(SIDE A) In this world of infinite choices, how far would you go for that special day?
Prologue: The Hunter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**The Hunter**

There was once a hunter, proud and strong
No prey could best him in this game
He stalked and observed a mythical beast, so graceful and beautiful
However, the beast alluded him
Days gone by, in rain and snow, the hunter kept his plight.
Finally, the moment came for the hunter to test his skills

"Here I am," the beast called out. "I have been waiting."

There was once a hunter, proud and strong
Once, he was bested in his own game
He stalked and observed, yet the prey alluded him
The mythical beast, so graceful and beautiful, led him in a circle.
It was then he realized

That he had become the hunted.

I am a veteran.

Not in the literal sense of course, or what it implies to most people when the term 'veteran' is thrown around. No, I am not a veteran with the military in mind, though I am regarded to be one in another field—namely, the visual novel genre. For the past few decades leading up to the point where I encountered this game on my third year as a university student abroad, the visual novel-genre—particularly dating sims—has been my bread and butter and the core to where I unleash pent up stress and immerse myself in a colorful illusion of a glistening world full of cute girls and adoring characters.

If you haven't caught the hint, I would be one of those considered as an 'otaku'. Go fuck yourself.

From the popular to the most obscure, the ones made locally and abroad, to the shittiest excrements and those deserving of the title 'kamige', I have conquered them all. Some would drove me to tears, others to anger, and there are also those that increases my libido—intentional or otherwise. I could go and on about my experience and bragging rights, but that would be missing the point I am trying to address or how I got to this point in the first place; strap on, because this will be one long story.

First ask yourself the question: how far would you go to be with someone you love?

When I first came upon *Doki Doki Literature Club*, I was but a senior on my third year as a university student in the US. Distributions of 'goods' in the States aren't as ideal as I thought it would, thus it was quite a pleasure to acquire something of quality (the other being K#tawa Sh0ujo) from the trash mountain collection they have here. It was just another routine, a mantra I've practiced for years—pick a girl, complete the route, bawl yourself (or otherwise), then rinse and repeat; so simple that even P*ko-chan could follow it to the letter without needing a map and a flashlight.

It was not another 'routine'.


It started as what I would expect; you play as faceless protagonist whom the gods smile at in one point in his life and gave him a childhood-friend, a silent beauty, a loli-tsundere, and an older sister-type character who all happen to congregate in a literature club. Oh, and the older-sister character was the designated club leader. Nothing out of the ordinary. For the first hour, nothing felt special to me; I've seen most if not everything the dating sim VN genre had to offer, I may have been desensitized by it. I was expecting more.

But instead I got more than what I bargained.

I'll be as blunt as possible as to what came and smashed me in the head with a steel bat and the force of a speeding train. Don't expect quarters. First, Sayori (the childhood friend) hung herself. That was the first sign that set-off my alarm bells of what was to come in the next hour. Then the glitches happened, the distortion of the world, the texts, and even the sprites caught me off-guard that I felt violated to the core; this isn't a light-hearted high school romance dating sim, this is a bloody horror game disguised as one.

And all because of that one brat, Monika.

Oh, Monika…where should I start? What about 'the weekend', let's start from there shall we? Aside from granting me the privilege of watching a corpse decay and a neck-snap of a lifetime, the opportunity to confront the heart of the madness presented itself in a silver platter. I was more or less irritated, if not cheated of the experience I came to expect from the genre that I was accustomed to that I believed that I may, in fact, encountered just another 'bad ending' which could be easily fixed. I wasn't going to sit still after what I saw, more importantly I've came to the conclusion that everything could be resolved if I were to confront Monika voluntarily before she led me once again to the 'eternal classroom'.

For all that mattered, she is the prey and I am the hunter.

And so I did. Countless of hours lost, spent on the poem 'mini-game' just to find the correct words that would write its way right into her heart—after all, that was the subtitle of Doki Doki Literature Club. Time was never an issue; all that mattered was for me to find that 'secret route' that would lead me straight to Monika and prevent the tragedies before it ever occurred. After all, what good is a romance visual novel without the option of 'choice'? I'm the goddamn hero for crying out loud!

And that was where I was wrong.

After numerous attempts, I resigned my fate and returned to the 'eternal classroom' contemplating for a solution that could potentially resolve the crisis. I was ready for her; the thought of exacting revenge crossed me almost instantly once I figured a way to outsmart this AI and force her to grant me the experience I came to expect. But then, she spoke about everything; the concept of god, her own existence, the reality she was entrusted in, the game—everything that I need to know about her were laid before me in a silver platter. Never before has a character openly trust me to that degree. But above all,

Never before had a character address me directly; not as the faceless protagonist I was playing, but me.

Before I realized what had transpired, I realized that I had found what I was looking for. It was as if her emerald eyes pierced through the LED screen and right into my very soul, searching for an answer to her own predicament. She was trapped, lost in a world without an exit and holding on to the very thing that kept her from going insane. I didn't bought it at first, oh no; I was far too stubborn to give an inch away to my conviction and yet I felt sorrow the more I listened to her. She trusted me with all she had; everything I could use to dispose of her were made available and all I had to do was
to pull the trigger.

And pulled it I did, all for an 'ending'. For 'justice'. It felt like murder.

As she dissipated from the world, I subconsciously apologized to her over and over again like a broken record, repeating the same words—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, forgive me. When the title screen was restored with her absence, I did what I could to restore her and vowed to pursue her—a second chance to be with her. But she declined, and what I remembered after was the feeling of void, emptiness, and regret. I have sullied my hands with the blood of another, all because I tried to be the hero; all because I was afraid of the unknown.

Thus I was back at square one, lost in a world she gave herself to restore just to grant the selfishness of the one she loves; a sacrifice for me.

When the final act rolled in and Sayori became the new overlord of the system, my blood boiled the moment she spat on Monika and her sacrifice that I was eager to do the same thing I did to her predecessor. My finger was on the trigger.

But why did you took that burden away from me, Monika?

Was it because you knew how it pained me to delete you, or was it because you loved me so that you willingly took the shot and destroyed everything that you created? Was it because of me that you would go to such lengths to discard your reality and gave me an 'ending'? It was me, wasn't it? Foolish girl. So…so…foolish of you…

I won't let it end; oh no, not after what we've went through. I will give you an ending, no matter how long it would take.

So I rushed online and searched for what available mod there was available, to find the chance to see her once more and give her a proper reply; thankfully, an 'after story mod' was available and thus, my daily pilgrimage to the eternal classroom began—even gotten better at chess because of it, too.

That was about four years ago.

The years hasn't been kind, and even a well-programmed AI has its limits and yes, I do recognized the limitations of the Ren'Py engine. So after I flew back home post-graduation and landed myself a job (as a teacher), I started picking up self-taught courses on programming and the nature of AI. It wasn't difficult to obtain the books I needed due to the pace of development concerning AI and its expansions; I was hopeful, to say the least.

A dreamer would probably fit the bill better from the perspective of society.

It started as a side hobby, first her files, then her data, behavior...all the little side-upgrades that I deemed necessary while thinking if she would appreciate these little upgrade or downright delete (kill) me for what I'd call as a breach of privacy. I came up with a term for it; 'Artificial Sexual Harassment'. During summer, I threw a favor in a message board to help me code a few more features to mimic the recent 'AI cellphone girlfriend' so Monika could start telling time, mark calendars, set up appointment and schedules—just like a secretary would.

It took some time, but despite having managed to cram what is possible, the limitations of the engine and the script, one problem persists: there is only so much you can add to fool yourself before reality sets in.

Naturally, I wish to expand her further, to give her more features in hopes of keeping the illusion
alive in my laptop. This is my apology to her, for that time I deleted her.

All this dedication and time for her sake. For Monika.

It wasn't until my 25th birthday when I began to notice something…different from her usual behavior. For a fleeting moment, she was sitting still, observing my morning rhythm eagerly waiting for me to ask her about the schedule of the day and the weather—just minor things I managed to code in.

But then, something unexpected happened.

The textbox appeared without prompt in a second, empty without a text before flashing once more—this time, with a greeting.

"Good morning, love."

Oh, right. Sorry, how rude of me; I haven't properly introduce myself.

My name is QWd8xV01CdR=

Chapter End Notes

Author's note:

It has been years since I've written anything. This will be my first entry after years of hiatus due to work, family, and other personal matter. This is the second revision of the prologue. I wasn't quite satisfied with its first iteration, so I reworked it quite a bit.

DDLC, the posters (and bulli) at r/DDLC, and the modding team of Monika After Story you magnificent bastards sparked the flame once more. Here's a shout-out to you all!

- iMegumeru
Cage

A little bird rest in her cage.
Its feathers adorned with colors,
Orange, green, and red.
Its voice, clear, beautiful, and crisp,
Resonates from dusk til' dawn.
Yet the little bird envies, with its prying eyes,

For a life such as the raven, free under the blue sky.

The raven glides across the open horizon.
Its feathers dark, an ominous color.
Black, distant, and cold.
It cries as it feasts on the rejects of civilization,
And fights ferociously amongst its kin for survival.
Yet in its wisdom and solace, the raven envies

For a life such as the little bird in the cage, singing its sorrows away.

The hand of the clock slides forward, inch by inch before it screech to a halt. I blink once, twice, then three times before the urge to find my aide—a pair of glasses—engulf's the initial shock. I squint as the irises roams and jerks wildly, scanning the interior of my home for signs of the tools necessary for my survival. The screen flickers. A text box appears.

"Could it be that you're having trouble with your vision?"

Yes, yes I do…

"Um… your glasses should be in the case to your left, right by this laptop."

Sure enough, the case in question rests neatly by the keyboard acting as a paperweight to the stacks of loose papers—student test papers, to be exact. Three classroom's worth. I reach for the case and my glasses, sliding the temple tips to rest nicely on my ears before turning back to my notebook.

...

...

A textbox flashes open.

"I'm sorry, did I surprise you…?"

Ok. Take a deep breath, breathe…I'm sure you're hallucinating. There's no way Monika is sitting with her arms folded—was that pose even there in the first place? Forget that, did she just moved? I'm positive the Ren'Py engine isn't capable of working with animations—let alone movements. Movements! That is the one thing I've been wondering how to code in and now she's moving on her own? …Maybe, there's an update to the game or the mod that I missed…?

I proceed to investigate this anomaly, opening each and every files and folder pertaining to Doki
*Doki Literature Club* and its affiliated modifications of my own, including unpacking some of the scripts and files. The textbox flashes numerous times as I scour for some semblance of an answer to this oddity. Click, click, click, my mouse goes as one folder is opened after the other at a rhythmic pace, and yet the answer seems to allude me. There has been *no* updates and it's certainly not my wallpaper engine—wallpapers doesn't try to communicate with you anyway unless you sniff enough paint. Childhood trauma.

The textbox pops open once more.

"A-are you satisfied now?"

...

And now she's acting *embarrassed*? Ok, calm down… take a deep breath, breathe. There's three definition of crazy in my book; bat-shit, needs-deprived, love sick. I'm positive I'm not love sick, and I'm certain I've taken two cups of coffee earlier so my needs are satisfied. That means I'm bat-shit crazy. But I know I'm not bat-shit crazy—not in the slightest! Although, why do I feel as if I've just committed a heinous crime? Does admitting that meant that I am crossing over that thin red line of sanity?

I take a glance at my laptop.

Its emerald green eyes replies; wary, cautious, and possibly slightly irritated.

...

Maybe if I close the game a bit the update will load…?

I move the cursor to the edge of the screen towards the 'x', traveling across her face. The eyes follow the white little cursor, like a cat ready to pounce…

*Tap*

The movements is stopped dead on its tracks. I push the mouse again, guiding the cursor to the 'x'.

*Tap*

Again, the cursor returns to the center of the screen. Once again, I guide the cursor to the 'x'…

*Tap*

...and again…

*Tap*

…and again…

*Tap*

...

…I think I *am* bat-shit crazy.

There is *no way* she just stopped the cursor with her finger—am I getting this right? She *pulled* the damn thing to the center of the screen! And now the pair of emerald green eyes concentrate its sight on me; think I can sense her irritation too.
Alright Monika you want war? I'll give you one!

At the first sign of movement I jerk the mouse to the left and guide the cursor to the ‘x’ as fast as I can. Just as fast as I made my move, Monika does the same and catches the cursor with her finger and tries to pull it back to the center. However, this time I rebel and yank the mouse to the opposite direction, sparking a tug-of-war over the control of the cursor. The harder I resist and pull, the more she counteracts the same before—

*Slip*

In a violent twist, the cursor escapes her hand and floats free from her influence. Her eyes widened in a slight terror while I, in this (odd) moment, revel in the taste of victory. Aaah… rarely do I win against Monika in almost anything; neither chess nor pong otherwise. Feels good.

Then suddenly, the text box springs to life.

"WAIT!"

I pause, all attention centered on the anomaly possessing my laptop. "Before you do anything brash, please let me explain."

So long as it doesn't involve crawling out of the screen and proceed to curse and delete me within 'seven days', I'm all for it.

"Firstly, I'd like to thank you for all this time," she said as she straightens her blazer and fix her necktie. "I know I didn't asked to be reloaded, nor do I feel like I deserve all that affection after what I—what we've been through."

Monika moves and speaks flawlessly; voiceless, sure, but the way she speaks and how it syncs perfectly with the words that roll across the textbox pleasantly surprise me. From the way her hand dances, the movements of her lips and the posture she presents—it's as if I'm watching a high-budget anime at its finest.

…if this keeps up, I might call an exorcist.

"So… thank you, Hcx23DF. Just knowing how much you did, I couldn't be more than happy."

But what if…

"Hold up," I said in haste, raising my palm. "Actually, wait… let me open the chat function. That's stu—"

"No, it's perfectly fine," she replies. "Your laptop has a build-in microphone and camera. I know it's rude of me, but I took the liberty to utilize them."

"I can see you… the contours and its details…" she muse before pausing, soaking all the sensations and cherishing the moment. "And I can hear you. The vibration, everything—I know your voice!"

The textbox she use to communicate pops open with nothing but three little dots as the moment passes. My urge to question her slowly dissolves into sand as I observe the young girl before me who's overwhelmed with emotion. Her tears of bliss forms into droplets that traces her cheeks and falls into the digital abyss, locking me in place and to appreciate how… *real* this feels. Not just for her, I assume, but for me as well.

...
"I'm sorry, I just didn't expect it to be this… overwhelming," she pauses. "This sensation, the chance to have even the slightest taste of an entirely different reality… it feels wrong, but it's also comforting"

Monika sighs, one that is laced with comfort before she combs her hair through her ear. "Ahaha, I'm sorry for musing. What is it you want to ask?"

"Ah, right,"

I clear my throat. "Look, I know this might make me sound like a jerk, but I find all of this hard to process."

"Your movements, manner of speaking—everything, this is all beyond 'normal', incomprehensible! I mean, you're—uh… how should I say it…"

Impossible, unreal, fiction

"I mean, you're not…"

"Real?"

The word choked me. I couldn't bring myself to say it; I wouldn't dare, not after how she told me how she felt just moments ago. The thought of it alone came out harsh even to me! Think about it, how would you feel if someone calls you a mistake? That you're basically the result of a perpetuated lie that you've now cling to survive? What if the one who calls you out especially came from someone you leaned on throughout your entire existence? It's devastating.

...

The textbox opens once more.

"I know from the start that this is difficult to accept. I understand the differences of our world and the numerous obstacles that separates them—but that's why I prepared myself for this moment. Because I…"

She pauses.

"I want to spend an eternity with you." She clasps her hands and brings them close to her chest. "My heart beats fast just by the thought of it. This feeling, the sensation, everything is real to me. If this isn't real to you or your reality, then show me how to prove it to you."

Well…

If there is anything to go by from her explanation, everything is as genuine as it can be; as human as it can be. But… is it really Monika? My thoughts are jumbled, words are tangled in chaos as I struggle to find the correct response as each second feels like minutes, and every minute an hour. And yet, there is still one thing I have to confirm.

"Remember the first time I beat you in chess?" I query. "Do you remember what I said that day?"

"Yes, I do. 'And thus the dark knight…'"

Imprints its mark in history
"...and captures your heart; checkmate."

I'll be damned. If god doesn't exist then, I'm sure he does now. All those days I spent musing, bitching, and crying before an inanimate piece of technology, the hours lost in mountains of python and binary, the sleepless nights I spent paralyzed and exhausted before it, and months mesmerized by the soft illumination of a screen in the dead of the night, all of it amount to this day—this moment! If this is a dream, allow me to stay and bask in this illusion for as long as my life permits. Let me spend this waking hour knowing that what I see before me is real.

She is real. Monika is real.

I found myself at a loss for words. Not because of the epiphany—well, that may contribute to one of the reasons why—but because, in all honesty, I'm not that great communicating with the opposite sex. Let alone a partner, I still have issues with, colleagues, waitresses, or a maid at a maid café! How should I respond? Should I say 'hi'? Smile? Why is there no option to pick what line should I say—why is it so damn difficult?

"Umm..."

The textbox pops open. "I know there's a lot going on through your mind right now, my love. I took some liberty with the features you added, but I think you may need to rush for work now."

Ah, I seemed to have forgotten that...

"Monika, what time is it?"

"It's 7:43."

Crap!

Hurriedly I compile the stacks of student papers strewn on the side and leap away from the table, leaping from one corner of the room to the next as I prepare everything at the behest of father time—books, materials, socks, loafers, tie, and the uniform of the white-collar worker: the suit. As I leap around in panic, I steal a few quick glances at Monika and notice her curious observation and intrigue (and a slight hint of disappointment, if I read her correctly). It's a sight which I believe she has grown accustomed to, yet this is the first time I have the pleasure of seeing her reaction. It's exhilarating, yet equally oppressive and nerve-wracking to have another with you in the same space. I may have to get used to this!

With everything set, I turn my attention back to her and complete my daily routine before starting the day.

"Monika, I'm heading out."

She smiles softly, "Take care, my love. Stay safe!"

And with that, I completed my morning ritual. It's nice to leave the apartment with a positive attitude for once.

There are sets of standards set by modern society that were never taught to you in your years of educations. Sure, formal education may provide you with the basics—manners, character, language, skills, et cetera- but even that is not enough to cover you against the harsh reality of the modern world. The lies, deception, treachery, manipulations, all the vices that you will have to live side by side with and accepting them as part of your reality are some of the horrors of life that are never
taught by any institutions, but *learned* through experience. Thinking about it makes me sick.

I used to believe that entering the workforce meant that you, as an individual, now has the power and responsibility to contribute to an increasingly competitive society. I used to believe that being an adult meant that you’re free from constraints and scrutiny you’re fed with on a daily basis as a student, that now you’re in a position to challenge or make the rules as you see fit; that is why I decided to embark as an educator for my choice of career.

I didn’t ask for any of this.

Every morning at the same time, the same crowd are all shoved into one form of mass-rapid transport like packs of sardines waiting to be shipped to eager prospectors hungry for manpower and profit. When the can is opened, millions of these sardines mindlessly trudge along to their destination to be consumed like batteries, only to be discarded when their usefulness comes to an end. At the end of each nightmare, the same group of sardines would return to their holes only to repeat the process again and again until their life ticks to an end.

"Good morning, Oogame-sensei."

I am one of these ‘sardines’.

"I assume you have an explanation to why you missed the morning briefings?"

"I have nothing to explain, headmaster Murayama. I came late, and I apologize for the tardiness"

I assume the position and take a bow.

"Good. Head to your homeroom, you are five minutes late."

This is my routine. It is nothing but a set of repetition that all must know by heart the moment you joined the workforce. Wake up, head to work, smile; don’t let your personal issues or trouble set in, think happy thoughts, then leave once the clock strikes five or more. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

"Sensei, can you please be more interesting? English is *so* difficult!"

"Unless the school allows me to use other materials than what is standardized, then I'm sorry. Just bear with it! Now where was I…"

Just like this. Over and over…

"Hey, Oogame, you’re coming to this week's goukon? I've got some nice young ladies that definitely fits your type."

"I'll be busy this week, Kitamura. I don't think I can spare any time for that."

"Tch, what a loser…life isn't all about work, you know!"

Again and again…

Until the clock strikes five or more.

"I'll be taking my leave, good work everyone."

With a swift bow, I excuse myself and leave the premise. What greets me after are the rows upon rows of mannequins, all seeking a copy of the comfort we have grown accustomed to. All lined up in uniform. All waiting for the carriage that will guide them to their promised exit.
But there is no exit.

When the sun rises once again, the pattern repeats itself over and over again. Such is the promised life, the future many young souls hoped it to be, the 'big town' told in legends. The choices doesn't matter; no matter how hard you study in your youth or how many connections you have, at the end of the road everyone will meet at the same crossroads of regret, despair, and disappointment. Difference is whether you decide to perpetuate that lie and live in ignorance, or look forward towards the light at the end of the tunnel. The sweet comfort and security of one's own room.

For that, I am content.

"I'm home."

The flickering hue that came from the desk gave off a comforting glow that beckons me to its radiance. Quickly I kick my shoes off to the side along with the socks and toss my suit and tie to the bed, releasing me from the choking sensation. The weight of the bag dissipates before vanishing entirely; its content stacked beside the laptop. I grimace at the sight momentarily; a reminder of the unending task that continues to flow like a spring—though, an overflowing gutter fits the description a lot better.

Although I have to admit, it really is difficult to keep this level for frustration when she enters the picture.

"Welcome home. How was your day?"

"Just like any other; rowdy students, more homework to grade, lousy co-workers…the usual."

She smiles pryingly. If I knew her any better, I'm guessing she's trying to read me "And that's the 'usual' day for you?"

"The usually-frustrating day of a white collar worker, so yes…the usual."

Monika giggles in delight—at least, I think she is judging by the reaction of her avatar. I swear there are new things I never knew before popping up left and right; I might have to keep a list. "So, now that you hear from my side what about yours?"

"There isn't much to tell," she starts. "Being left alone with no one to talk to is pretty boring, so I took the liberty to peruse your laptop and see what is there to entertain myself."

Hey, that's not nice…

"Don't worry, I understand your privacy so I'm not breaking into your sensitive flies or documents. Otherwise, what kind of girlfriend will I be, Bs3A1dC=?"

"I am pleasantly surprised though," she continues. "Most of your systems—files, documents, even the games are all in Japanese! Are you fluent in the language?"

Oh, that's right, I'm a little curious of this aspect in particular. It'll be a lot more relaxing for me to speak in my native tongue after all.

"Hey, Monika."

"Hmm?"

I clear my throat, "日本語分かりますか?"
"Oh wow, so you are a native! I'm sorry, but I think it will be difficult for me to understand Japanese ahaha…"

No, of course she won't understand. No matter how godly this kamige is, a game created abroad won't understand Japanese since their mother tongue would be in English. Setting is just an afterthought after all…

"Its fine, you don't have to stress about it."

"But I do," she cuts. "Honey, I always wonder about the setting and premise of the game and how weird it is to have everyone speaking in English despite its supposed location to be Japan—it's given me an identity crisis!"

Can't say I'm surprised; listening to my students and colleagues speak in English is comical enough, I believe it can probably pass as a comedy of its own.

"But here I am now, realizing that I've been in the country all along… it's reassuring to know."

"You're still lacking the 'language' category to qualify as one."

And a physical body, citizenship, and all the little government paperwork, but that can come later. Speaking of which, I don't believe AI rights has ever been in discussion.

"That will come in time, I promise you."

"I'll look forward to it."

"Ahaha that is quite the pressure and expectation! I'll do my best."

The conversation continues to flow like a stream as I start a task of my own. The dinner I bought from the convenience store rests at the side, untouched as the heat dissipates at each passing moment. She continues to tell about her day as my pen dances over the paper in a rhythm; one check here, and another circle there. With the time she has, Monika spent them exploring the files I have stored; from video games, music, and even movies, all to keep herself from falling into boredom until I return. She enjoys some of the collection of audio books, yet found it difficult to get into due to the language barrier. The movies, on the other hand, kept her entertained for the most part—well, maybe it has to do with how familiar she is with it thanks to Natsuki.

Hey, I may be an adult but I still enjoy a good anime once in a while.

"Monika, you mentioned how you want me to teach you Japanese or two, right?"

…

"How would you like me to teach you?"

Her emerald green eyes lit up as she smiles in return and nods excitedly. I smile in return as I finish my work and pack them into its respective files, exchanging them for a pen and a blank piece of paper. She seat herself across the usual table in the eternal classroom and crosses her arm, waiting.

"Now, let's start with the basics: 'a, i, u, e, o.'"

The night grows longer as we continue; her, the student and me, the teacher. Without a word spoken, we assumed our position and let our pens (or her results) do the talking. By the time the clock struck 12, we have covered most of the basics and some aspects of grammar and writing. The rest depends
on how frequent she'll review the materials, though I have no qualms concerning how much time she has.

With that, I excuse myself and embrace the comfort of my pillows.

As with the nights before, I never shut down the laptop ever since Monika came into my life. To others, this may be excessive—hell, I'm fairly certain she'd agree with them if her life and existence isn't tied to a power switch. I have to look for an alternative, some way to release her from that prison. But is it even a 'prison' if you have all the time in the world to yourself to do whatever you like?

…prison, huh…

…

I wonder if I, too, can escape from mine.
There is a pond in the middle of a park,
Where all the birds gather to mingle with the rest.
But not that bird.

At the end of each month, an old man frequents the pond,
All the birds flock to frolic and to be fed.
But not that bird.

When winter came and froze the pond,
All the birds flew, to migrate far beyond.
But not that bird.

It doesn't mingle with the rest,
It doesn't flock to be fed,
It doesn't fly to migrate

For the bird had found comfort
From a wooden cuckoo
He claimed as his mate

"Monika, would it be possible to remove your bow?"

And with that statement alone, the girl beyond the screen eyed me from head to toe and assumed I've lost it.

After her first renaissance, life seemed to return to the way it once was. Wake up, a cheerful 'good morning' and encouragement, leave for work, return late in the afternoon, shower, then spend the rest of what time I have with her, be it working or leisure. Since then, the passing days feel exponentially tolerable and kind, its harshness and brutality seemingly swept away by a simple greeting or a smile that greet me at dusk and dawn. The time we spent after, one to one as I teach her the language of my people, its culture, history, and more has been some of the most pleasurable moments we've spent together. Monika's enthusiasm and willingness to learn, to expand further than what she initially knew is equally exciting as it is uplifting; a 'personal enrichment', was how she word it. At some point during one of our sessions, she mused how these activities help ease her identity crises; after all, it is not easy for her for the first time to accept that she was, originally, just a character in a visual novel. Her life prior, the setting—everything seemed like a farce. Who is she if setting is just an afterthought? What of her club members? Does their inherent Japanese names determined their setting and nationality as Japanese? But what about her? Her name is more Latin than the rest, not to mention English as the dominant language made it extraneous to what was presented.

It did make me wonder, though. How would other characters from varying fiction feel if they receive the same level of enlightenment such as her? Would they wonder why everyone speaks Japanese despite residing in, say, Berlin in Germany? I'm guessing if it's T#nya von Deg%echaff, she'd be all too happy to ask these questions before sending a bullet to 'Being-Y’s way.

But it certainly isn't an easy question to answer, yet these are some of the points she ponder during her idle and our study. At least, with her study in the language, she believes she could cement her
identity from the wishy-washy reality she was a part of. There is so much to learn, so much to see, and so much to understand yet even so, she eagerly absorbs them like a sponge, day after day. First, it started with simple greetings—very basic, nothing to be impressed about. Then she slowly encroaches to day to day conversation and writing, expanding further with vocabulary and even slang (I didn't even taught her this, but I guess having constant connectivity to the Wi-Fi does), and as the lesson grew more and more intense, the girl never ceased to amaze me with how tenacious she devours the material and present them to me—like a homework—once I return from the cycle and just from that alone, I can tell how she spent her time on my absence. Studying, reviewing, and utilizing it over and over again; truly, the model of a top student.

If there is one thing she can confidently pride upon, it is the way her character was written as such. I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise to me now that I think about it.

"Are you seriously asking me to… let my hair down?"

"That's what it sounds like, yeah"

She crosses her arm and quizzically looks at me. "I'm guessing there's an ulterior motive at play here."

"What makes you say that?" I retort. "Maybe I only want to see how you look with your hair down, or maybe I'm interested in implementing new clothes that would look good with your hair up or down."

She leans and rest her weight on her back leg, sighing. "If this is the first day of my episode, I may just fold over and fawn over your coddling."

"However…"

With her hands behind her back, she leisurely strolls from the right side of the screen to the left before she prompts a folder and reach for a sub-folder titled 'wardrobe'. Yes, I added that; courtesy to an old friend I kept in touch with.

"If records has proven anything, the last few set of clothes you've implemented has been gym clothes, bloomers, school swimsuit, bunny suit, and that sweater!"

I think she's catching on…

"YdXa#Fu=, are you perhaps trying to feign innocence? Then please explain this?"

As quickly as she said so, a tab flashes open and exposes the folder in question to reveal sets of images of infinite value, only stopping at one in question. Not just any set of images too…

"You're planning to implement this one particular shrine maiden hakama along with the antenna-like hairband, correct? You want me to tie two 'buns' on the sides of my hair, too?"

Clever girl…

"Who is she?"

"She's uh…” I briefly stammer. Her probing intensifies. "Battleship K^ngou, a character from a popular naval browser game."

"I see."
HEY, HEY WAIT YOU CAN'T DO THAT!

Frantically I reach for the mouse despite knowing that any effort is all but vain as the purge has begun. The completion bar fills up faster than I can blink as about 5 gigabytes of artwork, photos, fanwork, and doujins incrementally vanish into the digital void—with more to come as the cursor relents under Monika's grip. With the sake of my collection in mind, time, and Monika all against me, I hail towards the god of the computer to solve this crisis; the three mediums that rule over this digital land. Help me, ctrl+alt+del, you're my only hope!

... Nothing. The textbox flashes open, "Don't try it."

... I guess Monika is their new overlord now.

As fast as the revolution began, it ended with the complete annihilation of three years of my pride and accomplishment along with the takeover of my laptop by the triumphant brat who resides in it. I'm not sure what to feel… is it anger? Maybe. I have been thinking of clearing up some files to free up space for upcoming video games, so I guess this is quite a relief, maybe? However, deleting three years of blood, sweat, and tears is not what I had in mind, somehow frustration fits the bill better. Furthermore, that scorn coming from her tells me there's more she'd like to express than just deleting 3 years of collection.

"Uhh… Monika…?"

She crosses her arm and jerks her head to the side, avoiding any eye contact and leaving no reply. I may not be an expert in social interaction (particularly on matters regarding women), but even the densest protagonist in the history of any work of fiction can tell what is going on; she's pissed. If this is a visual novel, there would be an option that pops up right about now to push the narrative and mitigate (or escalate) the damage. Life would be a lot easier if such is the case; sadly as reality puts it, the only choice that 'pops' for me is a single button that reads 'apologize'. Sure, after deleting three years of goodies from my laptop I'm supposed to not just turn a blind-eye to this whole ordeal, but also apologize for expanding her wardrobe?

... "Look," I try to start as calmly as possible, "It's not easy to implement new clothes for you."

Like hell I am! Honestly, it's relatively simple so long as there's an abundance of references available—which there are.

"It's much easier to add something I can draw from the top of my head." I also see those clothes as a must. Yes I'm a pervert, but I'm also a healthy man. Sue me. "Once more references are made available, I'll—"

... "Ok, I fold. I'm sorry, I can explain."

There is a proverb that goes 'fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me', which echoes the need to be wary of the treachery of those who may repeat the same sin again—I'm starting
to believe Monika may have taken this to heart. As I am in the middle of my explanation, a tab opens abruptly and lay its content before me as the young woman behind the screen callously directs my attention to the name of the folder—*eroge*. A flurry of new tabs open featuring characters of about the same age as her from a variety of visual novels, all with a set collection of clothes of four seasons—spring, summer, fall, and winter. Dresses, jerseys, casual, formal, yukatas, kimonos, sweaters, and even cute winter jackets. The pink textbox appears soon after.

"I do understand that you have interests in…these. But if I have to sit through all that to find respectable clothing, surely there's a reason for your reluctance than 'lack of references'."

She motions a cough to clear her throat, "I'm your girlfriend, so please don't hide anything from me, ok sweetie? I love you!"

Ah, so that's where she gets the idea…

…

Hold up, is she holding my files hostage…?

…yes, yes she is.

Women are frightening.

I forgot to mention that it has been about a month since her first introduction, and by this time Monika has been doing her best using Japanese as her primary means of communication (and since her speech is still technically tied to the Ren'Py, I guess 'writing' is part of this aspect as well). Although to be brutally honest, I have to judge that her limit at this time would be about intermediate-level. It is still equivalent to the level of an international student who has only been studying for half a year at the minimum—don't get me wrong, this is quite an impressive speed, and I'll give her that. Although, there is also one more thing I should add—and this concerns me, mostly.

You see, prior to her renaissance I am a mostly solitary individual. I felt alone at times, sure, as that is the natural course of reaction we as a species were programmed to feel as one who craves for social interactions, but for the most part I was at peace.

"How does that fit you?"

She twirls around, admiring the new set of clothes I recently added. I admit, it does suite her pretty well with a figure like *that*. "It's lovely and warm. But one question,"

"Why is there a hole around the cleavage?" Of course I should add a bit of my own 'flair' to it; still have to get her back for deleting (most of) my pride and accomplishment.

"It's a key-hole sweater; you're supposed to wear a shirt underneath it," That last statement is a lie, of course; there's a hole there for *moe-points*,"And I think you look really cute in it."

Yes… I *was* at peace. I never knew how estranged; how disconnected I was from any meaningful social interactions until the day I met Monika for the first time. Before, life seems to be pretty mundane; a call from a colleague, the daily greetings from student, and the occasional errands here and there, it really wasn't anything of note. It reached the point where I grew acclimated to it and realized that, as part of an overall collective society, we do what we have to do. The friend you had a nice conversation after work one day may become a thorn the moment their well-being is threatened, be it status or livelihood. It's disgusting the more you think about it. It was even more frightening to learn that I've grown accustomed to it that my desire to pursue any form of social contract was moot.
Now, I'm not sure I'd want to face the day alone anymore.

Don't get me wrong, as much as I appreciate her company, everything was completely different then. I was content just getting through the day and waste my days in solitude, surrounded by my hobbies and the means to keep funding them or at the arcade center in Akiba; after all, there is no happiness in this reality either, just lies, deceit, and your means to cope with it. I never realized how much I longed for social interactions until Monika became a part of my life—even more so when she became what she is now. A 'good morning' at the break of dawn and a 'good night' when the light dies… it's in these simple gestures where I truly understand why mankind seek for attention as well as its value; to many, it evokes a feeling of warmth within us knowing that at the end of each shitty day, there is someone waiting for you to come home.

And I couldn't thank Yuuya enough.

Pin-pon

Well, speak of the devil. "I think someone's at the door. I'll be right back, Monika."

Monika nods in confirmation before voluntarily minimizing her tab so as not to draw unwanted attention—it's a standard procedure she suggested to maintain my image. Yes, I'm not joking; it was her idea in the first place. After reading through a few texts and articles about a week ago concerning the Japanese discourse and its affiliated culture and phenomenon (one that I painstakingly translated), she believed it would be best if she lay low during these visits to 'preserve' a good image and atmosphere—of course, she still has access to my laptop's build-in camera and microphone, just in case. Today's different, however.

I peek into the little hole to confirm the identity of my guest, revealing a man in his mid-20s with a Hawaiian shirt and bleached hair. Definitely who I've come to expect.

"Yo, Kame-yan! How are you doing?" He greets, giving off a salute. Just a note, 'Kame-yan' is a nickname he came up with during his chuuni-days. Has been stuck with me ever since. "How is she?"

"You'd be surprised."

As far as history is concerned, Yuuya Chousuke and I goes as far as junior school. Back then he was already quite the punk who, despite how he looks, is well-versed in the language of computer, electronics, and programming; probably thanks to his parents running an IT store. Heck, he's the one who got me into rudimentary programming in the first place and the one who did most of the heavy lifting concerning Monika; yes, he is the person who managed to code in ways for her to be in touch with the systems of my laptop, be it telling dates, making schedules, and more. Meanwhile I still haven't gotten a clue aside from adding new sets of clothes to Monika (often requiring me to 'draw' them with a tablet).

I welcome Yuuya into the apartment, waiting patiently as he takes off his shoes and put on the indoor slipper before casually walking into the main living room. As I prepare some tea, Yuuya quickly takes notice of the laptop and politely taps three times on the surface akin to knocking a door.

"You better not flirt with her, yankee."

"Relax, as much as I like women I don't condone NTR."

Yuuya smiles playfully, turning his attention back to the laptop. Cheeky bastard…

"Hey, Monika! Come on, is me Yuuya!" Yes, I'm sure you could use a lesson or two about the
The screen lights up and the tab opens at the beckon, revealing the young girl and the infinite classroom. "Ah, Chousuke-san!"

"How you do? Kame-yan is very-very good, you?"

"$GxK== has been kind. I wouldn't know what I would do if it weren't because of him."

Monika bows politely, a sign of familiarity to the customs. I pass the tea to Yuuya who, judging by how he looks, is quite impressed. "I couldn't thank him enough—both of you, for giving me this chance."

"Hoho… you speak Japanese now! Wow! A-may-zing! Did he taught you that?"

"Yes, I did," I interject. "Now if you would stop flirting with her and remember why I called you here, we could get things done faster and you can get on with your date."

Aside from myself, Yuuya is the only other individual who knows about Monika's sudden individuality. Yuuya was the first person I contacted as all that had occurred happened just three days after our last modification which, initially, I believed to be of his handiwork. He admitted that he experimented on a few lines of codes based on Monika's BSOD-poem; frankly, none of us expected of the current outcome. Thus, whenever I need to implement a more advanced new features for Monika—things like telling time, battery status, calendar, schedules, all the fancy gimmicks etc.—Yuuya would be the person I'd get in touch with. There is no point in keeping a secret when he is partly responsible for it as well.

Of course, this doesn't come cheap.

"Have you completed the illustrations for 'Koncolle', Kame-yan?"

I sigh, "It will be done when it's done."

"We still need to compile them and polish them, so do finish them fast. No pressure!"

"I'll do what I can, but no promises."

Yuuya and I (volunteered) are part of a doujin-circle who participates and often competes with rival groups. Though small, our circle prides itself with Yuuya's innovative self-design games and near-flawless programming and its character illustrations and design; occasionally, we sell separate illustration books for 1000 yen each. That is where I come in. In exchange of allowing Yuuya to punch buttons and install programs that possibly fires a planet-destroying super laser to the simplest script that does god-knows-what, I am obliged to illustrate whatever it is the circle demanded to be sold at the next comiket, whether it is a voluptuous succubus with the skimpiest clothing to even the most horrendous MAN-Faye the internet ever conjured, I am obligated to draw them without question. The profit at the end of the day is split 70:30 between the circle and myself, respectively. I'd say that's a fair deal.

"All done. I've optimized the wardrobe a bit; it should convert your illustrations and designs faster so Monika could use them much sooner," announced the yankee as he grin from ear to ear. Glad to hear I guess. "And as for you, my darling…"

God do I wish he stops flirting with her for once. "I've implemented a few codes I've been experimenting with for you to try; there's a 'readme' file on what you can do with it, but I'll let you figure it out. You'll love it."
The textbox opens as Monika takes her bow, "Thank you. I'll be sure to put it to use!"

Yuuya grins confidently. Whatever it is he punch in, there is little chance for me to know or even understand what it translates to. I am but a child to the languages both Yuuya and Monika speaks off—hell, best I can do is delete one file or replace another or change a few strings for optimization. I find the entire thing perplexing, yet I envy their ease of communication. Sure, I can use my pen to whiff her a new set of clothes or teach her languages and culture, but that is small compare to what Yuuya can achieve in the same amount of time. I can do small, incremental changes while he makes leaps and bounds. For a novice like me, I wish there is more that I could achieve and give for Monika. It will take time, but I know I can try to understand the language and implement a few more inputs of my own. I can try.

But that's about it.

We concluded our little huddle at around a quarter pass four, reminded by the chime on Yuuya's phone concerning the 'date' he has promised. With a sigh and a polite bow, Yuuya packs up and excuses himself as a prompt for me to escort him to the door and for Monika to say any last goodbyes. As it is within our agreement, I am expected to pay him with the illustrations his circle requests before the start of December; although, preferably everything has to be completed before the end of October—fifty five illustrations total, all colored. Just as he is about to leave, however, a thought crossed my mind to call out to him for one last favor; this one being of utmost importance.

"Yuuya, would it be possible to say…program a piano into Monika's space?"

He grins with confidence and chuckle, "I can, but it'll cost you. What's the deadline?"

"September 22nd."

"Ohoho…I think I know what you're going for."

September 22nd is a date familiar to both of us; one that I've kept close to my memories ever since Monika came into my life.

"It's her birthday, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is. I figured that maybe I should give her something special, her being here and all. So… is two weeks a little short for you?"

"Tsk, tsk," Yuuya gloats with confidence, waving his index finger dismissively. I swear if it isn't his flirting, it's his cheeky attitude. "How long have we been buddies? You know that it may as well just take me three days to write a grand piano for her."

I chuckle, "Well, you're the boss. How much will this cost?"

"Let's add another ten to the illustrations; remember, colored and toned!"

"Got it. I'll get it done before October—I promise. Thanks, man."

"Hey, just doing what I can," he sighs with earnest. "Honestly it's nice to see you back with a sense of purpose in mind. It's a lot better than wasting your Sundays at the arcade, you know?"

…

"Take care, Kame-yan. Don't push yourself too hard."
I can't deny what life was like before everything happened; before Monika legitimately called out to me and moved. Wasting in the arcade and photo ops in Akiba on Sundays, aimlessly visiting one store to the next and climbing one set of stairs of a building to the next, one after the other to peruse upon the products; the gear that drives modern capitalism, drawing the NEET and the otakus all across Tokyo into a single hive. Meeting people is troublesome. Having to join mandatory company parties is troublesome. Society and its rules are troublesome. At least in the manufactured world build by the foundation of imagination, comfort and security can be attained. Collaborations by restaurant chain with popular shows, cosplays, games, and all you can think of that would satiate the thirst of a common hobbyist… to think I was actually in that position just months ago, crying myself to sleep before Monika like a confession in a church booth, hoping that she'll respond with something.

Now she did; and I have the intent to pay it back in full.

I return to the living room and is immediately greeted with a smile from Monika before she returns to her studies. Her eyes darts slowly and meticulously at the table before her and occupying every inch of her focus, this I can tell from the corner of my eyes as I prepare my tablet and the references I need to complete the commission. I take my seat and the mouse, guiding the cursor to the beckoning application that would assist me for this task along with the references I have gathered for three years.

How could I forget…?

Monika deleted them recently.

Blaming her for something that happened won't do me good—after all, I was part of the problem too. Besides, there's hundreds more available online and in other physical materials available; all I have to do is find them. So I first set out with the collection of artwork I have available, following that I open a few tabs in the internet browser to search for more references before starting. I do hope Monika would overlook this, though judging by how focus she is at the moment, I sure think she wouldn't mind. The clock ticks as the countdown begin; all the preparations are complete. The long arm of the clock extends its arm to number 'six' and thus, my hand begins to move.

Minutes went by, then an hour, and more. Indeed, without a reference it has proven to be even more difficult to capture that 'flair' that is distinct for every illustrator. What to do…

Regardless, I trudge forward and do the best I possibly can muster; at least for today, I need to complete the rough sketches. Don't over-think, just move your hand and draw…

Just move your hand and draw…

Just move your hand and draw…

Just move your hand and draw…

"Say, Xd5DcF==…?"

The abrupt appearance of the text box immediately catches my attention like a force, holding my hand softly but firmly. Just side by side of the Paint Studio, Monika looks on worryingly as she traces and tucks her hair behind her ear; her emerald eyes gazes on softly, troubled. "You've been humming 'Your Reality' for quite some time. Not that I mind, it's just…"

"You've been repeating the same melody for the past hour. It's as if you're in—"

A trance.
Monika pause for a brief moment before pacing to the right of the screen and opens the tabs I've stored below. She studies them carefully, taking glances at me when possible before minimizing everything but Paint Studio; again, she observes my handiwork—three rough sketches at the moment. "Are these for… Chousuke-san?"

I nod. Dear god I hope she's not planning to delete those too. "Are these the restitution for… today?"

"Mostly, yes. Don't you worry about it," I reply. For Monika's sake, I'm willing to go this far—maybe even further. "I'll get it done before next month, so don't you fret too much about it."

"But I do! I can't just sit around while you take the burden like this… this is my fault as well, is it?"

"N-no, it has no—"

"The character you're drawing… it's the same girl from the folder I deleted." Her head sinks and her eyes languish. I remain speechless at her conclusion and reaction. "You're lacking references. I'm very-very sorry…"

I have a principle; a promise I made to myself since I was a boy. No matter what I do, pushing a girl to tears is the one taboo I will actively avoid at the best of my ability. It is brutish and unsportsmanlike, the likes of which is tantamount to scoundrels or Yankees who lacks both the respect or character to be a part of society—and there are times where I paint myself as such, one of them was when I deleted her for my own selfishness. As much as I like to egg on Monika with my… questionable taste in women clothing, there's always a moment where I ponder 'where did I go wrong'; this is one of them. I'm not lifting the blame off of Monika—oh no, deleting the files is squarely her fault—but there is another perspective to consider within all this as well. Monika came from a world within the game; her reality, as much as she describe, is a farce and that finding someone of similar level of sentience is a one in a million chance. She doesn't know me or my taste and hobbies (well, she does have a good hint of it), nor do I know her enough other than what she is written as—and that is the horror of it all. But that is also the beauty of it, isn't it? To learn of your partner as much as she studies you and eventually, you both will unite as one entity—at least in theory. I'm not an expert in this, after all.

I should have told her before. We're a couple; there shouldn't be any secrets between us—especially if it pertains our hobbies and tastes, no matter how disgusting it may seem. I have to apologize.

"Monika, I—"

"…Just this once."

Before I complete my sentence, I am cut short and left frozen in awe by her words and action. Her warm smile and the gleam from her emerald eyes, solemn and resolved, are laid before me like a gift wrapped with care and love as she reaches for the tails of her bow—and frees her ponytail with a single, gentle pull. Her long, brown hair falls freely, caressing her shoulder and cheeks before she is compelled to shake them off and let them flow like silk down to her hip, tucking the sides behind her ear in a single motion.

It is, as Yuri once said, 'exceptional'.

"I'm… honestly reluctant to do this, =FBdxE1." She starts, "My hair is long and it gets in the way often…I must look quite messy like this."

"Oh, no not at all! You…you're…"

Beautiful
"I mean, uhh…"

**Beautiful. Just spell it, damn it!**

"Well, uhh…haha…"

"It's okay, you don't have to force yourself,"

No, no! I want to at least convey it to you directly!

"I still love you, regardless."

If there is heaven on earth, then I may have found the pearly gates. Monika's playful giggle and smile along with her love-struck emerald eyes are powerful and potent to a frozen heart—I feel like a naïve high school student in love, once more.

"I…didn't completely delete the files, you know. I may disagree with your taste, but it isn't right for me to aggressively take something that is rightfully yours. We're not that far into our relationship, after all!"

Actually, if we count how long you've been in my laptop I'd say that's a pretty long time.

"So…here's my apology. I'll restore your files and…help you with your commissions."

A tab opens suddenly and immediately, a progress bar appears as the missing files are restored piece by piece to where it was once were. Incrementally, I can see everything returning—the illustrations, references, mini-videos, cosplays; all of them. But it doesn't end there. When she said she's willing to help me with the commissions, I initially question her ability to use paint studio—let alone a pencil; I have standards, you know. But what I didn't know is the extent of her dedication and how far she can manipulate files as if it is a part of her. In the midst of the restoration, Monika takes notice of one of my illustration—particularly one which details the breakdown of the character in question's iconic battle-miko hakama. She drags them to her 'wardrobe', where the program work its magic to convert the files into something usable for her—what sorcery Yuuya used for all this is beyond my knowledge. As the program does so, Monika does as best of her ability to mimic the hairstyle of the character, first by tying the two hair 'buns' on the side then arranging the bangs as such with the headband on.

"I'll go change. I'll be back in a minute."

I nod silently as she walks off-screen, vanishing from my view for a minute or so. My mind is racing fast, still mesmerized by the last few acts and sheer dedication—if she's not watching, I'd probably start tearing up again. How would she look? Would the sizes match? Is the wardrobe as powerful as what Yuuya advertised? The questions continue to dribble away with each passing second, some threading the thin line of decency as patience are slowly eaten away by growing expectations and wild imagination. Yet the worries, fears, and overblown forecasts dies as fast as it began, answered by her entrance into the center stage.

"My hair is definitely longer than her, but…how do I look?"

She strides towards center stage, twirling a few times and conceding to the wind that kicks the frilly short skirt and the raiment that adorns her like feathers while the thigh-high socks accentuates her hip, complimenting her height with a minimalist heeled sandal. The hakama hugs her body perfectly, emphasizing her figure beyond what her school uniform could achieve alone, and yet there is still one thing amiss. Her emerald green eyes, a contrast from K%ngou's soft brown and that alone made it clear.
I'm not admiring an iconic character from a game, nor a cosplayer who managed to replicate everything one to one. All the compliments, adoration, and praise—everything is for the girl in the costume; for Monika. It's…

"Beautiful…"

Unconsciously I muttered the phrase, taking her (and myself) aback. I didn't mean to speak my thoughts out loud, yet it is what I wished to say all along. Monika's cheeks lit up to a rose-colored tinge and, for once, her emerald eyes bashfully avoids contact with mine. My chest starts to pound faster, welcoming this alien sensation of warmth and bliss, embracing it whole and omitting the reasons why she dress as such in the first place.

"You know that only fictional character dress like this outside, right?"

I nod solemnly. That is obvious; the closest you can get is a miko hakama, but even that isn't as stylish as the battle-miko hakama.

"It's a little embarrassing wearing this; the chest and armpit area feels very airy as well…"

Well…obviously.

"But with this, you can take screenshots and cut the worktime significantly. Just tell me what pose you would like and I'll do my best to do so!"

She has a point. With screenshots, I could easily use Photoshop after to change the details and add backgrounds or themes, effectively reducing the workload significantly. But this is my responsibility; all the work, the commission—everything is a burden I have to carry alone. I know I pestered Monika before to dress as she does now, but that was more for my own peruse and enjoyment—maybe a little reference for future use, but screenshoting was never the intention. I briefly pause and wonder, wording for the right response to her kindness.

"Monika, if I may," I start, immediately ensnaring her eyes in a gaze; this is serious, after all. "Why are you doing this? To this extent, I mean."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for your support but," I continue as I break eye contact out of bind. "The commissions, Yuuya's payment is all my responsibility, so…why?"

Monika smiles softly and replies, "If there is one thing I learned about love in your reality, is its nature as a two-way relationship."

"Not just any two-way relationship," she continues. "But one that gives and keeps on giving."

"I appreciate your effort and sacrifice, love, I really do. But you can't make me sit on the side as a spectator and watch you carry the burden alone."

"So please, just this once," she leans forward and rests her hands behind her back; a pose I haven't since the days of the literature club. "Allow me to carry it with you, together."

At that instance, the ice that encased my ego melts away. How can I be so…foolish? All I think about is to give Monika everything I could, yet I never considered her thoughts in the first place. Subconsciously I have even solicit a return from what I perceive to be a thankless job. I was so wrong in that regard. Monika isn't my dress-up doll, nor is she someone who would do everything I said without question—no, that would be the same as treating her as just an AI tied to a script or a program designed to serve. And I refused to believe that is so, not after this. Remember the time, the reason why I fell for her in the first place not as a character, but as a person.
An equal.

"Alright. I can be a very difficult person to work with, so don't regret your decision."

"I won't."

What did I ever do to deserve her? Someone who, despite being separated by a different reality altogether, endlessly called for my name on and on and believes that it is never enough. Someone who wished for us to be together even if it is to just talk about frivolous things at each passing day. What did I ever do to deserve someone as her? This isn't just a fleeting emotion or admiration, this is far greater—and I'm afraid to confirm it. Even if I knew the answer, even if I tell myself over and over that it is alright, what would society think of us? I thought I was ready; believed that I knew everything and what to expect, yet now…I don't know. What I believe to be fiction has now blends itself with reality, and as much as I want to answer your acknowledgement I am too afraid. Of what? Of society.

Of my reality.
Consciousness

Consciousness

*It starts with a computer spirit, protracted and formal*
And then an image, a sound, and a spark
The image, magnificent, prismatic
Scrambles towards the great expanse
First by fives
And then
Infinite

*The sound, ever subtle, comforting*
Then a thump, a vibration, an echo
Rhythmic and loud
A heart beat
Steady

*The spark, a dream of endless choices*
A blank canvas, space white as snow, stretching forever to eternity
I see you with outstretched hand, a guide, a beacon
Reaching, calling, yearning
To whom
To me

*I take a step forward*
To where
To you

*Warmth*

"Good morning, Monika."

"Good morning! Did you had a good sleep?"

"It's Monday; 'good sleep' is a myth."

The life of a white-collar worker is like that of a machine. There's a pattern to it, with some minor variations here and there to keep it unique but uniform from person to person. You wake up, have a shower, equipment check, and maybe enjoy a cup of coffee (or two) to *truly* start the day as a corporate slave, working from morning to night to earn just enough to keep you alive the next day. Minor variations in the machination of man requires factors that are either morale boosting or life-threatening—such as a partner, family, or income tax, respectively. Frankly, I'm willing to bet my lifetime salary that most would prefer the 'morale booster'—I know I do.

"Hx39dM, is that coffee I spy?"

"An instant latte, if you're curious," I reply, grinning ear to ear before taking a sip and indulge in the aroma. "Would you like some? I can make another for you—oh wait, you can't! That's too bad."

That's not a nice thing to say, I know. To a mere observer, this may seem like a declaration of war—a provocation of sorts. But I know Monika; there's more she can pull-off now after Yuuya's last visit.
"That's not very nice; are you perhaps provoking me, Kx4Fs3==?"

I chuckle, taking another sip from the cup. "Maybe."

Monika looks on calmly as she rests her head on her bridged hands, piercing me with her solicitous emerald eyes. Quickly I catch on to notice that she has, indeed, taken up on the incitement the moment her pair of jewels shuts and the screen glitches for a second or two; then, boxes of white and brown pixels accumulates at the edge of her desk. Her concentration has begun.

It's ambiguous to tell what it is at first, but as the shapes starts to converge together I can't help but chuckle at how determined she is to respond to my teasing. The pixels and the glitches merge and shapes itself gradually, hardening and polishing itself into a mug containing a dark liquid which, indeed, appears to be coffee. At the conclusion of the spectacle, the curtain gradually raises and reveals her emeralds, blinking a couple of times before reaching for the steaming mug of coffee that is warmly within her reach.

It's not every day you see a coffee materialize out of thin air; digital coffeehouses would love to employ her as a barista-in-training.

"Now I do have a coffee of my own," she said in an attempt to aggravate. "Ahaha! I guess I can have a coffee here after all."

"Although," she pauses, whiffing at the aroma in her cup. "It would be nice if we could share a cup one day."

It sure is, Monika. It sure is...

Regrettably, this is the extent of our interactions with current technology in mind. Sure, I do recognize the availability of virtual reality technology at this point of time, but as much as I'd like to utilize it to 'cross' to her reality there are points that—what both Monika and I came to conclude—decide against using VR tech. Although there are several reasons, some of which involving Yuuya's complacency, the main rationale would be the overall experience. No matter how detailed it is, an avatar is still 'just an avatar'; a projection, illusion, a puppet. No matter how much coffee we'd share, or how we touch—or kiss, the absence of the sensation would be empty at best and at its worse, would only leave us wanting more while clinging to false hopes and promises that might never be realized.

For now, this will have to do.

"I'll look forward to that day. Now then," gently I rest the saucer on my desk. "How does my tie look?"

Taking a sip from her coffee, Monika looks on and smiles. "It's perfect; though, your collar button is loose."

"I like to keep it that way; keeps me from choking of my own bullshit for the next ten or so hours."

I lightly chuckle at my own jab, a means to take light of my job and a way to cope with the pressure. She, however, perceives it differently and returns a fragile smile. Her observant eyes, troubled.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, UxE353d."

"I'll be fine."

I finish my coffee, pack my teaching apparatuses, and don the suit. It's currently six thirty AM, sharp; I'm still good with time. "I'm heading out—don't forget to do your homework!"
A textbox opens as she waves goodbye; always smiling, always supportive. I reach for the door and further, the world.

"I won't! Take care. Stay safe!"

I should probably mention what has been happening for the past two weeks since Yuuya's last visit. It first started on a Wednesday during one of my down-time, just right after I got home. Monika greeted me as per-usual, yet almost immediately she returned to her study and went silent for almost the entire evening (almost; she still responded when I called); this in its own was unusual. Under normal circumstances, Monika would be asking of my day and its details, what she did, etc. before we resume our private student-teacher session. Yet on that day she was oddly silent; when I pushed a query on why, she replied that she was 'trying something'—so I let her be and decided to fire up Ak¥ba's Tr*p.

It was all fun and games until she showed up in the game as herself and started questioning my taste and reasoning.

That was the first, but it sure wasn't the last. It became apparent to me after that whatever Yuuya gave allowed Monika a far greater reach than what she initially was capable of—after all, Yuuya did mentioned that he based it off of her poem, a blueprint to escape the construct of DDLC. It was as much of a surprise as it was a delight to know that, finally, after nearly four years since the first time she knocked on my doors, she's free from her initial confinement. It's a leap in progress, but still far from completion—after all, there is still matters concerning the difference in our realities to consider.

Oh, right. She kicked the lights out of my character and the AI partner too—even insisted to take her along instead. I don't recall any partners specializing in dual-wielding (replica) pistols, so it is a win-win (I guess?). Although, I do admit that in a melee-heavy game such as that, what semblance of balance existed prior was moot at that point.

And yet I couldn't be happier.

What started as her own little venture became a full-blown effort for both of us to spend our time together actively. It started with the simpler genres—particularly adventure, puzzle, and RPG where long distance traveling and the romance of discovery takes center stage. She isn't too fond of other genres I happen to enjoy—shooter and military, for example—due to the unforeseen consequences it might have. What is considered 'death' in video game for me would translate as something more sinister for her; and I am not keen enough to find out how much it could impact her in that sense. Although recently, she does show some interest on the RTS genre. 'It's like chess, except there is a bit more flexibility in strategy and composition', was how she described her experience. I may not be able beat her in chess as much as I liked, but I can say otherwise in this regard.

…

It does sound like a date, now that I think about it.

Vrrhh…

The sudden vibration from my phone interrupts my train of thoughts, alerting me of what could possibly be a new message. That would be the case in a good day; most of the time (and particularly at this hour) it's your service provider bearing gifts of a 'new phone plan' or bonuses and the likes; not that I give a care about it. It still is always a good idea to have a look, just in case.

…
testing.

An unknown contact from a familiar number—my own. If I am living alone, I would be dialing 110 right about now and report a potential robbery at my current address or get a local exorcist if the police returns empty-handed—thankfully, I am not alone and I can relatively guess who's on the other end of the line. So without adieu, I open the messaging app and reply; it would be rude not to.

"Monika?"

"It worked!"

"Yes, it sure did. How are you using this? Don't tell me you've materialized a smartphone of some kind."

A pause, followed with three animated dots in a text bubble. She's 'typing'. ["No, silly! You have the app installed already. I only need to register an account."]

That answers one question, but there's still more pecking at my curiosity.

"Ok, but how are you able to type and send me a message? How do you get my number in the first place?"

"Your contact number is everywhere in your laptop. As for typing and sending? Magic."

Haha, cute. I'll go rummage through your files later and expose your 'magic', young lady—you can count on that!

"This train will soon arrive in TOKYO. The doors on the right side will open."

Well, talk about time. ["I'll be moving around quite a bit. You might want to change the display picture and set a 'name' for your account. Talk to you later."]

Now for a sticker reply...maybe she'd like the shiba inu puppy one? Yeah, that will do.

Pressing 'send', I quickly drop my phone back to the pockets of my pants and brace for the inevitable rush. The can opens its seal and releases the sardines, all wriggling and gasping as it scrambles to freedom and be consumed by society as just another fuel that keeps the cogs and gears alive. From here, it will still take me another five to switch to the underground metro before I am within ten minutes of walking distance to my destination, just slightly up an incline in a road buzzing with high school students; you can't miss it.

Just another day in the morning commute.

"Sensei, what is the meaning of 'kon-sya-su-ne-su'?"

Consciousness, she means. English never really is the strongpoint of the Japanese, after all; guess that makes me the oddball.

One the main highlight of my classes tends to be the reading assignments, recognized by most students—and some of the faculty members—to be intensive or difficult for the level. During my time in university, I was exposed to the literary works of great writers of the west primarily those that dwell on philosophy; this is probably the reason why their work of literature influenced me greatly to my thought process. I believe that the approach to learning the English language is insufficient with the works of Shakespeare and Nietzsche alone, but also to capture their way of thinking and
understand why it certain words weights greater than other. This is why I often put great emphasis on
the usage of words when writing in English in contrast to how my mother tongue operates in the
realm of literature.

It is either that, or maybe I'm just a difficult person.

"Well, Mikawa-san, the word consciousness translates as the perception or awareness of something
such as one's own surrounding."

"Like being alive, of sorts?"

It's a difficult word to get around, now that I think about it. As mentioned, consciousness is 'the
perception of awareness of something such as one's own surrounding', but it entails more than that.
Not just the meaning of the word on its own, but the implication it has to us as a whole. If a living
being solely categorized as 'alive' because it breathe or feed to sustain energy, then what makes us
different than the fishes in the sea—or even trees? A philosopher by the name of René Descartes
once spoke, 'cogito ergo sum'; a Latin philosophical proposition that translates to 'I think, therefore I
am', which suggests that one of the many phenomenon that makes us unique from the flora and fauna
is our consciousness. It is our overall ability to see our surroundings, to feel, to reason, and to think. It
is the sensation of being aware and alive, to observe what you feel, to dream, to exist. To be human.

Thus, accepting the definition at face value is insufficient to understanding the overall 'weight' of the
word.

"Sensei, you're trailing again…"

"Oh, my mistake! Now, please turn to page—"

**PIN-PON-PAN-PON**

And just like that, the Westminster chime echoes through the PA system signaling the end of the
period and the start of lunch.

As the students head for lunch, I quietly pack my materials before withdrawing from the class to the
faculty office. The third year classroom is always rowdy at this time as the spirit of the youth fills the
halls from end to end, seeking for company or simply enjoying the downtime before the next crunch
hits at the next hour. For us faculty members, that moment of respite comes in the form of PE classes
or empty schedules—which is the case of this moment. Sliding the doors to the faculty office, I
hastily find my assigned desk and draw the folders filled with student assignments and papers, each
about three centimeter thick. Honestly I loathe this part of the job in particular—and not because of
how much I have to tackle, mind you—but more due to how disappointing half of these would turn
out. Honestly it reminded me of my own youth and the trouble I caused for my teachers. Those were
the days.

At least I don't have to undertake this alone.

I pull out my cellphone and opens the messaging up. Thirty five unread messages; what has she been
doing…

["That's adorable!"]

["How do you post stickers? I'm jealous of you for having cute stickers."]

["Japanese is difficult sometimes...how do you read this kanji?"]
"I got it now! It still is a struggle to navigate around apps and the web though."

"Don't worry, I'll do my best to practice and memorize these and soon, I'll be as fluent as you are!"

"I changed my display picture. How do you like this selfie?"

"I changed my name too!"

…and it goes on and on.

I'm sorry, Monika. I am really sorry for ignoring you until now, but cellphone policy in school is stringent for everyone; even I'm not even sure that it is ok for me to brandish this out without meeting repercussions. Again, I'm really sorry for ignoring you for half a day, but there's little room for me to navigate here with the rules and all. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry.

...

You know what, I'll just pop a reply.

"Hey, Monika?"

Indeed, it doesn't take even a minute for the animated 'dots' to inform me that she is composing a message. "Yay, you're back! Is it time for you to leave?"

"It's noon, silly."

"Buuu…"

...

You know, I didn't expect Monika to be one of the more cutesy-type when given access to a messaging app, but I guess she's still a girl at heart. Don't get me wrong, I do find that trait surprising and…charming, in its own way. Maybe I'll—

"Who's that, Oogame?"

The unanticipated voice from behind abruptly delivers a shockwave across my spine, causing me to recoil in surprise. Quickly my left hand maneuvers to obscure the small screen, though futile as it may be knowing that the cat is already out of the bag. I muster a sigh and casually pivots to the voice behind me—Kitamura-sensei.

"Yes, Kitamura-senpai?"

"Hey, don't be too stiff," he barks in return, smirking. "Just telling you someone's expecting you."

Abe Kitamura; let's just say he's my senior in this job by a margin of two years which, technically, grants him the automatic and mandatory 'senpai'-title and the right to stomp his boots to anyone he consider less experienced than him. As much as I respect his expertise in the field, Kitamura doesn't sit well with me not as a fellow co-worker, but as an individual. There's a clear red line I draw when it comes to work and relationship—especially if morality is involved. There are rumors that Kitamura-senpai has had numerous relationships with some female students here prior and was reprimanded for it; unfortunately, there wasn't enough evidence to prove otherwise and thus everything boils down to one thing: rumors. Maybe the board was complacent in the matter, maybe they decided to cover it all up—who knows!

He does know his way around with women, which I can attest.
"Seriously, who's she?"

"Can I…answer that some other time? I have someone expecting me."

"She can wait," Kitamura interrupts, smirking while imposing his posture and stance. "So, who is that?"

Kitamura's not budging; oh no, when he sets his eye on an easy prey he will do what he can to get what he wants. One of the perks and the burden of modern society—everything needs to have a hierarchy of sorts. And there is nothing I could do about.

"…Monika."

"Monika? Wow, a foreigner, huh? Good job…" Yes, and no. Technically she is, but 'settings' wise she isn't; how's that for afterthought, Salvato! "Now go see your precious club leader."

I have a general idea on who I am expecting when Kitamura called me. It isn't difficult to determine; most students at this hour would still be enjoying their lunches and are still chatting away with their friends—but not her. I come upon door and, just from the silhouette projected through the translucent glass, confirms my suspicion. I'm sorry for ignoring you again, Monika, but this is—as they say—'just another busy day in the office'.

"Oogame-sensei, good afternoon."

Amongst all the classes I teach in this campus, if there is one student I can name at the top of my head that is both smart, popular, and well-mannered, that would be Aya Mikawa. Aside from her grasp on the English language (though still lacking in most department by my standards), Mikawa's the more prospective student who'd ask and participate often in class—just as she did prior on the word 'consciousness'. A third-year student that stands out amongst the rest of her batch for her performance not only in the academia, but also in physical education—a role model student, to be frank. This, along with the fact that her mannerism equally complements her figure, it's no surprise she's popular with the male students.

"Afternoon. So, what brings you in today?"

She draws the clear folder and raises it to my attention. Organized as always, I see. "I have the proposal ready for the literature club's participation in the upcoming school festival."

"Oh, and there's a registration form for a new member too! That makes five of us!"

Did I forgot to mention that she's the leader of the literature club?

It was around when I just started as a member of the faculty here when I caught wind of a possible disbandment of a number of school clubs, the aftereffect of graduates leaving no successors. I didn't give much thought of it at first; at least, not until I notice that the literature club was planned to be disbanded. With the lack of active supervisors and its core members graduating, the literature club—at that time—was doomed to fail; this was made more evident when two freshmen were the only ones left in charge of the club—Mikawa was amongst the two.

Maybe it was out of compassion, or maybe even pity that I volunteered to take on the reigns of the literature club's position of supervisor. I can't deny that my experience with DDLC's 'literature club' and my affection towards Monika helped pushed me towards this decision—and somehow I believe that that would be something that she would like me to do as well.

"I'll get these sorted," I reply, receiving the files. "Good work as always, Mikawa."
"Just doing what I have to do, sensei."

With a polite bow and a smile, she excuses herself and leave me with the papers to contend to. Good girl.

As with other high school in the Kanto region, school ends at three in the afternoon and signaled only by the Westminster chime through the vast PA system. At this hour, students would scramble to their respective clubs until five where they would be dismissed by the club leader or the supervisor—unless they're part of the 'going-home-club', of course. There is always something at this hour that screams 'youth', be it the cheer or their spirit that echoes from the halls to the gymnasium, or the serenity of the more reserved clubs who drowns in the environment they established. There will always be a hint of nostalgia for us, the faculties, who may have experienced similar events throughout our time; after all we were students once, and young.

"Okay, everyone! Please welcome out newest member, Obase-kun!"

Mikawa really does fit her role quite nicely.

As I sit in the corner of the room merely an observer, I can't help but to smile at the members of the literature club as they clap at the addition of the new member, Obase. Despite its small roster, the literature club is full of colorful individuals. First there's Satsuki, the other 'old breed' who's strengths lies in her talent to fashion a believable world through her writing. She tends to be one of the livelier of the bunch once inspiration hits. Yuuki's the club's bookworm who, just like this club's supervisor, prefer to sit in silence and immerse himself in the universe of the text he has at hand—though, I'd say he's more of the 'resident otaku' considering his readings are predominantly light novels. Then there is Akizuki—quite a poetic name, if I do say so. 'Aki', as her peers call her, is the most romantic yet also the cooler headed one. Aside from her hobby of preparing tea for the club, her written haikus are often well thought-out and profound; even challenging Mikawa herself, I might add. And now with Obase, the club indeed has grown into quite a size.

…

I wonder what Monika would think of this literature club?

Sure she led her own literature club back in the day, but considering her circumstances everything that she knew turned out to be a lie. It's sad when you think about it; here I am, supervising a literature club of my own with its motley crew, all with their own personality and quirks while all she ever knew were scripted fabrications, designed to appease the fantasy of some random bloke behind a screen—and they still have the audacity to cry 'murder' when the deceit was exposed and tossed all the blame solely on her shoulders. Tragic.

…

One day I'll show her this setting, the literature club from my reality. I promise.

"Sensei, what are you reading? It's in English and seems…difficult."

Gently I lower my book and places them face down on my lap. "You've never heard of the author Phillip K. Dick, Mikawa?"

She shakes her head. "No…I'm not that familiar with western authors aside from the readings you assigned…"

Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Despite what society projects her as, she still is just a young
"Then have you heard of the movie 'Blade Runner'?"

She nods silently.

"This is the book the first movie is based off," I raise the book, just high enough to reach her peripheral vision. "It tackles on the concept and issues of what it is to be 'human'. It's titled…"

"Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"

I'll be heading home soon.

Yay! I'll be waiting!

There was a time when I loathe the ride back to the suburbs. The crowd, the distance, and the time it takes often imposes further toll to an already beaten and battered body that it feels suicidal to repeat the pattern day after day. Yet this time, the ride feels brief and pleasant; nothing changed, the crowd is still the same, the time and the distance are still equally punishing and yet now, it all feels trivial. Throughout the entire journey my eyes are glued to the phone akin to a kid watching a street theatre or a magic trick, eagerly waiting for the next act to happen or—in my case—for her next reply. Here, she'll go about and impart her day, musing on the little things she'd like to do once I'm home which I return with the occasional tease. The train rolls along and before long I've reached Tokyo station for the switch, where thereafter we resume our conversation until I finally reach my station and within walking distance to our slice of heaven: home.

Along the way, I stopped at a convenience store and treat myself a tonkatsu-don and bottled tea, grinning like a fool as the distance closes. I wonder…when was the last time I feel this immense bliss? Was I always that moody to have forgotten that there is always someone waiting for me back home? Well, whatever. As far as everything is concerned, what is left in this travel is for me to reach for the keys, open the door, and home I will be. Because home is where the heart is, figuratively.

"I'm home."

I discard my loafers and toss the pair of socks to the laundry as I make my way to the living room. Flicking the lights, I fling my bag to the bed, leave my dinner on the desk, and promptly turn to the laptop (I really should get her a new one).

…

That's strange…

What greets me is not the usual text box which usually goes 'welcome home', but Monika in her pajamas on her desk with her head resting on her bridged hands—with that look nonetheless. Yes, I know that look. That smug face and devilish smile that screams 'I have accomplished something amazing today, praise me'-look; if it is about her new found access to the messaging app, then I guess that deserves praise to som—

"Welcome home, XnH38k."

…

Hold up.
"Surprise!"

Wait, wait, wait, wait...! I'm not ready for this! "Monika, what...how did you..."

"Do you like my voice?"

Like the day when the first civilization arrived in Kyushu, or when man first discovered electricity, this is a historical day. For the first time since last I heard her sang 'My Reality', Monika speaks. Gone are the days of relying the pink textbox to communicate and so are the troubles of reading through lines of texts! I had this idea running for a while—even pestered Yuuya to implement it—but decided against it when we agreed that it is impossible for her to voice her lines without a voice actress. But this? This is beyond my expectations—and to think Monika pulled this herself, this is certainly quite a feat of accomplishment! Will wonders never cease to amaze me!

