be my best friend again. You’re pretty good at sucking up, so I may forgive you in time.” He showed me a miniscule grin.

“Thank you,” I cried, hugging him again. “I’d be honored to be your friend. I swear I’ll do a better job this time.”

“You can start by kissing my arm better. It hurts.” He held out his bandaged arm to me.

I released my hold on him, taking his arm gently in my hands and bringing it to my lips. “All better?”

“Not quite.” He shook his head. “It’s not just physical pain that I’ve suffered. There was a lot of emotional pain, too. My heart hurts.”

I obediently pressed my lips to his collarbone. “Anything else hurt?”

He pointed to his forehead. “I suffered some wicked psychological pain.”

I kissed his forehead without complaint. “What else?”

“Well, my face kind of hurts. I got slapped around a lot.” He placed a finger on his left cheek.

I softly kissed his left cheek and then his right. “And?”

“My nose. There were a couple times that I got hit so hard that it bled.” He shivered at the memories of abuse.

I placed a small peck on the tip of his nose. “Where else did he hit you?”

“Here.” He touched his lips with a small chuckle. At least he was feeling well enough to tease.

I took a deep breath and pressed my lips to his.

At first, he was shocked, but he quickly gave in to me, kissing me back.

It was a short, relatively chaste kiss, but it left both of us blushing.

“Th-that last one was supposed to be a joke.” Hajime swallowed hard.

“You looked like you needed it,” I explained.

“Oh.” He blinked, mind still a little foggy.

“Ahem.” My mother cleared her throat to remind us of our audience.

Hajime turned and noticed the three women for the first time. “Oh. Hi…everyone.”
‘Kaasan smiled and came to his bedside. “Hello, Sweetheart.” She gently touched his face and smoothed his unkempt locks. “How are you feeling?”

“Little embarrassed at the moment.” My friend chuckled and blushed, leaning into her touch.

“I think we can all pretend that we didn’t see that,” she assured, kissing his forehead like she would mine when I was younger. “Are you okay?”

“Not sure yet.” He shrugged, basking in the attention. “I’m…happy to see you all again. Thank you for staying with me.”

“Honey, we all love you. Of course we’d stay by your side.” She patted him on the head once again for good measure before letting Grandma Ayame have a turn.

The frail yet spunky old woman lifted herself from her seat and, scowling, came over to the bed. “You’re an idiot. Do you know that?”

“Yes.” Hajime nodded.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack! Not enough to take your own life—you had to try and take this old woman and her fragile heart down with you. Is that it?” Grandmother’s tirade continued.

“I’m sorry.” Hajime cringed as her voice reached upper decibel levels. He looked like he expected to be hit, and he was taking her criticism lying down. It was obvious that Hajime’s will had been broken by all of the abuse. The old Hajime would have fought back, yelled, and defended himself.

The matriarch paused and sighed. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself? Aren’t you going to try to speak up for yourself?”

He blinked. “No.”

“What were you thinking, child?” She slowly placed her wrinkled hand on his head.

“There was no way out.” He looked down at his hands, ashamed.

“If you ever feel that way again, come to us,” she urged, scratching behind his ear. “There’s always a way out, and we’ll find it together next time. You’re not alone, understand?”

“Yes.” The corners of his mouth twitched, and he smiled slightly. “Thank you, Obaasan.” He looked as if he were about to cry tears of joy and relief.

Grandmother stepped back so that Tsubasa could stand by her brother’s side.

“Nii-chan,” the young woman whispered quietly as she approached.

“Tsu,” Hajime mumbled.

They had no idea how to convey all that they wanted to say.
“Sorry,” the elder sibling started.

“No, I understand,” Tsubasa assured. “I saw what happened—what they did to you. Your actions were justified. I know what you did had nothing to do with me, so I don’t feel betrayed or anything. You told me you loved me and wanted me to be happy, and I feel the same way for you. My only regret is that I couldn’t do more for you.”

“Tsubasa, you did all that you could,” her big brother tried to convince her.

“I know.” She started to cry softly. “I know this doesn’t have anything to do with what I did or didn’t do. It’s all Hideo-san’s fault. Mother’s at fault too. How could she be so cruel to her own son?”

“She doesn’t think of me as her son,” Hajime stated dejectedly. “I’m just her replacement.”

“Father is to blame as well,” Tsubasa continued her rant. “He abandoned us.”

“Yeah. He did.” Hajime exhaled heavily, his shoulders heaving with his sigh.

“But that’s how the world works.” She shrugged, easily accepting it.

“You’re awfully jaded for a twelve year-old,” the attentive big brother pouted. “I liked it better when you pretended to be Little Miss Sweet and Innocent for my sake.”

“I’m thirteen now,” Tsubasa announced softly. “It’s the eighteenth today. My birthday was two days ago, on Tuesday. We all forgot, what with the commotion.”

“Tsubasa, honey, I’m so sorry.” Hajime began to beg for forgiveness and promise to make up for it.

“Don’t worry about it.” She shrugged it off easily. “I’m happy that you’re alive.”

Just then the door was thrown open, and Midori-san and a very tall, hairy man of mixed ethnicity stormed into the room.

My mother must have told a nurse who then informed the family of Tachibana’s change in condition while Hajime and I were kissing and making up.

My friend grabbed my hand and held on tight upon seeing the new visitors. His palm had grown sweaty, and he was shaking. He was afraid.

That monstrous man standing in the doorway must have been Hideo-san.

I squeezed back to show my support.

“Get out!” Hajime shouted, trying to sound ferocious. His voice wavered slightly. “You’re not welcome here, so leave already.” He was like a kitten taking on a mountain lion.

In five strides the giant had crossed the room and backhanded Hajime before I could react. But, once I heard the sound of his hand on my best friend’s skin and saw Hajime crumple
in pain, I was on the other side of the bed, standing between Tachibana and his attacker.

“What do you think you’re doing?! He’s injured! Did no one ever teach you not to brutalize people when they’re hospitalized?! What’s the matter with you?!?” I couldn’t contain my anger.

“Who are you?” he menaced down at me.

“Kimura Akira. I’m the guy who’s going to protect him from you.” I glared right back at him. “You’ll never lay a finger on Hajime ever again.”

At this he laughed. “I’ll reprimand my stepson as I see fit, when I see fit, and I don’t see how you’re going to stop me.”

I almost punched him right then and there, but Tsubasa beat me to it.

She flung herself at him in a rage, kicking and screaming and biting. She scratched, pounded, kicked, and punched every part of him that she could reach, screaming, “I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll scratch your eyes out! I’ll nail your dick down to a table with an ice pick and slowly cut it off with a rusty saw, you bastard! I’ll kill you if you come near my brother again! I’ll poison your food! I’ll hit you over the head with a hammer! I’ll slit both of your wrists for good measure and watch you bleed to death, you ass-faced weasel!”

“Tsubasa,” I called, grabbing her wrists from behind and pulling her off of the very freaked out Hideo-san. “Calm down,” I whispered, pulling her up against me and holding her tight.

“I am calm! He hurt my brother! I’ll kill him now, so let me go,” she shouted, struggling.

The door opened again, and a handsome nurse in scrubs stared at the scene unfolding before him. He blinked and brushed a mahogany bang out of his eyes. He looked back down at his clipboard as if he hadn’t seen anything at all. “Um…I’m here to take some vitals and preform some simple tests on…Tachibana…” He pushed the rest of us aside and rushed to Hajime’s side. “Kiddo, what the hell are you doing here?!”

My friend held up his arm in explanation. “Sorry.”

“You should have called me.” All of a sudden the nurse was touching Hajime’s face and running his fingers through his hair. They looked like lovers.

I hated this guy. When had Hajime gotten so close to someone that he’d let them call him ‘Kiddo’?

“They took away my phone,” the umber-eyed boy offered excuses. “I wanted to talk to you, but…”

“Shh…it’s okay. As long as you’re safe now,” girly nurse boy whispered softly as he
fondled my best friend.

That was it. I didn’t have to take this. “I’m Kimura Akira, Hajime’s best friend. Who are you?” I wouldn’t stand for him encroaching on my territory.

“Oh. So, you’re the other Akira. Nice to finally meet you. You can call me senpai\textsuperscript{158} or aniki\textsuperscript{159}, if you want.”

I tried my hardest not to scowl at him. Just what did he mean I was the “other Akira”? Was he an Akira too, then? If that was the case, he should have called me the “first Akira” since I had been a part of Hajime’s life for the longest time.

“Masashi-kun?” Hideo-san looked at the nurse as if he were seeing the ghost of his wife come back to haunt him.

Masashi-san turned and gazed in horror at Hideo-san. “Yamada-san? What are you doing here?”

“No way.” Hajime shook his head, eyes wide in disbelief.

“Do you know this doctor, Hideo-san?” Midori-san looked curiously at her boyfriend.

“I…uh…” Hideo-san couldn’t think fast enough.

“My real name is Matsumoto Akira, though Yamada-san…Hideo-san knows me as Matsuo Masashi.” The nurse introduced himself. “Your boyfriend is one of my clients.” He produced two business cards from a pocket on the side of his scrubs. “Hideo-san comes and visits me every week…usually on Sundays and Thursdays.”

“And how do you know my son?!” Midori-san yelled once she had read both cards. “Hajime, are you sleeping with this prostitute as well?!”

“No. He’s Akira-san, the med student I told you about.” Hajime shrugged.

“Your son and I are just friends,” Akira-san informed the concerned mother—though she was probably only worried about her reputation if word got out.

The powerful woman turned and glared at her boyfriend. “We’ll talk about a suitable punishment later. For now, we’re going home. Have someone contact us when Hajime is ready to be released,” she tossed over her shoulder on her way out.

“What lovely people,” Akira-san snorted once they’d gone.

Hajime rested his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands as he began to sob. “I

\textsuperscript{158} Senpai is a title for older students, senior employees in a company, or anyone who has been a member of a school, group, club, or organization longer than you have. It can be used as an honorific with someone’s name or in place of the name.

\textsuperscript{159} Meaning “big brother”. It is an informal way of referring to an older male who is sometimes not related to you by blood. The female equivalent is “aneki”.

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can’t go back there. I just can’t. I’d rather die than spend another day with them. I won’t go back there. I’ll die first!”

“No,” I reprimanded, going into a panic over thoughts of losing him. I wrapped my arms around him and rubbed his back. “It’s going to be okay, Hajime. I won’t let them take you back. You can come live with us,” I offered before thinking. “Right, Mom? Grandmother?” I turned back to them with a pleading look.

“That’s right,” Mother quickly chimed in. “We have an extra futon, and there’s plenty of food.”

“It’s not very spacious, but there’s enough room for you too,” Grandma Ayame added with a solemn look on her face.

“See, Tachibana-kun,” Akira-san came over and ruffled my friend’s hair with a smile. “it’s going to be just fine.”

“Is it really okay?” He looked up at each of us with his tear-streaked face.

“I’ll talk to your mother about it,” Mom promised with a tender smile. “I’m sure she knows that nothing good will come of putting you back into an environment where you feel cornered. She has nothing to gain by driving her heir to suicide, so I believe she’ll allow us to look after you.”

“Thank you,” Hajime responded with a tiny, grateful smile. “Um…I think I’m going to rest now, if you guys want to go home. I’m really kind of wiped. Thanks again for staying with me.”

“Not a problem,” they all assured as they picked up their things and said their goodbyes.

“I’m gonna stay,” I informed my family.

“You don’t have to. You’ve been here a long time.” Hajime didn’t want me to feel obligated to stay even if he did want me by his side.

“I want to stay with you,” I assured him, taking my seat at his bedside.

I stayed with him all day Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, but Grandma Ayame insisted that I go to school come Monday, so she took my place at the hospital with him until school ended for the day.

As soon as school let out, I went home, got showered, and came to the hospital to stay the night.

On Tuesday, after they had done some tests and psychological evaluations, they released Hajime into our care.
I was nervous about bringing him home. I didn’t know how to act, and I was scared that he’d try something again. I didn’t know what to say to him or how to treat him. I didn’t know what he needed from me.

We had dinner when we got home, and afterwards we all watched a movie.

“Will you take a bath with me?” Hajime asked tentatively while the credits rolled.

“Of course,” I gladly obliged him.

We bathed in relative silence, neither sure what to talk about.

“This was stupid,” my bathing companion started awkwardly, gesturing to his right arm. “Even as I did it, I thought that it was stupid. It hurt a lot. I regretted it as soon as I put the knife to my wrist.”

“I’m glad that you regret it,” I replied softly. “I’m glad that you’re alive too.”

“Oh…I meant that I wish I would have chosen a different method.” He paused. “Jumping off that building would have been more efficient. Now, not only do I have to keep living, but I have to live with this stupid scar marring my beautiful body. If only I weren’t so vain and spiteful.”

“‘Spiteful?’” I echoed.

“I wanted you to be able to look at me in my casket and regret everything you did to me,” he replied in a small voice and looked away, ashamed.

“I do regret it,” I mumbled, my heart lurching. “If I could do it over again, Hajime…”

“Don’t get all depressed on me.” He tapped his heel against mine. “That’s my turf.”

“How can I not be depressed?” I sighed. “My best friend is a suicidal wreck, and I’m totally useless. There’s nothing I can do, and I’m just so sorry, Hajime.”

“Stop apologizing so much, Aki.” He snorted softly as he splashed me. “I heard you the first billion times you said it, and you saying sorry over and over isn’t going to make things better. I’ll let you know when I forgive you, so stop worrying about it. Right now, you should be focusing your efforts on fulfilling my every desire.”

“Oh.” I nodded, deciding to take it one day at a time. “And what do you want now, my Prince?”

“I want you to wash my back,” he decreed.

“Turn around, then,” I chuckled. It was good to know that he was still himself under all of those bruises. He just wanted to be touched and assured that he was loved and needed. When he had turned so that his back was to me, I draped my arms around his shoulders and hugged him from behind. “I love you, so don’t leave me, okay? I’ll do my best to make you want to stay, so
you try to want to live too.”

“Un,” he quietly agreed, enjoying the attention.

As I gently washed his back, careful of his collection of bruises, we sat in comfortable silence.

When I’d finished, he looked over his shoulder at me and frowned. “Do you really think I’m a wreck, Aki?”

“Have you taken a look at yourself lately?” I patted him lovingly on the head.

“I look pretty good considering what I’ve been through,” Hajime sighed, and then it occurred to him that he had never told me what had happened. “Uh…I’ve been meaning to tell you some things, but I just never found the chance to tell you properly. Some things…a lot happened, and I….,” He trailed off, trying to collect his thoughts.

“Let’s get ready for bed, and we can talk about it then,” I bought him a little time to think about what he wanted to say.

“Let’s sleep together,” he proposed once we were back in my room.

I blinked as my heart rate went erratic and my mouth went dry. “Uh…you want me to…”

“Are you an idiot?” He rolled his eyes and got into my bed. “I thought that we weren’t at that point in our relationship yet. Have things changed?”

“A little bit.” I shrugged, getting under the covers with him.

Ever since I had met Luna, I’d been thinking more and more about relationships and bodily functions, and, all of the sudden, having sex with my best friend didn’t seem so undesirable anymore. I wanted to try it, but I wasn’t willing to use him like I had before. It was wrong, making love to someone that you didn’t love, and Hajime was important to me. He was dear and precious, but, while my schoolboy crush still remained, I wasn’t in love with him.

He blinked. “What does that mean?”

“It means I may have entertained thoughts of doing it with someone, but have decided against it for the time being. So, you wanted to tell me about something?” I quickly changed the subject.

“Yeah,” he sighed, snuggling up to me under the covers. “Aki, my parents got separated, and my mother’s boyfriend Hideo-san moved in. He beat me. When you told me we weren’t friends anymore and told me to keep the hell away from you, I got kind of desperate. I was lonely, so I started looking for a boyfriend. I was hoping to find some Prince Charming to save me, take me away from all of it, and give my life meaning. I…did some things that I’m not proud of.” Tears started falling from his mahogany eyes. “The guys I went with weren’t always the
best, and...and...one of them...” His body shook as he struggled to find the words.

“I know,” I saved him the trouble. “Shh.” I wrapped my arms around him and rubbed my hand in circles on his back. “You don’t have to say it. Tsubasa told me everything when we got to the hospital.”

“I-I feel really dirty,” he hiccuped.

“Shh...you’re not.” I pulled him flat up against me, holding him tight. “You’re better than that. It’d take more than that to make you dirty, and even if you were, that wouldn’t change my opinion of you. I’ll never stop loving you, Tachi. You’re my precious friend, and nothing can change that.”

My noticeably smaller companion slipped his arms around my neck and buried his face in my chest. “You always say what I need to hear the most. The pain goes away when you hold me.”

“Then I’ll hold you for as long as you need it,” I pledged. He was my mess to clean up, and I would dutifully do and say whatever he needed until he was better. “Good night, Hajime.”

I went to school the next day, leaving Hajime with Grandma Ayame. I rushed home as soon as the last bell rang only to find my friend still curled up in my bed where I had left him. “Hey, did you get up at all today?”

“Not really,” he sighed, not bothering to sit up.

“Have you eaten?” I cast a glance at the untouched plate of food on my nightstand.

“Not really.” The little bump under my covers moved slightly. I went over and sat down on the bed next to him. “What did you do today, then?”

“Nothing really.” He inhaled deeply.

I pulled the covers back slightly to find that his eyes were puffy and red. “What’s the matter? Why were you crying?”

“It’s nothing.” He did his best to sink into the mattress.

“I’m going to tickle you until you tell me what’s wrong. You have until the count of three. One...”

He immediately started singing. “I guess I’m just feeling sorry for myself. It’s stupid, but I feel powerless...like I have no control. I know I’m safe here, but...I can only stay here for so long. I have to go back to school eventually, and then I have to go to college. After school I’ll have to start working for the company, and when Mother retires, I’ll take over. Being here doesn’t change that. That’s the future that’s waiting ahead of me, no matter what I do, so what’s
the point of getting better? There’s no meaning in eating or even getting out of bed.”

“Tachi, you don’t have to do what your family tells you,” I tried to give him a new perspective.

“They’d disown me. I don’t think my parents would think twice about it. They’re the kind of people who throw away things that have no use to them, so I really can’t see them wasting money on an heir that doesn’t intend to do his job. I already learned the hard way that I can’t make it on my own.” He sighed in pure frustration. “There’s no point in any of it.”

“If it depresses you so much, don’t think about the future,” I advised. “Just concentrate on the present; you know, deal with things a day at a time. Worry about today and tomorrow, but don’t look past the day after that, because you never know what’s going to happen. The world could end before you get the chance to take over that stupid company anyway.”

“I guess,” my ward mumbled.

“Now, how’s about we get you something to eat?” I smiled kindly at him and offered a hand up.

“There’s no point.” He shrugged.

“Hajime, you have to eat,” I snapped, finally losing my patience. “There’s no way I’m letting you starve yourself to death on my watch, are we clear? I’ll force feed you if I have to, but you’re going to eat, understand?”

This got a chuckle out of him as he sat up in bed. “I was going to say that since Carol-san is coming home soon to make dinner, there’s no point in eating now, but I’d kind of like to see you force feed me.”

“Oh.” I blushed. “Sorry.”

“S’okay.” At least he was smiling now. “Wanna read to me until dinner?”

“What do you want to hear?” I went over to my bookshelf and searched for something he’d like.

“Got anything in English? Your English voice is sexy, and I haven’t heard it in a while.” He was giving me trouble on purpose. This I knew, but it still made me blush.

“We could just speak in English if you want to hear my English voice,” I said, switching over to my other mother tongue.

“I’ve probably gotten rusty,” he sighed, coming to look at the bookshelf with me. “I haven’t spoken English in two months…well, besides in school, but that doesn’t count ‘cause it’s not really conversation.” He had to stand on tiptoes to look over my shoulder.

“You sound fine to me.” He was even starting to lose his Japanese accent.
“Why are you so damn tall?” he snorted. “You’ve gotten taller in the past few months, haven’t you?”

“Just a little.” I shrugged. “I’ve got my American genes to thank for that, I guess.” I was kind of sensitive about being a giant. I hated towering over everyone I met—it made people stare.

“Don’t worry about it.” He clapped me on the shoulder, sensing my acute anxiety. “Girls like tall guys.” He hesitated before adding, “I like tall guys.”

“Oh?” It sounded as if he were actually flirting with me. His tone was different from when he jokingly hit on me.

“Yeah.” He shrugged as if challenging me to make something of it. “Besides, you wouldn’t want to be short like me. It’s annoying.”

“You’re not that short. You’re average for a Japanese male,” I reported.

“Nothing about me is average,” he stated firmly. “Each and every aspect is spectacular and superior.” It was good to see that he hadn’t lost his vanity or ego.

I rolled my eyes with a slight chuckle. “Yes, Your Highness. Please forgive my insolence.”

“Wanna get a start on dinner before your mom comes home?” Hajime smiled slightly. “I feel bad just lying about your house and eating your food for free. I kind of want to help around the house with the…what’s that word? The word for stuff you have to do like dishes and cleaning and…sentaku?”

“Chores,” I informed him. “And sentaku is laundry.”

He repeated the words a few times each. “I wanna help out with chores.”

“We can start on dinner, then. I think we’re having curry tonight, so we can probably start peeling potatoes and cutting up the carrots and onions.” I was happy to see the guy excited about something.

“You’ll have to show me. I’ve never cooked before.” Hajime was brimming with enthusiasm.

We went downstairs to the kitchen, and I showed him how to properly wash and cut up the vegetables. I watched over him like a mother hen as he used the knife, wincing every time he came close to cutting himself.