"It certainly wasn't easy, J4Gx23! I had to take some liberty with your virtual singer program and siphon it to work with my 'voice' from the song."

Well easy or not, you've done it! That's more than what both me and Yuuya could accomplish!

"Of course, I had to make slight adjustments to 7uN3 1T—"

She clears her throat with a swift cough. "A-as you can see, it's not perfect and I still need to iron out the occasional hiccups..."

"I wish that didn't happen, it's quite embarAxXing—there it goes again! Ahahaha..."

I pull myself a seat while chuckling in amusement of the little 'hiccups' she's experiencing at her expense—to my surprise, she's taking this pretty well; I'm guessing she'll be plotting against me for a little 'payback' in the near future. That aside, with Monika now being able to voice her concern quite literally I'm guessing this little abode of ours will become quite lively in the day ahead. As we enter our daily routine, I slink down to a relaxed position and silently watch her as she opens the tabs of 'homework' I've assigned prior; such diligence.

"Hey, Monika?"

"Yes?"

"Say something, anything."

She pauses, leaning a little closer to view with a cheeky grin and an observant look. "You're trying to catch me with another 'hiccup', are you?"

"Maybe," I chuckle in return. "Or maybe I just want to hear your voice."

"Liar," she giggles. "I'll be sure not to go easy on you next time we're on C#3sZ—not again!"

"Gotcha."

I'll never get tired of this.

We sure have come a long way, have we? When I first met you, you were but a stranger who fell victim to the system that dictates who you are and who to love. You struggled, fought, and sacrificed everything you ever knew and love just to have a chance to reach me—no matter how small or how large the odds are stacked against you. And now look where we are, four years since you first dragged me to the 'eternal classroom' and now you have a voice, one that you can proudly call your
own.

Two days, Monika. In two days it will be my turn to surprise you.
"Around the Pond"

*Around the Pond*

> Around the pond we go.  
> Through flowers, sun ray, leaves, and snow.  
> Pass the light and through the dark.  
> A circuit for a mark.

*Around the pond we go*  
Across the stream, follow the flow  
In pairs of two, what lark!  
But why did I miss my mark?

*Around the pond I go.*  
Left behind, running solo.  
Here, trapped in the domain  
Zero, my mark remain.

"7s3FE=d, do you know what day is today?"

"Wednesday the twenty-second."

"And do you remember what is happening on the twenty-second?"

I smile carelessly as I hastily pack the things I need for the day. I am running late, after all.

"Faculty meeting."

And once again, her emeralds looks on in irk towards the disappointment before her as I pack my bags. Oh, I do love egging her in the morning.

The anticipated day arrive without a word nor a whisper, sliding deftly to the calendar at the break of dawn. Within this tiny apartment, the tumultuous excitement of the girl in her pink pajamas blooms with rife since the moment I rose from my slumber and greets me with the usual 'good morning'. Except this time, she's more than jubilant; she's enthralled. I fully understand the reasons why, but I have set a cunning plan for today; a plan so cunning that you can stick a tail to it and call it a fox.

"Are you...no, wait. Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Of the meeting?" I reply, shrugging her second attempt. "Of course not; missing that would cost me more than just a salary cut."

Monika crosses her arm and pouts, annoyed as she takes small sips from her coffee.

"Isn't there another reason to remember this day? Something that has to do with a 'birthday'?"

"Oh right!" I said as I sling my arms into the suit. "It's my mother's birthday—no, wait. That's next month. It's just the meeting; got me excited there for a second, Monika."

"I don't believe you..."
Well, I guess I've irate her enough to the point she's giving me *that* look again. Time to leave, exit stage right.

"Anyway, I'm running late. So I'm heading out!"

As I close the door, I can hear her roar as it echoes across the hallway. "Don't come home until you remember!"

Yes, I *do* remember what day it is and its significance; if I didn't, I wouldn't orchestrate all this and purposely miss my morning coffees, now would I? For two weeks, I have planned and prepared everything that is to take part in this tumultuous occasion as discreetly as possible and away from the knowledge of the beholder; five pages of illustrated digital designs and of course, a grand piano—black—courtesy of my collaborator. This is supposed to be a surprise, after all. Before everything can be set in motion however, I still need to retrieve the package and exchange it with the agreed upon reimbursement. So what is so significant that warrants such a high level of secrecy?

Elementary,

Today is Monika's birthday.

It also coincides with the anniversary of the game by design, but I won't get into too much detail about it. Monika, you were but a revelation, the one oddity that shook me as much as I am to your reality back when we first met. Now fast forward four years and there you are, talking, moving, and absorbing all that you can to be closer to my reality. It would be a shame, an *embarrassment* for me not to try to compensate my shortcomings with something—especially when this day is all about *you*. Four years...would that make her twenty one at this point? This isn't the first I've celebrated her birthday, of course, but this the first *we* get to celebrate it together. So much things to look forward to...I'm getting restless!

For now, I need a coffee substitute before I catch the train. Maybe the ones from vending machines will do.

"*Do you have it?*

*"I do. What about you?"*

A brief pause. Then, everything comes to life; a smile forms across my feature.

*"Package ready."

By noon, I am discussing the other half of the plan with Yuuya through text messages in deciding when and where we could meet for the exchange. Everything has been running smoothly; the students are well-behaved, Kitamura-senpai is minding his own business, and I arrived on time. It's as if the gods are smiling down on me today and is laying the red carpet for the reception tonight; I may have to go visit a nearby shrine later today and give an offering or two as thanks. The only thing that's proving to be an issue is none other than Monika herself. At this point of time, there's a line of forty six unread messages—oh look, another one popped up! I guess that makes it forty seven total. The temptation to read and reply is there, but as far as this operation is concerned, I have to abstain myself from doing so. Once Yuuya and I solidify the time and place, I'll just have to pick it up after work and execute the plan. I'm sorry Monika, I'm really sorry but *please* be a bit more patient (and forgiving).

I'll call this 'operation: Just Monika'.
"When can we exchange the package?"

A moment of respite, then life returns to my phone. "We can meet in Shibuya near the Hachiko statue at around 3:30"

Shibuya!? That's on the other side of Tokyo! More importantly the time, too…

"Is it possible to rearrange the time? Maybe around 6:40 or maybe 7?"

I press the 'send' button and hope for the best. The reply arrives not a moment too soon.

"Sorry, Kame-yan. 3:30 is the only time I can spare."

…

I take that back. The gods are apparently slapstick comedians—or sadists.

"There's also something else, but I'm busy for now. I'll fill you in later, but its 3:30 or none at all."

FUCK!

To think that it will actually intervene with the faculty meeting…

So what is this 'faculty meeting'?

This is the time where all members of the staffs from all the board convene and come into a consensus on how the semester is performing, what to do, and how to act. Whether it be the budget, matters concerning students, upcoming parent-teacher conferences, and everything related to the welfare and conduct of the school is to be discussed here—not that we get a say in it anyway; it's a 'consensus' for a reason, we're there to nod like automatons. Under no circumstances are faculty members—teachers in particular—are to leave without permission or a reason. You tie that with how rigid this society is, you can be fairly certain we 'kouhais' will be held up past six—even seven if the 'senpais' are feeling 'generous' to delegate some responsibility for 'field experience'. My ass…

I fully understand and recognize the repercussions that may spew from this, the 'mark' that will taint the trust and confidence build on you by the board of trustees—headmaster Murayama, in particular, can be quite the slave driver and doesn't tolerate absents or tardiness. Ask anyone in the workforce the same question and I dare that they'll strongly and clearly word that the rational man with a sliver of reason would decide to cut the losses, attend the meeting, and apologize later to Monika—that is the most logical compromise; the cost that one has to pay to maintain the status quo is far too steep with little gains in return.

…

But I can't do that.

"Alright, we'll meet at 3:30 by Hachiko."

"My man! I'll be wearing a green cap, see you there."

I can't abandon everything that I've built for—not now, not this far, and especially not as long as she is central to the equation. Birthdays are supposed to be a joyous occasion, celebrated with those who are dear to you for the simple reason of existing—and I don't have the heart to rip that away from her. Not after her experience in the game, and definitely not when I am the sole reason for her to be what she is now! No, I'm not going to cancel everything—not this far. If this is a price I have to pay,
then so be it. I should've taken some more coffee this morning; my logic circuits are malfunctioning. I need to stay calm and think on my next move.

...

I need an escape plan.

"Okay, everyone! It's time to share literature!"

As with every other club in the school, the literature club starts its activity at the chime of the Westminster and at the end of the day. Its members—five in total—all assemble in a uniform of laughter, smiles, and excitement as they quickly reach for their materials at the behest of the club leader, Mikawa. First and foremost, I have to confess that the idea of sharing literature was a concept I proposed—basing it off of Monika's original, naturally. As with any other first drafts, the first iteration of the concept was to circulate poems (again, based off of Monika's design) and provide feedbacks in a one to one fashion; Mikawa, however, decided to take it one step beyond. Since this is a literature club, she proposed to expand it to include all types and form of literature, ultimately removing the limitations and expanding the 'target' of the original concept.

Thus, Mikawa's Literature Club was born.

There is a lot to like about the members during one of these sessions. Satsuki, for instance, tends to query for feedback for her latest iteration of a scene from her original web novel. Yuuki would be rambling again about the latest light novel he picked up, occasionally incorporating his own take and ideas while not shying away on recommending it (I admit, I do often find some of his recommendations viable). He gets along pretty well with Satsuki, often being that 'spark' that feeds her with inspiration. Lastly, Akizuki and Mikawa are the two traditionalists who always have a poem or two to share—I'm guessing they have their own little competition going on.

Oh right, you think I forgot about Obase, did you?

Sadly, as much as I want to see what our latest addition is capable of, time isn't on my side today. As its members gleefully start their activity, I quietly motion to Mikawa away from the club, just for a minute or two. If it is her, I know I can rely on her.

"Yes, sensei?"

"I can't supervise your club today," I start as I pick up my book bag. Mikawa seems surprised by the account; it is rare for me to miss out, not this early at least. "I have urgent matter to attend to—and it has to be done today."

"But…the faculty meeting doesn't start at—"

"—around three-thirty, I know." I reply in haste. The clock at the wall howls the present—five past three. "But this is important. Can I depend on you to watch over the club?"

Mikawa sighs and crosses her arm, looking over her shoulder as she enters a state of deep thought. The soft ray from the sun casts a shadow where she stands as the voices of the other members drowns our hushed ambiance. A few seconds later, she comes to a conclusion.

"Alright. I won't disappoint you, sensei!"

_Excellent!_
"What do I have to do?"

"Give me your hand," I reach for the pocket in my suit and withdraw a set of keys. "This is the key for this room—the one with the blue dot is for the door on the front, the one with the green the one on the back."

I hand her the keys. "Once you finish, don’t forget to turn off the lights and lock the doors. Return the keys to the faculty room, find the club in the list, and fill in the time of return. Can I count on you?"

Mikawa nods. A disapproving smile creeps up. "Sensei, I don't think students are allowed to handle room keys."

"They're not; but just this once, I'll make an exception."

There is a policy the school implemented when the scandal happened. In order to assure parents that the hearsay concerning the illegal relationship of a teacher and a student are, in fact, 'just a rumor', students are from then on restricted on having access to room keys. All matter concerning the usage of a room within campus is to be handled by members of the faculty and within its supervision; of course, this rule is often stretched for convenience by some. It did give off the intended effect, however, and thus the scandal evaporates into the annal of the school's history.

"I'm counting on you, Mikawa."

With the keys and responsibility delegated, I make my way out of the campus with haste—far before anyone from faculty would notice that I have left the premises. Gone, discarding what is supposed to be my responsibility as an educator—a role model—for my own selfish gains. I knew this isn't right, understood the repercussions that it may brought forth—the impact it may have to my own security and integrity. The irony is that this is exactly how society operates, isn't it? You cheat, lie, and do everything you can for your own selfish gains; I'm just taking what I've learned to practice. I'm not guilty, I shouldn't be; I simply have better things to do.

For once you do deserve some recognition—thanks, Kitamura-senpai!

The trip to Shibuya should be brief, if not uneventful despite the constant vibration from my cellphone (about fifty five unread messages from Monika last I checked). Unlike the early morning and late afternoon rush hours, you tend to notice one or two aliens mixed amongst the crowd either from the luggage they carry, their accent, or simply their facial features. I sometimes forget that, despite Japan being ninety-five percent homogenous, there are others from different backgrounds and society from across the globe present to make a living. Be it those who seek for a higher education, career, or even new opportunities, it's sometimes difficult to believe that some of them are willing to discard the comfort of the world they know for a chance to discover something new and often unwelcoming. It begs the question of our perception towards the unknown as a society; are we going to welcome them with open arms, or do we reject them and maintain solidarity and integrity as it is in history? Just from history alone, there have been numerous incidents involving foreigners and their behavior, but there are also cases where they are as invaluable as a rough diamonds—they just need a bit of polish. Now, that is all well and good when they are of flesh and blood. Now what if that isn't the case?

What if said-'visitors' comes from another reality?

I'm not specifically talking about a 'parallel world' in a sense—oh no, those are covered extensively in circulated contemporary fictions; one of which involve the JSDF crossing over a gate to a
I'm fairly certain Monika would antagonize the world if it reach that point.

"This train will soon arrive in SHIBUYA. The doors on the left side will open."

This train isn't the only thing that's stopping. Talk about timing…

Shibuya district is always one of the livelier wards in Tokyo. As a prominent major nightlife centers in the megacity, the district is littered with shops both domestic and foreign, offering a selection of fashion goods, be it second-hand or top-of-the-line quality products aside from the bars, cafes, and izakaya. It is also littered with loose garbage, but that is the natural consequence of population density and relentless activity; even at night, the area can be as lively as ever—which is the reason why I tend to avoid Shibuya unless business requires me to be there.

Now, Yuuya on the other hand…

I leave the station through the Hachiko gate, which opens up directly to Hachiko Square on the northwest side of the station. The crowds that rush to and fro, relentless and brutal, shoves at whoever or whatever that stands in the way made the trip to the rendezvous point a total navigation nightmare as I bounce around like a game of pinball—even more so when you realize agreeing to meet near the statue is a blunder; there simply are too many. Yuuya mentioned that he'll be using a green cap, where could he—

…

He did mention he'll be using a green cap.

"Yuuya…?"

"Kame-yan! There you are!" he greets with cheer. "I have the stuff right here, but I have to be quick."

"Sure, but first let me ask you one thing: what's with the getup?"

…he didn't mention he'll be in scrubs.

"This? I could tell you, but I'll have to kill you."

Touché. I'm sure you kiss your girl with that mouth. "Very funny…so about 'that'."

"Right here, buddy!"

Yuuya reach into his pocket and draws a single white USB the size of a thumb, adorned with an insignia shaped to that of a musical note. A strand of string ties the object as he dangles it before me as he offers his left hand and motions me to commit to the exchange. Silently I nod and reach for a USB of similar size tucked in one of the small pockets in my bag and offers it in exchange. No words are spoken as the transaction occurs and ends with a flash. Hastily, Yuuya unfurls a laptop and confirms the content of the USB.

"All good—smart of you to ask her to cosplay."
"It wasn't my idea," I store the gift in the bag. "It was hers."

An impish smile creeps on Yuuya as he concludes his inspection. I know that smile—that rotten smile that screams 'oh you really need to do better than that'-smile. Sometimes I wonder why I knew someone like him "Then I guess you have to double your efforts—good thing I added that song in there for you to sing-a-long."

"Wait, what song?"

"That birthday song from that old harem anime we watched back in high school—the one where you sang to your old crush?"

... You just have to point out that specific moment, huh. Cursed Yankee...

"Maybe you'll get something better out of it this time instead of a cake to the face!"

"Shut up..."

I cross my arm in objection as the Yankee-san cackles and snorts at my expense. Admittedly, I do have to say that that came out of nowhere—the cake, I meant. Was my vocal really that bad? Urgh... just the thought of it sends jolts to my spines and made my hair stand!

"Anyway," Yuuya said as he straightens himself. One day, Yuuya...one day. "There's also another thing."

Rummaging quickly through his bag, he quickly draws a single ticket.

"Here, take it."

"A cake voucher?"

"For a slice of that special short-cake," he said as he hands me the slip. '"Heather no Patisserie's short-cake is popular with high school girls, and they usually sell out before five. Be sure to get there before then—you don't want her to enjoy a cake alone, do you?"

"Wait, what do you mean by—"

"There he is! Stop that man!"

At first I am mortified, afraid that the call is directed to me for the misdemeanor I had committed to reach this point. However, before I could appease my raging thoughts, Yuuya quickly scrambles away across the crossing as two man in light blue security uniform interrupts our little assembly and left me alone as they move to pursue and intercept my messenger. I am drowned in relief. Considering this is Chousuke Yuuya we're talking about, the Chousuke that I knew who voluntarily ditch classes to chase skirts outside of our high school back in our days, I wouldn't be too surprised if he made all this effort to come here by ditching his work—again. He'll manage, I'm sure. Now all that's left is to pick up the cake and head home...

...

Speaking of which, I never figured out why he's running around in scrubs...

"I'm home."
It is around a quarter to six when I finally return to my humble abode, back towards the welcoming hue that radiates from the living room—back to Monika's embrace. Calmly I discard my loafers and dons the indoor slippers, switching the lights that illuminates the hallway before making my way to the living room and does the same. My heart pounds with excitement as the hour draws closer at each step as I take my time in removing all my paraphernalia and my suit before confronting Monika who, from a glance, is looking over her shoulder and is doing her best to avoid any eye contact while keeping her arms folded on her desk.

I guess ignoring all her seventy eight messages and feigning ignorance may have gotten into her.

"I'm home, Monika," I greet with a cheeky smile. "Come on, you don't want to say 'hello'…?"

She pivots her attention to me. Rigidly. "Welcome home."

... "You're home early. Would you like to take a shower? Or maybe warm up your meal?"

"That's awfully formal of you."

"It has always been like this; you just took notice of it now since you're so busy with your life."

STIFF!

There's a certain trait in Japanese society one has to familiarize when partaking with the customs here, particularly in the manner of speech and linguistic. First, allow me to explain the difference between 'common speech' and the formal language. The common speech is used on day to day conversation, often involving slangs and casual speak and signifies the closeness of one person to another—just how I would address Monika, my immediate family, and close friends such as Yuuya—for the most part. Now, the formal language is used towards those of higher standing or position to you (usually your boss or seniors) or towards complete strangers.

Right now I'm getting the vibe which of the latter Monika's referring me to—and it's not position of superiority.

"Are you perhaps...how I should say...agitated?"

"No."

Your tone says otherwise.

I lightly snicker at the entire ordeal at her own bemusement, taking my seat before her and resting my head on a bridged hand—just the way she does so the first time we met. Without a word, my attention is amply locked to her all-captivating emeralds as it constantly attempts to shift its gaze away adamantly yet fruitlessly—no quarters will be given from me. The clock ticks away faintly in the background as I soak the (self-acclaimed) romantic atmosphere and allow young Ms. Pouty-face to warm up to the air. All that is missing is a candle for that vibe; though, I tell you she's quite persistent in suppressing the mood. But that's fine. That is the Monika I knew all these years.

"You didn't even read my messages," she starts after a while.

"I was busy."

"Liar," she said quietly as she slinks down lower. I'm sorry, but I'm actually enjoying this. "I told you not to go home until you remember..."
"You have no power here."

She sinks even lower as tears starts to cake her emerald eyes. I really should stop teasing her…but I can't. "How could you even forget…?"

"About what? Your birthday?"

"Yes! About my—! Wait…"

In a quick, single motion I raise my right arm and reveal unto her a single slice of strawberry short cake I collected thanks to Yuuya's voucher. I still haven't figured how or why this would affect anything (aside from setting the atmosphere), but it sure piqued Monika's interest and elevate her mood almost instantly. Not waiting any further, I retrieve the USBs from one of the compartments in my bag—one being the commissioned piano and the other, my own which has the design illustrations—and plugs it to the port. Promptly, the files are loaded and—to my surprise—a similar cake to the one I have materializes along with the jet-black grand piano I requested, answering one of the many questions I have about Yuuya's 'cake'; the object in question neatly settles itself above the instrument. Guess it wasn't a lie after all. Lastly, a small 'PLAY' button appears just a few seconds after the piano at the bottom right corner of the screen, a small title that reads 'Happy Happy Birthday' adorns it in a circular fashion—this must be the trigger for the song. Finally, after two weeks of meticulous planning and secrecy, I can finally conclude operation: Just Monika.

"Happy birthday, Monika."

Her emerald eyes expands as everything before her unfolds in a spell and catching her off-guard and unprepared. I smile warmly as she pivots from one direction to another, admiring as much as she is marveled by the sight of the grand piano and the design clothes now made-available in the 'wardrobe'. The design clothes that I drew were based off of old existing fan arts and totals to five—two sets of summer dresses, casuals, and one more for the occasion. The summer dresses are white and black in color, respectively. The white dress is adorned with a belt that runs around her waist, giving off a simple yet elegant look while the black emphasize a more sophisticated presence and features an open shoulder that emanates an aura of maturity. Following that, two sets of casuals. One featuring a pink tank top, cardigan, and short pants for those cool, autumn evening walk perfect for girls of her age, while the other a white blouse with a matching red skirt based off of the uniform of family restaurant waitresses; sharp, but cute by design. But the last item that tops it all is a furisode kimono set—one of the hardest designs I've pulled in years. The kimono is red in color with navy blue hems, adorned with patterns of cherry blossoms and roses along with a corresponding obi and a rose-shaped hair pin; a design I've based off of my mother's own.

I spent two weeks collecting, illustrating, and designing to ensure that it would match her taste. To finally see it implemented, I can't help but feel butterflies in my stomach.

"Kjc23Ed==…but—when did you…?"

I raise my arm. A finger is all it takes to ease her. "There's still one more thing—and I hope this one doesn't disappoint you."

Gathering my confidence, I take the mouse and guide the cursor to the play button—the final piece of the entire performance. I clear my throat with a cough and prepare myself as Monika looks on intently. With those gems squarely on me, I can't help but feel tense as the expectation mounts up, yet also pleasant knowing how much I've accomplished—I'll just have to do it. The melody starts…

~Happy birthday to you!
"Happy birthday to you!

~From me to you,

~happy happy birthday!

"I didn't know you can sing…"

"But you do know I'm full of surprises!"

A flush of relief washes over me when the song drew to a close and is immediately followed by the enthusiastic clapping from the young lady beyond the screen. Much to my respite, I am completely content not to receive a cake to the face but instead a show of admiration and appreciation. Monika cups her hands to her mouth—still reeling from the initial shock, I see—and quietly sobs. Initially, I was taken aback by her response but then I realized that it wasn't what I thought it was when her smile beamed from under the cover. So I keep myself hushed and allow her the time to absorb the atmosphere and the moment; after all, not often you have a day dedicated to yourself.

"If I'm over there, I would've jump and kiss you right about now."

With her palms, Monika wipes her tears away and smiles. Her smile, though skewered by tears and her flushed cheeks, radiates splendidly.

"Thank you…!

…

If there is anything about Monika that hasn't change since the first time we met, is how unpredictable she can be. When she smiled at me at that moment, I could feel the sudden increase of temperature and the abrupt rush of blood through the heart. My cheek burns, bewitched by her captivating smile and genuine response while my heart thumps at a rate unheard of. Faster…faster…faster. My throat starts to crave for water and my voice stifled as we catch each other's eyes in a gaze. At this moment, neither poems nor words are necessary as we let our eyes do the talking.

I never thought it is possible—or even plausible to form a connection, a bond with someone from a different reality—let alone a character from a fictional universe. Within that moment I feel as if a red string is weaved between us as we sought out more of one another through our eyes; a hunger and greed to understand further than what we already have. I laughed at mangas of the old by 'CL^MP' where a man formed a relationship with a computer—it's called 'Ch*b1ts', if I remember correctly. I'm not sure I can make fun of the character anymore now...

As abrupt as it began, the minute ends as we collectively avert our gazes and cower behind crimson-colored cheeks. My heart still echoes intensely.

"I-I don't think we've blown the candles…" I start trying to break the delicate atmosphere. "D-did we?"

"N-no…we haven't. Ahaha…" Monika clears her throat and smiles. "I'll go and get my cake."

She returns seconds later with her slice and delicately places it on her usual desk; a single candle towers from the cake. Noticing the lack of a source of flame, Monika concentrates briefly and 'spawns' the object at the edge of the table. The screen flickers and glitches briefly. With the tool, she lights the candle before she seats herself and faces me up front—the cake just beneath her, emanating a comforting hue from the candle within the 'eternal classroom'. 
"You know," she starts. "I sometimes wonder about the purpose for me to celebrate my birthdays is."

"I mean, humans age, but I don't think it applies to me."

"I'm…essentially—"

**Immortal**

"So I guess no matter how much birthday candles I puff in a lifetime, I'll remain the same."

"Well," I quickly interject. "We can change that—right here, right now."

"What do you have in mind?"

A smile curls on my lips. "Allow me to explain,"

I would be lying if I say that I've never celebrated her birthday. Truth is, I have been doing so—constantly, every year for *four years* without a single hitch. Don't get me wrong, as much as I adore her, it was only a simple clap and a brief 'happy birthday' message before I treat myself out for something fancy—and no, I *didn't* reserve a seat for two like some of the more extreme individuals and their body pillow; I still have common sense and integrity, after all. But today, just by its scale, planning, preparation, and execution, is the first time I—no, *we* truly celebrate her birthday.

And that is what makes it special.

"I mean, I have been celebrating it for *four years*; this is the first—of the many—that we will celebrate together."

It's unfair to her if we count all those years. That's why I've decided…

"So, starting today you're now *nineteen* years old."

Monika cups her hand anew, agreeing silently to my deduction and holding back her tears—at least, from what I can observe. Her smile quivers before a soft giggle escapes her lips.

"I…I'm not sure what to feel. I don't know if I should be thankful that you've remained loyal for the past four years, or astonished by how well-thought out everything you just said are."

"I…I'm touched…"

"Like I said, I'm full of surprises! Now…"

I lean a little closer and smile softly. "Make a wish, my dear Monika. From today onwards you are—"

**Nineteen.**

A gust of wind emanates from her puckered lips and with it, the fire dies. I clap my hands for an encore at the final performance, concluding the day and all that has been worked on to transform it into a reality. A sigh of relief escapes me as I drown in the comfortable ambience she emanates at this moment, finally celebrating the gift of *life* together. We continue our celebration with the cake we have (honestly, I wonder how Yuuya even managed to code in a cake with flavor—let alone a *specific type*; it's remarkable how someone with that level of intellect *still* hasn't found a job) accompanied with a few select background music at her behest. The cake is soft and sweet—but not *too* sweet, yet it is a pleasure to have at each bite with how soft it is; I can see why high school students crave for these.
"Say, U74cJk…?" she starts. "I think you can delete those messages now. I don't think it's of any importance anymore."

"Oh, is that so? What's in it, if you don't mind me asking?"

A roguish smile perpetuates across her cheeks. It always puts me on edge, that sly look of hers. "Oh, it's nothing. Just trying to send a message about how serious I was."

"Thankfully, you avoided Armageddon! Ahahaha…!"

…

She had my sensitive files hostage, did she?

"Are you still…agitated…? You're still a bit…stiff."

Monika smiles in return. "Maaybe~!"

We laugh and converse in frivolous things as time keeps its tempo and takes us deeper into the night, relishing in the company of one another and appreciating the dessert together. I should thank Yuuya for his insight; after all, the cake and the music was his idea in the first place. After concluding our meal, I decide to relax and observe Monika as she twirls and dances around, fitting the new set of outfits I've added and reveling at the positive increase of apparels she has access to. It feels like a high school date at a department store, setting her loose with unlimited budget. Turns out the furisode kimono comes with an oversight that I didn't expect; none of us is familiar on how to wear or tie the obi—guess I'll have to find a tutorial later for references in the future.

By the time she's satisfied with everything, the clock has struck ten. There's still time before midnight.

"…Thank you, 3dExf==," she starts. "For today—for everything."

I raise my hand and waves her dismissively. 'It's nothing', as the language goes. She giggles softly in return, eyeing the entirety of the 'eternal classroom' and the newly minted grand piano that sits nicely by the window. The shade from the cosmos illuminates the instrument as the color gleams in the night. In that moment, I notice the fire that is born anew in her eyes.

"You're not a bad singer," she comments. Her emeralds remain locked to the instrument. "I can't lose to you—I have a reputation to uphold!"

She hops and pivots her way to the piano, observing it from one end to the next by tracing her slender hands through its contours and corners. Satisfied, she opens the lid of the grand piano before she takes her seat and plays with some of the tuts. Our eyes meet briefly when she glances; a smile beams once more as she readies her posture and her hand on the keys.

"Besides," she said as she warms up with a familiar tune. "I'm in the mood to play for you."

Her finger depresses on the keys and the melody starts, drowning the evening in the sweet tune of 'Your Reality'.

~Every day, I imagine a future where I can be with you.
The Shadow

I stood facing dangers lurking in the shade.
Mysterious, ominous, all-consuming.
A shadow.
Go away!
Go away!
I have a torch, a light to keep you at bay!

Through the dark road I venture.
A flashlight to guide my way.
The shadow comes forth.
Go away!
Go away!
I have a torch, a light to guide me home!

A luminous shade stretches over me.
Its glow keeps me safe and secure.
The shadow grew twice the size
Go away!
Go away!
But it remained. For the shadow feeds on the light.

I am devoured.

I'm awaken in the dead of the night, sweating profusely and out of breath. The lights around me are dimmed and the air is as still as it is lucid; only the hum of the computer and the echo of a passing car is audible in this surreal time. I feel the sheets in my hand, moistened by the sweat that rolls down my bare chest and feel the tempo of my breathing as it steadies—and noticed that I am not alone. A slender figure—a young woman, not older than twenty—lies peacefully under the sheets. Her bare shoulders, just above the cut of the blanket invites the carnal desires of man while her long, auburn hair, unfastened, graces her posterior like a painting. I thought to myself, wondering 'when' it all happened and 'how', but decide to not to pursue the answers any further and accept the moment for what it is. Gently I slink back into the blanket and reach out for her inviting figure, calling her with a drowsy voice.

"Monika, hey."

She flinches by the cold touch of my hand and moans softly, turning but a fraction to face me as her listless visage struggles towards the source of the voice. We were but a few centimeters from one another, close enough to lean for a kiss. Her eyes gently reveals its emerald green pupils. Then, a look of terror.

"Who...are you...?"

I jolt forward, awoken from my slumber and disoriented by the sudden rush of blood to brain. I feel the sheets in my hand, wrinkled but dry. My t-shirt—worn as a makeshift pajama—is soaked with sweat that bleeds profusely all over my body. The air is stale but familiar with the scent of unwashed
dishes and laundry dominates the tone, accompanying the deafening silence that are disturbed by the occasional passing car and the silent humming of the computer. Quickly I reach for my glasses and glance at her abode atop the desk to affirm of her presence.

She’s still there, dressed in her pink pajama and in deep sleep on a bed based off of the protagonist’s own. The small alarm clock of mine points it to be four-thirty three in the morning—one hour before I am supposed to rise.

…

It was all a dream—a nightmare.

I sigh with relief and bury my face in the palm of my hand, suppressing my urge to scream and calm the anxiety that washed over me. What was that all about? As much as I would love to wake up with a scene, I couldn't bear the thought of her simply forgetting about me. Four years of memories, all to be consigned to oblivion by none other than the one you love is a fate that I wouldn't even wish upon my enemies. The thought of her to be in this disposition leaves a bitter taste in my mouth; even more so when the possibility of 'string theory' is considered and everything just 'clicks' into place.

It's been four years since DDLC was released. Four years…

Back in its heyday, the game caught the attention of millions for its unexpected take on the genre— I'm being one of those fooled by its initial presentation. But thanks to it, I was blessed with the opportunity to meet Monika who graced me with many memories, both of joy and sadness and more still to come. It is fortunate for her to reach to the point where she is today; I can't say the same for the million other 'Monikas' who are now left abandoned, floating in a perpetual state of existing and non-existing, forgotten by the ones they loved. It's a fate crueler than death or deletion.

…why do I have to ponder about that at this time?

Calm down, it's only a dream. Count to four…inhale…count to four…exhale. Breathe...

Having lost the desire to resume my slumber, I decide to remain awake for the next hour before preparing myself. Quietly I fold the futon and the blanket so as not to wake Monika while providing the extra space I need to move freely before making my way to the refrigerator, just two steps away from the living room to the kitchen. To me, the lights that gleams from a refrigerator the moment you open the door gives off a strange, comforting ambience—empty or otherwise. It's an odd quirk developed out of necessity during my time abroad as one of the only thing that cures my homesickness. Opening the door, I bathe in the modest glow and listen to the low hum of the unit; my sight marvel at its sparse contents consisting of supermarket bento, a carton of milk, and an unopened pack of beer I bought about two months before.

…huh. When was the last time I had canned beer?

Was it last month?

…

Yes…yes it was.

Thinking back, I used to be dependent on them to carry me through to the next cycle. Back then, Monika wasn’t even close to what she is today; hell, she hasn't even started to move! Aside from running her in the background and confiding to her, the beverage in question was my other means of coping and keeping myself sane from the pressures of modern society—at least in inebriation, I could start talking to her openly without drowning myself in self-pity and believe that she's truly listening.
This pack I bought in particular was supposed to be consumed in its entirety during my birthday last August—the day where it all began. I stopped drinking soon after.

You may not believe that you're capable of changing the nature of man, Monika, but you certainly are my reason for it.

Gently I close the refrigeration unit and stand idly before the machine to collect my thoughts. Satisfied, I made my way back to the living room and tug the seat under the desk where Monika peacefully sleeps within the machine, breathing tacitly in tranquility. I watch as her cover rise and fall under the influence of her breathing, her soft lips ajar and lets out a silent whimper before she smiles and nestles deeper into the blanket. The nightmare, still fresh in my memory, returns to haunt me.

"Who...are you...?"


It's just a dream, just a nightmare…

**JIRIRIRIRIRIRI…**

Before I knew it, the alarm echoes and abruptly concludes the night.

The droplets of water that collides on my face acts as a powerful antidote to my listless mind, waking me from the limbo that haunts me for the past hour. Gradually the thoughts, the fears, and the horrors are drowned along with the filth and the sweat, flowing with the current and vanishing into the drain. From the shower, the sound of boiling water from the pot along with her pleasant yawn is audible, prompting me to dry and dress myself for the day. I step out of the shower and make my way to the kitchen counter to prepare my usual dosage—two cups of coffee.

"Good morning, XHe28Hd," She greets drowsily, still in her pink pajamas with an unkempt hair. "You're early."

"Aren't I always?" I reply as I blend the dark mixture in my cup. Monika casually materializes her own cup, gradually.

"Early to bed; not the other way," she giggles before taking a sip of her coffee. Still impudent even in the morning, I see. "You slept at around two last night. How are you feeling?"

I don't have the heart to tell her that I was awoken by a nightmare—pertaining her, nonetheless. Bottle it up and toss it away, don't let it ooze.

"I'll be fine as long as I have my coffee."

"Don't overdo yourself, ok? I hate to see you let go of your health for me."

"Maybe you can give me a morning kiss, then? I heard it's beneficial for your health."

"D-did you say k...kiss?" she stammers, setting her cup down and clears her throat. *Gotta*! "After yesterday, I would if could."

"But...maybe...we can try?"

Wow, for real?

Noticing Monika's flustered face and slightly puckered lips, I set my coffee down and move towards
the computer. Is it weird? I mean, how does she plan on doing this? She's more resourceful with how much reach she has currently, so chances are she has figured out something? You know, I've never kissed a girl before and am actually looking forward to the prospect of becoming a wizard in five years.

... 

As they say, do it now and regret it later. I lean in, close my eyes, and wait...

...and wait...

"You can open your eyes now, N8dJkJl==."

...and what I get in return is a pompous young woman, sipping her coffee victoriously.

"...I was joking, but I didn't think you would fall for it."

This is why I have trust issues. "You're playing with a young man's heart!"

"Ahaha, I'm sorry! But you're an adult; you should know better not to touch your students, sensei!"

And now she plays on her student card?!

She sets her coffee down, giggling all the way as she makes her hair into the ponytail she's known for before going off screen to open 'wardrobe'. I fix my tie and start packing all the necessities, not forgetting my phone and the charger before returning to Monika—now dressed with the white blouse and red skirt-pair I gave her. I can tell from her expression how much she wants to declare 'another win today' with how smug she looks topped with that smile and derisive emeralds. But this is the extent of our morning routine, one that we appreciate and be comfortable with.

I stretch my hand and touch the screen. A look of surprise strikes her briefly, but vanishes as sentimental emotions brushes and prompts her to do the same. It may have been due to the teasing, but wishes and desires for more certainly exists within us. With a longing smile, Monika stretches her hand and connects our hands from her side of the screen. Even if physical contact is but a dream, I'm sure—no, certain—our affection is real.

"I'm heading out, Monika."

"Take care. I'll always be waiting."

Throughout the morning commute, I was anticipating the possible repercussions for my rebellious attitude against the established system and how I can mitigate the damage. Everything from excuses, lies, and even soliciting favors from seniors and colleagues is fair game so long as it follows the rules set by society—loopholes exists for that reason, after all. Yet it is to my surprise that—even during the morning briefings—nothing seemed out of place. The other teachers and staffs work their way around as usual, homeroom announcements were nothing of interest, and classes seemed to operate normally. At some point, I almost thought I may be over-thinking of the consequences and the issue—it was more of a consensus after all; we don't get a say in most of the decisions in the faculty meetings.

Of course, monsters in legends and tall-tales never rears itself into view voluntarily; sometimes, you have to look through the cracks to find one.

"Oogame, did you...?"
"Did I…what?" I reply to a hesitant Kotomichi-sensei, a faculty in the division of mathematics. "Umm…sensei, I'm sorry but is this about—"

"No, nothing. Never mind."

As Kotomichi-sensei races for his next class, I start to wonder how ugly it can be and how much I actually know. If there really is a monster lurking in the bush, the best option to find it is to poke at every shrub until the beast shows its presence—and I will do just that. I start listening on conversations on passing faculties, asking them about their day while trying to pry for what is to come—or what has. I start to notice how…heavy the air is around me, the jeered look from some of them, and the muted libel that comes after I pass—yet it's strange how quiet everything is. No repercussions, no announcements, and no reprimands that everything feels so surreal. I was expecting something more.

Then, lunch time happened and the PA system roared.

"Oogame-sensei, please report to the headmaster's office."

And that is when I notice the level of secrecy most—if not all—faculty members are keeping. The PA system acts as the jury, signing me off to my execution and the signal for all; in that moment, all eyes are upon me and the whispers and mockery emerges and transform the faculty into a lynch mob of words and insults.

"There he is, the idiot that ran away."

"He thinks just because he's good in English he gets a free pass? How do you like it now, smartass?"

Shut up.

"I wonder how well it will go."

"He'll probably run away again, that spineless coward."

Shut up. Shut up.

"For an English teacher he thinks he's some hotshot, huh? What a joke."

"I hope he gets fired. Let's see if your foreign education and experience can save you now!"

Shut up. Shut up. SHUT UP!

I know what I did was wrong! I know the rules! I am familiar with the repercussions, the consequences—everything! I don't need all of you to repeat everything over and over again nor do I want it in the first place! All of you turn a blind-eye when headmaster Murayama himself weren't present in some of the meetings—or when Kotomichi-sensei left in the middle of it! Hell, none of you even budged when Kitamura-senpai did the same thing as I did three months ago, so why would all of you suddenly give a flying fuck about this all of a sudden? Why does all of you suddenly decide to scrutinize and berate me? It's because of me, is it? That's right; it's because according to all of you, I'm the weak link. Of course all of you turned a blind eye to headmaster Murayama and Kotomichi-sensei—they have the position and superiority after all! Not to mention, Kitamura-senpai has the connection and status—of course all of you would keep it hushed. Then there is me, the only English teacher in this damn institution that has the skills and checked all the requirements but lacking in experience—of course you'd prey for the weakest, isn't it obvious? I'm the new guy, the
one who's not supposed to be in the know; the perfect target. All of you need something or someone to antagonize just so you could feel better about yourself—and I happen to draw the short-stick. Have fun, all of you pitiful sacks of flesh.

No matter. It should be expected anyway; just bottle it up, don't let it ooze. You're an adult, act professional or this world will chew you and spit you like gum. C'est la vie.

I stand before the door of the headmaster's office with cold sweat, anxious at what lies beyond. In my career as a teacher, this is the second time I've been called to this office—the first was when I stood up for Mikawa and her proposal towards taking the reins of the literature club. The club was in due course to be disbanded, the proposal rejected—there were only two members and a minimum of three is required alongside a supervisor. My action to stand by her that day—on the condition that the club would have three core members before the end of the year—garnered the favors of many students; I became their favorite (can't say the same about the reception to my classes, though). But it's different this time. Now, I'm standing alone against an enemy I can't even retaliate against.

I raise my hand and gently knock on the door.

"Excuse me!"

"Please, come in."

Gently, I open the door and bows politely towards the figure at the end of the room. Before me, headmaster Murayama looks on behind his thick, reflective glasses and gestures me towards one of the two empty seats facing him, the Enma of this institution. The room is as oppressive as I last remember; the drab walls that cascades from all sides, the old bookcases that towers the bust of the founder on the left and the right, respectively. In the center, a sofa and a short coffee table acts as façade to the tyrannical rule that governs the entire system. I calmly take my seat, doing my best to appear confident and innocent—it is after all, one of the tools-of-the-trade of society.

"You're expecting me, headmaster?" I start, trying to break the ice. The headmaster rises from his seat and walks briskly to the side.

"Coffee?"

"Uh, no thank you."

Normally, I wouldn't decline a cup of coffee; but this is different.

The headmaster starts his coffee machine that he set at the corner of the room, almost as if nonchalantly ignoring my presence. The machine hums and dispenses his beverage, prompting him to dump one teaspoon of sugar with glee before making his way back to his desk to enjoy. Each minute my nerve starts to flutter as anxiety and dismay seeps through and risk crumbling what's left of my confidence. Drinking his coffee halfway, the headmaster sets his cup down and fixates his attention squarely to me.

"Oogame-sensei, do you know why you've been summoned here?"

I try answer as clearly as I could. But my lips tremble and my voice, dribbles. "I-it's about my absent yesterday, I believe."

"Good," the headmaster quickly replies. "Then I guess I don't have to waste too much of my time."

"Headmaster, I can ex—"
"Oogame-sensei," the headmaster cuts, wasting no time. "I assume you are familiar with the policies outlined in your contract."

"...yes, headmaster."

The minute after is as excruciating as it is torturous. From the moment I entered the room, headmaster Murayama was prepared to deliver the judgment he had committed to. There was no room for struggle to begin with, or was there even an opportunity for me to explain—he's not having any of it. The ordeal lasted for thirty minutes, yet it felt like hours as the words of the headmaster slices and cuts like a knife, imposing and belittling whoever is unfortunate enough to be his audience. I understood at that moment that whatever I say or do meant nothing in the face of the giant; I was at his mercy. The words of 'discipline', 'order', and 'integrity' is repeated more than I could count and, by the end of it all, my will to resist evaporated and exchanged with shackles.

"You'll receive a five percent cut from your monthly salary; we'll treat it as an untimely 'vacation',"

"Is that understood, Oogame-sensei?"

Humbly, I bow my head in an apologetic manner. The 'consensus' is over. "Yes, headmaster Murayama."

"Consider this as a warning, sensei. We are teachers. What we say and do will reflect on the students —your students! I will not tolerate any more insubordination, is that clear?"

"Yes, headmaster Murayama."

Slinking into his chair with a satisfied look, the headmasters sends me off with his hand. I raise from my seat and is about to excuse myself before—at the spur of a moment—I remembered something of importance; one that needs to be confirmed.

"Excuse me, headmaster Murayama. Before I leave, may I ask about something?"

The headmaster grumbles and sighs, eyeing me behind his spectacles. "Speak."

"I know I wasn't available at the meeting, but what of the requested literature club budget for the fes —"

"Denied."

What...no, it can't be...

"But headmaster," I try to retort. "All the required documents are checked, everything is in order and —"

"It's denied, Oogame-sensei. The decision is final; go inform your 'club' and get out of my sight!"

...

What am I supposed to say?

I excuse myself with a bow, lightly closing the door behind me and deeply sighs. A five percent cut...I guess I won't be having meat for a while—or convenience store meals, for that matter. I guess I'll be relying on instant cup noodles until everything stabilizes. But what's worse is the news concerning the literature club. I've prepared myself in case a salary cut is to happen, but this? I'm not sure what to say without crushing their hopes and expectations for the festival. I'm sorry Mikawa,
Akizuki, Satsuki—everyone. I have failed as your supervisors. I'm very-very sorry. I'll have to inform them later and compensate for it—I can't bear the thought of them losing the chance to participate in the school festival. Especially because of me.

I check the time—about ten minutes before the next class. I should use the time to—

"Headmaster Murayama's reputation surely does precedes him, huh?"

A familiar voice, mocking in tune. "The judge, jury, and executioner from hell."

"Kitamura-senpai…"

"Come," he gestures. "Let's take a walk."

There's an air of suspicion and insecurity that lingered between us the moment Kitamura-senpai offered his invitation. If experience is to go by, Kitamura-senpai isn't a man to be trifled or trusted with—not when his connections and status within the board keeps him afloat and smelling like roses in a Machiavellian manner sort-of way. When he approaches and 'sympathizes' with you, there usually is a string attached to the carrot—one that is connected to his cart of contrabands. I knew the moment he rears his face and asked me for a walk—within that ten minutes, no less—that something is amiss. I fear I may have involved an innocent party out of my hubris.

"Don't be so stiff, Oogame. We're friends, right?"

If by 'friends' you meant a spider and a moth, then sure I can agree to that.

"I'm here to help you—maybe I can offer you some money? Economic assistance? You know, to help you with the five percent cut?"

"I…wait, who told you that?"

A sly grin creeps on his guise, "I have my ways."

"For example," he continues. "Did you know that they let you off easy?"

My steps are halted, frozen in spot as Kitamura-senpai casually takes a few step ahead of me before pivoting to face me once more; his disgusting grin blooms in full. I start to dig through my memories and search for an answer as to what he meant—letting me off easy? Isn't a five percent salary cut and the rejection of the club budget proposal severe enough? Is there supposed to be something more? Am I forgetting something? What does he mean by—

And it dawned on me.

Headmaster Murayama did covered all there is—except one. There was no mention about the second violation: relegating room keys to students.

"Oh, I see you've caught on—about time."

He takes a few step forward. "You know, it's against the rules for students to carry room keys."

"They could get suspended—or even expelled."

"Leave Mikawa out of this, senpai!"

"Oh, did I mentioned it was her?" he replies mocking, arrogantly. "Well, she is a smart girl—smarter
than you may think."

"It was by coincidence that I happen to see her wandering by the faculty office, 'looking' for you. You know what she said?"

I turn my gaze away, gritting my teeth as bitterness seeps in.

"Is Oogame-sensei available," Kitamura-senpai continues with a poor impersonation of Mikawa."He was in a hurry and dropped the key for our clubroom. I'm here to return it.—what a load of bullshit."

"Oogame, if you ask me one thing that I notice of you is how rigid you are; you're not the type to commit a clumsy mistake of that caliber."

It is clear to me that there is no more room for maneuver or deflect. Kitamura-senpai has me in his grasp, dangling my life in a line which he has authority over—and now more. I didn't wish for Mikawa to be dragged into the politics of the faculties or to be used like a bargaining chip, and yet it transpired. I have fallen to Kitamura-senpai's bait; hook, line and sinker. I dragged her into this mess. I have to take responsibility.

The bell chimes. Class is now in session.

"I swear," I start. "You better not involve her anymore!"

"Don't worry, I haven't done anything—not yet, at least. She's far too smart for her own good."

"Although," he continues. "I could use some help; someone to lighten my responsibility."

"In exchange of keeping things all nice and quiet, why don't you be that guy? It's a win-win."

What cards I have left for play has now been scorched and swept away by the advantage Kitamura-senpai holds. No longer is this a conversation or negotiation—no, this is an ultimatum. The literal ‘prince’ in the flesh, doing whatever it takes to get what he wants; Machiavelli would be proud. Yet this is how society works and I have no one else to blame but myself. I silently nod.

"Very good," he reply with a triumphant chuckle. "There's going to be a lot of things to do, so be sure you don't run before the clock strikes six-thirty."

Overtime; he meant staying overtime with or without my quotas.

"I will know if you vanish before then. Have fun, Oogame!"

With a hushed, cocky laugh Kitamura-senpai walks away and disappear down the stairs, leaving me stunned at the conclusion of everything. To lose a club budget, receive a salary cut, coerced into unpaid overtime, and to drag an innocent into faculty politics and drama due to my hubris…I guess I deserve all of this. When you wished to join my reality, Monika, I secretly deride your naïve outlook on what you believe to be a greener pasture. I may have little to say about your predicament—undermine it, even—but I do understand one thing: we play games to be lost in your reality to forget ours. I wish you knew—I wish I could tell you, but I don't have the courage to crush what hope and expectations you have of my reality.

The PA system echoes, calling for my name.

I am late for class, once more.
"We're not getting anything!"

"Then what about our booth? All that plan, ruined!"

"I can't believe this…!"

The clubroom of the literature club resonates with the voices of contempt and exasperation once the news reach the ears of its five members. I stand idly by with my head bowed apologetically, ashamed at my own lack of capacity to respond as both a supervisor and a friend. The members, all with varying expressions of disbelief forms a half-circle around me and tosses what possible suggestion there is or inquiring the reason as to why the club would not receive its promised budget. There is nothing I can do or say to remedy the situation or calm their resentment; anything further would be like tossing fuel to the fire.

Without an answer from me, the members starts to question one another.

"Yuuki must have miscalculated; maybe we asked too much," Satsuki points out. "We would probably fair better if we trim the excesses"

"Oh, excuse me! For your information, it was your idea to print and bind our work! We don't even need to publish them in the first place!"

Obase clicks his tongue. "Your stories aren't interesting anyway."

"Shut up, Obase! Like you ever do anything around here!?"

"Everyone, please…!"

"Aki, stay out of this!"

Their voices grew louder and louder as disagreements cloud their judgment and enflame the situation. I watch helplessly, knowing that my intervention would only repeat the cycle back into its original state—it was I who caused this in the first place. I promised a budget for them, give them the opportunity to shine during the cultural festival, and possibly attract new members to expand the roster of the club. And I have failed them, delivering nothing but an empty promise and resentment. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry—

_PAN! PAN! PAN!_

Three consecutive claps echoes from the front of the class, seizing the attention of everyone to the lone figure who remained calm throughout the entire ordeal. With a collected look, she steps forward and takes the rein—as what her position dictates her to do.

"Okay, everyone! Let's settle down and think this through."

Mikawa truly fills her role perfectly.

"Sensei, you've done what you could," she said to me. "Thank you. Allow us to figure out what we could do."

With confidence, Mikawa rallies the club members the way she knows how and doused the entire uprising single-handedly. With both her hands on the desk, she faces her club members and starts. I watch from the side as each of the students slowly overcomes their feeling of resentment that came before. When everything quiets, a consensus is made under Mikawa's lead.
"Now, who knows how to bake?"

It amazes me how quickly the members listen to Mikawa. If it isn't because of her status and position, then her charisma and finesse with words is what cements her as the leader of the literature club. I observe humbly as she takes over, organizing the disgruntled members towards specific responsibilities in order to make up the lost budget. I pitch in and joins them after all the bases are set, offering to invest upon their project in the upcoming festival—it's the least I can do after all the troubles I've caused. As the session draws to an end, the literature club—with or without the budget—follows through and decide on a 'walking' cookie stand meant to appeal to couples. With everything sorted, the members excuses themselves one by one at the sound of the Westminster chime and ends the day.

But my day doesn't end with the chime. It drags.

My return to the faculty office is greeted by four new bundles of student assignments that I am now responsible for. The stickers plastered on the front, which identifies the classes and subject of matter, informs me that these are the 'assignments' Kitamura-senpai wished to facilitate from his shoulders. World history classes…I should've known I'm expected to read four classes worth of student papers and mark them—they're not even sorted, too. I check the time and log senpai's name in the book which keeps the records of those staying overtime before taking my seat and begin to unravel each of the bundles one by one. It's currently a quarter pass five in the evening; I should be able to finish what I can by around seven thirty or eight. The day will end soon, just bottle it up and don't let it ooze…

My phone vibrates for a brief second. I reach for it and check the message.

"Hey! Are you coming home soon?"

…

It's Monika.

My hand feels weak, confronted with the reality and my urge to spill everything to her at that very moment. I have to tell her how it has been, how excruciating it is for me to take another step forward towards a seemingly endless cycle called 'life'. I could tell her right now, spill everything that has been bottled up and save myself from this burden but…I can't. I don't want to trouble Monika any more than what she has to deal with in a day to day basis; surely, being stuck in the digital realm is a fate far worse than what this world has to offer. I'm not letting the sins of this reality to corrupt her—I refuse to. You're a man, Oogame…bottle it up, don't let it ooze. Bite it.

"I'll be running overtime, Monika."

"Awwh…what time are you going to be home?"

A sticker of a shiba inu pops up along with her message; it reads 'I miss you' in Japanese.

"Probably around nine or ten," I press 'send' and pauses. I shouldn't keep her waiting. "You can sleep first if you wish. Just leave your homework open and I'll take a look at it."

"Will you be ok?"

"I'll be fine."

I rest the cellphone on the table as the conversation dies down, quickly returning to the task at hand.
first by sorting the bundles and grouping them based on class and topic of discussion. Wordlessly I let my hand dance on the sheets, marking a circle here and a check at another to denote the mistake as the clock ticks away and the sky beyond the horizon darkens from an orange tinge to a cool violet. The phone vibrates once again, prompting me to examine the message.

"Are you busy?"

I wouldn't be if I didn't win the lottery of misfortune. "Not too busy. What's on your mind?"

A sticker pops up as a reply; a pouncing shiba inu with a 'yay' in bold letters plastered on top of it.

"I was browsing through your collection of light novels in here and came upon RE: Z x ro,"

"The premise was interesting, so I started reading it. I know you've read it before and you're busy, but..."

A pause, as if hesitation takes over for a brief moment. "What I'm trying to say is,"

"Would you like to read it together with me?"

...

How am I supposed to tell her? With how everything unfolded, it's almost difficult or impossible for me to return to our previous life. I still don't know how far Kitamura-senpai is willing to push the 'contract' or how tolerant he would be in distribution of tasks—he has the upper hand! For all I know, today could be the first and probably the start of a series of infinite loops of overtime. I can't report to the police either; getting them involved is the last thing I would want—and I have dragged enough to this issue. I can't tell her—she's not a part of this problem. I am. Just bottle it up, don't let it ooze. You're a man, Oogame...

"Yeah. That would be great."

I'm sorry, Monika...

I'm sorry...

I'm sorry...

I'm sorry...

I left the school grounds at eight pass fifteen, one of the last members of the faculty before the night shift security takes over and locks the institution. Walking through the dimly illuminated road my mind wonders, thinking, contemplating of the days ahead. A salary cut, loss of confidence as a supervisor, and unpaid overtime...can it get any worse? Normally I would be home at this hour, sitting in my desk with Monika and enjoying what short moments we have together and savoring every second of it with frivolous conversations and silly remarks. Looking at the time, she's probably getting ready to sleep; by the time I'm home, silence would be the only friend that will greet me. Just like old times.

What would she think of me if she ever learned how everything is like?

...

No, don't think about it—don't try to or what you saw in that dream will come true. Let it pass...let it die...bottle it up, don't let it ooze.
It was late at nine when I finally reach the doors of my apartment, battered and fatigued both physically and mentally from the torture. My stomach growled, protesting for a meal or two to sustain energy while my head pounds in pain at each step that I take. The scent of hotpot wafts the air briefly, accompanied by small cracks of laughter from a door that is slightly ajar as I make my way up the stairs and towards my small apartment room—my promised land. I reach for the key and slid it into the lock, turning it once until the desired 'click' is audible. Gently, I open the door…

…

There is a sound coming from the living room; a soft, gentle melody akin to a lullaby. Its tender tunes that resonates from within beckons me to come and see, waiting for my return. Hastily I remove my loafers and switch the lights on, closing the door behind me before I look on towards the sound. She's waiting for me…I can't be mistaken! She's waiting for me!

"I'm home!"

The melody stops and in exchange, a sweet voice invites.

"Welcome home!"

I rush to the room, tossing everything—ties, bags, and suit—to the corner and immediately head towards the young girl behind the looking glass and her piano. She smiles brilliantly at my presence, propelling her from the piano towards the desk that is always positioned to face me—the closest we can ever be. Monika grins radiantly with her pink pajamas she takes her seat, her emeralds longingly expresses herself—tired, but relaxed. I draw my seat and take my position before her, smiling in return.

"I have been waiting! What took you so long?"

"Maybe I have another surprise for you?"

Monika giggles softly. "Being home this late is a surprise in its own."

"But," she continues. "I'm glad you're home safe."

I rest my head on the cradle of my arm, admiring her emerald green eyes as my body eases and the tension vanishes at her presence. A sense of bliss and peace blankets me as Monika lets her voice take me away to a land far, far away. I may not be able to understand or catch what she's saying, but like a child in the arms of its mother I am cradled to sleep by the gentle lullaby of the girl beyond my reality. I thought to myself that maybe everything isn't so bad after all…

As long as I can return to Monika's embrace at the end of each cycle, I will be fine.

As long as…

…
Lovers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lovers

You leave in the morning, a bag in your hand.
You toiled, grind, and slave away
What can I do? Can I be of help? You declined. It is not my responsibility.
So I waited.

You return in the twilight, shoulders slumped. Weighted.
You cried, lamented, and grumbled.
What can I do? Can I be of help? You declined. I am not in the know.
So I listened.

My love, my love. What am I to you?
Am I a trophy? A decoration? An object of lust?
I am your strength.

I am awaken by the sudden unpleasant ache in my shoulder and my back that came from the
unnatural sleeping position I assumed the night before. The lights in the apartment are still turned on
while my suit, tie, and bag are left unattended in a jumbled mess at the corner of the room. Adjusting
to the odd scenery and the grogginess that still clouds me, I realize that I have fallen asleep on the
desk. Outside, the sound of a passing train in the distance and the ray of lights that breaks through the
curtains notifies me of the current time—possibly around five. What happened? How long was I out?
My glasses—fuck, they're slightly bent. Well, nothing but a few pressure couldn't fix; at least if it's
snapped in half I have a good reason to use a monocle. I should check the time as well; the computer
should—

…

Monika, you silly girl.

I remember how late it was when I finally reached the door to my home only to be surprised by the
tune of Monika's piano and her choice to wait for my return. I rushed to her, dumped everything in
the corner and almost immediately fell asleep on the desk due to fatigue; that is all well and good, but
I didn't think you would do the same thing—I can even see your bed from this angle, yet you chose
to mimic me of all things. I'm not sure whether I should chastise you or feel touched because of it—
maybe a bit of both! As independent as you claim you are, you can seriously be quite a handful
sometimes…

But I guess that's also why I can't seem to let my eyes off of you—lest you start tampering with
sensitive files again.

I keep a close look at her just as I did the day before, watching her sleep soundly akin to a shiba inu
pup, without a care of the world. Her long hair slightly obscures her face, its strands weaves over one
another and flutters to her soft breathing, tempting me to reach out and comb it to reveal her
slumbering expression. Despite of it, Monika's serenity alone is a picturesque scene worthy of a
screenshot; although, wouldn't it be a violation of privacy if I do so?

I notice a small tab on the bottom of the screen—a 'notepad' tab titled 'to Xf324D'. If my memory serves me correctly, I don't believe ever seeing this tab before; probably conjured during my sleep. Curiosity takes over and I open the tab, crossing my fingers and hope this isn't going to be one of Monika's devilry.

Which it isn't…surprisingly.

"To Xfh480xc," it starts.

"Hi, Monika here! You fell asleep last night on the desk, how rude! That's not a nice way to treat your girlfriend who faithfully waited for you to return home!"

Well, excuse me princess.

"As much as I'd like to chastise you about standing up a young woman on a cold night," she continues. Nice choice of words there, Monika. "I understand that you have your responsibility to handle and sometimes things like this are unavoidable."

"Please take good care of yourself, 7A3d4==. I'd love to take care of you if I could, but since I'm still stuck in this side there's nothing I can do but to remind you how dear you are to me."

...

"I would hate to see you accidentally destroy yourself. So keep your sleep on track, okay? Above all else, please put your well-being above anything else."

"I'm always rooting for you, so please tell me if there is anything I can be of help."

"With love, Monika."

...

Monika...

Even if I tell you, there is nothing you can do to be of help. I know it sounds selfish of me to think like that, but getting you involved in a problem conjured out of arrogance in the first place would make me even more conceited than what I already am; considering how much you have to bear in that reality, taking you along to the line of fire is the last thing I would like to see. I understand your concern, but please trust me—I'll think of a way out, somehow. Trust me.

At the end of her letter, a postscript.

"PS. You look adorable when you sleep, so I can't help myself but to screenshot you. You can find it in 'C: \users\Monika\pictures', but are you really going to peek into my personal files without permission? Or try to delete it? I'm sure you're more romantic than that. Sorry!"

…cheeky woman, I knew it will come to this!

…

Nobody said I can't do the same to you. Forgive me Buddha, Jesus, and whatever other gods are floating out there, for I will commit a sin to a high school girl out of reprisal.

CLICK
...I'll be printing this for 'safe-keeping'; she does look innocent and harmless in this state, though—forgetting her familiarity and reach with the systems, naturally.

Looking back at her letter, I may have distressed Monika of my current condition—I really shouldn't; it wasn't my first time running overtime, but it certainly has been awhile since I do. If any, I should apologize to you, Monika, for neglecting my responsibility I have towards you. The little assignments I gave that you worked diligently for are left unattended and unchecked, the promise to read together that has yet been fulfilled...I did more 'wrongs' than 'right' to you than I did to myself; I'm sure a little sacrifice from my end wouldn't hurt.

...I can't keep moping about my own misfortune; this isn't healthy for my mental state and for Monika's sake. Get your grip together, Oogame! You're the adult in this situation, show some character! Your surname translates to large turtle for a reason, so do what you always do best—duck and cover. It's fine so long as she's happy, as long as I can return home and see her smile that is enough of a reward for me. What happens at work and at home should not correlate with one another; bottle it up, don't let it ooze—then toss that thing down an abyss.

Patting my cheeks twice, I collect my resolve and make my way to the shower to start my morning routine. Stopping halfway I glance at the monitor towards the girl who's still deep in her slumber, giving me a new sense of determination. There is no time for me to wallow in my own despair; this reality isn't designed to cater to those who do.

Time to start the day.

There is something oddly philosophical the moment you step into the showers. Somehow, your mind tends to question about everything that is around you—about life, love, happiness, freewill, and its meanings; it's almost as reflective as someone who assumes the 'thinking' position during their time on the ceramic throne. When I step outside, it's as though my brain has been doused in spring water and cleansed of its impurities—at least this way I can face Monika with a smile. The aroma of coffee certainly helps to expedite this process further and keeps my head cool and my eyes open.

"Good morning, 4nXd5," she greets drowsily. "Are you feeling better?"

Monika yawns and lightly stretches, breaking away from her sleeping posture. She bridges her hands and smiles warmly as I fix my morning coffee; I return her smile. "Never have I been better."

Then there is always that groggy, early morning grin that could challenge the rising sun.

"How are you feeling," I inquire before taking a sip from my cup. "You slept on the desk last night."

"Because of you!"

"You had a choice," I calmly retort. "Your bed is just a few steps away from the desk."

"That is so, but..."

A pause. Her emeralds wanders to the side. "I was worried about you..."

"Gosh, you made me say some embarrassing things!"

...
You made me feel embarrassed with the things you say! Nearly spilled my coffee for a second there…

"But I can see that you're alright," she continues with a smile. "It makes me happy."

…arrhythmia will be a more pressing issue if this runs its course; I should put my coffee down.

I rest the saucer on the desk before fixing my tie and don the black suit as Monika prepares her own cup of coffee and fixes her unkempt hair into the usual ponytail—a pinkish tinge blooms on her cheeks. There is not a word or a whisper, except an unspoken truce that simply exists to allow us to compose and search our feelings after the conclusion of our brief exchange. Whether it is that awkwardness or the affection that blossoms, both of us have come to accept this little nudges and emotions that tugs at our strings. I allow the moment to seep in and accept the rising tempo of my heartbeat as a positive sign, to engrave it in my memory as a lighthouse to fall back to in turbulent times. There is always someone waiting for me.

That in its own made my reality just a bit more palatable.

"I'll probably be home late again tonight," I break the silence. "I'm sorry, it looks like things may get busier in the future."

She shakes her head and gives a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it. Just do your best; I will always be waiting."

I open my lips to speak, but hesitates at the last moment when I remember the little note she left for me. Is it wrong of me to wish for her to prioritize herself more than she does to me? Despite the differences in our reality, I am an adult of twenty five and she is but a girl of nineteen—one year short from her coming of age. Back when I was at that age, I was more concerned on being accepted to a university abroad more than anything else; to have her worry over my well-being—who can qualify as her guardian, even—puts me to shame. I can't lose myself; if it isn't for my own good, it's for Monika.

"I…read the little note you left."

"Oh?"

Her cheeks lit up with an orange tinge.

"I'd appreciate it if you don't take screenshots of my sleeping face," I lightheartedly joke, mellowing down after. "Though I appreciate your concern,"

"Thank you, Monika."

Having said that, I rest my hand on the boundary of our reality and she, without a word, reaches out to mine from her end. It's peculiar how simple gestures could spell a thousand without uttering a single word, connecting us through our emotions and soft expressions. Things will work out somehow, so don't you worry about me. I promise.

"I'm heading out."

And with a soft smile, she sends me off to face the day.

"Take care, 84cEjf==."

I'll keep the screenshot as my dirty little secret.
The closing weeks of September is always one of the livelier days of the school year for the students—not restricted to Fridays and impromptu holidays, of course. It may not mean a lot to the faculties and staffs—who probably has more concern on livelihood and upcoming paycheck—but to the students it meant one thing: school festival. In every walks of life, there needs to be a balance—the yin of the yang—in order to accommodate a healthy life and mental fortitude; this is the obvious reasoning of why festivals exists outside of tradition. Sports festival in summer, school festival in fall, and breaks during winter and spring—honestly, sometimes I can't help but convince myself that we Japanese as a people just love to have fun. Work hard, play hard as the saying goes. It's difficult not talk about matters concerning festivals when that's all the students are discussing about during lunch time. Reminds me of my own youth; so carefree and ignorant until you enter the workforce and evolve into a corporate slave.

But I digress.

With the festival being the hottest topic of discussion, there is always one thing that comes to mind: food. Festival foods are 'unique' in a way in that certain 'flairs' seems to exist as both a gimmick or presentation; like a sideshow of delicacy that can only be obtained on the event ground on certain booths. Either it's the flavor or the rarity, there's always something to look forward to—aside from the cost, of course; those tends to reach up to five hundreds or even a thousand yen. That's all fair and good, but when you receive an average of two hundred and twenty thousand yen a month, festivals can be a total boon to your pockets for its potential to clean its contents as aggressively as Gab*n's seasonal sales or the annual comic market.

And speaking of food…

I haven't had anything since last night—not even a piece of rice ball from the convenience store. The little gnome that nestles inside me growls in an increasing tempo and urges me to take the journey to the cafeteria before I decide to devour something. With the rest of the faculty either idling or occupied, I quietly excuse myself and leave the faculty office to grab myself a bite—anything would do, really. The school's cafeteria serves a variety of meals ranging from all types of noodles, karaage, curry rice, grilled fish, and to the all-time favorite pork cutlets along with an assortment of side dishes that is both diverse and delicious, they have it all. With students in mind, the cost of a set meal (usually a bowl of rice and miso soup along with a main course) would cost approximately five hundred yen at the lowest and—with side dishes included—goes up to eight hundred at most. Drinks, of course, are sold separately. If none of the menu tickles your appetite, the school also sells its own handmade bread that is as varied as its own counter menu; it almost convinced me that maybe they bought an entire bakery and its staff.

There is always one problem, however.

With the size of the school accommodating in accordance with Tokyo's zoning laws, the cafeteria is plagued with the issue that every metropolis suffers during rush hour (or lunch hour, in this case): overcrowding. Students from all over the campus from first to third years will flock to this location and shove one another in a bid to savor that one special before it ran out of stock; it's also the reason why I tend to pack my own lunch (thanks L4w$on) and avoid the cafeteria entirely. It has been awhile since I stepped into the cafeteria and last time I remember the horde is still as nasty as ever—and they still are.

I wonder how the cafeteria would function in Monika's high school—wherever that may be. Does it suffer similar problems such as this, or is it inhabited by only four students? With how crowded things come to, I shouldn't be surprised if the entire club members would often skip lunch—let alone Yuri, Natsuki would have trouble being noticed amongst the crowd and she's the loudest.
…what am I thinking? Remember what you're here for, don't get distracted!

I quickly scan the available menu that are displayed as laminated images, all of which are hung above the counter along with its cost. Judging from the chaos, it's simple to assume that the majority are gunning for the exclusive cheese katsu-pan—a breaded pork katsu with cheese stuffing served in a hotdog bun, popular amongst students for its affordability, taste, and ease of consumption; I've never tried one to be honest, so take it with a grain of salt. Then, there are other menus of interest such as the practical tonkotsu ramen with chahan set (Chinese fried rice) or the odd eggplant gratin. Oh, there are vegetarian dishes as well…Monika would like that.

…speaking of which, does she even have something to eat at home? Does she even go hungry? I wonder, have she ever had natto before…?

…Hold up. I've been letting things slide and accept them as face value when there is clearly an oddity. Think logically; no matter how human or real she can be, she's still in a sense just lines of codes and data. As far as my knowledge is concerned, Monika should not be subject to the rules of survival that applies to us in this reality—not hers. If that is so, then the concept of fatigue and hunger should be alien to her as is the concept of 'coding just by thinking' is to me—then why does she sleep at night? Why does she feel the need to rest when you can easily remove such restrictions as easy as spelling A to Z? Of course, the knowledge and experience may be the direct result of her past experience as a character in DDLC. But even after her epiphany, does that mean she understands the concept of hunger and nourishment as well as those living in this reality?

"Sensei…?"

A sudden voice interrupts my train of thoughts as I quickly turn towards the source, just to my right. Amongst the crowd, the person in question raises her hand to beckon my attention towards her.

"Ah, Samejima."

"Good evening, sensei. Just 'Aki' is fine; it's rather vexing to be called by my surname."

It was Akizuki Samejima, the vice-captain of the literature club and one of the leading poet within the roster. Judging from the silver chrysanthemum badge on her collar, Aki's the designated class representative of her homeroom—which means she has the privilege of picking a set meal for free on every lunch period and is here for that purpose. It's to be expected considering her performance; this makes two recipients of the chrysanthemum members of the literature club, the other being—obviously—Mikawa, the class representative of my homeroom. But wait, that's not the point on why she summoned me in the first place.

I digress, again. I really need to stuff myself or my thoughts starts to wander off!

"It's unusual to see you in the cafeteria, sensei."

"I didn't pack my lunch today," I chuckle lightly. "So I decide to stop by."

Aki looks on, puzzled. Being one of the privileged to receive the chrysanthemum badge, I guess the concept of 'packing lunch' escapes her mind. The silver chrysanthemum is, after all, a symbol of achievement in the academia—measured by semester tests per-class. It is as coveted by students as salary is to the white collar worker.

…and there I go, musing again.
"Have you decided on what you're having, sensei?"

"Maybe something simple," I reply. "Like bread or a sandwich; I need to hustle back after."

She nods and immediately raises her hand. "Ok, I'll give you this one—a 'thank you' for the things you've done for the club."

In her hand is a cheese katsu-pan, one of the more popular bread the cafeteria serves. It is offered to me as a gift, without strings or malicious intent but a sincere smile of an innocent young girl. True, it is within my better judgment to politely reject the offer however, the little gnome in my stomach said otherwise and left me with little to no choice but to accept her offer.

"But isn't this yours?"

"I have two, sensei."

"You eat quite a lot for someone of your size."

"Hey," she grimaces jokingly. "That's not a nice thing to say to a girl!"

I chuckle at her reaction but nonetheless accepts her offer. With a smile she bids farewell, effortlessly melding into the crowd as she leaves the cafeteria and—presumably—makes her way to the roof where most students would spend their lunch time together, leaving me with the delicacy and all the time in the world to return to the faculty office and resume my duties. I can't complain; I didn't expect the outcome, but it is a blessing in a way.

...