“Here,” I finally intervened, putting my arms around him in order to correctly position his hands. “Hold it like this, and when the piece gets really small, flip it over and stand it up, or else you’re going to slice your fingers clean off.”
“Um…Aki?” my charge turned his head slightly to look back at me, but my face was too close, so we ended up bumping heads. “Sorry.” He quickly returned to facing forward. “Um…I’m left-handed, so…”

“Oh. Right.” I had had him cutting right-handed and holding the vegetables with his left. That made perfect sense for a righty like me, but it didn’t work out so well for my left-handed friend. “Well…then…do it how I showed you, but switch hands.”

“You’re going to have to let go of me first,” he informed nonchalantly. “Not that I mind, really. You’re nice and warm.”

“And what are you boys up to?” Grandma Ayame finally made her presence known. She looked at us with a skeptical eye. I couldn’t blame her; it really did look like I was coming on to my best friend.

“Akira was showing me how to cut up vegetables the right way.” Though, that thought didn’t seem to come to Hajime’s mind, or, if it did, he did a marvelous job of covering it up.

“Was he now?” She didn’t look like she believed him.

I quickly released my sous-chef. “Hajime’s never cooked before,” I tried to explain. “We’re making curry.”

“Then why do you look like you’ve just been caught doing something wrong?” She didn’t wait for an answer before going over to the living room area and taking a seat in front of the TV.

“Is it true that cutting up onions makes you cry?” my assistant turned to me and asked.

“Uh…some people get watery eyes.” I blinked, going back to my own task.

Mother came home shortly after we had finished with the vegetables, so we set the table and made the side dishes while she finished preparing the curry.

“Thanks for helping out boys. I appreciate it,” my mother expressed her gratitude as we all sat down at the table. “You did wonderfully for your first time cooking Ta—….may I call you ‘Hajime-kun’?”

My friend paused for a moment and bit his lip in thought. “Only…if I can call you ‘Kaasan’.”

Mother smiled gently and acquiesced. “I’d be honored if you called me ‘mom.’”

We chatted about how our days went over dinner as Grandma Ayame periodically scolded Hajime. “Eat more. You’re practically a skeleton. Your parents have so much money; why don’t they use some of it to feed you?” She kept putting more and more food on his plate even though he insisted with a smile that he couldn’t eat another bite.
The next day, Hajime was sitting downstairs with Grandma Ayame when I came home from school. They were watching TV and arguing about which character the heroine should end up with.

“Tadaima,” I called out to distract them.

“Okaerinasai.” My Grandmother glanced up at me in disinterest.

“Ojamashiteimasu.” Hajime greeted. It was the right thing to say because he technically was a guest who had been there before I, a resident, had come home, but it sounded wrong.

“You don’t have to keep saying that every time one of us comes home,” I told him as I set my stuff down.

“What would you like me to say?” He cocked his head cutely to the side.

“Welcome home’ would be fine.”

“Okaeri, Aki,” he amended. “So, are you going anywhere with Luna tonight?” He was trying to sound casual, but he failed miserably.

I bit my lip and went over to the fridge so that I wouldn’t have to face him. “Don’t say ‘I told you so’ or anything, but…Luna told me that she’s not really interested in me. We hadn’t been hanging out as much, and then you ended up in the hospital, and I haven’t really had time for much else.”

“So you’re not going on a date tonight?” You don’t have any plans?” Hajime came over to stand beside me as I pretended to rummage through the refrigerator.

“No. Do you have any plans tonight?” I doubted that he did, but he seemed to be getting at something. It was almost like he was hinting that I had forgotten some event or anniversary.

“Me?” He pointed to his nose and laughed bitterly. “No. It’s not like I have anybody.”

“Hey, it’s been a while since you’ve been out of the house, right?” He hadn’t gone out since coming home from the hospital.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Do you want to go out tonight? We could get dinner at Kyoto Station and walk around some, if you feel up to it. Would you want to?”

His eyelashes fluttered as he blinked rapidly. “Seriously? Are…are you really asking me? For real this time?”

“Yeah.” What was the big deal? We’d gone to Kyoto Station together hundreds of times.  

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160 Instead of being a family-centered holiday, Christmas is for spending time with friends and significant others. Christmas Eve is a big date night.

161 Instead of pointing to their chests like a westerner would, Japanese people point to their noses when referring to
Maybe it was because we hadn’t really hung out since Luna. Maybe he was afraid that I’d run off on him if she called. It’s not like I hadn’t done it before. “I promise I won’t ditch you for someone like Luna again.”

“Okay.” He smiled shyly, a light blush tinting his cheeks. “But if you hurt me again, I swear I’ll make you pay, Akira. We clear?”

“Perfectly clear.” It was obvious that I would not be living down my betrayal any time soon.

We ate at the *kaiten zushi* restaurant that we had gone to the night that we first met. We talked and laughed, and it was as if the last three months had never happened. We were as close as ever. Really the only thing that seemed to have changed was Hajime.

He was more mellow nowadays, more mature. He’d always been a bit of a kid in a young man’s body—always squirming, talking loudly, and making a fuss. This Hajime was more subdued and accommodating. Even though he’d meant well, he’d always been a bit of a selfish brat with a bad attitude. The man in front of me was calm and patient. Even though I regretted the abuse and neglect that he had suffered to become that way, I had to admit that I liked this Hajime even more.

Somehow I ended up paying for the meal, and then we went window shopping. I was persuaded to buy Hajime a CD, a knit cap, a new pair of earrings, and a copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in English.

Despite having grown up quite a bit in the past few months, my friend retained his ability to talk anyone into anything. I made a mental note that he was even more manipulative than before. He had cut childish tricks out of his arsenal and replaced them with mind control techniques. He was now able to convince me that it had been my idea to buy him whatever caught his eye.

In return for my Christmas gifts, I received a leather-bound copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. The stories were organized in chronological order and complete with historical notes at the end. It was quite impressive and probably costly. He must have bought it while I was searching for *Alice* for him.

On our way out of The Cube, the underground mall, we stumbled upon a photo booth, and Hajime insisted that we have some taken.
“To mark the occasion,” he said it like it was obvious, though I was a little in the dark as to what occasion we were marking.

We did various silly poses with a serious one mixed in here or there.

Right before the last shot, Hajime pointed up and smirked.

I looked. Mistletoe.

“Sorry. I couldn’t help myself,” my friend chuckled as he pulled back the curtain and stepped outside of the booth. “Was that too soon?”

I followed him out, blushing madly. “It’s fine. All in good fun, just…if you’re ever to kiss me again, one: make sure no one sees, and two: make sure there’s no photographic evidence. My grandmother would kill me if she knew that we’ve kissed.”

“I think she knows. You kissed me in front of her the other day at the hospital, remember?” He couldn’t stop giggling and grinning like a sap as we waited for the photos to print out.

I paled. “Shoot. I forgot about that.”

“It’s okay. She sees the way we act around each other. She knows what’s going on between us.”

That’s right. She saw the way we laughed and kidded. She knew it wasn’t serious—that we were just friends, just hormonal teenage guys. She knew that nothing was going on between us. “Yeah, you’re probably right. I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“Can I see your phone?” Asking was a mere formality—he took the phone without awaiting my answer. “There.” He returned it after putting one of the stickers onto the back.

“Hajime,” I scolded. He’d attached the photo of us kissing onto the back of my phone.

“Fine.” He rolled his eyes and stuck one of the normal photographs over it. “But we both know what’s underneath.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I smiled as he stuck the same two photos onto the back of his own cell, one on top of the other. “Time to go home, Tachi.”

He nodded, looping his arm through mine.

“People are going to stare if we walk around like this,” I reminded in case he’d forgotten.

“There are so many couples out tonight that no one’s going to notice two guys linking arms.” He then proceeded to haul me back home, the two of us walking arm in arm. Maybe he still had a bit of stubbornness left in him after all.

“Tadaima,” I greeted my family upon our return.

“Ojamashimasu,” Hajime announced as he put on his house slippers.
“He’s got a pretty little head, but there’s nothing inside of it.” Grandma Ayame rolled her eyes at my friend. “You say ‘tadaima’ when you come home.”

“W-what?” The object of my grandmother’s nagging blinked and cocked his head to the side.


“So what do you say when you come home?” Grandmother asked pointedly.

“Ta-tadaima,” the former punk whispered experimentally.

“Okaerinasai,” my family responded.

“How was your date?” Mother teased as we made our way into the kitchen.

“It was a lot of fun.” Hajime didn’t even bat an eye at my mother’s playful jest.

“Don’t tease, Mom,” I groaned, blushing up a storm.

“All right.” She rolled her eyes and laughed. “You boys want to help bake cookies for Santa? Then we’re going to put up the tree and stockings while they cool.”

“Just tell me what to do.” Hajime was eager to participate in my family’s holiday traditions.

I had forgotten that it was Christmas Eve. I’d had a lot on my mind lately, and the days had passed me by without my knowledge. No wonder Hajime had asked if I’d had plans with Luna, and no wonder there were so many couples out and about.

“Do you have any family Christmas traditions, Hajime-kun?” My mother made conversation while the two of them measured and mixed the ingredients.

“No, not really,” he shrugged. “I usually go on a date, and Tsubasa and I get stuff for each other, but our parents never do anything for Christmas. I’ve never had a Christmas tree before.”

“Never?!” To my mother, this was a sin. Americans sure loved their Christmas. She firmly insisted on her family traditions even now that I was grown up. It was that important to her. “Well, we’ll fix that. This year, we’re going to have the best Christmas ever.”

We made cookies together while Grandma Ayame put in one of Mom’s old American Christmas TV specials. It was in English, but after seeing the same programs year after year, Grandmother had already memorized the plots and equivalent Japanese dialogue.

While the cookies sat out cooling, waiting to be decorated, we put together our four foot tall fake tree. It was the gaudiest thing once we were done putting on lights, ornaments, garland, tinsel, and the star, but it made Mom and Hajime happy, so I didn’t complain about the glittering,
We hung stockings on the banister going up the stairs, and Mom taught Tachibana some traditional carols while they decorated cookies. He especially liked “The First Noel” and “Silent Night.”

Even though it was his turn to use the bed, Hajime slipped under the covers of the futon with me. “Is it okay if I sleep with you?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“I had a lot of fun today,” he whispered softly, nose a few inches away from mine. “Thank you.”

I shook my head and smiled. “You don’t have to thank me. I had fun too. Besides, I’m just glad that you’re feeling better. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Thanks.” It was quiet for a while. “Hey, Aki? Are you…still thinking about running off to America with Luna?”

I blinked. Oh. I guess I had said that before. “No,” I assured him. “Luna’s going back by herself since things aren’t going so well academically for her here. She’s American through and through, and she doesn’t really fit in here.” I sighed. “I don’t think I’d fit in well over there either. I’d be just as much out of my element. Despite speaking English and having relatives over there…I’m Japanese, and I belong here.”

“I’m sorry that things didn’t work out for you,” he offered his condolences.

“No you’re not.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Thank you for pretending to be sorry, but you never liked Luna, and you’re happy that I’m staying here with you. You don’t have to tell me white lies.”

He smirked. “Well, it would have been rude to say ‘So long and good riddance.’ to Luna, even though I am glad to have you all to myself.”

I rolled my eyes. “Go to sleep, Hajime, or Santa won’t come to leave us presents.”

“Hey, Akira?”

“Un?”

I suddenly found his lips brushing mine. “I forgive you,” he whispered.

His breath was warm on my face.

“I forgive you for your forgiveness.” It was all I could do to think to say that much. My mind had completely fogged over, and my thoughts had scampered off in a dozen different
He tasted sweet—like the snicker doodle cookies we had made for Santa.
My skin felt hot, and my stomach had become entangled in itself.
That had been a real kiss. There was no joking or teasing in it at all. We’d kissed.
“Oyasumi, Aki,” Tachibana wished me good night and inched a little closer. His body was so small, but it radiated warmth.
Chapter Nine: A Thousand Autumns (Chiaki)

As the year came to a close, Hajime’s condition slowly started to improve.

We had two weeks off of school for the New Year, so I was home to spend time with him. This might have had something to do with his rapid recovery.

He smiled more and laughed often. He also hung on me frequently. I’d be sitting on the couch, minding my own business, and he’d come up and lean his head on my shoulder or lay his head in my lap. It was like I’d adopted a giant cat.

I indulged him. I’d treated him horribly during the worst three months of his life, so I figured that spoiling him a little now wasn’t going to hurt. I went out of my way to touch him. I’d pat him on the head, rest a hand on his shoulder, or occasionally place my hand on the small of his back.

He’d been starved of physical attention for months, so I was paying him back slowly for the neglect he’d suffered.

I did small favors for him and went out of my way to make him comfortable and happy. For instance, the day after Christmas, I went to the Tachibana estate to get his guitar and some other belongings like CDs and accessories. I figured that he’d feel better if he had some of his own stuff to put into my room so that it would feel more like his space too.

“So…how is my son doing?” Midori-san watched over me awkwardly as I went through Hajime’s things. She sounded slightly concerned.

“He’s better.” I was uncomfortable talking with the resident witch. I still held a grudge because of the way she had treated my friend. “Though it seems that he’s trying to pretend that none of it ever happened. I don’t think he’s dealing with it properly, but then again, that’s not surprising because he is the self-proclaimed master of not dealing with things. I think he should see a therapist.”

“Perhaps.” She chewed absentmindedly on her lip. “Do you think he’d come back to us if given the choice, Akira-kun?”

“Sorry for speaking freely, but I don’t think Hajime’s ever going to come back to you. I don’t think I would let him go even if he said he would. He deserves to be with people who care about him.” I grabbed Hajime’s belongs and left before I could say anything else rude and unnecessary.

Hajime appreciated my efforts, though. He embraced his guitar like a long-lost friend and immediately set about tuning it. He sang for me as he played, and he sounded just as lovely as
ever. You could tell he was happy because his voice had resumed its songbird-like quality.

Things proceeded well as the last days of the old year trickled away.

Hajime regained his strength and appetite, and the bruises all faded away. His coloring looked good, and he ceased to be so sickly thin.

My friend smiled more naturally, burnt sienna eyes gleaming as he chatted excitedly and volunteered enthusiastically to help with chores. He did it with such energy that you’d never guess that he’d been loath to even get up just a week before.

He got out of bed every morning without me having to force him, and he helped Mom with breakfast. Afterwards, he did dishes and then joined Grandma Ayame on the couch to watch her programs. They’d bicker and debate until lunch, and once the meal was consumed, Hajime would come and bother me.

He’d force me to study for college entrance exams with him, and I wondered if my grandmother had put him up to it. He liked to pretend that he didn’t understand a thing so that I would tutor him. Truly, it was a good practice for me, but it was a little frustrating having to explain even the most basic concepts.

Life was simple and predictable, and I think that that stability was good for Hajime. We had a set pattern that was only broken by his occasional demands to be taken this place or that. I’d somehow end up paying for his food, movie tickets, entrance fees, and whatever trinkets caught his eye. However, every third time would be his treat, and he insisted on only the best for me. It wasn’t really abnormal; he’d always spent an outrageous amount of money on me, but somehow it seemed different than usual.

Our calm, relatively uneventful life was finally interrupted on New Year’s Eve. It was just after breakfast when Hajime was helping Mom clean up that it happened.

“Can you hand me that spatula, Okaa-chan?” Hajime was washing dishes while Mom dried.

The doorbell rang while their hands were both sudsy, and I had gone upstairs, so Grandma Ayame was left to get the door.

“I can get it, Obaa-chan.” Hajime quickly rinsed his hands and went to the door. “Don’t get up.”

Our new cook and dish boy froze when he opened the door and saw who was standing on the other side.

“Who’s there?” I called, coming down the stairs.
“W-what are you doing here?” The hair on the back of Hajime’s neck was standing up like a frightened cat’s.

“We’re here for a chat.” Midori-san entered and put on a pair of guest slippers before any of us could even react. “Ojamashimasu.” The corporate giant bowed and greeted my mother and grandmother, offering them some expensive gift as compensation for arriving without prior notice. “I apologize, Carol-san, but I was sure that Hajime would flee if he knew that we were coming.”

Haruka-san and Tsubasa filed in quietly after the head of household.

“I’ll make some tea,” Mother replied as worry lines appeared across her forehead.

We all sat around the dining room table, the Tachibana family on one side, and my family and Hajime on the other. I held his hand under the table, and Mother put a hand on his right shoulder.

“Hajime,” Midori-san began, “we want you to come home. You understand your place in this family, don’t you? The Tachibana line cannot continue without an heir, so we’ve come to take you back with us.”

“N-no,” he mumbled, gripping my hand tightly. “I want to stay here with the Kimuras.”

“You realize that you’re being a burden on them, don’t you, Hajime?” Haruka-san glared at his wayward son. “Midori and I have decided to keep our affairs out of the house so that it’ll be safe for you to come home. Stop being difficult and come back before you make an even bigger nuisance of yourself.”

“I-I’m not a nuisance.” Despite his wavering voice, he stated it firmly. “They want me here with them. They wouldn’t have taken me in if they didn’t want me. Right?” He looked uncertainly at the three of us.

“Midori-san, Tachibana-san, I assure you that Hajime is welcome to stay with us as long as he likes. It’s no trouble at all.” Mother smiled mildly, but I could tell that she wanted to shout that they’d never have him back.

“He’s quite helpful around the house, actually,” Grandma Ayame added.

“We deeply appreciate your hospitality, Carol-san, Kimura-san, but it must be something of a financial burden on you, and I know what a troublesome personality he has.” You could tell Midori-san was losing patience fast by the way the corner of her mouth twitched. “We really can’t bother you any longer. Besides, Hajime belongs with his family.”

“The Kimuras are my family.” Tachibana’s hands were shaking as he denounced the ones who had neglected him for so long. “There’s that old proverb, ‘Honor the one that raised you...”
over the one that bore you,’ or something like that, right? They’re the only ones that ever bothered with taking care of me. They’re more of a family to me than you’ve ever been.”

“Nonsense!” Haruka-san shouted. “Your lack of respect and filial piety knows no bounds.” He turned to his wife. “I thought you had some of that stubbornness beaten out of him.”

Midori-san bit her lip and glared at her son. “Hajime, you’re out of line, imposing on them like that.”

“I’m not imposing.”

I could feel his whole body trembling in fear of being rejected.

“They want me.”

“They do not!” Haruka-san insisted.

Finally my mother had had enough. “I assure you that your son is very much wanted here. He is just as much of a son to me as Akira, and I would be happy to formally adopt Hajime to prove it to you.”

“Fine.” Hajime’s father stood and turned to leave. “Let’s go, Midori.”

“B-but…” The president and CEO looked back and forth pointedly between her husband and her son.

“Forget him. It’s not like we need him.”

“B-but…” Midori-san reiterated.

“You should know better than most, Midori, that, while preferable, the heir doesn’t have to be male. We have another child.” He smiled sweetly at Tsubasa, and it was the creepiest thing I had ever seen.

“No.” Midori, who had been a failure as a mother up until that point, rose to her feet and fiercely defended her child. “Tsubasa has nothing to do with this, and I won’t accept that kind of life for her. She’s going to grow up having everything she wants. She’s going to study what she wants to study, get a job doing whatever she wants to do, and marry whomever she chooses to marry. My daughter will not suffer as I did, Haruka.”

“We have no choice...unless Hajime decides to come back,” the scheming father baited his son.

“That’s not fair.” I shot to my feet, standing a good half a foot taller than either of Hajime’s parents. “How dare you threaten his sister like that!? I’ve had it! I won’t let you manipulate him anymore.”

“It’s okay.” Tsubasa spoke up for the first time.

We all turned to look at her.
“I don’t mind becoming the Tachibana heir,” she confessed. “Truthfully, I find business very interesting. I think I’d do well as the next president and CEO.”

“Tsubasa…are you sure?” Hajime gazed in worry at his beloved sibling.

She nodded. “It’s an important job. I’d become necessary to them. All along, I’ve just wanted to be accepted and respected. Our grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even Father would have to acknowledge me as a part of the Tachibana family, if I were the heir. They’d have to listen to me, respect me, and do as I say. I’d have power.”

Haruka-san looked reluctant to actually name Tsubasa successor to the family business.

“I’m not your puppet, though.” She turned and looked her parents in the eye. “I will not be manipulated or pushed around. I’m not weak, and I will not be your pawn. If ever I am displeased with the situation, I will leave you heirless. Understand that I am the one in control—not you, Father, Mother.”

Tsubasa was normally very sweet and playful, so this side of her was quite unexpected—frightening even. Her voice was firm, and her stance was confident. The small girl had a very commanding presence, and I could see then that she would make a very good company executive.

“I have some terms to which you will agree. My brother will receive a monthly allowance to provide for room, board, school, and entertainment until he graduates from university and secures a stable form of employment. He will live comfortably without having to worry about money. He is not to be interfered with.

“In return for financial support, Nii-chan will serve as acting heir until I graduate from university and am old enough to take over the company, should something happen to Mother. This means that he will study business along with whatever else he chooses in university to prepare him to take over, should the need arise.

“As for myself, I will study hard to become a worthy heir for this company. I will refrain from causing scandals, but I will date whomever I desire. My personal life is not to be interfered with. Additionally, I will marry whomever I choose, when I so choose. I will not be pressured to marry or to have children.”

She paused and looked at all of us. “Is everyone happy?” She turned to her parents. “You have your heir, Nii-chan has both security and freedom, and I have a place in this family.” The calculating imp smiled in a self-satisfied way. “I’m a pretty good negotiator, don’t you think?”

“You’ll do better than I ever would have.” Hajime shrugged, going over to kiss his kid sister on the forehead. “You’re a steal as far as heirs go.”
“She’ll do,” Haruka-san grumbled, quite displeased that he was to be ordered around by a thirteen year-old girl.

“If you’re truly okay with this…” Midori-san was still unconvinced.

“I am,” Tsubasa stated confidently. “Let’s go home and leave the Kimuras in peace. We’ve troubled them enough by imposing like this.”

With heart-felt apologies, the three Tachibanas took their leave, and the house was suddenly silent.