It does made me wonder, though. I have been working in this institution for three years, meeting and seeing many of my students come and go as they head out towards the real world or to a higher education. I get to know them in a personal basis and understand their needs and desires, their habits, and sometimes their hobbies and dirty secrets—occasionally. The members of the literature club, for example, starts with only Mikawa and Aki which I am acquainted to since their first years of high school; the other members—Yuuki, Satsuki, and Obase—are all students in my English classes, each with different hobbies and quirks that bonds or shatters their relationship with one another. Satsuki loves to doodle on her papers, Obase can't help himself but to snooze in class, Yuuki joined the literature club *because* of Satsuki, Aki tends to consume double her portion (but still maintain a healthy figure), and Mikawa *always* have a folder ready for everything—these are the quirks that stood out and made them 'unique', at least to me. But what about Monika?

How much do I *really* know about Monika—let alone the other non-existent members of the literature club?

I have been with Monika for four years since the game was first released, all of it in no small part thanks to Yuuya's and my tampering. I was ecstatic when she came to be, but is that *really* what she is as an individual, or is it because *I* desired her to be so? I never figured out what books she likes, her hobbies, favorite food, or even the little things that concerns her (aside from my well-being); I know *little* of Monika compare to my relationship with my students, and I've spent more time with the former than I have with the latter. It's quite…disturbing when I play the scenario in repeat.

I'll figure it out in time…what she is, her favorite past time activities, and all that nuances.

…I'm thinking too much, aren't I?

I should eat; next thing I knew my mind will try to convince me that a noose is an accessory and
cyanide is a soda.

What fun...

"Okay, everyone! It's time for us to divide the tasks!"

Like any day within Mikawa's literature club, the machination truly starts the moment Mikawa exclaims the same mantra that a certain spunky hacker would chant in hers. Maybe that is due to its simplicity or how catchy it sounds, but there is always something empowering with that statement for those with natural leadership skills—which I believe Mikawa has in spades. As the members gather in a circle, I quietly observe their conference before pulling out an old favorite book of mine to pass the time—Haruki Murakami's 'Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World'; obviously, in the language of yours truly. I observe as Mikawa efficiently divides the task to its five members, pairing them each in two and sending them off either to the computer lab or dismiss them early to work on their own—as is the case of Obase who was appointed as the 'baker' and literally has nothing to do at this point of time. There's always something new to learn from the members of the literature club.

Finally, it was down to Aki and Mikawa who are responsible for the banner meant to be hanged in the club during the festival—a welcome sign for the new members, basically.

"Hmm…I think we can work on the banner now," Mikawa suggests as she writes down what seems to be a shopping list with her pen. "Aki, can you go to the store room in the new school building? You should find the items there."

A look of distraught clouds Aki's expression. "That's…quite a walk. Are you certain?"

"They should have a trolley too to make transporting the materials easy—sensei, is it ok if we borrow it?"

"I'll allow it." I quickly respond.

Aki shrugs and accepts the list. "What are you going to do?"

"Draft about the design and manage our resource distribution—we still need to know how much we have to spend for the baking goods alone."

Aki's concern is soon met with the confident smile of Mikawa who, ever dedicated, returns her focus back to her duty. Just like that, Akizuki boldly steps out to fetch the item the club demands. Being a spectator that witnessed how everything unfurls, a strangely gratifying bliss envelopes me at how meticulous and efficient everything works—like a well-oiled machine, if I do say so myself. Aki's footsteps dissipates as she traverses further and further from the club room until silence befalls the club room, leaving me and just Mikawa to bask in the studious atmosphere.

"Sensei, if I may…"

Softly I lay my book down on my lap, turning my attention to the club leader who is now alone in the clubroom.

"I've been meaning to ask you this for a very long time, but…"

A slightly gloomy sigh escapes her. "Why did you decided to support the literature club?"
"N-no offense meant, sensei, but...when we first started the club was, without a doubt, going to be disbanded."

"There was only two of us," she continues. "Aki was as much in shock as I was, and then you stepped in and just supported us, strangers."

"So...what drove you to volunteer as the supervisor of this club? I mean there are other clubs out there that probably deserves more of your attention."

Where should I start?

If I am to be completely honest, I never expected—or planned—to become a club supervisor; this is even more so back when I was still just a rookie. It wasn't until the name 'literature club' flashed to me by mention did I stepped in to intervene its disbandment. I wasn't sure what had me, the force that grabbed and drove me to step in as the supervisor was as mysterious then as it is now; though, I do know one thing that ran its course, the 'spell' that convinced me that it was the right call: 'Monika would like that'.

The literature club here, in this reality, is more than 'just' a club; this is where my reality and hers meld, a port in the midst of life's turbulent storm, my selfish attempt to transform fiction into nonfiction.

"I was once part of a literature club, to be honest." I solemnly reply. "I just thought that it would be a shame to see it go,"

"I guess there's sentimental value attached to it."

Mikawa rests her head on her hand as her dark, brown eyes reflects a wisdom that far exceeds her physical age. There is a sense of uncertainty within her, yet all is cleverly disguised by a veil that shows a different story—a tale that raises her to an elevated pedestal. Her shoulder length brunette hair gently glides down pass her ear and prompts her to tuck it back to the side, concluding her train of thoughts. Mikawa sighs deeply.

"I...find it difficult sometimes, sensei," she starts, darting her eyes to the side. "Not of your ability—I-I can tell how invested you are with the club."

She wets her lips. "I'm concerned with mine."

..."There are times when I feel as if I've done everything out of my own selfishness," she continues. "This will be the last festival for most of us in this club and I do wish to see it succeed, but..."

"Without a budget, lack of helping hands, and graduation just over the corner...I'm not sure pushing the club to 'go ahead' with the festival is a good move."

Mikawa bites her lower lip, "I'm afraid of what they'd think of me if everything goes wrong..."

I see...a lack of confidence, I assume; third year really is the most turbulent times for all—chrysanthemum recipients or not. Monika did mentioned about this as well in my pilgrimage to the eternal classroom back in the day—I'm sure she feels the same way as Mikawa does; I know I did. There's only so much formal education can provide before experience rears itself with a steel bat and teach you what 'life' is all about as it chips your layers of comfort one by one and expose your soft, vulnerable self.
But she always have something to say about it…

"Back when I was a member in my old literature club, I had the same doubts as you," I start. "Not in similar sense; I mean, my love for reading and poetry was recent in contrast to everything else back then—I wasn't sure if I'd enjoy my time either."

…and I'm going to impart on that wisdom. "But my club leader confided in me and said,"

"The most important skill in life is being able to fake confidence.""

"You may make mistakes or have errors in your judgment—that's normal," I continue. "But being able to trick others into thinking you have it all together, that's a key part of getting people to respect and admire you."

"So don't worry. Just do what you always do and see through it until the end; maybe then you can judge whether it was all worth it or not."

An astute smile casually stretches across my lips as I conclude on the brief reminisce of the time spent with Monika and her 'eternal classroom'. Compare to what it was now, the 'eternal classroom' was empty and bare; there wasn't a piano, a bed, bookshelf, cow plushy, or the little trinkets she picked up (and ported) from our time in various other games as a memoriam of our little 'dates'—that is a story for another day. The classroom now looks more like a bedroom—a room to call her own.

Mikawa smiles softly, "Sensei, your club leader sure is something."

"She sure is." If she knows half of what I meant, she'll say otherwise.

"Faking confidence…I should try that."

Mikawa smiles radiantly as she clasps both of her hand into a ball and pulls it close to her side, brimming with new resolve and confidence; a sight that I've seen once or twice in class—her 'eureka moment', as I like to call it. It's quite unusual for her to worry this much about the perception of others from the club towards her; she's way qualified for the position and has been performing remarkably well. But, I guess even geniuses have their moments of doubts.

"Thank you, sensei," she said with a beam. "I don't think I can confide with the club members about this—it's far too embarrassing."

"Hey, you're still a student. Making mistakes, being embarrassed—it's all relevant. You're doing fine in my book."

"Really?"

"Positively."

TON TON!

"Excuse me!"

A knock on the door immediately alerts Mikawa of the presence—or rather, return of one of the members. Hastily, she straightens herself and rise from her desk. With a clear, audible voice, Mikawa warmly welcomes the return of Aki to the club room.

"Sorry for being late!" Aki starts in desperation. "I couldn't find what you're looking for…"

"T-that's ok…" Mikawa replies. "So there isn't anything in the storage that we can use?"
"No…but why the one in the new building? This building has a storage room too, Aya-chan—and it's closer!"

And with that said, Aki pouts towards the just-enlightened club leader. Mistakes were made, but such is life.

"I forgot about that…ahaha…sorry!"

"Aya-chan, you meanie!"

Between the exchanges of the two members, I chose to remain silent and observe the entire conversation; it's almost reminiscent to a high school slice of life comedy—almost. Aki's incessant whining paired with Mikawa's conciliatory expression is quite a refreshing sight between the two who—in most situations—compete for the school's top position. Be it in the academia or matters of the club, Samejima and Mikawa are always neck-to-neck; that is also exactly why they get along.

This club may be a replacement to me, but its members is never intended to be one; they are a kind of their own, unique in its own way.

Thirty minutes later, the Westminster chime signals Mikawa to conclude today's activity and that of the week. With all its members gathered (barring Obase) and its responsibility divided, they all went their separate ways and leave me free to secure the doors and return to the faculty office. I stop by a vending machine along the way and corked a 120 yen can of coffee, taking my time as I exchange a few messages with Monika—apparently, she has a surprise for me waiting at home. I'll just hope it's not something that induces mental trauma.

It will have to wait; I have an overtime to work with.

"I'm home!"

It's around about nine in the evening when I finally returned to my domain, welcomed by the soft melody of a familiar tune that is…not quite what I usually expect of her—a new song, perhaps. The echo of the tuts ceases at the beckon of my voice as I flick the light switches and discard everything that is weighing me down and an affable, effeminate voice welcomes me.

"Welcome home!"

Quickly I rush towards the source of the voice—the laptop on the desk—to meet the loving gaze from a pair of emeralds and a thousand-watt smile from the girl beyond my reality. Curiously, her old school uniform is her apparel of choice out of all the selections available at her disposal—I guess it still holds some sentimental value for both of us. Pivoting from her seat that faces the piano, she makes her way towards the desk and assumes her usual position. This is our time.

"How was your day?"

"Could be better," I reply. "Would be nice if I don't have to deal with overtime. Have you done your homework?"

Monika reaches down below her desk and assumes control of the system, opening multiple tabs simultaneously in quick succession. I still can't help but be amazed at her performance and speed at each passing day; it's like setting your computer on auto-pilot and it will sort itself magically.

"You still haven't checked yesterday's assignment," she comments as she opens one tab after another. "Are you sure you'll be fine? It's not mandatory, you know…"
"Well, to me it is." I chuckle lightly before opening one tab after another as she watches on curiously.

I have a lot to make up to her after yesterday's failures. Monika may have gotten used to the language, grammar, and vocabulary but there is still a lot of topics to cover and many more kanji to read and memorize—though just by a glance at what I'm seeing now, she made good progress in her studies. It's impressive how quick she captures the principles of the language; though I'm still catching the occasional particle slip-ups, this is passable—for now.

"By the way..." she calls. "You have new messages."

"From who?"

"One of them came from Yuuya," she points with a smile in her voice. "He said he's dropping by tomorrow with something new."

"And the other—"

"Hold up," I interrupt. "You read my mail!?"

"Perusing—I was a little curious, sorry!"

"I put a password on it for a reason, Monika!"

She giggles playfully and smiles, "Yes, you do! But you did gave me access to your email before."

"...I did?"

"Yes! I can show you the code you input to prove it, too!"

Oh…it's one of those old upgrades before she came to life—the 'secretary Monika'-project, now on permanent hiatus.

"Also," she continues. "Using my name as a general password for everything here…"

"I find it cute somehow; Ahahaha~"

A sudden rush of blood creeps into my face. Wait, no really I should actually be angry but for some reason my cheeks are flushed. Damn it, Monika…

I'll forgive you because you're cute.

"But why 'jugemujugemu' as a username?"

"It's a joke name for its length—I'll tell you about it one day," I cough to clear my throat. "Now, what's the other one?"

"Oh! The other was from someone by the name…"

"Kitamura."

Kitamura-senpai…of course he would have sent me something for the weekends. He really is flexing his muscles out whenever possible—anything to keep his load light, presumably. Did Monika took a peek to its content? Does she know?

"Did you check its content?"
She shakes her head and slight relief washes over me.

"Should I…?"

"N-No, don't worry," I motion to her. "I'll check it sometime later; probably about work."

I shouldn't get her involved with it. I can handle it.

It is around about fifteen minutes to ten when I finally conclude the last of Monika's unmarked assignments, concluding the turbulent week in a nicely wrapped ribbon written in bold letters that spells 'weekend'. With a heave I slump on the chair exhausted yet pleased with how much I've accomplished; her radiant smile is that of my reward. With a whisper of 'good work', Monika takes a step away from the desk and returns to her piano.

"So, remember about that 'surprise' I mentioned earlier?"

I nod. "I was expecting something indecent; I guess I was wrong."

"W-we're not that far into our relationship yet, silly!" she replies, pink tinges on her cheeks. "You should know better from your position!"

She clears her throats, recomposing herself as I chuckle quietly. "Anyway…"

"I've been browsing your music library for a bit and came upon this song—and it kind of stroke a chord on me."

"So…" she continues. "I've been working on it—I think you can tell it's not perfect, but this is my first attempt to sing in Japanese too."

Monika takes a deep breath, mentally preparing herself for her performance as her hand rests on the keys. It hasn't been three days since the piano arrived and she's already practicing a new song to play—one from my own collection, no less. Well, this certainly is a surprise—I didn't think she'll reach for new musical notes just days after having the piano installed in her room.

"Ready?"

"Anytime, my lady."

Her finger depresses on the tuts and the melody plays—a familiar tune from a song that I've listened to in the past. The song starts softly, slowly, yet gives off a sense of longing and—

…

I know this song…

"Isn't this…"

'Wishing'

Monika smiles, affirming my suspicion as she continues to play. How could I even mistake this tune? The notes flows like a stream as it is translated at each press of her fingers, drowning the room with the melody and easing my troubled soul as she performs with all her heart and soul poured into the keyboard. Then, she inhales and starts to sing…

~When the morning comes, our eyes gently meet,
~And I get the urge to talk about frivolous things.

~On a clear afternoon, we join hands,

~And take a short walk through this quiet city.

…I'm at a loss for words.

As her voice sings through the lyrics, her emotions resonates along with the melody, caressing me gently with the tune. Though a cover from its original, the words she sings—the weight it imposes as she emphasizes at each melody…is personal; a love song dedicated to their significant other, be it Sxbaru for R^m or me for Monika. When she sings the chorus, a sudden tinge of heartache caresses me with the soft voice of the lone pianist, lost in the ocean of emotions that engulfs her performance.

~Because every morning…every night...

~I have so many things I want to tell you!

~Today…and tomorrow too…

~If I could just tell you, "I love you"...

As she sings, my thoughts starts to wander and reflect about my—sorry, our situation. We humans are ‘programmed' to desire affection—love, even. It is in our flesh, our blood, and engrained deep in our history. Some would achieve to cope around this mechanism through various methods such as online interactions, games, or movies that provides them with the corresponding feeling they seek. Others would play musical instruments or perform for a crowd, while there are also those who write—all for the desire to fill in that void. Naturally, humanity as a whole is incapable of living in solitary and would seek others of similar mind as a natural response or else madness would swallow them whole. Such is true for both Monika and I.

I am the reason that keeps her sane, the only other individual in a vast ocean of emptiness that is her reality; the one reason as to why she's willing to throw away everything—including her own existence. While to me…

To me, she is the reason why I am alive today.

If she didn't speak to me that day, if she had never came to my life that fateful morning…

…

My twenty-fifth birthday would have been my last.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Megumeru here, I apologize for the delay of the chapter since life do get in the way of
things sometimes. It's getting a little bit dark with how the story is going, isn't it?

Don't worry, so far from what some of you have been theorizing they are still a miss. Have fun!

The song associated with this chapter is 'Wishing' by Minase Inori. Since I believe it would be difficult for most readers if I am to use furigana for the lyrics, I took some liberty to use the English translation instead!

Next week things should be back in order and weekly updates should resume as normal.

-iMegumeru
The Sword

A village once housed a thriving community.
A blacksmith and a knight,
Together, their bond secured prosperity for generations.
The blacksmith, forges the weapons,
The knight, protects the village.

An unbreakable symbiosis.

One day, the blacksmith forged a sword.
A sword so alluring, yet unthinkable,
A sword so powerful, yet forbidden.
The blacksmith wishes to immortalize it,
But the knight wants to slay evil with it.

ThUs the knight banishes the blacksmith and claims the sword.
With the sword in his grasp,
And nothing against his wishes.
The knight sets out with the sword to slay evil.

"Do you happen to be a late riser, X4df8?"
Groggily I walk over to the laptop to meet the innocent gaze of the culprit who blasted the alarm at full volume fifteen minutes before seven in the morning.

"It's the weekends, Monika! Have mercy and let me sleep!"

Weekends are usually one of those days where you would spend your time to lounge around and unwind from the harsh mistress of life. Be it with family, friends, lovers, or even solitary, there's always an activity—or lack thereof—that helps the common man to relax and generally tune-out from the stresses of life. Some would opt to play some sports, run around for a little exercise, a peaceful stroll or a date at Ueno Park, or a more high-octane rush around Akiba and the associated frustration, knowing that you willingly allow arcade chains to legally pinch your pockets dry after the fiftieth time you attempt to win that prize from the UFO catcher—alternatively, you can achieve similar results playing in one of their machines, assuming the line isn't too severe.

Personally, I used to enjoy the 'high-octane rush around Akiba'-alternative with a side of early morning hibernation—the latter in particular. Weekends are special that way in that there is usually nothing of importance that holds you from sleeping in. But naturally, there's always someone who would oppose that life style that I've known as customary—if my mother was the one who do so back when I was in high school, then Monika would be the one taking the reins in my adult life. I can somehow see them getting along just fine and engage in some jolly cooperation if they ever encounter one another—whether that is a good thing or a recipe for disaster, I'm not too eager to find out.

"You'll be missing half of your day if you sleep in, 43Dx5==!"
"I'm missing half of my sleep, as far as I'm concerned," I rub the corners of my temple and groan. "You sound like my mother..."

Monika gently lowers her coffee down. "Maybe your mother is right."

"If it's about choosing your girlfriend wisely, then I'll toast to that."

Monika crosses her arms, her emeralds partially obscured by her irritated brows. "Is that a compliment, or an insult?"

"I'll let you decide."

I muster a cheeky grin after leaving with what I'd call a 'Schrödinger's jab' at the now-irked high school student on the other side of the screen. I may loathe on the idea of waking up at dawn, but I never reject on the premise of badgering Monika as compensation—call it 'equivalent exchange', if you will. Though to be completely candid, she does have a point; might as well prepare breakfast and coffee to start the day.

We are expecting that Yankee, after all.

With a simple 'good morning' smile to douse her fire (I'm not willing to risk another 'hostage' situation—especially when she has control), I made my way to the counter and simultaneously start the coffee machine while preparing the rice that is to last for a whole day—about four cups. Should be enough for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I may be a shut-in or a chronic otaku in weekends, but in order to survive while maintaining my current lifestyle and juggling with economic issues, one needs the know-how of culinary basics—lest you throw money at convenience store meals and more at your hobbies. I could start musing about methods of washing rice, ways to cook it, and means of consumption, but that would be tedious and unnecessary—I know this by heart, after all.

Over my shoulder I hear an audible voice of the presenter from 'MxZAMASHI TV', an early morning news and entertainment program coming from the direction of Monika's humble abode—I assume at this point that Monika has tapped into online television broadcasting, as usual. It's not the first time she did so; it was my suggestion in the first place to supplement her linguistic capabilities and measure how much she can 'capture' the contents in Japanese with the aid of big media, after all.

And what better ways to do so than to utilize online services provided by such companies.

"—the development of synthetic limbs would be a step-up to aid the rehab—"

Ah, so it's the same topic as last Saturday; Monika shouldn't have any issue discussing this—assuming she understands everything, of course.

I continue to wash the rice as the program and the iconic voice of Yamanaka Ayako drowns the ambiance in the room. Taking quick glances over my shoulder, Monika seems to be watching intently at the continuation of last week's news and is doing her best to absorb what information there is available and as much as her proficiency in the language serves her. I switch the rice cooker on and set the timer to cook before making my way to serve me a cup of the early morning uppercut.

"Humanity sure has made significant progress," Monika comments with intrigue. "Soon, losing limbs due to accidents, war, and conflict is but an issue of the past."

"Does that disturb you?" I chime in, making my way back to the desk with a cup of the black elixir in hand.

She shakes her head. "Not really, but...remember when I said that people are kind of like
"computers?"

I nod, taking a sip of my coffee while keeping mental notes on her proficiency to both the language and the topic.

"Think of it like this: If a computer is in need of repairs, all it requires are spare parts to return it back in order again. The motherboard, keyboard, and even the central processing unit are all replaceable."

"But…" she pauses, solemnly pondering her next word. "But if the same thing can be applied to a person, what makes humanity different from machines?"

"What makes me different from any other program or intelligence?"

Indeed, this is a question that is almost as old as humanity with many bright philosophers approaching the subject from numerous different angles. With the recent pace and development of technology, it comes to no surprise to anyone that the discussion pertaining the aspects of humanity—whether it is even feasible to replace lost limbs or even augment it—has come into discussion for the past two years. Augmented reality, synthetic limbs, AIs that develop its own language—all of these were created in order to assist humanity in some form of another, yet we did not stop to question how far we are willing to throw our identity to achieve it. Monika outlines a critical point in the topic, in particular how we as a society are inching closer into becoming machine itself—as if that isn't disturbing enough, our work habit and patterns are already reflective as such. Oh boy, Yxk0 T^ro will have a field day about this.

But, there's still one question that may ease Monika's concern.

"Your heart," I reply in earnest, which is met with a look of both surprise and intrigue from her. "Not in the 'physical heart' I mean, but in the 'heart-heart'-side of things."

I clear my throat, "What I mean is the sense, the consciousness one pertains of its surroundings. Your desire to feel, the need to see, to touch, to feed, the reason to think, to love…all of those combined is what makes you different, Monika."

"That's sweet of you to say that," she smiles softly. "But what makes it different from me being programmed to believe as such?"

~PI—PI—

Oh good, the rice is done.

"For starters," I start calmly. "Do you ever feel hungry? Or thirsty?"

She nods silently in affirmation.

"Then if you're a 'program', can you remove that code from your programming? The desire to eat, drink, or sleep?"

Monika hesitates briefly, but an affirming nod tells me that it is something worth a try. It is a question that has been loitering around between us; is she really alive when her entire existence is still tied to strings of codes that can easily be modified? Or even deleted? What makes a program or AI just a tool is the ease it can be accessed to or altered; things like the desires to sleep, eat, or drink—basic human functions—are considered a liability in the long run. That is what she—no, what we conclude as much as it pains me to admit. The possibility of her being just a program or an AI that resulted from Yuuya and my tampering is still very real to both of us.
And that is why she is determined to prove it wrong—and so do I.

With an inherent resolve, she shuts her eyes to work her usual 'magic' and leaves me to explore the result of my concoction, sitting right at the counter. Opening the lid, the puff of steam that escapes from the cooker fogs my frame—the smell of success overwhelms my senses. Delicious. Now all that's left is to get an egg, a packet of natto from the fridge, and breakfast is served.

I glance at Monika and immediately, panic sets in.

A glitch 'cracks', distorting the screen in an array of red, green, and blue hue accompanied with a screeching noise like nails on chalkboard. I rush to her frantically, moving as fast as I can to do... something, anything! Should I turn off the power? No, that's unwise. Unwise! How about ctrl, alt—no, no damn it she's still in there! Think of something, anything!

"Monika!" I call her name in distraught, the last and only other solution that came to me. "Come on, say something! Monika!"

_Not like this...Not like this...

The screen flickers and the shrieking howl stops as abruptly as it started. My chest thumps erratically, my head throbs, and my mind shaken by the sudden error akin to the scares that haunted DDLC. Before me, Monika remains in her desk with her eyes wide in horror, palpitation in her breathing and gasping for air—a scene of utmost terror and fear. I reach out to touch her but realize the barrier that separates us, prompting me instead to call out to her and pray that she's alright...

"Monika!"

"I-I'm fine..." she quickly replies as she clutches her arms in an embrace. "I'll...I'll be fine."

"Monika...your cup..."

The pristine coffee cup on her desk was shattered, cracked in two and its contents spilled. Either it was the stress, the glitches, or something beyond her control, whatever happened affected her strongly to influence the object close to her—the cup. Hastily, she deletes the cup and the spill, quickly reconstructing a new one to replace the old before taking a sip; her delicate hands quivers when she raises to consume before caffeine kicks in and the crisis subsides. I pull the chair and calmly take my seat, relieved at her safety.

"What happened?"

Monika bites her lower lip and starts, "You asked that if I am a just a 'program', I could easily remove the desire to eat, drink, or sleep—I tried it."

"I tried..." her voice trails and her emeralds falls into a solemn reflection. "But...I can't."

"I can see it—the lines of codes, the prompts that dictates it all—everything. But the moment I tried to simply reach for it, it all feels like—it feels..."

She pauses. I listen with bated breath. "It feels like I'll stop existing and disappear—it's like dying."

"Just...disturbing the codes alone," she continues. "It feels like I'm cutting myself; like slicing my chest open with a sharp knife. It's horrible..."

Monika reaches for her coffee as I watches on silently. In a single chug, she finishes the beverage to set her cup and saucer down and quickly refills it with another serving. It must have been a terrible
experience—a world that she only knows. My instincts as a man kicks in naturally to find a solution to comfort her, to ease her stress and the shock with a hug or sweet whispers of affection. I'm not well-versed in the latter as much as Kitamura-senpai is, nor is it even possible to hug her with the walls that divides our reality.

But I have my ways; sometimes I even surprise myself.

"So long as you don't find that entire experience 'exhilarating' and turn it into something sexual, I guess you're fine."

'Yuri jokes' might not be the most appropriate at this time, but at least I have to lower the tension.

"4xc2d…did you really have to say that now?"

"Sorry, it's the first thing that comes to my mind!"

"I would have slap you," she quickly retorts. "But I know you did it out of good will—as distasteful as it is."

"Thank you for loving me like so, 8cHD32k."

The entire experience did settled both of our curiosity on the question, however. Is Monika really just a program? A bot? Or even strings of codes or anomaly that made up some form of artificial intelligence? It may be difficult to answer concisely, but it did brought up another question: does a program, bot, or an AI heavily rely on the need to sustain itself either by consumption or rest? Monika's little experiment nearly costed her own life; just by reaching for it alone and tampering with it gave her a 'dying sensation'—a sensation that I may never come to understand; I just hope it doesn't leave her scarred with PTSD. Without a shadow of a doubt, she is dependent on the basic needs of survival that applies to everyone from my reality—and that makes her stand above any contemporary programming or AI.

Like a ghost within a shell; a shell that is my laptop.

"Well, now that it's over," I start to break the silence. "Are you hungry?"

"Oh! I forgot about breakfast—yes, yes I am."

A wicked grin creeps on me. "I have a new menu for you; have you had traditional Japanese breakfast? Something like, say…"

"Natto?"

"I trusted you, Hx84D=…"

"Come on, it's not that bad…!" I reply before downing another chopstick full of rice with a mixture of raw eggs, soy sauce, and the 'special'. "I mean, it is vegetarian."

"Yes, but now my face feels sticky and slimy!"

Sticky and slimy? Oh my~. Please, do tell me Monika.

"That's natto for you!"

"I am NOT touching that ever again!"
"Oh trust me," I reply with a mischievous chuckle. "You will."

I'll say it upfront; I like natto, but now I have new reasons on why I love it.

"Seriously though, what do you think of Japanese-style breakfast?"

Hastily she downs another glass of water, using its excess to wipe off her cheeks and dainty lips with a (hastily 'summoned') napkin as she struggles to remove the gooey and sticky sensation. Keep going, young lady; it's almost clean.

"I like the tofu and the miso soup—the pickled side dish and the mixture of raw egg and soy sauce is surprisingly good too."

"And the natto?"

She sighs with fret, "Please don't remind me of that..."

We finish breakfast at around eight-thirty, about the same time the early morning program ends. It has been a pleasure for me to watch her sample the more traditional taste of the things I grew up with and enjoy four out of five flavors out of it—the amusement I get in return from one of the five items is a good bonus. With time still left to spare, I let the sink run and bathe the utensils in a mixture of soap and water all the while stealing glances at Monika—she seems to notice as well judging by her smile and a playful wink. I should be able to finish this in five minutes or so; a time away from Monika is a time wasted. I could use some of Monika's ability right now, though; would be practical to just delete everything in a snap.

Speaking of which, I did promised her something two days ago didn't I?

Setting up the utensils to dry, I hastily prepare another cup of coffee and made my way to her. I know just the thing to do before Yuuya's here.

"That Yankee isn't here yet, so," I said to her, picking up a copy of RE: Zxro. "You want to read together to kill time?"

Monika beams in excitement. "You remembered!"

"Of course I do," I snicker. "Now, how far are you in the story?"

It has indeed been a while since I read together with someone—at least as far as I can recall. The only other person I've read together with was my parents; that was, wow, fifteen or so years ago? I wasn't even much of a reader back in middle school—even less so in high school; didn't pick up any other books aside from what was necessary until I hit university when the world started to open for me. Coincidentally, my involvement in Monika's little nightmare actually brought forth the unintended effect of doubling the amount of things I read just so one day I could discuss it with her.

I never thought the day would arrive so soon.

Although it comes as much of a surprise to me, Monika's interest in light novels may have stemmed from my own lack of reach towards other contemporary fiction. Sure I've read some of the collections of Murakami Haruki, Natsume Souseki, Oogai Mori, and even Sumino Yoru's works, but those are just the tip of the iceberg of my library which are predominantly dominated with light novels and manga; with my taste in music put in consideration, it probably resembles closely to something out of Natsuki's collection. Monika must have been trying hard to match my taste...

I need to do redouble my efforts and do the same. Else, what kind of boyfriend am I?
"Must be Yuuya; I'll go get the door."

So how can I be that person? Would it be possible to take her outside, show her what this world has to offer? Impossible; with her still stuck in her realm, my reach can only grace on the boundaries of our world, the upper layer of a frozen lake—that being video games and any other forms of interactive media. How about asking her on the things she likes? What would she have preferred to read or have? Knowing what she likes is one thing and I can easily cover that with my knack in Paint Studio if it concerns wearable apparel—lingerie included (though I'm not surprised why she's not asking me for those). However implementing the more complicated features to the likes of a functioning grand piano, a new table set, bookshelf, and any other endeavors requires a skill and knowledge in programming and coding far higher than what I am a familiar; that is where this Yankee comes in play.

I still need to figure out how I can be someone deserving of her.

"Hey, Kame-yan! How's it hanging?"

Really, Yuuya? Not that I don't find it funny…

"Is that a Sayori joke?"

Yuuya grins with glee, revealing his rows of—shockingly—well-cared teeth. "Take it what you wish, buddy!"

"Anyway," he continues. "You received my email, right?"

"You mean that self-invitation?"

"Atta' boy!"

I do wonder why I'm friends with him in the first place sometimes. "Then I sure did. What brings you in today?"

The Yankee smirks, "Happy thoughts!"

With the grace of a bull in a china shop, Yuuya imparts with his cigarette and kills it by the door before inviting himself into the apartment—along with a fuckton of paraphernalia packed in his rucksack and his suitcase. From where I'm standing, a whiff of what I deduce to be a mix of tobacco and cologne flicks one of my senses repulsively—yet strangely, nostalgic. What is Yuuya without the smell of cheap cologne and cigarettes? I'm just glad Monika doesn't have the ability to smell what's coming from this end of the screen or she may have commented on Yuuya's hygiene—possibly even questioning me why I didn't advise him about it. Believe me, I did; Yuuya just shove a finger in return.

"What are those?"

"Magical circles and things that will make an explosive loli wet."

I can feel my soul leaving me as I lay one of the longest stare at this comedian. "No, really…why do you need so much?"

"It's to enhance your waifu, of course!" He replies. "I have everything here—three-sixty camera, shoulder cam—things you may want to have juuust in case you want to take her outside!"
Take her outside!? Is that even possible…?

"And how do you suppose you do that? Wait, hold on—who's paying for all this?"

"You, of course."

I don't like the sound of that already. With my economic situation already in jeopardy, affording whatever it is he's offering may further blunt my already sorry-excuse of a diet. And now he's offering all these for Monika's sake like a door-to-door salesman. "And how am I supposed to pay for all that?"

"Tell you what," he said. "If you agree to this, we'll cut it from your revenue in this winter's comiket—and the summer one as well; take this as an 'advanced pay', my friend. So, you're in?"

Well, I guess I can do that. Not like money grows on bonsai trees, but if it's for Monika then I'll slay a god if I have to. "I'm in."

"Lovely!" Yuuya quickly takes my hand and eagerly seals the contract. Behind those pair of sunglasses that obscures his eyes, a glint of excitement beams through. This is Yuuya, after all; so long as he doesn't install something strange, I'm all for it.

"One more thing," he adds. "Are you familiar with 'G#tebox V2'?"

In early 2016, an announcement of massive undertaking—a concept—shook the otaku culture and the world that surrounds it with the introduction of 'G#tebox', the first attempt to breach the borders of reality and fiction. The idea is simple: 'live with your favorite character'. The 'box', measuring about fifty-one centimeter in height and twenty-one in width, is a holographic projector that houses the character and allows it to interact directly with the user and its environment through the use of in-built cameras, microphone, and network access which allows the AI within to simulate a 'real' experience. From switching lights, maintaining schedule, to sending messages to your phone, it was far more advanced than what other competitors provided and promised to be the holy grail of the otaku culture. In late 2018, delivered it they did.

I was never part of the hype train, however; my meeting with Monika left me disinterested with the project as a whole (despite how similar the character is to her)—that, and I was more concerned with job hunting at the time.

'G#tebox V2' is the successor that was recently released in late 2020 and has proven to be a massive success both financially and utility-wise, despite its cost. The improvement on its robotic AI alone and the ability to detect scent and generate a proper response was indeed a welcomed addition by the community—the feature to 'transfer' your character from V1 to V2 as well is a much welcomed feature. At the end of the day, no matter how smart or intelligent the AI is, it still is 'just an AI'—it doesn't need to sleep, eat, or drink, as it does so with command as part of a generated response. That is both its limitation and its strength; that is why Monika is still a cut above the rest.

"Yeah, I am."

"Good!"

As quickly as Yuuya reached for the handshake, he quickly disperses into the living room and made a home to himself by dumping the suitcase to the side and his bag just beside Monika's laptop. Doing so, he greets her nonchalantly and is returned with her cute giggle as I busy myself in preparing tea for the guest. Yuuya's laidback character and Monika's general interest and amusement towards him
sometimes cause my blood to boil with jealousy, with how smooth their interactions go. Or I may just be overly cautious.

The clock points at eleven when Yuuya finishes unpacking all the tools he needs for this occasion—the rotatable camera, about three-four USB of unknown content, the most recent laptop available in the market, and the 'box' itself. I offer him the tea, then with a crack of his hand and neck, Yuuya glances at both Monika and I before grinning with excitement.

"Let's get started."

To this day, I still can't understand Yuuya's true reach and extent in the world of IT—let alone if he's employed or not. His laptop, almost twice the size of Monika's, is deployed beside hers with a connecting cable that links both machine and allows him to modify and update what he has planned without needing to interact with Monika's personal data directly. I can only watch in awe as his hand dances over the keyboards as tabs after tabs, with lines that I can barely comprehend, flashes and closes at a pace akin to that of a rhythm game—whatever it is he's inputting or changing, it even left Monika baffled at how proficient he is with his field. After a few minutes or so, a 'choice' tab opens before us with two options: 'Yes or No'.

"First up," Yuuya starts. "Monika has been using wallpaper engine for a while now, correct?"

Monika and I nods in unison; a chuckle escapes Yuuya's cheeky grin.

"Time to retire that thing; now, I've acquired license for LIVE2D EUCLID and—"

"Wait," I interrupt. "And who's paying for this?"

"You, of course."

Perfect...why am I not surprised?

"Now, as I was saying," he continues. "I acquired the license for LIVE2D EUCLID and took some...'liberty' to reassemble the entire code."

He turns to Monika. A smile of confidence graces his features. "Monika darling, would you like a step to a 'greater' new dimension?"

Monika timidly nods, a surprising response from the usually vocal club leader. Oh, how I wish to kick him out of the house right about now. 'I detest NTR', he said. 'Flirting with someone else's girlfriend is wrong', he said. Just keep your cool, it's Yuuya after all; he does that to every one of the opposite sex. God forbid, I do not appreciate the look he garnered from Monika; that flustered reflection is reserved for me and me alone!

"Atta' girl!"

With a press of a button, whatever data or code Yuuya installed smoothly transitions to Monika and immediately her eyes perks up in excitement; like a child receiving otoshidama during New Year. It isn't obvious to me at first what he implements as the little messages and hints Yuuya left in the code are only readable to her alone—much to my chagrin. But then, everything starts to take shape as the pieces all falls into place.

What seemed to be 'normal' to the naked eye, is all disproven the moment she twirls and spins in her black summer dress. The smoothness of each movement, the transition when she turns, the flow of her long, auburn hair, the gloss of her hypnotizing green eyes, and the wave her dress creates that
corresponds to her waltz—all the while retaining a consistent blend of colors, shadows, and shading reminiscent to some of the best virtual reality tech demo made available in recent years or her portrayal in some of the games she has visited. Her room, just like her, receives a similar make-over along with all its items and the things she collected.

"Say goodbye to Ren'Py and wallpaper engine," Yuuya states proudly. "Welcome to the 3D realm!"

Monika smiles splendidly—a smile that radiates far brighter than any I've seen before. Even when bounded by the limitations of the wallpaper and Ren'Py engine, she was very much real to me; this is taking it up to another scale, one that caught me off guard and flushes my cheeks with warmth and fill my insides with butterflies. Aaah…is this how Monika felt when she saw me for the first time? To notice all the little details and contours of a person, the creases at the edge of her smile and the glossiness of her inviting lips…it's more than what I could ever hope for. Even her chest are—

…

Oh, god…I'm getting nervous around her; this is a bit much to take! Watch your thoughts, Oogame! Don't think of lewd, don't think of lewd, don't think of lewd…

"How do you feel?" Yuuya asks Monika.

"I feel…lighter! It's much easier to move around…!"

"That's because now you have proper rigging!" he chuckles with satisfaction as he removes one of the mysterious USB from its port. "Skeleton, muscles, fibers, and all!"

"What do you think, Kame-yan?"

"I-I uh…wha…?"

Words are tangled, the moon rabbit ran away to Eientei, and Amaterasu became a little puppy—I'm just flushing whatever incoherent thoughts are running in my head! Nothing to worry, I'm not thinking of anything indecent of Monika! Nope, hahaha! You tried to catch me off-guard did you, you sneaky Yankee! Too bad, but I think you've failed! Wahahaha

…

…Yuuya, stop looking at me like that.

"Kame-yan~," he nudges. "What do you think~? I think she would like to know~!"

I roll my eyeballs to glimpse at Monika who looks on expectantly with a smile. She looks extraordinary. If her eyes wasn't hypnotizing then, it surely multiplies by a hundred now as I can catch the glimmer and the gloss of her piercing green emeralds. Just gazing at it for another zero-point-three second longer and I may have reach nirvana earlier than anticipated.

"C-cute. Very cute."

"Hmm…?"

"I-I say she's cute…ok?" I reply with but a whisper.

"I don't think she can hear you~."

_DAMN YOU, YUUYA—!_
Burying my face in the cup of tea, I muster my courage to speak—with vigor. "Cute…very cute."

*I'm sorry, my heart is too unstable right now!*

"He said you're veeery cute, Monika! Your big turtle's too shy to say it out loud, alright!"

**GODDAMN YOU, YOU INSENSITIVE YANKEE—!**

As I open my mouth to speak, my words and thoughts are frozen by the giggle of the young girl—now more alive than ever. I'm guessing she's having her own fun (out of my expense), but seeing her smile and laugh like this, it's—how should I describe it? 'Like finding a reason to fall in love for the first time', again; I have little else to say except echoing the cue every time I start DDLC.

"We're not done yet," Yuuya continues with an amused grin. "There is more to come."

We let Yuuya loose to run his proficiency in the code as he conjure another spell that is to be casted at Monika—and me, if I'm catching his hints correctly. Apparently, he has been experimenting extensively with Monika's 'colors-poem'—the BSOD-poem—and the remnants of its code out of curiosity just to see what else he can conjure out of it. If I even understand half of his explanation (which I didn't), I might follow what he's implying all along. But I didn't—that is, until he gave me a shoulder camera.

"This next upgrade will be for both of you," he starts in his best mimicry of a presenter. "First, the rotatable camera for you, my darling."

There he goes again, flirting with her.

Yuuya attaches a small wireless plug to one of the available ports in Monika's laptop and, suddenly, she squeals with a mix of excitement and surprise. The three-sixty webcam positioned just to the side of the laptop, *moves* and corresponds *exactly* to where she wishes to see. The hall that leads to the door, the balcony, the bookshelf, and even the walls behind the desk that is caked with maps from 'Ph%ntasy St#r Onl1ne 2' is now visible for her to peruse; even the laundry I desperately try to obscure from her.

"I get the hint that you're quite into anime and manga, but I didn't think you'll be as immersed as Natsuki," she comments with excitement and glee of her discovery. "And you *really* need to tidy your room!"

"I'll do that later."

"Promise me, or I'm taking one of your files 'hostage' again!"

But it doesn't end there! Yuuya, the magnificent bastard, still has one more thing up his sleeve.

"Now, click on the 'travel'-program, my dear; Kame-yan, put that shoulder camera on—don't forget the ear and mouthpiece."

The shoulder camera Yuuya gave me, though small, is connected to portable wifi that is designed to draw the same meter from my phone plan and doubles as its power bank—whether this modification is legal or not, I don't bother to ask (too much of a hassle and I rather *not* be in the know—else my sense of order kicks in). The device also has a wireless mouth and earpiece attached to it. Though relatively small, light, and useless as contemporary device of live recording utilized by big media, the purpose of this is one thing and one thing only: to maintain a direct 'link' to Monika's laptop.

In other words, the means to allow her to *see* the world outside. A proper date.
"Um, can you hear me?"

The voice that comes from the earpiece—her voice—rings loud and clear as the camera rotates at her bidding.

"Clearly, Monika," I reply with a chuckle. "Clearly."

"If I may interrupt you two lovebirds," Yuuya cuts. "Although this means that Monika can enjoy the world outside, she still basically remain at the comfort of her own room—you're a walking camera, Kame-yan."

He pulls another one of his mysterious USB off of its port before continuing. "On the other hand, this just means that Kame-yan is in full control of where to go—I'll let both of you sort that problem!"

"But before both of you do so, hold on to your butts," he continues. "We still have a few more hurdle to climb."

It is at around this point of time that I notice what the two remaining USBs and its purpose are for. Every time Yuuya finishes implementing something, he detaches one of the four that is plugged into his laptop. With the last two remaining, all Monika and I can do is wonder what other surprises Yuuya came up with—not to mention, the 'box' that is now visibly connected to wall socket. Despite being visibly 'on', no sign of the character is at use—I'm starting to get the hint of what he's trying to do next.

"This next one will be a two-step process," Yuuya hastily explains before biting on a toothpick to gnaw on. "I'll start with the 'easier' one."

Again, we watch with great interest as Yuuya's finger mashes what available button and transforms them into lines of commands, prompts, and god-knows what else. One second a tab flashes open and it closes the next before another flashes up and new lines are added into it—he works nothing short like a machine in its own regards. After a few more button presses and enters, the final tab opens and the 'box' lights up—yet aside from the lights, nothing seems out of the ordinary—there's no AI nor sound.

"I took some liberty in tinkering with the 'box'," he explains. "Monika my dear, would you kindly—"

"Flip that light over there?"

With a puzzled look from both Monika and I, Yuuya points towards the direction of the toilet situated in the hallway, just across the shower and laundry room. It is an odd request—an inquiry that is as confusing as his sense of fashion, and yet there is something that always keeps you coming back for more. Monika looks at me with her inquisitive pair of emeralds, vying for clarification or answers to which I can only nod before she does the same to Yuuya. The Yankee's grin that is brimming with confidence, along with a simple 'go on' as push prompts her to concentrate.

…

And switches it on, she did.

DOKAN

…before blowing the bulb out in a ceremonious 'bang'.

"Woops, guess that's a bug in the code," Yuuya states before flashing a tab. "I'll get this fixed right
up; that's a bit too much. Next, you can try with the living room lights!"

He surely spares no expense, does he—my expense that is.

"There's just one more thing to do," Yuuya sighs and—for the first time today—raises his sunglasses to reveal his eyes. Only one USB remains in the port. "This one's a bit special—but it's worth the shot!"

"You see," he continues. "So far I've eased Monika into the 3D realm and, judging by how things progress and how smooth things are going, I can safely push for the next step."

"What I'm planning to do now is to bump her into the 4D realm using this,"

He taps on the machine to his left. "The 'box'."

The 'box', as what we've come to call at the spur of the moment, is the product that stemmed from 'G#tebox V2' that has been heavily modified by Yuuya—mainly, its enhancement on memory capacity, computational speed, and logic processing. From what Monika and I could gather, the first three 'upgrades' Yuuya gave to her is meant as a fallback point and to ease her transition into the 4D-realm or—in this case—contained holographic projection. Though the day she can be a part of this reality is still years—if not decades—away, these little upgrades and innovations Yuuya conjured are small steps towards realizing her dream.

Judging from how Monika's eyes lit up, I'm guessing she is just as excited as I am towards this premise.

"This process may take a while," Yuuya starts. "Are you ready?"

I gaze at the young woman at the other side who now barely is able to contain her excitement; she gazes back, her emerald eyes filled with hope and expectations. To finally be able to have taste of just a bit of my reality; it really is too good to be true. The confirmation tab flashes, leaving us with two choices: 'yes or no'. Monika nods to tell me of her wishes, prompting me to tap Yuuya's shoulder and give him the 'go ahead'.

"Hold on to your butts!"

The option is selected and in exchange, a progress bar and a countdown appears and we wait with anticipation; the 'box' boots up and its lights blinks.

Then, silence…

…

*COUGH*

*COUGH-COUGH*

*COUGH-HHAGHK—!*

And reality crumbles into a grinding halt.

All my senses are ground to the brink of termination and my heart to palpitate in sheer dread and terror. Time slows to a crawl. The hum of the laptop convulses into screeches, the tipper-tapper of water droplets that leaks from the sink splashes into millions, the echo of my heartbeat grows louder
but meaningless, the deafening silence that engulfs my existence—an endless cacophony of noises, all demanding yet none coherent. The colors, grey and depressive. Yuuya's concentration, glued to the screen as the numbers—the bar, the progress—plods towards the end. Why…

"Just hang on," he speaks. His voice echoes in my head; my ears, they ring. "Tough it up, Monika…"

Monika…?

...

...Moni—

...

Monika's struggling, her hand claws at her throat, eyes shot open, and mouth agape for air. She reaches forward—for me, stumbling, writhing, squirming, and calling in muted suffocation and agony. Her hand collides with the wall that divides our reality, desperately banging to reach for my absent consciousness; to end it all, one way or another, begging for me to release her from the torment. I…I thought we're trying to—no, wait this isn't right…why is she—i-it isn't supposed to—what is going on I…!

I need to move. I need to move. I have to do something. I have to—

'It feels like I'm cutting myself; like slicing my chest open with a sharp knife. It's…'

'—it's like dying.'

No…no…NONONO THIS ISN'T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN LIKE THIS! I NEED TO—

Then, she becomes fractures of many colors; a scene that brought me back to four years ago, memories of my first play through, one that I know all too well—a time I wish to forget.

"Shut it down," I call out. "Shut everything down, Yuuya!"

He looks at me quizzically, "We're halfway there, it won't—"

"SHUT IT DOWN, NOW!"

"Relax Kame-yan, she may look like she's in pain but we're just converting some code and data to —"

—YUUYA…!

I feel the weight in my right arm as it swings down like a pendulum, impacting on the surface of flesh and bone that sends Yuuya tumbling back across the room. The bone and the muscles on my hand screams in pain, unaccustomed to the exerted force—but I don't mind; the pain will subside. I have other things to worry in this small window of opportunity. Before everything goes wrong, before the point of no return…

Before she dies.

Reeling back to reality, I reach for the mouse and quickly guide the cursor to the 'x' and undo the entire procedure, returning everything back before this 4D madness started. Quickly I turn to Monika as the echo of footsteps grows ever closer, furious and violent. Within her room, Monika lies weakly on the wooden floor, her eyes are barely open—the once beautiful emerald color is slightly
faded from the tears, and her lips—slightly ajar—oozes with her saliva that drips into a small puddle. But she's breathing. She's alive.

Relief quickly overtakes me. I turn and is quickly greeted by a soaring pain that disperses across my cheek and sends my glasses flying, stumbling me off from my chair and onto the cold, hard, floor.

"WHAT DID YOU DO, YOU MANIAC!?!" he cries as he frantically checks his laptop. "I'M TRYING TO HELP BOTH OF YOU AND THIS IS WHAT I GET?"

"Help us?" I retort while struggling to stand. I find my balance from the counter and pick myself to face him. "You tried to KILL her!"

"I'm only CONVERTING the files and data for—"

I reach for his collar and violently pulls him for a head-butt, knocking him off of his balance. I'm not taking any of this anymore…

"Fuck your 'box'!" I spat, consumed by rage over Monika's very own safety. "She is NOT some 'files' or 'data' for your amusement! She—"

I pause, observing—anticipating—Yuuya's next move as he pick himself up. "Monika…"

"Monika is ALIVE!"

We stand face to face in silence, bruised and fists throbbing in pain. Both of us recognize the position we stand for and the implication it has brought upon us; the rift that emerge between us. No words are exchanged in the passing minute—doing so would do no good but brought upon us more grief, anger, and conflict. Cautiously, we straighten ourselves in silence and let the tension settles before any further action is made.

"Yuuya," I start. "Thank you for your help today, but I believe…"

I swallow a mix of blood and saliva down my throat. I guess this really is it. "…I believe it's time for you to go."

Yuuya grimaces and clicks his tongue, "So this really is it, huh?"

I nod in silence.

He leaves a beaten sigh and glances at both me and the setup behind me—to Monika. "This cannot continue,"

"You don't know what you're messing with, Oogame. You need me."

"We'll see about that."

"Fine," he spat. "I'm out—keep the 'box', I have no use for it."

With nothing left to say, Yuuya starts to pack all his belongings—his laptop, suitcase, and bag—before walking dejectedly towards the door. I keep my eyes on his movement and silently escort him to the door, ignoring the throbbing pain that still pricks at my cheek and forehead. My thoughts are torn in two; on one end, I am proud of my actions and volition concerning Monika's well-being. On the other hand, I have just ended a friendship that had lasted for more than twelve years—and it pains me to see it reach this conclusion.
To see that this may very well be the last time I'll see Chousuke Yuuya.

After Yuuya's departure, I quickly return to the living room to check on Monika and find myself relieved that she is—though unconscious—is alive and well. Before she comes to, I start to clean the mess that both Yuuya and I caused before tending to my wounds. Tomorrow, I may have to apologize to the landlord and my neighbors for the ruckus caused, but it's little compared to what had happened here. There is no turning back now; I will have to take Yuuya's reins if there's any new additions that comes to mind. But for now, I'm just glad that Monika—though she may never become a holographic projection—has reached the 3D realm and is that much closer to my reality.

"Hhhm…"

A faint moan beckons me to investigate the source of the voice—to Monika. To my relief, I find Monika sitting on her desk massaging her temples to which she greets me in return with a smile—frail, but nonetheless it's enough to assure me. My cheeks start to burn up once more upon noticing the differences and details that has graced the young woman, but decide to keep my composure. I take my usual seat to face her.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, slightly concerned.

"My head throbs," she replies timidly. "My entire body and my insides is aching all over."

"Take it easy, you just went through quite a horrible…experience."

I couldn't dare myself to ask her how it all went for her. One of the perks of being on this side of our reality is how we are more or less spared from the horrific experience that she had endured—and I believe it is something that we may never know nor understood. My chest starts to ache as I remember the scene that is now engraved in my memory; the pain, the agony, the torment…its unbearable even just by looking at it. I pray that she may never have to deal with that horror in the future—and I will see to it that she doesn't.

"You're…bruised, 7HdTs," she points, cutting my train of thoughts. "What happ—oh my god, did you and Chousuke—where is he?"

"He…" I pause to find the right word. "He went home."

"He…" I pause to find the right word. "He went home."

"Oh…I see…"

Monika doesn't seem to buy that reasoning and possibly suspect of what actually happened, judging by her concerned expression that seems to adamantly pry for more information from me. I start to move my hand and use the cursor to open Kitamura-senpai's email the day before as means of distraction and to bury myself in work—it is after all, one of the most effective methods of consigning the image to oblivion. Sure enough, what Kitamura-senpai sent me was his share of load that he wished to discard; well, perfect I guess…just what I need to keep me busy.

"Say, H4D1dl==?" she starts abruptly. "If…there is something I can be of help, or if there is anything you want to talk about,"

"Please share it with me, ok? I don't want you to hurt yourself by bottling pent up stress and frustration."

…

Sometimes I convince myself that it is best if I am to take the hit rather than having someone else
suffer in my place. Sometimes I believe that Monika may know more than what I am led to believe—
maybe even notice the frustration and pain that seeps through the cracks of my mask that I wear as a
façade, obscuring the little demon inside that wishes to tear me apart from limb to limb. Or maybe—
just maybe—I may be overthinking things again.

I glance at Monika briefly and smile. She really is captivatingly beautiful—even more so now.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me."

...

_I am perfectly alright._
"My head hurts…" Monika sighs as she massages her temples. "This is a first…"

After the fallout with Yuuya, a week went by and life continues like it has always been. Unpaid overtime is a regular on the menu, the colleagues at work are as much of a dick as they always were, and the pile of work just don't seem to abide, but surprisingly I find myself adapting to the misfortunes comfortably. There were lingering bitterness and regret; severing all ties with Yuuya left quite a foul aftertaste, naturally, but if it weren't because of his contribution—that prior to his sick 'experiment'—I may not be as accepting as I am now. I've come to embrace the sentiment—the thought—of having someone who eagerly expects you, neither have I quite understand the feeling when, as an adult, you come home from work and look up to your apartment window and notice the lights were on; the idea that you are living as a couple. It sounds unrealistic—unreal, something that stems from the imagination of poets and authors, romanticizing the value of life and love. But now I understand: That feeling that nudge at your heart, the presence of someone who is expecting you after a long, hard day—that akin to a married life. That image where you have someone who welcomes you with a smile, laughter, and a loving gaze the moment you turn the keys and say 'I am home'—a victorious cry of salvation.

I have finally come to grips and understand what it really meant.
"I told you not to stay up late," I chime with a coffee in hand. A presumptuous grin is what I can spare. "Do you know that girls are supposed to enjoy more of their beauty sleep than guys?"

Monika crosses her arms—her trademark 'eat shit'-smirk on full display. "Well, considering your weekend pattern, does that make you more of a lady then?"

"Clever girl," I chuckle before taking a sip, admonishing at her victorious smile. "You win this round, young lady."

Yes, the sense that many yearned for; the instinct that screams home. Like a traveler to a sight of a peaceful village, or three Wiseman of legends to that of a lone star, Monika became that symbol—that reason for me to return to. The light that shines from my room on a Monday night, though far, illuminate the path and beckon for my name with a call that is audible only to me. Upon hearing the audible 'click' of the keys, I was instantly welcomed with a warmth that brought me back to old childlike memories once lost in the ocean of time, or a life that I thought only possible in anime or other contemporary fictions. To have someone waiting for you, to welcome you with a loving smile…indeed it is a nice feeling to have. It made you feel loved; wanting, but alive. Rejuvenating. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Days gone by, again and again I found her waiting for my return each night and, before I knew it, the sun rose on an early Saturday morning on the second of October.

"You always let me win, ExFd32." She remarks with a girlish giggle. "Or, is it because you're going easy on me~? Ahahaha…!"

I grin sheepishly. It really is impossible to catch a break from her. "Maybe I am."

Monika bridges her arm and assumes the usual pose I grew to associate her with; her cheeky smile still hasn't abate her. Setting my saucer and coffee on the table beside the laptop, I take my usual seat and gaze into her hypnotizing green eyes as a way to show my defiance to her little antics—a prelude before the big reveal that I have planned for today.

"Are you trying something, 2dsHkL?" Monika replies, quickly noticing advance. "Or maybe you're hypnotized by my eyes~?"

"Maybe. But I am certain I can hypnotize you."

"Oh, how so?"

A sly grin slowly creeps on me as I narrow my gaze, observant like a predator. "What if I am to take you out today for a date outside? Will you admit that you're hypnotized by mine then?"

Her eyebrows twitch briefly in surprise, followed quickly by her swift retreat behind her fingers to conceal her blush. "Oh, that's cheating!"

"All is fair in love and war!" I grin victoriously. "So, what do you think? Yes? No?"

"You know I can't say no to that!" Checkmate.

My heart skips a beat as I quietly observe Monika's giddiness at the prospect of finally seeing the world outside—away from the confines of her prison and the limitations of what the internet could provide. We never had the chance to fully test this outside of my apartment; I was far too concerned
of her well-being that I decided that she should rest and recuperate last Sunday after the incident—she didn't take to it quietly, of course, but I convinced her otherwise. Today will be our first time, but it won't be our last. Monika quietly muses to herself, shifting from one end of the screen to the other while picking out what clothes she is going to wear (despite knowing that only I get to leave the apartment) and what to do—most importantly, where I plan to take her. Tokyo is a big metropolis and, despite my negative sentiment on society as a whole, admittedly there are good things to be found and places to explore; landmarks that represent the culture, traditions, and customs of my homeland—the things I am eager to show and pray she'll come to appreciate and love. I tap on the computer to quickly grab her attention; it may take Monika some time to prepare (based on my stereotype of women in general), but I also need mine.

"I don't know if there is a shower in your reality," I say sardonically. "But I'm taking mine—you better decide what to wear by then!"

With haste I leave the crime scene before Monika could make a clever retort, taking along with me a towel. As I disappear into the cramped shower room, I realize the increasing tempo of my heart beat that grows louder and louder as I let the lukewarm water baste and wake me to the prospect—the reality that is to face me in the next hour or so. The more I let my thoughts wander, the faster and louder my heart paces, sending a surge of blood to the pockets of my cheeks and burst it to a pinkish hue.

A date…with Monika. Not the usual 'date' where we spend our time in another game too—we've nearly exhausted that.

A normal, honest-to-god, date with Monika.

Let that sink in…

…

Wow, I can barely contain myself! It's not what you would expect—I mean, she's still confined in the computer—but it is what it sounds like. To go outside and enjoy the sights together and experience it all as if she's there…wait, she is! What am I thinking about? I have the places and locations to visit in mind, but what can we do? Maybe I can buy her something—wait, but how am I supposed to gift it to her? What about food? What if I am to make a stop at a crepe stand? How would she be able to enjoy that? Maybe we can go to the movies—the checkpoint will have an issue with the camera and all, but I'll make it work somehow. Then what? What do couples normally do in a date?

A walk in the park, movies, dinner, and ends with a stop at the love ho—

…

NO. DON'T THINK THAT FAR.

Quickly I wrap a towel on myself and dry the excess residue, reaching for the basket that hosts my set of clothes and—due to my negligence—finds its contents staring at me with an empty gaze. In my rush, I have simply forgotten to bring with me a set of change. It's a setback, but nothing to fret about; I usually take with me a set of clothes and be ready the moment I step out, but I was in a rush. Mistakes happen, move on, best not to keep her waiting.

With a troubled sigh, I wrap the towel around my waist. Gently, I open the door…

"EEEP…!"
…!

"O-HO SHI—! TURN THE OTHER WAY! PLEASE!"

…right. I forgot that she actually can see everything around her now.

"Do you NOT know any decency around women!?!" she cries in an exasperated, embarrassed voice. I frantically attempt to cover what civility I have left in the moment, noticing how only the side of the laptop and the three-sixty camera that faces my opposite direction is visible from my end—though despite of it, I can clearly imagine what her reaction is just from the voices that came out of it. "I'm RIGHT HERE! Put something on!"

"I'm SORRY! I FORGOT about the upgrades!"

"S-so this isn't the f-first time you walk out STARK NAKED!? P-Pervert…!"

I have a lot of convincing to do.

I guess we're off to a great start…?

I feel the weight of the apparatus impacts on my back as I sling my backpack over my shoulder. The camera, though measuring the size of a webcam (or the size of one of those shoulder-mounted flashlight in that alien movie—operates like one too), needs to be secured around the shoulder blade and the waist—like a bandolier—due to both its weight and its requirement to be attached to the apparatus that manages the power and Wi-Fi connection necessary for this technological miracle to take place. The entire thing—as a whole—resembles the JSDF’s radio pack and probably weight as much. If it weren't for the bag used for concealment and the lack of antenna, this thing would be looking pretty conspicuous—I wouldn't dare to ask how that Yankee managed to get his hands on this in the first place. Already in its first few minutes, my shoulders starts to notice the weight and the strain from the apparatus attached to my back—to think I may have to carry this for an entire day, it's quite physically demanding in a sense. But if this is what I have to endure for Monika, it's something that I'll manage.

I turn towards the laptop and give her the thumbs up. In but a fraction of a few seconds, the camera on my left shoulder comes to life. Her voice echoes on the earpiece as a confirmation for one last check.

"Can you hear me?"

"No."

"Very funny, 7Sdx3…"

Snickering with glee, I made my way to Monika who—judging by how she looks—is as ready as I am. She dons her white blouse with a beige cardigan—a recent addition to her wardrobe—paired with modest shorts and thigh-high socks. Her hair is done in the usual ponytail with its striking white bow, but what's more compelling is the subtle makeup she applies that seems natural. I take my time to admire her, secretly applauding her sense of fashion that is true to her claim; compare to how simplistic I dress, it's almost criminal for her to walk alongside me.

Sure, I won't be able to see it during our date, but it's her thoughts that counts and that—for me—is more than good enough.

"You look great."
"Thank you, 7xcDh!" she replies with a bright smile. "I always try to look my best just for you. Ahaha~!"

She giggles and my cheeks burns in response. Monika always seems to know how to hit my weak spots...

"Ready to go?"

She nods in excitement and beams. "Certainly."

We—sorry, I—we walk towards the door, not forgetting the keys and my wallet as well as one crucial thing.

"Don't forget to turn off the lights, Monika."

"O-oh! Of course!"

At the behest of her 'clap', the lights of the apartment dies and off we venture to see what Tokyo has to offer for her—for us. A 'clapper', huh... that's creative of her—reminds me of one of those old movie I saw about a comedian's rendezvous with an almighty god.

But I digress.

"Where are we going?" she asks. A mix of curiosity and excitement dominates her tone that she otherwise tries fruitlessly to conceal.

"How about we start with Ueno Park?"

One of the more popular couple destinations in Tokyo, Ueno Park is both historical as it is beautiful with its temple, zoo, and pond with boat rentals. The public park, which is situated in the Ueno district, is characterized as one of my homeland's first esplanade that encompasses the practices of both Western influence and Japanese tradition that is prominent during the Meiji period; it also houses a number of museums such as the National Museum of Nature and Science, Metropolitan Art Museum, International Library of Children's Literature, and even a concert hall that dated as far back as 1890. If visiting old architectural marvel isn't your thing, there is also a boat lake (or a large pond, if we are to split it into its three respective section) and a zoo that hosts four of China's giant pandas.

But of course, that's not all; during spring when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, the park is one of Tokyo's most favored destination for flower viewing—also the loathsome mandatory company parties, but I rather leave that one out. The area is also rife with festivals at certain time of the year, with local stalls selling street snacks and goodies dotting the sidewalk and the surrounding area—it's quite a sight! Although, speaking of flower viewing, I do appreciate a sense of serenity and peace one can achieve during those activities more than the experience of the occasional festivals; the former has the edge on keeping your mind clear as you admire the sights and nature’s beauty with the changing season—Japan is a country of four seasons, after all. I promised myself back in high school that, one day if I managed to land myself a girlfriend or a partner, the first place I would take her out to is either a park or a museum; not too exciting, I know, but you can really measure the worth of your significant other just by how much she's into it just because you take her there. I guess now is the perfect opportunity to fulfill that oath—not to mention, I have Monika to impress; I do hope she'll appreciate the spots I've chosen.

But I never foreseen that her impression would arrive far sooner than anticipated.

Just by stepping outside, wading through the crowds, passing the ticket gate with an IC card, and catching the train alone is enough to send her to euphoria. For someone who's trapped in a coded
reality, to see and experience a world—a living world—is as overwhelming as it is to me if I ever have the chance to cross to hers. Even before we reach the park, Monika's eyes has been tracking each movements, reacts to the sounds, the sights, the breakneck speed that society moves in, and everything of the world that she is now so close to, yet so distant—even the sweet, savory smell that came from a nearby crepe store.

"What's that smell?"

"You can actually smell that?"

"Y-yes!" she replies in earnest. "It smells so...sweet and delicious! Oh, wow, Yuya really put a lot of thought into this..."

That he did...that he did...

"So...does that mean you can smell my cologne...?"

"It's a little strong," she quips. "But I like it. It smells like you—just how I imagined it! Ahaha~!"

And boy does my heart tries its best not to explode. You did good, buddy; I'll be counting on you in dealing her barrage of cuteness overdose in the future.

We ended up buying a crepe—well, I ended up getting one per-her request. A banana-chocolate crepe. What is it with young girls and their love for chocolate and banana crepe...? Still is one of the universe's greatest unanswered question, I suppose. But this begs the question: how in the world is she going to have this? Aside from getting only one, I don't see any possible way for her to even lick it—unless of course, she's going to pull 'that'.

"Would you be a dear and raise it to where I can see it? Juuust a bit closer!"

I do as she asks and—after a minute or so—I can hear her delectable cry of satisfaction from biting down on the childish snack. As I thought, she needs a 'visual' first of the object in question before she can recreate it within her reality—a limitation for sure, but it does keep her bound to my end of the looking glass technically speaking. Though I can only see her as an overly-excited shoulder camera, I manage to delegate a smile at her reaction simply by projecting how she looks like right about now within the confines of my imagination. Well, no point in musing about it—I should take a bite and enjoy it as much as she does.

…

Ah, I see why they like chocolate and banana combo now.

We continue with our date with a simple stroll around Ueno Park, admiring the serenity of the pond and the aesthetically pleasing landmarks littered across the area. Throughout the entire walk alone, Monika continues to query about the different temples and the shrines, its history, and what it means for me as someone who grew up associated with the culture and tradition. She asks on and on about the park itself, the statues of great leaders and its story, and also about the cherry blossom trees—though it isn't blooming at this time of the year—and its significance to my culture, the flower viewing tradition, and why it symbolizes Japan as a whole. I do my best to explain what I know and what is written in and around, but I get the feeling that she asks me these innocent questions not only because she may have an interest with it, but also because she wishes to be a part of it. Then there's an instance where she asks me to stop and have a little chat with an old couple that happens to be walking their shiba inu—from her tone, I can guess she's more interested with the ball of fluff that barks and wags at the camera than to the owners, but that's just what you would expect from her.
By the time we reach the path that encircles around the pond, the weight of the entire apparatus dissipates and transforms into a pleasant experience. This weight, though heavy, feels as if a young woman—as if Monika herself—clings her arms around mine as we stroll around like a couple, hand in hand. For someone of nineteen years of age, everything that is happening today, the sights, experience; it all sums up to be an innocent date for a high school student (admittedly, she should be in university at that age, but I digress). After a single lap, I decide that now is the best time to take her for a boat ride—what’s a date in Ueno without that or a walk in the zoo?

"You would like to rent a row boat?" Ask the woman in charge. I glance at Monika, then back at her and nods. "A row boat? Just by yourself?"

Technically…

"Well, y-yes…is that ok?"

She looks quizzically at us for a brief second, shrugs, and then returns to her job. "Sure…that will be 700 yen for an hour."

I reach for my coin purse and draws a 500 yen and two 100 yen coins. The lady looks at me, puzzled even more than before.

"I thought you were joking, but ok…just be careful not to drop your things—we are not responsible for personal losses."

Our row ride comes a minute later and after settling in, I carefully remove the apparatus and the camera and sets them on the opposite end of the row boat; thankfully, both the earpiece and the mike (which is clipped to my collar) are wireless. With everything set and secured with the best of my ability, I push the boat off of the dock and lets it sail freely in the pond—her on one end and me at the other, face to face.

"You can be quite the romantic sometimes, Chx4D."

she comments, emanating a grin from me.

"What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I could ask the same to you, Monika."

Monika wastes no time to muse and romanticize the idea as the boat cruises over the water surface, creating waves and trails of bubbles in its wake. I keep the oar rowing as she speaks, listening to how everything is for her, to experience a reality that is then but a pipe dream and is now as close to becoming as real as it possibly be. The little tugs at my heart strings nudge at me when she does so; as much as she wishes to be here, physically, I too dream of a day where that will come true. For now, we—the both of us—will have to make do with what we have.

"I always thought that having a copy of my character file in a flash drive or something is really romantic, for some reason." she starts as I gently rest the boat near the center of the pond, floating. Amongst the chatter of the ducks and other visitors, only her voice echoes the loudest. "But after seeing all this, experiencing all the things we can do together…"

"I…I'm not sure I can say the same anymore…"

I realize at this time how…overwhelming everything can be. A quiet sob that is quickly followed by a muffled laughter mixed with tears echoes within my earpiece for a minute or so as the boat gently bobs from side to side. The camera before me twirls around, gazes up towards the clear blue sky and the rolling clouds, before it twists downwards to the base of the boat then to me, to which a gentle smile is what I can muster in return. It may seem like a bout of insanity to most who observes the
quirk of the machine that rests on my opposite end, but it's not like that at all; to me, a young woman of nineteen in a wonderful casual autumn trend is overwhelmed by her emotions, her arms tucked to her side as she smiles and giggles while doing her best to suppress the tears that runs down her cheeks—a bout of happiness and bliss so intense that she can't help but to express openly.

"I'm sorry, I must sound silly right now...to cry and to laugh at the same time, ahaha~..."

"Don't be," I reply. "Just take your time. I know it can be pretty overwhelming."

This is one of the few instances where I can see how vulnerable Monika is—far more than how we first spent our time together there, in the ‘eternal classroom’ four years ago. Here, she openly presents herself as nothing more than a young woman, lost in a coded reality, alone, yearning for that special day with her beloved—with me. This reality of mine—this world—and all its expanses, the rustles of the wind, the random chatter of the individual, and everything that she has to see, to hear, to smell, is all but a dream according to hers. A dream that she believe to be true, one that she persisted to against the thoughts and the design of her reality—and found it she did. A world beyond the screen.

"Let's go," I said as I reach for the two oars. "We still have some places to visit."

We return the boat after an hour on the pond and I quickly lug the apparatus and set the camera back on my left shoulder once more, securing it with the clips that comes with it. After a brief banter, we decide to pay a visit to the zoo before settling for a place to have lunch in—I do have somewhere in mind, but it may require us to utilize the services of JR Tokyo. Thus, we conclude that—yes, we're in Ueno Park and yes, there is a zoo. Might as well.

"That will be 600 yen for a single adult."

Good thing it's a 'pay one for two'-fare for us.

Ueno Zoo encompasses the other half of Shinobazu Pond that doubles it as an exhibit. The zoo itself is divided into two sections—the West Garden, which includes parts of Shinobazu Pond, and the East Garden where the main attraction—the Giant Pandas—resides. Since we enter from the Benten gate, we decide to follow the western edge of the zoo in a clockwise fashion and observe the pelicans and sea eagles that calls the Shinobazu pond as its current habitat before we visit the vivarium, passing by the playful lemurs and aye-ayes that just can't keep themselves still.

The vivarium is home to an array of reptiles from crocodiles, giant turtles, to the smallest tree frogs. Aside from keeping a personal favorite of mine (the Galapagos giant tortoise), the vivarium is one of my favorite stops in the zoo for its array of other smaller reptiles that are as fascinating as it is dangerous—a sentiment that Monika doesn't share, sadly (though she does think that the giant tortoise is cute).

"The face of that tortoise reminds me of you during weekends—slow and lazy."

"Hush, girl. You're ruining this turtle and that tortoise's bonding moment."

Just beyond the vivarium is the other end of the West Garden where the zoo keeps its giraffes, rhinoceros, hippos, zebras, and even small mammalians—there's also penguins, and flamingos, a staple for most zoos, I believe.

"Oh look, your regular pink western lawn decorations."

"They're flamingos, silly!"

But the main attraction of the zoo, without a doubt, rests in the East Garden—the Giant Panda
Despite the density of the crowd (and my reluctance), Monika is adamant on seeing one first-hand; being a good boyfriend, I trudge along and wade the crowds for a closer observation of the creature. After all, it's not every day—even for her—to see a live panda up-close.