As the door closed, there was a collective sigh.

Hajime crumpled to the floor, back to the wall and knees hugged to his chest. He took a big breath, sighed, and stared straight ahead, a blank look in his eyes.

We went over to him, Mom kneeling to his right side while I took a seat to his left. Grandma Ayame stood in front.

“You okay, Sweetheart?” Mother softly inquired, stroking his hair.

“I wonder,” he breathed. “I’m conflicted.”

“I know, Honey.” She hugged him gently, kissing his forehead. “It’s okay. Take your time.”

“We’re here for you,” Grandmother reminded him of our support.

I squeezed his hand.

His henna eyes looked to each of us. “Do…you really think of me as a part of your family?”

“Of course we do, you little punk,” the matriarch scoffed. “We wouldn’t say it, if we didn’t mean it. I doubt the Tachibanas will let us adopt you officially, but you’re a Kimura regardless.”

“Then I can stay here with you?”

“Of course, dear.” Mother laughed as she mussed his hair.

“Thank you.” The newest addition to our family smiled earnestly. “Um…if you don’t mind, I’m going to go lie down. I’ve got a lot to think about.”

Without further ado, Hajime was helped to his feet and sent upstairs to rest while Mom and Grandma Ayame finished the dishes.

I followed behind my new brother, making sure that his legs didn’t give out and cause him to fall down the stairs.

“So, how does it feel to be free?” I asked once we’d reached our room.

“Ironically, a lot like being trapped,” he laughed with a lopsided grin.
“How so?” It didn’t quite make sense.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to do things that were impossible before, like become a rock star and marry a foreigner, and now, I really could do those things.” The pitch of his voice rose as he became more and more enthused. “They’re not just impossible dreams anymore. I could actually do those things, if I worked hard.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I still didn’t see his point.

“Yeah.” He smiled softly. “But…it’s confusing too. I have a life. I have a future. Anything could happen to me from here on out, and I could do anything. I get to make choices and decisions. Nothing is set in stone anymore.”

“I don’t see what the matter is.” All the things he had said were positive in my opinion.

“It’s like I’ve been in a cage all this time.” He tried to make an analogy for me to follow. “I couldn’t come and go as I pleased, but everything I needed was provided for me. Now, it’s like my cage door has been opened, but I can’t decide if I’m brave enough to venture out or not.”

“I’ve read articles about animals choosing not to leave their cages. There’s not a conscious weighing of the risks against the possible gains, but the animal’s instincts tell it that it has everything it needs inside the cage, so it should probably stay.” I paused and then gave a straight-faced response just to give him a hard time. “Tachi, it’s okay to come outside of your cage. I promise that we’ll feed you.”

“You know what I’m getting at, Aki,” he groaned, rolling his eyes.

“You’re scared of the unknown?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged, implying that it couldn’t be helped.

“The Tachibana that I know and love is a lot braver than that.” I nudged him playfully. “I think the Handsome and Talented Tachibana-sama can handle becoming a rock star and marrying a foreigner. I have faith in him.”

“Can I marry you?” He gazed at me and batted his eyes sweetly.

“Of course not.” I put my palm to his forehead and gently pushed. “I’m your brother; that’s incest.”

“You know, incest is only bad if you plan on having kids. Since we’re both guys, we wouldn’t have to worry about it,” he cheerfully informed me.

“So you’re saying we’d only have to worry about both being guys?” I rolled my eyes. He was up to his old tricks again.

“It’s not such a big obstacle, really.” He smirked. “Two guys can have sex just fine. Here, I’ll show you.” He laughed, pushing me down onto the bed and straddling me.
“That’s okay.” I scampered out from underneath him. “Tsubasa explained how it works to me; I get it, so I don’t think a demonstration will be necessary.”

The dirty images coming to my mind were also unnecessary. I cursed myself for giving in to my hormones and fantasizing about my friend.

“Tsubasa explained it to you?” Hajime’s thoughts were clearly in other places. “She knows that she’s not allowed to read yaoi. That’s it. She’s grounded!”

As the young father sprung to his feet to fetch his phone so that he could lecture his sister, I sank down onto my bed and let out a self-pitying sigh. My pants were too tight, and there was nothing that I could do about it.

School started up again shortly after New Year’s, and Hajime said that he was feeling well enough to attend. He seemed normal, for the most part. He got tired a little easily, and some days he had a hard time getting out of bed, but most days were fine.

I was proud of him for adapting so quickly to his new way of life. Having a supportive family probably helped, but I thought that he had made a miraculous recovery. He’d gone from a suicidal wreck to an almost functional human being in a little less than a month. There were minor issues here and there, but Tachibana strived hard to achieve normalcy.

Things went back to more or less how they had been, except that he suddenly became serious about his studies. Hajime diligently completed all of his homework and took good notes during class.

When I asked what had brought about his change in attitude, he told me that he wanted to be able to get into the same university as me.

“I told you before that you should choose a school that you want to go to, Tachi.”

He shrugged and retorted: “You’re going to study business and try to get into Mother’s company, right?”

“Yeah?” I didn’t quite see what that had to do with anything.

“Well, I have to study business too, in case something happens to Mother before Tsubasa’s of age. It doesn’t matter to me what school I study at. I just want to be with you. Since we have the same area of study, anywhere you pick will have what I need, so anywhere is fine with me.”

“If you’re sure.” I knew not to argue with him further. Although more logical and accommodating than before, Hajime could be as stubborn as permanent marker. “I guess that means that I need to choose for certain, then. I think Grandmother has come to terms with the
fact that I’ll never get into Tokyo University, but I should still go to a well-known school. I mean, the school you go to practically determines where you get a job.”

“If you’re looking for a good school with connections to the Tachibana Empire, Keiyo would be the place to go. It’s my parents’ alma mater.”

“You mean Keio, in Tokyo?” Surely he wasn’t suggesting I try to get into such a prestigious university. It wasn’t far behind Todai in the rankings.

“No. Keiyo, in Kyoto. It’s about half an hour from here by train.” He held out his arm towards the west, fingers spread to indicate the direction. “It’s not hard to get into, but it has excellent academics. It’s not a big name school like some of the others, so not a lot of companies have heard of it, but that’s not an issue if you’re planning on entering my mother’s company. Now that I think about it, they have a pretty good music and theatre club. My mother did theatre there when she couldn’t dance anymore.”

“Would you want to go there with me, Tachi?” I offered.

He grinned and nodded. “Un!”

The final term of the year flew by as we studied for entrance exams.

Every evening after we came home from school, we’d sit down on the bed and study until dinner time. “Study dates,” Hajime called them. Most of the time was occupied memorizing passages of history books and cramming math formulas into our heads, but there was occasionally some fun had as well. We’d play footsies, throw rolled up scraps of paper at each other, make paper planes out of old practice tests, arm wrestle, and sometimes tackle and try to pin one another.

When we wrestled, I had the advantage of strength and size, but my opponent was slippery. He’d squirm his way out of my holds before I could finish the ten-count. It was also difficult to win because Hajime played dirty. He wasn’t above pinching, biting, and hair pulling, to name a few. He’d do anything he could to get the jump on me. This included tickling, kneeling in inappropriate places to make me drop in pain, or—on days when he felt like inflicting psychological damage rather than physical—applying gentle pressure between my legs with one of his own in order to make my knees go weak.

When I asked him to stop utilizing the last technique, he refused, saying, “No way. You’re bigger, so I have to do everything I can. Besides, I like that startled little ‘a!’ sound that

162 It is very impolite to point in Japan, so Japanese people indicate objects with their palms open, facing down.
you make when I do it.”

While also serving to make me increasingly sexually frustrated, our study dates accomplished their original goal. After two and a half months of panic attacks, nagging grandmothers, and ridiculous exams, we finally received notice of our acceptance into Keiyo University at the end of March.

Mom threw us a big party (truthfully, only Tsubasa, Luna, Shigeki, and the Shihoudani twins came, but we had no other friends, so that was about as big as it could have been) to celebrate. We ordered sushi platters from a local shop and bought the usual party foods—chips, fruit, veggies, and various snacks. We even got a cake from Lovely Futaba, the bakery around the corner.

After cleanup, we took turns in the bath and retired to our respective rooms.

“Hey, Aki?” Tachibana sat down on the bed beside me, biting his lip and trying to find a good place for his eyes to rest.

“Yeah?”

He was acting suspicious, fidgeting like I hadn’t seen him do in nearly half a year.

“Um…I was wondering…I mean, it’s okay if you want to commute from here because it’s not very far, but…” He bit his lip and rubbed his palms together nervously. “There are some apartments that are about a five minute walk from campus, and I was thinking that maybe…perhaps we could…you know…I mean, it’s fine if you don’t want to. I understand if you don’t think we’re ready to…but I was thinking…” He took a deep breath and looked me in the eye. “Akira, will you move in with me?”

“I’d love to.” I grinned, wondering why he had been so nervous about asking me.

“Really?” He seemed both thoroughly delighted and surprised.

“Sure. I think it’d be fun to have our own place—get out on our own. I’d have to ask Mom, but I’m pretty sure she’ll say yes.”

It took some convincing, but Mother finally gave in after Grandma Ayame argued that it’d teach us independence and responsibility. Though, actually, Grandmother’s points about teenage boys needing privacy and our new neighbors having to deal with the noise when we rough-housed instead of the two of them seemed to be more effective in persuading Carol Kimura. Despite her agreement to let us go, my mother assured us that she’d gladly take us back if it didn’t end up working out.

We moved in to our cozy little apartment shortly after graduation so that we could get settled before the term started. It was a snug, homely little space that came fully furnished. It
seemed like a steal to me, so that probably meant that there was a reason it had been so cheap. I refrained from asking and hoped that it wasn’t haunted.

The apartment was on the second story, so it had a miniscule balcony that was intended to be used for hanging clothes to dry. The floors were hardwood except for in the water closet and the bathroom. Those floors were made out of cork and tile respectively.

The front room was divided into the living room and dining and kitchen areas. In the living room, there was a black chenille couch, a black upright piano, a black plasma TV on a black, wooden stand, and small coffee table of a similar color. It was the bare minimum, but that was all that we really needed.

The kitchen and dining areas to the right were also stocked with only the necessities, but we had the required machines (all in black) and cooking utensils. The dining table and matching chairs were also wooden and similarly black.

The back room was the sleeping space, furnished with two dressers, two desks, and two beds. Guess what color the furniture was.

“Well, now I’m kind of glad that our bedspreads and sheets are black,” my new roommate commented as we looked around.

“Okay, Hajime, I have to ask: what happened to the people living here before we moved in? Surely we wouldn’t get such a good price on a fully-furnished apartment in such a choice area, unless something happened here or the previous owners met a bad end, right?” I found myself looking around for talismans\(^\text{163}\) hidden somewhere.

At this he just laughed. “My aunt Sonoko’s youngest daughters, the triplets, Emi, Misa, and Sae just graduated from Keiyo. Emi and Misa used to live here, but they’re getting married, so they don’t need the apartment anymore. Auntie Sonoko’s actually pretty fond of me, so we got a good deal on the place.”

“Thank God it’s something like that,” I sighed, taking the bed on the left side of the room for myself.

Classes started the first week of April, and by then we had more or less acclimated to our new environment. We’d found the supermarket, the Book Off,\(^\text{164}\) the Starbucks, and the local vending machines, so we considered ourselves all set.

I was feeling confident about my new lifestyle. I was an independent young man, ready

\(^{163}\) To ward off evil or malicious spirits.

\(^{164}\)
to start a life of my own. My first challenge would be to find all of my classes. My second
challenge was to find a girlfriend and get laid before Hajime drove me certifiably insane.

Step one was easy enough, but I knew step two would be a little harder because I didn’t
want to repeat Hajime’s mistakes. If I were to sleep with someone, I wanted it to be for love, not
just to satisfy the lust imposed upon me by my roommate. I wanted a long-term relationship.
Unfortunately, I had little to no experience with girls, so it was looking like I was going to be
single and celibate for a while still to come.

Anyway, classes were fine. Business was okay. It didn’t really fascinate me, but I found
the logic and strategy behind it interesting. International Business was really the only class that I
enjoyed, though, Statistics also proved to be entertaining.

The class was easy. The professor clearly outlined everything we would need to know on
the exam, so as long as you half paid attention and took good notes, you were fine. The thing that
made the class fun was Kurogane Toru.

Kurogane-senpai was a big guy—180 centimeters\textsuperscript{165} tall and built like a wrestler. Toru
seemed enormous even to me because even though I was a giant, I was skinny. He was imposing
with his large body, impassive face, and snow white hair.

He sat next to me in the back row and quietly doodled in his notebook throughout class.
He didn’t speak to me until the second week, but once he did, we really hit it off, however, our
first conversation started off in a rather dull fashion. The first thing that he said to me was:
“Have any white out?”

“Sure.” I dug it out of my pencil case and obediently handed it over.

“Thanks.” His voice was deep and rich. “Forgot my pencil today, so I had to use pen. I
made a mistake.” He held up his notebook and showed me an elaborate music score.

“Wow.” I gazed at all the little notes swirling about the page. “Do you play an
instrument?”

The white-haired giant nodded. “Piano. And drums. You?”

I shook my head. “No, but my roommate does. He’s going to be a rock star someday.”

“He in a band?” Toru’s speech was very simple. He didn’t waste time filling his
sentences with unnecessary details. I later learned that he was very shy and awkward around
people, but he loved working with numbers. He had a real head for math.

“No, but maybe he’d like to form one. I don’t think the thought’s ever crossed Hajime’s

\textsuperscript{164} A chain of used book stores that also sells manga, anime, video games, DVDs, and CDs for a good price.
mind, but I’m sure he’d be interested. He’d be really good, too. He sings and plays guitar and piano. Violin too, but I’m not sure that’d be needed in a band.” I paused when I realized I’d been rambling. “Sorry. I’m talking too much. Are you in a band…uh…?” I also realized that I didn’t know this guy’s name.

“Kurogane Toru. Second year. Accounting and Psychology major.” He smiled slightly. “You two get along very well, don’t you? Your name?”

“Kimura Akira. I’m a first year in the International Business program. It’s nice to meet you, Kurogane-senpai.” I bowed awkwardly from my seated position.

“Toru is fine,” he grunted. “Not in a band right now.”

“Maybe…would you like to meet Hajime? We live in an apartment about five minutes from here. We could go after class, and I could introduce you. Maybe you two could recruit some other members and start your own band.”

The way I saw it, if Tachibana and Toru-senpai formed a band together, Kurogane and I would have more opportunities outside of class to meet and talk. If that happened, we could possibly form a friendship. I was grateful to Hajime for making a network of friends for me back in middle school, but I wanted to try creating my own circle of friends now. My interpersonal skills were limited, and making friends on my own would allow me to broaden my horizons.

“I would like that.” The white-haired percussionist grinned slightly.

After classes were done for the day, Toru-senpai and I met up by the fountain and walked back to the apartment. We were greeted by sizzling sounds coming from the kitchen.

Hajime had taken to cooking ever since we’d moved in together. I got a hot breakfast every morning, a hand-made bentou for lunch, and a nutritious dinner when I came home from classes. Not bad for a guy who didn’t even know how to hold a knife properly four months ago.

“Tadaima!” I called to get the homemaker’s attention.

“Okaeri, Aki!” My roomie came rushing in from the kitchen.

“Ojamashimasu,” Toru-senpai mumbled as Hajime threw his arms around me.

“How was your day? Who’s your friend?” My best friend gazed curiously at our guest, but chose to keep his arms wrapped around my neck. “I’m Tachibana Hajime.”

“Kurogane Toru.”

“We have Statistics together, so we started talking today in class. Toru-senpai wants to

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Six feet.
know if you’d be interested in forming a band with him,” I explained, figuring it would be easier than drawing the information out of Kurogane. His slow way of speaking was not conducive to quickly conveying facts.

“A band?” I could see the wheels start turning in Hajime’s brain. “That would be awesome! I should have thought of that before. Whadda ya play, Toru?”

I winced slightly at the familiar way in which Tachibana addressed our senpai.

“Percussion,” Kurogane replied with a small smile, not seeming to mind in the slightest.

“I play guitar and piano.” Hajime finally released his hold on me. “We’ll need a bassist and another guitarist if we can find one. I really prefer to do vocals myself, but if you know someone else…” He suddenly trailed off. “I’m sorry. I’m being rude keeping you standing in the doorway like that. Please come in and have dinner with us.”

“Wouldn’t want to impose.” Toru seemed to shrink in awkward embarrassment.

“I’m not just being polite. I made extras for Aki’s bentou tomorrow, so there’s enough food. It won’t take very long to make another omelet, so don’t worry about it.” The chef of the house took my new friend by the arm and dragged him into the dining room. “You guys start eating while it’s hot. I’ll be back in a few.”

Toru-senpai and I took our seats and began to eat while Tachibana went back to the kitchen.

“Your boyfriend is very cute,” Toru chuckled, looking at the om raisu on my plate. It was decorated with a ketchup heart on top. “I can tell that you’re very much in love.”

Both my jaw and my fork dropped to the table. My mind went blank as my cheeks went red. “W-we’re not…he’s not my…we’re just…I don’t…”

“Akira, your face is all red.” Hajime walked into the room to find me flustered. “Do you have a fever?” He set down his plate and put his forehead to mine. “You’re a little warm. Want some medicine?”

“I’ll…be fine.” I blushed further, and then attempted to steer the conversation back to music.

Tachibana and Toru-senpai really hit it off. Besides music, they also shared an interest in the same TV programs and manga, so they chatted happily for hours. Well, Hajime did most of the talking, but you could tell that Kurogane was enjoying himself as well. He developed a

166 An omelet with rice inside that usually has ketchup on top that is sometimes poured in decorative shapes or
fondness for and protectiveness of Tachi like one would a puppy, and they became fast friends.

The next member of the band was found in autumn just after the new trimester started. I met him at the campus coffeehouse at which I had gotten a part-time job. It was just before my shift ended.

Uotani Kou had royal blue hair with sky blue highlights at the time. He especially stuck out because he was wearing big, dark shades and had a chain connecting the cuff on his cartilage to the hoop through his lip. His nose ring reflected the light from the ceiling into my eyes as he cocked his head from side to side while he puzzled over the notebook on the table in front of him.

All of a sudden, the walking metal-detector-agitator looked up at me and asked, “Hey, what rhymes with shinjite?”

“Lots of things.” I blinked, coming up blank.

“Like what?” The customer blinked back.

“Like…Hajime?” It was a stretch, but it was the only thing that I could come up with.

“It’s a nice name.” He wrote it down in the margin.

“It’s my roommate’s,” I added lamely, not sure if I should be talking to such a bizarre looking guy. “Are you writing a poem?”

“Lyrics.” Now he was pursing his lips and moving them from side to side. His nose twitched like a rabbit’s. “Not that anyone’s going to sing them.”

“You don’t sing?” I wasn’t sure if I should ask or not.

“Nah. I just play bass.” The misfit sighed, taking a gulp of the caramel macchiato I had made for him.

“Are you in a band at the moment? My roommate is recruiting bassists for his band right now.” I debated saying anything until the very moment before the words left my mouth.

His big silver eyes—probably contacts—lit up as he lowered his shades. “Seriously? Dude. I’d love to audition for him.”

“Well, I get off in five minutes. Our apartment’s not far, and the percussionist will probably be there too, so you can meet the both of them. I’m Kimura Akira, by the way. I’m a first year majoring in International Business. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Uotani Kou. Same year. I plan on becoming a music teacher, if I don’t make it as a

used to spell out words or phrases.
musician. Pleasure’s all mine.”

We chatted superficially along the way, and I found out that Uotani, like Hajime, preferred to be addressed by his last name only. “I mean, it sounds like ‘mouth,’ for Chris’ sake. What parents would give their child a name like that? If I ever find my biological parents, man-o-man are we going to have a talking.”

We arrived at the apartment before Uotani-san had the opportunity to sum up the talking he was planning on having, and Hajime met me at the door with a hug like usual.

My roommate had gotten progressively more and more physically affectionate with me over the months we had been living together, and it was getting to the point where I wanted to just push him down and ravish him.

I refrained from groping my friend in front of our guest as Hajime clung to me, standing on tiptoe to place a kiss on my nose and both cheeks. “Welcome home, Aki! Who’s your friend?”

I made the introductions and explained the situation as Tachi pushed us into the dining room and set plates down before us.

“Eat up while it’s warm,” Tachibana demanded, going back into the kitchen to fix a plate for himself.

“Wow.” Uotani started to drool as he gazed at the selection spread out before us.

Tonight we were having a five-course meal. Miso soup was the first dish, which was followed by an assortment of vegetables, including asparagus in miso paste, lightly grilled tomato in olive oil and a mix of spices, and seaweed salad with a vinaigrette dressing. There were shrimp gyouza for an appetizer, and the main course was a variety of sushi and sashimi.

For dessert, Hajime served homemade green tea ice cream.

“I wish I had your boyfriend,” The blue-haired bassist sighed longingly. “You know, if he were a chick. He’d make one sexy chick, too, if you don’t mind me saying. Is he a pro chef or something?”

“He’s not my…we’re not…”

“No need to be embarrassed, Akira-kun.” Toru-senpai smiled gently. “Hachi’s a steal.”

“But…” I tried to convince Toru for the nth time that Hajime and I were not a couple.

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167  The command form of the verb shinjiru, to believe.
168  While the word for ‘mouth’ is kuchi, the kanji can also be read as kou.
169  Chinese style dumplings usually containing some kind of meat or vegetables.
170  Toru’s nickname comes from Tachibana’s first name. Instead of calling him ‘Haji,’ he calls him ‘Hachi,’ which
“So, Uotani, after dinner, would you mind playing a bit for us?” Tachibana returned before I could satisfactorily make my case.

“Sure.” Blue Boy easily agreed, eager to show his stuff. “So…what other instruments do you guys have so far?”