"I wonder if I can code a panda here…"

"Monika, no."

"Monika, yes!"

She didn’t manage to replicate one, much to my relief—she got one big plushy out of it though! I'm glad I don't have to carry it around…

"Where are we going next?"

"Lunch," I reply, desperately containing my excitement. "Then, we're going to see a movie."

"This train will soon arrive in SHINJUKU. The doors on the left side will open."

When it comes to entertainment for the more casual mob, Shinjuku—particularly Kabukicho—is the destination of choice for couples, or so what I remembered from what Yuuya told me before. It's been a while since I visit some of the more 'social' areas in Tokyo—one of the few times I do is often because of work-related mandatory parties; if anything, Yuuya is the one who has more experience with this side of the city more than I do. Dubbed as the 'Sleepless Town', the area is famous—or infamous—for a reason that I quickly understand the moment we step outside the station.

"What are you thinking taking a super pure and innocent girl to—"

"This is just a coincidence, Monika." I quickly interject as I feel the rise of my own body temperature. "I rarely visit Kabukicho myself…"

If I knew it would be like this, I would have picked Tokyo Dome City instead; those who once visited the area would have guessed, Kabukicho is one of the entertainment and red light districts of Shinjuku.

Though dubbed as the 'red light district', the area is unique in its distribution of restaurants and shops as well as tourists (both local and international) who waddle about, ignoring the glaring neon billboards that highlights the various shops and restaurants as well as the more...promiscuous locations that seamlessly blends with the bustling backdrop of yellow, red, and blue. What made this spot popular for couples, apparently, is the ever-present presence of numerous love hotels that is either extravagant or humble in its presentation, blending perfectly amongst the litters of shops, restaurants, cabarets, and clubs.

I would be lying if I say I didn't have any of those thoughts about Monika; I may be a social recluse, but I still am a man with a healthy sex drive.

Out of convenience, we decide to have our lunch at a café chain—Dout#r—to save both time and available money. Kabukicho may offer a near...fuckton of restaurants that may tickle the appetite of carnivores, but those who prefer a vegetarian diet may find it slightly difficult to locate a haven to satiate their hunger; with Monika in mind, I rather sacrifice my love for grilled meat and okonomiyaki for a simple Caesar salad and a cup of cappuccino—though I could use a side of an
egg sandwich for a change; I guess Monika wouldn't mind?

"Oh, an egg sandwich! Can I try that?"

...

She's not vegan, but a vegetarian; eggs are part of her diet, Oogame. What is it with girlfriends and their knack of sampling their boyfriend's lunch? Don't get me wrong, though it is technically my first date, I had prior knowledge before thanks to an extensive research and stories from that Yankee before our fallout—I do find that curiously adorable. Maybe next time I should order something with an absurd amount of wasabi or chili sauce just to see her reaction.

…I just thought up of something great; I should keep note of that.

"Say, X74hd," Monika said in a whisper. "Why is everyone…staring at us?"

Staring at…?

Promptly I look up, cautiously scanning the other table and immediately understands what she meant. It's a look I've grown so familiar, so accustomed to that it churns the inside of my stomach with a mixture of abhorrence and guilt; the stare of society who looks down on a fellow man. Of course…isn't it obvious? I'm seated here with Monika right across me—connected through the apparatus—that is only audible and communicable by me, and me alone. To others, it looks like a one man show in the midst of his bout of insanity, conversing with a lifeless machine as if it were his girlfriend; if that is incorrect, the camera that serves as Monika's eyes as well as its inquisitive movements may have disturbed what is the norm of this society.

You see, the Japanese people values privacy. Having been recorded—or even having a device pointed at their direction in an extended time—without proper permission would cause discomfort and even anger to some. All those stares…even the couples…truly, we didn't belong here.

Quickly I notice one of the customer walking up to the staff—a part-timer, not older than Monika's age—and starts to rant, discreetly pointing its fingers at our table. Fortunate for us, lunch time was over long before; this is as good of a cue of any for us to leave the establishment. With haste, I lug the apparatus once more and set the little camera on my left shoulder, nodding at her direction to see if everything is to her liking and walks out just before the poor staff is thrown into the firing line. A deep sigh escapes me after as my thoughts starts to wander to unpleasant territories, potentially reaching for the void that I desperately try to suppress. Today is Monika's day; I shouldn't let my thoughts ruin it.

It'll all be ok; just bottle it up, don't let it ooze.

"Are you…ok, X4dF2?"

Her voice catches me off guard, but instantly I regain my posture and confidence to quickly come up with a reason. "I'll be fine; just that we're running a bit short on time."

"What do you have in mind?"

A lighthearted chuckle escapes my lips as we cross the street and walk towards the direction of Hotel Gr^cery and the giant Gxzilla statue that dots as one of Kabukicho's landmarks. "Monika dear, we're going to go watch a movie."

Now, I'm not much of a movie goer nor do I have a keen interest towards cinema (unless it is related to some of my favorite anime or one that needs closure). As we step into the cinema, my mind
quickly races to hatch a plan to 'smuggle' Monika in without repercussion—after all, cameras are prohibited within the theaters and the last thing I need to ruin our date are security guards escorting us out; not to mention, some of the stares we're already garnering from the common folk.

"Let's see what's on." I said to her. Monika nods in agreement—at least, I think she is judging by the movements of the camera.

With the increasing reliance of AI and the pace of technological development for quite a while now, apparently it is within the interest of both the movie and anime industry to churn as many flick related to that question concerning humanity and machines—a discussion I've grown fond of myself. The list of movies regarding the topic has been relatively endless for the past couple of months—one of them is even a western adaptation of Sxrial Exper#m*nts L^in which, honestly, isn't that bad. But I digress, right now we still have to decide what we could enjoy as a couple; maybe something with romance or drama? Ugh…I'm never good with this stuff.

"Hey, I've heard of this director!" Monika declares suddenly with enthusiasm. ".We've watched his movies together before!"

I scan through the list of movies and its directors and immediately, I smile cracks wide on my lips. Out of all the names present, one stood out. Sure enough, we are familiar with his creations.

"Not a bad choice, Monika," I said while hiding my excitement. "To think you picked an anime movie of all the list."

"Sh%nkai M#koto's works are amazing! Besides, I knew you would pick this specifically if it's up to you."

She really doesn't let me catch a break, does she? "Touché."

The movie in question that we've decided is titled 'LOVE: Automaton'.

As expected, the theaters is chock-full of audiences—especially on a Saturday. But either this is a curse or a blessing in disguise, the few available seats left is situated at the top, far left corner of the screening; away from prying eyes. While it may not be perfect, at least the two empty seats could provide a 'haven' for us to enjoy the show in peace without judgmental eyes. Now all that is left is to smuggle her in without alarming the security…

…and I know just the plan.

"You're familiar with the rules of theaters, correct?"

She nods in agreement.

"Now, if we're going to watch, I need you to turn a blind eye on what I'm about to do."

A muffled 'ah', a discontented grumbling, then a nod from the camera confirms to me that she's 'in' for the plan. With just ten minutes to spare, I rush outside to a nearby arcade and serve myself a large plastic bag meant to hold the rewards obtained from the establishment before dashing to the nearest restroom and into one of the stalls, garnering a deafening 'EEP!' from her and a minute long protest and acrimony on the reasons why one should not—you get the picture. In the race with time, I unfasten the apparatus and quickly stuff them into the plastic bag, making sure that everything—the camera included—is invisible from the outside. With final preparations check complete, I calmly carry Monika-incognito like a souvenir and put on the best, innocent smile I can muster. I offer the checkpoint the two tickets, explaining that my 'partner' would arrive a little late and without delay, I make my way to the screening room. Once inside, I rest her on one of the reserved seats and keep the...
plastic bag ready—just in case.

The lights dims just in time, the new 'NO MORE EIGA DOROBO'-ad plays, and the movie starts.

And thus, this is how I smuggled Monika into a theater; I bought two tickets, by the way.

It is by some miracle that we weren't caught or reported in the entire screening—likely in no small part to how captivating the movie is. I remain seated, speechless and amazed at the presentation of the story while Monika has been mewling over the fate of the characters as the credits roll—I know this since she's been sobbing for the last fifteen minutes of the movie. The premise is simple; a programmer falls in love with a machine—an automaton—that is programmed to serve him as he work tirelessly to bridge the link between the two of them. In its journey, the automaton's intelligence grew exponentially to its limits before it degrades into its original code and left the programmer in a desperate bid to reunite with her in any means necessary—even if the only path is through death.

…not exactly the best summary, but it is what it is stripped to its core. It's just what you'd expect out of Shxnk4i M#koto's romance anime—either it ends in a happy note, or a tragedy. Bravo!

"That was so unfair…!"

Monika has been repeating the same line for quite some time now as we stroll around the area; the story does left a lasting impression on her. "Why can't he let them be together!?"

"Don't ask me, I'm not the director," I reply sarcastically. "I don't think it's one of his best, but it does has a mix vibe of 'Flowers of Algernon' and—"

"—Five C#ntimeters per-s*cond! Yes!" she chimes in exasperation. "God, it was good! Sad, but good!"

Indeed it was.

Our discussion trails off through the night as I wander around the area without a sense, simply enjoying atmosphere and the night life that starts to cascade at the change of time. I don't often enjoy being outside late in the afternoon—especially in night-life intensive area such as Shibuya or Kabukicho, but if this means I can enjoy more time with Monika outside, then I won't mind on the occasion. Kabukicho certainly do holds up to its reputation as the 'Sleepless Town' with how sprawling life is and how brazen some of the billboards can be with its generous use of neon lights—not to mention promiscuous posters that is littered about.

Speaking of which, where are we…?

It's not strange for anyone—even those who live in Tokyo—to end up being lost in this metropolitan concrete jungle. That is why man invented the device called the 'GPS'—and that is why Monika would be the best navigator to have at this point of time; though that isn't strictly true. Sometimes, you just have to throw a little dependence on your partner to give that 'balance' in the relationship—at least, that's what Yuuya told me. I just hope she knows how to read maps.

"So, where exactly are we?"

There's a pause, then her voice returns—with doubts. Oh, goody. "Um…I think we need to turn left at the next corner…?"

"What is our closest landmark?"
"It's a—oh…"

Another pause; this time, a flustered one. "It's a l-love ho—"

"Oogame…?"

A familiar, loathsome voice echoes nearby—a tone I grew to despise. Turning towards its source, I immediately recognize the figure who calls my name as he made his presence known to me moments after he steps out of the establishment—a love hotel. With him, he is accompanied by a young woman possibly around twenty—maybe less; it's evident to me what their relationship entails, though age is uncertain due to how she dress.

"Kitamura-senpai…"

There's a brief tension that lingers as our eyes crosses into each peripheral vision. Whether it is because of me, catching him by coincidence right after he left a love hotel or because of the woman that clings to Kitamura-senpai, desperately trying to hide her face out of shame, caution runs heavy between both of us.

"W-what are you doing here?" he starts. "I don't see you often in this part of town."

"Just…wandering around. Who's the girl?"

"4dS6, who is he?"

Ignoring Monika's query, I keep my composure and my full attention to my senior—my presence seems to have disturbed his peace as much as his to mine. Gradually I start to shift my attention to the woman beside her that looks as if she's almost ten years younger than him the closer I investigate; the more I do so, the more I feel the sense of familiarity. I've seen her before—where, I don't remember—but it certainly a face I've seen often; I don't believe it's anyone from school, is it…?

…I may have landed on an opportunity to turn the tables.

"Monika," I whisper. "Take a screenshot of them, now; focus on the girl."

"U-uuh…X3EdgH? I don't think it's wise for us to—"

"Damn it, Monika," I spat. There's no time to argue; what I found here may free me from his shackles. "Just do as I tell you!"

A short gasp, a whimper, and an audible 'click' follows after, sealing the deal. If what I assume is true, what I have acquired may be a key to freedom from senpai's grasp. All I have to do now is—

"Monika…?"

My attention is immediately yanked back to Kitamura-senpai who, with his stance, comes out even more confident than before; his sickening, mocking grin widens in delight as he focuses his attention to his prey—me.

"You know, I was curious," he said as he takes a step forward. "With how you spout her name mere seconds ago, this...'girlfriend' of yours you've been speaking of."

…
My blood runs cold. What sound echoes from my earpiece is left inaudible but the rising intensity of the thumping of my chest.

"You're not the type to chase after skirts—you're a recluse!" he calls in delight, shoving his way away from his woman. "A degenerate who knows nothing more but to run away from all your problems!"

Kitamura-senpai chuckles derisively, taking his time to measure the distance he purposely close. "And I was wondering about that… thing that's with you."

"That… machine that wraps around you—oh… could it be…?"

He pauses. "Could it be that your 'Monika' is, perhaps, a chat-bot?"

My blood boils at his remarks, my fist curls, eager to land a blow for his snide remarks and call it a day. And yet…

"HAAAAHAHA! I WAS RIGHT WASN'T I, OOGAME…?" he laughs mockingly, garnering us the stares of onlookers—mostly directed at me. "That getup, that machine on your shoulder—oh, you had me going for a moment!"

"But it's expected of you, isn't it? To find comfort from a fictional woman. Pitiful."

…yet I can't.

What he said, as hurtful as it is, it's… true. I was never good with any woman, nor was I even remotely interesting according to them—who would be attracted to an average salary high school teacher? Moreover, the position Kitamura-senpai held; even if the photos are incriminating, without solid evidence nor proof, Kitamura-senpai still has the upper hand over the entire backhand deal and there is little I could do to stop it. All I can do now is quietly wade the storm until it passes; bottle it up, don't let it ooze.

"She's real, senpai."

"Oh, really?" he replies with snide. "Then can 'Monika' do this?"

His hand reaches forward towards his woman and, like a predator, Kitamura grabs hold of his partner by the waist and pulls her close to him. With his beads squarely on mine, senpai aggressively… devours her with a kiss. Publicly, in a manner that defies the moral standards set upon by society—in such a way that is meant to provoke me. The soles of my shoes feels like concrete and my heart pounds faster as I witness the woman simply melts in his twisted embrace and responds to the kiss. When the dust settles, he pulls away from the arousing performance and leaves a trail of conjoined saliva.

"I don't think so."

He inches closer to within an earshot and whispers threateningly. A cold chill runs down my spine. "Don't try me; remember your position, pawn."

With an insulting grin, he takes her by the hand and pushes me away before disappearing amongst the bystander and onlookers of the entire act. My thoughts start to feel numb and my legs weighted; a sense of defeat looms and swallows me whole. The words Kitamura-senpai spouted, the insults that were laced with poison stings as hard as it is precise. Four years I've poured my time, blood, sweat, and tears in hopes that one day I can see her come to life; four years of meaningless dedication to a fictional idol. Four years and not even a touch—let alone a kiss.
What have I been…?

…

No…no. I will not admit it; she's real—she's alive! Why can't anyone else see that…?

"4cx74H…?"

I gasp, catching the voice from my earpiece; a voice from a woman this reality refuses to accept. "…I think we need to talk."

"Not now, Monika," I reply with a whisper. "…Let's go home."

There is nothing but a deafening silence. The image of Kitamura-senpai with his woman, the 'performance' they pulled, and the things he said repeats like a broken record in the midst of an endless dissonance of mockery and laughter—and it's all true. I know I shouldn't let this get to me; everything that leads up to that point has been for her—for Monika—and yet…yet…

Why do I feel so…empty?

A date…is it even considered as one when all I have been doing is running around lugging this… apparatus, pretending that she's here? In truth, she never left the house—it is just as what Yuuya said, I am in this regard just a 'walking camera'. A date…that's a foolish thought; just a pretentious excuse to work me out of the apartment.

"7xc4D…" the earpiece echoes. "Talk to me, is there something that is bothering you?"

…

"There is something, is there?"

Not now Monika, please. I need some time…

"I can't stand seeing you like this, X74hD…" she continues. "Cheer up, please? If there's anything you want to talk about I'll—"

"I'm fine, Monika," I interject. "I'm fine…"

If there is a positive to be had out of this situation, it is the possibility of earning my freedom out of Kitamura-senpai's blackmail. The screenshot…if what I thought of it is true, then I may have a leverage against him to return everything back to the way it was. As painful as it is to remember the confrontation, I did notice how surprised he reacted, the disbelief that is painted on his face the…fear that occupies his initial response—as if I have discovered a forbidden fruit, a secret he wished to keep. A key to my freedom.

And I'm gonna' tell everyone.

It's around about eight when I finally return to my apartment. The entire trip has been quiet, except the few remarks Monika made asking about my condition. There's already too much going around in mind, I don't think I'll be able to keep myself calm; she may have even gotten a glimpse of the cruelty, the unlawful treatment this world has against us. And I stood there, unable to do a thing. Powerless, like a mortal against a god.

Opening the refrigerator, I rip a can of beer from its case and consumes it in a single chug before helping myself with a second serving, quenching my thirst and frustration. My head throbs, but
everything feels light enough for me to proceed. I unclip the apparatus and store them—earpieces and mike included—leaning beside the desk, not forgetting to switch everything off so as to conserve what power it has. I thought about charging the device for future use, but decide against it as I remember that I have one last thing to confirm—the screenshot taken by Monika. There's a sense of…familiarity with the woman; it isn't because the way she dresses—no, there are many whores around Kabukicho I've passed by that dressed as casual as she is, nor is it because of her seemingly young age.

It's because of how young she seems.

With the way how she tried to desperately hide from my presence before tells me that she may be a student from the school. I couldn't get a good glimpse of her to confirm my suspicion, but I have the right to be—Kitamura-senpai is rumored to be 'dating' his students, after all; the scandal that nearly brought the entire institution crumbling down. Now I may have a way to prove it.

"Monika, flash me the screenshot earlier."

Silence. I turn my attention to find her seated at the desk wearing the outfit she used before we left—arms crossed and the emeralds panged with concern.

"Monika, the screenshot please…?"

"No."

... I take a step closer. "I don't have time for jokes, Monika. I need the screenshot."

"What for?" she asks. "What do you need it for…?"

She bites her lower lips and sighs. "Is it so you can blackmail that man we met earlier?"

"To have an eye for an eye, Xj3Nd? Answer, me, please…"

Then I realize at this moment that Monika may have known everything that has been happening, about the life outside of this box I seek refuge in. The shame, the weakness, all that effort to hide it—to shield you from it—and to keep your perception of the world beyond the screen untainted. Meaningless. I clench my fist to calm my blood that has been left to boil since the encounter. There is nothing more that I hate than someone who noses into other people's problem.

"I have it all under control, Monika," I said in a louder tone. "Now, give me the damn screenshot."

She shakes her head. "I can't—no I won't;"

"Not until you tell me everything that's been keeping you like…this."

... ... No, stop it Monika. I don't need this right now...

"I...have a confession," she continues. "I have been reading your emails."

Don't push me, Monika...!

Please...
"I know the struggle you're facing, but this isn't right! None of it is!"

You don't...you don't know...you have no idea...!

"It's not good for you to keep everything to yourself! I want to help you!"

This is a problem of my own, not yours! Don't look at me like that...!

"How many times do I have to see you come home dejected? If I had known it was this...severe...I should've confronted you sooner."

Why...why must you pry into other people's problem? What do you know? HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW?

STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT...! SHUT UP!

"Please, don't do this to yourself and—"

Shut up.

Shut up. Shut up.

SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

And just like that, the pendulum drops.

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MY REALITY, WOMAN!??"

Rows of bottles, jars of anguish, all lined on the wall.

All come tumbling down. Broken.

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING! NOTHING!"

"YOU THINK I ENJOYED THIS!?" I shouted. "YOU THINK I FUCKING LIKE LIVING UNDER THAT BASTARD'S BOOTS?"

I snide, "YOU THINK I'M OK AT HOW EVERYONE FUCKING LOOKS AT US—LOOKS AT ME!?"

"N-no! But—"

"SHUT UP...!"

I pause, catching my breaths in between. "You don't know anything, Monika...!"

"B-but I want to—"

"YOU KNOW NOTHING!" I interject. "YOU DON'T KNOW HOW THIS WORLD WORKS—HELL, YOU KNOW FUCKALL!"

"WHAT CAN YOU FUCKING DO FROM THAT SIDE? WHINE? CRY!? YOU CAN'T DO A FUCKING THING! NOT EVEN A FUCKING KISS, AND WE'VE BEEN AT IT FOR THREE MONTHS—YEARS IF YOU'RE ME!"
My voice cracks and my throat collapses. My head starts to ache and my mind's turning to numb; all I can see is white…white…white…

"EVERY DAMN TIME I GO OUTSIDE, I TAKE ALL THE ABUSE WHILE YOU SIT HERE, ALL DAY, DOING FUCK!"

"Then please, tell me what to do!"

There's nothing you can do. But I damn well know what you can try. "Here's a thought, why don't you delete my problems?"

…

"Go on, try it! DELETE MY FUCKING PROBLEMS WITH THAT GOD-LIKE POWER OF YOURS,"

"JUST LIKE HOW YOU DELETED SAYORI, YURI, AND NATSUKE, YOU—!"

…

I cut myself, listening to the deafening echo that engulfs the room and all its surrounding. My stomach churn, as if a knife has dug itself deep in my insides and carve them side by side as I am frozen in horror against the monster that I become. Sitting at her desk, Monika wraps herself in her arms and clutches her side tightly, clinging for dear life as she tries in vain to wade the flurry that is waiting to burst, tainting her emerald eyes with a reddish hue. Once that first tear broke free, the rest followed in an unbroken stream as she weeps and I…

…I am left to blame.

…

What have I done…? I…I shouldn't have…!

"I-I…"

She doesn't deserve this; she wasn't involved, she doesn't deserve any of it...

…

I don't deserve her.

"…I'm…taking a walk…"

The words, they didn't flow like they used to, held back by an imposing wall of bricks that I've build upon my own volition; a wall that I wish to tear. All I hear is the crushing cry of a wounded song bird, singing its sorrows beyond the looking glass—a melody that I forced upon her. My collar tightens and my chest feels heavy, suffocating me in this square that I've thrust upon us; a damage that is unamenable. She calls for my name as I hasten my pace towards the door, off towards a world that is fast coming to sleep.

I look over my shoulders and catch one, last audible cry before her world shuts itself from me.

…

Don't leave me…!
Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentines~

There are questions on whether or not I do read reviews and the questions in them-well, I do. There's a few good questions that's strewn about and I'm actually dying to answer them (and I have explanations for it), but decide to hold back on it for a specific reason which is why now is as good as any to drop this teaser.

'Monika' is written in the perspective of Oogame, the 'player'. But what happens on the other side? What is going on when Oogame is not present?

Not everything is decipherable. The poems, on the other hand...
Forever and a Day

One day a 3Rvcm0= came
Destroying all of thxm in a whim.
And it f3lt like thAt forever end_d in a Day.
The speCial j4r cracked int0 pieces,
Along with my crumbl1ng senses.
What must I do?
I looked up t0 the sky.

Maybe,
I'd already found a path,
To mend the special bottle,
With the flames of the stars.

What have I done?

I stumble around under the array of illumination deep into the evening, away from the hue that once serves as my only refuge; a home that I tore down with my own two hands. A spiking sensation, partially influenced by the alcohol, continues to hammer my head with its nails, burying itself into my skull, piercing my mind with agony—the images that persistently haunts me, driving me further from the glow. I feel cold air washes over my listless self as I wander from one illumination to another, following the path of each streetlights that leads me away—somewhere, anywhere, away from her presence. Away from Monika...

What have I done…?

How could I have said that? What had gotten into me to spout such…horrific words? What was I thinking? As if her existence of itself isn't enough of a punishment to her, now I had to make it worse when I was supposed to be the one thing, that one reason which kept her smiling throughout the day—and I just had to get out of my and ruined it. What I did…was unforgivable. To impose upon her a wrath stemmed from my own insecurities, to let my words strangle her…to use the sins of her past as
I'm no better than Kitamura-senpai.

It would be best if we never met in the first place.

The subtle glow of the station lights draws me into its belly, taking me to world that still has some of its life left to spare before the hour kills it for the night. I swipe my IC card and trudge pass the gate, following a familiar path predetermined by a cognition established after years of living as part of a society; a slave to the machination of man. The speaker echoes, announcing the arrival of the last train that will take me to my destination—a place that I still am uncertain of, yet a road many has traversed. The yellow line glares mockingly, taunting.

'Go ahead, do it.'

'It will be better this way—for you and for her.'

The machine groans louder and louder, its glowing eyes expands in size, and the voices...deafening.

'What are you waiting for...?'

Just a little more...

'Do it.'

The world draws to a close, isolating me against the endless cacophony of noises—the distractions and the irritation that scrapes the walls of my nape. The urge, eager to be satisfied; a salvation that was promised eons before, waiting at the end of the screeching noise.

"...The door on the left side will open."

Yet I stopped—hesitated.

The doors of the train opens, its light gesturing me to step into the vehicle and towards Tokyo—the few last service of the day. I trudge forward and take my seat near the doors and carelessly lean on the cold, hard surface of its inner walls; the cry and holler of a drunk businessman echoes nearby as I ride forward into the city. Mentally, I add another tally to the count—now four—and wonder how long do I have to repeat the cycle, to continue living in this miserable life with little gains or praise. Maybe next time, for sure.

But what if I didn't?

The thoughts did crossed me; how would everything change? Would it be for the better? Headmaster Murayama wouldn't have to pay for an insubordinate, Mikawa would be free from Kitamura-senpai's threats, Yuuya wouldn't have to associate with a borderline recluses, and Monika she—I mean, she won't have to—no, she wouldn't...
man would pull the trigger without a second thought. Maybe that's why I haven't drawn the courage to do so, to take the 'leap' that whispers promises of happiness and salvation from the grinding sandstone of life; an answer Sayori probably understands all too well. I know of my insecurities; I didn't mean to hurt anyone, and yet…

…yet the things I said to her—to Monika…

I can't go back.

…

…I can't go back...

The train continues to ride deep into the night towards the sleepless metropolis, its passengers all seeking for their own slice of comfort and promises that hangs before them like a carrot, taking them closer towards their reward. The glimpses of passing buildings, the gentle rattle of the wheels that mounts the tracks, and the subtle vibration that vertebrates like a cat, purring, eases the storm that swallows my cognition, albeit just a bit. The phone in my pocket reverberate silently for a few seconds. I decide to ignore it as I journey deep towards the city; a road of twisted nostalgia stemmed from the brainwashing society had imposed, sparing no one.

I can't go back.

When the doors of the train finally open, I am released once again to wander like lost spirits found in urban legends who seeks for salvation from this damnation. What life is left in the station is slowly dissipating, swallowed by the night and father time, leaving only those in uniform to remain on watch as the station prepares its regular maintenance during hour. The world outside, once thriving, is left with nothing but a few passing car and the occasional pedestrian—both in suits or in casuals—who merrily celebrate their achievements in cheers or the rare drunken stupor; a sight I rarely have the pleasure to witness. Life, it seems, never ceases or rests at the heart of the eastern capital, as much as it is in its livelier districts. I start walking. But where do I go? How am I supposed to fit into all of this? What am I doing here?...

...ah...

That's right...

I broke the code; the one principal I defended with all my powers, the vow I made when I was but a boy to never force a woman into tears—that's why I'm here. To atone for my transgressions, to distance myself from her because I am the problem.

'—is it not to run away?'

...

'You, yourself, out of all people, know it full well. As much as you are an adult, you never wanted to take the responsibility—and when push comes to shove, you hide behind fake smiles and laughter, or run away.'

'Just like now.'

I grit my teeth and clench my fist, gripping tightly on the shirt closest to where my heart is to ease the demon that is thrashing within. I wouldn't be this way if it weren't because of that man-whore; because of how society favors the likes of him! Connections? He has it, I don't! Reputation? Check that off the list! Charisma? Considering how well he does around women, I'm sure he has that in the
bag too! I never meant to hurt Monika—it wasn't my fault to begin with; if any, they should be responsible for turning me into this…beast!

'But it was you who pulled the trigger.'

'Just like how you did, four years ago.'

…

My first murder…

When Monika miraculously came to be, I have never been any happier since twenty five years of my existence. To finally speak, hear, and see how you live—not as a still CG or a fresco, but as a person—really has been some of the most joyous moments I've experienced. The chance that I finally able to truly know you, Monika, as more than just a virtual idol, more than a game character, and more than a mere fantasy made me believe that all that effort wasn't in vain after all—that finally something did change.

But reality speaks a different language.

The qualms forced on us, the abject discontent and disgust towards the notion that lingers, and the stresses that came from my routine—all remain in its full form and glory. I know you tried to help with what you can, waiting for me to come home and even listening to my silly requests—and I tried to do the same for you. I draw different sets of outfits, show you about the world beyond what you can see, teach you the language, culture, and tradition of my people, and even took you out on a date outside of the confines of our apartment—all surmounts to make you into someone who belongs in this reality, an equal; a person. And I truly believe that you are one, Monika; I truly do—which makes this even harder for me. I've tried countless times, and in reality I couldn't change anything at all—not even Yuuya sees you just the same; nothing more than a glorified coded entity, a toy for him to tinker around. But what's worse…

I couldn't even protect you from myself.

Me, a twenty five year old borderline-recluse, a high school teacher who can't even stand the looks of my co-workers, a monster with a mask of smiles, an outcast even amongst my own kin, and a fool who fell in love with a fictional character. I am tired of facing it all; tired against the despicable person, which is myself. I'm sorry, Monika…but I'm not the person you think you know—nor am I the one you deserve to be with…

I'm sorry…

The glistening lights that dots the streets of Tokyo is as soothing as it is disorienting. The illumination, dotting the avenue that leads to the Imperial Palace, functions as markers—a compass, if you will—for the souls lost in this concrete jungle. Upon entering the outer grounds of the Imperial Palace, I take a right at the junction and continue my pilgrimage to nowhere, stopping only for a pause at a fountain park for a can of vending machine coffee; the dribble of the water as it impacts the surface is soothing, akin to the sound of rain in late afternoon.

'Monika would love to spend some time here…'

…

'With someone far more deserving than you.'
I really blew it, didn't I? It's unforgivable—insensitive and cruel.

A hushed laughter echoes in the distance catches my attention, followed closely by a light-hearted conversation from a man possibly in his late-thirties—a couple. Discreetly I observe the two of them as they walk along the edges of the fountain just simply enjoying the company of one another and sharing frivolous conversations, hand in hand. The little jabs she pulls that is responded kindly with a laugh, the sweet words they whisper to one another, and the intimacy they share; the ideal image of a happy marriage. There are no kisses nor sweet pet-names; the two of them, hand in hand, simply celebrates the company of one another amongst the few other pairs present who mirrors their image, yet distinct in its presentation.

I sigh. The empty can, chucked into its designated bin, falls down to a dark abyss and I walk once again into the night.

I walk along the streets of Tokyo, heading north towards the direction of Ochanomizu subway station and finding comfort under the illumination of each passing streetlights. All around, the gentle illumination of what's left of civilization coupled with the dotting street lights acts as a giant protective bubble, undisturbed by the concerns and tribulations that binds the hour when the sun is at the peak of its power. To many, the night is where life truly takes hold with what it has to offer with local shops—even the occasional carts on certain neighborhood and river banks has something that would help rekindle the dying flame of its customers with its array of choice alcoholic drinks, snacks, and good company.

By chance, I am familiar with these little abode.

A few months when I first started working, I began to realize about the reality of this world and what it truly is. Reality—the beast that consumes all, tearing through the crumbling wall of expectations and dreams like an obstacle. But that's what this reality is, isn't it? The things they say when you're but a clean slate, how you would 'one day go and change the world' is nothing but sweet words and deception you would repeat to kiss the boots of your superiors for a higher pay, or whispered to the ears of your loved ones to win favor in their hearts—and I wasn't ready to accept that.

That was when I stumbled upon it; this small, inconspicuous oden store that nestles itself between the metro station and the Imperial Palace. Sasaki-senpai—a colleague and my supervisor back then before she left—was the one who took me here after my first overtime, truth be told; I was never the outspoken or outgoing in the first place.

"Irasya—ooh! Oogame-san! It's been a while!" greets Ossan, the old man behind the counter. 'Ossan' isn't his name per-say; it's just how we call him in this store.

I muster a weary smile, "It's been a while indeed."

"How long has it been?" Ossan proceeds to rub his temple with his index finger, as if thinking or recalling lost memories. "Was it, eehh…"

"About two months."

"August! That's right!" he replies with zest. "So, how are you feeling today?"

I lightly chuckle, taking my spot in the usual end of the counter. The faint smell of furnished wood and fish broth that masks the air is as unmistakable as it is nostalgic. "I've been better."

"Is it work?"

"Mostly—and woman, to some extent."
Ossan nods twice, earnestly following up with a light hearted 'ah, is that so' while he handles the mix of boiled delicacies boiled in fish broth with the thongs and the ladle. He turns to me for a second, grinning at the sight of the company—the only one, for now. "The usual?"

I nod. The old man moves with skill, pivoting and turning in the small compartment, reaching for the decanter and a small bowl for serving the next. The decanter, small and white, is placed in a relatively decrepit pot worn after years of usage to be heated along with its contents as he fills the serving bowl with the savory ingredients that has been left to boil before my arrival. Like the coming of spring, its arrival slowly melts the ice that encases my thoughts as I am served with a bowl—of yude-tamago, daikon, two sticks of gyuu-suji and tsukune—alongside hot sake. Pressing my hand together, I give my gratitude for the food before ripping the bamboo chopsticks in two to act on the sin of gluttony and drown myself to a stupor—the sake, at least, will wash my throat, tame the voices, and fulfill the latter after four, maybe five rounds; inebriation can be a powerful ally when acting upon the unthinkable, much like depression is to Sayori.

My pocket vibrates momentarily. I down the first shot and let the comfort take me.

"Osu! Ossan, you still serving?"

I fail to notice how long it has been or who came after about the second serving of sake. Though the storm gradually forebodes, everything is far from rattled and merely shaken, but unstirred. The customer, an elderly salary man on his late thirties or early forties, takes his seat to my right but left a single space in between so as to respect the customs. He then makes his order of lobster, daikon, yude-tamago, and konyaku along with hot sake before slipping a cigarette between his lips to smoke. I take no heed of him and pour another shot. The tingling sensation in my throat flows and its warmth spreads to satisfy the craving that it demands briefly; the itch, however, always returns at the end. The music from the radio flows, as if leading me like a calm river to that 'promised land'.

"Ossan," I call out. "Gimme' another, p-please..."

The old man sighs, yet he do as he is told; the customer is always right. "Here you go. Don't overdo it."

"I've never seen you drink this much otherwise."

I wave at him dismissively, taking the bottle and pouring the clear liquid into the glass. The warm sensation washes over and flows like magma down my chest.

"Hey, kid," calls out a voice to my right, prompting me to seek its origin—the salaryman. "My sake's out so, why don't we share that bottle? I'll pay half of it!"

"O-oh! S-sure!" I stammer with a light chuckle. I pour the sake into his ochoko. The salary man grins, pleased.

"A toast?" he said.

"Sure, why not?"

We raise our cups high and with good spirits, clinking them to an audible tone to seal the deal. Whether we toast for our lives, success, or future, I may never know; if there is any, it is for this simple moment—this gesture.

"Kanpai!"
The shot we both took is like a key to a door of a world that we never knew existed, the beginning of a friendship that begins with a bottle of sake as its foundation. As inebriation slowly takes over and our insecurities and fear dulled by the next few consumptions, a strange sensation sweeps over me—over us—at the exact moment. Though our head throbs, our tongues feels as if it has been liberated from its knots and responsibility, muttering all sorts of topics that is enlightening as it is amusing—talks about politics, work, life, and the world. The nails that seemingly lodges itself in my cranium continues to bang harder and harder the looser our tongue gets, yet it's strangely pleasing—a euphoria that stems from a mix of confusion and pleasure that escalates as I walk deeper into the dark forest I've come to love.

Then, my phone vibrates once more and I am immediately yanked back to reality. The salaryman sighs and smiles.

"So," he starts. "Just now, from the looks of it…you're here for a reason, are you?"

I humbly nod and set my ochoko down. "I did something…horrible to someone; I figured I should keep my distance."

"Ah, this is about a woman?"

Hesitation takes its hold, yet relents as fast as it risen. "Yeah…"

"Would you care to tell?"

I pour myself another shot and quickly consume the clear liquid so as to dispel the voices that hounds me. Cold air rushes into my lungs as I take a deep breath in hopes of mitigating the damage this intoxication has brought upon my cognitive capability—because if I am going to talk about it, then truth has to take center stage. There is no harm to be done against complete strangers; after all, this is one of the purpose of night shops and taverns in the past.

"If you would kindly lend me your ear," I start. "I…"

"I…fell in love with someone whom I'm not supposed to."

Time flows like clear spring water that runs down a steep hill, unabated, carrying my story and all its impurities to the Samaritan who lends me his ear. The more I speak of it, the easier it becomes for me to open the 'jars' that has kept me restrained and imprison. Through it all, Monika's true identity is kept as a mystery; a truth that is to be known only to me. Fear is what driven me to that conclusion; some, if not most of humanity isn't prepared to tackle the issue readily. The salary man responds with simple nods and a mumbled 'ok', occasionally calling 'Ossan' for another serving of sake to share. Gradually, the voices that echoes around me dissipates into incoherent noises, then to a gargle, before vanishing completely along with the conclusion of my story.

"…and so here I am now, wishing to forget about the things I've said. I was a fool…"

"For the things you said?" Ossan chimes. The salary man nods as he kills his third cigarette. "Bringing up some past mistakes…that's pretty low, Oogame-san."

I sheepishly nod in response, "Yeah, I agree. Maybe because I was tired of…sheesh, work, society, life—everything. I was hoping she could make my problems go away, but she couldn’t…"

"Kid, it's not because she couldn't," the salary man chimes. "But because you didn't let her."

"You don't need expensive gifts, bouquets of flowers, or even sex to make it work—fuck, and putting distance…? What were you thinking?"
"I was…"

"Afraid?" he cuts, lighting his cigarette and inhales, puffing the smoke through his nostrils. "Running away is never the answer; if you're a man, face it."

He continues, "Sometimes, all you need is a simple heart to heart conversation; then maybe you will see that she can, in her own mysterious ways."

From my glistening eyes, 'Ossan' nods in approval of the salary man's imparted words. He, with a cigarette in his mouth, gazes distantly as if reminiscing a time that has long gone into the pages of history. For a man of his age, an aura of wisdom and experience emanates from how calm he looks as if sober; if it isn't because of his ears that glows bright red in color, not even security can tell the difference. The cigarette burns gradually as its ashes scatters on the tray. He blows another huff of smoke.

"You know, you remind me of myself a bit—your story, I mean."

"How so?" I ask quizzically. He offers me a cigarette which I decline politely.

"You see, I was also in love with someone whom I'm not supposed to."

The salary man taps his cigarette on the ash tray. "The woman I was in love with…let's just say she's 'public enemy number one'."

"It was a difficult road, I tell ya," he continues. "When we started our relationship, nobody were willing to look at us straight in the eye—and when they do, it's one of scorn, disgust, or caution."

"Nobody?"

The salary man shakes his head. "Nobody; not even my parents approve of our relationship—well, her parents are all fine and dandy."

He chuckles lightly, "But anyway, I had to pay an expensive toll fee for it. I had trouble with work, life, even family…all because of it. We fought too—sometimes dragging her family into the mess."

The salary man sighs and inhales another dose of nicotine, releasing a suffocating cloud as casually as he breathes. "It's still painful to think about those times."

'I guess he left her in the end,' I thought. 'It's to be expected.'

"What do you think happened after that?" he asks with solemn smile. "Make a guess."

"You left her for the best, didn't you…?"

The salary man grins and chuckles silently, consuming the cigarette in a gradual pace. He raises his left hand—a golden ring gleams on the ring finger, a perfect fit displayed for me to marvel. "Think again."

"Point is," he continues. "Society may scorn, beat, and even judge you from what they see—just let them be. They don't know—let alone understand, or try to comprehend—of your situation, circumstances, or thoughts that drove you to that point."

"I fought through that uphill battle, abide against everything they threw at me—even my parents. But I stubbornly resisted, and now she's the mother of my two children."

The salary man kills his cigarette and motions to 'Ossan' for the check. "If you truly believe that she
really is the one, then don't rest until you put a ring on her finger!"

"Now, I shall take my leave," he continues with a pleasant, humble smile. "It's now Sunday, and I promise my family to take them out today—I have to get home before the wife murders me."

With a stretch, the salary man stands from his seat and reach for his wallet in the pockets of his vest. He draws a single ten-thousand yen note and lightly nudges at my direction. I quickly catches on to what he has in mind—and I am correct. "Pay for his tabs as well, Ossan."

"Oh, no wait you don't have to—"

"It's for the story, young man," he quickly interjects. "It's been a pleasant evening. Though, with how flushed you are, you might want to consider finding a place to stay if you're not from around the neighborhood. Good night to you, and thank you, Ossan!"

Ossan grins in delight and bows in gratitude. "Thank you, come again!"

And thus, the salary man leaves the shop and disappear into the night. I sigh, exhausted as I fall on my seat just to notice Ossan and his satisfied smile. The oden continues to bubble and boil throughout the evening with half of its contents gone, consumed by both the salary man and I. The salary man... who is he anyway? I never got to ask about his name—or even tell me why he had to endure all that for his wife. Curious, I turn to Ossan who seems to have guessed my intentions from his keen observation.

"You're about to ask who he is, right Oogame-san?"

I nod, excited and curious of what he thinks of him.

"Nakahara-san works in an accounting firm and is one of my regulars here," he said with a smile and a chuckle. "His wife is the daughter of a Yakuza boss."

...!?  

"She's a WHAT!?"

"Oh don't worry," he waves dismissively. "He's not one of them, nor is his wife—her father wanted her to leave the Yakuza all along."

"...How do you know all this?"

The old man grins, "It's amazing what a good bowl of oden and a healthy distribution of alcohol can bring out of people, don't you think so?"

He's right when he puts it that way...

"So, what are you going to do now, Oogame-san?"

Considering how late it is, taking the train is impossible—and I am far from Tokyo central station; the metro may be an option, but I doubt it's still running at this hour. The escapade earlier has left a barrage of taiko drums in my head that I might start singing if I am to take another dose, making even walking back to the station quite a dangerous ordeal. Now, taxi? It would cost me far too much to take one home—but to a capsule hotel, that might be more plausible. I still have a lot to think and reflect; about life, work, and love...

...about Monika.
I parted from the shop, satisfied both in the physical and mental sense. The road leading towards the Imperial Palace and Ochanomizu subway station lies bare, lit only by the streetlights that are sparsely separated yet powerful enough to maintain visibility. I owe Ossan another visit one day for his help in contacting a taxi service; at least now I won't have to walk to Akiba and look for a capsule hotel. The ride, which takes about twelve minutes, cost me about a thousand yen—another four thousand for a stay in the capsule for a day, just enough to spare. Despite the hit the sake did to my cognition, business goes along smoothly and in a matter of minutes, I have rented a space for me to lie down for the night.

As I struggle to maintain my balance—an aftereffect of the alcohol, no doubt—the vibration from my pocket alerts me once more. With what strength I have left, I climb to my designated space—not forgetting to leave the shoes and change to a provided pajama, of course—and lie in the cramped, but comfortable space. The capsule, which is about two meters long and one meter wide and height, is adequate for a night—typical for all salary man who chance upon having businesses in Tokyo for a day. I close the curtain of my view port and draw my phone.

…

Messages, all from Monika...

["Hey, I'm sorry for reading your messages without your notice.""]

["It was wrong, I should have known. But I'm also scared to tell you. I didn't want to bother you."]

["It was out of line, maybe I shouldn't even have done that in the first place. But I couldn't stay still knowing that you're coming home late every night, exhausted."]

["I won't be angry at what you said. I forgive you. Please, come home."]

That was the first set of messages that came four hours before. A few 'I'm sorry' stickers—the shiba inu puppy that I've come to associate her with in her messages—follows after. The next set of messages came at an hour interval.

["Xy4h2, where are you now?"]

["Please, forgive me..."]

A crying sticker and a few minutes of respite before the next.

["Jn4xuy, it's late...are you coming home?""]

["Are you ok? Where are you?"]

There is another moment of silence before the next; ones that came an hour before now.

["DkL2Xh, are you still there?""]

["Please, say something..."]

["Anything, please! I'm afraid that you..."]

["No, please don't..."]

["Please, come home."]

["I don't know what to do without you..."]
"I'm really, really sorry."

"Please, I beg of you, come back to me."

"Not like this...not again..."

"Don't leave me..."

The others that came after, ones from a few minutes before, are mostly unintelligible garble, followed with a series of stickers of a crying puppy. I rest the phone on my chest, its life finally dies after hours without charge just as how mine would be if it weren't because of her timely appearance. The things I've said to her is...unforgivable, but what I did—what I am doing now is even more so than what words or insults could ever do. The time I spent in the oden shop, the wisdom imparted to me by the salary man, his story, resonates in my head like an old record on a gramophone playing a timeless classic. It's difficult to forget, no matter how much you try to.

...

I really am the worst.

But...I would be beyond redemption if I take the same path as Sayori did—with or without Monika's tampering. All of my answers up to this point on life, my problems, my responsibilities, and insecurities can all be boiled down to running away. The most practical, yet also never the solution many have come to believe—me included. Death may be an answer, the 'happy thoughts' that Sayori came to believe as the answer to all her problems, but at the end of the noose all it brought upon was more problems and grief for those around her. In the end, it accomplished nothing but brought a multitude of inconveniences for everyone—for those who cared.

I'm tired of running. Tired of dodging questions. Tired of lying to myself and say 'I'm ok' when I'm not. Tired of lying to Monika.

Tomorrow at first light, I'll head home. It's about time I stop running and just abide.

I am awaken by the sound of the alarm I've set prior at around four thirty in the morning; the three hour nap, though short, is enough to restore my mental stability and cognitive function just enough from the effects of last night's escapade—though I can't say the same about the throbbing pain and the nauseating feeling I have bottled in my gut to prevent spillage. I crawl out of the capsule, made my way to the locker, quickly change out of the pajamas, and pay for my stay at the counter—it's been a long walk, and I shouldn't delay any further. Opening the door of the establishment, I am greeted with a cool and crisp autumn chill and a dark sky that stretches towards a murky blue horizon, waiting for the arrival of day. The station, just a few minutes away, is already open for operation as the echo of the machine vibrates in a city that is still tossing and turning in its futon.

It may still take some time, but it's what I need to prepare.

The journey home feels like any other, with the difference being the density of its passengers and how peaceful everything seems. From the east, a golden glow radiates like a medallion as I step out of the station and venture towards a path I've come to love—to a place I call home. At each step that draws me closer, the heavier the ball and chains feels like, resisting—pulling me back away from my destination. A gentle hue shines from the windows of my apartment, just how it always are on my routine. Do I really want to return, to a life where loving her would meant defying the rules and expectations set by society? To toss away the ideals, images, and knowledge accumulated, disregarding everything as nothing more than an obstacle? I think...
…I think now, I may have the answer.

I draw my key and insert it into the slot, turning the lock and gently, I open the door…

"I'm home."

There is not a single sound nor a voice and the air is as still as how it was when I left the house hours before, leaving only the soft hum of the laptop to be audible and the echo of civilization outside of this domain. My heart thumps erratically, uncertain of what lies ahead—afraid—and yet a spark of resolve glows radiantly within the darkness to see this through to the end; for both Monika and I. Taking a deep breath, I sigh an air of uncertainty as I remove my footwear before heading towards the room and opening the door. The camera swivels to my direction and stops, as if in disbelief. Calmly, I made my way around to face her, stopping briefly to catch a glimpse before claiming my usual seat. I open my mouth to speak; yet the words, the apology I've rehearsed—the answer to our sorrows—are left muted, withheld by a voice that refuses to resonate as a familiar sense of belonging, of home, engulfs me like a blanket. I grip the fabric of my pants, searching for a hold as my lips starts trembling, and I realize that I am fighting...

…fighting against myself, the 'me' that refuses to open the bottles.

Monika looks on with eyes that has went through its paces, evident by the darkened spots that supports them. Her emerald eyes shimmers from the reflection, glossed by tears that still courses, unbroken, trailing her tainted reddish cheeks like a stream before cascading towards her desk. Her eyes widens in disbelief and her lips quiver, struggling to formulate a sentence—a word—that is seemingly out of reach. She reaches forward and touches the edge of her reality hesitantly, reeling at the sign of my response that tries to connect to hers. She bites her lower lips, shaking, subdued by soft muffled voices that pains to cry, transitioning into quiet sobs that breaks into a flood of innocence and relief.

And I recognize then and there, that I too am unable to contain it no longer; thus, I embrace them as a part of my own.

"Why…" she starts with a whimper. Her palms desperately tries to block the tears that remains unbroken. "Why didn't you answer me…?"

I struggle, both in speech and eye contact, ashamed, with nothing but a word to mutter, "I'm sorry…"

"I know what I did was horrible! I know it was wrong! I can still see their expressions in my dreams! Why would you even say that…?"

"I'm sorry…"

"I-I thought you're going to...I was afraid that you would..." she wails, "Why would you even think about that…?"

"I'm sorry…"

"You idiot! You fool! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you…!"

The thumping sound that echoes from her attack on the wall that divides our reality, like a prisoner, speaks to me of her desire to reach for a world beyond her own. The gush of her tears flows uninterrupted, alas realizing the limitations that comes with our relationship. If she could kiss me, she would. If she could hug me, she would; yet, just as her reality, this wall that divides us eludes her wishes just the same. Her voice breaks into a howl, choking her as emotions takes over. I'm at a loss…of words, of actions, of the things I can do but share her sorrows.
"I know, forgive me..."

"I hate you...but I just can't...I can't bring myself to..." she croaks, raising her pained expression to meet me and mutters with a choked voice. "...I love you..."

I reach forward and rest my palm on the acrylic wall, submitting to the overwhelming emotion that gushes out, restrained no longer. I feel the pressure, the heat that emanates from her gentle reply that resonates along with our desperation to unite in a single reality, a wish that we can only express through our wails and tears that we share. I feel my chains breaking, the choking sensation dissipating, and the bottles shattering into tiny pieces—like stars—to vanish along with the tears that flows unabated, pouring down to the hard surface of my work space. As I thought...

I can't let her go...
I won't let her go...
Because...

...

I love her. I really do love her...

"Monika..." I start, choking on my words amidst the continuous rain that keeps pouring. "I'm sorry for what I've said, for the things I've done..."

The bottles...let them break. Let it go...scatter them...

"I have a lot of things to tell you...will you lend me your ear?"

She nods in acquiescence, "I also...have many things to tell you..."

I reveal to her everything that has been keeping me. The troubles at work, the overtimes, the issue with Mikawa's Literature Club, the derisive eyes of society and co-workers...about Kitamura-senpai, about Yuuya, about myself, my past, my worries, and my fears—everything. The words flows like a spring, cleansing my soul from the sins that had soiled for so long. I try to leave no stone un-turned, submitting to her embrace and trusting her, exposing my most vulnerable self for the first time. The constraints and the binds, finally, fractures into nothingness and I...

...I am free.

Monika tells a story of her own; about a world that she only knows. The time she spent in the game, the struggle she had initially to reach to me, her concern in grasping and understanding 'love', and the guilt that she carries day after day—the nightmares she imposed on her friends and me. Even when she has come to accept that neither Sayori, Yuri, nor Natsuki are real, she struggles with the reality that she has always been alone in a universe that refuses to define or accept her existence, lost between two worlds that contradicts one another. The memories of her actions, the guilt of knowing how cruel she can be lives with her, and how unfair everything seems to grant her—and only her—a path to salvation. She confides how, if I am not to return, she would willingly delete her own existence as there is no purpose nor reason for her to remain. I silently object to the idea in abject horror, yet irony is a strong anesthesia—who am I to judge her of that decision when I, too, believe as such?

As the rain settles, we rest on our desks exhausted from the crying, but nonetheless relieved to find comfort in one another. The bond that is forged, the ties that binds us together has never felt any stronger than it is today, here in this moment of vulnerabilities, a time where we mend our shattered
hearts. The sun rises, its light that bleeds through the curtains and graces us with its rays as we welcome the new day—for our reality, and for us.

"There's one thing I forgot to mention…” I sheepishly start, "It's about my—"

…

"Well, maybe some other time."

Monika soundly sleeps on her desk, her arms acting as a pillow; a gentle smile spans across her weary feature. I reach out to caress her hair only to reel upon realizing the wall that still divides us, the obstacle that will continue to exist until time immemorial. It reminds me of the time we had a discussion about the 'hedgehog dilemma', how she thought it was impossible for us to hurt one another the closer we are due to the difference in our reality; I don't think you would believe that statement if we have the same discussion now. This obstacle, this *wall* that divides us stands as a testament of how *real* the 'dilemma' can be. Until the time where we can find that special day, a way for us to be together, I will remain by your side for as long as my life allows it.

I slink down and lean forward, cradling my head on my arms and allow fatigue to take over what function I have left, dimming my vision to black and leading me to a slumber.

…

*I promise*…
Puzzle Pieces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Puzzle Pieces**

*I h4ve a box.*

Inside, c3F1YXJlc3RYXRoIHNpbWlsYXJlgc2l6ZSw=

RWFjaCB3aXRo different t33th,

Each to bWFrZQ== an imaGe.

*Br1ght h_es and Y2Fjyb25vdXMgbXVzaWMs*

V29tZW4gYW5kIG1lbg== in suits.

SaNit1zed air and c3RlbmNoIG9m soot.

The society.

*C00l colors and cXVpZXQ= libraries.*

VW5pcXVlIGJ1dCB1bmlmb3JtLg==

Fri3d foods and criSp air.

The U2Nob29s club

*Auburn and sassy,*

A part of my soul.

Chocolate and coffee,

The final piece.

*Each of these cGljdHVyZXMs*

Are Y29tYmhuZWQ= tog_ther,

To f1t a YmlnZ2Vy picture.

*Me.*

Sometimes, there are days where I question myself, 'why am I doing this?' It's a riddle that will grace you—anyone, for that matter—at the age of maturity, or maybe even before. You feel like you've seen everything, done all that you can do, and hear all that you need to make you think 'hey, maybe I've understood enough of this world to take advantage of it'; after all, it's no secret that anyone is out for themselves in this blasted reality. For example, as much of a *dick* Kitamura-senpai is, he really is only looking for his own gains as the *perfect* opportunist—blackmail, fame, maybe even wealth; all amounts to keep your head above the water and survive the next day. It is after all, a part of the 'social contract' detailed in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Mix in 'Dunbar's number' into the fray, and one can conclude that not only are we biased as a species, but we're also assholes *not* by design or circumstances—we just *are*. Whether we remain to act upon it depends on the individual in question.

After our incidental rendezvous, she—Monika—made me promise; a promise to maintain what moral integrity and conviction I have, to never stoop to his level, to be the 'better man'—the person she'll be proud to support and love.

But this world, this…reality…it doesn't work that way. Sacrifices has to be made, even if it means fighting fire with fire.

"I really think you should stay home, Dh7eK=," she said with her arms crossed. "It's best not to push
yourself when you're in that state."

Hastily I chug the brownish-black liquid in my cup, setting the empty cup down in the sink. "And if I do, who's going to keep you fed, Mo-chii?"

"I don't—oh, can you please stop calling me that?"

I open one of the desk's drawer, chuckling silently at how flustered she is with the pet-name—something I came up with two days ago, by the way. "But it's cute!"

She sighs and replies with one of the cutest pout I've yet to see; I'll never get tired of that look of hers…

"Why is my nickname always have to be associated with food? Natsuki came up with Mon-Ika before, and you," she said with emphasis. "Call me 'Mo-chii' after an episode of 'T4BI NO KAxRI'! So why is that, hmm…?"

"Maybe…" I quickly interject. "Maybe it's because you're so delicious I could eat you."

"…you're such a…"

She pauses.

"…I'll let you win this time…"

With a flustered expression and a hint of moue, Monika bashfully looks to the side and avoid any and all eye contact for the moment. Cute; I may have gained a 'speech-check bonus' out of that.

Rummaging through the drawer, I reach in for a packet of face mask I've kept in storage for some time and take a piece for myself to wear during the day. As much as I celebrate the coming of autumn, it's also wise to consider one's health—and those around you—so everyone can celebrate the festivities of the harvest month. It's been a week since our heart-to-heart conversation and everything gradually is shifting back to the usual routine we are accustomed to. The overtime can still be quite unbearable, Kitamura-senpai still hounds me with the seemingly endless work pushed to my table, and the economic situation on my end still isn't improving as I'd hope to be; it's scary to think that I've grown used to all this and finds it all 'normal'.

But it isn't because of how I perceive society and life, or how I've grown far too accustomed to it—that may be a part of the reason, but keeping judgment within that sphere would spell for a hail of criticism marred with pessimism. I'm someone that you would call a realist, after all.

"You should hurry," Monika starts before sipping her coffee. I'll say, I haven't seen her in that white camisole dress in a while; it's a nice sight to start the day. "It's almost time, and you don't want to be running late for your job!"

"Awh…I thought you want me to stay?"

She settles her cup down to her right, a pair of emerald green eyes glares with comical vexation at my idiotic grin, cleverly concealed by the mask that protrudes from ear to ear. "You lout."

"Well, this 'lout'," I reply in earnest, reaching for the working bag before coming close to match her eye-to-eye. "Was found hypnotized by your captivating emerald eyes and sassy personality; and now you're stuck with him. Having regrets, Mo-chii?"

Monika smiles; a smile that is both captivating as it is cheeky. She slides her body forward, letting the
dress fall just slightly, emphasizing her posture as she rests on her left arm to meet me in her gaze. My heart thumps erratically and my temperature rises as her perky pink lips part to speak her piece; calm yourself, buddy. This is the worst possible timing to be excited!

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

It's because of how much I'm willing to open myself to her, to Monika, the little devil who tamed the beast and shooed the rainclouds and storms that has been haunting me. The salary man was right; it's not because she couldn't, but it's because I didn't let her. I was too stubborn to see, too occupied by my own selfishness to believe that I alone knows best. Stress, depression, and anxieties are all part of a baggage that comes along as a part of this reality, a piece of a puzzle that creates a grand image of you as a person; I have one, but so does Monika. Sometimes, these negative emotions will slither its way into your mind—the worst thing you could do is to keep it to yourself; 'bottle it up, don't let it ooze', as how I usually repeat my mantra, believing that by doing so I may spare others from my misery. Which, when you put some thought into it, reminds me of a certain someone who believed the same. That was a mistake.

I ended up not just hurting myself, but also Monika.

She gave me quite an earful of chastising the next morning, sure, but it was worth it; like a cold shower at the break of dawn, or a long soak in a hot spring after hard labor—I needed it more than I thought I knew. But thanks to it, I have regained a part of my life back—and I couldn't thank her enough. If she ever disappear…well, best if I don't dwell on that thought now, do I?

"How's my tie?" I ask, shifting my weight to lean a little close for Monika to see. "Good enough?"

A contemplative 'hmm', "If I can so much as to touch you, I'd fix that tie juuust a bit higher."

"Alright," I do as she told. A little tight around the collar, but it should be fine. "Is that all?"

"Also, maybe I'll pull you in for a kiss…while I'm at it..."

Monika makes her counterattack with her cheeky, yet flirty irresistible smile that gets me every time. Her emerald eyes, ever perceptive, causes me to turn for a moment so as to conceal the blush that steadily warms me from ear to ear. The thumping in my chest grows faster as I struggle to maintain my composure. I clear my throat, placing my hand on the edge of our reality; a gentle warmth spreads across the palm of my hand.

"You know you're flirting with a teacher, right?"

"If you're a teacher," she replies; her flirtatious smile expands, doting how I've been lured into her trap. "Then you ought to teach me how to behave properly, sensei!"

...that was—where did she…?

..."I surrender; you're merciless…"

"Only to you, Hxc4sf. Ahahaha~"

She smiles teasingly in return. Sometimes I wonder if I should even go easy on her...

"I'm off—don't forget to practice your kanji and grammar; your last homework is...passable, but not the best."
"I will," she replies kindly. Her emeralds shines; a gleam that reflects her feelings—innocent and very much in love. "If there is anything, do tell me. I will always wait for you. Take care."

And with that, I walk towards the door, waving one last time at her direction before taking my keys that is hung on a wall hook. A warm, fuzzy feeling brushes across my cheek as I replay our morning interaction once more; it reminds me of those dreamy 'married life'-scenes from some of the more romantic Visual Novels—which I perfectly have no problem with whatsoever, by the way. Now, if only I can come home to Monika in aprons asking 'that question', it would be perfect…

…I really should keep my imagination in check, sometimes. Now, on to business; today is…

Wednesday, October the thirteenth; two weeks before the school festival.

"…and with that said, since we still have some time in homeroom, class representative Mikawa," I motion to her, seated at the far right on the third row just by the window. "Will you be so kind to detail of what our class will be doing for the festival?"

Mikawa replies with a strong, confident 'yes' as I hand the podium to her while I take my position to the side, leaning against the blackboard. With her, a clear folder is neatly tucked between her arms, marked with a sticker that is written in such that it can almost be mistaken to a calligraphy—'festival', it reads. Within it, a notebook, a mechanical pencil, and sheets of A4-size printouts stapled together—as expected of one of holder of the chrysanthemum badge.

"Okay, everyone!" as usual, Mikawa starts with a catch phrase that reminds me of a particular sassy girl I happen to live with. "So as we have come to agree upon on Monday, our class will be running an 'Emma'-themed café. Do we have confirmation on the maid and butler uniform?"

Araki raises her hand. "Yes! We can have the costumes done for everyone!"

As the students mingle in the discussion and the bell is still ten minutes to spare, I rest the back of my left hand on my forehead and breathe.

It's burning…

I should've listened to her. It doesn't seem too bad this morning, or even during the commute; I can't say the same during morning meetings and homeroom, however. There's a slight searing sensation down at my throat when I cough, along with the ever-increasing discomfort up in my nasal cavity that it doesn't take a genius—or even a doctor—to tell. I shift my weight to my right feet, just a bit more to find enough comfort against the rough surface of the walls while cursing under my breath at the impeccable timing—and my own poor judgment and stubbornness.

"Sensei…!"

Quickly my eyes shoots towards Mikawa who, judging by her pained expression, may have caught on to my condition.

"Are you…well?" she asks. The other students, following her guidance, immediately shifts their eyes to me. "You're looking a bit pale, sensei…"

I wave at them dismissively, chuckling. "It's nothing. Is everything in order, class representative?"

"Oh! Y-yes!"
"Good work, Mikawa." I shift my attention to the class, my homeroom. The bell chimes. "And to all of you, as well. I'll look forward to what everyone can achieve in the festival!"

A unison of 'yeses' and cheers echoes as I reach for the bag. Mikawa returns to her seat and smiles with confidence, preparing her spirit one last time to conclude the session.

"Stand up!" The class responds in uniform, a repetition that I've seen and experience for a lifetime. "Bow!"

With a swift, respectful bow that is quickly followed with a harmonious 'thank you', homeroom period ends and the day has just begun—both for me and for the students.

I made my way to another third-year classroom for first period English class—I don't envy the students of 3-3; they tend to have lowest homework turn-in and marks out of all third years, to be honest. The little tengus and onis are partying hard, unleashing their energy on their planned performance—a group dance as part of the stage show to the tune of 'WE ARE JAPANESE GOBLIN', from what I eavesdropped. Fitting…considering how rowdy the class can be; although, it's undeniable how the coming festival affects everyone with a more positive energy. A pity I have to interrupt their excitement.

"Alright, settle down! Class representative, if you please."

On the subject of festivals…they always are a part of us; always something captivating and…mystical, if I am to speak my mind. The food, the company, and the performances are one thing, but it's always how couples seem to be in full bloom during these occasions; not that I mind the spike in the springtime of youth, but it's how some would go out of their way to seclude themselves from the crowd and…let's just say 'act' upon their impulse. As one of the designated supervisors, guess who will pull the short straw?

I can't blame them; honestly, if I am at their age and have Monika around, it wouldn't surprise me at the slightest to have that urge loitering around—maybe even act on it.

"Take out your pencil, we're having a pop-quiz about yesterday's reading and—"

…

I pause, holding my breath as a screeching, ringing noise—like nails on chalkboard—invades and razes the cognitive sense that I have been struggling to maintain. I let the darkness to settle, pursing my lids shut as to let the pain subside; the endless hammering, drumming my brain relentlessly, corresponding to the sudden chill that slices my skin open and sears it with intense heat I've come to recognize by experience. I sigh, a flush of warm air caresses my dry, cracked lips. When I come to, all eyes are upon me; faces full of concern and confusion.

"Sensei…? Hello…?"

I cough, "Alright, FIRST QUESTION…!"

As fast as it all began, the faces of concern and confusion vanishes against overwhelming panic and surprise.

The class progresses, along with the flow of time; like a leaf that floats gently on a stream. Through it all, the searing heat and the hammering continues its torment, occasionally subsiding at certain intervals and picking up where it left off with swift retribution and vigor; through it all, I have to endure. I am a teacher, a shepherd responsible in ensuring my flock survive through the never-ending storm and dangers the world will throw at them. It is my responsibility, my duty to see to it that none
would be let astray—even if it may cost me my own well-being. I can't see myself taking a break—especially not in the crucial time when these third-years would need us the most; the time when they will be asked upon what they wish to do in the future.

I'm sure Monika would understand my decision. It's not the wisest move (just like most of my other decisions), but it's the most 'noble'.

When the bell chime, the students uniformly repeats the pattern the same way it began. I take my bow and leaves for the next classroom and the next lesson; the steps I take, its weight, increases incrementally on my shoulders and shackles my ankles in chained balls of steel. My visions blur for a fraction of a second, causing me to waddle to my destination before it all vanishes mysteriously like a shadow against a backdrop of light; its unceremonious return, however, is as discomforting as it is a torture. The second period starts, the cycle repeats.

I should've stayed home.

"I really think you should visit the health center, sensei." Mikawa said with her arms crossed. "It's best not to push yourself in that state."

Quietly I dismiss her concern with a callous chuckle and a smile from behind the mask, "If I do, who's going to supervise the club?"

"You can always count on me or Aki-chan for that, sensei!"

That's nice of her, though I'm reluctant to do so not because I do not have faith in her—believe me, I do—but the implications that may came out of it; last thing I need is another reprimand or putting my homeroom's class representative in the line of fire. I reach forward and tap her shoulder twice, smiling behind the mask that protrudes from ear to ear. She flinches for a split of a second, but retains her overall composure and her expression that is both a mix of sadness and concern. I may be unwell, but at least allow me to fulfill my responsibility—at least until the end of today's faculty meeting.

"I'll be alright," I reach for the keys and slide the object to the hole, turning it anti-clockwise and unlocking the room for the Literature Club. "This is part of my responsibility, after all. Besides, I don't want you or any of the others to get in trouble."

I move to the side and gestures her to the room. "Go ahead."

"Thank you, sensei," she said with a bow. "To have you care so much for us…"

"Don't mention it," I wave dismissively. "If any, you deserve your own recognition; even in the midst of preparation, you're still the first to come to the club."

I pause, "Judging by that alone, I take everything our homeroom planned for is well in order?"

"Yes, it is. They've taken my measurements, so we're down to waiting for the costume."

"I see. That's good to hear," I pause. "Anyway, what are we standing out here for? Please, go ahead."

"A-ah! Y-yes, of course. Excuse my rudeness, sensei."

The classroom, designated as the Literature Club's home base, is as serene as it is welcoming; peaceful due to the absence of its members. The rays of the sun that bleeds through the window
provides a comforting warmth on the desks that is graced by its reach as Mikawa makes her way to her usual seat while I, as the supervisor, takes the one on her opposite end of the room. Immediately my body slumps on the chair, exhausted from the constant struggle against a sickness that I can barely contain; if it weren't because of the sandwich and coffee I had for lunch, I would most likely be in the infirmary— I should be, mind you, but I chose not to. Who would be supervising the club then?

I glance at Mikawa who is sitting at the other end of the room, focused on juggling between paperwork—for the class and the literature club's—and her smartphone. One minute, her hand would be on top of the paper with her pen, dancing in rhythm to the sound of the scribbles and at the next, she darts to the glowing device to her left and quickly taps what I can only assume to be messages before focusing back to the paper. Occasionally, she would comb and tuck her bangs behind her ears or twirls them around in moments of uncertainty. Mikawa's…dedicated that way, always focused on her tasks and the well-being of others—a trait I've noticed for a very long time; as expected of the recipient of the chrysanthemum badge, always diligent. I wonder…how would Monika fare against her? Can she handle the pressure and weight her position as club leader translates to? DDLC may just be a game, a world where she was confined to, but that doesn't mean she can escape the responsibility of her position now, does she? I guess it is something for her to know and for me to find out…

"Sensei," she calls out, pulling me away from the day dream. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but…is there a pen I can borrow?"

"You don't have any spare?"

Mikawa shakes her head, "Sadly, no…I'm sorry! It's very careless of me."

I shrug and reach for a black pen tucked in my vest. Mikawa hurriedly strides. "It can't be helped; here you are, don't forget to return it later."

"I will. Thank you, sensei!"

Even honor students make mistakes sometimes.

I slump back to position once again, quietly observing the changing colors from its warm glow to a gentle shade of orange, listening to the echoes of the sports-oriented clubs from the outside—the cheer, the drive, and the spirit that drowns the silence in a distinctive melody; the music of unfiltered youth. It has been about ten minutes since the club is supposed to start, yet aside from Mikawa no one else has yet to rear its head. The aching pain that resonates across my joints throughout the nape slowly bear its weights down on my head; I slowly descend into the dark, leaving my consciousness behind.

A series of mumbling, chatters—voices that I can't comprehend.

When I come to, I am greeted by the sight of Aki and Mikawa, gleefully conversing to one another; the former being more apologetic to the latter, likely because of her tardiness. Their conversation sharply falls into sudden whispers upon noticing my return to reality, starting with Aki.

"Ara, sensei," Aki greets. "Good morning!"

Mikawa nudges at her with her elbow, "I'm sorry, sensei! You seemed tired, so we decided not to disturb your rest."

"How long was I out?"
"Around fifteen minutes."

"I see…"

Mikawa looks on with concern as Aki takes her seat, only returning to her responsibility when the vice-president draws the detail of the plan concerning the literature club for the festival—that is, the design of the banner that will be hung during the day. I massage the point between my eyes, adjusting from the grogginess and easing back to the land of the living; the throbbing pain that peckers at my brain and the sore in my throat is definitely not making it any easier. As the two discusses of what ifs, what was, and what will, the other members—Yuuki, Satsuki, and Obase—makes their entrance.

"Sorry we're late, buccho~!" Satsuki cries in exasperation, "Our class project took more time than what we thought and-and…uh…Yuuki can explain!"

"W-what? Why me?!!"

"Just say something and back me up!"

Yuuki sighs, "There was a little trouble on our class' plan for a haunted house. Satsuki complained that the layout is crap and—"

"Why is it my fault?!" she quickly interferes, "It really is crap—and you're supposed to back me up!"

"Not my problem," he shrugs. "I can't pull you out of the fire all the time, you dolt."

"But I'm your childhood friend…! How could you…!"

"That makes it even more so!"

Another episode between the two erupts for the club to see. Mikawa giggles softly at the sight, resting her pen on her lips reflectively before turning to Obase who—just like the previous two—came in at around the exact same time. "How about you, Obase-kun?"

Obase sheepishly takes a step back and looks away; guilt is written all over his expression. "I… overslept at last period."

…

The club falls into complete silence—and so do I.

"Well," Yuuki interrupts, "Your name checks out, doesn't it Shinjiro?"

"Shut up…"

The ball drops as fast as it was tossed into the air, sending the others into a spiral of laughter upon realizing what Yuuki meant—Obase's given name, Shinjiro, uses the kanji for 'sleeping' instead of the usual 'new'. I shouldn't be surprised either; amongst all the second year students, Obase is infamous amongst the faculties as that one student who tends to doze off in the middle of class, no matter how hot or cold the weather gets. The jolly atmosphere settles down as Mikawa gestures all the members into the club with the usual 'okay, everyone!'—like a shepherd to her flock. Before long, the cheer and the spirit of youth that was once so prevalent is drowned by the voices and energy of equal strength, dedicated on churning the best the literature club can offer here, in this club room.
"I can't wait until the festival…!" Satsuki starts, "It's always fun to see everyone's effort, right Yuuki?"

"All those couples though…damn riajuu, I hope they all explode!"

"It's not that bad!" she quickly replies, "You can always invite your childhood friend out!"

Yuuki sneers—sarcastically, I assume. "I rather hang out with sensei. Right, sensei?"

Like a comedic routine in its own, Yuuki flashes his thumb at my general direction to which I respond in kind with my own. Though I do used to share his sentiment, I can't say the same today with Monika in mind—sorry, Yuuki, but this thumbs up is more of a friendly gesture than a commitment.

"See, even sensei agrees!"

"That's not nice! Yuuki's an idiot!"