“Guitar and drums,” Toru announced. “Hachi sings.”

“You do?” Uotani looked hopefully at my live-in chef. “Do you think you could take a look at some of my songs to see if they’re any good?”

“Yeah. You got some with you?” Hajime would take any opportunity he got to sing.

After looking over a couple pieces and asking about key signature and some other musical jargon that I didn’t understand, Tachibana started to sing a love song entitled “Until the End of the World.”

When Tachi was finished, Uotani got down on one knee and asked: “Will you marry me? That was beautiful. I never thought my songs would ever be sung, but you brought them to life. The way you sang, it was like you reached into my soul and saw exactly how I was feeling when I wrote it. You’re magnificent, and that voice—oh God! Please, won’t you be mine?”

Hajime chuckled as his cheeks turned a slight rosy tint. “Thank you very much for your kind words. I’m flattered, but…”

“Hachi belongs to Akira-kun.” Toru grinned, patting my roommate on the head like a pet.

And so we obtained a bassist and lyricist, and the myth that there was something going on between the inhabitants of apartment 221b proliferated.

On a side note, it later came to light that Uotani had a voice fetish, and I was informed that I should keep a close eye on my “boyfriend,” or he might be taken from me.

We found our second guitarist in the spring of our second year of college.

Shirogane Shouta, a first year student in the International Business department, had a knack for getting lost. Somehow the pipsqueak always ended up at the coffeehouse asking for directions.

One day, we started talking after my shift, and it just happened to come up that he played the guitar, so I took him back to the apartment to introduce him to the gang.

“Aki!” Tachibana came running at the sound of my voice.

I received my welcome-home hug and, as an added bonus, a peck on the lips.

is easier to say, especially if combined with the ‘chan’ honorific.
Seeing this, Shouta-kun’s chestnut brown hair stood straight up, and his hands balled into fists. “Just what is the relationship between you and Akira-senpai?”

Hajime smirked and hooked his leg around my hip. “Guess.”

“Hajime!” I hissed, growing increasingly uncomfortable as my pants tightened.

“Yes, Honey?” The playboy blinked innocently up at me as he squeezed me harder.

“I can’t believe you’re gay!” My underclassman wailed. “Senpai was my hero! I wanted to be just like him, and now I find out that he’s sleeping with…THIS!”

At this, Toru and Uotani came out from the dining room, Toru with an enormous scowl on his face.

The giant effortlessly lifted Shouta-kun off of the ground as he glared menacingly. “Hachi is a wonderful person. Akira-kun and Hachi are deeply in love. You will not insult them.”

“Oh, Toru-senpai, he looks like he’s going to pass out,” Uotani observed. “Maybe you should set him down.”

“He will eat with us and then apologize to Hachi.” Toru set Shouta-kun down so that he could reposition the much smaller boy under his arm. The very frightened Shirogane-kun was then carried into the dining room.

“I should go make some more food.” Tachi sighed, untangling his limbs from my own.

“Un,” I grunted, feeling a little light-headed.

Despite whatever homophobic views he had held before, Shirogane-kun was singing a different tune after he’d eaten Hajime’s cooking. “Wow. I can see why you fell in love with him, Akira-senpai. This food is good enough to make any man turn. Maybe he’s good enough for Senpai after all.”

“There’s been a mistake.” I tried once again to clear up the misunderstanding. “Hajime and I aren’t…he’s not my—”

“Kimura-kun, we all know.” Uotani rolled his eyes and took another bowl-full of rice. “There’s no use in trying to deny it. We see the way that you and Hana-chan look at each other. Even if what you say is true, and you’re not dating yet, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re in love with each other—even if you haven’t realized it yourself yet.”

I sighed, giving up. Truthfully, it was less embarrassing to let them think I was in love.

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171 Uotani’s nickname for Hajime comes from his last name. When combined with some words, the pronunciation of “hana,” the word for flower, changes to “bana.” While Tachibana’s name does not contain this kanji, that is the origin of the nickname.
with Hajime than to explain that the way I looked at him was the result of his teasing making me so horny that I’d become desperate enough to do almost anyone.

Shouta-kun auditioned after dinner and was welcomed warmly into the fold. And so Prince of Punks was born. It was amusing to hear them try to pronounce their band name. It came out sounding a lot like “purinsu obu pankusu.” After some coaching from Hajime and myself, it got a little better, but, in the end, it was decided that Hajime would be the one to announce the band title whenever necessary.

They softly practiced a little after the dishes had been done and the leftovers put away, and they sounded really good together. They talked about a practice schedule and space, and they all headed home around eight o’clock.

“I thought they’d never leave.” Tachibana sighed after the door was shut behind our guests.

“Why?” I turned slightly towards my best friend and was surprised when I received a mouthful of his.

My brain overloaded, and my circuits fried as he kissed me. My skin lit on fire wherever he caressed.

We fell to the floor in a jumble of limbs, and it felt like my heart would explode, it was beating so fast.

Only when clothes started coming off did my brain click back on, and I pulled back, breathing hard. “Hajime, wait.”

“We’ve waited a year and a half. I don’t think I can wait any longer,” he whispered huskily, nibbling at my neck.

“Tachi, we shouldn’t be doing this.” It was hard to think logically when my body was on fire like that.

“Why not? Aki, I know how you feel about me.” His hand gently stroked my thigh. “I can feel how hard you get when I touch you. I feel the same way.”

“Hajime, I’m not quite sure what it is that I’m feeling,” I confessed. “The truth is, when I do make love to someone, I want to be sure it’s not just lust. I want it to be for love.” This was incredibly hard for me to say as my body throbbed in pain. I wanted to throw away my idealistic views and just sleep with him. “I wanna make sure it’s really love and not just hormones.”

“That’s really sweet.” He bit his lip and tried to slow down his breathing.

“I don’t want to mess up our friendship, either, Tachi. I don’t want to hurt you. You’re the only close friend that I have, and I want us to be together forever. I don’t want us to start
something like this only to realize it was a mistake later. Your friendship is more important than anything to me.”

“I get it,” he sighed, dismounting and lying down on the cool floor beside me. “If I weren’t so horny at the moment, I’d think that that was the sweetest thing ever, but now I’m just frustrated that I’m not getting any. I mean, I’m glad that I’m so important to you that you’d drive us both up the wall just to make sure that our friendship remained intact…. But…Aki, I have needs, and they’re not being met. I need someone to touch me. Snuggling and hugging and sleeping in the same bed like we do is great, but…I need other kinds of affection too.”

“Tachi, don’t get me wrong, I think you’re magnificent, but I don’t think I’d be comfortable…you know… I mean, I’ve thought about it a lot, but…after that time behind the Home Ec building when you taught me to kiss, I decided that I’d never use you again. I don’t want either of us getting hurt. I think it’s best if we just stick to the hugging and snuggling and sleeping. Maybe…if you need more…you could find someone who could serve your needs.”

“You want me to sleep with other guys?” He sounded hurt.

“NO,” I stated firmly. “Absolutely not. I forbid you to sleep with strange men. That was not what I meant at all. Look, from what I understand of it, you want to make out and…be orally stimulated, right?”

“It’s called a blowjob, Aki.” He chuckled as I blushed. “Yeah. That’s what I want.”

“Then…I think it’d be okay if you found some people that you could do those kinds of things with. Just…be careful. Make sure someone knows where you are and who you’re with at all times.” I grabbed his hand and squeezed gently. “I’d hate myself if something happened to you.”

“It wouldn’t be your fault.” He squeezed back.

“Yes it would,” I sighed. “You wouldn’t have to go make out with strangers if I were man enough to—”

“—Hush.” My friend rolled over, back on top of me. “Akira, you’re a gentleman. I get what you’re saying, and I appreciate it. I understand, so it’s fine. Maybe one day our relationship will get to that point. Until then, it’s my own fault for having such an overactive libido. I’ll deal with it, but you don’t have to worry. Yours is the bed that I’ll always come crawling back to.”

Then he changed subjects. “So. How are you going to deal with celibacy? I really wouldn’t mind helping you out, you know.” His lips lightly brushed the skin at the top of my pants.

“T-t-that won’t be ne-necessary.” I stuttered.
“Okay. Roll over onto your stomach. No tricks, I promise.”

I did as he said and nearly melted into the wood of the floor when he started giving me a massage. He’d gotten good. “Where’d you learn how to do that?” I sighed happily as all of the tension flowed out of my body.

“Akira-san taught me.” There was a blush in his voice as he confessed. “He says that it helps his clients relax.”

The way he said it, it was unclear whether this was a therapeutic technique used at the hospital or a form of foreplay he used with his former clients. Whichever it was, it did its job. When Hajime was finished with me, I was calm, clearheaded, and very much satisfied.

And so a compromise was reached. Hajime went out with his band to pick up make out partners whenever he was feeling antsy, and I received heavenly backrubs whenever I asked for the small fee of one kiss each time.

Things worked out well for the most part until that fall. Toru-senpai always went with Hajime, so I could be sure of my friend’s safety.

Uotani went most of the time when there was drinking involved so that there’d be an extra set of eyes on Tachibana. Sometimes he got lucky, and Hajime picked him to be his companion. The green-haired bassist with a voice fetish gladly set aside his sense of social mores and went with it when Hajime sang for him and pleaded.

Shouta-kun had fallen (metaphorically) for Hajime, looking upon the older boy as his mentor and role model, so he went along sometimes to hang out and conscientiously object to Tachi’s homosexual activities.

I never went with them on nights that Hajime was on the prowl. I couldn’t stand seeing him go off with someone he’d never met before. I found something to dislike intensely about every guy or girl he picked. None of them deserved my best friend. They were all there for the same thing—hook ups. Hajime was better than that. He deserved someone permanent—someone who didn’t just look upon him as a sex object.

Another thing that turned me off to the idea of my roommate going with strange people was the fact that he drank when he did it. Hajime was a social drinker. He told me that it was hard to get intimate with someone he’d never met, so he drank a little whenever he went out to hunt for a partner.

I was opposed to this. He was only nineteen at the time, and I did not condone his behavior. I told him straight out that he was not allowed to sleep in my bed on any night that he reeked of alcohol. That kept him pretty sober.
There were a few nights when he came home tipsy, accompanied by his caring entourage, and there were fewer times still that he came home completely sloshed. On those nights, Toru carried him home. We bathed him and made sure that he didn’t have alcohol poisoning before we put him in bed.

It was on one of those nights that Hajime met Mizuno Ritsu, though my best friend was so drunk that he probably doesn’t remember.

About a week after one of Tachi’s drunken outings, I came home to find him lying on the kitchen floor with another man on top of him. I blinked once, and headed for the front door. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“Hold up!” Tachibana called after me, wriggling out from under his companion and coming over to give me my welcome-home hug and kisses on the cheeks and nose. “You’re not interrupting anything. Ritsu tripped and knocked me over. Welcome home, Aki. I’m sorry that dinner’s not ready yet. I thought that I had enough miso paste, but it turns out I don’t. Do you mind hanging out with Ritsu while I run to the store? It’ll only be fifteen minutes. Thanks.”

My roommate was gone before I could say anything, and I was left to socialize with a perfect stranger. “So…” I took a seat on the couch. “I’m Kimura Akira, a second year International Business major. How did you meet Hajime?”

“Mizuno Ritsu. I’m a second year studying Law.” Mizuno was a very plain looking guy about Hajime’s height. His hair was black along with his eyes, and there wasn’t anything really to set him apart from anyone else. He definitely wasn’t Hajime’s usual type. “Tachibana and I met last week at a karaoke club. I knew that we were made for each other when I heard him sing. Our eyes met, and it was love at first sight. He came and talked to me afterwards, and we stole away to a dark corner of the restaurant. We would have made love if not for Tachibana’s giant, white-haired friend.

“He came and said, ‘Hachi, what did I say about seducing when drunk?’

“And then Tachibana responded, ‘No seducing?’ and left with his friend.”

Here Mizuno-san took a deep breath and continued his impassioned speech. “I thought I’d never see the love of my life again, but a few days afterwards, we saw each other at a bookstore. He didn’t remember me, but I am determined to stay by his side until he can think of me as his lover again. I won’t lose to you, Kimura-san. Obviously you’re having relationship issues, or else Tachibana wouldn’t have been at that club anyway. I’ll steal him away from you.”

I blinked, biting my lip to try to keep it in, but I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Mizuno-san, I’m very sorry, but there’s been a misunderstanding. Hajime and I aren’t a couple. We’re just
friends, so there’s no need to get worked up about it. If you want to date Hajime, just tell him.”

The odd and overly passionate houseguest just blinked at me. “Really?”

“I think I’d know if I were dating someone,” I chuckled. At least, that was what I’d thought at the time.

“Oh.” Mizuno took a seat on the couch beside me. “Well then, how do I go about winning Tachibana’s heart?”

“I’m not quite sure.” Hajime liked tall guys with pretty faces, but it was a little too late for that. “He likes it when you touch him and compliment him. It’s best to fawn over him every chance you get. He’s a dog person, and he prefers sleeping on the right side of the bed. He likes snuggling, and his feet are never cold. I know that he likes it when you speak to him in English. He also likes being bossed around and controlled when he’s drunk, but not so much when he’s sober. I’m sorry. Is any of that helpful?”

“Are you sure you’re not dating him?” Mizuno-san scowled in suspicion.

“No. We’ve been friends for years, so I just know some stuff about him. We confide in each other, so we kind of know everything about each other.” I was glad when the lock on the door clicked open and Hajime returned.

“Dinner will be ready in a few.” Tachi flew through the door, throwing the announcement over his shoulder as he rushed into the kitchen.

After a very awkward dinner, we retired to the couch to watch some TV. It felt like I was crashing a date. Mizuno had made small talk all through the meal, trying to find out about Hajime’s hobbies, likes, and interests. All the while, Tachi had remained oblivious to the homely boy’s attentions, preferring instead to flirt playfully with me.

As we sat on the couch, my roommate rested his head on my shoulder like usual, moving my arm so that it was around him and in a more comfortable position for me.

Mizuno sighed, discouraged.

We watched a police detective drama, and during one of the commercials, there was an advertisement for baby products.

“I want a baby,” Tachibana sighed, nuzzling my neck. “Aki, get me pregnant. I wanna be a mommy.”

“You can adopt when you’re older and in a committed relationship.” I squeezed his arm, figuring that he was probably feeling lonely. Hajime had always wanted a loving family, and while my own family had taken him in and made his life considerably more fulfilling, I knew deep down that Hajime wanted someone related to him by blood or bound to him forever by
“Aren’t we in a committed relationship?” He began to pout, sticking his lip out slightly.
“You know what I mean. When you have a ring on your finger,” I further explained.
“So we can have a baby when you buy me a promise ring?” he teased.
I rolled my eyes. “Sure.”
“Get me one for my birthday then.” The little menace snuggled closer to me, grinning happily.
“I should go home.” Mizuno’s voice reminded us that we had an audience.
“I’ll walk you. It’s far, right?” Hajime reluctantly slipped out of my arms and stood to go with his new friend.
“I’ll come too.” I went to get our jackets. “If it’s far, I don’t want you walking back by yourself, Hajime. Knowing you, you’ll manage to find trouble.”
“Will not,” my friend snorted, but didn’t protest further.
We walked a disheartened Mizuno Ritsu home, said our goodbyes, and then turned and headed for our apartment. On our way back, a little shop on the corner caught Hajime’s eye.
He was across the street without a word before I could warn him to look both ways.
“Warn me next time we’re going to make a detour.” I sighed as I followed him into the pet shop.
“Sorry. I just—” He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw a Shiba Inu puppy peeking out of her cage at him. He went straight to her, kneeling down in front of the cage to stick his fingers through the bars and pet her soft fur. “Isn’t she gorgeous, Aki? I love her.”
It was then that I noticed that something was wrong. He was really, truly happy playing with that dog. I hadn’t seen him that happy in a while. He had always put on a smile, but I realized then that it had been a Band-Aid slapped over a wound. Why hadn’t I noticed it before? Even though things had been going pretty well, Hajime hadn’t been truly happy in months.
“Her eyes kind of look like Antoinette’s.” My roommate continued fawning over the little red pup. “You remember Antoinette, don’t you?”
“Yeah,” I mumbled. Hajime’s golden retriever had died just before the end of middle school. He’d been depressed for two months.
Hajime scratched behind the dog’s ears as I pondered the cause of my friend’s recent slump. “We should get a dog. I know that it’s too soon to think about adopting kids, but we could get a dog, couldn’t we? Kind of like practice for when we’re parents?”
He looked back at me, and it became obvious to him that I hadn’t been paying attention.
He stood and came over to me, putting his arms around my neck. “Hey. Let’s get a dog.”

I blinked. “Hajime…that’s a little…dogs live a long time. Do you really think that we’ll still be living together in fifteen years?”

His face fell, and his lips began to quiver as he blinked back the tears that were building in the corners of his eyes. He turned away and went back to the dog. “I thought that you and I…you said that you wanted to be with me forever, so…I understand that a dog is a big commitment in a relationship, but I thought…” He started crying and switched over to English to afford us some privacy from the ears of the shopkeeper who was now staring. “I’m sorry. I feel like I’m PMSing. I mean, what’s wrong with me today? “I want a baby,” “I want a puppy.” I sound like I’m trying to force you to commit to me. I sound desperate.” He sniffled, resting his head against the bars of the cage. “No wonder you look scared. God, I’m so f-ing lame. I swear I’m not trying to pressure you…. I…thought sometimes that maybe I was just a fling. Don’t worry. I’m used to it. No one’s ever wanted me forever. Why would you be any different? I’m disposable.”

“Shh.” I put a hand on his head and reached down to pull him up off of the floor. “I’m sorry, Hajime. Whatever I did to upset you, I take it back.” I pulled him into my arms and placed a kiss on his forehead. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is ever permanent,” he whispered into my neck. “Every time I think that I have something, someone else takes it away from me, it dies, or it breaks. I’ll always be alone.”

“You’re not alone,” I insisted, holding him tighter. “You have me. You have Mom and Grandma Ayame. You have Tsubasa. Hajime, you have Uotani, Toru-senpai, and Shouta-kun. We all love you, so you’re not alone, Tachi. Please don’t cry.”

“Let’s just go home,” he sniffled, drying his eyes.

I wasn’t sure if I’d helped or not. I’d be more attentive around him. I’d find out why he was unhappy, and I’d do what I could to fix it.

It started to rain on the way home, and we were without umbrellas. Even though we made a mad dash back to the apartment, we both got soaked by the pounding, icy rain.

“Take your clothes off,” I instructed as soon as the door was closed behind us.

“W-why?” I wasn’t sure if his voice were shaking from embarrassment or the cold.

“You’ll catch a cold if you keep them on,” I informed him. “The best thing that we can do is take a warm shower, towel off, and put on some dry clothes.”

“Un,” Hajime agreed, stripping on the way to the bathroom. “Wanna go first, or should we just do it at the same time?”
“Let’s just shower together.” I shrugged, tossing off my clothes and following him in.

“So…you’re unhappy, aren’t you?” I asked him straight out in English while we soaked in the tub.

“Not exactly unhappy.” His henna eyes avoided mine. “I’m just…insecure lately.”

“What? What about?”

He pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them. “About us. You seem distant…and reluctant to touch me. Am I doing something wrong? Is it me?”

“No!” I replied vehemently. “No, Tachi. You’re wonderful as always. I really appreciate everything you do for me—the food, the laundry, the dishes, the cleaning. You do everything well—in fact, you probably do too much for me. I’m the one doing something wrong. I should help you out more around the house.”

He smiled, pleased with my compliments. “I don’t really mind if it’s for you. It’s kind of fun playing *oyomesan*.” He paused, and his expression turned grave. “Well, if it’s not me, then…is it because there’s someone that you’re interested in?”

“I’m not really interested in anyone at the moment. I’m busy with work and school and friends.” I bit my lip and thought back over my interactions with Hajime the past few months. “I guess I have been a little more distant. We haven’t really been hanging out just the two of us lately. I’ll try to be more observant and not take you for granted. Sorry, Hajime. I’ll try to be a better friend. How about we pick a day for just the two of us to hang out every week? We could go do something, or just stay home and watch a movie. How does that sound? Would that make you feel a little better?”

“Yeah.” He grinned, flicking water droplets at me. “I’ve decided to take back Saturdays.”

“Then they’re yours.” His smile looked much more natural.

My bathmate knocked his knee against mine and chuckled. “Thanks for being so accommodating, Aki.”

“It’s no trouble, you know.” He made it seem like he was being a bother. “I like spending time with you, and I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” he assured me, reddish-brown eyes twinkling. “You make me happy.”

“You make me happy too.” I blushed, feeling a little sappy. “I’m glad that we’re both here together. I’m grateful.” I was truly glad we’d both lived through the lowest points in our lives.

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172 (Bride) Traditionally, young wives are supposed to do chores and lovingly prepare meals for their husbands.
“We’re good together, yeah?”
“Yeah.” I took the opportunity to splash him.

The next morning, I woke up feeling crappy. My throat was a little sore, and my nose was runny. I had a sinus infection, and I didn’t feel like getting out of bed. Perhaps Hajime would bring me breakfast in bed?

I then noticed that I didn’t hear the soft bustling sounds of Hajime making breakfast. Maybe I had accidentally slept in. I looked at the clock. 7:30 AM. No, I was fine on time. I rolled over and saw that Hajime was still in bed, shivering under the covers.

I forced myself to get up and went over to check on him. “Tachi?”
He groaned in response.

“You okay?” I put a hand to his forehead and immediately pulled it back. “Hold on. Let me get the thermometer.”

Once I had found the device and persuaded Hajime to put it under his tongue, it told me that his fever was about 39.4 degrees.173

“Poor baby,” I cooed, getting him a cold cloth and some ice to chew on. “Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Everywhere,” my patient mumbled with a shiver.

“Hold on. I’ll get you something to eat so that you can take medicine.” I grabbed a yogurt from the fridge and brought it to him along with some Ibuprofen for the fever and water to take it with.

“Just eat that for now, and take your medicine. I’ll make some rice porridge and bring it to you.” I gently tussled his hair and discovered that he was all sweaty.

I brought him a warm washcloth and got out some fresh pajamas. “Once you’ve taken the Ibuprofen, wash off, change into these, and get into my bed. I’ll wash your sheets for you.”

“Thanks, Akira,” he replied quietly, eyes full of appreciation. His throat was obviously sore. “I love you.”

“It’s nothing.” I gave him a quick peck on the forehead. “You take care of me all of the time, Tachi. I love you too.”

Once I’d seen to Hajime, washed and hung his sheets, made rice porridge for him to eat, and eaten something for breakfast myself, it was time for me to go to class. Not that I was

173 About 103 degrees Fahrenheit.
planning on going when my friend was in such a poor state.

Hajime glanced at the clock and then pointedly looked at me. He repeated the action a few times until I understood his meaning.

“Hajime, I’m not leaving you alone when you’re this sick.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “I’ll be fine. Go to class. It’s five minutes away. I’ll call if I need anything.” It took a lot out of him to say as much.

“Missing one day of work and class won’t hurt. I don’t want you to be alone.” I knew that I would want someone to be with me if I were that sick.

“Then get me a sitter.” He started to cough.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just stop arguing about it. You’re in no shape.”

He nodded as I fished out my cell phone.

I got Shouta-kun and Uotani to take care of him until Grandma Ayame could get there, and I came back to check in after my classes. Hajime was doing comparatively well, so I felt better about leaving him to Mom and Toru-senpai while I went to work.

As soon as I got off and picked up my paycheck, I called to see how Hajime was doing before I decided whether or not to make a detour on the way home. His fever was down, and he was able to sit up and talk, so I decided I had a half hour to spare. I called to confer with the landlady, and then I headed off on my errand.

Once I’d trekked fifteen minutes one way and then back with my purchase in tow, I was quite tired. I trudged up the stairs to my apartment and heaved a great sigh when I opened the door. “Tadaima.”

My mother and Kurogane came to greet me at the door, and their faces lit up when they saw what was in my arms.

“How precious!” my mother squealed. “I’ll have to come over to visit more.” She gave me a kiss on the forehead as she made her way out the door.

“Hachi will be ecstatic,” Toru-senpai smiled, pleased that his friend would be happy.

“Good night.”

“How ya feeling?”

“Un,” he grunted. He was lying in bed, eyes closed.

“I’ve got something to make you feel better.” I smiled, setting the puppy down on the bed beside him.

His eyes flickered open as her cold nose brushed his cheek and her pink tongue assaulted
his ear.

He sat up slowly and stared at her, as if he didn’t believe that she was actually there. He
picked her up slowly like a curious child, looking her over.

She was a good dog, wagging her curled little tail all the while, waiting patiently without
barking.

“You got me a dog?” Hajime looked up at me with bright eyes full of joy.

“No. I got us a dog,” I corrected, slipping into bed beside him.

“A dog is a big commitment. They live a long time. Are you sure?” He bit his lip as he
waited, cradling his new friend in his arms like a baby.

“Hajime, I don’t know what either of us will be doing in fifteen years. I’m not a psychic,
but I know that, at the very least, we’ll still be good friends. If we don’t live together, we’ll still
live close. We’ll be able to take care of a dog together. I can’t imagine a reason why we’d ever
stop being best friends. I meant it when I said that I wanted to be with you forever.”

“Daisuki,174” my friend whispered, brushing his lips against mine.

“Th-the dog?” I blinked, mind a little fuzzy. The way he was looking at me made my
stomach tighten.

“Yeah,” he chuckled, kissing the puppy on the nose. “The dog too.”

Suddenly the smile dropped off of his face, and he turned back to me. “Is it really okay
for us to have her here? I know we’re renting this apartment from Auntie Sonoko, but technically
she’s renting from the landlady. Do you know what her policy is on pets?”

“It’s okay. I talked to Tanaka-san before I bought the puppy. She says we’d better
housebreak her, and she’s not allowed to howl at night or in the early morning, but if she’s good,
she can stay.” I took a turn kissing the pooch.

“Thank goodness.” Hajime nuzzled his baby lovingly.

I could tell that the dog would be spoiled within days. “So, about taking care of her…I
was thinking that I could feed her and give her water in the mornings and evenings if you could
take her for a walk. We can take turns letting her out, and I assume she’ll get played with enough
with all the people we always have over, so we shouldn’t have to schedule any attention for her.”

I looked at the new mother and smiled. “Well, she has all of her vaccinations and
everything, so it looks like all she needs is a name.”

“Is Chiaki okay?” Hajime inquired, setting our Shiba Inu ont’o my lap.

174 Suki means to like or love something or someone. Adding dai intensifies the feeling. The way Hajime says it,
“It’s pretty.” I rolled her onto her back and played with her paws. The pads were squishy like Jell-O. “It fits her. You know, since her coat is red, and *aki*[^175] makes you think of the maple leaves turning blood red. Why ‘Chiaki?’”

“Because,” Tachi said, leaning his head on my shoulder. “I want to spend a thousand autumns with the two of you like this.”

“That’d be nice,” I sighed, resting my head against his.

[^175]: Fall
Chapter Ten: Brightness (Akira)

It was during the summer of my twentieth year that I realized I had a problem, and that problem was that my best friend’s little sister had breasts.

Tsubasa came over every week on Friday to visit. She stopped by the coffeehouse first just before my shift ended, and we walked back to the apartment together. She always came in wearing a lot of makeup and low-cut tops. Her skirts were almost always way too short.

She’d come in wearing a sexy outfit like that and lean over the counter while she conversed with me.

I’m not proud to admit it, but I looked. I was a hormonal nineteen year-old guy, and they were as big as oranges! I couldn’t help it! I mean, she wanted me to look, didn’t she? Why else would she wear such a revealing outfit and lean over the counter? She wanted guys to look at her cleavage.

And so I was conflicted. There I was turned on by my best friend’s fourteen and a half year-old sister. It had been easy enough when I was younger to say that I’d never fall for Tsubasa. It was easy when she was a thin little slip of a girl, but now that she had curves, I found myself a pedophile.

Tsubasa had always been small for her age, but in the past two years she had blossomed. She was now 159 centimeters, a little taller than the average for a Japanese girl, and while she retained her slim waist, she’d developed very small hips and a gigantic chest.

Anyway, she’d come and visit with me at the coffeehouse before we walked back to the apartment together. Just before we left, she’d always go into the bathroom to change and take off her makeup.

“It’s a secret from Nii-chan and my parents,” she explained. “They’d flip if they knew.”

“Then why do you do it?” I could calm down a little now that she was reasonably covered.

“To make guys horny.” She shrugged.

Mission accomplished.

“Sometimes it’s not a good idea to draw that kind of attention to yourself.” I tried to think of what a responsible older brother would say.

“But I want to have sex with boys.” It was like it meant nothing to her.

176 Five foot three
“Time out.” I stopped and grabbed her shoulders. “Tsubasa, are you…sexually active?”
“No.” She tilted her head to the side and grinned. “Why? Are you jealous?”
“No,” I sighed. “Just…really worried. Don’t do anything stupid, Tsubasa. Just wait until you’re sure about the guy. This isn’t a game. You’re just a little kid, and you should act like it.”
“I’m not a little kid.” She pulled away and started to pout. “I can make my own decisions.”
“I’ll tell your brother,” I threatened.
She stopped and turned. “You wouldn’t.”
“I would. Hajime and I tell each other everything.” I wasn’t quite sure how I’d break it to him, but I would, if need be. “You can’t go around dressing like a cheap hooker. It gives guys the wrong idea about you, and it makes me really angry, so just stop. I know what they think when they look at you, and I don’t like it.”
“How would you know what they think?” she scoffed.
“Because I’m a guy, Tsubasa. We’re all dirty perverts.” I blushed as I told her the truth.
“You’re not a pervert, Akira-san.” She smiled impishly and wrapped her arms around me.
“Yes, I am.” I moved back before she could feel me get hard against her leg.
“So…how’s it going with my brother?” She sensed my intense discomforted and switched topics. “You guys have sex, right? Is it good? What positions do you do?”
I winced. The Tachibana siblings had no training in the art of subtlety and minding their own business. “Tsubasa, we’re not a couple…. And you really shouldn’t ask questions like that; it’s not appropriate.”
“Don’t worry,” she assured, laughing at my expense. “It’s just ‘cause it’s you, Akira-san. Though, my friends and I talk about sex all of the time. I don’t see what the big deal is. So, when did you break up with my brother?”
“We were never a couple.” I was glad that I could see the apartment and our awkward conversation would be over soon. “We’re just friends.”
“Oh?” The little imp’s steps slowed as her voice took on a pensive tone. “So…you’re single, Akira-san?”
“Yeah,” I sighed as we climbed the steps to the second floor.
“Is there anyone you like right now?” she continued to pry.
“Nope.”
She grabbed me by the arm as we reached the top of the stairs. “Then…it wouldn’t be wrong if you wanted to touch them.” She indicated her breasts. “I don’t mind. I see you staring at
them all the time. Go ahead.”

I was sorely tempted, but I thought of how Hajime would castrate me with his teeth if he found out, and I resisted. “Tsubasa, you’re way too young for me. You shouldn’t say things like that; people are going to get the wrong idea about you.”

I powerwalked to our apartment door and opened it. “Tadaima!” I called out, hoping that Hajime would come to my rescue.

“Okaeri, Aki!” my roommate sang, coming to give me my welcome-home hug and kisses.

“Ojamashimasu,” Tsubasa sighed, leaning against the doorjamb. I’d upset her.

“Hey, Tsu. Why the long face?” The devoted brother immediately started to gush over his precious sibling.

Chiaki came rushing to the door right behind her master and barked once at the intruder. She knew better than to make too much of a fuss, but she wanted to firmly state her displeasure at Tsubasa’s arrival. The little pup came over to me and issued a low growl. She knew that Tsubasa got me riled up, and she didn’t like it. The dog was also under the impression that Hajime was my mate, and she wanted to let me know that infidelity would not be tolerated.

“What’s the matter, Chiaki?” The pooch’s favorite owner scooped her up and cradled her in his arms. “It’s just Daddy. You love your daddy, don’t you? Say sorry.”

Chiaki obediently nipped the underside of Tachi’s jaw—a dog’s way of showing deference to the alpha—and whimpered a small apology in my direction.

I sighed, taking my pseudo-child from my pseudo-wife. “She’s just anxious because Tsubasa’s here. She’s used to being around guys, so it upsets her when girls come over.”

“She’s fine when Okaa-chan and Obaa-chan come.” Tachibana shook his head, unable to figure it out. Sometimes I wondered if he were secretly the dense one.

“Perhaps she doesn’t see them as competition.” Tsubasa shrugged, setting her stuff down and letting herself in. “Is dinner ready?”

Many a night occurred much as that one had. I would be teased and then sexually harassed by the little vixen, and once I returned home, I would be chastised by my dog for cheating on my “boyfriend.” Friday nights were stressful and taxing; thus, I often asked Hajime for back rubs on Fridays.

The worst part about it was that I didn’t entirely mind Tsubasa’s outlandish behavior. She was a strange one, but I genuinely liked the girl. Sure she could be vexing at times, but she also had her softer side. She could be sweet and kind. She could also transform into a cruel and
occasionally violent ice queen whenever the appropriate time arose. She was funny and charming
and beautiful. She had her childish side, but she also had moments of maturity. Additionally, she
treated me like a regular guy. Tsubasa wasn’t interested in me just for my peculiar appearance.
She knew me, accepted me, and liked me for who I was.

I really liked Tsubasa, but how was I supposed to tell her that—much less explain it to
her brother and both of our families? Right now our five year age difference felt like a lifetime.
She was a child, and I was almost an adult. It was wrong. She was just a kid, but I was having
those kinds of thoughts about her. All I could do was wait five years and see if I still felt the
same way. In the meantime, I would probably be driven insane by celibacy.

“Was your hair the same color as Tsubasa’s?” I found myself asking Hajime one day
over one of our Saturday night dinners.

My dining companion glared at me. He’d been talking excitedly about a gig for his band,
and I had interrupted him. “Have you been paying attention to anything that I was saying?”

“…No. Sorry. I was just thinking about how pretty Tsubasa’s hair is. Was your hair that
color?”

“Yeah. Why?” I completely missed the miffed tone in his voice.

“Why would you dye your hair like that if you already had such beautiful hair?”

Hajime absent-mindedly ran his fingers through his hair, taking a few of the longer
strands and looking at it. “I like it this color,” he replied in a small, wounded voice. “What’s
wrong with it?”

“I just think that it would look better black. Doesn’t it get all dried out if you dye it? I bet
Tsubasa’s hair is nice and soft.” I was letting my mouth run as I imagined running my hands
through it.

“I take good care of my hair so that it doesn’t dry out. It’s really soft. See? Feel it.”

“That’s okay. I believe you.” I shrugged, babbling on about how pretty black hair was.

Hajime sat in silence, half listening as he picked at his food. He sighed.

This got my attention. “Hey, are you okay? You’re not really eating.”

He shook his head, staring down into his plate. “I added too much sugar to the
tamagoyaki,” he lied. “And I cooked the rice too long. It’s kind of gross. I really don’t feel like
eating it.”

“I thought that dinner tasted a little off tonight. Just add some salt, and it’ll be fine,” I
shrugged, adding insult to injury.
“E-excuse me.” He stood and darted out of the dining room like a fox chased by hounds.

The bedroom door slammed behind him, and I was left wondering what the hell had just happened.

A little later, as I was finishing my dinner, I heard Chiaki whimpering and scratching at the bedroom door. I ignored her until she started howling. It was my responsibility as her owner to ensure that she didn’t bother our neighbors.

“What’s the matter, Chiaki?” I sighed, picking her up.

She stopped whining, and it was then that I could hear muffled sobs coming from behind the door. She was agitated because Hajime was upset.

I went in and found him curled up in his bed, crying into his pillow.

“Hey,” I called out, going to sit on the bed beside him. “Tachi, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

“Hajime, please talk to me. I can’t help, if I don’t know what the problem is.” I sighed stroking his hair to calm him down. Despite years of bleaching, it remained soft.

“Leave me alone.” His voice wavered slightly, and he sniffled as he spoke.

“Are you mad at me, Tachi?” I employed his old technique, feigning innocence, though, in this case, I wasn’t entirely sure if I were guilty or not.

Hajime took a deep breath, sat up, and glared at me. “Of course I’m mad at you! First you insult my hair, and then you insult my cooking! First off, there is absolutely nothing wrong with my hair. It looks good on me. Secondly, I spend hours cooking for you, working on a dish until it’s perfect. I was making up an excuse when I said that the food tasted bad because I was upset when you insulted my hair. There is nothing wrong with my cooking or my hair, and it’s not fair of you to degrade me while praising my sister when you’re supposed to be spending time with me, so, yeah, I’m pissed.” He sighed and went back to his curled up position.

“Sorry,” I whispered, knowing that I had screwed up. “I didn’t mean to insult you, Tachi. Your cooking is always really delicious. You’re a great chef, and I’m sorry that I didn’t realize how much time it took you to cook for me. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful; I really appreciate it when you make meals for me.”

I lay down beside him, my shoulder brushing against his. “And you’re right. There’s nothing wrong with your hair. It suits you, but…I kind of have a thing for black hair. I’ve always wanted black hair myself, so I don’t really get why you would change your hair color if it were already such a beautiful shade.”

“Because I have a thing for auburn hair,” he replied, rolling over onto his side. “Why
would you want black hair, Aki? Yours is so pretty with those natural highlights. People pay a lot of money trying to get their hair to look like yours.”

“I think it’d make me look more Japanese if it were black,” I responded truthfully.

“Are you still hung up on that?” my roommate scoffed. “Nowadays, it’s a good thing to be a little different. Why are you still determined to become like everyone else?”

“I want people to accept me,” I sighed. “No one ever asks you if you can speak Japanese or if you eat sushi or where you come from or for how long you’ll be in Japan. I’m sick of always having to explain myself. It’s like that with everyone I meet.”

“I never asked you any of those things,” he whispered, kissing me on the cheek.

“But you already knew about me before that one day on the roof.” That didn’t count.

“I never cared about why you looked the way you did. All I ever cared about was coming up with an excuse to introduce myself to you.”

“Oh.” I relaxed a little bit as he rested his head on my shoulder and inched closer in order to cuddle.

Chiaki, eager to join in snuggle time, climbed from the floor into the desk chair to the top of the desk onto the bed. She nestled in between us and began nipping at my fingers.

“Little scamp,” I chuckled, moving my digits back and forth for her to snap at. “She inherited your personality.”

“You think so?” Hajime stole my other hand and started nibbling on my fingers.

“Yeah.” I pulled my appendage back and pinched his cheek. “You’re both annoying—”

“—If you’re not nicer to me, I’m going to break up with you,” my pretend boyfriend announced. “If you loved me, you’d treat me better. I’m gonna find someone else, if you don’t step up your act.”

“I was going to say ‘in a cute, endearing kind of way.’” I nudged his shoulder playfully.

“Please don’t leave me. I couldn’t live without you.”

“Really?” he whispered, cheeks turning the color of cherry blossoms.

“Yeah. Who’d do my laundry and clean my house and make my meals?” I teased.

“Jerk.” Tachibana rolled his eyes, sitting up and preparing to climb over me and out of bed.

“No.” I grabbed his arm and tugged him back down.

He lost his balance and ended up lying on top of me.

Chiaki squeaked and moved out of the way as her master fell.

“‘Kay,’” he mumbled, staring uncertainly into my eyes. “Just…make me want to stay more often.” He rested his head on my chest, listening to my heartbeat. “Don’t neglect me.”

The following day I returned home from work a little early and found that Hajime wasn’t in the kitchen.

Chiaki brought me her leash and wagged her tail, waiting expectantly.
Not only was dinner not ready, Chiaki had yet to be walked.
“Hajime?” I called out, searching the apartment for my roommate.
“Coming!” I finally got a response when I knocked on the bathroom door. “Sorry. I had the vent on and didn’t hear you.”

I blinked. Hajime’s normally orange hair had become jet black with tan highlights, kind of like a German Shepard’s fur.
“I dyed my hair,” he explained awkwardly, waiting for me to say something about it.
I blinked, too shocked to respond.
“Does it look good? This is my real color…besides the highlights, of course,” he continued nervously.
I couldn’t think of anything to say. He looked really different.
“Do you like it?” My friend chewed on his bottom lip as he fidgeted under my gaze.
“You said that you had a thing for black hair, so I thought that maybe I could try it out. I mean, it’s been forever since I’ve had black hair, so I thought that maybe I’d like it better. I don’t, but, if you like it, I think that maybe I could grow to like it too. So…um…does it look okay?”

I finally found my voice. “It…doesn’t look bad. It’s strange. I mean…it’ll…take some getting used to.”

“Un,” Hajime grunted, looking down at his feet. “You don’t like it. It’s the same color as Tsubasa’s, so I thought… Is it the highlights? You don’t like them? I can take them out. I don’t have to have highlights. I thought having just black hair was boring, so I thought that they’d show a little personality, but, you don’t like them. I’ll redo it, so… I’m sorry. I didn’t make dinner or walk Chiaki yet because I was busy fussing over my hair. I wanted it to be perfect, but…you don’t like it. I’m sorry. I’ll go make dinner.” He started to shuffle past me to the kitchen, head down in—disappointment?—hurt? He was so sensitive lately.

“Hajime,” I called out, grabbing his arm. “Look, it’s okay. I don’t dislike your hair. I’m not crazy about it either, but it’s not bad. It might even be okay if you give me a little time to get used to it, but…I kind of get what you were saying the other day about why you dye your hair. I
think it does look better the way it was before. You’re not a plain person, so your hair shouldn’t be plain either. I thought that because you two were siblings, having black hair would make you look elegant and kind of refined like Tsubasa, but…maybe you were right.”

“You…think that I look…plain?” His voice faltered.

“No.” Hajime was very preoccupied with his appearance. It was best to get off the subject quickly. “Just compared to how you usually look with your make up and your hair… The black hair isn’t as…um…showy—no—interesting—uh…attractive—no, not attractive. You’re very attractive. I meant…dramatic. You’re a really dramatic person, and your appearance should mirror that. That’s what I’m trying to say.”

“But…this is what I actually look like. You think I don’t look good without my stupid fake hair color and my stupid eyeliner and mascara and eye shadow.” The water works started flowing. “Well, we can’t all be natural beauties like Tsubasa. She doesn’t have to do anything, and you still look at her like you wanna jump her.”

“Hajime? What are you talking about?” I reached out slowly to touch his shoulder. He was acting strange.

He slapped away my hand and glared at me through tears. “Don’t play innocent, Akira! I see the way you gaze longingly at her when you think I’m not looking! I see the way you stare at her!”

“Tachi, there’s nothing going on between Tsubasa and me. She’s just a little kid; you’re imagining things.” I could see that now was not the time to tell him about my little crush. He was unstable.

“Am I?” he sobbed.

“Hajime, what’s wrong? Is there something going on? You’ve been acting kind of off lately. I’m worried about you.”

“Hold me.” He threw his arms around my neck and cried into my shirt.

“Shh. It’s okay,” I whispered, rubbing his back soothingly. I was still completely in the dark as far as the situation was concerned.

“Aki,” Hajime mumbled, gazing up at me with his teary mahogany eyes. He leaned in to kiss me.

I pulled back.

“W-why not?” Hurt filled his eyes as they searched mine for a reason.

“Look…I don’t mind sometimes when you’re just playing around, but…I can’t give you that kind of comfort, Hajime.”
“But…” His body began to tremble as he started crying again. “Why not? It’s been two years, so…why can’t you? Do you…not like me?”