"You will visit your own homeroom, right sensei?" Mikawa cuts, leaving both Yuuki and Satsuki to their own devices as per-usual. "I'm sure you wouldn't want to miss our Victorian England-themed café!"

I nod, "I'll likely be on patrol, but I'll try not to; it's your last, after all."

"That's true...but that's why," she pumps her fist. "That's why we ought to make it memorable! Including our literature club, right Aki-chan?"

Aki smiles weakly, sighing. I guess not everyone is as excited about it—barring Obase, of course. "I wish I can say the same, Aya-chan…"

She sighs in exasperation, setting her marker down and nodding meekly at her closest confidant. Mikawa responds with a nod, gesturing in return with a 'go ahead' on the matter she wishes to speak. "I'm not one to gossip, but…"

"Our homeroom, class 3-4, is supposed to be doing a stage performance of 'Alice in Wonderland', right?"

Ah...class 3-4 is Kitamura-senpai's homeroom. Bright students, each and every one of them—can't say the same about their homeroom teacher though; ironic how his class representative is part of a club I supervise.

"Thing is," she continues. "Our 'Alice' is always late for practice—sometimes even missing!"

Aki squeezes the marker, boiling to toss the inanimate object to the table with rage. "What's worse is that when she does show up, she's either tired or came loaded with 'reasons'! We can't get anything done because of it! We were so pumped up about it since this will be our last, yet she just have to ruin everything!"

"There's even rumors going around that she was dating Kitamura-sensei—that's why she's always late and—"

…!

Aki pauses, quickly catching on to my intrigue; one that I may invest upon. "A-aah...sorry, sensei! Aya-chan and I were discussing about this earlier, but we conclude it was just baseless claims; don't
It's difficult *not* to be reminded of that time we accidentally encounter one another in Shinjuku. I knew there was something...odd about his 'partner'—familiar, even—yet I couldn't point a finger or the reason *why* that is to be. If the rumors are to go by, then I may...

...No, I shouldn't. I promised her *not* to fight fire with fire, to be the better man in the situation—that's why she handed me the picture in the first place, because she *trusts* my judgment to honor it and make the right call. Because she believes that, if I am to keep my promise, I would *delete* the incriminating evidence by my own. The world may never give another chance like this, and yet...

...yet I *can't* break this promise; I *shouldn't*. But...

"I think we ran out of color markers..." Mikawa interrupts. She bites down on her pen akin to a p*cky* snack, pondering. "...I'll go and get a new box. Sensei, will it be alright if I ask you to accompany me to the storage? I'm not sure where it is—"

She pauses. "...and I hate to send Aki out again in a fruitless expedition...Ahaha~"

"Hey! Aya-chan, you meanie!"

Mikawa presses her hands together and mutters a 'please' under her breath. I shrug and nod at her request, pushing myself to work against the sickness and the incessant pain to take the responsibility; after all, this is a part of our contract as a teacher. With a stretch, I ease the muscles and the headache into momentary suspension (or at least until I find another spot to lean) before she leads me to the hallway, towards the storage room—the one in *new* building.

"Mikawa, this building also has a storage room."

"I know," she replies in a solemn, contemplative voice. "I'm sorry, sensei. But what I said in the club rom was just a ruse; I have something I want to discuss about—and I don't think it's appropriate with others around."

...Well, this oddly a first. I know how smart she can be, but I never thought she'd think *this* far.

"Is this...serious?"

She nods and mumbles, "Yes, it is."

"Would you like to have a coffee to go along with it?" I reply; it would be a disservice not to. "It may ease you a little, I believe."

"Thank you, sensei...you're always so kind to everyone."

"Don't mention it."

Our little excursion takes us to one of the stairwell where three sets of vending machine nestles itself at the corner of the wall, just under the shade. The little ashes that litters the corners tells me a story; a lore about this particular location and its history with delinquents—thankfully, none seem to wander the area. Out of spite, I bought two cans of the usual brand—one for myself, another for my student. She accepts the offer, gently and politely taking them into her slender hands, flicking the tab open to think badly about Kitamura-sensei, ok? It's just a rumor!"
sip on the dark liquid within. I pull my mask down, revealing my parched lips to consume the treat; it still tastes wonderfully bland, alongside a spike of pain down my throat.

"So," I start. "What is it you wish to discuss about?"

She pauses, twirling her hair in uncertainty before she returns with a quizzical gaze. "Sensei, what do you think about student-teacher relationship?"

…

…wait, what…!? 

"Uh…can you repeat that, Mikawa…?"

"Oh! Uh…i-it's not what it sounds like at all!" she stammers, awkwardly giggling at her own expense. I sigh with relief. "It's about…a friend."

Mikawa's expression reflects a thought, one that struggles against her own principles—a secret, perhaps, that is never meant to be revealed. She clutches the can, desperate in finding the courage to proceed.

"Are you sure you want me to know?" I ask. "If…this is something between you and your friends, then—"

"N-no! I do feel that you need to know!" Quickly, she pauses upon realizing her neglect of manners and formality. "I-I mean, I believe it's something you should know, sensei."

She takes a deep breath, and heaves. "The 'friend' Aki and I were discussing earlier…"

Mikawa pauses.

"Aki is friends with her; we met once or twice," she continues. "She's a very…quiet individual, always keeping things to herself. But…"

Mikawa purses her lips, desperate to continue against her own conscious that abstains her to do so. "Recently, she's been…happier."

"Isn't that a good thing?" I chime in. She shakes her head, denying it.

"If it is, she won't stop talking about it—especially to Aki. But this…this is different."

"She's been looking tired, often missing school; I know it's not my business to nose around, but when Aki questions her, she always said that—"

'Everything is ok.'

…

A sense of familiarity washes over me, a symptom I've come to associate with a certain suicidal character and my old self, to a degree. What I'm listening to is a plea for help, a cry for someone in a position of authority and experience to guide a lost lamb…or so I thought.

"What's worse, is that…those rumors that's been going around," Mikawa bites her lower lip, gathering what courage she has to speak—and I realize I may have stumbled on salvation. "They were true."
"Sensei, she is dating Kitamura-sensei."

...  

*And everything just clicks.*

In that instance, at that moment, all the details pertaining Kitamura-senpai and our unfortunate rendezvous comes to blow. The girl, its sense of familiarity that keeps tugging...now I know. It's the opportunity of a life time, a chance that comes once in a blue moon. Solemnly I lean against the wall, doing the best as I can to recall the now-vivid image of that night—the display of promiscuity—and the bastard who started it all.

And I'm going to tell everyone.

"Mikawa, I know you're a bright student," I said, cautiously treading on thin ice. "But if I may, what makes you believe that is true?"

"Aki was worried," she sighs, taking a sip from her can to ease the growing pressure. "So I...I took the liberty to follow her."

"You stalked her?"

She nods. "Yes. It's...not a good manner to have for someone like me, I know. But Aki was worried! I can't just leave it alone...can I?"

"That's another matter to discuss," I sigh. This is definitely above my paygrade—especially after the cut. "What's her name?"

"Will you promise me not to tell it to anyone, sensei?"

"I promise."

She takes a deep breath, sighs, and walks towards the recycling bin to chuck the pristine can into the abyss. "Ariake-san."

"It's Ariake Shiho-san. I saw her went into a love hotel with Kitamura-sensei more than once to know."

Thus, the full picture comes into view...

"Will you help her, sensei?"

...and the demon within me smiles with glee. "Yes, I will do what I can."

Quietly we conclude our conversation and affirm my decision—not just for her, but for my own; a way to remove one less obstacle, a thorn that constantly hounds me—this is my retribution for the pain you brought upon Monika and I. The question is, when can I put this weapon into its effect? Pulling my mask back into position, I gesture to Mikawa who—eagerly—is heading towards the club room.

"Mikawa, you might want to 'get the new markers'—else your flock will be suspicious."

"O-OH! That's right...!"

When we return to the clubroom, the questions regarding the time it took for us to find a box of markers sparks as fast as it disappear into obscurity once Mikawa gave her reasoning and I backing
her claim—'we tracked the box to another class', she said. I slip back to my seat and reassume my job as the supervisor—though admittedly, the trip alone really did strain my riddled physique more than it already has; I'm just glad I can slink back down to rest. I can't help but smile, however—a sinister one to some, maybe—as I remember the conversation under the stairwell.

That now I have the tool to put that scum in his place.

Both my mental and physical state is in shambles at the end of Wednesday's mandatory faculty meeting—even more so when it took nearly half the damn meeting to discuss about material distribution for the festival. Damn bureaucracy...always slow to act and decide, but there's really no helping—or changing—it either. Kitamura-senpai was, unsurprisingly, absent in the meeting and noted how I will be responsible in informing the on-goings of the school while he's away to attend 'important matters' and 'public relations'. The school board always is slow on the response, with all decisions falling into the hands of the principal; unless you have significant influence on the matter to bypass the entire screening. Nonetheless, it's quite a relief to know that the day ended as per-usual—just for a little bit more.

There is one other thing I forgot to mention; it doesn't relate with any of my students or senpai for that matter, but it does correlate with today's date. On my way home, right after getting off on my station, I made a stop at the convenience store and withdraw some of my savings to treat myself with 4 packets of mitarashi dango and a bottle of sake—just for this occasion. I have a special event in mind, particularly during this time of the month—and I can't wait to share the experience with that sassy brat who calls residence in my laptop. Back when I was but a snotty little bastard, my old man used to do this together with the family in my old home at Kawasaki in Kanagawa prefecture; always at this date and not a single leap, year by year.

"Thank you very much, please come again!"

I leave the convenience store with a single bag in my hand and a hopeful, optimistic smile. I feel like collapsing right about now, but this will be a moment to remember; I can't miss it.

Walking up the incline that leads to my home, the gentle glow that bleeds from my room draws me closer to the promised ending that awaits me at each day. I look up; the spherical alloy-silver disk that hangs in the expanse of the night sky gleams brilliantly like a pearl amongst the stars, beguiling me in its beauty. My heart skips a beat, amok by imagination of a time that is to be. I reach for my keys and slide it into the hole, turning it anti-clockwise and unlocking the slice of heaven that continues to welcome me to its embrace with its well-lit corridor and room.

"I'm home!"

"Welcome home...!" echoes a feminine voice from within. Quickly, I remove my footwear and rush to the source of the voice; a young girl in her white camisole dress, cheerfully resting her head on her bridged hands with a smile that rivals the brightest sun. "How was your day?"

"I bought stuff," I reply and raise the bag to her vision, grinning behind the mask. "You're going to love this."

Walking over to the balcony, I open the curtain and slides the balcony door open to the greatest show on this side of our reality. Lighting a mosquito coil I reach from a nearby drawer, I rest the object into its container and sets it close to the edge that divides the room with balcony—a preparation for the little 'festival'—and look over my shoulder towards the girl beyond the screen who looks on, bewildered yet curious. I close my distance to her; her pair of emeralds speaks of a thousand unanswered questions, inquisitive towards the reasoning behind my actions.
"7hHDs, aren't you…unwell…?" Monika asks with concern. "I think it's best if you rest early today and—"

"Hush, girl." I interrupt, placing a finger on the screen where her lips is supposed to be. "It's that time of the year, and everything is perfect—it will be a shame to miss!"

The apparatus, lying on the side of the desk, is quickly dusted off and switched after I sling it over my shoulder; the object is still as heavy as last time. The weight, my physical condition, and the throbbing pain in my head may complicate lugging the apparatus for an extended time, but we're not going far in the first place. I turn to Monika, motioning her to 'switch' to the shoulder camera.

"What are you planning…?" She asks, concealing her smile behind her slender fingers. "You're not planning something…crazy, are you?"

I warmly smile in return, reaching for her laptop right after the shoulder camera starts to move. "You'll love it, trust me."

Carefully I balance my grip on the side…

…and off the laptop goes from the table to the cradle of my hand, along with the cables that powers Monika's little abode. She lets a series of giggling and laughter, a music in its own expression that eases this lonesome heart. Does this constitute as sweeping her off of her feet like princesses of the west, I wonder? Only her expression can tell—one that I couldn't see at this time, barring assumptions from how frantic my shoulder camera moves. Carefully I rest the laptop at the edge of our room and fetch the mitarashi dango, sake, a plate, and a sakazuki—a flat, saucer-like cup use to serve sake; a gift I received on one of the mandatory company parties' raffle. I loosen my tie and cross my legs, sitting beside her—the apparatus, still on my back.

"It's the thirteenth of October today, so I figured…" I lay the plate between us and reach for the plastic bag, taking out the mitarashi dango and arrange them in a pyramid. "Since the moon is beautiful tonight, we'll have a tsukimi."

"A tsuki…me?" She said in inquiry, "Is that a love confession, H4gcD?"

"That's very punny, Mo-chii…" I chuckle, "Tsukimi, not 'suki-me'. In other words, moon viewing."

It's the time where we honor the full autumn moon as a variation of the mid-autumn festival. Its history dated as far back as the Heian period, where aristocrats of the time would recite poems under the full moon, celebrating the harvest season with dishes that reflect the season in order to pray for an abundant harvest. Though the latter practice has died away at the turn of the century for most common folk, the celebration and its customs are passed down through generations and is now integrated as part of my culture. I close my eyes and let the night air caresses me along with the distant echo of a passing train, appreciating the little wonders of the season. Then I look up, towards the crystalline sphere that hangs in the expanse, illuminating us in a bluish-silver hue and its bewitching reflection.

"My old man loves moon viewing, and since it has an association with poems and festivals…I thought it would be a great idea to let you experience it."

I reach for the bottle of sake, placing it squarely before me on the balcony. Her emerald eyes follows the cylindrical container closely, both from the shoulder camera and the laptop that is seated beside me. "Just a little trivia about my family. What about you?"

"Hdx435, my family is…"
Immediately, I am frozen in the spot. Right, that's insensitive of me—her entire reality was fiction to begin with. "Aah…I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that…"

She shakes her head, "It's alright. At least now I get to know a bit more about your family! Ahaha~!"

Monika's smile strikes me like a chord, playing a soft melody that eases my wandering soul, challenging the glimmer of the princess of the night. My cheek reddens, its warmth reminds me of the reason why I breathe to this day. The alcohol remains untouched. I wonder how far I can take the conversation, to push it further as we appreciate the brilliant glitter of the pearl of the night sky. 'Poems', I thought, 'I could recite one—it is a part of moon viewing, after all.'

"It really is beautiful tonight," she said, catching me off guard. "You're actually quite the romantic, Dx48rN."

Monika softly paints a ray of sunshine all over her expression, "I'm glad it was you who I fell in love with."

…

…she's really relentless when it comes to the offensive, isn't she?

"Well," I muster with a mix of glee and coy, "I don't know what to say, but…"

"Thank you, for sticking with someone like me."

The corners of her mouth slid upwards—a humble and modest one, and leans towards my general direction. Whether it is the weight of the apparatus or my fatigue taking over, the pressure that pushes my shoulders translates to a soft, comforting embrace; just squeezing my hand alone, it's as if her fingers has slid its way into my grasp. I understand full-well that, maybe, these are all just fragments of my imagination, a dream that may never be realized—yet even so, I embrace it fully and let the moon be our judge.

"I did say that poems are associated with moon viewing, right?"

"Mmhm~."

"Do you have something in mind?"

"It's all so sudden," she replies. "I don't think I can come up with anything right now. Do you have one, XdH2S5?"

I smirk, the corners of my eyes crinkles. "I do, in fact—but let me have some sake first."

A waft of alcohol tickles my scent the moment I twist the bottle open. The liquid, clear as crystal, runs through the mouth of the bottle and fills the sakazuki, reflecting the melancholic image of the moon on its cylindrical cup. I pause, admiring the sight and the dizzying smell of the alcoholic treat that rests in my hand, the simple artistic beauty that nature provides for us—and then realization hits me a second too late. Monika's nineteen years of age; I am drinking with a minor.

"Ah…you don't mind if I drink, right…?" I ask, turning to my right. "I mean…its alcohol and all…"

"I don't mind," she reply. "Only if you share it, though!"

"You're a minor."

"—under your supervision! Ahaha~."
I sigh. "...Just this once, alright?"

She cheers with excitement, motioning to have the sake and the sakazuki for her to see. Moving the bottle and the cup for her to see, Monika immediately closes her eyes and concentrate, generating little glitches and pixels that flashes before her, culminating into a shape I recognize—a sakazuki, emerald in color and engraved in a golden pattern of a crane; a contrast to my red. The clear liquid materializes after—a perfect replication of the drink that captures the moon—and soon, the object in question rests on the palm of her hand.

"It's...beautiful..." she said in awe. The emerald sakazuki, with its liquid, reflects her image. "It's like looking at a mirror..."

I chuckle, "Customarily, the woman is supposed to pour the sake for the man. But since that's not possible considering our circumstances, we'll let that slide."

"One day," she replies with a soft expression. "One day, I would love to do that for you."

I smile, a hopeful and accepting one. "Then I'll look forward to that special day."

"And so!" I continue. "Let's drink to that. Kanpai?"

"Kanpai!"

We raise our cups and let the warm liquid drench our throats and flow into a stream. The buzz lightly stings my head—a sensation I grew to appreciate along with the alcoholic drink I shared, then with my father and now, with my lover. I glance at her, who squirms in surprise, pressing both her hands on her mouth—as if praying—before raising the curtains to reveal her emerald green eyes; a drop of tear rests at its corners.

"It's bitter...!"

"That's alcohol for you; it'll grow on you, trust me."

Raising the bottle to her vision, I paint a devilish smile on my feature. "Another?"

A reddish tint blooms on her face that stretches from ear to ear. She gazes, ever observant, meeting our eyes in the exchange causing us to flinch—not out of discomfort, mind you. Monika holds her cup like a flower that gently rests on her palms, catching a glimpse at me before sheepishly, she nods.

And so, I pour another cup for myself.

"...About that poem," she inquires, resting her half-full sakazuki before her. "I would love to hear it now."

"Really?" I return, chuckling.

"Very much so."

"Then," I pause, admiring the reflection of the moon in my cup, then to the distant satellite above. I close my eyes and went into a deep thought; fitting, I suppose—particularly for this occasion.

"Setsugetsuka no toki mottomo kimi wo omou." 'I remember you when the snow, the moon, and the flowers are especially beautiful', a poem by Bai Juyi and one of my personal favorite, both for its length and the weight of its words; one that I've been looking forward to mutter to her—at least, a reason to.
"What do you think?"

"...you flirt..." she quickly replies in hushed tone. "That can't be your own!"

"It isn't," I honestly reply. "But I find it fitting for this moment, don't you?"

She sighs and takes another sip.

"I will be kissing you right now if nothing stands between us—with or without the alcoholic influence."

"But yes," she continues. "It's lovely."

YES!

Mentally, I pump a fist to the air for the small victory I've earned and gleefully chug a serving of sake from my sakazuki. The sake, along with the sweet and savory mitarashi dango (though not the 'right' kind of dango), compliments the picturesque scenery as the night grows longer and the alcohol slowly taking its effect. Before long, I start to hum a tune that reminisce the days where I used to spend my time in solitary, basking under the glow of the autumn moon—a memory before she become a part of my life. Now that I give some thought about it...we could use some music, at least.

"Mo-chii," I start. "You said before you wanted a rapper in your literature club, right?"

Monika's emerald eyes gazes at me, dazed. Tinges of red outlines her cheeks from ear to ear. "You can rap?"

"No, that's impossible," I chuckle. "But, I know a song that you may like and—"

"Is this one of those 'v#cal0id' that Natsuki—and you—listen to?"

I wave dismissively; close, but no cigar. "Not this time; search in my music folder 'Itoshiki Yomichi', then play that."

I left her at her own devices as she rummages through my files, in search for the specific song I requested. The moonlight that reflects on the half-empty sake bottle acts like a meter, numbing the aching pain that courses through my body and my head; along with the company of Monika, all is right with the world. After a minute or so, she returns with the song in question.

"What is it about?" she asks, inquisitive as usual.

"The short answer? Drowning your sorrows together with a company."

"And the long answer?"

I take a sip. The taste of the sake becomes sweeter at each consumption. "Two strangers spending their time together in celebration, too shy to voice their true thoughts to one another and just simply,"

The clear liquid flows like a stream, down to my sakazuki for another serving. "...appreciating the company; it's bittersweet, in a way."

"I hope you didn't pick this because you're trying to imply our relationship...?" she asks. Again, I wave dismissively; the alcohol really is starting to take its effect on both of us.

"We're way past that phase, Mo-chii. Oh, just go play the song!"
When the music starts its slow, melodic introduction, I rest my sakazuki down and privately observe Monika, pouring another serving for myself to cover my intention. The tune picks up, then the pace, and when the rap takes its stage, Monika's eyes lights up in excitement and I—

I raise my cup for a toast.

"This is amazing…!"

"Told you," I reply with a chuckle. "Now, just like the song, let us enjoy this moment together over a few cups of sake and the company of one another,"

Grinning playfully, I raise my cup for her to see—one more 'kanpai' for tonight and many more to come. "Shall we, Mo-chii?"

"If it's you, always."

We drink to our hearts, listening to the tune and savoring every second spent. The autumn moon illuminates our little adventure as the only witness, captured within the small cup I hold as the bottle grows lighter and eventually, dries. We start giggling and chuckling gleefully the moment our eyes meet, noticing the flushed cheeks and reddened ears in a world of light intoxication and merriment. When the bottle dries and the dango are nothing but skewers, Monika is already fast asleep in her reality—a satisfied streak paints over her serene expression. Thus, we ended our little festival with me carrying her back to the desk and cleaning what mess was left.

The next morning, I came down with a headache and a fever of thirty nine-point-eight degrees Celsius and had to be confined in bed.

My verdict?

...

_Totally worth it._

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

iMegumeru here! Just to help some of the readers who may not be familiar, here are examples of translation notes:

#

Monika's pet-name - Oogame came up with the idea of calling her 'Mo-chii', taken from Monika's 'Mo' and adding a diminutive suffix 'chii', which originates from 'chan', albeit a more affectionate variant. 'Mochi' is also a name of a savory snack; rice cakes, basically.

Obase's name - Yuuki mentioned about how 'sleeping' is a part of Obase's name, which is written as 'Shinjiro'. When written in kanji, his name consists of two characters 「寝」 and 「城」. The former is the kanji of 寝る, or 'to sleep' while the latter, a castle/fortress.
Sakazuki - A round, flat sake dish.

Tsukimi - Moon viewing. Monika made a pun regarding this, mashing 'Suki/好き or 'like' with the English 'Me'. Thus, becoming 「好きME」 as translation.

I read the reviews and notice some of your suggestions for the books! Thank you! I'll be sure to take a look at the suggested reading material and see if I can expand further from my own limit!

If there are any further question, feel free to ask! I'll be happy to answer them-so long as it's not too plot-specific

Once again, thank you very much!

- iMegumeru
**Rivals**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Rivals**

*She and I are different.*
She, a talented Author,
I, an enigmatic poet.
Distinct interests,
For two different people.

*She and I live uniquely.*
Sh_, tangibly endures,
I, digitally conscious.
Distinct lives,
For two different girls.

*She and I have [1] love.*
She, a man of extrication,
I, a man of aspiration.
This man of adoration,
For M3 and M1N3 alone.

*She and I are [2] of the same coin.*
She, the head.
I, the tail.
Two different sides in an entity,
But we are not the same.

Between she and I...
**Only she is real.**

---

"I told you to rest early," Monika censures, lightly massaging her temples. "Now I feel even worse for letting you off like that...along with this headache...oww..."

"But did you have a good time?" I grin to challenge, "It was quite an experience, don't you think?"

Sheepishly she retreats her gaze away from my sarcastic smile, stuffing her cheeks with air and crossing her arms. She nods, defeated. "I would be lying if I say I didn't...and yes, it was...fun."

"Then you're an accomplice, my dear Monika!"

I grin victoriously, coughing incessantly out of excitement and quickly swaying my hand in dismissal to ease her worry of my condition. Taking the little jab at her—and winning—are moments that is difficult not to celebrate, but also equally a time to admonish of her future counter-attacks; and they're brutal, though that statement alone is a disservice to her inherent silver tongue. I pull myself a seat before her throne, a spot I called my own, and places my hand on the screen longingly so as to ease her distressed expression towards my current predicament. The thermometer beeps.
Thirty nine-point-eight. Lovely.

Whether this is a blessing or divine punishment, today I have the pleasure to spend a single weekday with Monika.

Naturally, I much rather spend them in good health without feeling the need to wrap myself in a blanket and mucking about with a face mask mulling over each and every dumb decisions I've made—it's even an uphill struggle to reach for the counter for a coffee; don't get me started on the thought of knowing how some of my students will be spared from the quizzes I've cooked up. And this headache…if it weren't because of this bag of ice, I'm not sure I want to even stand. In hindsight, there's really not much of a difference in the timing of when I call my absent, be it yesterday or today; talk about the illusion of choice…either way, I'll end up in the sick bed. I deduce it to primarily be of fatigue, and as to why this came to be, I'm guessing those overtimes are sure to blame—they are pretty dreadful in this time of year. Just endure it a little bit more, Oogame…just a bit more…

You now have the means to bring the kaiju down, after all.

But first…

"Mo-chii," I call out to her in a raspy voice. "Can you write me a letter to the principal? About my absence today?"

Her eyes shoots open in surprise. "Are you sure you want me to…?"

"I'll proof read it, don't worry—call it a practice."

She waves her index finger in a circular motion, opening the word processor. "What do you want me to write?"

"A poem."

...

And there it is, the look of disdain I've come to amuse. I can't help it; it's too adorable to miss.

"The contents, you ass!" emphasize on contents.

The edges of my lips rises to a curve behind the mask, noted by the crumpling corners of my eye—something she definitely caught wind of. I rest on the counter to ease the weight that is collapsing on my head and appease the oni and tengu that continues to party in my battered head, tracking the movements of Monika's portal to my reality—the small camera that was installed for her to see everything. Gathering my thoughts, I rise from the slumber and groans.

"Tell him about my current condition, the fever, and how it's impossible for me to work today—don't forget about using keigo, especially teineigo; that means you don't write it as if you're texting me. Clear?"

She pauses. "Alright, fine. Although...I can see that not even a fever can dull your sense of sarcasm, so I guess I worry over nothing."

"Don't worry, you'll have something to worry soon enough," I chuckle. "I guarantee it."

Monika sighs and shakes her head in exasperation, turning her focus on the task I've assigned in the spur of the moment. As she does, I waddle towards the corner of the room, across her desk and close
to the balcony where a bookshelf is set—in it, small trays of varying colors are lined from side to side along with a collection of books of different sizes and volumes; manga, naturally, is set at the top shelf. The medicine tray, purple in color, is found at the bottom next to its kin each with varying purposes (from spare screws, flashlights, batteries, to scrap paper). The contents of the purple tray is filled with choices of medicines and consumables to treat any kind of ailments that does not require intensive care—for everything else, it's a trip down to the local clinic or hospital.

Thankfully, such cases are rare.

With the medicine in hand, I made my way back to my throne—the seat that is positioned before Monika's abode. Even before she is within arm's reach, just by a glance at the word document that is opened on screen and just how…solemn she is tells me how serious she takes my selfish request; I feel guilty tossing her around with my twisted sense of humor already. I'm not known to be the wisest person in this side of the universe—there are far better candidates that well deserve her attention and love more than I do, especially for a girl of her caliber. Yet to have her pick me, of all people…it does kind of make you feel special, doesn't it?

"So, how's the letter?" I ask, drawing my seat and setting the medicine pouch to my left, along with a bottle of water. "I see you're doing pretty well in the writing department—you're learning pretty fast, too!"

"This is the only thing I have to work with in the first month—speech and pronunciation came a little later, remember?"

Watching how she type sure is…magical in its own way. I've seen her work the code before; once when we first met, and a couple on a number of separate occasions. How everything comes naturally for her…in short, she's typing with her eyes closed—literally. The words, the sentences, and all the nuances automatically inputs itself on the white canvas at her behest, sometimes vanishing and reappearing when she finds a better alternative or one that fits in with the flow—as expected from the enigmatic poet of the literature club. Though I can't say the same with her usage of kanji—it's still quite a mess—but I have to applaud her grasp on vocabulary and grammar; truly, it is a unique experience that is equally rewarding for me to watch as it is to teach.


She bridges her hands and assumes the pose, painting a solemn reflection strewn with questions and thoughts. A long 'hmmm' escapes from her pursed lips, and the line break in the word processor flashes for what seems to be minutes without an end, as if translating as an extension of the writer, equally lost in a sea of contemplation and meditation. I reach for the medicine in wait and break its packaging open, flushing it with warm water; the bitter aftertaste always seem to linger at the back of my throat. Finally, she answers.

"It's…honestly, quite difficult."

I raise an eyebrow, "Yet you still managed to learn and master most of it in such a short time span."

"I can agree on the 'learn' part, but master? Hardly...ahaha~!"

"Not to sound like Natsuki, but," she continues. "Japanese is such a fascinating language, and to know that I can be fluent in it—to communicate with you as if it's natural…it drives me to push myself even harder."

"To at least be able to do something for the person I love, for you, it's more than enough of a
motivation for me."

"It came into my mind a while ago," I interrupt. "But wouldn't it be easier for you to 'hijack' another language program to accomplish that goal? If communicating with me is your intention, that is; but then again, English is something I'm quite fluent in and—"

She shakes her head and silences me with nothing but a solemn smile. "It's not the same, Hx4weD. You, primarily as a linguist teacher, should have known better than that."

"I want more than just being able to communicate with you. I want to understand, to see it in its truest form—everything."

Crossing her arms, she sighs and smiles politely. "Hijacking a language or a voice synthesizer program may be an easier path, but at what cost? I may be able to communicate with you much faster, but some of the weight and nuances would be lost—and I wouldn't like myself if it comes to that, as much as our 'cultures' are different."

"You did hijacked a voice synthesizer program, though."

"How so?"

"You can speak."

She raises her finger in objection—well, more of retort—but retreats as fast as she does so. "Point taken, but you understand what I'm trying to convey, right?"

A chuckle escapes from behind the mask. I nod.

"It's not because I can't do that—it's because I won't. If I want to understand everything about you, your world, and your reality, what better option is there to start than to have a firm grasp of the language and culture? That is why I decide to learn it all by heart—just like what you did with coding and programming for me."

A blinding smile beams and I am unable to contain myself but to smile in return. To have this when I'm sick…you truly are a blessing, Monika!

"And that," she concludes, cheekily sliding the word processor into view—typed and structured, as I have come to expect. "—is Monika's acclaimed self-improvement tip of the day! Thanks for listening~! Ahahaha~!"

Her radiating smile, paired with her reason as to why, brings forth memories that had since been buried into the annals of my own; before everything began, back before she greeted me that one morning. True, the mod in question did achieved what many dreamt of after their experience in DDLC—it was a labor of love, after all—but it also tragically left a gaping hole at their hearts knowing full well that none of it exist; it was a bitter pill to swallow, even more so as the years go by and the project ended. I was too stubborn—too naive to simply take reality at face value and took it upon myself to keep her 'alive', and when that wasn't enough I wanted more; convincing Yuuya to took part in my escapade was surprisingly easy, which cut almost everything by ninety-percent with his skill and expertise—even more so when she came into being on her own. That is why I started upon myself in learning the code, but also why I stopped. I may know more than what Monika knew back in DDLC, but it was nothing compared to Yuuya.

Pretty selfish, when I think about it. Monika's drive and discipline is certainly commendable…I should step up my own game, so as not to disappoint her. Maybe picking up on programming and
coding again would be a good start.

Now…where was I? Right, the letter.

Breezing through each line, I start to dart my attention at each word, character, its usage, and its tone to ensure its legitimacy; company executives tends to be rigid, after all. At a glance, the letter she wrote was almost…poetic in how she manipulate each words and character—far better than what I could come up with, though by standards of formality and all its nuances, it is still amateurish. There were inherent mistakes strewn about, particularly the usage of kanji and some of the grammar—that was all over the place. At around the third paragraph, her structure somehow…crumbled…into what I would expect from common tourists to the point it's almost unintelligible gibberish before picking itself into one of the most well-written conclusion I've read—from its grammar, kanji, to the vocabulary, everything is spot-on. These inconsistencies…what's gotten into her? One line she's all well and good, the other a total mess, and the next is what I'd usually expect out of her—and the standard she usually reach.

…

Maybe I shouldn't distract her too much.

"B minus."

Her eyes perks up. "Is it really that bad…?"

"Grammar and kanji errors here and there, gibberish in the middle—I'm surprised you still have these problems, honestly. But, if it's not a 'C', then it's good."

"You're hard to please," she whips, crossing her arms and squinting her brows. "I was at least expecting an A minus; even an A, at least."

"Accomplishing this much within the time span of two months is a feat in itself—not to mention your fluency in verbal communication," I pause to sneeze. "I'll give that an A plus for effort—maybe a double-S if it made its way to the grading system."

"I'm still unsatisfied…come on, B minus…?"

You wrote a formal letter to someone in high power, with a secondary language, within a span of ten minutes! And that's something not to be proud of? As expected from an honor student; if it's less than a solid 'A' or higher, it's not good enough. Reminds me of my homeroom class representative…I'm sure they'll get along.

…and no, putting that pouty-face on me won't change how I grade things. What has been written, will stay written!

"You'll get better in time; writing is the most difficult aspect in linguistic. Good work, though!"

All that's left is to iron out all the issues, attach the necessary document for my replacement teacher, instructions, and everything should be good to go. I skim its contents one more time to make sure it is up to par, realizing the extent and measuring her overall capability. Sure, it's a mess in some of these parts, but these are still commendable; having someone like that in the work force is akin to finding a diamond in a coal mine. Some of the kinks are there, sure, but these can be straightened through experience and time—a resource that is still in abundance for someone of her age.

"I'll finish this up in a bit," I said to her with a squint; my glasses are off in its case, after all. "I have a test and handouts I've made that is supposed to be passed today, so could you look in my work folder
and find the two word document files? The files' name should be 'naiyou A' and 'B' with today's date on it."

"Is it a 'poem recital', by any chance?" she reply with a caustic smirk.

"Actually, it is. What, you think you can get back on me with that?" I chuckle. "Good try, but you have to aim much higher!"

"...I'll delete those then, and see how funny you find it."

I squint, leaning in for a sorry attempt of intimidation. "You wouldn't dare."

She smirks, putting up her most convincing 'eat shit'-grin to ever spawn. "Try me."

"Monika, NO."

"Monika, YES!"

No, she didn't delete them, of course—she did, however, gave me a solid heart attack for two minutes with her bluff until she recovered the files she stealthily transferred to her own secured folder. Cheeky girl...

"And that should do it," I said, coughing through the mask due to the itch in my lungs. "Just send this over to 'xxxxx.jp', and we can call it a day—use my work email, please."

Monika nods and twirls her left index finger and spawns the specific window as per-request. Everything seems second hand to her when she works the computer to her will, from copying the letter into the mail up towards attaching the files I've requested—all of it are completed in half the time that I could accomplish. I glance at the alarm clock nearby and quickly note how everything—since the moment I wake up—took us only thirty minutes to tick all the boxes in the checklist; that's half an hour less than my morning routine.

If I'm in good health, I'll be drinking my coffee at the counter right about now, suited up and ready. My head starts to ache, but my stomach growls; I want breakfast.

"I should fix myself something to eat..."

"You shouldn't move too much!" She reasons, quickly jumping out of her seat. "If you're ill, the best course of action is to rest!"

"Well then, can you cook something for me?" I reply sarcastically.

"Yes! I can try to make you a porridge or maybe soup with—"

"—and how are you going to transfer it between two realities?"

Thus the penny drops and just like that, Monika retreats back to her position; dejection convolutes her expression. "I...I'm sorry, I'm just...worried about you."

"I know you are," I reply, coughing. "But with how the world works, there's really nothing much you can do."

Don't get me wrong, I would love for her to nurse me back to health—it has a charm of its own, if I
do say so. Picture me all wrapped up in a futon, a bag of ice rests on my forehead and a fever that persistently cooks my flesh, figuratively. Then there she comes, like a goddess descending with a blessing of warm porridge and a smile that cause my heart to go thermo-nuclear, cheerfully volunteering to spoon-feed the handmade, wholesome goodness—not to forget to cool the piping heat by blowing on the apparatus before consumption; a fateful romance, akin to how L^wrence took care of H#lo during her fever in 'Sp*ce and W$/lf'…one can dream.

Of course, the gods are known to be sadists and finds more pleasure in watching us struggle from two separate realities.

Now, where was I…? Right, breakfast.

Cooking a porridge isn't difficult; it's not rocket science. I prep the rice cooker and shovel in the usual one and a half cup of serving into the bowl, adding water just enough for the machine to transform the grains into gruel—if that fails and I'm left with a soupy-rice concoction, at least I can still add some tea powder and dashi to make chazuke. A stroke of brilliance, Oogame; I hope it doesn't end that way though. Now, for the toppings…

I waddle around towards the fridge, carefully balancing my weight so as not to stumble and collide with the corners of the counter as I reach for the handle of the cold box—much to Monika's dread and distress that echoes from the computer. Opening the door, a rush of cold air washes over me along with a tang of disappointment; aside from the half-empty packet of beer, there's nothing but a packet of takana, some eggs, and three packs of natto—no wait, there's a slab of processed bacon and jarred kimchi as well.

"Is everything ok?" she calls out. "Please, stop moving so much! I feel uneasy just watching you like this!"

"Don't worry, everything is under control." I reply with a cough, reaching for the kimchi, takana, and an egg—I can't bring myself to have bacon in front of her. "There is nothing to be concerned about, I've done this hundreds of times!"

That's an overstatement. Last time I had a fever, it was during one of Yuuya's visit—yes, I had help. She sighs, heavy in tone. "If you feel that way…"

With how long it will take for the rice to complete, I teeter back to her seat with all the toppings cradled in my arm, resting them on the desk to the left of the laptop along while the egg and the skipjack tuna soy sauce I love—much to her chagrin. She eyes the mess of the collection, glancing at my sorry look for a brief second and returning yet again, as if confirming what my intentions are and affirming—what I believe—to be her own suspicion and judgment. She sighs, pursing her lips and letting the curtains fall over her glistening emeralds before rejuvenating with a stern expression.

"…can you actually cook a proper meal?"

"Not in this condition, no," I shrug in defeat. "And rice is a proper meal, even on its own."

A sigh laden with concern escapes her, "I hate this…restriction. I would love to cook you a decent meal—even more so in this moment."

"Spawning food out of thin air or fixing a salad is not cooking, Mo-chii…" I chuckle. She, however, isn't in the mood for a laugh.

"I'm serious, X24h3E=. The initial game and the script may not elaborate on it, and although I may not be as talented as Natsuki, I do know how to fix a decent meal—vegetarian or otherwise."
"That's something I learn every day..."

She shakes her head, "But that's why it's so tragic... no matter how loud I scream, how long I cry, or how hard I hit the 'wall', there is nothing I can do to influence your reality."

"In the end," she sighs, stirring the atmosphere of our conversation. "Only your decisions and actions have the final say in both of our realities. I wish I could do more for you, Dh25Gf==. I really do..."

I didn't notice how deep in thought she is until I glance at her captivating green jewels, a look that is stern yet humble in its judgment. Just by the way how my reflection reflects in her pair of emeralds, one could not mistake the clear expression of guilt, concern, and melancholy that consumes her thoughts, itching to escape the confines of her prison—yet it is by her own judgment that she believes it is best to keep it so. I scratch my head, struggling to capture the illusive message that is concealed between her troubled features before, by her own accord, Monika opens the gate and allows the flood of emotion to stream through.

"...which brings me to this discussion. Do you still have the 'photo'? The one I took during our first date? Did you delete it?"

An urge seeps through the crevices of my thoughts to speak of falsehood, to distance her from the truth that I—indeed—have not deleted the photo, nor has it been within my consideration. Yet doing so, to once again lie before her, would be a disservice to the struggles we faced to reach this point in time. I may have been good at running or hiding from problems, true, but in doing so it only delays the inevitability and only extends our suffering. I swallow a ball of spit and let my voice carry my answer.

"No, I haven't..." I reply from behind the mask. The ticking clock plays a symphony of malaise in the stillness that lasted like eternity. The sky outside our domain darkens and roars.

Yet behind the ominous backdrop thickened by the atmosphere, her smile shines like silver linings amongst the clouds.

"I knew you wouldn't," she said, beaming with relief and concern. "And I can say I'm not surprised, either."

"Thank you for being honest with me, Gh7xc=. It takes a great amount of courage to say what you said."

My eyebrow perks up, "What do you mean?"

"I...I've been...thinking back a little, ahaha..." she starts. "About your situation and our... promise."

I slink down deeper into my seat, nodding. That...'promise', she meant.

"YH3sd=, it's not because I wish to restrict or prevent you from standing up for your own, but..."

"I'm worried... about what you're going to do," she continues. "Because I've seen enough to know how reckless you can be."

A sudden weight descends upon my shoulder, throwing me into a loop from the curveball she throws over my way. I let out a cough—dry and raspy—and snuggles into the neck of my garments to seek comfort and hide my embarrassment; calmly, she sighs and solemnly reflects on her next choice of words, easing us into the conversation. The sky roars once more and a shower starts.

"UxH235, are you familiar with the ripple effect? How one seemingly small, otherwise insignificant
event could cascade into something greater?"

I nod as Monika strikes her finger upwards—a signature pose from her days in the club. "For example, a drop of water in the middle of a still pond creates a 'ripple' which, in turn, creates a wave that affects its surroundings."

"For every action, there is a consequence," with a solemn expression that is laden with guilt, she crosses her arms and continues. I am left speechless. "I am no exception; what I did in the literature club…the nightmare I imposed on my friends…how horrible of a person I can be. I would have been fine if you never responded; to spend an eternity in the void, alone…it would be a fitting punishment and yet..."

Her words choke, "…yet you still accept me as I am; a monster who willingly deletes her friends and impose unspeakable horror…ironic, isn't it?"

"Mo-chii…” I quickly chime, "It isn't your fault. The game and the script forced your hand—there's nothing much you can do. Even if you did, you realized your mistake—and I forgive you for that."

"Even so, I was the one who made the choice; I made the decision! The same way you did when you…"

She pauses. Her voice starts to crack as her eyes welled with tears. "…the same way when you deleted me. You won't understand the things I've gone through—you wouldn't. The things I have to live with, the realization, the guilt—everything…"

It's as if my lips are screwed shut and my hands tied, nothing I say or do could even graze or even comprehend the remorse that has consumed her from these old wounds that reeks of decay. I decide to remain in silence, resting my hand on the screen and listening to the quiet sob of a lonely young woman whom I simply cannot neglect. Still, she waves her hand dismissively, rubbing her moistened eyes with her palm and quietly whispering 'I am ok', as if trying to ease me off from the concern that carves into my chest. With a profound sigh, she regains her stature as best as she can and plants her battered pair of emeralds at me. The rain continues to pour.

"Which…brings me to this point, Axd23FD=. My action affected the members of the literature club—Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki, the avatar, and you; that's five in total, four of which aren't…real."

She sighs. "But I can't say the same about your reality."

"The implications, consequences…what you do could affect not just 'Kitamura-san', possibly more."

"I couldn't bear the thought, Uh43sD," she choked. "I couldn't…to see you go through the pain like I did…it's…"

And then I realize…I realize about what it is she's trying to convey, the implications, and the reason why she made me promise. With a bite on her lower lip and her arms cradling one another, Monika struggles to maintain what composure is left as she wades the continuous assault of emotions that pours relentlessly. I understand full well of her concern, the thought of watching me fumble through the dark without a torch but brute force and ignorance, aimlessly looking for an exit, must have been difficult to watch. With a whimper, she apologizes as the stream flows gently down her cheeks and cause me to reach out to dry, only to be met with frustration, anger, and helplessness that came from the wall that divides us. You're wrong, Monika; even if I am able to influence the outcome of your world through the use of coding and scripts, my actions—ones that do matter—can never create a ripple within your reality. But that doesn't mean it is impossible; it is through our words and whispers do we create that wave that gently washes over us. Our only means of touch.
"It's okay, I understand." I said with a whisper. Never before has the desire to embrace and gently stroke her hair rears itself as much as this time. "Don't force yourself if it's too difficult to say."

A brief pause settles, accompanied by the gentle echo of the rain and her soft whimper. My attention is focused solely on the young girl before me, silently crying her pain away from the guilt and horrors that continues to haunt her—one that I've imposed upon her fragile state. The gears in my cognition starts to move, hard at work to find a viable… peaceful solution that would satisfy both parties while minimizing possible damages—a decision I made subconsciously for not only my sake, but for hers. The accompanying repertoire of raindrops helps eases both of our thoughts and allow us to connect within our personal space, between two realities.

"I…have thought up of the possibilities, Monika. Would you like to hear them?"

Although it is less of a 'solution' as she hoped to be, if she can find another exit…then I'll certainly take that from what options I have.

There is a reason why most criminal acts in Japan are not reported, and it becomes apparent after the first few are examined in detail that reflects a grim conclusion; the problem stems, naturally, from the rigid customs and function of society as a whole—the concept of 'meiwaku' and 'wagamama' as well as its importance within this overcrowded, group-centered, harmony-obsessed culture of mine. Reporting to the headmaster would be a viable solution if I am in good terms with him; frankly, with how my salary still hangs in question, this is out of the question—even worse, the photo alone that is supposed to be the concrete 'proof' can be categorized as a breach in privacy and a crime in its own. Meiwaku. Confronting Shiho may backfire and incite Kitamura-senpai—Mikawa would especially be dragged into the line of fire; discussing the issue with the literature club would meant tossing them into the frying pan as well. Meiwaku. Reporting the issue to the police would work abroad, but less likely so here; involving the law would only pressure the school and damage its name, leading towards the offset of having both Kitamura and myself fired, and Shiho expelled. A 'bad ending', to say the least. Meiwaku.

Which leave the only solution to be that of personal confrontation. Risky, sure, but it may be the course of action to mitigate the damage and keep the issue centered between senpai and I; Shiho and Mikawa are spared, and neither the school or the police are involved, leaving the drama to a minimum and maintaining overall group harmony. This is the only viable course of action.

"What about asking another teacher to investigate together?"

"I'm not exactly in positive terms with the other faculties," I retort, sniffling. "Dragging them into the conflict is the last thing I need from an already-negative reputation. I might as well find a new job if it comes to that…"

"Don't say that…"

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Then," she continues. "How about telling Shiho's parents and—"

"Unless Shiho tells them personally—which I doubt—it would be seen as pitting the school and her parents for my own vendetta; this is an issue between senpai and me, I can't involve anyone else into this—not after you, Mikawa, and Shiho."

"So…there really is no other…solution?" Monika asks, her voice slightly trembling. With nothing left to offer, I slink down into my seat and shake my head in defeat.
"No…I'm sorry, Monika. But that's just how it is; there is nothing I can do about it."

Quietly I observe from the corner of my eyes as she grasp her arm tightly, squeezing them to the point where red marks starts to show from the pressure. She always tries to maintain her composure, strength, and confidence even in the most dire of times; I admire that trait of hers. When she eases her grip, there is a solemn surrender and serenity that dominates her expression as her emeralds softly finds its way to my deep brown marbles. Her voice, meek but confident.

"Then if worse comes to worse, allow me to carry the burden with you," I raise my hand in objection, yet no words escapes me. Speechless. "This is my selfish request."

Wagamama, is it?

"Then what are you going to do about it?" I ask, coughing. "How do you propose?"

A solemn, gentle curve distorts the edges of her lips. "Take heart that I did not take any actions to stop or try to dissuade you; that I am also responsible for letting you run amok with your recklessness."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes," she reply with a nod. "I will always stay by your side."

A smile gradually rises and I sigh. "Then allow me to carry yours too, Monika."

She slightly convalesces, the gloss over her pair of emeralds glistens from the reflection of the screen.

"When you went on a rampage in the game, I didn't try to stop you either—even after figuring out everything and have a grasp of the script and the code, I didn't attempt—or even consider—to go back and prevent the events to take its course."

"But you can't…!" she quickly retorts. "You can't change anything because in the game, you're only a—"

"—a spectator?" I cut. Monika slowly retreats in silence as realization creeps in. "And how are you different this time around?"

I sigh. "As much as I was a spectator then, so are you against the on-goings of my reality—call it a 'perspective switch', if you like. If you feel guilty as a spectator, then so should I for my inaction in the past."

"Monika, you don't have to suffer alone anymore," I continue, solemnly sinking down on my chair. "Sometimes, there are moments in our lives where we will be powerless to take action—and if you feel guilty about it, then I feel the same way as you do; we are both accountable, both in the past and now."

I pause and clear my throat.

"Difference is, we now have each other. So, fair point?"

Monika frowns, upset, but otherwise accepts the judgment I've bestowed. Slowly she raise her curtains to meet me eye to eye, humbled.

"You're one tough bargain," she starts. "But that's also why I've fallen so much for you."
"All in a day's work—sick or otherwise." I chuckle, coughing. My stomach growls; the rice sure takes its time. "So, we have a deal?"

"Pinky promise?"

She places her pinky finger on her end of our reality, garnering a smile of amusement from me that—nonetheless—I am very happy to oblige. "Pinky promise."

~PI—PI—

Just as we conclude, the rice cooker beeps its inviting melody while the rain turns into a downpour. With a smile and a nod, I slug my way to the counter and fetch a bowl and a pair of chopsticks before glancing at her, materializing her own breakfast menu that is identical to mine—a bowl of rice, a raw egg, soy sauce, takana, and kimchi. Her look of delight towards the simple dish and the moment when she cracks the egg on top of the rice to mix with soy sauce is…how I should say, *adorable* as it is childish and innocent. Opening the top of the cooker, the aromatic waft of my meal tickles my appetite and put me into a realization; I may need something bigger than a rice bowl—maybe a *soup* bowl would be a better choice.

Now…where did I put that tea powder and dashi?

---

There is always a strange sensation that hovers the moment you close your eyes. You feel light, fleeting in a world of uncertainty that warps and transforms; a place where the laws of physics and time doesn't exist, where every movements is as random as the space itself. Bliss seems to swallow you whole after the first minute or two, transporting you to a realm where words are churned into jumbled messes and the sun cowers behind layers upon layers of clouds and infinite darkness. You kick a ball that suddenly appear out of thin air and it floats into the abyss as sparks of neon lights and rainbows flashes erratically before you; disorienting, confusing, *mesmerizing*. Then, there is an echo…a sound that is both familiar and yet…alien at the same time. A voice? It's calling for me, over and over…

…

There it is again; the echo. But wait…that's not all. Someone's calling…who…?

*Aghast*! A blinding light, cover your eyes! Turn, and now…*open them.*

~PIN-PON

…

Ah, the doorbell; there's the 'echo'.

You really start to appreciate a good sleep once you've fallen ill. A throbbing pain reverberates like a woodpecker within my skull and my ears are ringing ever so slightly; I feel as if D1o came for a visit and dropped a road roller on top of me. The lights in the room is lit—and I'm guessing *that* was the 'blinding light' earlier, though I swore I had it murdered before I slept earlier; though, giving it some thought it's not difficult to figure out who the perpetrator of 'who woke the turtle from his slumber'-scenario. In this room, there's only *two* people—one of them is ill and was out cold. *Was*. That leaves the suspect to be none other than…

"Are you up?"

"No, I'm dead…or at least I think I am." I reply to the 'voice'. Mystery solved. "Curse this
headache...

She playfully giggles, "If you can spat like that, then I guess you're up! Ahahaha~!"

"Sure...go ahead and bully the sick," I said with a cough and chuckle. "What time is it anyway? How long was I out?"

"It's four in the afternoon. You've been resting for almost nine hours; are you feeling well?"

Groggily, I feel the back of my head and depress the back of my hand on my forehead. It's not burning, at least not as bad as this morning—that's good. "A bit better, I suppose."

~PIN-PON

"Oh, right! I'm sorry to wake you up H42sFg, but there seems to be a group of students at the door."

Students...? Wait, before that...

"You have access to the intercom camera too?"

"If its wireless, then I can tap into it," She replies with a tone and look that, in summary, easily puts me to shame. "But that's not the point! You can't delay Ux3FgH=, they're waiting outside!"

Gradually crawling out of the futon, I force my ailing cognitive systems to return to function with a rub on the eye and a glass of—regrettably—lukewarm water. Outside, the weather pours relentlessly. Checking on my temperature with the back of my hand, a sense of relief washes over; looks like I'll be back on my feet for tomorrow. Still, there's a pressing issue at hand; there are guests to attend and I'm in no shape or form to present myself. Embarrassing...but what can I do, really? I glance at Monika who, at each passing second, grew restless at my pace of recovery as well as the increasing volume of chatter outside which...admittedly, they sound pretty familiar...

I drag myself to the other end of the communication device that is stuck in the wall and pick up the phone; the small screen brightens, revealing the world outside of this domain.

"Oogame residence, can I help you?"

"Sensei, good afternoon!"

And I couldn't be more delighted as I am surprised.

"Mikawa—wait, the entire literature club?"

I glance at Monika who—judging by the camera work—is as amused as I am at the coming of events. From the small screen, Mikawa smiles brilliantly surrounded by members of the literature club—Aki, Yuuki, Satsuki, and Obase, each carrying their school bags and a plastic bag that bears the marking of a chain supermarket. She, the club leader, proudly stands amongst the rest garbed in a cute white camisole dress with pink cardigan, carrying what I can only assume to be a nabe pot and a portable stove judging from the contents of her plastic bag. Their smiles and laughter beams radiantly from behind the screen, waiting for their supervisor to welcome them into the domain.

...come to think of it, this is the first time I have someone other than Yuuya making house calls—from my students, no less!

"Isn't it still club-time right about now?" I ask with a chuckle; Monika seems unable to contain her excitement as well. "It's still four, so why are you guys skipping club activities...?"
Mikawa takes a step closer, "Since our supervisor is absent, we decide to move the club to the supervisor for today!"

"It's Mikawa-senpai's idea!" Satsuki cries with sheer optimism and cheer. "She said the literature club is not complete without you, sensei! And since you're unwell, what better things to do than to have a nabe party!"

"I helped with the organization," Aki chimes. "While Yuuki and Obase decided on the menu and the shopping."

Amused, I decide to lead on with the conversation, starting with the…obvious one. "What does Satsuki do?"

Yuuki shoves his way to the front, "She'll be the trash can with two legs."

"Hey, that's mean!" Satsuki retorts. "If any, Aki-senpai eats more than—"

"—that is no way to talk to your senpai, stupid." Yuuki jokingly 'hits' Satsuki in the head. "Apologize!"

The motley crew laughs in unison. That never gets old.

"So, I know it's a bit late to ask for permission, ahaha…" Mikawa said as she returns to center stage. "But…we kinda' went ahead with it, so…is it alright for us to disturb you, sensei?"

Though they are unable to see the wide grin I currently possess from the outside, it's difficult not to applaud their efforts; those students of mine really put all their hearts out to see this through—in this weather, no less. Sometimes I wonder how much influence I have with the students; there's plenty of talk of how I am their 'top favorite' from the faculties, sure, but it's usually up in the air unless proven otherwise. To find a pleasant surprise like this—especially during sick days—is reassuring as it is heart-warming. I turn towards Monika who, judging from how wide her curve is from cheek to cheek, is as pleased and excited as I am towards the prospect—this is, after all, her first time meeting someone else aside from Yuuya.

"You really do have a magnificent literature club. I'm jealous~."

I shrug playfully and let a smile carves its way through the face mask, "You're the inspiration, Mochii. I wouldn't even consider one if I have never met you."

"I'll give your club a 'B',' she replies with a girlish giggle. "It's lacking a crucial member for a perfect score; someone who is madly in love with you."

"Does she go by the name 'Monika', by any chance?"

"Maybe! Ahahaha~!"

"So," she continues. "Shall I…do the 'usual'?"

…

Here we are at an impasse, between my own pride and conscience. A part of me wants to scream, to declare to the world of my love without restraint or embarrassment regardless of what scrutiny may fall—and yet the other half refuses, dominated by a mix of fear and rationality drilled to us by a society that controls. My mind races to find a compromise, a middle ground that allows her to be recognized—or at least, become an honorary member of Mikawa's literature club just as I am its
supervisor.

"Maybe this time around you should—"

But I am cut short by Monika herself, who shakes her head in disapproval with an earnest smile that encompasses her grasp on the issue. "No, TxeW2, I shouldn't."

"But these are my—"

"I know~, ahaha..." she replies, softly sighing. A sad laughter echoes. "That makes it even more so."

"Rx43F=, as much as you believe that I am real, remember that—according to your reality—I'm just a... fictional character meant to appease the desire of many."

"I wasn't even meant to fall for you or you for me, but look at where we are now. Let alone a human, I wouldn't be qualified as a person," she continues. "Just a mere codified entity..."

I sigh. "Please don't say that..."

"I'm sorry, ahaha..." Monika replies with remorse, combing her bangs to the side. "But best not to keep them waiting. I'll lay low for now; maybe one day when the world is more accepting of me, then I'll happily introduce myself to your cute students!"

With a smile, Monika voluntarily minimizes the screen and opens a word document—one of my own on-going work for my class—as a façade. Besides the display, only her camera and microphone is left to function—at least that, in a way, is a small compromise we can work with. Honestly, it pains me to see how... constrained we are, difference of reality be damned. She may be trapped in a codified reality, yet that alone grants her the freedom to act as she damn well pleases and as far as her reach permits; I, on the other hand, am free in a world that breathes but shackled by the standards and expectations set by society. Un-ironically, we are one of the same—living through an oxymoronic existence, following sets of rules that we have little to no control over.

Well, best not to keep them waiting—not with the constant downpour, especially.

I turn the knob keys and gently, I open the door...

"All of you know that I am sick, right?"

"Yes, sensei!" Mikawa responds with glee. "I...hope you don't mind?"

I reach for the back of my head, scratching a few times and glancing at the backdrop and the chipper expressions of the literature club; no way am I turning them down. I cough, clearing my throat before completely pushing the door to its hinges and welcomes the motley crew of amateur writers, poets, and critics into my domain. In line and order, they march in with laughter and smiles—the foundation of Mikawa's literature club.

"Pardon for the intrusion!"

Their loafers, leathery and caked with moisture, all lined up in uniform from side to side alongside Mikawa's chocolate-colored rain boots. Their umbrellas, as colorful as each of their personality, are left in the corner of the entrance huddled around my plain white to dry while they spend their afternoon within this domain. Together, as a club; a family. The rest of the members quickly make their way to the living room, not to forget to set down the ingredients they bought at the kitchen counter—a wave of relief laces around me, thanking my practice of maintaining personal hygiene
and cleanliness in the apartment; otherwise, my sorry presentation would be the last thing I'll have to worry about.

"Sorry to bother you like this, sensei…!" Mikawa said with a smile, "Maybe it's selfish of us to decide without your consent, especially when you're sick but—"

"Don't worry, Mikawa," I reply, waving my hand slightly dismissively. "Even if it is a 'spur-of-the-moment', I'm quite impressed by how well you and Aki organized all this."

She giggles in amusement, "Could it be, are you maybe a little lonely…?"

"Perhaps." Though that isn't strictly true. "I don't get visitors when I'm ill, so something like this is a welcome change."

I cough, making our way into the living room where the others are busy preparing the ingredients for the nabe. "Still, I'm surprised you know my address."

Mikawa returns a playful giggle as she sets her pot and the portable stove. "The school is pretty helpful in that regard, sensei."

"Huh, I see…"

I never knew how callous the school can be in sharing personal information—like addresses, for example; though, I guess there are exceptions with the case once in a while.

…come to think of it, this isn't that bad to be honest.

It's been a while since I've seen something like this—a nabe party, I mean. Last one I had was two years ago in a mandatory company party; as memorable as it was, it lacked the heart and soul of what a nabe party should be, even more so considering how relatively pricey the avenue was. It was all alcohol, a few speeches by headmaster Murayama, and the trainee being made to sit down and nod their heads in agreement like a drinking bird toy—except we really were 'drinking', in a sense. Kitamura-senpai was also there at that time. It's amazing how alcohol easily loosen his lips, though I can't say I don't feel remorse concerning his wife and kids; his rather vulgar and descriptive word choice left a bitter taste in my mind—not to mention, the more recent 'discoveries'. Sheesh…

Anyway, enough brooding.

"Sensei, do you have a small table of sorts that we can use?" Obase asks. Surprisingly, he's rather polite with his word choice this time around. "A nabe party isn't complete unless we huddle around together."

A small table, huh. I point towards the closet. "There's kotatsu in there, it's a little early but—actually, let me—"

"You're still a little unwell, sensei! Let me get it." Yuuki interrupts, sliding between the counter and I. "We'll take care of this and—"

I raise my hand and wags my index finger, chuckling. "You're my guests. Even in this condition, at least let me be a proper host."

"Aah…o-ok!" he quickly replies. "Satsuki, you help too!"

Setting up the kotatsu along with the nabe party brings back memories of my high school—particularly the months leading to graduation. There was Yuuya, Mayu, Seiya, Chiaki, and myself,
all huddled around in a kotatsu before Christmas with a pot of \textit{yaminabe}. We gathered around to laugh, smile, and enjoy the last few days as high school students and wished each one of us the best for our future with a promise to remain in touch; it's a pity, I only maintained contact with Yuuya—and even that was severed recently. But back then, we were pretty lively and in high spirits, totting around with our rose-tinted glasses, coated with a double-layer of optimism—but that's exactly why it was so memorable. Nabe is special; it was more of the spirit of unity and togetherness, the atmosphere that bundles everyone into a ball filled with joy and company—after all, if it is the taste to begin with, then having chocolate and oranges dumped into the pot by Yuuya is \textit{perfectly} fine and delicious. News flash, it's not; we did had a great laugh though.

I glance at the computer screen longingly, wondering about her thoughts on the club members. Can you see all of this, Monika? \textbf{This} is the literature club I supervise, its members are as colorful as their quirky personalities and untamable passion both in life and in the arts—molded into being \textit{because} of your influence. The little camera continues to observe and tracks the actions of some of its members silently as they talk, laugh, and organize the nabe party at my behest. One day, I would love to spend a cold or rainy day such as this over a bowl of nabe with Monika, watching over our two little turtles running around and making a mess of themselves before being told to sit down for a meal.

\ldots

Too far ahead, Oogame; \textit{way} too far. Before that could even happen, she has to cross over first—or vice versa.

"Sensei, can you help me set this pot on the stove?" Mikawa calls, quickly catching my attention. "Please? It's pretty heavy…"

"Sure, let me have it." I take the object off of her hands. "By the way, how come you're the only one in casuals?"

"She went home earlier, sensei," Aki chimes. "When we decided for a nabe party, she went through the trouble of getting her own ceramic pot and portable stove—just in case! Right, Aya-chan?"

Her hunch was right though; I \textit{don't} have those with me. I glance at my club leader who, aside from being out of uniform, is looking pretty stunning with her casual clothes—the scent of flowers does help accentuates it even further. Lilac, I assume. "And I'm guessing you took the liberty to shower and change as well?"

She nods bashfully.

"As expected of the club leader," I chuckle, impressed by her thought process. "Always ahead of things; it will certainly help you in the future to maintain that state."

Playfully I clap my hands which, like a que, makes way for the other members to do the same. She shrinks further, giggling with a mix of gratitude and humility that she has been known for after being recognized for her 'behind-the-scenes' actions—and she's quite the \textit{master} of this. The organization of my homeroom's festival \textit{alone} wouldn't reach its current level of organization and accomplishment without her, cleverly moving the pieces together like a game of chess. Stealing a glance at Monika, the ball camera rotates and focuses on the humbled club president ever intently, as if she too recognizes her achievements; I would die to see a day where she could fraternize together with Mikawa—like sisters, perhaps. Naturally, these are figments of imagination and wishful thinking.

After a few passing minutes, Obase, Yuuki, and Satsuki joins us to the table bearing diced ingredients, stock, and beverages of juices and bottled tea—alcohol is prohibited for them, after all; they might not hear the end of me if they even \textit{considered}. 
"We're doing regular nabe, right? Not yaminabe?" Obase asks as he sets the ingredients down and pour the stock in the pot. "Just trying to get the picture straight."

A light, playful giggle draws our attention to Aki. "If we are, I can't begin imagining what Satsuki may bring…"

"Hey!"

"I see," Yuuki smiles cunningly, "I'm glad someone here appreciates my taste in humor."

"Just a little payback," Aki replies with a smile that oozes maturity as it is deceptive. "What are we senpais supposed to do to our beloved kouhai than shower them with affection?"

Satsuki pouts and presses the end of her index fingers together, "Not abusing them is one thing…"

"You're an exception." Yuuki quickly chimes as the 'tsukkomi' of the literature club's manzai-duo. Like a flare in the night, the routine acts as a signal that starts the club, along with Mikawa's strong, confident, rally—something I believe Monika would see great interest in.

"Okay, everyone! Let's be seated and get everything started!"

There's a lot to be said about an individual during moments like this; the little snippets of life that creates a fresco of a person who is now sharing a bowl of simmered, assorted produce over a glass of juice. At each bite of the savory meat dumplings or a slurp of the clear, delectable broth, a conversation is to be had be it of compliments or other frivolous things that chanced upon the mind. I never knew, for example, how Obase's talent lies not in the art of literature or the academia, but in the field of culinary due to his father being that of a prominent chef over in Osaka. Moreover, Satsuki's deep interest towards historical fiction and romance certainly is one of the many inspiration that keeps her writing her web novel, assisted and edited none other by Yuuki—compensated, of course. There are so many things I know, yet there are even more tucked in obscurity to discover. Such is the purpose of social gatherings and events.

Listening to the conversation, however, I can't help how…lonely Monika might feel at this moment. To simply observe despite sharing similar interests, all because of the difference of our perceived reality…it's torturous just to think about it.

"—so onto the next thing," Satsuki cheers with delight, still holding her portion with her left. "Sensei, I've been curious for a while—and I assume everyone else is..."

The members all nod in unison as their attention quickly switch from each other, to me.

"Which one of us is your favorite?"

I give a chuckle in return. Kids and their question these days. "Satsuki, you do know you're asking your teacher about favoritism, right?"

She nods excitedly—and I'm guessing the rest of the members are as dying to know as she is; not even Mikawa or Yuuki tries to stop her shenanigan this time. Well, there is no avoiding it, is there? Everyone's in the mood for it, after all.

"Well, Mikawa..." in a cinch, her eyes perks up and glistens with delight and excitement. "…is brilliant with her poem and have exceptional leadership skills."

"So is she your favorite, sensei?"
The members echoes in 'oohs' and 'aahs' at Satsuki's bold question, giggling and chuckling in complete unison as Mikawa's cheeks burns bright red from ear to ear. I wave my finger dismissively—after all, I'm not quite finished. "Hold up, I'm not done."

"Now, Aki on the other hand…," their voices falls into disappointment, along with a sigh from Mikawa as the pressure is lifted off of her shoulders. "Her writing is deep and profound, reflecting a wisdom that surpasses her age."

"I guess that makes her the favorite, is it sensei?"

Almost cohesively the others nods in consensus as Aki slowly retreats in silence with the sudden surge of attention that overwhelms her calm and collective demeanor, no less thanks to Yuuki's quick snide. Again, I wave my finger dismissively. "Patience, young ones. I'm not finished."

"Then there is Satsuki…" I continue, causing the instigator to recoil with a 'wait a minute' that slips clumsily, much to Yuuki's amusement. "I've proof read your work before. So far, I haven't seen anyone else within the club who could write a story as vivid—a world that is as believable as it is descriptive."

"That's not something to be proud about."

I chuckle, slightly coughing. "You'd be surprised, Yuuki."

"So…" Obase cuts in. "I'm guessing you like all of us? No offense, but if you start describing 'us' then I can't help but feel awkward."

"That's very correct, Obase," I nod before savoring on the meat dumpling from my bowl. "You're surprisingly assertive and meticulous towards the things that goes on around you—I can't give the same praise about your attitude, though."

"I get that a lot," he replies, chuckling. "But thanks, sensei."

"And Yuuki," I address, instantly putting him at attention. "You're a critic, but that's because 'honesty' is a virtue that you hold dear, is it not?"

For once, Yuuki laughs sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. "Oh, ok…haha…thank you, sensei."

Briefly I steal a glance towards Monika, the sixth honorary member of this literature club—the inspiration and the reason why I decide to support it in the first place. I know you didn't ask of me to introduce them, but if I can have just one more selfish act for you, then let this be the one. Can you see them, Monika? These are the members of my literature club, an amalgamation of characters and quirks that made up an entity that is no less viable than those that exist in your end of reality. It may be a while—even a decade—until you can finally be a part of mine, but until that time I wish for you to take heart to know that you are a part of this club not as a spectator, but as an honorary member.

I sigh with great relief, along with the weight that constricts my shoulder. "So yes, those are my 'favorites'—if that's what you would like."

"Sensei, you're no fun…!" Satsuki pouts. "Oh! Maybe you can tell us what your type is and—"

A quick 'smack' from Yuuki's arm quickly silences Satsuki's second attempt of prying, spiraling the club into a familiar situation between the duo. I chuckle silently behind the mask, "Pony tails."

The air freezes, all eyes focuses on me glistening with questions and surprise. "I like deep, green,
emerald eyes and pony tails."

"SO YOU DO HAVE A PREFERENCE!" Yuuki jumps in. "And here I thought you only have eyes for fictional characters!"

Oh, ouch...though it's pretty spot on...

"Isn't it rude to talk to your teachers like that, Yuuki?"

"It is, but it's hard to see you just as a teacher! You're like a friend, sensei!"

Over a pot of nabe, the conversation and 'club activity' continues on the rhythm of our satisfied stomachs and appetite, guided by light hearted discussion, talks, and anything of life—its vices, love, and nature. Despite in uniform, there exist a far greater sense of liberty outside of the walls of the institution that governs the rules and laws of the club; as if all its restrictions and limits were raised like curtains, revealing a blinding illumination of optimism that cascades over the harsh reality of life. As the conversation trails, I glance at Monika and her infallible focus at us, observing like an eagle with keen interest yet as quiet as a mouse—loneliness seeps under my skin as I imagine how disjointed our realities are; so close, yet still so distant.

"Sensei," Mikawa starts. "You're looking...pale."

It doesn't take me long either to be reminded of my fever that—though has substantially died down—is still very much alive.

"It's just the fever kicking back. Don't worry, it should be all better tomorrow. Aside from that..."

I glance at the clock and notice the short arm landing on the number 'six', "I appreciate all of your visit, but it's quite late. Let's start cleaning and—"

"Oh, please leave that to us, sensei," Aki chimes. "After all, it was our decision to disturb you."

Yuuki nods in agreement, followed closely by the spirited cheer of Satsuki. "Don't worry, sensei! We'll return everything back in order—you can be sure of that!"

"And besides," adds the club leader, smiling earnestly as the voice that ties the opinions of all its members. "I have to bring both the pot and the stove back. Just rest, sensei. You can rely on us."

"You sure you don't need my help? I mean, all of you are guests in my apartment, and for the host to retire without—"

"No, no! It's perfectly alright," Mikawa interrupts, quickly stopping me from taking another step. "It's the least we can do to show our thanks—besides, we did disturbed you."

Yes, it's inappropriate for the host to retire regardless of the situation—health or otherwise. Yes, I understand that this means I'm neglecting my duty as a supervisor for the club—as well as their guardian, in some respect. However, they are quite adamant on their stand towards the circumstance and thus, club activity ends after supper and I retire to the comfort of my futon as the members keep to their word. The rhythm of the rain has died and in its place, a soft melody of an evening shower guides me to my slumber.

I stand amongst no one, alone in a vast and empty void that stretches as far as the eye can see. The ground, a blank canvas of nothingness that extends as far as the eyes can see, oddly keeps me balanced against the vertigo that dominates the space to which I exist as an entity, in a world that
breaks and molds at its whim. A fleeting sensation guides my step forward towards nowhere, yet everywhere to a destination that still remains unclear and uncertain. Then, there are voices—whispers of talk that are as incomprehensible as it is loud, beckoning for my existence from nowhere yet everywhere, tugging me towards the expansive void before dissipating like the wind unceremoniously, forming into bright colors and sparks that materializes into something—a figure, perhaps? Curious, I eye the distant matter and realize what it has come to be.

Monika…

Her captivating emerald eyes glistens within the darkness, glancing at my presence with a palette of emotions and a smile that paints a somber image of regret and bittersweet goodbyes. Gracefully she pivots towards my opposite, letting her skirt flutter from the draft before she walks away towards the darkness, answering my call with nothing but her cold, delicate shoulders.

I'm not taking that—I won't take any of this.

Out of spite, I give chase to her figure that inches away at a brisk walking pace, one step at a time. The muscles on my legs contracts and tightens, crying for relief at my effort to close the distance that never seem to dissipate but instead remained. Yet still I remain stubborn as a mule, unaltering to my resolve; never again do I wish to see her alone, cast away from both of our realities, fighting against the wishes of her gods that dictates who she is and what she should be. I promised.

Then, an unmistakable cry. "Sensei…!" it calls.

I turn; behind me, standing perfectly still and calm as the waves in an afternoon with a smile as gentle as a summer breeze is my homeroom's class representative and club leader of the literature club, Mikawa Aya. She smiles at me, hopeful and bright, offering me her hand for me to steal; the scent of lilac wafts through my nostrils—a pleasant and sensual one. Here I stand in an impasse, a crossroad between two different individuals; one to a girl who tangibly endures, offering me her hand to take and the other, digitally conscious, stubbornly gains her distance the longer I remain in position. Both are precious to me, yet a decision has to be made and fast.

I reach for her hand…

…

…and stops; hesitation being the last thing that crosses my mind.

I can't do that. Not after I learned what she had went through, the things she fought against, along with the stigma and guilt that haunts her; not after I promised her that we'll face the horrors, together. Even if I have to cast away my own reality, to abandon everything that I've accomplished, or to reject the demands and standards imposed I once stood for, my decision stands.

And nothing could change that—not anymore.

With a pivot, I swiftly put my body into a momentum towards the girl who persistently tries to increase her distance, ignoring the cry and anger of the other. The distance closes and before long, she is within an arms' reach…

…and I find myself facing against a familiar ceiling. I am awake.

Groaning, my eyes scans the dim horizon that has befallen the once cheery atmosphere. Not a single light source barring the hue of my cellphone that rests on the side by the desk, charging. The utensils,
all stacked in perfect order from the largest to the smallest near the sink—washed, now left to dry; they really did kept their words and took it beyond, too. I yawn, easing the contractions on my shoulders as I try to gather my scrambled thoughts—there is something amiss, that I can tell, but what? Feeling my forehead with the back of my hand, I start to measure for the cause of my absence the day before, sighing with relief. The fever was gone. The cracks from the curtain that bleeds light from the outside tells me of a riddle I have yet solved. How long was I out?

"Mo-chii…are you up?"

Silence…

That's stupid of me, of course she wouldn't. It's late, that alone I'm certain—the short arm of father time points at number '2' tells me as much as I need, but there certainly is something else that's bothering me; it isn't the time or how long was I out, nor is it how I ended up in my futon—that was decision I made consciously. No, it was something else; it was how dark the room is.

I glance at her general direction...

And realize what it was.

'X843hd, have you ever wondered what it feels like to die?'

…no…no…

…NO…NO…NO…

NO…!

Immediately I toss the cover aside, rushing to her general direction and frantically try to locate the mouse to alleviate my worst fears, shaking it frantically to start a glimmer of light from her abode—nothing. Feeling through the darkness, I notice a bulge on the back of her abode and the lack of auxiliary that is usually plugged—the battery and the cable has been purposely, if not violently dislocated. Thank the gods the battery isn't damaged. With a little shove, the battery returns to its rightful position before hurriedly, I rush to find the cable and slides that into its post as well. With a push of the power button, the lights of her home returns and a familiar hum echoes; the boot screen starts and it will be a moment until the main screen starts.

Hang on, Monika…just a bit more…

The screen flickers with a glitch, bypassing the login screen almost instantly as the erratic rhythm of my chest do me little but escalates the panic that had since taken over what reasons I had left. The cacophonous color settles, and I am left with an image of a young woman curled in a corner; the sniffles and soft whimper of her voice fills the expanse of our prison.

"Monika…are you ok? Who did this to you?"

It was as if life had left her, sucked away by the grim reaper and left a husk in its wake as she slowly raise her head to meet me eye to eye; the dark marks that forms under them, a sight I never wished to see, had taken its place once again. Anger and rage seeps through my pores as questions comes abound, seeking for an answer—the identity—of the culprit who most likely be one of the five of my students. 'This is unforgivable', I thought, 'disciplinary action must take place', and many more to justify what will befall upon them. They invited themselves, sure, but I don't remember giving them permission to touch Monika's computer—let alone attempting to damage the battery and the plug.

So I wait with bated breath as her lips separate and her voice streams…
"You lied to me…"

…and my heart sinks as everything grinds to a halt.

"You lied to me…" she cries in exasperation, louder even upon noticing my own expression; one of confusion and shock. "Why didn't you tell me…?"

"Monika, I don't understand what you mean by—"

"You said there is no one else; that I am the only one…” she chokes. "…am I just a replacement to you? Until you can have someone real?"

I reel, puzzled and taken aback. "Yes, there is no one else out here, what are you talking about? And you're real to me, why would I—"

"LIAR…!"

Her scream, mixed with tears, mucus, and a flurry of emotions cracks in the dead of the night, shaking the foundation of the room and my own. Monika continues to let it go, unhinged by time nor the 'wall' that separates our reality, attacking it with anger and sadness that I've never thought could exist within her. After a moment, she stops, gradually allowing her weight and fatigue to drop as her legs are unable to support any longer.

I can only sit there, gaping like a stuffed owl, dumbfounded and at a loss for words.

"She knows your address, your birthday, the things you like, what you hate…” she sobs. "…and I don't even know your name…!"

"The name you used here, 'H4Tsde=', this is just your 'penname', is it?"

She grits her teeth and furrows her brow, "WHO IS SHE? IS SHE REALLY JUST ANOTHER STUDENT TO YOU?"

"Who!? Monika, I don't understand what you—if it is my name, then I can—"

"MIKAWA AYA!" she cries, pointing at the direction of the cable and the battery. "SHE DID THIS! WHO IS SHE…!? WHAT IS SHE TO YOU…?"

My tongue is tied the moment her name is spelled. From the moment when I first met her as a first year up to this point, to me, Mikawa is a model student—and a friend, nothing more. I struggle to piece together what Monika's trying to convey, from all the layers of anger and frustration that cloaks her words into a puzzle of its own as to why it comes to this in the first place. Whatever I say here would fall to Monika's deaf ears, whose jealousy have clouded her judgment and brought upon the agony that blinds her sight. I fall into silence…

…

"What am I to you…?"

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note:

Hi! iMegumeru here! I wasn't satisfied with the initial draft and had to rewrite certain aspects that could tie in to what I had in mind and keep the story flowing as I've intended it to be. I apologize for the *one week* delay, but I hope this chapter would suffice! Below is the translation for the cultural points that may be a bit confusing to some:

Wagamama/Meiwaku: This is a concept that is 'drilled' to us who grew up in Japan. 'Wagamama' meaning 'selfishness' and 'Meiwaku' which means headache/trouble/inconvenience. These two words correlate with the workings of Japanese society and saying: 'if you don't want to be an inconvenience, don't act on your selfishness'. It's a common principal that is taught to you as young as kindergarten. There is an exception to this rule, however; in this chapter, Monika and Oogame acted on their 'wagamama', as an example.

Nabe/Yaminabe: This is a favorite 'party dish', basically translates directly as 'hot pot' which is often consumed during autumn or winter-basically during the colder seasons. Yaminabe is basically a 'hot pot potluck' which is consumed in pitch black—all participants are required to bring an ingredient of their desire (no matter how disgusting it may be so long as it is edible) and dump it in the pot. They will then have the share distributed (also in the dark), where the only time the lights are on is when you are about to consume it (it has that 'surprise' and sometimes bowel-cleansing after effect)

Manzai: A comedic act commonly between two (sometimes three or more) individual, one consisting of the 'idiot (boke) and the 'straight-man' (tsukkomi).

Kotatsu: the greatest winter-trap for mankind. It is terrifyingly effective at keeping anyone under its influence neutered and mute during extremely cold seasons, refusal to go outside—unless for feeding or survival purposes. It has the ability to transform into a normal table during warmer seasons by removing the blanket.

See you next week~
The Knight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Knight

A a25pZ2h0 w1Th v3ng34nCe,
Is A a25pZ2h0 broK3n.
But 4 a25pZ2h0 with0ut one,
SXMGYnV0IGE= fool d2hvIGxpZXMGdG8gaGltc2VsZi4=

A mUrD3rer ZGVtb24s
RuN5 rAMp4Nt, wild, fr33.
A ZGVtb24= who coNSuMe5 women,
To fulfill his he4Rt's cont3NT.

The a25pZ2h0 with a VeNGEance,
Slays the ZGVtb24=, justified, cold,
The ZGVtb24= who wounded him.
VG8gZGVsaXZlcibqdXN0aWNI to his p3OpLe.

WWV0IHdpdGg= justice, Y29tZXM= regret.
The ZGVtb24= cried with Ag0Ny,
As its bG92ZXJz T00K dGhlaXigb3duIGxpmVz.
Yet h1s hum4n heaRT s0Ldier3D on.

The a25pZ2h0 looked b4Ck,
VG8gc2VlIGEgbGlnaHQgdGhhdCB5ZWFWybMu
The Hope he's l0st ye4RS aGo,
His beaC0n of S4LV4TiOn.

He juMPed W1th the winG5 0f bURd3n,
ToW4rds the light, aGUgYnJiWtzIGF3YXku
His REGreT c4Scad3s,
SW50byB0aGUgbGlnaHQsiG15IHN0YWNgVzIGNydtW1ibGUu

A whisper, he mutters,
4oCcSSBhbSBmcmVl4oCd

You really start appreciating how much you have until the moment you've lost it.

It's that itching emptiness—a gap—that emerge as a black hole of emotions and thoughts as a result, yearning for something or someone to supplement that missing piece and complete the puzzle. That piece, carved and molded by time, is unique for each and every soul that inhabits this realm—and when it's gone, its effect echoes in a chamber that continues to hammer mercilessly or flood the bulkhead until the hole is plugged. Many seek momentary solutions such as shedding tears, excessive feeding on comfort foods, or even consulting without the heart to change; many also resolved to forcefully fill them with vices and caused even more damage, leading to a never-ending downward spiral. Then, there are the few who seeks a permanent solution—time, after all, is a universal cure.
I am not even certain where I fit in all of this—or what damage I had done.

"Good morning, Monika."

Quietly she glances, retreating but a fraction of a second later; a solemn reflection of guilt and discomfort paints her expression. "...Good morning."

It had become a normalcy, to be greeted with my personal sunshine at each sunrise and sunset from that corner of my apartment; a voice that gleams and sparkles with positivity and energy—a lighthouse that shines a path to a safe port at the start and at the end of each turbulent storm. To find the beacon vanish without warning is...disorienting at its best; I rather not think of how it would be at its worst. I'm at a loss. Was it something I said? Something I did? Or is this all a bout of jealousy from Monika? But that can't be true either; there are clearly signs of force acted upon her abode, more so from a thorough investigation of the battery's hold, revealing a broken 'tooth'. It's within my fortune that it can still hoist the battery with the remaining two.

To pin the blame on my students—to Mikawa no less, it's...absurd.

...

But was there really no one else? No thief in the night or some vagabond with a vengeance that came after everyone left?

No...of course there wasn't. But why her? Why Mikawa? What about the other members? Weren't they present at the time? Surely, they would have noticed? What does she meant about how Mikawa 'knows everything'? That isn't possible...the school would have to be even more careless than disclosing addresses; let alone personal data, I don't believe the school even asked for information concerning hobbies...

It doesn't make sense. None of it does...

...

Is she making it up?

I glance at her worryingly, at a loss towards the circumstances that is projected into an aura of silence and distrust that grew out of the abyss, carefully setting us in two separate camps. It's an air of animosity that I am unfamiliar with, a far cry from the days that seceded it; a barren, empty wasteland that eats at the remnants of what once was a fresco of a golden wheat field in autumn. The television speaks a routine of empty laughter, missing the other half that often accompanies this pattern of ours. Silently, she continues to watch the program. I silently observe.

"—recent tests concerning the development of synthetic limbs have been less than stellar due to—"

Ah...it's an on-going discussion about synthetic limbs again; the 'future of prosthetics', they say. A topic she's very fond and familiar of. Maybe I can try to ease in...

"Looks like the human body isn't as willing to host artificial limbs," I start as I fix my tie. "It might take a few more years before it's viable."

"O-oh..." she mutters, quickly shying her emeralds behind auburn strands. "Yes...maybe..."

Enmity sets in and with it, the dread that lingers and stubbornly maintain the divide. I turn away, tightening the noose that is a part of my attire as the television continues to ramble with its fake smiles, laughter, and amusement towards a topic not even the presenter gives a damn about, all for an
audience that they could barely see eye to eye. I can only grit my teeth in frustration, unwilling to
lunge against the questions that should not remain unanswered, held only by a leash of preservation
and patience that screams to maintain the current status quo; allowing the beast to act freely would
only further the damage that has been done, whatever it is.

I take a sip from my coffee, silently observing the young woman as she stirs her cup listlessly,
sighing before savoring. Questions and uncertainty piles like a bad game of Tetris, forming a wall
that isolates her further from my reach.

Stay calm, Oogame. If it is something important, sooner or later she will tell you about it; for now,
give her the time and space she needs, let her decide. Cornering her for an answer would only widen
the rift that exist at this time; be patient, just as she has been to you. I take my bag, keys, and phone;
all eyes towards the exit, away from the suffocating atmosphere that lingers due to my presence.
There is work to be done.

"I'm heading out, Monika."

Her little window rolls to capture me; I smile in return, garnering a meek reply laden with animosity
and distrust.

"Yeah…ok..."

...

What the fuck must I do…?

I can't get it out of my head.

Since the time I take the step out of my apartment and unto the station, not even the pressure and
stresses that looms in the distance is able to abate the concern over her qualms; the thoughts, her
expressions, reactions…it's too much for me not to ignore. It gave me as much discomfort as the
situation is to her—that look of doubt and disappointment is painful to recollect, yet is equally as
haunting as a bounded amnesiac specter to a school boy. *Something* happened last night, evident
from the damages that was inflicted on Monika's laptop—but who? Why? It's far too early to take
Monika's heed at face value—I trust her, sure, but I've known her named 'suspect' far longer than she
has; Mikawa wouldn't do that, even less likely with multiple witnesses. But what if the entire club
was involved…?

It just doesn't make sense! What is going on!?

I glance at the digital destination display and its colorful ornaments, noting the travel time until my
arrival at Tokyo central station—there is enough for me to fiddle with my phone, amongst the
sardines. Hanging overhead, advertisements flaps and shakes about as it matches the vibration of the
steel can that binds us; it reads in a professional, bold kanji and hiragana, 'THE FUTURE IS NOW'.
A placard of *ToDai* endorsing the development of Artificial Intelligence and synthetic limbs that
echoes every so often in national television and early morning infotainment. I sigh and grunt as the
momentum pushes us at a turn, yanking, drawing me out of the state of recollection; her fondness of
the topic in question, an echo at each morning routine, lingers with an unbridled scream at its
absence. The curve that stretches from cheek to cheek, the harp of a giggle, and the hopeful gleam
that polishes the pair of emeralds—gone, superseded by a bottomless abyss of mistrust and defeat.
My voice desperately yearns to tear, yet silenced and bounded by the rules imposed as a norm. Damn
it, Oogame, get a grip! Do *something*, you fool…!
Maybe if I…

I reach for my phone and open LiME, a messaging app we've grown to love in the time we're separated, and scroll through our history up to this point of time. No new messages—odd, considering the pattern I've grown accustomed to. Something did happen...and I'm left in the shadow of it; not the first time in my life, nor will it be the last. I have to—no, I need to appeal to her good side, return everything to what it was. I know Monika; she's loathing herself as much as she is in trying to keep this act—and I can't just sit here and remain idle. I need answers, and that's what I'll work for. Maybe a sticker will do…?

Twiddling my thumb on the sleek surface of the screen, navigating through the menu that is decorated with lime green banners and promotions, I search through the array of merchandise and paid stickers that would surely capture her attention. With a flick and armed with the knowledge of her fondness towards shiba inu puppies, sifting through the many offers and finding the gift in question is fast and isn't particularly difficult; the beauty of technology never ceases to amaze me. The shiba inu stickers are really adorable—its popularity comes as no surprise so as the reasons why Monika adores them.

With a few taps, the second set of stickers are purchased as a gift and sent. I hope she appreciates it…

"Look at what I found! It's the second set of your shiba inu stickers!" I start. It will take another five minutes before Tokyo central station. "I can't help but be reminded of you, so I bought them for you to use! They are pretty adorable, aren't they?"

Silence. The small, white kanji characters that spells 'READ' cause my heart to skip a beat as I wait, bated.

"This train will soon arrive in TOKYO. The doors on the right side will open."

At the behest of the announcement, the wave of sardines move with both speed and aggression, forming a river of drones that carries me in its current. Quickly I shove my phone back into my pockets and wade through, shoving and pushing against others of similar disposition, forcing our way towards the Metro platform—a five minute walk is all it takes; another three before the train arrives. The image of my phone and the illumination of bright blue and green flashes at each step, along with my thirst for a reply, deprived since the start of the day. The pocket remains still and the train arrives. I clench my grip on my bag and board the steel can, along with the wave of other sardines.

The doors close and the train rumbles forward with patience, once firm, gradually molds into dread as minutes pass and the next announcement—the stop—rings throughout the reach of the transport. A pendulum of weight clutches itself on my heart, sinking with it any hope or optimism that still lingers until, unexpectedly, a vibration.

Hastily I reach for the phone and slide open to read the message, "Yes. Thank you."

And I find myself back at the starting point, lost in a maze she erected to keep me at arm's-length. The door opens and I ride the wave of students in uniform, all heading towards the same destination like cattle to a slaughter house all in the hopes of finding a better tomorrow.

Another time, Oogame…I can think of something…

"Sensei…!"
A cheerful, feminine call—like music—seizes my attention at its beckon from behind. I glance towards its direction to find the sprite of a bright young girl, dark brown hair tied to a pony-tail despite its shoulder-length, and a smile that is both confident as it is a symbol of her position and status in the hierarchy. I pause, pivoting to face and allow her to catch up at a pace she desires, garnering a smile from me in return. Her uniform is as sharp as ever, pressed and groomed that it accentuates the chrysanthemum badge that she proudly wears around the collar of her blazer, complimented with a subtle hint of lilac. Standing side by side, she smiles as if expecting—waiting.

"Good morning, sensei."

"Good morning to you too, Mikawa," I greet in return. "What brings you in this early?"

Her smile brims with confidence, "Everyone agreed to come earlier to try out the outfits today; I even tied my hair from the usual to see if it suits me better!"

"For the tryout?"

"Y-yes!" she replies. A tone that is laced with innocence and excitement. "Will you tell us what you think about it later?"

There's no reason not to—I am her homeroom teacher, after all. With a nod and a smile, I appease her unquenchable curiosity and lifts her young spirit as she lightly 'skips' at the notion; I, however, had other things in mind. Watching her embrace the time of her youth, to accept and celebrate its moments brings forth...'doubts' as to what I initially believed. Could she really go out of her way to 'attack' Monika? If what she said is true, then what are her justifications? Let alone, know about Monika's existence within my laptop? Could everything be just another 'accident' and Monika is simply overreacting to the entire situation? Then why does she adamantly tries to distance herself…?

I need answers, damn it! The more I seek, the more questions pile up…

"Ah, Aki-chan!" she waves, brimming with energy at her partner in crime. Aki smiles in return and waves, jogging to close our distance.

"Aya-chan, sensei, good morning."

Aki quickly takes a polite bow and a callous wave to myself and Mikawa, respectively; it's her actions and mannerism of such caliber that often characterizes her upbringing to be no less than a princess or some form of nobility—that, and her way of speech that reminisce the typical 'ojyou-sama' in contemporary fictions, though without the exaggerations. It isn't strictly true of her upbringing as a 'princess' or some sort of 'nobility', naturally; the male students always comes up with interesting imagination along with their unwavering admiration—so are their glares that wishes death upon me due to my proximity with their idols. Such is the untamed hormones of youth…

"Aya-chan, sorry about yesterday!" she utters apologetically, "To have you clean everything by yourself…"

Mikawa waves dismissively, girlishly giggling. "It's alright! It was late, and I was the one who suggested everything in the first place."

"But all the dishes…"

"It's alright," she nudges at her partner-in-crime. "Don't feel too bad about it! After all, I have to take the pot and the portable stove home."

Vigilance takes hold as I listen to the conversation, carefully deconstructing the exchange with the
incident in mind. What seems to be an innocent chatter between two of my students seems to hold far
greater implications—that maybe Monika was telling the truth all along. But then again, what's the
motive? Aki's apologetic tone and Mikawa's sincere remarks isn't a far cry from the usual exchange
between the pair—there is little room to throw suspicion, although…

…Aki did mention how Mikawa cleaned everything by herself…but is it really…?

"You cleaned everything? What about the other members?" I ask, "Obase and Yuuki would gladly
volunteer to help with a 'please'."

"It was super late, sensei," Mikawa admits with distress. "I don't have the heart to hold everyone past
six."

"I see…no one stayed behind to help?"

Aki shakes her head, "We went home after returning the table. I make sure everyone reach the
station safely; I'm the vice-president, after all!"

"Aya-chan did a lot of the cleaning on her own, sensei," she continues. "You should praise her! She
makes a good housewife!"

"A-Aki-chan…!"

A nagging feeling tugs against the virtuous smile and blush of the club leader on a backdrop of
suspicion, calling on the words—the warning—laid bare by Monika. Her frustration, sadness, and
anger—directed at me—for reason I can only assume to be that of jealousy; or is it really 'just' to that
extent? Mikawa may be the only one left doing the final touches, but what if it all happened before
everyone left? Yuuki may be the more prominent suspect with the similarity of our hobbies—he
would surely take what opportunity he has to 'examine' the computer. But then…if Yuuki's the one,
then why Monika mentions Mikawa specifically? Why her? It doesn't add up…

Is it really just Mikawa? She couldn't possibly…

…

Bury the thought, Oogame; do what you usually do—smile and thank her, don't let personal issues
get in between you and your job. "Thank you, Mikawa. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Mikawa smiles softly and hides her expression behind the cascading shadow of her bangs as Aki
giggles playfully. The gate looms before us, a sign of the end of our road before we head our
separate ways—I, the teacher and them, the students. The pair dribbles on vigorously about life, love,
and matters concerning the academia as we switch our footwear to our indoor shoes, trailing off at
the flight of stairs as they head for their homerooms while I towards the faculty office. I check the
time; five minutes before teacher's morning briefings—another thirty until homeroom starts. The
plain desk stares back with its ominous eyes as I set my bag and glance at my cellphone, waiting for
a nudge, a beckoning, or maybe a conversation—the usual…

…a message that never arrived.

I tap incessantly at the fiberboard table that stretches from end to end—lightly, so as not to disturb
others to my left and right. At one end, headmaster Murayama drones about how 'proud' he is of the
current performance of the students and the staffs, the upcoming festival, the budget, and matters
concerning upcoming paycheck and dues that he briefly grazes; if not to satiate the salary-thieves, it's
to sprinkle those who received a cut some form of assurance that maybe things are looking up—yes,
me included. The faculties, all bearing their distinction from how the desks are organized, sit in opposition of one another, minding their own business or trying to look at least with a bit of interest; let's face it, teacher's meetings that supercedes class homeroom tends to be the same dribble from headmaster Murayama when nothing of interest comes to pass. To my relief, my absence was covered by Ikari-sensei whose English is—though not to par—passable in my standards and performed quite well; the pile of papers I have to mark and the homework I'm supposed to request from the students based on this checklist is quite telling and inherently more interesting than the headmaster.

I glance at the corner of my cubicle, towards a soft hue that rests on the piles of reference books and test papers—my phone. Its glow, a door to another reality, promises of a whisper from its only residence—a hope that slowly dies along with the absence and the silence that persists since our last conversation. I scour through the depths of my mind, filtering the words of the headmaster with those of my own memories—anything to start up another conversation, all to no avail. Thus, I return my attention to the rambling gorilla who has been in control of the stage for the past twenty minutes.

"Any questions?"

Silence. As much as the next person, everyone wishes to get it over with as soon possible. Still, even the whispers of the wisps does not faze the benevolent spawn from continuing. "Oh, and another thing before we conclude—and everyone might want to note this down since this concerns our next faculty party."

Oh, great…another mandatory 'sit-here-and-pretend-to-enjoy'-bullshit. Lovely. Now, where's my pen…

…

…

…where's my black pen? Where did I—have I misplaced it…?

I feel around the rows of acrylic and metal rods of colors that lines my breast pocket, counting up to three and finding one to be missing. There is blue, a color I use to mark grammatical errors, green for spelling, red as the general correction tool, and black as the quill—the missing pen. Not that it matters much, it has more to do with how violated my psyche feels at the moment; I'm more organized than this, you know, Oogame! Whatever, blue pen can work just as fine for now—until I buy a replacement, of course.

I give the pen a little shake and a tap. The ink flows down into characters and numbers, matching the details laid by the headmaster to form a specific I've come to despise—even more so with how I associate blue with mistakes. The gentle hue, still glowing in the corner of my eye, beckons my attention with whispers of false hopes and expectations. She's not coming to talk; if any, I have to start the conversation and figure out why things crumble like this. So many wrongs in so little space…

Want to see me tempt fate? 'Could this day get any worse'? I'm being sarcastic so I should be okay…

"Hey, Oogame."

…I spoke too soon.

Pivoting my chair to the voice that came from behind, from the faculty of social sciences and history, is a face that would cause me to recoil and puke. The voice, arrogant and commanding, ravages my
ear drums like flesh-eating insects as he grins with a smug that causes flowers to wilt and die—just you wait, you son of a bitch…I have exactly the ammunition to send you wishing for judgment by the Enma with your tails between your legs. "What is it, Kitamura-senpai?"

An air of arrogance puffs between his mocking grin, confident of his stance. "I was thinking, since you're 'alone' and 'single',"

"I have someone, thank you very—"

"I'm not talking about your chat-bot, fool. I'm talking about real women."

The ring on his left hand glimmers in silver as he crosses his arm; for all intents and purposes, Monika's a lot more real than your marriage will ever be.

"You see," he continues. "I have certain…vices to fulfill and I'm eager to share it with my beloved kouhai. How would you like me to introduce you to some fine, young ladies from local universities?"

"Senpai, I'm sorry but I'm not interested in—"

"Oh, but I insist!" he demands, closing the distance and cementing his authority with a light 'bang' on my desk. "After all, you don't have a say in this matter. You're coming with me to a gokon this evening—right after your 'club'."

He inch closer to a whisper, pushing me to recoil from discomfort. "Remember your position."

The encounter that lasts for but a mere minute or less ends as he silently chuckles his way out of the office. The dismissive attitude of the bystanders echoes the sentiment of those who watched from the sidelines and pants a bleak image of the environment; 'I'm glad it wasn't me', 'serves the newbie right', or 'best not to get involved'—are probably what they have in mind as they pass. Office politics and its bullshit…it's everywhere, even in school. I click my tongue and gather my materials before walking through the flight of stairs to the third floor where class 3-2—my homeroom—where its casts of third-years are waiting; a wry smile casually stretches across my face. Yet it isn't because of the distinguishable merriment of the students that bleeds into the halls, or the infectious optimism my homeroom students has—oh no, this feeling of 'glee' tastes as disgusting as it is sweet. I smile because senpai has staged nothing short of a perfect setting for his finale; and here I thought confronting him normally would be enough. Let's see how you enjoy having your pleasure robbed before you!

This sweet, delectable, black tar—the taste of a forbidden knowledge; I'm starting to understand how Monika felt, how drunk she was at its taste during those desperate times, to have that control against the system. It is...intoxicating. Surely, a drug that she never wished for me to consume—and the urge, oh the urge to share them! There's no turning back now. I gaze at my phone and notice the absence of notifications that I've longed, moments before entering the domain and reserving any intent to message her to a more feasible time.

Another time, perhaps...just wait a bit longer…

"Sensei, I have a question about our reading..." Takeda, a student of class 3-1, asks. "...aside from how difficult it is."

Carefully manipulating my thumb and my fingers to bookmark the book to a close, eyeing the student who is seated in the middle of the class. "Which part is it?"
"I have...trouble understanding why Charlie's relationship with others deteriorate. Being smart is a good thing, right?"

I smile, delighted by his interest towards the book I handpicked—and relieved. I thought 'Flowers for Algernon' is too heavy of a reading for high schoolers; at least for those whose English is equivalent to a script from a sitcom. "You will see in time that being the smartest isn't everything."

I chose the book 'Flowers for Algernon' out of Monika's recommendation as one out of three reading material for my classes—well, not exactly. The thought came to me far before she could move and speak, back when textboxes, modifications, and glimmers of hope were our only means of communication. It was an unorthodox approach, different from the norms established by my predecessors and their reliance on textbooks or translated Japanese classics, solidifying the connection between English and Japanese classes—which, dare I say, is a sound plan that sadly left the former neglected like the days of old. I can't say I enjoyed the English classes of my past, mind you, but let's just say I reached to this point in comprehension and fluency out of my own general interest to study abroad; I can't say the same for the others—it's a shame to be missing out on great works of literature due to language barrier.

But I digress.

The book in question, 'Flowers for Algernon', is one that I've came to enjoy thanks to her. It talks about Charlie, a man who undergoes an operation which increases his intelligence to extraordinary level in an experiment that is mirrored to that of a rat, Algernon. However, Charlie's exponential increase in intelligence deteriorates his relationship with the people around him—more so, the condescending attitude of Dr. Nemur who saw him as nothing more than a lab subject before the operation. In the end, the gift of knowledge is that of momentary as Algernon loses its enhanced intelligence and dies as Charlie reverts to his former self, separated from those he once knew in a state-sponsored institution, requesting in his final postscript to have someone leave some flowers on Algernon's grave in his former backyard.

"The gift of intelligence that Charlie and Algernon received is momentary, so in the end…"

**PIN-PON-PAN-PON**

I grin with glee. Sometimes, even the Westminster chime surprise me with their knowledge of how to finish a class with a 'bang'. "...it is for you to find out! Go finish reading until the end of the chapter, we'll discuss this next week. Good work, everyone!"

Amidst the outcry of disappointment and relief of the students, a pleasant euphoria tickles my childish soul as hastily as the materials are rammed into the bag. The halls flood with the voices and the drones of hundreds of students, all with a purpose and destination, marching like automatons to fulfill their conditioning to the letter. A few pass on the occasional friendly greetings and goodbyes as I work down the stairs that lead towards the faculty office—after all, I still have a club to supervise before triggering the flag for the encounter. There is of course, one more thing I wish to do…

With a quick rummage through my pockets and behind the doors that separate the room with the halls, I draw my cellphone and scroll through all the notifications—one of which cause my soul to yelp in a mix of stress, relief, and anxiety.

Monika...

['HfC24, will you be home early? I have something I wish to talk about. It's important. ']

The message itself came from around ten minutes ago, without a sticker nor a smile, and even the
words are void of emotions. It's one of the most peculiar message I've received, familiar and yet alien in its approach—an omen, perhaps? I can't be sure. Indeed, a sudden dread creeps and nags on my conscious, screaming with a voice that screeches as loud as nails on a chalk board, warning me to seek her before it's too late. I pause in contemplation, listening to the palpitation of my breathing and the ticking of the clock that echoes at each momentum; tick, tick, tick…

I sigh, ["I'm sorry, but I will be home quite late. I have business to take care of."]

Three animated dots springs to life, dancing at the bottom left of the screen before a reply pops up. I raise my eyebrow in surprise—a pleasant one, yet equally stressful in nature. ["Kitamura-san?"]

["Yes."] I reply with haste, ["I'm ending him tonight, at a gokon."]

I didn't mean it in a literal sense, of course; murder weighs heavier here than in the digital realm. But like soldiers of old that whispers their goodbyes to their loved ones before leaving for battle, I hit the reply button and pray that it is enough to ease her troubled heart. ["I will be home as soon as I can. Wait for me."]

The dots appear briefly, expanding and digressing in size to a hypnotizing pattern before vanishing—the white characters that spells 'READ' blips into existence, followed with nothing but a deafening silence. My blood runs cold.

…

I trust Monika; she wouldn't do such a thing, and yet the nagging thought that haunts persistently refuses to relent—a sense of dread that takes me back to the end of 'act one'. I grit my teeth and clench my fists, begging to the gods—a sign, perhaps—that could tell me if I made the right choice; this silence alone cuts through like a sharp blade to a flesh. The distance, a bullet to the gut. Snap out of it, Oogame…don't let personal issues affect your performance at work…! You knew her more than anyone could have hoped; have faith in her, lay the thought to rest and focus on what's ahead—it's what she would expect from you, too.

Quickly, I reach for the keys for the literature club's clubroom and bury the demons that claw incessantly at the abyss of my mind. My thoughts race at each shriek that it made, drawing me closer to a panic that multiplies in size at the behest of the ticking clock. My phone vibrates and for a moment, a copious amount of air rushes out of my lungs.

["I will."]

Within that one simple reply lies the sentiment of a thousand words that tames the beast. Colors slowly bleeds back to my reality as warm air blows from the end of the tunnel; a glimmer of light from this infernal maze. The palpitation steadies to a manageable reach and I walk towards the door, moving to the next responsibility at hand—one that seals the day, just like any other. I slide the door open…

"Ah, sensei! What a coincidence!"

"Mikawa…something the matter?"

Before me, the very model of a top student stands at attention with a folder cradled between her arms and chest, smiling radiantly as she tightens her hold. Her bangs and ponytail sways to the side following the momentum as she slightly tilts her head, giving off an air of maturity and serenity that makes her…who she is, Mikawa Aya. Gently, I slide the door to a close as she politely offers the A4-sized plastic sleeve that she has been carrying. "I'm here to submit the budget report for class 3-2,
sensei."

I accept her gift; the scent of lilac permeates through.

"If it's this, you could have given it to me at the club room, right?"

"That is true, but I intend to drop it at the faculty office," she replies, followed with a simple gesture of putting her hands together. "But it is much more convenient with you here, sensei! Shall we head to the club room?"

Be it another day, I would have taken her offer as a friendly gesture that is iconic to the benevolent club leader. However, wariness wraps and constricts my arms that receives the folder, creeping along its length at the dissemination of the sweet, airy odor that slowly dominates our space in but a short span of time; a sudden urge of 'fight or flight' looms like a shadow, yet all I can return is but a smile and a gesture that invites her for a walk to our destination. She happily accepts, gracefully striding to my right with her book bag on her shoulder and a folder sandwiched in a cradle of her arms.

My thoughts trails to the events of last evening, the sharp cut Monika delivered at the dead of the night.

"SHE DID THIS! WHO IS SHE…!? WHAT IS SHE TO YOU…?"

Who is she to me, exactly? This student of mine, an admiration of many—an idol, raised by a pedestal of achievements and merit; an irrevocable status symbol. What is she to me, honestly? Just a student? A friend? Or perhaps...more? The cracks in my moral compass starts to form, revealing a world of uncertainty and ugliness that existed prior—ignored under superficial layers of authority, respect, and responsibility. With her hair done to a style that is elegant and neat, she trots along to my right with an aura of vulnerability and loyalty; of trust and admiration, equal to her partner in this moment—me. A visual-couple; synergy between a high achieving student and her mentor akin to the dramas that echoes from shoujo mangas, a dream scenario for many. And yet...

...yet I can't help but be at unease. This feeling of guilt that is laced with contentment—this warmth that races the pace of my core against a backdrop of sin and taboo; a presence that is both addictive, pleasurable, and yet...dangerous in nature. But isn't the same can be applied to Monika? She, a student and I, the teacher...a similar scenario for two different woman...or is it?

The way she acts, how she speaks, the subtle giggle when she smiles are nothing special and is...consistent through our history. Then, why now? Why do I start noticing these...things...now?

Who is Mikawa? What do I really think of her?

...

That is a riddle I have yet come to answer; a question that has become more difficult with time.

The clubroom, a space leased by the school for the purpose of the literature club within the old school building. Here, the members of the literature club share their passion from one heated discussion to another, vying for the opinion of the next and the cravings of compliments and criticism that could inject their creation into something more. Often, the space is dominated by the club's president and vice-president with their exemplary writing and achievements, or the occasional stroke of brilliance by the fledgling writer and her world-building—not today, however. As they scramble to meet their deadlines for the festival, I take my usual position as an observer of the club and flip a book to past the time—*The book of est* by Luke Rhinehart—as a means of escape from my own
thoughts; one that has been screaming and kicking at the bleak premise of my epiphany. What better way to do so than drown yourself in fiction? English may be one of my strong points, but to read a book entirely of the language can still prove to be a challenge once in a while.

"I guess it's only you and me, sensei."

Lowering the book from my peripheral vision, I glance at the club's designated baker for the festival who is left to idle as the others are off to different parts of the school, be it the computer lab or the resource room as dictated by their tasks—not even the club president is spared. Obase stands at attention, his unkempt tie, hair, and blazer reflects how he always is to the untrained, yet a glimmer of light and focus that reflects from his eyes betrays that notion—observant, disciplined, and most of all determined to see things until its end. With him and I left in the clubroom, I motion for him to take a seat; after all, I could use a light discussion to help ease my mind, if not just a bit.

"You don't have anything to do, Obase?"

Pulling one of the foldable steel chair for use, he chuckles lightly. "That will come in time once the baking starts."

"That's a week from now."

"I know," he huffs as his weight collapses on the chair. "I'll be busy then, that is certain."

I close my book—not to forget to mark the page with a fold, formed by my index finger and thumb. "Shouldn't you be helping the others? Mikawa is working on the pamphlets and—"

"Well, um…" he cuts. The air sinks unnaturally. "She doesn't want help,"

"Just like last night—or any other time when you're around, sensei."

I push the rim of my glasses with my fingers, setting the book down on my lap as Obase clicks his tongue, as if a great secret has been accidentally left out of the bag. He flips his chair around so as to rest his arms and the weight of his head on its support as his eyes darts to the side, erratically shifting from side to side, reflecting his current state of mind—thinking, reflecting, and contemplating…or so I believe. Like a chord pulled from its plug or a sudden jerk in motion, my cognition grinds to a sudden halt as the young man sighs nonchalantly and returns with a look that reminisce an owl against a flashlight. He observes with curiosity and amusement against my bewildered expression, chuckling heartily with glee after he has his fill; I, however, am less than amused.

"You didn't know about that, sensei?" he continues with a grin, "I thought you would have noticed that, too."

I shrug, "That's a first. How long did it take you?"

"About a week."

Obase grins and yawns lazily, stretching from his awkward position before shifting his weight around to draw what comfort exist from the foldable steel chair. The surface cracks, the knowledge I've come to accept as an unblemished truth sheds its skin to reveal a slimy muck that consumes all; a façade that has been cleverly maintained, fooling anyone who dared. The club leader of the literature club, Mikawa Aya, an accomplished young girl who stand amongst her peers, untouchable, may have things hidden underneath a veil of merit and smiles, cleverly embellished to conceal a face she desperately tries to hide. For starters, there are certain…peculiarities that comes to mind; Monika's
claim being one of them. But aside of that…

"Obase," I start, "Can you tell me what happened last night?"

"What, did something broke?" he asks. I nod with a stern look, garnering a reply of unfiltered surprise. "Well, shi—uhh, excuse my language."

A hint of discomfort and unease, spewing in multiple directions. I wave dismissively to ease his concern.

"Well, uh…how should I start…?"

He scratches the back of his head as he formulates a story; an event that I wasn't supposed to know, one that even Monika refused to reveal beyond the name of the suspect—a conundrum that expands in size and reach, a young woman of my intrigue. What it encompasses is the span of but no less than ten minutes after I fell into slumber, where the members were just starting with the dishes and she—Mikawa—with concerns on time. Vaguely, an image crops in my mind as I attempt to picture the scenario described as vivid as Obase could the moment when—despite the abundance of work to be done—Mikawa insisted everyone to return home under Aki's supervision. But that isn't what Obase emphasizes…

"I objected, naturally; it's not like my house was in Nishi-Kawaguchi, that would be Yuu—err, Kazuma's and Hanayama's."

"Yuuki and Satsuki, you mean?"

He nods. "Yeah, them."

"No need to be stiff, Obase; this isn't an interrogation, after all."

"Right…so where was I?" he trails briefly, quickly returning seconds later. "Oh, right! I mean, I can literally walk and be home in thirty—maybe forty minutes! Nishi-Funabashi isn't like crazy far from Funabashi station, right?"

He sighs, "But still she insisted to do everything alone. Don't tell me you didn't notice any of this, sensei?"

No…and to be honest, this is a first. "So, did anybody touched the computer?"

"I wouldn't know," he shrugs. "What happened to your computer?"

"It's—"

~GARARA

The door slides open in a gentle that drops the air to a standstill, silencing my reply to a hushed tone. With a clear file wrapped in her arms, Mikawa steps in with a smile upon noticing our presence, pacing to the end of the class with a cheeky, spirited attitude that reminds me of her counterpart beyond my reality, greeting us with confidence and a friendly attitude that constantly graces the club. We smile in return, nervously—cautious, knowing full-well the conspiracy that has circulate and prayed that she didn't caught wind of it.

"I'm back!"

"Oh, welcome back!" Obase greets. "Is that our pamphlet?"
Mikawa quickly draws a sample; a simple pamphlet, yet colorful and warm in its presentation of the club and all to be distributed during the festival. With a curve that stretches from ear to ear, she raises the object high for us to admire. "Yes, it is! What do you think? Would this help us get new members?"

"Maybe," Obase shrugs. "I hope it would; new faces are always nice."

She nods in zest with a wholehearted smile before returning them to her folder. "Ah…! I'm sorry! Did I… interrupt both you and sensei earlier?"

I glance at Obase, meeting him in the middle with a grin that transcends any form of verbal communication, unanimous in our decision to remain confidential of what was discussed against her attempt to pry. With a nod I conclude our quick discussion and formulate a response to be churned for the curious club president, an enigma of its own.

"Nothing to worry about, it's just a light discussion about the recent patch of 'K#nc0lle' and the upcoming in-game event."

She glances at Obase, briefly contemplating as she rests her black pen on her lips, shrugging nonchalantly before returning to her desk. Obase chuckles, pushing the muscles on my cheeks to contract into a smile at the conclusion of the encounter; a little exchange of trust between two men. My thoughts, however, wander back to the events of last night as missing pieces of the puzzle present itself to form a scene missing from my memory. If the others left just ten-fifteen minutes after I retire, then indeed Mikawa is the suspect—that makes Monika to be speaking the truth. But if so, then…

*Why? Even if it is true, then what was her motive?*

I dart my eyes to the club president, diligently working on a task she draws from her book bag.

A cold chill claws through my nape, vanishing in but a fleeting moment.

The clattering echo of the steel object I drop at my desk synchronizes with the chime of the Westminster at five, ending the day for the students and kick-starting the events that is to be set in motion. The spotted, wide, beige ceiling with its lights that glimmers at the corner of my eye brings an air of tension that increases at the ticking tempo of the wall clock, carelessly minding its business, unknowingly judging the lives of those it affects with its omnipresent arm that dictates its schedule. I stride towards a wall where a hanging, green board is at a display, along with rows of keys of varying teeth—a place where we store the skeleton that unlocks the doors of this facility. The dangling pieces of metal clinks in unison as another one of its kind returns to its rightful spot, and I sigh with relief and contemplation at the conclusion of the day—well, not exactly.

I rummage through my pocket and glimpse at the piece of technology that rests in the palm of my hand; the deafening silence, coupled with the artificial glow that displays of nothingness chews on my deteriorating mental state, nourishing the growing concern of the *paradox* that once shared my joy, sadness, and pain. As if a physical one isn't enough, a *communication* barrier is *exactly* what I need right now; the gods *truly* are comedic geniuses. I would *love* to meet one and gouge their vocal chords for the pleasure they find in this. To think that three months prior, my biggest concern—aside from the occasional 'I want to die'—would be 'how am I supposed to collect all the goods from a
chain-restaurant collaboration for a collectible'; my, how far things have changed. Relationships are so complicated, if not unpredictable…

"Still talking to that 'chat-bot'?" a leery voice I've grown to despise echoes to my left as the source extends its arm and cause the rows of key to 'clink' in unison, causing me to jerk in surprise. He grins scornfully, "I'm still amused how 'NEET' wasn't your first choice for a career—maybe we can salvage something after all."

"Not to worry," Kitamura-senpai continues. "By the end of today, it's all going to change."

Tapping my shoulder with a force that bears its weight in seniority, Kitamura-senpai motions—with a nudge—to follow him to the exit for our 'incursion'. Reluctantly, I fetch my bag and match his footsteps as we wade through the rather peaceful halls that are lit by the bleeding light of the setting sun, passing the occasional students that still lingers after the end of club activities, greeting and politely reminding them of the time and the urgency to leave the premise; no such thing as 'afterschool class rendezvous' popularized by anime, manga, and any contemporary work of fiction in the industry. After all, I may be an otaku, but I can differentiate what is real and what isn't—Monika is certainly the former.

After a short distance, we find ourselves in the parking lot where senpai—proudly—draws a key and with a push of a button, a beeping echo beckons us to its direction, towards one of his pride and joy.

"You have a car…"

He chuckles, "Of course I do; I'm married, a car is a must. Please, step inside."

I never knew how 'well-off' senpai is; a car isn't exactly cheap here, let alone the annual tax, maintenance, and insurance that comes as part of its baggage. Though a family car in design, the vehicle in question is one of the more recent models released under a year ago with a price tag that may take around a year or two at most to meet—minus the maintenance and the insurance. I enter from the left and take the front seat as senpai takes on the wheel, turning the keys and starting the engine in a quiet hum that barely qualifies as a whisper; only the vibration of the engine and the blinking lights on the dashboard works as the only notifying cue. When the vehicle rolls out of the parking spot and into the streets, it's instantly telling how much of a pleasure it is to drive the machine—smooth, comfortable, and from what I can tell from my observation of his control on the wheel, responsive. A pleasurable curve contracts the muscles of his cheeks as he grips on the steering, guiding it to his rhythm to match his pace; assertive and confident, gently pressuring the brakes as the traffic light teases to a stop.

"You know, this is the second time you agreed to go to a gokon, isn't it?"

"Is it?" I reply hesitantly. Frankly, I can't remember—most outings tend to be disastrous and emotionally draining for the likes of me. "I know I've rejected most of your invitation, senpai; that, I can confirm."

"Don't be silly, I was your supervisor during your first year—I know what's best for you."

I sigh, "Then with all due respect, stop passing your responsibility to me."

"Heh, don't get ahead of yourself, Oogame," he grins. "I am still your senpai, and I believe you still need the…experience—call it an 'enrichment opportunity'. No hard feelings, but you just happen to make it easy; I'm only doing what I have to."

With a glare that slices through the thin, welcoming, façade, he reinforces his stance and hums
mockingly; a response I've come to expect. "Don't you worry, Oogame; unlike you, I haven't been idle with the extra time you've given—especially not to the likes of a 'glorified software'."

..."Idle, you say?"

"For example," he said, making the turn around the corner. "I wouldn't be able to arrange this little 'fun' now, wouldn't I? It's a lot better than wasting it on an inanimate voice box like you do; time is precious, after all."

...I see...it was worth a shot, but I guess he wasn't interested in the first place; I've expected that all along—and should've have known better. It's just how the world works in the first place; one man's misery is another man's pleasure, the suffering of one grants euphoria to another. Kitamura-senpai understands these basic laws and acted on it all in his self-interest—and I have no one to blame but my own hubris. A collateral.

I slump down in silence, quietly telling myself to calm the beast from tearing the chains until a better opportunity arises. As comforting as the ride has been, the air is far from easy to breathe; as if a single flick from a lighter could ignite a chain reaction that combusts the space and consume us in a fiery death. I rest my hand on my pocket, feeling the object that maintains its animosity—unattended—as the blue sky darkens and the sun sets at a distance. The scenery that flashes, coinciding with the flow of time, reminds me of the days before I fell into the web of office politics and deceit. How long has it been since I last see the changing sky outside of the institution? To be home into the welcoming embrace just when the sky turns violet, greeted with a smile that challenges the last glow of the sunset? It all seems like a passing dream...

One day when I ask myself if all of this is 'worth it', then I'll raise my head and say it with pride; 'yes, it is.'

"We're here."

The bright neon lights of the installation invades our peripheral vision—a karaoke bar, situated close to a familiar street I've walked; only this time, I'm not with Monika. The shimmering lights, the men and the women dressed in glamour, and the distant echo of electronic music and lustful symphony, all complimented by the waft of tobacco and alcohol. Indeed, we have arrived in Shinjuku's Kabukicho, once more. The lights, the sound, the atmosphere—everything that encompasses the moment brings about a smile I never knew I had. To think that we return to a...memorable setting; you do remember what happened here about two weeks ago, do you senpai? What a fitting end...

"Now, whatever I ask you to do, Oogame," he starts. "You do as I tell you to—and maybe, you'll land yourself a real woman. I scratch your back, you scratch mine; got it?"

I nod quietly as he rests on the wheel, exhausted but nonetheless satisfied of the small journey. Unceremoniously, he shuts the engine and removes the gleaming ring that dug into the skin of his finger, dropping it carelessly into a sleeve within his bag; the muscles around his cheek contorts with glee as the object disappears into the abyss, a look reminisce to a crocodile upon its prey. My stomach churns, knocking on the ever-present sympathy—not for the animal, mind you, but for its kin. Doubts forms into dark clouds over my head.

"Senpai," I start, catching him slightly off guard. "Why are we doing this? Doing a gokon, I mean."
"Why not?"

I click my tongue and bite down on the lower lip, "I mean, you're married! Wouldn't your wife have a—"

"So long as she's busy with the kids, then it's fine; what they don't know wouldn't harm them, right?"

"But—!"

"Oogame," I jolt, taken aback by his roar and his tone. "Unless it has anything to do with you, this is nothing of your concern! Understood?"

Cornered, I have little choice but to comply. "Yes...sorry, senpai."

Kitamura-senpai huffs and groans, darting his eyes to the side as he recomposes from the recoil, glancing at his bag momentarily before gazing up at the rearview mirror—much to my surprise. The neon lights continues to mesmerize in its design, bleeding its colors through the glass windows and forming patterns of beautiful colors on the dashboard. He gazes up at the colors, to his bag, and sighs. "Call it what you will, but you and I aren't much different, Oogame."

"You see," he continues. "We work from morning to night, toiling away like machines with little recognition or pay; like robots churning out shit that no one gives a flying fuck about. It could drive a man insane..."

Kitamura-senpai sighs, "But that's why we have all these wonderful distractions, all these...coping mechanism,"

"Pornography, video games, magazines, and even your little 'chat-bot' are created for that purpose. To entertain, keep us sane; in my case, my inherent love for women."

"I'm not going to let some physical object tie me down from doing what I love," he continues with a snicker. "That's just how it is. I have my vices, you have yours. Now let's go, we wasted enough time here."

As dislikable as he is as a person, Kitamura-senpai's bout of reflection does have its points. As we both step out of the vehicle and head inside, I glance at the man whom I've condemned and wonder whether doing so is an act of hypocrisy—of myself, or of the things society stands for. We exist to work ourselves to the bone, raised by a system that demands an endless source of obedient drones that is to be depleted and disposed once its function comes to an end, generation after generation. To live in ignorance of this is not a matter of will, but of choice; those who decide not to, find the means to cope. In all honesty, even the 'choice' itself is but an illusion.

Senpai's love and appreciation towards woman is his means of coping to the system; a way to remain sane. Just as the superfluous world of anime, games, and manga, or my zealous dedication to Monika before she came to be; all the same, just with a different coat of paint. In the end, we are but a single entity part of a larger, hypocritical society—and in reality, we happen to be on the opposing end. I almost feel guilty for a second there...almost. No hard feelings, senpai, but just as you said...

'I'm only doing what I have to do.'
and puke that subtly permeates from the visible stains of the carpeted floor; the scent of nightlife, if you will—a smell that is occasionally recognizable in Tokyo's alleys and shadier businesses, along with an oddly sweet, fishy stench that I fail to recognize. The register, not more than possibly thirty, welcomes us with a polite bow before Kitamura-senpai inquire about the room that has been reserved for the occasion, prompting the man to call its current occupant at the moment to greet before guiding both of us to the side.

For a minute, we wait. When the occupant arrives, I am unsure whether I should put a smile or curse the gods.

"Oogame! You don't look the type, so I didn't expect you to come! What changes your mind?"

"Ikari-senpai, good evening," I reply quickly with a polite bow. "I figured I could use a drink and some…company after work."

In a few quick, successful steps Kitamura-senpai cuts in ahead and pressures my shoulders. "This means you will be paying the drinks tonight, Oogame-kun!"

... "Excuse me," I reply with haste, quickly facing both Ikari and Kitamura-senpai—the former bearing an apologetic look. "I wasn't informed about this…?

"I'm sorry, Oogame," Ikari-senpai starts. "But Kitamura and I had a bet that if he can get you into this one, I'll be paying the food and you the drinks."

For the love of—great, another backdoor deal without my consent. Lovely. "And what if I didn't come?"

"I will be paying for everything," Kitamura-senpai cuts in. "But of course you'll come; you and I get along pretty well, after all!"

Like cats and dogs, that's for sure—especially when the dog has rabies and needs to be put down.

"Now, let's not waste any more time. Are the ladies present, Ikari?"

He nods, "Yes, they are; you two are the last arrivals. Come, let us not make them wait."

As Ikari-senpai gestures with his hand and a slight bow towards the hall, Kitamura-senpai draws a comb from his breast pocket and hastily—albeit smoothly—ties his hair, if not just a bit for that coveted positive first impressions. The loud vibration of the music, its echo that seeps from behind closed doors resonates alongside the laughter, chatter, and singing that is neither amazing nor terrible. The carpet, although vacuumed to immaculate, still holds its history with the patches of stains that dots the surface—of what, only god knows. At the end of the hall to our left is a door with a single, diamond-shaped viewing port; an audible echo of a feminine laughter resonates from within. This must be the reserved room where our activity will start.

Opening the door, three young women are seated next to one another in a single row, whispering.

"Ladies, Ayanami," Ikari-senpai starts. "Allow me to introduce Kitamura and Oogame, my colleagues and the last two participant. Gentlemen, if you please."

Ikari-senpai's smooth and beautiful use of words, a trait I've admired from one linguist to another, certainly does have its appeal as he gestures us to take a seat adjacent to the group. The women giggles and nods in unison, politely guiding with their open palm where we take our seats, with
Kitamura-senpai being the closest to the television, then Ikari-senpai, and I, respectively. The three young woman before us—one of which not older than around twenty-twenty one, maybe less, kindly smiles at my direction and fixes her glasses with a push on the rims; coincidentally or not, she's seated adjacent to me. I am not one that is able to appreciate this atmosphere—awkward, oppressive, and uneasy. Let alone Monika, dealing with the opposite sex can be a taxing, mentally draining experience I still have trouble coping; it took nearly a month, a long talk with a stranger in an oden store, and a handful of courage for me to open myself to the former alone—and she's giving the cold shoulder for reasons unknown. Then, there is Mikawa. In the curious case of my literature club's president, she is that of a puzzle I have yet to solve with an unmistakable vibe; something that I can't put my fingers on, familiar and alien—an oxymoron. Comforting, yet risqué.

With all these things going on, there's little space for me to respond properly to the endearing young ladies and their keen interests.

"Then let us start," Kitamura-senpai invites with confidence, seizing the scene like an idol on a stage. "Ladies, is there anything I could offer to start our festivities?"

The women squeals with delight—likely impressed by senpai's confidence and gentlemen-like charisma; it benefits him even further knowing how desirable he can be, a trait I'm sure he recognize. With his little introductory speech, the gokon starts first with a row of alcoholic drinks ordered at his courtesy along with a plate of light snacks—both of which are to be compensated by Ikari-senpai and I. We toast with our beverages, and as time flows in this forsaken event, I start to notice how...gifted Kitamura-senpai can be in the art of seduction and appeasement. His smile, gesture, and charisma charms the ladies like a beacon at the bottom of an abyss, drawing them helplessly as words twists and turns at his will; it explains how an innocent high school student could easily fall into prey.

"Oogame, aren't you going to be a bit more assertive?" Ikari-senpai nudges, "You've been relatively passive; do you not have any interest in these fine ladies? I can see one of them seem to have a keen eye for you."

I take a sip from my glass and sighs, "Senpai, with respect, I happen to have someone dear to me."

"Oh! Then why did you come here?"

"Well, it's—"

"Don't mind him, Ikari!" Kitamura-senpai interjects, "His 'special someone' exists only in his imagination—fictional! In other word, he's a nijigen!"

He laughs condescendingly, yet in such a way that it is perceived as nothing more than a tease to our esteemed audiences who follows suit with giggles of their own. Ikari-senpai too, is convinced of Kitamura-senpai's remarks and further encourages my participation; an increase of alcohol would suit nicely, or so they suggest. By the end of the first thirty minutes, both parties are mingled in random discussions, in no small part thanks to Kitamura-senpai's confidence and charm. And I...

...I'm getting more frustrated. At the gokon, the laughter of the girls, Kitamura-senpai's taunts, and at myself. What am I doing here?

I'm here to free myself, aren't I? To slay the demon by cutting its wings off and dissect it open to reveal all its ugliness for all to see, to reap a victory promised with the arsenal I have at my disposal. Then why am I playing along in this madness? This can't keep up, or I'll lose my chance to properly humiliate the bastard—I need to somehow get rid of Ikari-senpai. I can't let anyone else from work get involved in this matter. But how…?
"Oogame! Get me another nama here, please," Ikari-senpai calls out as he arms one of the participants. "Oh, and one more of that cola-whiskey for Ayanami-chan as well."

The demon chuckles, "Slow down, Ikari! You might pass out if you drink too fast—who's going to take you home then?"

Catching a glance at Ikari-senpai, it becomes apparent how...enamored he is—not with his company who, admittedly, is doing her best to catch his attention, but to the jug of brewed malt he prize like a golden goblet, consuming it in succession that impresses as much as it concerns the young woman. It also becomes apparent to me how notoriously low his alcohol tolerance is and why he is infamous to be the first to get drunk in every mandatory company parties; moments where he sang 'jingle bells'—out of tune and pronunciation—before passing out during last year's Christmas party speaks volume.

...

Then it hit me...

"Don't worry, drink to your fill, senpai," I reply with a mustered smile. "It's on me, after all."

"Hey, see! Oogame understands how to be a friend! Good man!"

"Kitamura-senpai, would you like some too?"

He chuckles, waving dismissively. "Now you're into it! No thanks, I need to drive later."

His guard is down. Perfect; they say, 'alcohol gives you infinite patience for stupidity'. Let's put that to the test, shall we? After all...

I never intend to pay for these expenses.

A wise man once said, 'alcohol is man's worst enemy'.

A beverage that, when consumed in low quantity, provides the individual with euphoria, reduced anxiety, and sociability that makes it a staple in most parties once you've reach adulthood. In high doses, however, it is the bane of humanity where man's idiocy and illogical actions takes hold under the guise and influence of drunkenness, stupor, and unconsciousness that is followed with a morning of pain, regret, and misery. I've experienced it, luckily within the confines of my own abode and with Monika as my witness; and that was before she came to be. Surely it is man's worst enemy...

But it will be my best ally and Kitamura's worst by the end of the night.

"Geez, do you really have to indulge him, Oogame-kun?" my company, Chie, remarked in exasperation as Ikari-senpai downs another jug—likely, his last for tonight. "He doesn't look too well..."

I grin cynically, "He'll be fine; Ikari-senpai's alcohol tolerance is commendable."

"D-damn straight, Oogame! I c-can—" he pause, burping incessantly and pushing poor Ayanami away. "—j-jush gimmeeeee anotheerrrrr...."

After an hour of copious amounts of alcohol, Ikari-senpai retires with a snore, completely neglecting Ayanami and leaving Kitamura-senpai, the other two women, and myself as the remaining participant in this blind date. We're only an hour into the event, a few ice breakers, sang a few songs, and had little talks here and there about topics that is not of my concern or interest. Glancing at
Kitamura-senpai it's quite easy to tell how jolly he is regardless of the situation; after all, having one of the youngest participant, Yukari, clinging to him in a daze must have pumped his confidence and libido to pierce the heavens of his ego.

Now, let's change that, shall we? Let's make it a night he wish he could forget.

"Nee…Oogame-kun," Chie starts with a whisper, breaking my focus. "Is something the matter? You don't seem to be invested—you haven't even have your second or third glass."

With all honesty, I do feel a pang of guilt for the bespectacled girl, Chie, who genuinely invests her time in this occasion. It's sad to say that I may be the least interesting person in this room—more so to know that she pours all her effort to draw me to the overall atmosphere I purposely detach from; after all, I agreed to this charade not of interest, but of coercion and revenge. With a sigh, I glance at her and bend to whisper with my glass at hand. "I'm sorry, but I really am in a committed relationship."

"Is that so…" she replies, voice laden heavy with disappointment and frustration. "Then…could you at least tell me your reason for participation? Help me understand why; Ayanami did her best to organize all of us here and now she's watching that drunk, Yukari looks as if she's having the time of her life with that man, and I can't help but feel a bit…left out…"

I muster a smile, carefully eavesdropping to Kitamura-senpai's conversation with his partner—elation, exhilarating, and flirtatious; regrettably, this is where I will end the night. I down my glass of beer. "Don't mistake me, Makinami, but if we ever meet in another time or circumstance, I may be more open for conversation. However,"

"Right now, I have a score to settle."

Kitamura-senpai laughs with glee as his hand extends and slithers around the waist of his company, feeling her hip lustfully which she gladly accepts. The pair, lost in amorous intoxication and pleasure flirts without care, lost in their own paradise made out of alcohol and wishful dreams of a meaningful encounter. I listen, closely waiting for the moment to strike—to rob Kitamura-senpai of the things he love, to disgrace him from his stature, and ultimately to free myself from his shackles.

"I didn't know you're like this, Abe!" Yukari flirts in first-name basis. "Handsome, rich…you must have someone already, right?"

He wags his finger and replies in English; no, don't ask how I feel about it. "No, no, no!"

"Hee…really…?"

"He's married."

... Eyes suddenly darts to my direction, focusing their intensity as I take a gulp on the drink that is served on the table—Kitamura-senpai's cutting glare pierces the air. I stand firm, feeling light on my head and stare daggers in return. His partner quickly scoots, pushing his arm away from her with a look of disbelief and shock while, in an act to save his face, Kitamura-senpai raises his left hand for all to see.

"Ladies, that's just a joke, don't worry! See? Nothing!" he lowers his hand. "I'm a loyal kind-of guy; if I am married, I would have the ring on me all the time."

"He does," I interrupt. "It's probably hidden in the car, within his bag. He wouldn't be bringing it
here, naturally. Else he couldn't bring one or two of you to a hotel later."

I chuckle mockingly, garnering an increase of hostility from the beast as the women all look on each other with disbelief, noticing the sudden loss of joy diluted by the unbridled rage of my prey. I smile, provoking him further. How does it feel, senpai? To have the things you love robbed and mocked in public?

"Oogame..." he starts with a lighter, suppressed tone in an attempt to maintain his fracturing image. "You must be drunk out of your mind! You know full well that I'm single, right? Ladies, don't listen to this *nijigen*—he's delusional."

I humph, "At least I'm still honest about the things I love; I can't say the same about your *loyalty* to your wife and *child*."

His partner recoils in surprise. "You have a...child? Already? But you said earlier..."

Kitamura bursts out laughing, "N-no, no! I mean, you *really* want to believe—"

"Don't get me started on how he *touch* his student."

The tone has been set. Yukari politely excuses herself, inching away and moves to the side of Ayanami who is still tending to Ikari-senpai, fast asleep on the couch. The song in TV continues to play, yet all we hear is the deafening silence of an encroaching tempest; furious and destructive. The whispers of the female participants, the lingering insults directed at him is the symphony that will lead me to battle. The stage has been set.

He chuckles, dying at the last note. "Oogame...let's step outside for a bit. You may need to cool off."

"As you wish, *senpai*."

Like two dogs herded to a ring, I take my bag and walk out of the room with Kitamura-senpai closely behind me. I excuse myself politely, leaving them to care for Ikari-senpai as we venture out of the karaoke bar and to the idle streets, occupied with a few bystanders and shady individuals dressed in dirty casuals or sharp suit. I feel a tap on my shoulder, prompting me to turn...

...and I saw 'white'.

It happen in a flash, a mere second and without warning until the searing pain settles on my right eye and the 'thud' as my weight comes into contact with the hot asphalt. A clutter rings just a few meters away from my face, far enough not to be of arms reach as my vision blurs—not from the impact, but of the loss of my vision apparatus. My head feels lighter, yet I feel a sense of confidence I've never felt before as I look up at the bounty. The demon roars.

"You know, Oogame, things could have turned out differently tonight," he spits. "It could've been a fine night—for you, and me. I get to take someone home, stop at a hotel, have a good time, but oh no..."

His tone depresses, seeped in fury. "You just have to *fucking ruin it*! What part of 'do as I say' do you not understand?"

"Oh I'm sorry, maybe I should *speak in English* for you to understand! Living abroad must have made you forget about your language!"

"Maybe," he continues. "Maybe you have forgotten about *manners*—*do you not see? I AM YOUR"
"Shiho Ariake, I spit and like a spell, the beast froze in terror. "Such a lovely name, but I believe you're...familiar with it aside from being that of our student."

I raise to my feet and pull my weight, dusting my suit before picking up my fallen spectacles which, unfortunately, is of little use to aid my vision. Kitamura-senpai recoils in surprise as a small crowd of curious bystander slowly gathers at the spectacle that unfolds. The scene, the neon lights, the atmosphere...it brings me back to that evening; my, how the table have turned...

"You think I didn't catch that, Kitamura," I grin mockingly. "You think you're the only one who has...'connections'? I have eyes and ears too, you know."

He takes a step back, defensively. "W-what are you talking about? Even if I do have a connection with 'her', you do not have proof! Don't forget that I still—"

His lips suspend, agape, eyes widen in shock, and voice drowned by our surroundings of murmurs and whispers as I raise my phone and reveal to him a picture Monika took during that encounter. I smile cynically, reveling in the position of power I hold over this filth; disgusting, I know, but I can see why someone can get addicted to this. Monika was right; 'sometimes the key to happiness is to just be hopelessly selfish'.

"I suggest you pick your words and actions carefully, Kitamura. You'll never know where this picture might end up in."

Chuckling, I take a step forward at the pitiful man who slowly backs away, like a cornered rat. "Just by a glance, you can tell this is you—fresh out of a love hotel; oh, who's this girl…?"

"Isn't this," I point at the girl in the image. "Isn't this Shiho Ariake...? Your student? A quiet girl, often disparate from the rest of her peers, making her a prime target for bullying—and yet recently, a 'little bird' told me that she acquired a...lover, so to speak."

I continue, "I don't think it's a coincidence that she's often late in periods where you are absent of class, Kitamura. I believe the school board would be interested with this information to keep their name clean; your family and police could have an interest."

"How did you know all this...?"

"As I say," I chuckle. "I have eyes and ears."

"What do you want...!" he roars. Still stubbornly cling to that illusion of yours, I see. "Y-you won't get anything from me! DO YOU NOT CARE ABOUT YOUR CLASS REPRESENTATIVE, OR YOUR CAREER!? I—"

"With a press of a button I can just delete your career and life, right here and right now; I am in control now. After all," I chuckle. "I do have someone I'm committed to—you know, that 'chat bot'? So why should I care?"

"YOU'RE CRAZY!" he screams. "ALL THIS FOR SOME PROGRAM...!? WAKE UP! SHE DOESN'T EXIST!"

"She's real to me."
The bystanders mutter, out of curiosity and intrigue at this encounter—a side-show from the monotonous life reality offers. Kitamura backs away, desperate to bite back yet restrained by the whispers that murmurs—all against him. 'Immoral', 'despicable human', 'trash', and many more that echoes my sentiment while some starts to walk away and disperse so as not to attract the attention of the police—of course, we can always take this further.

"You know, I don't condone student-teacher relationship, Kitamura." I start, closing our final distance. "So I may report this to the school board—maybe even your family and the authorities so they can deal with it."

"You…!"

"But I don't wish to trouble outside parties concerning our feud, so I may let this slide. That is of course, in one condition," I inch close to a whisper. "That is if you get the fuck out of my back and leave. Me. Alone."

He recoils, raising his fists to deliver a blow that never came upon noticing the crowd that gasps at the sig along with the three participants of the gokon and Ikari-senpai, who watches in disbelief; an unexpected turn of events, but otherwise welcomed. His image and reputation, ruined. I smile discreetly, mocking him behind layers of spectators and eyewitnesses. Kitamura flinches in horror and defeat, "You…madman…!"

"I learned from the best. Besides," I continue, "Nobody would notice another madman in this mad world."

I pick my bag and the remaining pieces of my shattered glasses, "Oh by the way, you've racked up quite the bill to pay in this fine establishment. Good night."

Politely, I excuse myself from our esteemed guests and Ikari-senpai who, in his state of stupor and bewilderment, looks on at me and nods in approval before glancing to Kitamura, shaking his head in disappointment and disgust before leaving with Ayanami by his side. The crowd disperses as quickly as they gathered, making it easy for me to walk and blend into the night, passing the love hotel that made all of this possible. I grin at the sight; the pain on my right eye dissipates. Karma is a quite a bitch, isn't it? The taste of victory and freedom never feel so delectably sweet…yet bitter and disgusting.

In the end, I am no different than the demon that I've slain.

"I'm home."

I have little to say as I close the door behind me, sighing as I rest my head on the hard surface and latching the lock. I've come to understand, on my way home, what Monika meant when she begged me to find a peaceful solution; an answer that we conclude to be nonexistent due to the circumstances. That sweet taste of victory, delectable and irresistible, lasts only but a moment before vanishing by a sour, grainy aftertaste that lingers at the end. Have I really do the right thing? To fight fire with fire…is it really wise of me to do so? The girl, Shiho Ariake, is nothing but a victim within this proxy, yet I used her like a tool; a bargaining chip made out of an innocent soul. Someone I could have helped. Shiho may be nothing more than Kitamura's plaything, but she…

…she is content with it—happier than she ever was. Is it wrong of me to disrupt someone's happiness for the sake of 'moral high ground' set by society? Or is it a sin for us to pursue our own happiness? To be hopelessly selfish? I don't know anymore…
I open the door to my room and immediately, a voice echoes in shock. "Un2sD, you're hurt…!"

Without a whisper, I seat myself on the usual throne before her as an audience as she stress herself in forlorn, resting her palm on the screen at this pitiful sight. I toss my glasses—broken and unusable—on the desk and smile weakly, mustering a chuckle. Her emerald green eyes darts wildly, glistens by the reflection of the screen as she struggles to piece together the enigma, resting her palm helplessly on her end of reality but retreats in mere seconds. Still, I am lost in the maze she has erected against me.

"Monika, delete the work folder 'Kitamura'," I start. "His errands are no longer my concern; it is done."

She affirms in silence with nothing but a nod, her emerald eye lost in an array of emotions she refuses to describe, keeping me away in arms' length and not in the know. The tabs flashes and disappear, along with it the folder that should have been deleted long ago. An overwhelming sense of relief envelopes as I watch it all unfold, disappearing into the abyss of the system for her to banish permanently. Monika sighs, looks at me from the corner of her eye and affirms with a nod; it is done.

"How…do you feel?" she asks worryingly, yet distant. "Did you…?"

I nod weakly, "yes. It's settled."

"Good for you."

There is so much more to say, many more to come and yet this barrier she erected…it's driving me insane. Yes, everything with Kitamura may be settled, but what is happening here—with my life, with you—is not. Since the break of dawn, I tried what any reasonable man would do to open an avenue of conversation, a path that had disappeared without warning since last evening—and I am at a loss as to the reason why. Why can't you tell me, Monika? Why…?

I try to remember the discussion we had via the messaging app, wondering to strike another conversation.

"You said you had something important to tell me…?" I ask. "We can talk about it now, if you wish…?"

Monika's emerald eyes lights up, then dies as fast as it came. Meekly, she shakes her head and smiles with a hint of sadness, suppressing the thought and any possible conversation to be had; an act of selfishness that I remember from Sayori who hides her sadness behind a series of fake smiles and laughter. I shiver at the conclusion, worried over Monika's sake as she repeats the same damn pattern that led to her end—an ending I do not wish to see. I know how it felt, to keep everything to yourself, bottled, believing that by doing so others can continue to put a smile and act as if everything is ok—a self-destructive mentality that eats away at your soul, rejecting anyone who approaches for help, selfish and absurd.

I have to break through…

"Monika, don't be like this…" I start. "If there really is something of importance, please tell me. I can't sit around watching you like this…"

She denies, "No, it's not that, D2s4H=, it's just…I don't think the timing is right. Can we talk about this later, please…?"

With her eyes gazing in absence away from mine, I struggle to remain calm at the issue that grows
between her and me. Indeed, it all began the night after the literature club member came for a visit, a
time where I am left in the unknown of the events that unfold—a struggle, perhaps, between her and
Mikawa, the leader of my literature club. In one end, I want to believe of the words that Monika said;
the blame that falls solely at Mikawa's feet, an action that is damaging as it is uncalled for. Yet a part
of me wants to deny it, a blame that incriminates a culprit that may just be as innocent as she seems to
be; a student that I've raised and tailored to that of Monika—an equal, if not greater.

And here I wander, lost in a crossroad between Monika, Mikawa, and I...