“I…I’m sorry. I’m not physically attracted to you, so I can’t…I can’t kiss and…do other things with you like a lover would.” I couldn’t look at him. He was lonely, and he wanted to feel like he was loved. I knew that our pseudo relationship was very important to him and his emotional and mental health, and that’s why I’d let it go so far, but I couldn’t let him lean on me like that. It wasn’t fair to either of us.

“So…you’ll never…want to do those kinds of things with me? Then why did you…on Christmas Eve after I got out of the hospital…why…? Did you just feel sorry for me? Is that why you…? Were you just trying to make me feel better?!?” He pushed me away hard, his body shaking as the anger built and tears fell. “You don’t even like me, do you?! You just feel guilty! You feel responsible for me because of what happened two years ago when you abandoned me!”

“That’s not true.” He was scaring me. “Hajime, I wouldn’t hang out with you if I didn’t actually like you. You’re my precious friend. You’re important to me.”

“Don’t look at me like that!” he screamed, throwing one of the pillows off of the couch at me.

“Like what?” I knew deep down that he wouldn’t really hurt me, but I was scared. He’d lost it.

“Like I’m insane! Like you don’t know what I’m talking about! You always furrow your brow and scrunch up your nose like that, and it really pisses me off!” He sat down on the couch and pulled his knees to his chest as he began wailing. “There’s nothing wrong with me! You always look at me like I suddenly have a third eye, and it makes me mad because there’s nothing wrong with me! There’s nothing strange about what I’m saying! I’m not being unreasonable, so stop f-ing looking at me like that!”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, slowly moving closer.

I didn’t know what to do. The way he was acting was abnormal, and it made me think that perhaps he should see a professional. Something was going on, and it was about more than just Hajime’s hair color.

“You’re right.” I sat down beside him. “I’m the one that’s being unreasonable. I’m not treating you fairly, and that’s wrong of me. I’m sorry, so let’s just go get something to eat, and then we can take Chiaki for a walk together. Or, if you’re tired, I could go get something for us and walk Chiaki myself while you rest. How’s that sound? What do you want to do?”

“You’re just saying that,” he snorted. “You always do this. You take the blame and tell
me I’m right even when you think it’s my fault and that I’m wrong. You just don’t want to fight. I’m going out.” He went to grab his wallet off of the counter before he stormed out the door.

I sighed. Dealing with him was exhausting sometimes.

Since my chef had gone AWOL, I went to a local convenience store to pick up a ready-to-eat microwavable dinner. I returned home, ate, and then took Chiaki for her walk. Just about the time I got home, I received three texts in rapid succession.

The first text was from Toru-senpai; it said: “You two fight? Hachi is upset.”

To this I replied: “Yeah. We had a fight about his hair color. I’m really worried, so keep an eye on him for me, okay?”

Uotani’s text came shortly after Toru-senpai’s, and it read: “Hey, we’re out doing karaoke, just the four of us, and Hana-chan’s getting totally plastered. He seems really angry; every other word is ‘f-ing.’ Something happen?”

I sighed. Why did his coping mechanism have to be self-destruction?

“Just take care of him, okay?” I responded.

The last was from Shouta-kun, and this is what he had to say: “Akira-senpai, is everything okay between you and Tachi-senpai? He’s singing 30 Seconds to Mars and Breathe Carolina. He only does that when he’s really upset. He refuses to scream, though, so he just sings the screaming parts even louder. It would kind of be funny if it weren’t for him being dead drunk and really upset.”

“Don’t let him go off with anybody, and make sure he makes it home safe,” I wrote back.

I waited up for Hajime until three in the morning. To pass the time, I played with Chiaki, tossing her toys for her to fetch and fetching her toys whenever she flung them across the room. I pet her and scratched behind her ears when we both tired of fetch. Eventually we ended up staring at the TV screen, and Chiaki fell asleep lying on my chest.

At three AM, the door opened, and I could hear whispered “ojamashimasu’s at the door.

Toru-senpai was carrying an extremely intoxicated Hajime bridal style, and Shouta-kun and Uotani were following behind. It was a rather grave-looking little procession.

“How is he?” I could smell the alcohol from a couple feet away.

“I’m fine,” Hajime whimpered. “Put me down, Toru.”

His caretaker acquiesced, but Tachibana stumbled to the floor as soon as he took his first step. Senpai picked him back up. “Hachi is very drunk.”

“I can see that,” I sighed. “Well, let’s get him ready for bed. Sorry to trouble you, Toru-senpai.”
“Not a problem.” Kurogane carried his charge to the bathroom, and we got him bathed and changed while the other two stood around in the living room awkwardly, unsure of what they should be doing to help.

We were about to put him to bed when Hajime protested that he would be sleeping with me that night.

I shrugged and told Senpai to go ahead and put him in my bed.

Once Hajime was situated, I walked the others to the door, thanked them profusely, and bid them a good night.

I went back to the bedroom and prepared to get into my roommate’s bed.

“You don’t want to sleep with me?” Despite being so drunk, Tachibana’s voice was only slightly slurred.

There were three kinds of drunken Hajime. The first one had a bad temper and a dirty mouth. Hajime number two was slap happy and promiscuous. The third was meek and a little downtrodden.

Tonight we were dealing with drunken Hajime number three. Best to just give him what he wanted before he started sobbing like someone had stolen his pony.

“Fine.” I gave in, crawling over him and into my bed. “Goodnight, Tachi.”

“Aki… I’m sorry.” He was speaking politely and softly, kind of like a woman. “I didn’t mean to yell at you before. I’m sorry.” Despite my efforts, he ended up crying anyway.

“It’s okay, Hajime. I forgive you.” I tried my best to quell his tempest of tears. “It’s alright, so just go to bed.”

“But… it’s not okay,” he whimpered, bottom lip quivering. “Maybe you’re okay with the way things are now, but I’m not. I’m really, really, really unhappy. I’m miserable, so it’s not okay.”

One good thing about drunken Hajime number three was that it was very easy to get information out of him. He volunteered facts that I would have had to fight the sober Hajime for days to obtain.

“Why aren’t you happy, Hajime?” I took advantage of the opportunity given to me. “Is there something that I can do to fix it?”

“I want you to make love to me,” He blushed as he inched closer to me under the covers. “but you don’t want me. You don’t care about me. You’re just using me. You’re the most important person in the world to me, so it makes me sad that you don’t care about me the same way.”
“Tachi, that’s not true.” So that was how he really felt. He thought that I didn’t care about
him—that we weren’t really friends. How he got that into his head was beyond me, but now that
I knew, I could fix it. “I care about you a whole bunch. You’re my most important person too.”

“Really?” he breathed. He sounded like a small child that had just been offered a puppy.
“I thought you were just fooling around with me. I didn’t think that you were serious. I thought I
was being used because you only touch me when it’s convenient for you. You only want me
when you’re horny and need a back rub. Whenever I want you to touch me or show me affection,
you push me away. I didn’t think it was fair that you got attention whenever you asked for it, but
I never got any when I wanted some. Why is that, Aki? Why won’t you ever touch me when I
want you to? If I’m important to you and you like me, why don’t you ever show it? I’m always
the one to start things when something happens between us. I’m the only one to ever show
affection. I thought you were just messing around with me. I thought that you didn’t actually like
me. Why don’t you ever touch me anymore, Aki?” He looked at me with big, innocent eyes that
welled with tears.

He was right. I always went to him for a backrub whenever I needed to release a little
tension and frustration, but whenever he needed to fool around a little, I always scolded him and
pushed him away. I was using him. I wasn’t being fair.

I took a deep breath, leaned in, and gave him a small kiss on the lips. “I’ll do better.
Hajime, you’re my best friend, and I’ll do my best to make sure you’re happy in the future, so
talk to me next time you’re unhappy, okay? I can’t do anything unless you talk to me.”

“Kay.” My friend smiled, attaching himself to my torso and using me as a pillow. “Will
you make love to me now?”

“Not when you’re drunk. Good night, Tachi.” I sighed and learned to accept my role as a
teddy bear.

The next morning, he was still out cold, even with the alarm blaring in his ear, so I got up
and made breakfast myself.

I waited an hour or so more, and then I went in to wake up Sleeping Beauty, bringing in a
tray of breakfast for him to eat in bed. I’d made bland foods for him, knowing how nauseated he
became when he had a hangover.

“Hey. Good morning, Sunshine.” I gently shook my roommate awake.

Two sleepy, bloodshot eyes peeked out from under the covers. He blinked and grumbled
incoherently.

“It’s okay. I closed the blinds. It’s nice and dark.” I spoke softly, knowing that he’d have
a headache. “I brought some breakfast. You can have painkillers after there’s something in your stomach.”

He mumbled what sounded like a “thank you,” and endeavored to sit up in bed.

“Do you remember what happened last night?” I passed him the tray of food.

“Did we have wild animal sex?” I missed the cute, polite drunken Hajime number three.

“No,” I replied curtly.

“I remember…kind of.” He took a bite of oatmeal and put some butter on a piece of toast.

“You told me you loved me and wanted to make me happy. There was some talk of me being the most important person in the world to you. There was some heavy petting too, right?”

I sighed, taking him by the jaw and planting a chaste kiss on his lips. “Look, I know how important physical affection is to you, so in order to keep our relationship intact, I’m willing to make out a little. It’s kind of weird for me, but…if it’ll make you happy, I’ll do it, but I can’t have sex with you, Hajime. Even doing this with you…I’m not entirely sure since I have little to no experience with any kind of relationship, but I’m not sure if it’s normal for two people in our situation to do things like that.”

At this he laughed, but then winced in pain from the noise and the effort. “Aki, for two people in our situation, it’s perfectly normal to neck a little. Heck, even going to second or third base wouldn’t be out of the ordinary.”

“Really?” I blinked in confusion.

Sure, I had never had a friend before Hajime, so I wasn’t completely sure, but I didn’t think that best friends became sexually intimate with each other. It wasn’t in any of the movies or anime or manga I had seen or read—well, actually, best friends did become lovers in a lot of the media I had been exposed to, but somehow that seemed different. Then again, I had read somewhere that homosexual teenagers sometimes experimented with intercourse with some of their opposite-sexed homosexual friends. Also, in cases where best friends were heterosexual and of the opposite sex, I had read that there were many instances where they engaged in some kind of romantic behavior over the course of the friendship. Maybe Hajime was right. Experimenting sexually with friends was apparently common after all.

“Maybe you’re right. I guess it is pretty normal, isn’t it?” I chuckled nervously at my lack of experience. “I’m sorry. I just…never really had much contact with people before you, so I really don’t know what’s normal and what’s not. I don’t have much experience with different types of relationships or human interactions, so…”

“It’s okay. It’s kind of cute how naïve you are.”
It took a little while to get used to it, but making out with Hajime was actually kind of fun. He was very good, and I came to regret that I had missed out on those kinds of encounters with him over the years because I had misunderstood the limits of friendship and romantic relationships. I still refused to believe that friends preformed acts of fellatio on each other; however, I was tempted to try it. I was able to resist only because Hajime’s massages were fabulous and making out with him really helped to reduce the sexual frustration brought about by Tsubasa’s cleavage and Hajime’s teasing.

Though, things kind of ended up changing on September twenty-fourth, my twentieth birthday. I was legally able to drink, and the band wanted to celebrate, despite the fact that two of their number were still underage. We went to a karaoke studio and ordered some drinks while Hajime provided the entertainment.

My “boyfriend” rolled his eyes when he saw that I had ordered soda. “Aki, you can drink now. It’s okay. It’s legal—not that that makes much difference.”

“I don’t really want to get drunk.” I shrugged. “I see the way you get when you’re totally hammeered; I don’t want to be an inconvenience to you guys. I’m probably a lightweight.”

“It’s your twentieth birthday, for crying out loud,” my best friend sighed, elbowing me lightly in the ribs. “Live a little. Just this once.”

“Just one time is okay.” Toru-senpai encouraged me, probably because Tachibana was so adamant about it.

“It’ll be fun.” Uotani lowered his shades and winked. The fact that his eyes were red (colored contacts) made it less assuring and more creepy.

“I won’t be drinking much, so go ahead and have little fun, Senpai. I’ll make sure you two get home safe.” Shouta-kun’s words helped a little more than the bassist’s had.

“Okay. Just this once,” I finally gave in.

“Awesome!” Hajime pulled out scraps of paper and wrote down numbers before folding them up.

“What’s that for?” I eyed my roommate in suspicion.

“We’re going to play Ousama!177” my friend announced, mixing up the slips of paper.

“I’ve never played before.” I nibbled nervously on my lip. I had heard that those kinds of games could get pretty wild, but we were all men, so it shouldn’t be that bad. Then again, Hajime didn’t really discriminate between genders. If he became king, I could potentially end up kissing

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177 “King.” Players are assigned numbers, and one player becomes the ‘king.’ The king gives orders, such as:
any one of my friends. Somehow, I didn’t think that I was at the point of intimacy with them where that would be acceptable.

“It’s simple. On the pieces of paper are numbers one through four and the word ousama. Whoever gets ‘king’ becomes king and orders the others around. Okay. Everybody grab a slip of paper!” Hajime was extremely enthused, much to my chagrin.

“So, who’s king?” my auburn-haired roomie sighed as he looked down at his own scrap.

“I am.” Shouta-kun smirked. “Okay. Number One has to tell his deepest darkest secret.”

Toru-senpai sighed. “When I was little I had a bunny rabbit. It ate the heads off of my sister’s dolls, so I thought that it would try to eat my head too. I’m still afraid of bunny rabbits.”

“That’s really adorable, Kurogane-senpai,” Shouta-kun chuckled before turning to the rest of us. “Number Four has to tell us about his most embarrassing moment.”

Uotani took off his shades and set them down on the table. “Okay, so one time back in high school, I had this girl over for…you know. So, clothes start flying, they’re all over the floor, and then my mom walks in while the girl’s sucking on my…you know. Mom says ‘Oh…you’re doing laundry.’ and walks out. Real mood killer. The girl never came back, and my mom and I couldn’t look at each other without blushing for weeks. Worst thing about it, she must have told my dad, because that night he gave me the sex talk. I thought I was gonna die.”

Even I chuckled a little at Uotani’s expense.

The bassist snorted and turned to Hajime. “Oh like you’ve never been caught doing the dirty. Surely your parents talked to you about it, right? And no way you’re not a virgin, Shirogane.”

That shut up the younger of the two, but Tachi just kept laughing.

“Nah. My real parents never really talked to me about sex…except for that one time when my mother told me about that guy that she was having an affair with…” He shook his head as if to shake the bad memories out. “Bad image. Anyway, I’ve never been walked in on…though, maybe it would have been better if someone had heard me scream and come that one time and…” Tears started building in his eyes.

“Shh…” I put an arm around him and squeezed tight. “It’s okay.”

“Sor-ry,” Hajime sniffled, unable to stop the tears. “I’m fine. It’s nothing. I know it’s nothing to be upset over, but…I just…just thinking about it…”

“You have every right to be upset,” I whispered, taking him into my arms.

“Number one kisses number three,” or “Number five gives the king a back rub.”
“Number Three and Number Two should make out for a whole minute,” Shouta-kun quietly ordered. “Make sure to use lots of tongue.”

The game went on, and the orders got more and more ridiculous. I ended up sitting on Toru-senpai’s lap, giving Shouta-kun a piggyback ride, and confessing that the time when I was most nervous was probably when I first confessed to Hajime when we were fifteen. I also had to chug an entire can of Kirin beer, and say that the time I was most scared was when Hajime was in the hospital.

Hajime had to give Uotani a lap dance, take off his shirt, French kiss Shouta-kun, and sing three different folk songs—one about an elephant with a long nose, another about a rabbit, and a third about rainy days and umbrellas. Then, for good measure, Uotani had him sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” in French, Japanese, and English. He was a little drunk at the time, and his French may have slurred a little.

After we’d all had a turn being king, we played the no laughing game. We went around in a circle and said things to try to get the others to laugh. Those that did had to drink.

After that, we played the Pocky game. Two players took an end of the same stick of Pocky in their mouths and ate away at it until their lips met, or one or the other chickened out. The one that let go first had to drink. If the players ended up kissing, it was considered a tie, and no one drank.

Hajime was king of the Pocky game. He never backed down, and, as a result, he ended up kissing Uotani and me. Uotani and Shouta-kun came close to kissing once, but afterwards Shirogane always pulled back. The best I could do was hold my ground against Shouta-kun and go for the tie with Hajime. As a result, I ended up pleasantly buzzed by the time midnight rolled around.

Toru-senpai—probably the least drunk of us all—made sure that everyone got home safely before heading off himself.

“Did you have fun?” Tachibana asked as we stumbled into our apartment.

“Yeah, I did.” Somehow that was really funny. I couldn’t help but laugh.
Hajime went over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of *Nihonshu*.\(^{180}\) “I got this for the after-party...for just the two of us. It’s Friday night, and you don’t have work tomorrow, so let’s get totally wasted. It’ll be fun.”

“Just this once,” I easily agreed.

“Awesome. You know, you’re a lot more fun when you’re liquored-up, Aki. You always fret too much when you’re sober.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help thinking that he might be right. “Okay, so are we just going to drink until we pass out, or are we going to play a game? How are we going to do this?”

“Oh! I learned this game from a *ryuugakusei* from Texas...what’s that word in English?”

“Exchange student. Why do you speak in English when you’re drunk?” That was also hilarious for some reason.

“No clue.” Hajime was laughing pretty hard too. “Anyway, it’s called Circle of Death. We take turns drawing cards, and different cards have different things that you have to do if you draw them, and someone always ends up drinking. It’s tons of fun. Wanna play?”

“Sure.” I was game for just about anything at that point.

I woke up the next morning with a gigantic headache. It seriously felt like my head was going to pop and my brains would be splattered all over the walls. I groaned and wiped the sleep from my eyes.

Hajime groaned beside me as I shifted.

I sat up and blinked a few times. Things started coming into focus, and I realized that my shirt was completely unbuttoned, and my boxers were down, hanging around my left ankle.

Tachibana yawned, rolling over to look up at me. “Mornin’.” He kissed me on the jawbone and got up to get dressed. He was completely naked save one right sock, and there were hickeys all over his body.

I went to the bathroom to look at my own body in the mirror. I was covered in little purple marks too. “Shit,” I mumbled trying to remember what had happened as I got into the bath.

I remembered coming home and playing card games until we were both completely trashed. Then we decided to play the Pocky game and ended up making out. Clothes started flying, and we’d ended up in bed. The teeth marks on my skin told me all the places where

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\(^{180}\) In Japanese, “*sake*” is used to refer to alcohol in general. “*Nihonshu*” is used for *sake*, Japanese rice wine.
Hajime’s mouth had been, and judging from the hickeys on his body, I could see that my mouth had been in similar places. I remembered how it felt. I remembered whimpering and calling out his name as he had called mine when it’d been his turn. Thankfully we’d both passed out before we’d gone any further, but it had been far enough. Was I still a virgin? Did that count? In order for it to be intercourse, there had to be penetration, right? I tried to recall articles I had read, but my mind was too foggy.

“Shit,” I reiterated.

I was never going to be able to look at him the same way again. Now there would always be lust and memories of all the erotic sounds his throat was capable of producing.

After I’d finished in the bath, I put some clothes on and went to the kitchen to face him. We needed to talk.

“Hungry?” The chef was hard at work producing a hangover-friendly breakfast for the two of us.

“Hajime…about last night…” I didn’t know what to say after that.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “That didn’t really go how I had planned. I know that’s not the way you wanted it to happen either…but it’s not like we can pretend that it didn’t happen—we’ve both got marks to prove that it did. The way I see it, it might be best if we just acknowledge it for what it is—a mistake. I mean, don’t get me wrong—it was really, truly magnificent—you’re amazing with your tongue, but it shouldn’t have happened like that.”

I nodded. “You’re right. We should just accept it…. It was pretty wonderful, but, I really don’t think we should be doing those kinds of things. I don’t want it to get in the way of our friendship. I don’t want to engage in things like that casually with you. I respect you, and I want us to be able to continue on the way we’ve been. I like our relationship the way it is now. I don’t want to jeopardize it.”

“Let’s not worry, then.” He shrugged, setting down a plate for me. “Let’s just let our relationship run its course without the influence of alcohol.”

“Yeah,” I agreed and started to eat, vowing to never get completely drunk ever again.

Thankfully, our relationship was able to survive our first accidental sexual encounter, and we went back to making out occasionally as normal friends did. The only difference I noticed was my increased libido. Now that my body had had a taste, it wanted more. This made it increasingly harder to deal with Tsubasa’s stupid voluptuous body crammed into low-cut tops. I resorted to buying looser pants and wearing belts.
This worked well for me until one night in November when I went with the gang to do karaoke. We were just walking in the door when a group of younger students came up behind us. Tsubasa was with them, and she was wearing a tight top and a short skirt.

The Tachibana siblings looked at each other in horror.

“What the hell are you wearing?!” Hajime hissed. It looked like he was about ready to take someone out.

“Uh…clothes?” Tsubasa bit her lip, unable to talk her way out of it.

“Tsubasa, you look like a whore! Mother and Father let you go out of the house like that?!”

“I changed at a friend’s house,” she mumbled, ashamed that she’d finally been found out. “Mother and Father don’t know. You know how they are. They hardly bother with me.”

“We’re going home right now so that you can change, young lady, and you are never to leave the house looking like this ever again, is that clear?” Hajime decreed.

“You’re not the boss of me,” the young teenager quietly rebelled, still looking at her feet. “What?” Suddenly all of Tachi’s steam and righteous fury was gone.

“I’m not a little kid, Nii-chan. I like dressing like this, and it’s not your place to tell me what I can and can’t do.” Tsubasa’s voice shook, but she stood her ground.