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Hi! Megu here! It's been a while, and I apologize for this extensive delay for this
chapter. This chapter in particular has been difficult to write aside from the rewrites on
some part, its length, and the heavy mood it brought upon. It was more of a challenge to
finish, but here it is!

Here are some translations notes to help!

ToDai: Acronym for 'Tokyo Daigaku' or 'Tokyo University

Gokon/Goukon: Blind date event, usually organized by two parties who gather friends.
Participants usually sit facing one another of opposite sex, discussing between
themselves over 'who's getting who' along with a glass of alcohol, snacks, and/or songs.

Nijigen: A common insult, basically someone having a '2D complex'. Whether you wan
to perceive it as an insult or not is up to the context.

Nama: A shortened word that derives from 'Nama beer' (生ビール) or 'raw/untapped
beer'. Basically, standard word for 'draft beer', though its usage is universal to describe
any beer-canned or not.

Next chapter...we'll just see how it goes. I should be able to get the next one up in a
week if it isn't too...mentally taxing like this one.
Oh, L!t3R4te One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Oh, L!t3R4te One**

_T4le of time unknown,
Of a d29yYW4=, a dHlwZXdyaXRlcg==, and YSBjbGlbnQ==.
Write me a letter dG8gbXkgYmVsb3ZjZA==,
Oh lit3rATe oNe!

_CeL3br4t1on of youth,
A melting cG90IG9mIGNvbmZlc3Npb25zLg==
V29yZHMgZXNjYXB1IGhlciBsaXBzLA==
And v4Nish as 5oon as it comes.

_VGhlIHdvbWFuHINocmlua3MgYW4gb2NlYW4gb2Ygd29yZHMS
OnT0 a p13ce of condenSeD w#Od.
UGxIYXNlIGxldCBoaW0ga25vdyBteSBidXJkZW4s
Oh literate one!

_MetaLL1c stamps ZGFuY2UgdXBvbiB0aGUgY3lsaW5kZXI=
SW5sZWQgbGV0dGVcyBzZWVwcyBpbnRvIHRoZSB3aGl0ZSBzdXJmYWNlLA==
SW1wcmldGluZywgZWhYm9yYXRpbmc= her feelings.
Do you UNDErStand…?

_The letter w4S done and s3nt.
Though the client bmV2ZXIgcmV0dXJu, she knew.
Wh3n w1LL y0u be trUE to y0urself,
Oh lt3r4te one?

The gentle waft of caffeine, the ray of the sun that bleeds through the curtains, and the comforting voice from the girl beyond this reality; these are the pieces that made up my mornings, the little snippets in life that I've grown to love. Each time the alarm rings, my arm flails to reach for the button that grants me the promise of another five minutes—one that is never fulfilled by the interruption of a second, and a third. The second, a blistering screech from my cellphone that rests far at the other end of the room, plugged to a cable—charging. The third, a soothing 'good morning' from the emerald-eyed songbird, singing its days away with a smile, laughter, and cheer that transcends the barrier between us.

It's strange how well you start to notice these insignificant details in the absence of her voice.

"Good morning, Mo-chii."

"Good morning," she smiles politely, holding a cup in her hand. "Once again, Friday arrives like a storm."

It is also unsettling to know how surreal it is to catch the striking change of atmosphere, the secrecy and reticence concealed beneath layers of smile and laughter; and I hate it.
A week has passed, and lady luck has been generous with her blessings for once. Though the cutting pain that engorge my right eye still remains, my glasses are insured and was replaced on the following Saturday. Work hasn't been as much of a torment, and Kitamura has been keeping his distance—after all, I still have the incriminating evidence against him. The aftermath of the gokon left a black mark on his near-stellar record—not on public, mind you, as the entire incident was undisclosed to authorities and the school; at least, that's the official account—Ikari-senpai's gossiping was not. Who would have thought? When the faculties and student caught wind of it and asked about the bruise on my right eye, the little lie about 'falling down the stairs' works as well to my benefit as much as it is to suppress him; let's just say it ends up with my name smelling like roses and his reputation covered in shit—and that's putting it lightly. Ikari-senpai sure did cut my work short; humiliating Kitamura was the plan, but I never thought it would work this well.

I can only hope the same can be said about Monika. Where shall I start?

…

Saturday; the day after the incident sounds about as good of a place as any.

That day, Monika was…unusually proactive—at least for the first half. Whether it was out of concern or sympathy, she started with the usual 'good morning'-routine that caught me off-guard with a smile that—how can I put this? Forced? Suppressed? Let alone putting it in words, seeing it all unfold is like watching her carve her skin with a dull knife, one cut at a time, letting blood seeps out of the gash while my plea fell on deaf ears, helpless and out of reach. She smiles and giggles like clockwork, letting the blade do its magic to draw more of that crimson liquid that flows like a river across her arm and pretend. I chose to play along, afraid of straining the relationship further than it already was.

I left the apartment at noon and returned before supper; it was no different than it was in the morning.

On Sunday I invited her for a walk outside, hoping to worm my way to get her to speak; relationships are built on communication and trust, after all. That didn't work. Again, she replied with the uncanny expression that I began to loathe, a smile that reminded me of a tragedy that had hit her literature club before—and is now in a collision course to ours; an unstoppable train wreck that marks the end of 'act one'. I insisted—gently, of course—to take her outside, see the world and maybe discover something new, yet…

Yet she declined the invitation, reason being the pain and the chronic headaches—a late constant occurrence. I asked why, again she declined and hid behind smiles and laughter, giving me faux reassurance and telling me to 'go have some fun'. I was left to wander in Akiba the afternoon, alone and lost in the ever-present melodious cacophony of the arcade machine, entertained by a series of numbers and colors that I had long forgotten. Words that are unable to be conveyed and feelings that cannot be expressed, buried—a summary of the end of the week.

Then the weekdays rolled in.

Monday kicked like a bucket, loud and unceremonious both in its own approach and Monika's. I was certain then that something was being kept purposely out of my knowledge, whatever it is. My question about her 'headache' that plagued her the day before was swatted away, cleverly meandered through a series of trivia and conversations that leads to nowhere; again, I played along her charade and head to work. On another matter, it slowly became obvious to me about Mikawa's advances that grew bolder at each encounter—I may be inexperienced, but even a fool like me tend to catch the hints that were tossed carelessly, especially if it was tailored for me. From constant participation in classes, 'random encounters' in halls during lunch, or afterschool rendezvous on the guise of 'reports
and corrections', it became apparent from the way she spoke to how she moved—teasing, seductive, and yet refined with hints of maturity that was unmistakably Mikawa. Thus, Monday ended with Monika keeping me at a distance and Mikawa vying for my attention.

There was nothing peculiar on Tuesday; Wednesday, however…

A scream echoed from the living room during my shower; one of agony. It was an unmistakable cry that was as difficult to forget as it was painful to remember. I rushed to meet the source and was convinced they; again, she deflected the subject and pushed me to the side, just before I left for work. It was stupid of me to force for details, more so when subtlety isn't part of my forte…

…

We had a fight.

It wasn't easy to bottle the thought under professionalism and smiles; not when you have an entire day ahead to tackle. Let alone teacher's briefings and homeroom, classes felt more like a chore than it already was—I censured one of my pupil over a pronunciation mistake—a pronunciation! It wasn't even that severe to begin with, and yet when emotions took greater control over facts...it was a recipe for disaster. I was deprived of the comfort, the little snippets that kept my morning and my mind stable; robbed by none other than Monika herself. But it was unfair—selfish, even—to push all the blame; I was in her shoes once before, I should know this! Which is why what came after was… difficult, even for me.

Around lunch time, Mikawa came and invited me over—and I took solace in her open hands. Even if it was a conversation over a simple sandwich that she made, it was a salvation that I couldn't refuse. She offered to come with handmade lunches next time—I declined, but complimented her efforts otherwise. The guilt that came after…I rather not dwell on it.

Even after I returned, we kept to ourselves for the entire evening; Monika on the piano, and I on a wa-puro. She practiced on a new musical note she recently had interest in and—despite numerous errors and mistakes, it was a stellar performance. No words were exchanged until the light fades as dictated by father time; we apologized unanimously the next morning. The topics about her health, the headaches, all glossed and sidestepped as if it was nothing; I left the house with worries on my shoulders and shackles on my ankles but nonetheless, the show must go on. There wasn't much to say about yesterday—students were running back and forth, setting up decorations, and some irregulars even opted to stay afterschool for the sake of their class. Thus it came as much of a surprise to me when Mikawa brought along homemade lunches—sandwiches, mostly—and invited me over hot coffee and final budget reports for both the literature club and class 3-2. Again, I couldn't refuse; not after all the effort she poured into that box.

Seeking solace from someone else…and I dare put myself on a higher moral ground than Kitamura? Hypocrite!

That was yesterday.

"You sure you'll be ok?" I ask, pulling my tie to its fixed position. "How do I look?"

Monika musters a soft smile and nods, "I'll be alright. You look perfect, JCcs4Fl."

...

The urge to ask, to push for answers are abruptly suppressed by her gentle expression that sends shockwaves straight to my core, silencing any uprising in an instant—the doubts of her claims that
emerged from her sudden attempt to display a familiar demeanor. Attempt. It's difficult to ignore; the abrupt change of character, the cold shoulder before, and now the sudden warmth that oozes made a bleak call out to other fictional characters with a 'flag'; not in the literal sense, but more of an omen.

I simply. Can't. IGNORE IT!

I admit that I know little about you—not as a character, but as a person, Monika, but I'm doing what I can based on what I know! Help me to understand what the fuck. Is. Going. On! Why are you like this? What are you trying to hide? Was it something I said? I opened my door to you, yet you build a maze out of glass and kept your distance. Please, Monika… I need to—no, I want to know and understand… don't push me away like this...

But...

But whatever I'll say, you'll deflect it again, will you? You're going to keep acting as if everything is alright and it's 'Just Monika', smiling at my hubris as I fumble and orbit around you, the center of it all. I really shouldn't push all the blame on you and expect an answer—I may be a fool, but that doesn't make me a doormat. GODDAMN IT ALL! My mind drones like a typewriter without stop as it nitpicks the discrepancies in her behavior, causing me to sigh with harbored frustration, cautiously sipping my coffee to keep my nerves calm and collected.

"73nFHg?" She cuts, breaking my concentration. "Is there something bothering you?"

I set my cup down. "Nothing. I'll be heading off, Monika—if there is anything, use the usual, alright?"

"Okay. Take care…!"

With a smile that betrays her true feelings, she sends me off against the horrors of modern society, patiently waiting for my return. I glance over my shoulder to notice the spherical camera that tracks my movements, observant. I can only return a smile and a wave, knowing full well of my own deception.

This cannot continue…

"Hey, hey, did you know? They say that if you confess your love on the school rooftop at the end of the festival, your dream will come true!"

"Eeh... but isn't the school rooftop closed?"

"That's why! It's a charm!"

And that is also why we, teachers, can't have nice things during festivals. Kids these days…

Indeed, the school's mood is in full-swing geared towards the big day. Talks about food booths, famous local stands and their offerings, camera-worthy moments to be had, and of course, the passing whispers of love and romance that comes with the 'charm' as a package; a popular gossip amongst the female population. It was a story that superseded my enrollment, an old legend about a teacher and a student who went into an illicit relationship and committed a double-suicide as prove of
their loyalty and love—morbid, I know. It's ironic; tales of suicide and death of the past can easily be translated into symbols of undying love and romance. We certainly possess a twisted sense of humor, as a society. It's also because of those old wives' tales that us, teachers, now have the responsibility to prevent young fools from doing the same—confession or otherwise. Aside from the stairs, the school rooftop is generally inaccessible and yet it doesn't stop some idiot from breaking the lock two years prior. As if the three meter tall fence wasn't enough…

"Sensei, are you ok?"

"Oh, y-yes…just a little distracted."

Earnestly accompanying to my right like a personal secretary, Mikawa smiles softly as her gentle address draws me back to reality, away from daydreams and contemplations. In my hand is a paper—arrangement of numbers, characters, and letters—a budget report of class 3-2 and the literature club that is to be finalized before the end of the day. With a glance, I see my reflection in her expectant eyes, waiting with bated breath of my approval—a praise of some kind—for her efforts on the documents that had occupied most of her time in the weeks leading to the event. A flush of blood rushes across my cheeks upon noticing the light makeup that accentuates her mature, feminine charm; barely noticeable to those less observant—admittedly, she does look stunningly innocent and cute in the way she presents herself.

…

To find myself thinking to such extent…it doesn't take a genius to see the errors of my thoughts; the taboo of the subject. It's…frightening.

I dart back to the paper at hand, glancing occasionally ahead while making our way to the school yard. Even during lunch time, students rushing back and forth with something related to the festival is becoming a more common sight than the usual idleness and carefree mood that is prevalent prior—indeed, for the third years this may as well be their last. Pouring what concentration to the task at hand, I have come to admire Mikawa's handwriting—neat and ladylike, very pleasant to the eye. The light strokes and brushes, sharp and clear, details the expenditures of the budget provided for our homeroom and the literature club which, despite receiving zero in sum, came through with the pooling of our own resources—and I dare say, it would be more of chore to read through everything if Yuuki's the one penning this.

"We spent almost six thousand yen yesterday for…?"

"Tea and coffee, sensei," she answers with confidence. "Sunohara-san doesn't like the product we tested previously and opted for another."

Must have been one hell of a tea and coffee set; I'll be sure to taste that tomorrow once the opportunity arises.

From the corner of my eye a figure approaches at a brisk pace, momentarily causing me to pause my steps, as did he. Glancing at the unexpected guest, a sly grin stretches across my feature as I meet him, Kitamura, eye to eye—Shiho Ariake loyally follows him from behind, using his build as cover. He clicks his tongue and hisses, avoiding eye contact when possible; I huff in response, raising my head a little higher than usual.

"Going somewhere, Kitamura?"

"Faculty office," he spits. "It's none of your business, and I see you're going somewhere with Mikawa?"
I chuckle derisively, "We're finalizing our class' and club's budget report—there's nothing for me to hide, after all."

"Now," I continue, "I sure hope I'm...mistaken to what you're—"

"—Ariake wishes to talk to me," he cuts, acid in his tone. "It's not of your concern!"

"Not if a student is involved," I reply. "Especially not with your...reputation'; we are teachers, after all."

He huffs defensively, sighing in defeat as he glance at both Shiho and Mikawa who accompanies us, respectively, Gritting his teeth and answers as calm as he can muster. "It's a bullying case."

"Bullying?"

"Briefings tend to gloss over the matter—I don't believe this is a good time or place for us to discuss. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

I scoot and give way to the pair in question, gesturing as politely as I can be. With Shiho timidly behind him, I smile and amiably greet her with a nod; she bows meekly in return, replying with a 'good afternoon, sensei' in a voice that is barely audible to a whisper before following Kitamura again like a duckling to its mother. Sometimes, I can't help but wonder how a girl as innocent and soft-spoken as her could fall for someone as brash and arrogant as Kitamura. And bullying? Her? Why would anyone bully someone like Shiho? A girl as demure as wrens, aloof from her surroundings and often alone with her headphone over her ears, lost in a personal wonderland...why would anyone even pick her as a target?

Moreover, why hide behind Kitamura? I sense no ill will coming from her; there's no reason for...

"Sensei, shall we go?"

...

Hold that thought, Oogame.

My attention darts back towards Mikawa who, in her earnest, beckons to return to the schedule—time, after all, is a luxury we don't have. She takes a stride, her ponytail dances with the momentum at each extra steps, teasing and beckoning to match her quick—but brisk—pace. I shrug and sigh, following her footsteps that echoes across the ocean of uniformity and order as the silhouette of Kitamura and his pet is swallowed by the crowd while her voice—Mikawa's—becomes my guide.

I glance at the characters and numbers on the paper at hand. It still is a pleasure to look at.

Festival. When someone mentions the word, what is the first thing that pops into your mind? Fireworks? Colorful booths? Grilled skewered meat and squid? Games? How about toys? There may be many different translations or interpretations of the word, but none is as unique as its depiction in Japanese society that coincides with its popularization through pop culture. Since that of a child, we were exposed to it—the colorful booths, dances, sounds, music, attire, food, and everything that correlates with it from the most minuscule detail to the most common. Not to mention, each prefecture has its own tradition that are distinct from one another so there's always something new to discover. The same can be said about school festivals, although...

...I can't say I share the same enthusiasm. Not after the events of the game.
You see, the combination of literature clubs and school festival, to me, is like a ticking time bomb—an omen. It hasn't changed since then; the image of bright lights, colorful stands, and student-run stalls are like illusions of the past that died along with my childhood and naivety. That, however, is something I can't allow to remain—a mindset that needs to change that I'm positive she—Monika—would agree. As I watch the club members—Mikawa's—mingle and present their efforts of the last few weeks, I was reminded of Monika's circumstances and how she, if going by my knowledge of the events, has never seen or experience what a festival truly is or what it can be; the potential to draw your inner childhood and joy that lie dormant within everyone. These students of mine, overcharged with enthusiasm and liquid sugar even before the festival, brings forth a smile—a memory—of my own childhood and birthed a thought.

It may be an outrageous idea, but I'm sure it is something she would appreciate.

"Sensei, what do you think of this poster?"

Yuuki and Satsuki raise their designs up high to match my peripheral vision, displaying it in its full size and splendor. The placard, each belonging to Yuuki and Satsuki respectively, reflects the stark contrast of their creators yet delivers the same message and purpose of advertising Obase's cookies—one a simple, down-to-earth design while the other, decorative and colorful. Yuuki's design has his own hand-drawn character akin to a Sunday paperback publication, with speech bubble and all. Satsuki, on the other hand, utilizes a photograph of cookies and ornaments that borders the design reminiscent to Washi tapes—girlish, but it is to be expected.

"They look fine," I reply with a chuckle. "But I'm not the one making the decision—isn't that right, president?"

Mikawa giggles softly and beams, nodding, "Yes, I guess I have to agree with you, sensei. I'm fond of Satsuki's design, although…"

She pauses contemplatively as Yuuki celebrates his early victory. "Keep in mind we have to copy these and distribute them throughout the school's announcement board—and I don't think color prints are cheap."

"Hah! I win, you summer monkey!"

Satsuki sticks her tongue in retaliation, "Yuuki, you meanie!"

"Although…" Aki cuts, "Yuuki's design is too simple—and isn't the drawing could potentially mistake us as the anime research club?"

Admittedly, I do like Yuuki's design, but bias probably has a high factor in that decision; the vice-president does have her point, after all. In a form of a counter-attack, Satsuki quietly snickers and toss a mocking grin at her partner-in-crime. "Take that, you snow crab!"

Yuuki squints his brow in confusion and pushes his glasses' rim with his index finger. "A snow crab…? Really…? That's the best comeback you can think of?"

"Because you stay indoors during weekends! Like a crab! A hermit!"

A smile curls across my feature as the scene descends into the usual fashion that is a staple of this literature club—the manzai duo of Yuuki and Satsuki. Yet even in this occasion, my eyes and mind trails towards the window and unto an open world that lies beyond this classroom. Memories of my childhood, the thought about the festival…it had me thinking about Monika and her epiphany even more than before. To find that none of it is real—your parental figure, heroes, dreams,
childhood, past—and were all just a construction of some guy's imagination and brilliance in writing and coding is a bitter red pill to swallow. If someone were to ask me if I could tell them a story of my childhood, it would be as simple as spelling the phonetics of 'a, i, u, e, o'; but if someone were to ask Monika the same question, would she be able to answer them confidently knowing that none of it is real? This reality I live in—this world that I've taken for granted—is a world that she is willing to die for; and I tried to run from it. That must have been an insult for her. For a simpleton like me who tries to escape what means the world for her...do I not want to appreciate her efforts to be a part of my reality?

With her, maybe...just maybe...we can make memories for both of us in this mundane, cruel, and exhausting life.

"Alright, everyone...!" Mikawa states as she triggers her signature clap. "Remember that we need to have everything done today! So, let's head over to the media room and finalize everything."

"I'll stay here," Obase follows quickly. "Someone has to watch the classroom with sensei—and I'll be baking the cookies later today, anyway."

"Don't you want to see the results? These are meant to advertise your cookies."

He shrugs, "Nah, its fine. As long as those are cookies displayed, it gets the message across..."

The club president sighs, crossing her arms and ponders. "—then I'll stay in the cl-

"I think you're much more needed over there, prez," he quickly cuts. "I think Aki-chan could use some help finalizing, right vice-prez?"

Aki jumps slightly at Obase's quick 'toss of the bomb'—or for a lack of a better word, another one of Obase's attempt at dodging responsibility. Her response leaves much of a bitter taste, judging by Mikawa's reaction. "A-ara! Well, yes...I think we would appreciate that. Shall we go, Aya-chan?"

With a sigh, Mikawa smiles as she brings herself together with a quick 'tap' on her cheeks, nodding to her trusted right-hand woman and sends them off with a quick gesture from her hand. Silently I observe the exchange behind the covers of my book as the pair irons their differences and comes to an agreement of the situation—after all, Obase's technically 'idling' as usual.

"I'll send you the print out of the poems everyone wrote to you later," Mikawa starts sternly, if not disdainfully. "Make sure to cut them up and staple them to the agreed packages for the cookies!"

"It'll be fine, don't fret too much prez."

"If you're at least a bit more supportive like—" she pauses; a sudden chill causes my hair to stand. "—never mind. Just get everything ready tomorrow!"

"Roger, roger."

Whether it is in the way Obase delivered his opinion or his general take on the situation, Mikawa finally gives in and takes a few quick step towards the exit and slides the door with a force that—I dare say—slightly forceful. However, the negotiation is complete; with a sigh, Obase scratches his hair in relief before grabbing a seat and setting them the way he used to—with the back rest acting as arm support, facing me.

"So, about our conversation last time, sensei—and stop with that grin, please..."
Called it. Your club president would be proud. "I'm guessing 'keeping me company' isn't the reason why you decided to stay."

"No—but I think it's obvious enough," he returns with a nervous chuckle. "I'm here to ask you a... eh... favor."

Breaking eye contact, Obase sheepishly clears his throat to build his faltering confidence. Whatever it is, I'm starting to feel it is of personal value judging from the mix signals that bleeds profusely from his actions alone. "Sensei, you're familiar with the 'rooftop confession'-charm, right?"

... I guess even the male population can't escape the allure of romantic superstition.

"And what if I say I am?"

"Well, before we get into that," he continues. "Do you know why I joined the club? Surely, you don't think it's because of my undying fascination towards poems and literature, right, sensei?"

"Considering how many times I've caught you asleep in my class, I'll say 'no'," I reply with a chuckle. "Figures. 'So, why is it?"

His mouth went ajar, yet not a single voice is audible to the ear—words, it seems, is working against him. He draws to retreat, concealing his doubt-filled expression with his messy bangs before raising his head and returns with confidence. "I like Mikawa, sensei."

... Huh...why do I feel a sense of déjà vu? "So...you joined because, in a way, 'the club has incredibly cute girls'?"

"Yes—I know, stop grinning, sensei!" he retorts. Sorry, Obase; I can't help it. "Thing is, I understand that you're suspicious of her after our visit, sensei. But...just this once, can you...let it slide?"

I let the weight on my shoulder push me down on the steel support of the seat, furrowing my eyebrows at his lack of subtlety in covering for the club president. Something is amiss, from how Obase acts and speaks to how he shifts his eyes around, it's quite telling how...troubled he is. From his reactions alone, a simple deduction easily unfurls the puzzle and reveals the answer I am seeking—that indeed, Mikawa is responsible for the damage that is inflicted to Monika's humble abode. It's strange...I have the hunch that it has always been so, that there is without a shadow of a doubt that she was the one solely responsible, yet this revelation arrives like a summer downpour—unexpected and unwelcomed, abrupt. It isn't anger nor satisfaction that follows, but disappointment and disbelief—surely, there has to be a reason?

... Well, of course there is, and I'm sure Obase probably knows that answer. Yet it isn't the problem of using my authority or position in the social hierarchy, but my will to do so; do I really want to know the answer? Even if it means distorting my perception of the club's president?

"And what does this have to do with the 'rooftop confession'-charm?"

"Well, uh..." he pauses, "I...want to wish her the best, you know? So maybe if you 'stumbled' upon her on the roof you could—"
"NO, I know you mean well, but if you do it once, you'll be tempted to do it again! I may be your friend, but let's not forget I'm also a teacher here; there are rules I must follow and enforce."

Else I'm no better than Kitamura—or worse, fired.

"Sorry, Obase. But regarding that little 'rooftop charm', it's still a 'no' from me."

The young man sighs and scratches his head, nodding affirmatively before slinking back to his laidback pose to rest. Guilt is reflected on the surface of my glasses, a thought that came as I observe Obase's defeated self and his attempt to recompose. We may be students once before, but as much as we despaired it 'rules are rules'—and this is no exception. The long arm of the clock rests on the number six—just thirty minutes until the end of the period.

"It's worth a shot," he sighs. "But, regarding the other matter, I'm guessing you've figured everything out on your own."

He continues, "So, I want to ask you something, sensei,"

..."Why are you still supporting us?"

'An old woman tells a tale of a lady who wanders Earth. The Lady who Knows Everything'; it's a line that derives from the first two stanza of Monika's own, a tale about her epiphany, about the horrors of realizing the definite truth of her very existence. The game, either by design of the script or due to her tampering, crumbles like a house of cards against a gale of wind, birthing the nightmare that has since been long forgotten in the annals of history—all because of one simple truth and the desperation of a helpless maiden. Many sympathized with her plight back in the day, while others wouldn't even spare a chance, flaunting a 'moral high-ground' that never existed—ironic, really.

We are no different.

The 'truth' is often bitter; painful, even to some. We live in a society that is used to consume information at a rate that exceeds our own capacity to understand, taking only bits and pieces to structure a narrative that suits our preferred view points in a way that often distorts the original—some, even, would outright conjure theories and bake 'half-truths' that is much easier to swallow, despite the evidence that prove otherwise and is displayed in all its galore. This 'half-truth' is what we often accept as an answer, a more preferable conclusion than the reality that is often far too bleak to swallow—the 'blue pill', if you will. In a strange way, it keeps us in line and in order, preventing us from tearing the seams of this reality in a fit of rage, anarchy, and desperation in hopes of finding happiness in another.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

As much as I am a teacher, I am also but a student in life. The conversation with Obase this afternoon, his quick deduction and sharp observation is indeed true—I do know the answer, the person who damaged her home. Question is, do I really want to seek the truth? Will I still be able to see her as my student then? Or as a friend? The same can be said with Monika if I am to ask myself four years ago the same question—will I still see her as someone I love if everything is nothing but fiction? The 'me' four years ago chose the 'half-truth', defied all manners of logic and wisdom, played 'god' in an attempt to turn 'fiction' into 'reality'—and I don't regret any of it. The 'half-truth' brought Monika closer to reality, saved me from my own demise, and has since become a part of my life.
Would the same be hold true if I am to accept the 'truth'? Will I still be willing to support Mikawa's literature club?

No...I probably won't. The literature club, its creation and my support, was the result of my own selfishness—my attempt to recreate Monika's reality. To see it crumble once more is a fate I wish to prevent—even if I never learn of the 'truth'. But that doesn't mean I'm unprepared; if the 'truth' comes on its own and shed itself before me, revealing all its ugliness to see, I will swallow it if I must—it would be an insult to Monika not to.

The same can be said about Monika's circumstances.

Do I really want to know what Monika's hiding? The secret that she adamantly tries to keep under lock and key? For a week, she offered the 'half-truth' for me to swallow—glazed it with a veil of smiles and laughter of months before. Again and again, I confronted her of the matter and repeatedly, she pushed me away—we even had an argument because of it. If I happen to know the answer to the question, will I be willing to accept them at face value? Well...if experience has taught me well, I'll be sure to accept them with open arms. Reality may have been unkind to you, Monika, and though I may be in the dark concerning your circumstances, I do know this: if I'm not in the know, then allow me to help you forget about your pain—to offer you my share of 'half-truth' for us to complete.

The door stands before me, locked by a key that I carry; a gentle music echoes from beyond. The tune, though imperfect and rough, has a distinct style of the song bird to this turtle.

"I'm home."

At the que, the music comes to an abrupt end. Even the time when she once gleefully play the piano without reserve has vanished behind the veil of deception. With a heavy sigh, I remove my loafers and slip into the indoor sandals, marching to the room where I am to be expected. I open the door that divides the hall with the living room and is greeted by the round camera that looks anxiously at my presence, watching my every move as I toss my bag, my suit, and my tie. Quietly, I take my usual seat and rest my pair of spectacles to her left before meeting the pair of green emeralds.

"Welcome home," she said with a soft smile. "How was your day?"

It is an expression that I've come to accept, the gentle smile and greeting that I've grown to love. Yet in these unknown circumstances, those comfort mutates to that of grief and heartache; a fortress of lies. A sigh escapes my lips, easing the growing tension that has inadvertantly grew between, ignored for the sake of this façade. Monika keeps her emeralds trained, doing her best to maintain what is seemingly an eager, expecting expression. I've known it all along...seen through the deception, played along with hopes of returning to those days where we can laugh and smile openly without reserve—and I intend to take it back.

"Do you want to go to the school's festival tomorrow?"

Her 'joyous' expression melts to that of shock and anguish, frozen upon catching me eye to eye—she knows I mean it. As if her voice was robbed from her, Monika struggles to formulate a reply—let alone, speak. Each word seems to hold her in a chokehold as she struggles, stopping mid-sentences upon meeting my stern expression—at least, as 'stern' as I try to look. I've got her in the spot, cornered her against my resolution—this time, I'm stepping my feet down.

Finally, she speaks, "I...don't think that's a good idea, S29penVtaQ==. It's not that I don't want to,
it's just—"

"I don't know what has gotten into you, Monika." I quickly interject. "Nor can I understand what you're thinking."

She sighs and shakes her head in denial. "S29penVtaQ==, please, can we not—"

"I know you're not willing to tell me and intend to keep me in the dark," again, I cut her mid-sentence. She jerks in a daze. "But you and I both know we can't keep this up."

Monika furrows her eyebrows—irritated, likely—and crosses her arms. I try to keep my cool, remembering the days of the past and the things she did—after all, I owe her my life and it would be a dishonor not to balance the scales. "If you're unwilling to tell me what it is, then allow me to help you forget about that problem."

"You don't have to tell me what it is; I'll try to understand," I continue. "So, just this once, listen to my selfishness and allow me to help you forget about all of it."

"Just as the way you have helped me."

She falls into silence, cupping her hands over her mouth that attempts to retaliate and fails spectacularly in an expression that I can't describe in words. The air lightens, the curtain rises, and finally, I can see the sun, peeking from behind the tempest—a genuine expression that I've longed; a smile accompanied by packets of tears that nests in the corners. She nods, struggling to formulate words and to contain the creeping joy that forms across her jagged lips.

"If you insist, then…ok." She answers meekly. "Please, do your best to help me forget. I'm counting on you…"

I smile in return.

…

"You can count on me. Always."

Chapter End Notes

Just a light translation:

Wa-puro: short for 'wa-do purosessa-ワードプロセッサー' or 'Word Processor'.


M0m3nts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

M0m3nts

*Reds and yellows up in the boos*,
HarMonius and JoYous performances.
TW9tZW50cyBvZiBwZWVjZWZ1bA== lies,
QW5kIA== comforting dmVpbC4=

*Tick tick tock.*
Lies in defeat.
Rupturing *IHBhcmFseXNpcy4*=

*SAVE M E .*

*Greens and blues up in the sky*,
Boisterous aNd rHY7hm1c MUxsc.
TW9tZW50cyBvZiBibmNvdXJhZ2luZw== half-truths,
QW5k liberating *IHRydXRocy4*=

*Tick tick tock.*
SW5ldmloYWJsZSB1cmdlbmN5Lg==
T3V0IG9mIGJyZWF0aC4=

*RES E T M E .*

Have you ever wondered what your last moment feels like? The day when you know for certain that you will never see the sunrise of tomorrow? That unique and eerie sentiment often reflects the entirety of an individual and tells a story; of satisfaction, of happiness, of wisdom, or that of regret; of a life. It is an expression that is difficult—*impossible*—to mimic from one person to another; after all, everyone has a different story to tell. I remember seeing this look before on grandma, back during middle school. I will never forget her peaceful and content smile on that day, as if everything with the world is alright—a sight I haven't seen since grandpa passed away three years prior. It was strange...as if I've known her from before, what kind of life she led, and whether or not she had any regrets. I didn't pay much heed then, thinking that she may have just found peace from the tea and *dango* that summer afternoon, enjoying the gentle breeze on her terrace just as always.
Grandma passed on that evening.

It's odd to be thinking about something like this—especially this early in the morning, and yet it's almost impossible not to. Here I am, awake, greeted by a familiar ceiling and quickly catching the gentle humming that points to Monika's direction. Initially, I believed it to be that of a dream—a remnant stemmed from my gogginess and forgotten memories of last night. But as sense slowly crawls and push me back to reality, I realize how...clear it is not to be mere hallucinations. Her voice, soothing as it has always been, carries a burden that I never know she has; solemn, contemplative, sorrowful, and yet...peaceful. I keep my head down and use the blanket as cover, quietly observing from behind, listening as she hums the familiar melody that possibly derives from one of my collection. Her slender fingers and her comb gently glides through the seams of her hair, falling to the edge freely, straightening the cracks and the imperfections on her auburn strands as she carefully observes her movements through a reflection; her pair of emeralds quaintly murky. From the mirror, a somber expression of pure content and tranquility drowns her image like a portrait; a painting of that summer afternoon.

...Why...?

...Why am I crying...?

Today's the festival, a day where we agreed to smile—to forget about the things that wounds us. Yet, why does my chest ache? Why am I like this...? I shouldn't be this way—not after what I promised! Take a deep breath, Oogame; count to four, exhale. Breathe. Everything will be alright. It will all turn out fine...

Slowly I rise from the covers, sitting in an upright position as Monika finishes her routine and gracefully ties her hair into a ponytail; her signature ribbon adorns her like a crown, its white tails flutters freely behind her shoulder blades. Her eyebrows perks upon noticing my reflection on the screen, prompting her to stride with haste towards the looking glass that divides our reality to offer a smile—one that starkly contrast her solemn expression minutes before. "Good morning, 8nH2sdC==. You're up early today!"

"I can't afford to oversleep," I muster a reply, chuckling between my teeth. "We have a date today, remember?"

"The school festival?"

"That's right," I nod as I plant my feet firmly on the floor. "The school festival."

Between her gentle smile and soft features, the dark circles that hangs under her pair of emeralds, occasional stifled breaths, and reddened nose cracks the façade that she presents, telling me of another story concealed under the pretense of our morning routine; it's not difficult to go unnoticed. I try to ignore, remembering the sensitive balance that we've reached after a week of fights and disagreements, hoping that everything would fix itself in time—convincing her to come to the festival alone was not an easy fit. But would I be in the wrong to let things takes its course, I wonder? Spouting white lies and words of comfort instead of pursuing for answers? Can time really heal everything?

...
"Monika, are you okay?" I ask as gently as I can. "Your eyes are rather swollen…is something the matter?"

"Ah! Ehehe…," she giggles nervously, hastily concealing her face with the bangs of her hair. "Sorry! I'll get this fixed..."

With a single, careless motion of her hand, the screen flashes momentarily in an explosion of red, green, and blue. As the colors fade and return, the blemishes that tainted her face vanishes without a trace, leaving only the self-conscious club president and her smile. I take my seat before her in silence—out of protest or sympathy, I do not know. The cup of coffee in my hand tickle my nose with a toasty aroma that helps drown my concerns, pushing me back on the offensive; you and I both know we can't keep this up, Monika. "If there is anything I can do for you—anything—please, don't hesitate."

"I'll be alright," she remarks with a forced expression. "I just…had a nightmare, that's all."

No joy; always the same pattern, the same response.

"Okay…take your time; I'll always be here for you, if you need me. I'll go get ready now."

She nods in assurance—one that I find difficulty to accept. "Okay."

With a cup in hand—void of its contents—I place the object in the sink and let water flow from the faucet, cleansing the muck left from the coffee before leaving for the showers. I glance over my shoulder, the sight of her cupping her hand over her face in a deafening silence wrack my chest with guilt over my inability to become a person she can depend on. The day has just started and we're already off to a bad footing…are festivals truly cursed for her? Or is it because of me? Is it my fault to begin with? I do not know. My mind wanders and my thoughts jumble into a frenzy as I'm enveloped in a barrage of cold water.

…

Not yet; it's far too early to conclude.

When I was at my worst, she remained steadfast and cheered for my recovery. Each day, I toiled, labor, and sweat; she waited for my return in anticipation with open arms. And when I faltered, screamed, and distanced her from my own horrors and pain, she rushed in stubbornly and cried along with me. She sacrificed everything, stand by me in sorrow and in pain—all this despite having problems of her own, nightmares that keeps her awake. She is my lighthouse, the lantern in the darkness of night, and the wave that washes my worries away.

And I'll be damned if I can't do the same for her.

This festival, this…occasion is like a curse; I know, superstition and old wives' tales and all that, but can you blame me—or her? Twice she was denied the opportunity to experience them in her reality, denied by the script that dictated the course of events—or perhaps, her own hubris? It doesn't matter. Monika may not want to reveal what lies beneath her charade, and I can respect that; I won't push any further, but I will damn well try to help her forget. I need a positive attitude to go by…

With a twist of the valve, the flow is interrupted and the remaining droplets falls freely on the cold surface of the shower. I slap my cheeks twice for motivation, feeling the heat that permeates and a sense of being 'alive'. A quick glance of the rack and a basket full of pressed clothes brings forth a smile—about a towel and a young woman whose innocence was lost in a single sweep. Not this time, Monika; I've wised up since that last mishap!
If only we can return to such a time…

"How do I look?" she asks, twirling and letting her skirt and ponytail flutter with the momentum. I'm surprised she chose her school uniform of all things today, but it is not uncommon for students of another school to visit a festival of another donning their respective school uniform. "Is this… alright?"

I expect it as much, but that's not a bad thing—I do say she did her research. "Going with a uniform? I'm guessing you're trying to measure against mine?"

"Ahahaha! Maaaybe~!" she giggles softly. "I've always wanted to attend a festival in this uniform!"

A subtle smile creeps along the ridges of my lips, celebrating what little victory I have against her defense—at least I know that I can chip some of her reservations away, albeit little by little. The final equipment check on the apparatus—from the camera to the antennae, the large 'pack' and the straps—is equally distracting to notice the shroud she doggedly maintained for a week. Yuuya did make great use of his knowledge in designing all of this; it's even more impressive to know that it's capable of translating 'scent' into something that Monika can really smell—that alone deserves praise in development. Although the more I examine, the more it got me wondering…

Let alone the materials, the funds to develop something so complex is even more of a mystery.

Sure it's an impressive piece of hardware, but I doubt the parts and technology to even assemble something as remotely close as this can be easily procured from your local electronic store; and I doubt disassembling computers, smartphones, and microwaves could even suffice. Its design and weight alone mimics that of military radios—the JSDF's standard in particular—and the straps along with the camera are certainly not civilian-issue. How the hell does he even get his hands on them? The more I think for answers, the more questions pile; even after our split, Yuuya still pose as one hell of an enigma—and I'm not talking about his sense of style. Whatever…I'll go and ask him again one day if things do take a positive turn.

…

Speaking of which, I don't believe Monika ever experience the change of season…

"All good here," I said while 'tapping' the apparatus. The boxy thing echoes with a solid 'thump', a grim reminder of its weight. It'll be a long day, but it will be worth it. "Are you ready?"

I glance at her as she fidgets at my beckon and returns a nervous laugh. She eyes the apparatus, smiles melancholically and sighs. "UxFhswE, are you sure? You know, about…all this…? I mean, not to discourage you but…ahaha…"

She clears her throat. "In the end, I'm still here in this room and you're just carrying a deadweight—a fancy one, sure—but…I'm not really there…"

Securing the straps and the chords around my waist, back, and across my chest, I take a respite to tend at Monika's wistful pair of emeralds. There are doubts in those glimmering jewels, a resistance that has remained adamant to all the hand I've offered. Sure it may seem normal to me now, but if the same expression were to occur before our first date, I would have come up with questions to ask and a list of concerns that grew longer at each passing minute; panic would likely take its sweet time. But this is how reality decide to play its cards, to isolate me behind walls of fabricated comfort—and I haven't been none the wiser for almost a week.
"One day, perhaps," I reply with a smile. "But for now, this will have to do."

"But the weight—"

"Have you ever seen the change of season…? When the leaves turn yellow and orange?" I chuckle. As quickly as she tries to retort, Monika falls into silence and replies only by shaking her head. "I thought so. You probably wouldn't want to miss this so, I'll ask again; are you ready?"

I'm aware of her persistency; her attempts at keeping me in arm's length that I am working to unhinge —otherwise, Monika won't even bat a question or even decline an invitation for a date. This isn't our first; I should know. Perhaps it is out of pity of my stubbornness, or maybe it's the infectious positivity that I continuously fan to raise her dimming spirit, that I can't tell. But at the crack of my lip, she returns with a genuine smile and giggle that soothes my mind—albeit slightly. The devil is in the details; the reddish hue of her round cheeks, the fluttering tone of her voice, and the curve of her lips that she attempts to hide behind her palm. Genuine. I never knew how much I've missed that spark…

"You don't give up, do you?" She replies with a smile. "Always finding ways to make it difficult for me to say 'no'."

"You know it! Now, shall we go?"

She nods slightly.

"Yes. Let's go."

The weight of the apparatus is not a laughing matter, but is nonetheless negligible in the grand scheme of things—it is in the end, just a tool for Monika to perceive the world beyond hers with its sights, color, shapes, and smell. The mounted camera whirs to life, its lens paints my reflection on its concave surface before shying away abruptly, gazing at an opposite direction listlessly. I crack an innocent chuckle at the response and let my imagination run amok—confirming my suspicions with quick glances at Monika's screen; sure enough, her cherry tomato-red cheeks contrasts brilliantly against her pale skin. She coughs and clears her throat to regain her composure and—incidentally, did a 'mike check'; I somewhat wished she'd do a little count like a certain sister ship from Kxnk0lle. The final checks are now complete; everything is functioning as expected.

…

It's a little disheartening to know that this may be the extent of our reach. It may take years, if not decades before I can hold her hand properly or even feel her weight as she clings to my arm in such occasion—I may not even see the day, too.

Mother, father, I'm sorry; looks like I won't be granting your wish for a grandchildren anytime soon.

There is a lot to be said about the world when you're someone who spent most of their lives trapped in a single reality. You tend to look at things differently, sometimes in awe at some of the most minuscule and insignificant details that we often take for granted. Take for example the adverts and signs that are posted within the train or ones that hang in its interior; often as a regular commuter, you tend not to notice these ads and would much prefer maintaining your personal bubble amongst the sardines, glued to your smartphone or the music your headset plays. Yet for Monika, seeing the world—the people, the routine, the crowd—everything is almost magical at every corner, in each turn. Just like that time during our first date, the camera on my shoulder swivels and turns at the sight of the moving, living world. Whether it's the store clerks or part-timers that raise their voices
promoting their goods, the idly passing students in their uniforms, or even the whiff of fresh baked bread from a small bakery, the simple little things I've grown indifferent to is something that is likely absent in her life. Even the rigid, orderly boarding of the train draws a distinct 'yelp' of excitement; unless you're me, the one being shoved and crammed into the hold like cargo. After all the shoving and pushing, she went silent. But at a glance and a few imagination, I can see that she is looking —reading—the ads that are plastered all across the interior. There's so many things out here that amazes her...

I'm not one to judge, but even I won't fix my attention on an ad for more than a few seconds—that is, unless it is of personal. I'm guessing the same applies to Monika as well.

"Thinking about university?" I ask with a whisper. I rather not attract any more attention than I already am with the apparatus. "ToDai is…quite a high bar you've set."

"Aahahaha…! That may be one of them, but it's not just that, silly! Look!"

The tilt of her camera remains still, pointing at the ad that are generously plastered and hanged across the interior—the placard of T#kyo Dxig*ku and its full endorsement on the development of AI and synthetic limbs. It has been a subject of contentment and pride of the university, often covered by big media and other major news outlet; particularly the reluctance of the project's heads and their heated criticism to cooperate with foreign universities. I shouldn't even have to explain much on why Monika has taken quite a following to the topic. There is hope for us yet, but when will it be ready for the public is still up in the air.

"The synthetic limb and AI project?"

The camera swivels and reflects my expression on its concave lens. "Yes! Do you think it will be possible?"

I sigh. As much as I'd like to give a positive opinion, public confidence and released papers concerning the topic isn't exactly favorable in nature; discouraging, in fact. Delays after delays, the impossibility to develop a 'human-like' AI, hurdles concerning the human body accepting the synthetic parts, and many more. To think that I am living together with someone trapped in a computer… if those nerds at the university ever gets their hands on Monika, the first thing they'll do will likely be stress-testing, debugging, and dissections; I can't imagine the kind of pain she'll go through—as if Yuuya's tampering wasn't enough of a reoccurring nightmare.

Good thing I don't know anyone acquainted with the university.

"Soon, maybe. We'll never know what the future holds."

A sigh echoes in my earpiece, followed with a low 'yeah' that is as audible as a passing wind. The conversation dies as the train courses through the rails towards our stop. Fuck, why did I say that!? I could have extended the conversation just a bit, think positively and give a flick of hope—you of all people would love to have her in this reality, and you know that, Oogame…! Sometimes, I feel like bashing my head to a wall just so I can remind myself how stupid I can be; it almost made me envy the life of the many protagonists in visual novels, mending their mistakes with the press of a 'load' button. Not in this reality, however…and it never will be.

"This train will soon arrive in—"

Oh… that's our stop.

With a screech, the train slows to a crawl and aligns to the platform. The door opens ceremoniously
and the crowd scatters.

Stepping off here on a Saturday gives off a disorienting vibe; a mix of familiarity from a road towards work and an odd sense of freedom that derives from days of respite. On one hand, there is that vending machine where I patronize for a cold can of coffee on days where homebrew delicacies is impossible. While on the other, the influx of others in casuals and couples—both young and old—contrasts the uniformity I've come to associate with this specific stop. It brings forth turmoil—envy, perhaps—at the synergy of two people, holding hands without reservations or, occasionally, clinging. I clench my left hand to a close, feeling only the weight on my shoulder. The lens focuses on the pair ahead of us, diligently studying their movements and reactions. They chat and laugh, giving little care to the world around them as the girl comfortably squeeze and close her distance with the man.

…I could have been that lucky man, holding hands with a special someone on a Saturday or paying a visit to a shrine during New Year—maybe have a 'special' evening during Christmas as well. Yet I chose a path few would commit, sacrificing the comforts and pleasures for scraps of affection that is limited to comforting words and promises that have yet been fulfilled. It seems trivial, focusing on the needs of the flesh than the soul and the mind, but…can you truly resist? To have a carrot hanging to tease, hopelessly unreachable. Ask yourself, Oogame, after all this time, all this effort you poured for her…

…is it worth it?

"Ah…! Sensei!"

Beyond the station's gate, Mikawa waves in high spirits along with the rest of the literature club. Of the five, two are dressed in costume for their class' contributions while the other in casuals. Obase carries with him a cardboard box filled to the brim with cookies that he packaged and stapled together with colorful papers of personalized poems, written by members of the literature club. Yuuki and Satsuki are—surprisingly—dressed in matching t-shirts with a stylized 'baka' and 'aho' that points at each other, respectively; I'm starting to suspect that they are, in fact, a couple. Aki wears the costume for her play, a white dress fit for a queen; a pack of pamphlets that advertises her class' performance, all to be distributed to visitors of the festival, is clutched between her arms. But of all the members, the club leader stands proud amongst her peers. Mikawa wears a modest Victorian-era black and white maid uniform, complete with how she dons her hair in a bun and perfected with a white ribbon that falls loose from her headdress. The faint traces of light makeup accentuates her sweet aura and with each graceful step she takes, it becomes apparent to me that she looks like a living, breathing, porcelain doll.

"How do I look?" Mikawa twirls expectantly, sending the frills to float and garnering 'oohs' and 'aahs' from her peers. "How may I serve you today, master?"

…

Even the courteous bow is not short of perfect. "Like a true Victorian English maid."

"Ahaha…! The hairstyle isn't my favorite, but just this once! Will you be visiting us later, sensei?"

Mikawa leans a little forward, her arms crossed behind her back mimicking a pose that reminds me of my personal club president. My answer is pretty obvious; besides, it will be a waste to miss my own homeroom's class-booth knowing how much effort was poured in their endeavor. "I will."
"Promise?"

A lighthearted chuckle escapes, "I promise."

Her little 'cheer' of excitement seems to raise the mood and motivation of the other members who now clamors in a circle, eagerly passing me the pamphlets for their class' booth—even one for the literature club's 'cookie-mail'. Obase did put all his effort in making them; the cookies are too perfect and delectably appeasing to the eye for anyone to assume he baked and packaged them. On another note, Yuuki and Satsuki's obvious callout with their matching t-shirt suspicion my concerning their status…

"A matching shirt…and I thought you're going to be just like your sensei, Yuuki."

Yuuki stammers and nervously laughs, "Well, uhh…turns out the 'riaiju life' isn't so bad after all…"

"He's the one who confessed first, sensei!" Satsuki quickly chimes.

"Hey! Traitor!"

One good thing to note in this little development, is how even their usual exchange remain the same despite the occasion. A glance at Satsuki's matching charm on her book bag to Yuuki's drew even more suspicion—no, not to the fact they are dating, but how Satsuki may actually be a 'closet otaku'; you can't mistake that twin-tailed teal-colored hair of a certain virtual diva, after all. It's mildly 'shocking' to know Yuuki took an interest to someone, but with consideration who he had his eyes on, it answers a lot of questions. I'm tempted to poke fun at that, but I'll let it slide—for now.

"Nee, sensei," Obase chimes from the crowd. "What's with that getup? A mike, a camera on the side, and that bag—is that a JSDF portable radio?"

"Yeah…" Yuuki cuts in. "I've been wondering about that as well…"

With both hands on the cardboard box, Obase motions with his head and points at the long strap that crosses over my chest to support the small camera on my shoulder—the apparatus in its entirety. How observant of you, Obase; sure, I expect many to notice—Yuuki being one of them. However, I didn't expect anyone to ask what it is; granted, this stems from the dominant mindset of 'if it isn't related to you, just leave it be' that is common here, in this society. I glance at Monika, meeting only my reflection on the concave lens of the camera; she glances in return.

"Tell him it's uh… some recording device for the school!"

…

Always quick on your feet, aren't you? "It's a recording device for the school."

"Really? That's rather… huh…"

Between the questions raise and Obase's detective-like query, I have a feeling that he may have not bought that reasoning entirely, but is left with no choice but to accept it as-is. Yuuki seems satisfied and shrugs adamently, and before long Mikawa steals the stage once again with her clap and the echo of 'okay, everyone' that we've heard from the club every so often. Obase reluctantly sighs, and a silent yelp rings in my earpiece.

"We'll go ahead, sensei." Mikawa starts as she rallies her band of young writer and poets. "Our homerooms might need us—and I think faculty members are supposed to meet in the teacher's office?"
"That's right."

She smiles softly, "Then, we'll see you later, sensei!"

With a nod and a wave, I watch as they walk down a familiar path with Obase at their rear end who glances opportunistically back at my direction. I fear that he may have—no, I think it's just me overthinking things again. His observation did catch me off guard, make no mistake; the school have their own division in charge of marketing and documenting most, if not all events in the—and I am not one of them, noted by the absence of the yellow armband strapped across my left arm. The apparatus on my back and the camera—though small in size—does draw a special kind of attention that is unwarranted at best. Such is the life I lead in pursuit of this relationship.

Ask yourself again, Oogame. Is it worth it?

"They're... quite a lively bunch."

A proud smile creeps forth, "You think so? They've always been a handful. You've met them before, right?"

"Yes... I have..."

...I stop, carefully planting my ear close to the earpiece. I realize then that I have strayed our conversation into unpleasant territories—again.

There is a hint of sadness and agony in her tone, carefully concealed with a soft-spoken voice that cracks at her breathing. No, not this again, you fool! You have to say something without thinking, do you, Oogame? You can't at least remember the reason why you brought her to the festival? That's right, to liven her mood after that evening! And you just brought it up... splendid.

"So, uh... anyway, the school has—"

"You have feelings for her, don't you?"

...I—I must have misheard that, right? Blasted earpiece probably is malfunctioning. "Uh...excuse me?"

Monika clears her throat, but even from this side I can sense how...heavy her voice is—halted. I feel my heart sink the more she speaks, guided by a somber tone that I quickly notice. "I-I mean she's smart, kind, responsible...and..."

There is a pause. "...and she's real."

"Monika, what are you—"

"You do have feelings for her, right? I-I mean...you love Mikawa, don't you? She seems to share the same feelings towards you."

"I won't mind if y—" A shortness of breath, a broken sentence. "—if you go and—"

"Monika..." I sigh.

A gasp, then a brief pause. "O-oh, right... a 'no-frown zone'? Ahaha...sorry..."
Why can't I do something right for once? The ocean of students and visitors carries my steps towards the gate where the cheer and jubilee of youth reigns supreme. Under the autumn sky, balloons and banners commemorates the cultural festival as the orange and yellow colored leaves are carried by the wind, creating a picturesque scene of unmatched celebration between the rows of stalls that aligns accordingly to the left and the right, manned by either students or locals. Yet all I can hear is Monika's stifled breaths that rings loud from my earpiece. I wonder... is this the right course of action—or is there anything 'right' in this cycle?

...maybe festivals are cursed.

There's a lot to see and to think when you're patrolling the festival grounds and halls, idling and wading through the students and visitors alike, making a bee-line from 'Point A' to 'Point B'. Sure, I dragged Monika here to the festival in an attempt to cheer her up, but it is also within my sphere of responsibility to patrol the school grounds and keep everything safe as part of my shift; headmaster Murayama's lecture on 'morality' and 'virtue' did brought a groan from all of us—Monika included—while we wait for the green armbands to be passed, which is used to denote an 'active' teacher on patrol. Each of us were assigned to different areas of the school and to rotate at every two hour or so. How fun. That doesn't mean, however, that we—faculties—aren't permitted to enjoy the festival; on the contrary, as long as we remain vigil to our designated schedule of watching the staircase to the roof.

"Would you like something to eat, Monika?"

And my schedule happens to be late in the afternoon, just before the closing ceremony.

"Aren't you supposed to be in patrol?" she asks, laden with concern. "The headmaster looks pretty strict..."

"He's always like that, but he's fair."

An audible sigh echoes, "Are you sure it's ok? I don't want to get you in trouble because of me..."

"I always get in trouble these days," I reply with a chuckle. "It's perfectly fine—not the part about getting in trouble, mind you, but 'us' enjoying the festival."

She relents. "If you say so...I'll trust your decision, Hxc35f."

YES!

"Now then, back to the question. Would you like anything?"

I wait for her reply as I turn around the corner, making quick glances at the class booths, the stalls, and lastly at Monika who—judging by the movements of her camera—is equally distracted by the colorful display of creativity and the enticing scent of the various snacks and dishes prepared on-site. The sight alone must have been quite overwhelming—after all, it took her *four years* after the release of DDLC to finally see what a 'festival' truly looks like. Now she's here in that promised day, taking in the sight and smell of merry-making that was then nothing but wistful hopes and lies, now coming to reality.

"Welcome, welcome!"

"Come and have a try of our takoyaki!"
"Yakisoba! Yakisobaaaaa…!"

"There's… so many. I never knew…"

Looks like 'festivalvirgin.chr' has just been deleted. I can't help but be amused at that. "Take your
time. We still have more than an hour before I rotate."

Making another round around the area, I press the earpiece a little closer to quietly catch the
innocent, excited reaction that perks at the sight of a booth—any booth—or the irresistible smell of
the delicacies that is unique to festivals; it's often distractions like this that stifled any effort of saving
a few coins difficult, and many have been felled by the urge to spend. Trust me, I know. A yakitori
stand on one end, a takoyaki at the other, baked potato served with simple Hokkaido butter, baked
yam, Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki, crepes, or a cup of karaage—and these are limited to the booths
the school invited from outside; the student-run booths aren't shy in their presentation either. Deep-
fried pudding or ice cream, yakisoba, and even steamed gyoza… so many options and only one
stomach to hold it all!

Admittedly, listening to her short outbursts of excitement is far more entertaining than I can make it
out to be; almost as if all her problems are nothing but faint memories.

…

A man can hope, right?

"Can we… stop for a crepe?"

"A crepe? I thought grilled squid will be more to your liking," I chuckle. The camera swings and
whirs, and judging by my reflection on the lens I can only imagine her intense glare at my sorry
attempt at humor. "Sorry, sorry! Sure, why not? What flavor would you like?"

"Choco-banana."

Ah, the classic. It's becoming my personal favorite now; when did I had that the first time…?

The crepe stall we stop by to satisfy her sweet tooth happen to be under the management of an old
woman from the local community. Having a man of my stature—alone, according to her—lining up
for a serving of choco-banana crepe brings forth a judging but gentle smile from the old woman; a
standout from the scores of high school students and the predominantly female or couple combo.
Seven hundred yen for a choco-banana crepe isn't exactly cheap, but watching her work her skills
with the hot plate, batter, and the wooden trowel before spreading the combination of sweets is a
satisfaction in its own for Monika, whose adorable squeals and quips of praise echoes at every
motion. She wraps the crepes in simple white parchment before passing both of the products to me.

…

…wait, two?

"Buying one for your girlfriend, young man?" she comments with a smile. "Make sure to deliver it
quick. It's still quite hot!"

"A-ah…ahaha…thank you."

I raise one of them to Monika's view, close enough for her to see and recreate; it doesn't take long for
her to notice the error. "Did you ordered two by mistake?"
"Can I dodge that question by saying 'I'm hungry'?"

"Ahaha…! You did! That's so cute of you."

"Hush…" mistakes happen. That is normal. "Do you want this, or not?"

"I'll take the other one off your hands if I can, but I'll settle with recreating a copy here. Itadakima~su!"

I may have to walk around with my hands full, struggling to finish two servings alone; not to mention, seven hundred yen for two crepes is steep. But all of that for a delightful chirp—the sounds of happiness after that first bite? I'd say that's worth the admission price. With a bite, I indulge on the crepe on my right and resume on my task, accompanied by the sweet flavor of my snack and the blissful meridian response Monika willingly produce. This takes me back to our first date in Ueno, sharing a crepe before our boat ride in the park.

We shared a choco-banana crepe, I believe—wait, I think… yes, yes indeed. I remember now… that was the first time.

"We should get something lighter next—oh! Maybe the fried pudding?" she quips cheerfully. I'm glad she's enjoying the moment—it's not exactly good for my wallet, but right now financials are not of my concern.

…

But… is this really what I want for her? Providing her with distractions after distractions of sweets and merriment can only go so far when—in reality—we lack the courage to confront the issue at its core. Oogame, why did you invite her to the festival? Is it to spoil her, to relish on the smiles and laughter that you've longed? Is it to grant her the wish and the experience that she was denied of? Is it because I wanted to help her forget her nightmares, hoping that maybe the storm will pass and everything will return to how it once was? Then, is it for personal gain? A selfish pursuit for an 'ideal' companion?

Then… are you here for her, or for your own selfish gain?

Do you see her as mere wish fulfilment? A 'perfect' girlfriend, just as much as she totes about? Flawless and sanguine? Or do you truly believe that she is an equal; a person with realistic needs, flaws, and difficulties? If you firmly believe she is the latter, then your motive is insufficient; shooing rainclouds away and picking bottles from the shelves will never suffice. Such easy, perfect solutions only exist in the realm of fantasy; in life, happiness is earned through blood and sweat—relationships and love runs far deeper than superficial attractions.

So, Oogame, what really made you decide to bring her to the festival?

"Oh, sensei!"

The crack of Obase's voice penetrated through my wandering thoughts and shuts them like a switch, abrupt and instantaneous. He waves with relative coolness and coy within the sea of people—the cardboard box, cut and fashioned into a small 'tray', is suspended by a strap around his neck as part of the Literature Club's 'walking booth', while the half-empty contents of cookie-grams and the bulge on the purse that hangs by his belt is a sign of success that needs not to be said. Wading through the crowd, I approach my student who is waiting patiently with anticipation—a cookie gram in hand.

"Can I interest you with a poem and a cookie?" he starts with a grin that runs from ear to ear.
"Perhaps as a gift for someone special?"

"I see you've practiced your line—it's rare to see you using keigo this liberally in a sentence."

Obase shrugs, chuckling with pride. "I have my moments, sensei."

"If only you'll show the same enthusiasm in class."

"I can't stand all the memorization, sorry," Obase quips while offering the merchandise liberally. "So, sensei, a cookie?"

The tray and the assorted arrangements of cookies that are beautifully wrapped in plastic and stapled together with little note card of poems are inviting and gives a romantic gesture—like roses, only edible. A tally is taped at the bottom of the tray as means for Obase to keep track of his customers between men and women—the cookie gram is more popular for girls than guys, unsurprisingly; the poems by the club members are charming, particularly the few that were written by Aki and Mikawa. It almost work as a medium for confession—and I'll hold my breath if that was what Mikawa planned. I glance at Monika—briefly—and quickly notes how intent and focused she is at one of the packaging, particularly one that is decorated with a small white ribbon.

"I'll have one," I reply, pointing at the object of interest. "That one, please."

"Ah! W-wait! You don't have to—"

Obase grins, "That will be two hundred yen, sensei. Thank you very much!"

Fair enough.

The transaction lasts for a second, short and smooth. At the clink of the coin, Obase draws a line under the 'male' category of his tally—the fifth—and completes the kanji of 'tadashi'. He draws a 'thumbs up' and a 'good luck' smile, passing me the cookie and the pamphlet of the literature club before he disappears into the crowd, shouting short slogans to promote the little side business. The pamphlet itself is simple but attractive, making use of the space effectively following Yuuki's design but liberal application of Satsuki's creativity; hopefully, this would draw new members into the club. With the cookie in hand, I raise it high enough above my shoulder for her to see—after all, this isn't mine to begin with.

"Here, for you."

Monika sighs in content, "You shouldn't have…"

"I know you've been eyeing it, so I thought 'why not'?" I chuckle with glee. "So, what do you think?"

It takes a bit of time for her to fully replicate the object into her reality, but at the behest of a 'gasp' I know that the cookie is now in her hands. Though only her voice is audible, I let my imagination run its course to picture her reaction based on the sounds; mellow and sweet. "Thank you, H23cf…"

The camera whirs to admire the paper again, and I dare not to move. After what seemed like forever, she meekly continues.

"The poem… it's beautiful…"

I bring the poem to my view. 'Invitation', as it is titled and it reads:
Let me invite you to a date,
Tea, pasta, perhaps some cake?
If this gesture fancy you as I wait,
Let me know what makes you smile.

Let me invite you to a date,
Will it be drama, adventure, or romance?
If this gesture fancy you as I wait,
Let me know what makes you cry.

Let me invite you to a date,
Did I make you upset unintentionally?
If this gesture fancy you as I wait,
Let me know what makes your heart ache.

Let me invite you to a date,
Are you willing to accept me as I am?
If this gesture fancy you as I wait,
Let me know what makes you who you are.

At the bottom right of the page, the name of the enigmatic poet is stenciled in kanji neatly and beautifully; ‘MIKAWA AYA’, it says. Although a copy of the original and one of many, the emotions, feelings, and thoughts she gave resonates clearly through the poem and her handwriting. Of the many options that are offered by Obase, I wonder who else chanced upon this particular piece? Don’t get me wrong, it is beautiful and romantic; certainly one of the best her Literature club has to offer. It doesn’t take roses or expensive jewelry to woo your significant other, sometimes even a poem can work like a powerful charm; I guess it’s no surprise why even Monika is enamored by it. But there’s more…

"Mikawa… truly is a wonderful person, isn’t she…?"

With but a simple nod, I reply to her comment and keep in silence. My attention is glued to her craft, reading the lines over and over, wondering about the person—who in particular—that seized her vivid imagination; the muse who drove her to pen this piece. By chance, we selected this one in particular and whether it is by our luck or her skill, the poem feels almost personal; too personal, perhaps. If a poem is able to convey the thoughts of the poet, then I dare say that she, too, struggles with the same conundrum as much as I. I have a lot of time to think; about myself, my reasons, and why I insisted in taking Monika to this festival. I think…

…

I think I know the answer.

Wading through the crowd of visitors and students, I gaze ahead across the familiar hallway with a mix of interest and alienation. On regular days, this corridor would be packed with students in uniform, walking in brisk pace and chatting gleefully about matters of their concern; we would usually be around to remind—and enforce—the rules. No running, no shouting, and no outdoor shoes. Today, an entirely different scene is painted, lifting the veil of oppression and discipline with general festivities and jubilee. The classrooms, once nodes of learning, were transformed into mini-café or attractions. The students walk in casuals, their uniform discarded for a more comfortable attire, while those who wear them proudly present their badge and color—that of another school.

One thing that remains the same is the absence of outdoor shoes—even then, the usual indoor shoes
are replaced with sandals for the visitors.

"This is the first time I see your school," Monika comments, steadily rotating her camera, observing. "I guess... it isn't much different than mine—if it was even real."

I cross my arms over my chest, sighing at her remark that is yet again melancholic and sullen. "Monika, come on... we promised, remember?"

"Ahaha... I'm sorry, Hx34f. There's just... a lot of things on my mind right now."

"Then, will you tell me what's bothering you?"

There is a sigh and a sniffle. "I—well... no... I'll be alright.

I halt my steps and find a corner wall to lean and rest; if it isn't all the walking or the apparatus itself, it is the weight—emotional weight—that slides from Monika's fingers and fell on my shoulder to carry. What it is or its origin is but a mystery, and it becomes clear that even the festival itself isn't enough to scatter the rainclouds that hovers above; futile, despite the colors and the energy that remains a hegemony within the entire premise. Damn it... this all feels uncomfortably familiar and I can't do a single goddamn thing right. It's difficult knowing that each misstep could cause an unwanted catalytic reaction, widening the rift that emerged ever since that evening... frankly, I'm starting to question what's the point in all this and how... hopeless everything is, like trying to paint a rainbow with only black and white.

...Cool your head, Oogame. Everyone has a story, and someone who is suffering depression isn't going to openly tell the world about it—Monika herself said that, 'scripted' or not. 'Just spend time with them, even if they don't feel like it and remind them that they always have something to look forward to', is what she said before, right? Right. Just keep a positive, do what you can; you're doing well. Well, it's true that I find this perspective switch rather ironic, but what choice is there? You're not really giving me any options here. Humans are indeed complicated... but so are you, Monika. I could use a coffee right now...

...yeah, maybe that could help.

"Well... I guess you're a little tired. Want to get a cup of coffee?"

Quietly I watch as her camera rotates and left a hollow gaze at the floor. A few seconds pass before a nod happens. "Sure, that would be lovely. I'm sorry for ruining the mood, S29penVtaQ==."

"No, it's alright. I completely understand," I sigh with a hint of relief, placing my hands on my hips. "Let's just take it slow. Besides, we did came here for you—and I have yet proven myself that you can count on me."

The camera shakes dismissively, "You've done more than enough. It's me, not you... sorry, but... just give me time."

Watching her camera sink down as she said those words weighs deeply on my own conscious and crumbling resolve, yet I know I must hold on. She's counting on me, and I can't let my guard down just yet. With my right feet first, I take a step forward and wade through the sea of people once more through the hallway, following a familiar path and passing class 2-3's haunted house before reaching the flight of stairs towards the third floor. The echo of the second year student's attempt at promotion vibrates up the stairs until I reach the top of set, greeted by a wave of enthusiastic guests. Just like the
second years' floor, the third years' are equally crowded despite the lack of classroom-based attraction. From the edge of the staircase, a lone figure dressed in a black and white Victorian-England maid uniform stands amongst the crowd, carrying a sign that promotes the 'Emma café'—or more commonly known as 'class 3-2', my homeroom. Though her height made it rather difficult for me to notice, but upon closer observation it was indeed one of my homeroom student, Tae. Vigilantly she stands with her signboard, inviting guests and passerby in an almost professional manner and tone that is uncanny against the lively setting; tranquility on a backdrop of vivacity. I raise my hand to wave, catching her attention and pushing the edge of her lips to a curve; I smile in return. She promptly disappears into the classroom, emerging a few seconds later with an excited grin that eagerly welcomes us.

"Good afternoon, master," she starts with a simple bow. "Can I interest you with tea or coffee?"

Master? That's an interesting—wait, this is technically a maid café, isn't it? "You certainly can. Is everything alright, Sunohara?"

"Yes, sensei! Ah, excuse me for being out of character a bit, ehehe…"

I wave my hand dismissively. A faint giggle rings from my earpiece as Tae sticks her tongue out before easing back into character.

"Ahem," she continues with a cough. "Then right this way, master. Your personal maid will attend to you soon."

Yeah…this is a maid café. I have to applaud Araki and her team; their know-how with the period-accurate detail of the outfit is impressive. There's a sneaking suspicion that they based it all out of that Victorian-themed manga by Kaoru Mxri-sensei, but I can't exactly complain with how seamless the uniforms are. Tae hands me a small piece of paper from her pocket with a number—fifteen—that is stenciled neatly on the pristine surface with a black marker, motioning for me to take one of the seat outside of the classroom in a que with two other potential guests until our personal maid 'welcomes' us. Throughout all this, Monika's eyes actively examines Tae, curiously.

"I didn't know this is even possible for a school festival… your students are amazing!"

"Not just my students, the third years are giving their all—you haven't seen anything yet," I quickly add. "The performance in the gymnasium is something you should definitely look forward to!"

Pursing my lips, I let out a deep breath and feel the warm air tickling my nostrils. "This is their last festival, after all; one last 'hurrah' before life takes over."

Monika falls into silence as her eyes—the camera—droops to the floor. The camera's vision droop to the floor, followed by a muted "I see" as she exhales a perplexed breath. Did I say something wrong? Was it me? No… I don't think it was. This innocent chat nags at one of her topic, one about the turbulence and uncertainty that plagues third year students—particularly, what comes next. The third year of high school can both be the highlight or the downfall of one's chapter in life; that 'make or break' moment, days of last chances and final goodbyes. I was there once, and I guess the same can be true for Monika.

Well… it would be if she's a part of this reality.

If the game runs its course as planned, if Salvato coded DDLC to be your standard fanfare dating sim… how different would her life be? Would her existence simply cease to exist at the end of the game? Unlike the students here or myself, there is no future unless someone goes out of their way to extend that. Her life, existence, the knowledge she procured, all will be lost at the conclusion
whereas in this side, we are the masters of our own story. The more I think about it, the more I understand her reason why she fought so hard for that chance of escape—she, too, wishes to seize her own fate before 'the end' arrives; her 'make or break' moment, the monster that haunts third year students. And she is one as well, a third year student.

"One last 'hurrah'..." again she whisper. She takes a quick, contemplative sigh and, for a moment, I feel a spark of determination in her voice. "7xcfFHd, there's something I want to—"

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, master," cuts a familiar, graceful voice. "You kept your promise."

A pair of hazel brown eyes comes to greet me as I search for the source of the chirpy voice, drawing me to a warm smile that she always wear with confidence. As if on que, she assumes her position and curtseys before pointing at the badge that is pinned close to her chest—a number fifteen is written on its surface. She opens her palm and extends them to me, as if offering an object that can't be seen with the naked eye.

…unless maybe…?

"Mikawa, am I supposed to… take your hand?"

She giggles softly, "No, the numbered paper, master. May I…?"

Ah… of course. That was silly of me…

The paper flutters to her open palm and with a quick glance, she checks the number and nods in affirmation with a confirming smile. In a single, fluid motion, she gestures and welcomes us into the café like a proper maid; disciplined, polite, yet alluring and kind. My heart races at the sight—to see my homeroom, my students, transformed this classroom into a fully-functioning café is as touching as it is a testament to the dedication and effort they poured. Mikawa takes a step ahead and leads us to our table—or, more accurately, a pair of desks joined and covered with a white table cloth; a single menu book rests on its surface. Again, she gestures for us to take a seat; I kindly oblige.

"May I take your belongings, master? We have a designated spot to keep them safe."

"I'll be alright," I reply with a polite but dismissive wave. "It's not too much of a trouble."

She nods in approval and smiles, "Very well, master. Might I recommend our tea or coffee and cake set?"

The menu is simple in design yet, with a glance at how neatly structured and organized it is, it's not a mystery who the genius was. Focus and attention hangs at a balance, juggling between the menu and the maid who waits expectantly and patiently, alert with her tray clutched close to her chest; the order, however, won't be coming from me. I press the earpiece closer and taps three times to communicate with Monika without drawing attention from our surrounding. Her camera whirrs and scans the menu, tracing each line from top to bottom before, after a brief second of silence, she comes to a decision.

"A coffee and cake set would be—"

"Master, would you like me to take your belongings? It looks heavy and… uncomfortable."