“I’ll talk to her, so just go have fun,” I whispered in Hajime’s ear before taking Tsubasa by the arm. “Come along, Tsubasa-chan. We’re going home.”

The little imp pretended to struggle until we were around the corner and out of sight. Once her friends could no longer see, she followed me peaceably of her own accord. “I think I overdid it.”

“Ya think?” I sighed, letting go of her arm. “You owe your brother a big, heartfelt apology. He loves you very much, and you hurt him just to make your friends think that you’re a punk. If they don’t like you for who you really are, they’re not really your friends, Tsubasa-chan.”

“…I know,” she mumbled. “But…haven’t you ever just wanted to fit in, Akira-san?”

“Yeah…I know the feeling.” Better than most, I’d say. “But you can’t treat your brother like that, understand? You mean the world to him, and his feelings get hurt pretty easily. Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t,” she promised. “Do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“He’d let you get away with murder.” I touched her shoulder reassuringly.

“I’ll call him later, then,” she decided, and then we walked on a while in silence.
“So…you’re still dressing like that?” I took the opportunity to have an intervention.  
“I like looking sexy.” The young teen shrugged.  
“What’s a fifteen year-old girl have to look sexy for?” I asked. My height afforded me an excellent view down her shirt, and it was extremely distracting.  
“You know, it’s one thing when Nii-chan does it, but I can’t stand being treated like a child by you, Akira…san.” Her body was shaking from either anger or cold, and she wouldn’t look at me.  
“I’m a mature young woman. I’m a woman, not a girl. I’ve been through puberty—I have breasts and hair in certain places and I get a period every month, so I’m a woman. I can have children, and next year I’ll be able to legally get married with my parents’ consent. I’m not a little kid, so stop treating me like one. I can dress how I want, and I can do as I wish.”  
There was a brief silence before I found my voice. “You’re right. I’m not being fair to you. You are a young woman, and you are fully capable of making your own decisions…but why do you want to dress like that?”  
“I want…people…to look at me,” she confessed.  
“Tsubasa-chan, you’re beautiful. You don’t need skimpy clothes and lots of makeup to make people look. You’re already pretty enough as you are, and anyone who can’t see that, doesn’t deserve you.” I wanted to reach out and embrace her, but I resisted the urge.  
She stopped, turned around, and looked me right in the eye. “I want you to look at me, Akira.”  
Everything stopped as I processed what had been said. She’d finally been honest with me. She felt the same way. She hadn’t just been teasing me. She loved me too.  
“I…I am looking at you, Tsubasa.” I finally found my voice and wrapped my arms around her. “I have been this whole time. It’s just I’m so much older than you, and right now I feel like a pedophile. I know it won’t make much difference when we’re both in our twenties or thirties, but right now…I don’t think we can be together. I want to, though, and it’s so frustrating having all of these mixed feelings.”  
“I know, right?” She giggled, holding me tight. “I always feel so insecure because I know I’m young. I always felt like I had to compete for your affection with Nii-chan and older girls, but…you really do like me? You’re not just saying it to make me feel better? You love me too?”  
“Yeah.” I looked down at her and smiled. “I love you, Tsubasa.”  
“I love you too, Akira.” She beamed at me, gorgeous henna eyes twinkling.  
She had the same eyes as her brother. “Hajime’s going to kill me. There’s no way he’d let
me sleep with you or kiss you or touch you or even just date you. We’ll have to wait until you’re older.”

“We’ll just have to keep it a secret,” she whispered, tightening her hold on me. “We can hang out as friends, and it’d be okay if you kissed me from time to time. We’ll just be careful not to leave marks, and we’ll be cautious not to get pregnant before we’re married.”

“Tsubasa, I can’t sleep with you.” I sighed, running a hand through her hair like I had longed to do for months. “Hajime really would castrate me. That’ll have to wait for later.”

“Are you a ‘waiting for marriage’ kind of guy?” Her tone was flat.

“Kind of.” I blushed. “My mom grew up Christian, and it’s sort of a big thing. I mean, I don’t actually believe that there’s this big guy up in the clouds that’s going to smite me if I have premarital sex, but, you know…it’s just kind of in the back of my mind that I should wait.”

“Oh.” She heaved a long sigh. “We’ll wait for the sex part, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t make out a little, right?”

“Right.” I smiled. I was happy. I loved her, and she loved me. Sure, there were some obstacles, but things were going to work out.

“Love you,” she giggled, standing on her tiptoes and weaving her fingers through my hair.

“Love you too,” I responded, leaning down and pressing my lips to hers.

We held hands on the way back to the karaoke studio and shared a quick kiss before going to find our respective groups of friends.

“You look happy.” Hajime raised an eyebrow at me upon my return.

“Tsubasa agreed to stop wearing such trashy clothing,” I reported. “She also says that she’s really sorry for what she said to you. She was trying to impress her friends.”

“Oh.” My friend returned my smile and went back to his microphone.

I felt bad for lying to Hajime. I made excuses whenever I went to hang out with Tsubasa because I knew he’d become suspicious if I randomly started spending a large portion of my free time alone with his little sister.

There was a stab of guilt in my stomach every time he smiled and said, “Have fun.” He wouldn’t have said it if he’d known I was going to play tonsil hockey with his precious sibling.

Things only got harder as the weeks passed. I felt like I was betraying him. Normally we told each other everything—there were no lies or secrets between us, so I felt like I was stabbing him in the back.
On the sixteenth of December at Tsubasa’s birthday party, I pulled her aside and told her that I couldn’t keep us a secret from him anymore. Every time I touched or kissed or even looked at her, I felt like I was betraying him, and I couldn’t go on like that anymore.

Tsubasa nodded. “He’ll be furious, but I think, after we give him some time to think it over, we’ll be able to convince him. I mean, we’re serious about each other, aren’t we?”

“Tsubasa, I’m going to marry you if your parents will let me,” I firmly stated my resolve, squeezing her hand.

“I’m going to marry whomever I so choose, remember?” she chuckled straightening my tie. “And I pick you, Akira.”

“Come here.” I pulled her around the corner so that no one would see as I kissed her.

After that night I spent about a week looking for the right opportunity to tell Hajime. I received my chance on the twenty-third.

I had the day off of work, so I was sitting on the couch watching TV as Hajime cooked dinner.

“I have a surprise for you.” After he’d set everything out on the table, he came in and straddled me so that he was sitting on my lap, facing me. He opened the jewelry box he had been holding and showed me the silver pocket watch that was inside.

“Wow.” I marveled as he showed it off.

“I had it engraved.” He flipped the lid open and showed me our names on the inside. “I was going to give it to you tomorrow, but I picked it up today, and I just couldn’t wait. What do you think?”

“It’s gorgeous, Hajime,” I breathed, looking at it from every angle. The craftsmanship was simply amazing. It had so many fine details; it must have taken days or even weeks to create. “It must have cost a fortune. Thank you; I love it.”

He shrugged, glad that I liked my gift. “Anything for you.” He slipped it into my chest pocket and arranged the chain. Once satisfied with the effect, he sat up on his haunches and leaned in to kiss me.

Over the past two months, it had become increasingly awkward to make out with Hajime. As I got more and more intimate with Tsubasa, I realized that some of the things I did with her brother were eerily similar to couples’ activities.

Regardless, I kissed him back, just with a little less fervor than before.

After he’d finished, Hajime kissed me softly on the cheek. “Let’s eat. Dinner’s going to get cold, and I made one of your favorites tonight.”
I caught him by the arm as he went to get up. “Hey, Tachi?”

“Hm?” He sat back down and cocked his head to the side.

“I was thinking…maybe we shouldn’t make out like that anymore.” I knew he would ask why, and then I would have to explain to him about my relationship with Tsubasa. This was my chance. I couldn’t chicken out now.

“Why do you say that?” He blinked twice. “Is there a different manner in which you’d like to make out? I’m willing to try anything once. Except handcuffs. You know I don’t do handcuffs.”

“Hajime, I’ve been seeing someone.” I decided to ease into it. He’d flip if I came right out and confessed ‘Hey, I’ve got plans for your sister.’

A small, strangled noise emerged from his throat as his face went white and his lips started to quiver.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen, but…two months ago…it just did. I didn’t mean to keep it from you. I was worried you’d take it badly, so I lied. I’m sorry, Hajime, but I’m seeing Tsubasa.”

He slowly stood, body shaking as he glared fiercely. He smacked me hard across the face and started screaming. “How dare you! My sister?! How could you do this to me?! First of all, she’s way too young for you, and second…my sister?! Of course I’d take it badly! But, to lie to me, to go behind my back with my sister, don’t you even feel guilty about it?!”

“Of course I do.” I shot to my feet and tried to explain myself. “I’ve felt ashamed of myself every time I looked you in the eye and told you I was going somewhere else when I was really going to be with her. Every time I kiss her, I think of you, and I feel sick with myself. When I look into her eyes, I only ever see yours looking back at me. That’s why I decided to tell you now. I can’t lie to you any longer. I’m sorry, Hajime.”

“And what? You think I’d just forgive you after I found out what you’d done? Do you think I’d just forgive you anything, Akira?” he scoffed. “You have a really short-term memory, don’t you? Have you already forgotten the last time you abandoned me for a woman? You promised you’d never do it again. Have you forgotten?”

He thought I was leaving him again. No wonder he was so upset. “Hajime, just because I’m going out with Tsubasa, doesn’t mean that you and I can’t still—”

“—Whoa. Stop. Stop right there,” he laughed coldly, shaking his head, as if it say ‘are you even serious?’ “Who do you think you are? What’s that expression in English? ‘You can’t have your cake and eat it too?’ You don’t get both of us, Aki. It’s her or me.”
This was ridiculous. “You want me to choose between you?”

He nodded, completely serious. “Aki, if you just promise to break up with Tsubasa, I may still forgive you. You’ll have to beg, but perhaps I’ll forget this little incident ever happened.”

“You’re being unreasonable,” I sighed, starting to pace.

“I am not,” he huffed. “You’re the one in the wrong here, Aki, not me, so just say you’re sorry already.”

“You know what? No.” I’d finally lost my patience with him. He didn’t have a monopoly on me. I was free to love whomever I decided. Just because he was her brother, that didn’t give him the right to interfere like that.

“‘No?’” Tachibana replied quietly.

“No,” I reiterated firmly. “If you’re going to be like that, I pick Tsubasa. I love her, Hajime, and you have no right to try to make me choose.”

The anger faded from his face, and he looked down at his feet, beginning to cry. “Are you breaking up with me, Aki?”

I sighed. Enough was enough. “Look, Tachi. This pseudo-relationship thing we have going on between us isn’t healthy for either of us. I know it’s important for you to be shown affection and feel loved, and I do love you very much, but I’m not in love with you, and I can’t let our fake relationship get in the way of my real love life. I’m not your boyfriend, Tachi. I never was, and I never will be. We should stop fooling around. You need to go find a real boyfriend or girlfriend. Understand?”

He stared at me, but his eyes were out of focus. They moved back and forth, looking for something. He swallowed a number of times and opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn’t find the words. He was taking this hard.

“Hajime, we can still be friends, even though I’m dating your sister,” I rushed to assure him. He was fragile, and I was afraid that I had pushed him a little too hard. “Nothing has to change between us. I just don’t feel comfortable making out with you like before, though little pecks on the cheeks and lips are okay, and we can still snuggle and everything. I didn’t actually mean what I said about picking Tsubasa over you. You’re very important to me, and I don’t want things to change between us, okay?”

He shook his head and took a step back, tripping over the coffee table.

“Hajime!” I rushed to his side as he crumpled up on the floor, sobbing. “Hajime, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Don’t touch me!” he screamed, flailing an arm blindly at me. “G-go away.” He rolled
onto his side and muttered unintelligible to himself. “It wasn’t real. None of it was real. All this
time, it was just me that thought… I was the only one who ever felt… You don’t even like me.
You’re so important to me, but you don’t even… Everything I thought we had… The
anniversaries, the gifts, the kisses, the hugs… all of it was fake. These past two
years… everything I felt… everything I thought you felt… it was all a lie. All this time I’ve been
alone. I’m all alone.”

“Tachi?” I slowly approached and gently ran a hand through his hair. “Tachi, what’s
wrong? I don’t understand. Is this because of me and Tsubasa? Like I said, I’ll still be your
friend. I’m not abandoning you. You’re not alone. I’m right here. I’m always with you, so you’re
not alone. And… like I’ve said before, I like you very much. I do like you, so please don’t say
that I don’t. Are you… okay? Do you want me to get you something?”

He sat up and looked at me with pitiful eyes. “You don’t get it. You don’t even know.
You don’t have a clue what’s going on, what you’ve done, or why I’m upset. How can I be mad
at you when you don’t even know? That only leaves me to be mad at. It’s my own fault this
happened. I misunderstood. Somewhere along the line, I misunderstood, and I thought…” He
broke down into sobs once again.

I reached out to embrace him, but he pushed me away.

“Don’t. You’re only making it harder. It’s only harder if you’re nice to me. It only hurts
more.” He staggered to his feet and made his way to the bedroom slowly, like a zombie.

“What can I do to make it better?” I followed behind uncertainly. “Tachi, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m going to lie down, okay? Dinner’s on the table.”

“Won’t you eat anything?” I chewed nervously on my lip. I didn’t understand, but I got
the feeling that I had done something unforgiveable. He had that same look on his face—the one
from that one day on the roof when I had almost lost him. It was like all the happiness had been
drained from him, and not one ounce of hope was left.

“Maybe later,” he mumbled.

The door shut behind him, but I could still hear his muffled cries. It made it hard to enjoy
dinner. I picked at my food, saved the leftovers, did the dishes, and then resorted to pacing,
Chiaki following right on my heels.

She was upset too.

I picked her up and rocked her back and forth like Hajime usually did. It calmed her
down some, but I could tell that she was still anxious.

Tachibana came out at around nine, dressed to go out.
“Where are you going?” I got to my feet and followed him to the door.
“Out.” He shrugged, shying away from the hand that I tried to put on his shoulder. “With the guys.”
“Can I come with you?” I didn’t want him out of my sight. I kept getting the feeling that he was going to disappear.
“I kind of want to be alone.” He wouldn’t look me in the eye.
“With other people?”
“With anyone other than you,” Hajime admitted softly. It was simply a statement. There wasn’t the slightest bit of disdain or any form of anger at all.
“Are you mad at me, Tachi? Have I done something wrong?” I just wanted to know what was going on. I couldn’t stand being in the dark when he was acting like that.
He sighed and lightly brushed his lips against mine. “No. I just need some space to think. I just need to be away from you a bit. I need to sort some things out.”
“Make sure you come home safe tonight. Promise me,” I insisted.
“I promise.” He smiled, but it was empty, just for show.
I paced the apartment, fretting every second he was gone. I spent hours planning ways to cheer him up. I came up with elaborate plans and strategies. I would buy him flowers, cook for him, get him gifts, take him out to dinner, kiss him and hold him and snuggle with him. I’d do anything to make him better.
He came home around midnight, his eyes red and his face puffy.
“Hajime, I’ve decided to break up with Tsubasa,” I announced. “I’m sorry that I picked her over you. I was wrong. I should never have picked her over all the things we’ve been through together, so please forgive me and don’t cry anymore.” I took him into my arms and held him tight. “I’ll do anything, so please just smile. I can’t stand seeing you like this.”
“Aki,” he sighed, “I don’t want you to break up with Tsubasa.”
“You don’t?” Then what was the problem?
He pushed me back so that we were at arm’s length. “No. I want you to love her and treasure her. I’ll kill you myself if you ever hurt my baby sis.” He let go and started walking to our room.
“Then we’re not fighting because of Tsubasa?” I racked my mind for another possible cause.
“We’re not fighting, Akira.” Hajime shrugged, going to get changed for his bath.
“Aren’t we?” I grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to face me; he looked to the
ground, shuddering at my touch. “Then why don’t you want me to touch you? Why are you crying? Why won’t you look at me?” I needed answers.

“Please.” He threw his arms around my neck and started crying anew. “I can’t…I can’t…” His lips met mine passionately, and all I could do was go along with it.

Just as suddenly as he’d pulled me towards him, he pushed me back and retreated to the bathroom where he sobbed as he bathed.

The next day, Christmas Eve, he stayed in bed, crying.

I offered him food, but he silently refused.

He just shook his head and went on crying.

The next day, Christmas Eve, he stayed in bed, crying.

I cancelled the date that I had had planned with Tsubasa to stay home and watch over him. I ended up staring at the TV with Chiaki on my lap, whimpering softly.

The day after that I had to go to my mom’s house. “Hajime, I have to go. My cousin from America is over because she’s going to be studying abroad at our school when the new term begins. Mom said I had to be there. Won’t you come too? You’re part of the family, after all.”

He shook his head under the covers.

“I don’t want to leave you alone. Please come?”

He shook his head again.

“Then I’m going to get someone to stay with you for the day.”

Again with the shaking of the head.

“I’m really worried about you, Tachi. Won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

There was only silence.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I’m going to head out then. I love you, Hajime.” I pulled back the covers and kissed him on the forehead.

An action that I’d thought would calm him only served to make him wail like his heart had been ripped out.

I called Toru to stay with him.

When I got home, I went straight to the bedroom to check on him, but he wasn’t there. I found him in the kitchen with a knife in his hand.

“What are you doing?” I yelped in fear, pulling the knife away from him.

“Slicing the other one open?” he chuckled, nodding towards the carrots on the cutting board.

“I’m scared,” I whimpered, dropping the knife and pulling him into my arms. “I’m scared that I’m going to lose you, and I don’t know why. I don’t know anything. I don’t know what to
do to stop it. I can’t lose you, Hajime.” I let my tears fall freely, holding on to him for dear life.

“Shh…” He rubbed his palm in circles on my back. “You won’t lose me. I’m yours forever. Don’t worry, Aki. I just need some time. ‘All things heal in time.’ Right? Don’t cry.”

“Where’d you learn all of those sayings?” I hiccupped, drying my eyes.

“Okaa-chan taught me.” He shrugged. “Aki, I’m going to be moving out, okay? Don’t worry about the rent; I’ll still pay my half. I’m going to move back in with Okaa-chan and Obaa-chan. I can’t live here anymore.”

“Why not?” I must have done something. Why else would he leave me like that? He was running away from me.

“Cause. This place is filled with so many memories that were once really happy. Now, thinking about them, they just make me miserable. Like…this kitchen. I spent hours practicing and perfecting my cooking skills here so that I could cook for you. And the dining room is where I met with all of my friends for the first time—the friends you made for me. The hall is where we first made out, and the couch is where we cuddled. On the floor is where we got drunk that one time, and in the bedroom is where we snuggled and…you know…that one time when we got drunk and went to third base. It’s also where you took care of me when I was sick and where you gave me Chiaki. This is the place where I thought I was truly happy for the first time in my life, and this is the place where I found out that it was all a lie. I’m not strong enough right now to continue to live here anymore.”

That night, he gathered his things, and he left, saying: “Please take care of Chiaki…and yourself.” He kissed me lightly on the cheek.

“You can’t leave Chiaki behind. She’ll miss you too much.”

“I can hardly take care of myself at the moment. I don’t want to burden Mom and Grandma any more than I have to.” He kissed his baby goodbye and turned to leave. “Please don’t come visit for a while, okay? I love you, Akira.” He choked on the words.

“I love you too, Hajime.” I watched from the door as he got into the car and drove off into the distance.

I hurt everywhere. I was in tremendous pain, and I had no explanation for it. On days that I didn’t have work, I only got up to take Chiaki for a walk. It was a good thing that she had been left behind. Taking care of her made me take care of myself.

I made bland meals and longed for my live-in chef.

I lay on the couch with my limbs spread to take up more room. It was simply too big for one person. The entire apartment was too big for just one. My bed was cold without another
body heating it. It was too quiet. I talked to myself just to hear a voice other than Chiaki’s whining.

I realized that I was depressed on the third day when I noticed that Chiaki’s symptoms and my own were the same. I knew the dog was depressed. It was easy to diagnose.

She slept a lot, she ate only a little, and she cried a lot. She had no energy, was always anxious, and didn’t seem to enjoy anything that she’d used to.

It was on the third day when I noticed that I was doing the same things.

Chiaki slept in Hajime’s bed. She missed his smell, and it seemed to comfort her.

I gave up and gave it a try too. It calmed me slightly. His pillow smelled of his kiwi-lime shampoo, and the sheets were stained with the scent of his body wash.

Chiaki waited by the door at four o’clock every day—the time Hajime usually got home from classes. She’d howl and whine and run in circles like she’d been possessed.

I too found myself waiting, looking out the window occasionally, and then going back to pacing.

On the fifth day, I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to see him. I put Chiaki on her leash and started walking.

“Tadaima,” I called out when I had finally arrived, setting Chiaki down and taking off her leash.

She took off running, bounding up the stairs as fast as her stubby little legs could carry her. She was determined to see her mommy.

I, however, was not allowed to run up the stairs and throw myself into Hajime’s arms. I was stopped as soon as I’d walked in the door by my very displeased family. It was clear that I was not welcome.

“You have some nerve!” My mother fumed in English, swatting me with a hand towel. “Akira Eric Kimura, I am sorely disappointed in you! How dare you set foot in this house after what you did? How dare you?”

“Hold up,” I automatically became defensive. “What the heck did I even do, anyway?”

“What didn’t you do is a better question!” she snorted. “How could you cheat on your boyfriend with his own sister? You knew how close those two were, and then you went and screwed up everything! Tsubasa-chan is the only real, biological family Hajime has, and you just had to go and put a rift between them, didn’t you? We, as his adopted family, can only do so much, you know? I am ashamed to call you my son!”

“Mom, Hajime and I weren’t dating!” I rolled my eyes. Why did everyone think that?
“Oh puh-lease.” She returned my eye roll. “Akira, we all know. It’s been obvious for years that you two had a thing going on. The way you look at each other and touch each other and kiss and all that! Not dating—ha! The walls aren’t that thick, Aki. Did you think we couldn’t hear the two of you up there?” I hated when she spoke in English. She suddenly got a lot tougher.

“That’s not what you think it was,” I sighed. “We were just teasing and playing around. There was never anything funny going on between us when we were in high school.”

“And what about since college started?” she challenged.

“Sometimes things got a little…” I bit my lip, unsure how to continue. “But, we’ve never been a couple.”

My mother switched back to Japanese and solicited the help of Grandma Ayame. “You were here when Hajime and Akira started dating, weren’t you, Mother?”

The sage nodded, turning away from her drama. “It was on Christmas Eve two years ago. You asked him out right in front of me. It was unsightly. Too sappy.”

“That wasn’t…” I guess I had asked him out on Christmas Eve, but that was just as friends. “It wasn’t a date. It was just friends hanging out.”

Mom opened her mouth to argue, but then she stopped and really looked at me. “God. What a stupid boy I’ve raised. You honestly think that nothing happened.”

“Because it didn’t!” I insisted.

“Honey, it did. Whether you realized it or not, you and Hajime have been dating for years. He asked you to move in with him, for goodness’s sake. What did you think that meant? What do you think that meant to Hajime?”

I paused. “Was I the only one that didn’t think anything of it? Did…did Hajime think that we were…did he think that we were a couple?”

She nodded. “He told me all about it. When you went on dates…when you had fights…he always came over and told us all about it. How could you not know, Aki? You kissed him, didn’t you? And you two snuggled together when you slept, didn’t you? He cooked for you, and kissed you when you came home. You bought a dog together. You went on dates and celebrated anniversaries. Are you completely dense?”

“I…thought we were just friends.” Things were starting to make sense, and I was beginning to hate myself again. Only, this time, there was no Hideo-san to shoulder all of the blame. This had all been my doing. “You guys never let me play with other kids. I didn’t have any friends. You never taught me how to be friends. You never taught me how to deal with
people. How was I supposed to deal with people when you never taught me how it’s done? All I knew was what Hajime taught me. I thought he was teaching me how best friends behaved with each other, and it made sense based on what I’d seen in the media and what I’d read in articles. I didn’t have any experiences to draw on, so I just thought he was teaching me how to be friends. He said it was normal, and I believed him. Why didn’t you ever teach me anything useful?! What good is it to be able to recite history book passages and solve math problems and speak English when I don’t even know how to relate to other people?”

I ran upstairs, crying my eyes out the whole way. I ran to my old room where I found Hajime in bed, Chiaki sitting happily in his lap. Also sitting on the bed, beside my ex was my cousin, Sky. They appeared to be talking amicably about something. They seemed close.

She smiled at him, picked up the puppy, and quietly left us in peace.

“I’m sorry.” I cried, burying my face into his neck. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. It’s all my fault. I didn’t even know…I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Can you prove it?” He whispered, pushing my sopping bangs out of my face.


“Really? Anything? Like stand on your head?” He was yanking my chain.

“I’m serious, Hajime! There’s no excuse for what I’ve done. The way I’ve treated you all of these years…I didn’t even know anything. I messed up. I just want us to be able to be friends again. I want you to be happy again.”

“Oh?” He looked at me, as if he were considering something. “Would you trade your own happiness for mine?”

“What do you mean?” He’d lost me.

“Come here.” He took my hand and led me out to the balcony where we hung laundry.

There was some out drying at that moment, and it hid us from the view of anyone looking from another house or up from the street.

Hajime pulled back a sheet and looked out at the pure blue sky. “Nice day for the middle of winter, huh? Not too cold. Beautiful sky.”

“Hajime?” I was confused.

He let go of the sheet and turned to face me. “Akira, I’m in love with you. I have been since that time when we were nine years old and I bumped into you in the hallway. I love everything about you—your eyes, your hair, your nose, your mouth, your body, your birthmarks—”

“—Birthmarks?” I blinked. I didn’t have any birthmarks.
“Un.” He nodded, slipping his arm around me. “Here. In the center of your shoulder blades. You’ve got a little mole that looks like a crescent moon. And here.” His fingers touched the back of my right ear. “There’s a cute little dot where your ear creases and meets your head. I wasn’t finished, by the way. There are a lot of other things that I love about you. Like your voice, and the way you always worry about me, the way you speak, the way you move, the way you get angry, the way you’re oblivious, and the way you always do your best. You never give up, even when it’s hard.”

“I did that one time, but you saved me. I would have given up a thousand times if it weren’t for you, Tachi,” I quietly admitted.

He shrugged. “Fine. Whatever. I still think you’re sexy. This is my confession, and I can say whatever I want. You already had your turn.”

I nodded.

“Anyway, the point is, I love you, Akira. Do you love me?” He waited patiently, calmly. He wasn’t nervous or worried at all.

“I do…in my own way, I do. It’s not the same as what you feel for me, but…I’m not sure. I think it’s love. No one ever taught me, so it’s a little twisted. My body reacts to you, but I always feel bad about it, like it’s not right. I want to sleep with you, but, truly, it could be with anybody. I just want to feel things, and you always make me feel things, so…there are elements of lust to it, I guess. Sorry that I’m not as eloquent as you. I haven’t really had eleven years to think about it.”

“It’s fine. Go on.”

“I don’t know how to love you like you want to be loved. I don’t want to be your lover. I don’t think that I can make you happy. I want you to find someone worthy of you, and I want you to settle down and have kids and smile all of the time. I want the best for you. I also want you to be with me. I was never lying when I said that I wanted to be together forever. I want to be close to you. I want to snuggle and tease each other and share secrets under the covers at night. I don’t know what all of this means.” I looked down into his eyes. “Do you know?”

“It sounds like you want me to be your best friend, your brother, and your friend with benefits,” he summarized.

“Do I love you?” I chewed nervously on my lip.

“Yes and no.” He smiled. “I’m your precious best friend on whom you kind of have a crush. It’s not quite the romantic love I feel for you, but it makes me happy to know that I’m so important.”
“I’m sorry. I wish I could return your love.” I felt bad. I’d led him on for so long only to break his heart.

“You do…in your own way.” He shrugged, leading me back inside. “Now that we’ve got that settled, are you willing to trade your happiness for mine?”

“What do you mean?” I was still confused.

“Think about it. You’re in love with Tsubasa. You want to marry her and have kids and stuff, right?” The look he was giving me told me that Tsubasa’s overprotective brother would kill me if my answer was not “yes.”

“Of course,” I replied truthfully.

“Okay. That’s your happiness. Now. What would make me happy? Hint: it’s almost the same as yours.” He waited patiently for my answer.

“You…want me?”

“Correct. And that means?”

“Oh. You want me, but if you have me, that means that I can’t have Tsubasa.” I solemnly put the pieces together.

Hajime nodded. “You were a pretty good boyfriend before, so I figure that you’d be an even better boyfriend if you knew you were a boyfriend. Will you go out with me, Akira?”

I paused. I wanted him to be happy. I really, really did. I didn’t know if I were capable of doing it or not, but I wanted to make him happy. “In order for you to forgive me and make things right between us, you want me to take responsibility and be a real boyfriend to you?”

“Yep.” He smiled. “You don’t have to, you know. I’m not forcing you. I’ll probably be okay on my own. It all depends on how much you think you’ve wronged me and how important I am to you.”

“Okay.” I agreed with a resigned sigh. “I’ll go out with you.” It wasn’t the end of the world. Sure, I wouldn’t be perfectly happy, but there was no guarantee that things with Tsubasa would make me perfectly happy either. Hajime had always been a constant in my life, and I needed him. I wouldn’t lose him over something like this.

“Thank you,” he whispered, gently kissing me. “Hey, Aki? Will you sleep with me?”

I nearly swallowed my tongue. Man he worked fast. Then again, we’d been dating for two whole years…maybe more. I had confessed to him when we were fifteen. Did that count? Had Hajime thought that we’d been dating since then? That would explain a lot. It would also raise more questions. This was so messed up. I cursed my idiocy and lack of training in interpersonal communication.
“Yeah,” I whispered, kissing him back. “Just…tell me what to do.”

We locked the door, and clothes slowly fell to the floor. I was nervous.

“You sure that you’re okay with this? You can always change your mind. It’s not like you’re shackled to me for life.”

“No.” I sighed, gathering my resolve. “I’ve imagined doing this a thousand times. I can make love to you.”

“Just curious, but in your fantasies, who was on top?” my boyfriend chuckled, kissing my jaw.

“You were on top, but…I think I was doing the guy’s part.” My ears turned vermillion as I admitted it.

“Yeah, that’s usually what I picture too.” He smirked as he pinned me down to the bed.

I was nervous at first, but that quickly dissolved. It was hard to be anxious when Hajime’s lips and fingers always seemed to find the right places. He mixed tickling and caressing with interesting comments and jokes to keep me chuckling the whole time. Except for when his mouth was otherwise…employed. Once he’d finished and had wiped his mouth off, he lay down beside me and signaled that it was his turn to be serviced.

It was then that I was nervous again. Hajime was more experienced at this than I was. I copied some of his earlier moves, but they didn’t seem to have the same effect on him as they had on me.

“Because our bodies are different.” He shrugged, amused at my attempts. “You know my body. You know what I like, so make me feel good, already.” He chuckled and nipped my ear.

When I thought about it, I knew what I needed to do. I knew all of his ticklish and sensitive spots. I knew how he liked to be touched.

“See. You’re a natural,” he moaned.

Once I’d finished and we were both breathing hard, I looked at him, and I knew that the time for foreplay was over. “Ready?” I breathed, spreading his legs.

“Stop.” He smiled, kissing the corner of my mouth.

“Stop?” I blinked. Was I doing something wrong?

“Thanks.” He got up, tussled my hair, and started to put his clothes back on.

“Thanks?” I parroted.

“For being willing to go so far to keep me by your side.” Tachibana tossed my boxers at me, hitting me in the face. “I feel better now knowing that I didn’t lose to Tsubasa. You picked me over her, and that means a lot to me. Get dressed so that we can go take a bath—or do you
want to smell like me for the rest of the day?”

“You were testing me.” I blinked, putting on my clothes.

He nodded.

“So…what are we now?” I seemed to be in a constant state of confusion nowadays.

“I’m your best friend and unofficial brother that you kind of have a crush on…soon to be your brother-in-law,” he stated with a smirk. “I’m also dating your cousin.”

“I hate you,” I pouted. “You made me do all of that, and you were dating my cousin the whole time?!”

“I didn’t force you to do anything.” Hajime shrugged, leading me to the bathroom. “Remember? I said that you could change your mind. Besides, you liked it.”

“Yeah…well…you’re dating my cousin?!” I was embarrassed about how vulnerable I had been in front of him, and I felt that I needed to act displeased in order to preserve my masculine pride.

“Kind of.” He smirked. “Sora-chan181 has a thing for Asian men. I have a thing for westerners in general. Plus, she’s kind of like you—her mocha hair, her blue eyes. She’s nice and kind of spunky. She’s been taking care of me these past few days, and we got to talking. I really like her, and she likes me, so I was thinking that since things between us were pretty much hopeless, I might as well give someone else a shot. I’ve never had a serious relationship besides you, so…” He smiled and flicked water droplets at me. “I want to try to make this work out. She was pretty open-minded when I told her about myself. Your cousin’s kind of a hippie…actually, she’s kind of like Okaa-chan. She’s really easy-going and accepting and understanding. She said she wouldn’t mind me sleeping with you just once when I told her what I was going to do.”

“You told her about this?” I could feel all of the blood in my body going to my face.

“Well, yeah. I plan on being completely honest with her. She understood when I told her about how long I’ve been in love with you, but now that we’ve had our fling, I’m an honest man. No more fooling around. I’m a one-girl kind of guy.”

I nodded. Either Hajime had magically matured without my noticing over the years, or Sky was a worker of miracles. Or a little of both. Well, they were both strange individuals. Maybe they were made for each other.

That didn’t make me any less protective of him.

Two days later, while we were helping Hajime move all of his stuff back into the

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181 “Sora” means sky in Japanese.
apartment, I pulled Sky aside.

“Hey.” I was just about as socially awkward as usual, and I unfortunately didn’t have much else planned to say.

“Yeah, Akira-kun?” Sky blinked, waiting for me to go on.

“Uh…about Hajime.” I tried to think of the best way to say it.

“What about him?” Those crystal blue eyes blinked innocently at me again.

I switched to English. “You’re serious about him, right? I don’t want him getting his heart broken again. He can’t take it.”

She followed my lead, speaking in English too. “Don’t worry, coz.” She smiled and clapped me on the back. “I need to marry a Japanese guy so that I can get citizenship. Plus, he’s loaded.”

I was going to kill her in cold blood.

She burst into peals of laughter. “God, your face! I’m kidding! I’m kidding! While it’s true that I want to get citizenship and marry a Japanese, I’m not really interested in Hajime’s money. The way he talked about it, it sounded like blood money, anyway. He’s sweet. I really like him. I don’t know if we have marriage in our future, but I’m not planning on cheating or breaking up with him any time soon. I just want things to develop naturally between us, so don’t worry about it. His heart is safe with me.”

“Good.” I sighed. “Good. He needs someone like that right now. I’m counting on you.”

“Hey.” My best friend came up behind us and forced a cardboard box into my hands. “Less chatting, more heavy lifting. Boxes don’t move themselves.”

It was the summer after we graduated that Hajime’s band signed with his aunt’s record label, and Prince of Punks was a smash hit. Pretty, charismatic boys that could sing, dance, and act were easy to market. Hajime instantly found himself a local idol. A few years later he’d make it to the national level, and a few years after that, his music would be overseas.

Sky had to go back stateside to finish up her degree, and during that time, I had to listen to my lovesick best friend whine and moan about his long-distance relationship. We had commiserating parties where he complained about not getting any because of the physical distance. I complained about not getting any because of the age difference.

Thankfully, in the fall, Sky was able to get an assistant teaching position at a high school in a suburb of Kyoto, and the happy couple was reunited. The assistant teaching position turned into a more permanent job, and come fall of our twenty-fifth year, there was an engagement ring
on my cousin’s finger.

While the match made in heaven spent their twenty-fifth year in absolute bliss, I spent the year waiting impatiently for December sixteenth. Went it finally came, it was the best night of my life. Tsubasa, the lovebirds, and I went on a double date to an expensive restaurant, and afterwards we went our separate ways.

Tsubasa and I walked around the lake in the park, holding hands as the snow fell softly. A thin layer built up on the ground, and it made crunching noises under our feet. We stopped and sat down on a park bench and just enjoyed the quiet night and each other’s company for a while.

“Want something warm to drink?” I offered, planning on getting something for her whether she wanted it or not.

“Milk tea, please.” She smiled up at me happily, those gorgeous burnt sienna eyes smiling too.

“Back in a sec.” I grinned, heading off to the vending machines under the oak tree. I placed the ring under the tab of the can so that it wouldn’t fall off, and then I handed her the warm beverage.

“A…” She carefully removed the ring and examined it. Then she looked at me and then back at the ring.

I took it from her and got down on one knee, deciding to do this the American way. “Will you marry me, Tsubasa?”

“Yes!” she squealed, throwing her arms around me and beginning to cry happily.

I slid the ring onto her finger and admired how good it looked on her.

The following summer, once Tachi got back from his tour, he and Sky got married. They decided to do a purely American wedding, both of them insisting that they would look better in a tux and a dress than in the traditional garments. I was, of course, selected as best man, and I was, of course, at a loss for what I should do. Uotani and Kazuki helped me out there. Uotani just happened to know a thing or two, and Kazuki had experience what with serving a similar role in Kasumi and Shigeki’s wedding two years before. All and all, the wedding was a success, and the newlyweds were seen safely off to Italy.

Next was my own wedding, the spring after Tsubasa graduated from university and got settled within the company.

Haruka-san was not pleased in the slightest. His wife’s lovechild was slated to take over the company while his own son was off making a name for himself in show business. To top it
all off, the little heiress was marrying a commoner with not such a great background. It was like breeding a prize-winning purebred with a mutt off the streets.

Midori-san was more accommodating. She wanted her precious baby girl to be happy.

I was scared stiff of my in-laws, but Tsubasa promised not to let them bully me once I became a member of the family. Hajime also offered his support.

My mother was thrilled, but Grandma Ayame was as sour as a Granny Smith apple. She was not pleased that she was losing me to the Tachibanas: “There will be no one left to continue the Kimura line.”

I too was a little concerned about becoming Tachibana Akira because of all of the responsibilities and pressure to produce an heir, but I had to admit that I liked the sound of the name, no matter how much I would miss my old appellation. It was like losing a part of my past to gain a new future. Grandma Ayame would get over the lack of a Kimura heir. She’d only become a Kimura when she’d married, after all.

The ceremony was a bit of a blur. I remember exchanging rings and drinking cups of sake with my bride and in-laws. There was a reception and congratulations, and then I was on a plane to Southern France with my wife. My wife.

It was September, just before I turned twenty-eight, and on that day in particular, I was eager to get home from work and call Hajime. No sooner had I walked in the door to the Tachibana manor and loosened my tie, the doorbell rang.

“Hey neighbor!” My best friend grinned, inviting himself in.

“I was just about to call you.” Now that he was here, I didn’t know how to tell him my exciting news.

“Oh?” He had Chiaki with him. I didn’t remember it being my week with our daughter, but sometimes he just brought her with him because he could. He lived right next door after all. It was no great feat.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t just blurt it out. “Wanna hang out?”

“Un!” He smiled and went to the living room. He seemed to feel more comfortable in this house now than when it had been his own home. “Tsubasa home yet?”

“She’s got a meeting,” I informed him as I changed into more comfortable clothing.

I envied Tachi’s profession. He always got to wear whatever he wanted…well, unless they were filming or doing a photo shoot or something. I should have agreed to play tambourine for them when I’d had the chance. Being rich and famous seemed to be more fun than my office...
We sat together on the couch in our usual position, his head on my shoulder, and my arm around him. Even after we’d decided we were in a strictly non-sexual relationship, we’d still kept up with snuggling and chaste kisses on the cheeks. We’d been so close for so long that it was no longer something of a sexual nature. We were just close, and that was how we expressed affection.

We talked about everyday things for a while, staring at the TV, but not really watching it. Then a commercial came on for baby food, and we both shifted slightly.

Hajime turned to me. “You know how I told you that one time back in college that I wanted a baby?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’m going to have a baby.” He grinned, proud as a peacock.

“Really?” I couldn’t help grinning back, just as widely.

“Well, not me physically. Sora-chan’s going to do that part, but I’m going to change diapers and have to get up in the middle of the night and smell like baby food for the next two years.” Somehow he seemed excited about all of the unpleasant aspects.

“When did Sky tell you?”

“This morning. I came right after the shoot so that I could tell you. It was killing me having to sit through all that and not tell the guys, but I wanted you to be the first one I told.”

“Tsubasa told me last night, but it was too late to call you, so I had to sit at my desk at work today, just waiting to get home and tell you.” I was finally able to share my good news.

“No way.” He laughed. “You too, huh? Crazy! Aki, we’re going to be parents together! Isn’t that exciting!?”

“Yeah.” I grinned, happy to be able to share this part of my life with my best friend. “Do you want a boy or a girl?”

“A girl. Definitely.” He’d probably been thinking about this for a very long time. “I wanna name her Shiori. What about you?”

“As long as it’s healthy.” I shrugged. “But…a girl might be nice, if you’re going to have a girl.”

“If you have a boy, he can marry my daughter.” Hajime was getting ahead of himself like usual.

“They’ll be cousins. They can’t get married.” I gently reminded.

He pursed his lips and pouted “You know, Tsubasa is only my half-sister, so they’d really
only be half cousins. Does that count?”

“I’m not sure.” My brow furrowed. “But, since Sky is my cousin, your kid will be my second cousin, making our kids…third cousins?”

“Maybe we should just both have girls or both have boys, and they can just be friends,” he revised.

“Unless one or both of them turn out to be gay or bi or something.” I chuckled.

“You know, I’m not sure if I’d want that or not. I mean, it worked out okay for me, but homosexuals have a hard time sometimes. Not everyone gets ‘happily ever after.’” He sighed, and I regretted making him think about it.

“Do you think we got ‘happily ever after,’ Hajime?” I let the topic flow in a new direction.

He thought about it for a minute. “You know, I think I did. Kind of a ‘rags to riches’ story.”

“Maybe ‘riches to a different kind of riches’ story is more appropriate.” I chuckled.

“I don’t like thinking that much.” He shrugged. “So. Got a name picked out?”

“I haven’t thought about it yet. I’ve decided to not name it Kou because that’s apparently a terrible name. Akira is also out. Hajime, Tsubasa, Midori, Carol, Ayame, Haruka, and Sky are similarly out. I don’t plan on naming it Toru, Shigeki, Kasumi, Kazuki, or Shouta either, so how many names does that leave?”

“Smart-aleck.” He smiled wryly and elbowed me in the ribs. “How about Hikaru? It’s a good name for a boy or a girl. I know Tsubasa is a big ‘Tale of Genji'182 fan, and it kind of goes with your name. You know. Akira—bright/brightness—and Hikaru—shinning/bright. What do you think?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” I mused. “I’ll talk to Tsubasa about it later. I’m not sure she’ll be up for picking out names, yet, though. She only just found out, after all.”

He smiled nervously at me, biting his lip. “Aki, this is kind of scary. I’m not so good at taking care of myself. In just nine months, I’m going to be responsible for a little, fragile life. I’m not really sure that I’m ready.”

“It’s not like you have to do it all by yourself.” I smiled, giving him a reassuring hug. “You’ve got Sky and Tsubasa, the guys, Mom, and Grandma Ayame. And I’ll be with you. You’re not alone.”

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182 The main protagonist is Hikaru Genji, or the shining Genji.