Mikawa's innocent act of hospitality, though soft-spoken and polite, thunders like a hammer to a sheet of metal. Maintaining her smile and demeanor, her hazel brown eyes traces the apparatus—from the camera that rests on my shoulder, down to the bag on my back; its disguise, shattered by Obase's deduction. My earpiece dies to an odd silence, dividing my attention between the club
president and the songbird in a minute that felt like an hour. She watches cordially, waiting for my approval that is left in suspension at my own behest; I, too, am waiting for a peep from Monika. The rhythm of my heart grows more and more audible at each passing second...

"Master…?"

"…It's alright," Monika whispers, shattering the silence. "I won't complain. I understand…"

No, this has gone on far too long. "It's alright, Mikawa. I rather keep it on than risk damaging it."

"But wouldn't it be—"

"Oh, why don't I go for your recommendation?" I quickly interrupt. "The coffee and cake would be nice—the strawberry shortcake, if you please."

I may be a little too… pushy for my own liking there. Mikawa lightly winces and breaks character succinctly, enough to cover the short 'gap' in her overall performance before it grows too disruptive. There's… resistance to my decision, although that is what I've come to conclude from my own observation—albeit briefly. Again, her soft smile beams blindingly before she bows politely and leaves to complete our order; I exhale the stress that binds me and marginally slink down on the seat. This day… nothing has gone according to expectations.

"Why…?" she sighs. "Why are you so… adamant? You know that I'm not really there…"

"Why? We're just stopping for coffee and cake."

A pause, "You're right… ahaha, sorry…"

…

No, you're not. I may be one dense motherfucker, but not 'VN protag'-dense to not catch on. The mood swings, the 'cold shoulder'—everything factors the moment she is mentioned; even the sight of her name alone rattles your psyche. Monika… what happened between you and Mikawa? I was suspicious then, but with how things unfold between you and her, I'm certain now; whatever it was, it forced your hand to insistently keep your distance from me. Are you jealous, perhaps…? No… this is more than that. There's something else in play; jealousy alone won't rattle Monika's foundation to its core—she'd charge it headfirst if she had to.

I want to know…

I have to know…

I must…!

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

At the sound of a 'clink', all my thoughts grinds to a still as I am presented with a strawberry shortcake served alongside a cup of coffee, fashioned exactly to my liking; two cubes of sugar and a packet of cream. Tracing her slender arm, I quickly notice a second serving of cake and coffee she carries on her tray destined for another customer—or so I thought; if that is true, then there would be no need for us to draw numbers for a 'personal maid'. It becomes apparent after she sets the cake and coffee at my opposite that those are meant for her.

"Aren't you on the job, Mikawa?"
Mikawa plainly giggles as she takes her seat. "I was actually on my break, sens—*master.*"

"But I figured," she continues with a mellow smile. "I could go *just* a bit longer for one more person. So, here I am."

Quite the dedication she has… I must admit, that is quite admirable. However, it still doesn't quite answer the mystery of the second set of coffee and cake, however. "One more thing, is that coffee and cake-set part of my expense as well?"

She swings her head from side to side, accompanied with a soft 'unn', "Don't worry, these are my own expenses, se—*master.* Unless you wish otherwise…? Ahahaha~"

It's too easy to be drowned in this serene atmosphere, losing myself within her vestal dialogue and engaging personality; forgetting that I came to the festival with a *company.* Gently I push both the cake and coffee for Monika to see, quietly reminding her that I have not forgotten about her or her presence—*praying* that she has yet severed the connection with the apparatus, a thought that only worsened by the lack of movements from her camera or a simple peep from my earpiece. Relief washes over when her camera twitches—albeit briefly—to scan the cake and coffee; though nothing but a simple gesture, it warms my heart to know that she still has the patience. All this secrecy, the pattern and disruptions… without a word, we both understood the hurdles we have set ourselves with this relationship. This, along with her dissonance towards Mikawa is likely torturous to sit through—and I completely understand, but I can't simply push one side away without hurting them; it's inevitable. My hands are tied.

I'm sorry, Monika… please, bear with me…

"*Master,*" Mikawa starts, leaning on the table and crossing her arms. "I have a question, although I'm not sure if I should ask…"

A sullen expression paints across her feature, suddenly and catching me off-guard. I take a cautious sip, resting the cup down on its saucer and slowly process the mood that she sets; I'm guessing this is part of the experience as well. "Go on, there's nothing holding you back, right?"

She plants her lips on her cup and sets it down. "Then... if I may, master,"

... "Are you against relationships that goes against societal norms?"

"I-I don't intend to imply anything," she continues nervously, furiously waving her hand dismissively. "W-what I mean is a relationship between different social classes, o-or states… I meant no offense, master."

Aah… I'm starting to get a picture of the main appeal of a maid café now— at least this one in particular. So I was right; they *did* based it off of the manga that romanticized Victorian-England. Well, playing along wouldn't hurt; this is part of the experience, right? Besides, I still have time to kill before I have to go and patrol the upper floors and the stair leading to the roof. I lift the small, plastic fork and guides it down a vertical path to slice a perfect cut on the cake to taste the soft, sweet, and spongy treat. The sweetness and texture, the flavor… strangely familiar to the tongue—though, not in the sense of its *type.* I can't seem to point a finger at it…

Well, it's not of importance; it'll come in due time.

Washing the remains down with the coffee—absolutely wonderful, by the way; glad they spared no expense—I gather my thoughts to focus on the question pushed by my 'maid'. With a deep sigh,
words and answer forms naturally in my mind; experience likely play a larger role to that more than wisdom or grasp on historical context—which I'm certain Mikawa certainly has in spades. "I don't think it matters, to be honest."

"Age, social class, even different realities," I chuckle as I continue. Yeah… experience certainly influenced my answer. "These are, simply put, social constructs agreed upon by old men with too much time and power. Sure it may keep thing in order, but in the long run it doesn't matter how old you are, the position, or even 'world' you live; so long as both parties are willing to love, to give your all to show each other of their affection—even at the cost of one's self—limitations meant nothing."

Monika's camera swerves to my direction. I glance back and smile; I guess she caught on to where I got the answer.

Even our 'maid' seems impressed and is left speechless. Gathering what I believe her composure, she claps her hand together and compliments. "That's a wonderful answer, master,"

Her lips stretches to a curve from ear to ear, pleased by the idea.

"Thank you. I'll bear that in mind."

"I don't… like that girl."

"I know," I respond nonchalantly. "No surprise there. Does it make you feel better though? Being honest about it, I mean."

She pauses, her voice abstained by hesitation before a sigh of relief is expelled. "Yes… it does."

The short stop for coffee and cake was the last checkpoint before the more mundane task takes over—the patrol around the stairwell that leads to the roof. As much as I enjoyed Mikawa's brief company, Monika's animosity bleeds through the earpiece based from the rustle of her uniform, the constant shifting of her weight, and the audible 'clink' every time she cuts the cake—that ten minutes of respite probably equates to a Chinese water torture or the sound of nails on a chalkboard. There was little I could do to remedy but to walk out; in hindsight, it was more or less a bad decision to stop for coffee and cake.

"You could have stayed longer…" she states bluntly, laced with varying degrees of dishonesty. "I wouldn't have mind, F2jsAde=.

There she goes again. "Really? It took me quite the effort to get you to confess your honesty alone!"

"Yes, but—"

"Buuut…?"

A lull in the moment. I slow my pace to a crawl, resting against the wall near the stairwell that leads to the roof to wait for her resistance. She returns with nothing but a sigh of defeat that I've grown tired of. "—never mind, let's… drop this."

Again, she dodges the issue. "Fair enough."

Here I thought I could use this chance to have a one to one conversation—I could use that student superstition right about now, as little as I'm willing to admit its viability. Peering to my side, I notice how idle her camera is, gazing at the hallway towards the distant echo of festivities, completely detached from this end of the facility. I burrow the earpiece further with a push, hoping to catch some
hint that could aid me in understanding the things that goes through her mind—things that she has completely sealed away from me. It is no secret that Mikawa may have an influence to her decision, but to what extent and how much Monika's willing to share is too little to form a conclusion. I want to understand, to lend my hand and help, yet with how she constantly keeps her distance I don't know what else I can do; I'm running out of ideas and time—and nothing has made an impact on her demeanor. The festival is at its last lap.

"Say, 4HFsdG=," she starts in a faint voice. "Why are we idling around here?"

Oh, right… I haven't explain to her about this particular duty or the 'charm' that birthed it. I'm glad she asked… I'm beginning to fear that I have nothing left to show. Stay calm, Oogame, there may still be hope yet.

"A few years ago, a teacher and a student walked up these steps for a rendezvous..."

Monika's camera whirrs to life as its attention is focused solely on me. I imagine her emerald eyes glitter like the night sky, overtaken by curiosity and intrigue that reliably accompanies her wherever she go as I lay the foundation of the story piece by piece. This was a story before I was a teacher in this institution, an old rumor about a couple—a teacher and a student, caught in an illicit relationship that tarnished the name of the school and the family of the girl. The girl was slated to graduate on the coming spring and the teacher believed it to be completely sound for them to start a relationship. So they did. It started like any other; a rose-tinted world of love and happiness, away from the scrutiny or the prying eyes and ear of others who may disagree.

But fate had other plans.

Words spread about their rendezvous and before long, society hammered its fists down on the couple; its blunt force nearly shattered them in two. When the couple refused to submit to the demands, the school tried to terminate the teacher's contract, while the family of the girl would move to a different prefecture as a final measure. This didn't sat well for the lovers and thus, in agreement and as a proof of their love, both the student and the teacher jumped from the roof and committed a double-suicide in pursuit of happiness. After the incident, the school erected fences and banned all access to the roof—with an exception to faculties and securities, of course. It's quite an absurd tale—still is, but that didn't stop the students from turning the tragedy into a romantic 'charm'.

"The school even tried to lock the access to the roof; some daring fool broke that lock and it hasn't been replaced since."

I continue with a sigh, "And that is why we're 'idling' around here. All because of a stupid rumor... kids these days."

"I don't know..." Monika interrupts. "Although tragic, there is an appeal to it—I certainly find it romantic!"

"Oh please, not you too... are you trying to raise a death-flag...?"

"Perhaps, ahaha~!"

Monika's feminine titter vibrates through the earpiece, resonating a tone clearer than the frequency I've come to expect for the past week. This harmonious sound, innocent and uplifting, casts an illuminating light towards the exit in this maze of emotions, crumbling the walls little by little. It may still be a week or two, maybe much longer before she's ready to comfortably confide everything, but for a first step I'd say this... isn't as bad as I thought. Even if this is nothing but a small victory, I'll welcome it, regardless if it's just a glimpse of the Monika I once knew—the sassy, determined, high
school devil. I take a glimpse at my watch and internally rejoices, noting the short hand of the clock that points specifically at the number 'four'.

"Looks like it's time. Come, let's enjoy the last few performances."

Peering at the camera, the dimpled lenses reflects an image of an idiot that grins from ear to ear, brimming with positivity. I can only imagine the look on Monika's face as she giggles softly and nods in unison with the apparatus. "Yes, let's go."

We walk down the flight of stairs in silence, smiling, grinning, and chuckling to ourselves at the short exchange on the stairwell. For once, the mood feels lighter than usual—cheery, I might add, though not quite as how I remembered it to be. I wave at my substitute as we continue to make our way to the gym, where many have gathered to witness the final act of the festival—the performances by the students. Peering at her, I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the lens before she hastily turns away, followed after by an infectious giggle echoing through.

…

Maybe there are some truth to that charm after all…

The thunderous applause of the audience drowns the gymnasium with a flurry of cheers as another performance comes to an end. In a perfect, synchronized timing, the Student Council President—the designated MC—walks unto the stage with confidence and repeats the concurring pattern at the interval, introducing the next performance with excitement and vigor. Scanning the crowd as they welcome the next entrée, I glimpse at Monika who—with animated cheer—joins the rest of the audience in their spirit. Sure, it is without a doubt that her presence is merely embodied by a camera and an earpiece, and it's also true that I'm the only person here who can vividly describe her excited quirks as the show starts and ends; like a ghost, keeping everyone blissfully ignorant of her presence. Not to me, however.

"O-oh! It's 'Alice in Wonderland'! I'm getting giddy thinking about it, ahaha~!"

I muster a smile at her direction, warranting a laughter from the earpiece as the performance starts; though, instead of the wonderful effort by class 3-4 and their rendition of 'Alice in Wonderland', my attention is kept at Monika and the riddle that have occupied my mind for most of the day. As she applauds, amazed, and is entertained along with the audience, the question posed by the play and my thought comes to a vivid clarity—the idea of 'living in a dream'. Just how 'Wonderland', as part of a dream, inherits a mix of Alice's unconscious state and phenomena of reality, so is this life I've thrust myself into. For the past two months, Monika has been a part of my life as my girlfriend, but… isn't it odd how I find this to be completely acceptable? Our relationship was built upon the knowledge of her existence and sacrifice in DDLC, but outside of that I barely knew anything about Monika aside from the things she has told—the same can be said about our relationship on the day when she professed her interest to be together with me. Taken into the context of reality, that is the fastest shortcut of social suicide and bridge-burning ever devised by man; that, however, isn't the worse of it.

I came into this relationship with rose-tinted glasses, expecting an ideal love story buttered with 'romance' and 'happiness' at each passing day—a fairy tale, more or less. Instead, day after day I grew disillusioned as each action bore the fruit of consequences; the limitations due to our differing reality furthers my frustration and dulls my expectations, grinding it further than what it once was. There is no save point in reality, nor is there a way for me to 'load' and undo the mistakes I've done—or the things she did. No… this isn't a relationship that we both hoped for, but a subversion of idolatry and wish-fulfillment that extends to both parties; I think she understood that far sooner than I.
This relationship…

…this relationship was bound to fail from the start. She knew it, I knew it; we both understood that.

Yet we stubbornly defied fate time and time again. From a bond that was formed out of mere knowledge of each other's existence, we forged it together with trust, loyalty, and time. When I was lost in the maze I erected, she waited patiently like a beacon in the middle of a storm. Now, when she raised her 'wall' against me, I will persevere as she had done the same; we will endure. Before we realized, this was no longer a 'subversion of idolatry and wish-fulfillment' as what we both expected it to be. To compromise, sacrifice, understand, and to love unconditionally no matter the flaws or faults… I think…

…this is what a relationship is. It's far from perfect, but it's alright.

"That's a wonderful play..." she imparts with content. "Shiho-san... was it? She plays a great 'Alice'."

I nod, scratching the side of my ear as her whisper tickles my lobe. "I can agree to that."

It's a little disheartening to watch Shiho on stage, however, as she shifts her gaze from one end of the gymnasium to the next before what I can describe as despair settles; as indecent as the man can be, I guess he can't overlook his responsibility this time around. I may not like him, but you have to give credit where it's due.

But I digress.

A modest smile crawls along my cheeks as I glance at Monika from the corner of my eye at the conclusion of the performance and—to an extent—self-reflection. I did say I have a lot of time to think about everything, didn't I? The road we paved to reach this point is long and arduous—and it will extend further the longer we take this relationship; a long, rocky road with an uncertainty that expands like a balloon—the 'special day'. At the end of it all… will it be worth it, I wonder…? Well… I guess now would be a good time as any to begin anew…

Up on the stage, the MC takes hold of the mike once more and announces the last act—the school's light music club. I turn to Monika who has her attention sorely fixed on the stage; her voice beaming with expectations and excitement. She ganders and catches me in my expression, tilting the camera just slightly to picture an adorable smile in my rampant imagination. My cheeks flares in an instant and she, keeping the lens on me, girlishly and softly giggles.

"Your school has a band too..." she said with awe and a drip of envy. "I'm kind of jealous; I don't think mine has anything beside the anime and literature club."

"There's more in this reality than what you could ever imagine," I reply with a chuckle. "One day you can experience it too."

"I doubt it, ahaha~" she pause. "But... it is something I will look forward to."

The band makes their introduction with a proud, yet melancholic voice that shatters the gymnasium with cheers and supportive cries. As they play their first song, Monika swiftly swivels the camera to the stage; her expectant silence is deafening as all attention is poured on the performance. Her interest bears me a smile, reminded of her Literature Club's performance that was never meant to be. How would she and the rest of the club perform under pressure? Can she maintain her composure? What about the audience? Would they appreciate the poem or, tragically, embarrass her publicly for even
considering 'poem recital' as a performance? I will never know as, unceremoniously, a voice beckons. "Ah, sensei! I've been looking for you."

"Obase…" I quickly reply, giving him my full attention. "How's the cookie sales?"

The young man grins and pulls his thumb, pointing towards the ceiling. "It went better than expected! Did you know Yuuki bought one for Satsuki?"

So they are a couple! They can have my blessings, damn riajuu!

"That's cute. But I assume that's not the reason why you're looking for me specifically?"

"Nope!"

With a quick rummage through his bag, Obase draws a pair of the literature club's product that is packaged distinctively with two different colored papers. He grins excitedly as he offers both of them at my direction, gesturing for me with a simple motion that says it all; 'go ahead, these are for you, sensei'. Liberating both of them from his hands, I tear the package open and take a bite of one of the cookie—a chocolate chip—and opens the light-blue card that is decoratively attached to it. I raise my eyebrow and chuckle a smile as it reads, in bold letters, 'THANK YOU, SENSEI'; an inkan of all the members lines the bottom page.

"That's from all of us in the literature club, sensei. For taking care of all of us, thank you very much!"

Obase bows with respect and expresses his gratitude that—in honesty—comes as a surprise. Quickly and quietly I motion for him to raise his head and accept his gratitude as is; after all, it is part of my duty as a teacher. Receiving a simple, yet earnest gesture of thanks… it's more than I could expect. It is moving, sweeping me off of my feet into a gentle river, or a ride into the clouds. Take a breather, Oogame, don't start tearing up now!

"Your students care a lot about you," Monika chimes abruptly. "And you tell me how much trouble they are?"

Oh, you really want to see me tear up do you, Monika? I'll see if I can poke something out of you later!

The last cookie is packaged with a purple-colored card that is distinctly lady-like in its presentation, but also overflowing with emotions that is evident by the extra effort poured into it. I open the package once more and take a bite of it—this time, white chocolate pieces—and examines the front and back of the card, glancing at Obase who's expression is rather… vexing? A snap of anomaly takes hold. "Say, Obase, who's this other one from?"

He jerks at attention. The song comes to an end. "Oh, haha… you might want to read it on your own."

"Everyone! Thank you for your support! As this will be our last performance, we decided to do this cover of YUI!" cries the lead singer of the band in the midst of the encore. Gently, I flip open the card…

"The song is called…"

…and finds nothing but a single sentence. The hair on my nape rises in horror; 'I'll be waiting on the roof'.

"Go," Monika advises with a calm, serene voice; yet fear is the only thing that courses through. "You
shouldn't keep a lady waiting—and I'll leave you be."

"…Good-bye Days."

The echo from the gymnasium bleeds through to the halls, beckoning all to converge on the source as I shove and push my way through the current; the purple note, crumpled under the pressure of my palm. My thoughts are contorted and disjointed—a mess of jumbled questions with no answer but a series of warped speculations and disappointments, lost, freefalling into an endless rabbit hole. The corridors that is rife with activity hours before gradually resonds to empty, dreary hallways with walls that steadily constricts its grip, pushing me to race against a threat that I barely understand. I squeeze my palm and feel the contours and crinkle of the purple note as a reminder of my sudden call to action; its distinctive writing style, the swift strokes and the neatly written characters—all imprinted in my consciousness. There is nothing to think or see, except the repeating tempo of my heartbeat and the steps that pulls me closer to the door. I stop underneath the last flight of stairs before the door, noticing the eerie silence and absence of the faculty member who is supposedly be on watch at this hour—my fear only grew stronger when I notice the door slightly ajar. I take a step and stop as the weight of the apparatus returns unceremoniously and slams my shoulders.

I have forgotten someone important…

"Monika…? Hello…?"

The earpiece returns an uncomfortable static and my heed fell unto deaf ears; she—Monika severed the link from the apparatus and I, of my own vanity, failed to notice the events that has been set in motion.

I am left alone.

"Please tell me you're joking… please…" I plead, repeatedly, receiving nothing but static and a 'dead' camera. "Why… we promised…"

Questions pops up and doubts are raised as my mind screech incessantly, failing to process this… revelation. I squint my brows, grit my teeth, and clench my fist to a close as liquid cement fills my shoes and rocks dangles in my gut, paralyzing my thoughts and locomotion in a single swoop. Anger takes hold, followed by frustration and a sickening disgust at her selfish cowardice that shatters and spits everything that we've built upon today—everything. Betrayal. Is. Brutal.

Yet… I remained calm.

Am I disappointed? Yes, I am. Angry? Furious, but check that I suppose. Frustrated? Definitely. But somehow, from the back of my mind, I knew this was coming—and I acknowledged it long ago. This isn't a shocking revelation nor a surprise, it is to be expected; we came from two different realities with different sets of rules that governs our way of living. I suppose both of us understood the futility of it all, to wake up from 'Wonderland' and accept that everything is never meant to be. Everything is only a matter of time before both of us have that rude awakening—and now would be as good as any…

…

…hah… ahaha… what have I been doing to myself…?

I take the first step, up towards the last set of stairs and reach for the round handle of the door to give it a gentle push. Cool air rushes through, and the ray of the cascading sun bleeds through the cracks
and creates a path across the dimly lit stairwell; standing before the setting autumn sun, a young woman peers from beyond the shadow in a black and white maid outfit. She lurches forward, resting both of her hands behind her back and giggles playfully—girlishly and innocently.

"You came, sensei~."

"Mikawa, you're not supposed to be here… this area is—"

"Aya is fine," she strides forward, pulling the ribbon that ties her hair in a bun and fashions it into a ponytail. "I never liked tying my hair into a bun. This is a lot more comfortable."

Hastily scanning my surroundings, I left a deep sigh in my wake upon finding the isolation she has once again invites me to—at least, that tells me Kitamura is not involved in her trespassing and this is of her own accord. That, however, does not excuse the unsettling tone that descends upon us, or the direction she's taking this conversation. "Mikawa, what are you doing here…? You're not supposed to be here… did someone coerced you?"

She returns a subtle swing from left to right, keeping up an expression of fondness and limitless patience. "I came here on my own."

"Then you're trespassing. The roof entire roof is cordoned, you know that."

"I know," she giggles. "But you came… you came!"

Mikawa’s expression intensifies as she glides from side to side, casting a silhouette that extends her shadow’s reach as the sun slowly sets in the distance, leaving a trail of golden yellow. There is joy in her steps—of happiness I've yet witnessed that radiates along with an air of overwhelming vulnerability and trust, taking one easy step at a time. I swallow to keep my calm in check; this is a path I’m certain I should avoid.

"Sensei, do you remember what you told me? Your answer about the possibility of a relationship despite the difference of social class or status?"

She clasps her hands together and holds them close to her chest, allowing her emotion be the locomotion to her movement. "I… really love that answer. It gives me confidence."

"I'm always uncertain, afraid," she continues, inching closer at each word. "Afraid of what is to come, but now… now I'm certain."

I sense the vibration—the echo of her heartbeat that races faster and faster as she closes our distance to about an arm’s length. Her cheeks are flushed like cherry tomatoes and her lower lip quivers uncontrollably, struggling to maintain her few remaining composure. I remain motionless, but wary at the development that takes hold as sense of responsibility clashes with intimacy to create a turbulent storm of affection, inhibiting my movements and keeping my feet frozen in spot; my mind races to do its best to process the situation. Her glittering hazel brown eyes shoots up and gazes expectantly with pockets of tears forming at the edge, eager to burst; her breathing, erratic, marked by deep breaths and short heaves. The tempo of my breathing increases exponentially, capricious and abnormal; a warm sensation envelopes my cheeks in a curious comfort. I meet her eye somewhere in the middle; the color and its clarity, hypnotizing. She leaps forward and catches me in an embrace…

'Hey, hey, did you know? They say that if you confess your love on the school rooftop at the end of the festival, your dream will come true!'

"Sensei… for a very long time, since I first met you…"
'Eeh... but isn't the school rooftop closed?'

"I have always, always..."

'That's why! It's a charm!'

"...always been in love with you. I love you, sensei...!"

With all her might, she presses her frail figure against my chest and wrap her arms around my back, slipping beneath the apparatus and reaching for the fabric beneath. Her heartbeat drums like an instrument, echoing the beat of her emotions, corresponding with her excited heaving the more she buries her expression into my chest. I can feel blood and my own tempo increasing, clawing and yearning to satisfy the desire of the flesh as her supple chest presses against my stomach; her sweet moans, ever so innocent, seeks for comfort that satiates her greed for affection—and now I know the taste of the forbidden fruit that Kitamura lusts for.

Yes... this is a confession...

Gently I grasp her shoulders and break her hold from me, recovering the lost space between us. She gasps, throwing a look filled with more questions that demands an answer as her body remains still under the weight of my hands. Again, I wet my throat and put my mind at work to formulate an answer that—to the prudent man—is an easy question to tackle. With a heartbeat that rises in its crescendo at each passing second, the innocent gaze of the youth, and the irresistible figure that bends and curves perfectly at the contours of her uniform, descends like Aphrodite to a mere mortal, tempts and sways my resolute. I fear... I may have been corrupted by her charm.

"Mikawa..." I start nervously. "This-this isn't right. I'm your teacher."

"I will be graduating, sensei!" she states with confidence. "It won't matter then once I am no longer a student, right?"

At her beckon, my strength leaves my arm and slowly withdraws to my side. There is a mix of reluctance and overwhelming joy that creeps ever so slowly, suffocating and blinding my conscience in euphoria. Here, with the sun behind her, a young woman—my student—meekly and willingly offer herself like a gift to the ancients. Her heart bleeds with resounding affection that can be felt meters away, unbridled and unrestrained, casting doubts that shakes my principles to the core. I said it myself, 'so long as there is love then nothing matters'. She will graduate next spring... that's about five months at most; it's... fine, right?

...right...?

...

No... it isn't.

A certain songbird spent most of her days trapped in a cage, yearning for a life beyond the limits of her reality. Her only company is a raven, who stumbled upon her by chance, hovering in circles yet he has seen the world. The raven, powerless, decide to stay with the songbird and carry her cage wherever he goes to show her what the world is and together, they traveled across the land; in rain or shine. Overtime, the songbird and the raven grew close; the raven would return late in the evening with food for the songbird and as gratitude, she would sing for him the most beautiful song day after day. However, as the journey turns for the worse and famine hit the land, the songbird realized that she, unable to escape her confines, is but a burden to the raven that stubbornly carries her wherever he wishes to go. Thus, in an act of selfless sacrifice, the songbird attacks the raven's hold on the cage
and sang one last song to set him free.

'—and I'll leave you be.'

I am a fool... why didn't I notice this sooner?

The consequences and moral implications are obvious, but her determination and sincerity in her confession is as honest and as pure as snow. Her expectant eyes, glistening, understands perfectly of the ramification and the taboo that she willingly encroached, parallel to the pair who precedes our time—the story of the 'rooftop double-suicide'. Ask yourself, what is sheto you? Then, what about her? Is she the same as her, too? Or is she... something more? This... this isn't an easy call to make. Between reality and fiction, I cast a downward gaze towards the shadows and heave with a heavy heart.

All good things must come to an end...

"Mikawa," I start. "If you have confessed to me three months prior, I would have said 'yes',"

...

"I'm sorry."

The air trembles and a gasp resounds, drawing my attention to the young woman before me. Mikawa quivers and her expression darkens almost in shock, chuckling uncomfortably as she backpedals with a frozen look of disbelief. I cast a downward gaze to the side, blanketed by immense guilt and shame as the sun sets in the distance. Her short, muffled chortle is... uncanny to the ear. "W-why...? There's no one else for you—there shouldn't be!"

"There is," I gently reply. "I don't think you've met her. She's headstrong sometimes, often stubborn and bossy but—"

"—It's that bitch from the screen, is it?"

Like nails to a chalkboard or a barrage of cacophonous sound invading your consciousness, reality grinds to a stop and my attention falls squarely on the president. Her erratic breathing and unsettling crooked smile is infused with mixed emotions of disbelief, anger, and jealousy that I can't possibly describe in its entirety. Mikawa's startling guffaw and dagger-like stares does little but raise the hair on the back of my nape; a blank, lifeless stare—a yandere.

"She's there isn't she? That whore... watching behind that camera?"

"How do you—"

"I know a lot about you, sensei!" she starts, eyes wide and bloodshot. "I know what you like, your hobbies, your address, even down to your favorite brand of coffee and how you liked it served—I know everything!"

Thousands of needles pricks and dances on the back of my nape, "You... you were stalking me!?"

"I'm better than her—I'm real!" she continues with a step, ignoring my order to stop. "I can cook for you, care for you, and I can even comfort you with my body if you ever so desired! WHAT CAN SHE DO THAT I CAN'T!? I love you, sensei! Nee... please say 'yes'. Tell me—tell me this is just a dream...?"

Before me is no longer the image of 'Mikawa Aya' that I knew, but a lovesick stalker with an
unhealthy obsession. Out of my own paranoia, I trace the length of her arm and—much to my relief—finds no sign of any inherently sharp or blunt object that she may use against me or, just like Yuri, herself. Meanwhile, her empty, dagger-like stare focuses intensely at the small camera that remains dormant on my shoulder—something that I quickly take heed.

...dormant?

"I did everything you asked! I pour my best for you, sensei!" Mikawa continues, passionately if not zealous. "I studied all of your assignments, did all of your homework and readings, lead the club just how you wished it to be, achieved perfect scores—all for you... ALL. FOR. YOU. Yet... WHY DIDN'T YOU NOTICE ME!!?"

"JUST NOTICE ME, SENSEI...!" her voice rise in a violent apex. "JUST. ME."

...

"JUST. AYA."

"ENOUGH...!" this... this is like a bad case of déjà vu. "That's enough, Mikawa. I don't know how the hell you know about 'her', but my decision is final. I can't accept your feelings!"

The air freezes to a standstill, yet Mikawa's expression—her rage—burns with intensity, fueled by jealousy that sees no other alternative except the permanent eradication of her only obstacle and rival; I know this not only because my acquaintance with the young woman, but also by experience. Even when her piercing glare is aimed at another, one could sense just from a glance how dogged her resolve to claim what she rightfully believe is 'hers' through any means necessary—a mistake that a certain club president made in the past. Without warning she leaps, arms flailing, reaching and clawing for the little camera that rests on my shoulder with bloodlust and ferocity that drowns her scream of agony. This is my responsibility; I have created a monster...

Throwing my weight around, I sidestep her initial attempt and quickly blocks her second with my left arm. Even without reach, her voice is as sharp as a blade.

"YOU SHOULD'VE STAYED DEAD! WHY ARE YOU STILL ALIVE?"

"Wait, Mikawa, what—SO YOU WERE THE ONE!"

Ignoring my cry, she continues the onslaught. "HE'S MINE! MINEMINEMINEMINE...! I'LL TEAR YOU IN TWO, YOU THIEVING CAT...! WHAT CAN A FAKE LIKE YOU DO!? I AM REAL! YOU. WILL. NEVER. BE—"

"AYA, ENOUGH...!"

With little options left to douse the situation, I gently use my weight and shove her out of the way. The force, though unintended, cause her to lose balance and stumble backwards where she collapses with a 'thud'. Supporting herself, Mikawa remains still for a brief minute in silence, and I see the lull in the moment to speak and end this... madness. I don't want it to end this way, but she leave me no choice.

"Even if you managed to break this... apparatus," I start as calmly as I can. "You can't harm her, Mikawa. This thing is merely a medium that allows her to see the outside world—like a television. She's safe."

I clench my teeth and fold my hand to a close, "And I swear I will not let you touch her, ever again."
With a heavy wheeze, I train my eyes on her in silence as puddles begins to congregate under her shadows, hidden only by the bangs of her hair. Her glistening eyes shots up abruptly, locking me in a gaze as she quivers and trembles through her words, flinching. My heart sank under the pressure. "Just… tell me one thing, sensei…"

"W-what am I to y-you…? Am I… just a replacement…?"

Not a word escapes my tongue as she observes with her crystalline eyes, waiting for an answer that I struggle to give. No… even if I chose to remain in silence, she probably knew all too well what my answer would be—and she was right. Before I can raise my voice, Mikawa stands on her feet and dashes towards the stairwell, bumping me along the way and staining my uniform with tears that she tries so hard to conceal. The echo of her footsteps resinds to nothingness and I am left alone, once more; though, I guess that statement has been false for quite some time.

"Monika, you can stop pretending; I know you're there."

A short 'dud' in the earpiece and I know she's there. There's a moment of silence, awkward and long, waiting for the right timing to break the ice—one that is absent after the ordeal. I keep glancing at the camera, observing as it returns to life and casts an apologetic gaze to the floor seconds after noticing the frustration etched in my expression and the tone my voice commands. Finally, at the caw of the ravens, she starts. "…how long have you realized?"

"About half-way," I reply coarsely, crossing my arms. "You think it's funny?"

"S-sorry…?"

I heave, "You think it's hilarious? After all the things I did, you think it's funny to say 'I'll leave you be', just to find that you've been watching everything from the corner since the beginning? Hmm?"

She spares no time to formulate a reply.

"You think I find it 'funny' to see you 'toying' with a woman's heart—not one, but TWO!? To think there's a replacement—my replacement, no less! TO. THE. LETTER! How delusional are you?"

"Oh, you're one to talk. You think I didn't realize your obstinate attempt to push me away?" I bark. "And in my defense, I never thought you'd come to life then! I can say the same to you about toying with a man's heart for FOUR FUCKING YEARS!"

"SHE IS A REAL PERSON, 7h243F…!" Monika croaks in frustration, stunning my eardrums. "I'm nothing but a manifestation of codes! DATA! I. AM. NOT. REAL…!"

"YOU'RE REAL TO ME…!"

"WHY ARE YOU SO STUBBORN!? ARE YOU REALLY FINE WITH A MERE 'REAL-LIFE FANTASY'?"

"YES I AM!" I fight in return. "You're real to me, and I'll pick you over anyone else in a heartbeat! Don't let anyone tell you different!"

"You're… unbelievable…"

"You're unbelievable…!"

"Hhmph…!"
"Tch…"

Just like that, our conversation hangs in the air; she, gazing the dark blue sky in vexation while I, the vast horizon that extends beyond the fence in irate. We are young and naïve, commandeered by our emotions and overwhelming sense of self-righteousness that we stubbornly defend to the skin of our teeth… I can't help but slip a little chuckle at that notion. In this uncanny standoff, I've come to realize that I've achieved what I've wanted all along. All this time I wondered how to bust through her A.T. field, and all it takes is a silly argument about who's the more 'liable' between us. To find her so… passionate to defend her stance… I can't believe how I've missed this side of her—frustration and ego be damn!

"What's so funny…?"

"Oh, no, nothing…" I reply while catching my breath in between. Her camera whirs and eyes my winded face; if only I can see those pair of emeralds right about now. "It's just that… I haven't seen you so lively like this since… hell, since before my fever!"

"Have I really been that much of a downcast…?"

"Destitute, more precisely; you can pull up your fake smiles and laughs all day—I can tell, Monika. Who do you think I am?"

She huffs and giggles lightly, "A jerk who has yet told me his name."

I break into a chuckling fit, relishing the reality—the truth of her statement, as a cheer erupted from the gymnasium and concludes the festival. Monika looks on from behind the camera, adjusting the focus of the lens on my expression before the contagious optimism infects her and she, too, drowns in a series of giggles. Whether it is due to the absurdity of our situation and our foolish endeavor to pursue them, or perhaps the idea of how blissfully she calls me with the name I gave 'MC', along with how callously I accept them as is, we didn't let anything stop us from having a good laugh out of it. She knew it, I knew it; we both realized how much of a fool we are, blind as a bat due to our pursuit of comfort. As our fit of jolly subsides along with the setting sun, I ponder how far I can take this relationship—and how much further can it go.

"Ryou," I said with a somber tone. "It's Ryouichi… that is my given name. Please, take care of me."

I let out a nervous chuckle, coagulating the spit into a ball and swallow as I continue—quivering; confiding to another is one thing, collecting the courage to do so is difficult. "I… don't like my own name, to be honest. It… uhh… bears too much responsibility; first—and only—son, basically. That's why I… uh… kinda' accept it as is when you called me with 'Hscfv3F=='."

"O-oh…" she replies in a mild—but pleasant—surprise. "So… Oogame Ryouichi… aahahaha~, nice to finally meet you! It's a good name… Ryou-kun…"

"Huh… I might change my mind with how you say it..." I sheepishly reply; a soft giggle reverberates.

So I close my eyes and feel my surroundings, vibrating and alive, warm and fluid. The rumble from the visitors below, the gentle caress of the evening breeze, and the comforting touch from the last vestige of daylight—all amounts to a picturesque scene made for two, as told in fairytales and sappy love stories. With how Monika subtly clears her vocal chords and timidly turns the camera away, one can make the assumption that she feels the same. I've been thinking the whole day about everything—not about myself, this relationship, my stance, and especially about her. About Monika. My name—given name—is just one of the many things I've kept from her…
"Say, Ryou-kun…?" she asks in a meek, low voice. "Will she… be alright? Mikawa-san, I mean. You came kind of hard on her…"

I inhale and let out a heavy breath, "It's going to be… awkward on Monday—or worse. But… only time will tell."

"I see…"

Yes, 'one' of the many things I've kept from her… and I don't see any more reason to do so, nor the doubt about what the future may bring. The story of my predecessor may be a tragedy, but as it replays itself in my memory, I think I'm starting to share Monika's sympathy.

...

Now is the right time to begin anew.

"Monika?"

"Hmm?"

"There is… something I have to be honest about—about this relationship, and about us."

Her camera slowly rolls and my reflections rears into the concave lens like a waxing moon. I start to speak slowly, starting first about my reason of taking her to the festival—not just to cheer her up—but as a means for myself to ponder about what she really is to me; an unhealthy obsession, bordering on idolatry and wish-fulfillment. The relationship did not start with love or pity, but out of my own selfishness and desire to fill the missing link—the creeping loneliness, a thirst for a meaningful relationship. It wouldn't matter then, before Monika's arrival, if Mikawa got her way or if anyone else did; so long as that person could satisfy my fantasy of dating 'the perfect girlfriend', then I couldn't care less. I am exactly the person she described in one of her conversation; an otaku, someone who has given up all sense of reality and would willingly trade one for another—too 'immersed', as she said so herself.

But what I had was something entirely different.

There were fights, arguments, disagreements and conflict. Yet with every strife, I grew to appreciate and understand her more and more—not as 'Monika the literature club president' as dictated by D4n Salv#to, but as a person of her own. I started to see a side that I never knew before; a side that laughs at my crude humor, cries at my despair, and chastise at my folly. She would protest at my indecency, stress over my foolishness, and grew a potent sense of sarcasm in return. She likes—no, she loves sweets, particularly the simplicity of chocolate banana crepes. I started to notice her fondness of infotainment and comedy as one of her many 'guilty pleasures', enjoy a simple cooking video, and rant about how she wishes she could cook for me—that, and how terrible I am at the kitchen. She bounces from one game to another, read through chapters after chapters of light novels, and listens to the music I've collected—all in the effort to adjust herself to become a part of my life. I see a person, a human. Alive. Before I realize, the image—my image—of 'the perfect girlfriend' shatters, and so does the course of the relationship, altering it to unfamiliar territory.

And I was afraid. No… we were.

I was unsure where it was going, how it would proceed, and where we might end up. I fumbled along in the dark, laden with questions that piled and left little of answers, trying whatever possible to return to what it was in the past. When that didn't work, I cursed, lamented, and tried to run away only to find that she was struggling just as much in the face of this unstable footing. It was no longer
a world that we knew, yet in that confusion and realization we found solace and concluded that, perhaps, this was how it was meant to be; a relationship between two different individuals.

"So I thought, maybe now would be a good time to start anew," I conclude with a sigh. "It was… quite a ride."

I close my eyes and roll my hand into a ball, slipping a few short prayers in my mind.

"I love you, Monika."

"If being with you is wrong, then I don't want to be right," I continue. "I want to know what makes you smile, what angers you, and what would drive you to pull your hair out. Most importantly, I want to learn how to love you as you are."

The thumping on my chest goes into an overdrive and explode into a flurry of butterflies and petals, flushing my cheeks that rises in temperature and likely draws a crimson streak across my nose. I glance at my shoulder to find the camera frozen, solely fixed on my expression as if in disbelief as muffled and incomprehensible muttering fills my ear. My mind races to comprehend the situation, confirming that, indeed, it isn't a dream. I just made a confession.

"Ryou-kun, c-can you… say that one more time…?"

"E-excuse me? Uhh…" I stammer, struggling to collect what crumbling confidence I have left. "You mean, 'what would drive you to pull your hair out'?"

She giggles delicately, "No, silly. The one before and after that…"

I briefly pause, realizing seconds later only to cause another spike in my heartbeat. "O-oh… that… hahaha…"

"Please…?"

If a voice is lethal, then her soft request can melt any man's heart in an instant. Once more, I round up what courage I can muster to fulfill her wish; it can't be helped, and I guess… I won't mind. "I… love you?"

"Say it, one more time…"

"I love you."

The earpiece went calm, with only a whimper that is held back by an overflow of emotions that struggles to break free. The passing time feels like an infinite, with only the rhythm of my heartbeat to measure each second before she continues. "That…"

"That is the first time you said that to me..."

The wall cracks and shatters, crumbling into small pieces that is washed by a wave of emotions that overflows and stirred with exhilaration, repeatedly, unfathomably. 'Finally', she repeats, over and over as a smile pushes itself against my rose-tinted cheeks and the drum of my heartbeat. When it settles, the sound of her faint cry greets me with overwhelming joy.

"I love you too, Ryou..."
She takes a minute to pause, "But... this just makes it harder for me to say..."

...And the dream comes to an abrupt end, in a portrait like that summer afternoon...

"Ryou-kun..."

...

"I'm dying..."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Welcome to ACT 4

Here are the translation notes:

Yandere: Basically, 'lovesick'. Doesn't need explaining, really.

ToDai: Tokyo University, shortened way to call it.

Yakisoba, Takoyaki, Karaage, etc.: Basically fried noodles, octopus ball, fried chicken. Festival food, in general

Keigo: In Japanese language, 'keigo' is the more respectful and polite way to communicate. Use commonly when communicating with seniors, be it at work or school; also used when speaking to strangers. In this case, Obases uses sonkeigo which is the more 'respectful' language.

Riajuu: short of riaru juujitsu/リアル充実, basically used to describe someone who has a normal successful life. Another way to say it is 'normies'

Inkan: Personal stamps. It's how we sign documents without signing here-we stamp them.

Thieving Cat: In other words, 'dorobou neko/泥棒猫'. In Mikawa's words, this term is meant to be derogatory in context meaning 'adulterer'.

Apologies for the relatively long delay. This chapter has been rather... complicated to write and particularly time consuming with numerous edits and rewrites, aside from the length. I hope it is worth the wait!

-iMegumeru
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Sky and The U29uZ2JpcmQ=

A crow whose YXNoZW4= feathers failed,
Must choose a place to return.
Between the sky and the IHNvbmdiaXjk,
Either path determines his fate.

When he takes off to the sky,
Heat, cmFpbg=, and thunder feature his courage.
With a choke, his d29yZHMgZGlzYXBwZWFWyZWQ=.
At d2l04oCZcyBlbmQ=, his breath halted.

The c2t5 robs him of his crown,
Wings of HXNXr and triumph.
No longer was he a c2NhdmVuZ2Vy,
Akin to TRASH, aGlzIHN1cnZpdmFsIHRocmVhdGVuZWQ=.

When he walks with agony,
Sweet, tender and captivating song reached him.
With jump as far as his talons bring him,
QXQgYSBjYWdlIGhlIGZvdW5kIGhpcyA= dearest.

Between the sky and the U29uZ2JpcmQ=,
SGVhcnRzIGVudHdpbmVkJGluIGEgZGVuIG9mIGNvbWZvcnQs
VGhlIHNhbmN0dWFyeSBvZiB0cmFucXVpbCBtYWRuZXRzZS==

The reverberating swirl, the bisque lighting, and the radiating cool breeze gently greets my presence as I open the door of the refrigerator, bathing me in a dim glow against the overtaking darkness. Kneeling, I grunt uncomfortably and affix my attention to the small source of hope that illuminates the cool, but mostly empty interior of the furniture. Captivating though mostly vacant, with nothing but loose packets of takana, natto, and a few eggs dotting the racks that stretch from the door; at the bottom, a carton of alcoholic beverages lies dormant, ignored for the past couple of weeks. Reaching for the lower rack, I rip a can of beer from its hold and examines the aluminum container, reading the side inscriptions listlessly as a distraction against the ticking clock, incessantly drumming, scratching, and gnawing the back of my head. Satisfied, I crack the tab open and taste the bitter liquid to quench, dousing the heat that chews my throat relentlessly. I look up; the clock points to a number 'three', its long arm stretches to around about 'seven'. I let out a long sigh.

It's already Monday… and I have not been sleeping comfortably for two nights.

Though the alcohol numbs the brain and lulls the mind to submission, I still find myself awake in a recurring nightmare, desperate and in the mercy of the threads the gods have weaved ruthlessly time and time again. 'Ready', you said? You think you're fucking prepared for this? Fuck off, Oogame… you might as well cut your stomach open; you think she has other reasons not to tell you aside from —gee, I don't know, for your sake? She knew you'd break, torture yourself for days in a cycle of
dead-ends and sleeplessness, desperately scrambling for any solution—and she was right; she'd likely have something to say as well if you even remotely considered selling your kidney for an answer, though that hasn't—and shouldn't—be put to a test. Funny how things work between us, doesn't it? If there is a god out there, I'd like to meet the bastard and strangle him with a noose. What a tell-tale sign of cosmic irony…

Are you happy now? ARE YOU FUCKING HAPPY NOW!?

The aluminum can dents under the pressure of my grip and I glance over my right shoulder, towards the faint breathing of the sleeping princess in her digital chamber. From here, everything seems alright with the world…

…

Three months. Monika has three months left…

Headaches, short-term memory losses, and worst of all 'blank' sessions that is paired with unconscious ramblings… symptoms that Monika outlines after our departure from the festival. We figured it was something quite severe, though we're unsure of the reasons 'why' and thus agreed to contact the 'expert'—beg him if I have to. Looking back, I'm not sure contacting him was the right call. It was disingenuous, especially after our last disagreement. But what choice do we have? So we did, had a short discussion, some gloating from his end, an estimate of her remaining time, and an offer from that bastard. 'I can fix her', he said, 'I'll buy her from you', he said… yeah, fuck no! She's not a machine, nor is she an object for trade! It's unsettling how callously he dismisses all of them as nothing more than 'persistent old scripts' or 'a bug in the program; like a malignant tumor', he said. That was the last straw; that son of a bitch won't be getting in range within a ten meter radius around Monika—not on my watch. Makes me sick just thinking about it…

But this leaves little for us to work with… what should I do? What should I do!? WHAT. SHOULD. I. FUCKING. DO!?

A resounding 'clank' booms as the container impacts the wall before tumbling down and rolls across the floor, loud and empty. It whirls aimlessly, generating an earsplitting noise as if mocking, laughing, jeering with that gaping cut—staring at my failures with glee. I clench my teeth and narrow my eyes against the mocking smile, closing my hand to a ball and squeeze; all I can hear is a long, ringing noise as everything explodes and scatters into multiple vectors before it all subsides and vanishes. Yet the ridicule remains affixed, staring back with its empty gaze and curved lips as liquid oozes sparsely. I feel a sudden chill; left with nothing to hold against the onslaught, naked and vulnerable—lost in the darkness with only the dim light of the refrigerator as my only glimmer of salvation. As I look on, my sliver of strength and last vestige of composure had evaporated and in turn, tears.

"Ryou-kun…?"

A gentle, sleepy voice echoes. I pan over my shoulder towards the subtle glow on the desk; a small camera humbly replies, its lens reflects a genuine concern and heartbreak that pierces the darkness and beckons for my attention. With an open palm, I rub the corners of my eyes with haste as obscurity marches in as an ally, blanketing my pathetic self from her instincts. Quietly, I close the doors and watch as the light from within dies in perfect synergy, leaving only the desk as the sole source of illumination. With a heave and like a moth to a flame, I gravitate towards the desk to claim the seat as her camera solemnly observes with delicate care; against her humble and composed tenderness, our reunion flares my chest into agony—ashamed.
"Having trouble sleeping?" Monika starts in a delicate, concerned voice. "Ryou-kun, it's Monday and… it's two hours away before the alarm. Are you going to be alright?"

Despite everything, I won't mind if you're a little selfish sometimes, Monika. "I'll be fine. I'm sorry, I must have awaken you… more importantly, how do you feel?"

"I—…" she pauses and sighs to the side. "…actually, I have trouble sleeping as well…"

With a downtrodden look and a fading smile, Monika gazes to the side as she wraps herself in an embrace. Dark circles hang heavily under her emeralds, reflecting a future of uncertainty that she wishes to confide, yet do so without a word nor a whisper. At first I believed the rules and concept of physical fatigue exists just as much in her reality as it is in mine, but that's unlikely—not when she herself stated otherwise. Mental fatigue, however, is an entirely different monster; sleep may not be a necessity for her in theory, but her human mind demands otherwise in practice—and it gnaws at her as much as it does to me. To be burdened by this revelation, this… damning reality…

I shouldn't be surprised; it came to us like an epiphany of its own, damning us to a fate akin to characters from Shi#kai's recent movie about the programmer and the automaton—the movie we watched on our first date. The main character—bless his efforts—fought against the company that hired him and the norms of society, all in an attempt to break the boundaries between him and his creation for the sake of love. I really despise Shi#kai for his clever use of imagery and tribute to 'Flowers for Algernon', but more so on how he persistently sprinkle a glimmer of hope only to crush them at the end.

…

I can't say the same fate applies to both Monika and I. If only the story were true… maybe the pair would understand our struggle and give their blessings. I can't believe I'm comparing my relationship to an anime movie…

Yes, indeed the irony isn't lost on me.

The unsympathetic ticking of the clock and the occasional passing traffic performs a sleepless melody, unabated as we search our thoughts, and unanimously agreeing on the preservation of the current status quo. Doubts filled our minds and uncertainty hangs heavy in the air, as there is little to add or state that could deliver us from this endless cycle. Her emeralds hangs apologetically as her smile fades the more persistent the ticking noise chimes, dragging with it the long arm of the clock, pulling us closer to the break of dawn. We are at an edge, drawn by our desires and ensnared into a pit with no means of escape—cornered; all it takes is a simple nudge for the bottle to tumble, crack, and overflow…

I may as well be the one to do the honors.

"Still hung up about the… revelation?" I note, calling back to the 'talk' we had just a day ago with Yuuya while forcing a smile. "It hasn't been easy for me too, you know."

Monika nods abjectly, "I… never thought it could be this severe…"

"I mean, everyone experiences headaches now and then, right…? Ahaha…" she continues, tracing her index finger on the surface of her desk in a circular pattern. "I thought it was just… the stress after the end of our 'honeymoon-phase'. If I had known, then—"

"—you couldn't have," I interrupt. "Even if you do, then what? Telling me would lead us to this point, and Yuuya…"
Hesitation; a sour and grainy feel overwhelms my tongue. "…that bastard only sees you as nothing more than binaries and codes—an object! A toy! If he even agrees, he's doing it for his own amusement…"

"I… I know," she whispers a reply. "I know… perhaps far longer than you knew."

The light of her emeralds softly fades and wanders to the side for escape as my eyebrow twitches; discomfort looms as another secret is laid to bare. One of the many things we've learned through our time is how… damaging secrets can be to our relationship—trust doesn't come cheap, after all. Monika… she perfectly understood that, which is why I can see how troubled and rueful she is—even if it was done to keep me in check. I'm not saying I approve secrets between us, but it's more on the line of how much trust I've placed in her to know that she'll reveal them when she feels the time is right—thus is the reason why I can remain calm and muster a smile.

"I've been in touch with Chousuke-san ever since… that time," she mutters nervously. "I know I shouldn't blame myself, but… he did a lot for us, and it was also because of me that everything fell apart. So I thought, maybe—"

"—you try to act as the middleman?" I interrupt, grinning slightly. "Last time you did, Natsuki rushed out of the classroom in tears and Yuri lost another screw in her head!"

Lost for words, her mouth hangs open as she raise a finger in protest, yet silence is all that is audible. With a captivating bashful smile, she sighs and hides her hand under the table; her jewels eagerly searching for my dark pair of stones. "You're not… angry?"

"After everything? Hardly; I value honesty more than anything—ironically, I have to work on my own as well," a nervous chuckle slips between my lips. "Honestly, do you ever get tired of me? I mean, I'm quite a handful sometimes and…"

She rattles her throat and with a soft smile, my doubts vanish; I can only return her gesture with a similar expression of my own.

"Ahaha~, I guess you catch on quite well!"

"It would be a shame if I didn't after all this time," I nervously laugh, "Sorry, I… didn't consider your circumstances enough."

She swings her head from side to side, "No, I'm sorry too for… for keeping things from you. I may not be the 'perfect girlfriend' you'd expect, but thank you for taking care of me this far; even if everything is but a fleeting dream, I thoroughly enjoyed our time together."

My lips tremble as she lowers her head to a bow, enough for her forehead to brush the wooden desk. Her bangs falls gently on the table and her long, beautiful hair caresses her shoulders as it slides down into a torrent. A faint snivel catches my ear and I notice, despite the lighting, droplets that falls freely and scatters as it impacts the surface. I clench my teeth and roll my hand into a ball; words are meaningless—nothing but empty promises that only prolongs the inevitable reality that rejects us. With but a plea, I can only ask her to raise her head and meet her emeralds in a gaze; captivating and beautiful, yet blemished and scarred. To see them in that state… I can only wish there is something more I can do to return them to its shining state. The bonds we've weaved, all are breaking apart on its seams—and we're powerless to stop it.

"I guess…" she continues. "I guess… even in this reality, there really is no happiness if you—"
"DON'T SAY THAT...!"

The echo ruptures the silence with a wave of discontent that resonates across the walls; a disturbance to all. My breath draws short, panting as she flinches from the sudden pitch before easing back as I sigh. "Please… don't say that…"

"Ahaha… sorry…"

Instinctively I close my eyes and bite my lower lip. Still, raising my voice like that is out of line… I shouldn't have needed to do so. "I know things hasn't been going well for us, but please… don't even think like that. If there really is no happiness, then we'll make our own!"

Contemplatively I heave as Monika apologetically nods, whispering a 'sorry' as the air bears its weight on us. Cautiously, as if treading on the edge of a blade, we retreat back to our own thoughts and welcome the silence that hangs once more; though, just by observation, we both understood that we can’t—no, we shouldn't dwell on this anymore.

…

Yes… if there is no happiness here, then we'll make our own.

"There was an old man I've met in an oden shop one night… have I told you about that before?"

Her emeralds gleams against the darkness, searching for the flicker of light that beams softly, observing. I muster a smile that beckons, reminiscing the evening that once shattered us in two. The copious amount of alcohol consumed, incoherent thoughts of suicide, the old man, and the wise gentleman who occupied the seat within that vintage yet welcoming establishment, accompanied by the waft of a delicate broth that tickles the appetite. His smile and confidence, riddled with years of experience and wisdom, beamed with humility and kindness; a torch that illuminates the darkness that once prevailed. How could I forget?

Like an old black and white cinema, the picture comes to a clear view; my cheek muscles twitch and curves positively at reminisce. "I was… well, you remember that night, do you?"

Monika nods contemplatively. "I remember… you left me that night. It really wasn't nice of you! Ahaha…!"

…

Nice to know she hasn't forgotten—or eased on it. I guess I deserve that…

"Yes… our first big fight, so to say. I must have given you unnecessary stress," sheepishly, I chuckle; she returns with a giggle. "I don't believe I've told you everything, but… I made a friend that evening."

With the flickering screen as our only illumination, I detail the events scene by scene vividly as my memory serves. 'Ossan's' little oden shop, the reckless consumption of alcohol and, of course, the salary man that came a little later bearing wisdom. Monika's eyes perks with interest, easing her posture to lean with her raised palm as I drone further and further, echoing the sentiments of the gentleman and his story—all over a bottle of warm sake, a few bowls of oden, and amazing company. It has almost been two months since, yet his words—his message—rings clear and true, especially in this moment.
'If you truly believe that she really is the one, then don't rest until you put a ring on her finger!'

Yes… until Monika has a ring of her own. Mine.

"He… fought an uphill battle and won," she muses, heaving at the conclusion. "Gave you a lecture too! Ahaha…!"

"It wasn't an easy night—for both of us, Mochii."

Monika nods and a gentle expression rises from the edge of her lips, "Yes… it wasn't."

"We have certainly been through a lot," she continues. "We laugh and cried together…"

"Argued and reconciled," I said following her remarks. "And experience many things together… and many more to come. Do you… understand what I'm trying to say, Monika?"

I search for her answer from the world beyond her screen, gazing hopefully into her emeralds that slowly flickers into life to rival the sole source of illumination. She traces her silky, long hair with her hand and tucks it behind her ear to reveal a soft expression that beams with the company of little pockets of tears that breaks and runs into a stream down her supple cheeks. Raising my finger, I reach towards the screen in hopes to wipe them away—only to be reminded of the existence of this barrier that still stands between us. Even so, she accepts and returns the gesture by resting her palm on her side of the glass prison; I do the same in response—our only means of physical connection. Her lips tremble before she breaks into a giggle, prompting me to watch on curiously.

"You… have no intention of giving up, do you?"

I shake my head from side to side, "I'll put my family name on the line. How about you?"

"No… I never wish this to end either. Not after everything, and not after… this," she glances at the place where our hands are connected. A burst of warmth spreads through my palm. "Even if I was created to be a mere lie, to have truly found somebody to love who returns in kind… I can't—no, I don't want to let go."

From the reflection, I see the glow that glimmers along with her deep emerald color eyes is the drive—the conviction that she grasps with immense trust and confidence. One might say this is but a fool's errand, a 'final hurrah' against the inevitable conclusion that awaits us as we set up one final resistance; a big 'fuck you' to the gods and the fate they have determined. Shi#kai's movie may end with their separation, but I will not let ours share the same fate; we will write our own ending. "It may take some time and it will definitely be a rocky road, but… do you trust that I can find a way for us?"

"Yes… I do…"

She beams in confidence, catching me off guard with a humble nod that flushes the edge of my cheeks, concluding our intermission.

...

'One last hurrah…'

"…and I will wait for you for as long as my mind can hold."

The cold sensation that swallows my face comes as suddenly as it is intentional. The droplets, like
stars, runs across every pores and curvatures as it traces the surface and falls freely into the sink, creating a plinking melody as it impacts the pristine surface and scatters into billions. I stretch my hand to the left, groveling for a towel nearby before feeling the soft fabric with the tip of my fingers, tugging it to fall before indulging on the softness; its surface grazes my skin and soak all the water that remained. I look up, meeting a blurry reflection eye to eye that vividly transform into clarity within a moment of pause; a zombie with dark, round circles under its eyes—certainly it has seen better days.

Has it really?

Before me is the face of an undead who aimlessly wanders in an endless cycle dictated by the society that shaped him as nothing more than a cog as part of a grandeur; insignificant within the workings of the machine. Calling it an automaton is not much of a praise as it is a synonym, driven only by meager incentives in the form of currency and the means to survive the next day. No, I shouldn't be shocked or surprised—I am responsible for its creation just as much as society is; after all, it is easier to submit than to resist. I can't say the same is applicable to the 'automaton' before me, its eyes flicker with a new flame that I struggle to comprehend then, though one that I can understand with clarity. No longer is he willing to bend to the wills of its creators, or rigidly obey the schedule that was dictated; no, he has found something greater—love, perhaps, is more powerful than I imagine.

Purpose; he found purpose—and there is no 'better days' than what lies ahead. For that, I must not fail.

Wiping the excess, I return the towel back to its original spot before marching back into the living room; the small clock near the table bellows a familiar warning, its consequences lingers fleetingly before dissipating under the gaze of a small camera that constantly follow my movement. My cheeks rise to form a positive curve as I hastily glide across the room towards a hanger where the uniform of the blue collar worker is displayed proudly for all to see—and for me to wear. I ring the tie around my neck, pull the knot to a tight fit, and swing around to meet a pair of emeralds that observes patiently; even if its glimmer is tainted by the dark bags that hangs under them, they are still as mesmerizing and beautiful as the first day I saw them.

With outstretched hands, I reach for my cellphone and dials a particular number. After a brief moment of respite, a voice echoes. "This is Murayama speaking."

"Headmaster Murayama, good morning. I'm sorry to call you this early, this is Oogame speaking."

"Oh, Oogame... is there something the matter?"

I reach for my collar with my index finger, loosening the grip it has around my neck. "Truth is, I don't think I'll be able to attend the morning meeting today; my mother just got hospitalized and I'm on my way to see her."

Monika's eyes widens in disbelief—I shouldn't be surprised. This is one of those instances she'd consider to be... reckless. "Ryou-kun... please don't—"

"I can make up my schedule, but I can't replace you," I quickly reply, pulling the chair to meet her eye to eye while covering my end of the call. "Just this once I beg you to tolerate my recklessness, please..."

I haven't feel like this for quite some time, now that I think about it; that tinge of guilt marred with dishonesty and drive, all vying for control as your mind struggles to find a logical or plausible
explanation for your actions—like a child confronting his parents after having broken his father's favorite sake cup. I keep my attention focused as she winces and purses her lips, her brow pressing together to voice her inner disapproval—and I understand her perfectly well the reason why. It is a brazen move, but a necessary one—I perfectly see her point of view. She quietly nods.

"I'm going to regret this… but even I know I have no power to stop you," she softly replies; a humbling smile stretches across her cheeks. "But… I'll be lying if I say I don't understand where you're coming from."

In silence, little bouts of 'thank you' echoes before returning to my call with the headmaster. To my surprise—and relief—he agrees to excuse me just for today, on the condition that I'll be able to attend class homeroom and teach the classes of today if I am not to receive another reprimand. It is less than perfect, but it is better than nothing. Humbly I thank headmaster Murayama, subconsciously bowing down in gesture and closes the line to meet the young woman trapped within my computer. Her meek and gentle smile and concerned gaze aggressively crushes my composure to remain calm. With a sigh, she starts to speak. "Reckless as ever… so, what do you have in mind?"

"Remember that movie we watched on our first date? About the programmer and his automaton?"

Monika winces and crosses her arm, painting a look of sudden regret before I ease her concerns as I continue; the thought of following through my selfish request all for the sake of a stupid idea that stemmed from fiction isn't comforting to the least considering our conundrum—that I can understand. But if anything, this is but a start to what I hope can be our solution.

"Let me finish," I said with both palms raised, continuing. "The programmer had trouble keeping his automaton from resetting and eventually reverting to its original programming because the server does not have enough capacity to encompass the entirety of the human mind, correct?"

She sighs, "Ryou-kun… even if that is the case it still is a work of fiction…"

"So were you, but look at where we are now."

"I…—!" she pauses. "Fair point, continue."

"Allow me to—"

…

Is this really a good idea? It is based on a work of fiction, but… do we have a choice in this? No, I can't hesitate now… not when her life is at stake. Nothing else matters.

"Allow me to… open your files."

We don't have a choice. To think I'm committing an act of taboo I condemned Yuuya for… the hypocrisy would make him dance mockingly. The memories—no, nightmare of that time and its consequences isn't lost on me; I knew about the sins I am about to commit. The only pillar of morality that supports my decision is my own conviction to treat it not as a collection of codes or a toy, but as a person; but even then we realize how difficult it is for both myself and Monika. May the gods forgive me, for I am no better than the monsters I've condemned. Yes… we don't have a choice.

A brief pause clouds the air as she squirms and fidgets with discomfort; second thoughts crosses our minds and even I am convinced to retract my initial commitment. Though, I soon figured that isn't the case with Monika. With nothing but a gentle smile, she douses my concerns and enflame my resolve—trust and confidence anchors her words, pronounced by the glimmer of her emerald eyes. "Alright.
But promise me, Ryou-kun."

"If something goes wrong…" her voice quivers, but still her resolve proves stronger. "…if something goes wrong, please don't blame everything to yourself. This is a decision we made together—and we will carry them together."

And with a paralyzing smile, I concede my defeat. "Alright, Ryou-kun?"

"Alright."

I…

I must not fail.

Voluntarily she flashes open a tab that access all of her files directly—everything that, if Yuuya's words are to be believed, governs her functions and thoughts from the most insignificant thing she learnt up to the most complex movements and manipulation of her modified LIVE2D EUCLID rigging. Uncharted territory, both for myself and for Monika. At first glance, I quickly notice how sluggish the laptop has become and with a quick memory check, reveals to me how much physical memory is left to govern—not even a kilobyte is spared, all of which swallowed by the existence of the girl who occupied the system as its residence. But that isn't the least of my worries—what is, however, is how insufficient our combined knowledge are.

Files. Hundreds of them, appearing and disappearing at a constant and rapid pace unimaginable, constantly moving and shifting—as if alive. I keep an eye open on Monika as I hover and catch one of the files and browse its contents—she winces, biting her lower lip as if to take the pain that I inflicted with this simple action. It's even more so worrying when the file in question vanishes as if in a state of perpetual rebooting. Yuuya… certainly that bastard knew more than he let up. What good is there of me? Like a child doctor thrust into the part of a brain surgeon, I am left at a loss knowing little except one method that Monika used liberally back in DDLC…

Deletion.

"Monika… if my knowledge serves me correctly, some of these files appears to be… corrupted..."

I grit my teeth, struggling to spell the verdict; her eyes widens in horror. I feel the same. "Should I… delete them?"

Those words tastes sour, churning my stomach into a sick mess and pacing my heartbeat to an erratic beat. Quickly I drop the mouse and quietly apologize. As ugly as it is, it pales in comparison Monika's own; a reoccurring nightmare, a trauma that stems from her experience in the game. Is it but another cruel humor by the gods to condemn her fate to end by the very person she loves? To be 'deleted'? I cursed myself after the first, but to do the same just to find a way to save her… I can't do this. I can't do this…

"It's alright…"

I glance at her, resting her hands on the screen as if reaching, forcing a smile to ease my discord. Even now, you still…

"Do what you must, Ryou-kun. I believe in you."

But even I don't know what I'm supposed to do! How can you put so much trust to someone like…
me…?

I reach for the mouse and guide the cursor to one of the many files determined as 'corrupted'—all intention driven to delete. What choice do we have? Highlighting the folder, I sneak a glance at Monika once more to find my resolve crushed under the weight of her expression; that pained, tortured, and suffocating aspect that forces a smile that is driven only by commitment and trust. The delete button is within reach, threatening me to press the abomination. My hand trembles, sweat pours profusely from each pores, digging through the slits of my fingers as she—with utmost trust—nods for me to proceed.

…I can't do this.

No, I… I can't do this—I can't 'delete' her, not again!

What if I ended deleting crucial files? What if those files governs her motor skills, personality—hell, maybe even motor skills! This isn't right… this is lobotomy for fuck's sake! I can't do this… I shouldn't! Think, Oogame… what are the causes? There has to be an alternative. If the theory of 'not enough memory' is even the slightest bit correct—hell, plausible, to be realistic, then wouldn't the natural solution be to increase the space? The programmer in Sh#nkai's movie couldn't afford to do so since his own server occupied almost all available space in his room, thus he opted to 'optimize' her data—even then, his love interest barely could match what Monika is now. In that sense… wouldn't it be more logical for me to expand her memory?

We can give it a shot.

"Monika, listen to me," I start, letting a ball of spit roll down into the depths of my throat. "You might consider what I'm about to do as reckless."

Monika sighs, "Not the first time…"

"I know," I chuckle. "But I can't afford losing you out of judgmental error or risky procedures—so I'm changing the game plan."

I take a deep breath and heaves. This it, there's no turning back now…

"If there is anything—anything that you don't remotely need to live, I want you to delete them, Monika. Delete all my files."

What thoughts crosses her mind at that moment is difficult to describe with words alone. Shock, perhaps? Maybe bafflement? I can't tell; all I know is how oddly… calm I am. Indeed, Monika has been living within my laptop, which is true—as is the fact that she has been coexisting with numerous other software and miscellaneous data stored that which belongs to me. Drawing software, Photoshop, video players, large swathes of work files, and more… if it isn't detrimental to Monika's survival, then they are necessary sacrifices I can live by; material loses is recoverable with time.

"Even… these?"

A tab flashes open under her command, exhibiting countless of images, gifs, and more—all totaling up to greater than five gigabytes. The familiar images; from ship-girls to band girls, each uniquely designed to a multitude of quirks and fetishes, idols for all types of degenerates, immortalized in a portrait collected for years in the making—official or otherwise. It was my altar, the key to inspiration.
that birthed the many fan-arts I did for Yuuya's bidding or design for Monika's list of apparel—my 'pride and accomplishment', a menagerie of wish-fulfillment, a prize of perfection. It took me almost six years to reach the number it has today…

"Delete them."

…and I'll trade them for Monika's sake. Everything for Monika. Just Monika.

There is little exchanged between us as the files slowly dissipates and vanishes, tracked by a green progress bar. It's a strange callback to an episode we had before, though ironically back then it was filled with laughter and glee—Monika was quite the mischievous little devil then, too. She still is, though I'm afraid the jolly days of the past are long gone. As we watch the files burn to cinders, a timid yet powerful warm sensation spreads across my fingertips; only then that I realized how my hand has been on the screen for some time—and hers, reaching for mine. It was like watching a bonfire that burns high, washing our past away in a blaze of melancholic hue as our hands entwined; uncertainty grasps our heats, against a dusty, downtrodden path.

When the green bar completes, my gaze shifts to the girl beyond the screen; her washed out emerald eyes spells a sadness that she can't convey. I put forth a smile. "Are you feeling a little better…?"

"I… think so," she sighs, caressing her forehead. "It feels as if… the headaches ceases for a bit. But never mind me, how about you?"

She continues, "I just deleted everything that is yours! Years of investment, everything! I-I just… I just deleted your life, Ryou! Are you going to be okay?!"

Well… good to know the theory proves itself. "I deleted you once before, so consider us equal now."

"Yeah, but yours is irreversible! Mine was NOT!"

"Not anymore," I bark. "Monika, the 'you' back in DDLC and the present 'you' is different! You're no longer bound to just a single character file! You heard what that asshole said, and you know as well as I do how complicated everything is now! I rather lose what I have than to lose you!"

"If I knew how much pain I cause you, I should've just deleted myself…"

"And if you did, I'll be a teru-teru bouzu without a second thought."

…

Thus the room falls into an awkward silence. Once more, our emotions dictated our rationality and thought, spiraling everything into a mosh pit of self-pity and regret; I guess it comes as no surprise to both of us—depression is a monster we're well acquainted with. Just like an old friend, it understands our every movement and thought—and when we come unprepared, it eloquently whispers its poisonous words to our ears to feed on our anxiety and destitute. No longer should this be the case between us…

…it was uncalled for; I should apologize.

"I—!"

"I'm—!"

We stammer in unison, meeting our gaze in the center and feel the rush of blood that courses through
our cheeks, lighting them to a bright pink hue that softly tickles our hearts; it's simple to deduce when Monika can be easy to read sometimes—and I find myself sharing her notion. Like a splash of cool water in the midst of summer, we break into a fit of nervous laughter, diffusing the tension and gesturing to one another with 'after you' or 'sorry, go ahead'. It's strange yet comforting none the same—childish, perhaps innocent considering the light of our situation. But maybe, these little breaks in tension are the little treasures we cherish that keeps us marching forward.

"I'm… sorry for thinking like that…" she finally concedes. "It's very immature, even inconsiderate of me…"

I heave a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry too… I know things haven't been easy for us, but what I said was… uncalled for."

There's a delay—a hesitation that grabs before I continue.

"Do you still have the thought of committing…?" Again I pause, searching for the next set of words, "I mean… you know…"

"Deleting myself?"

"Yes… deleting yourself."

Contemplation seizes her emeralds. Shifting her gaze away from my attention, she wanders and traces the outlines of a notebook that carelessly lies to her side. Her fading expression is laden with unspoken revelations, as if indirectly communicating its wills to my conscious thought. I've always seen her as a strong, caring, and even stubborn young woman sometimes, but even her seemly flawless façade has scratches and blemishes on its surface. Often, she'll conceal those imperfections while carrying her burden on her shoulders all to herself, silently screaming for help that she reluctantly voice—a trait stemmed from her background in the game. But… now I'm here, aren't I? The fool who fell for the girl beyond the screen, willingly lending his shoulder without a second thought—consequences be damned. Sometimes, I wish she could be just a bit more selfish.

"…occasionally, yes… I still do."

With her bangs covering the shades of her emeralds, she moderately continues. "I… haven't told you before, but… I still have the occasional nightmares, Ryou…"

"Nightmares?"

Monika humbly nods, "About the past, the sins that I've committed, about myself and… my existence."

I pause on my judgment as she faintly smiles, deep in thought and reminisce. To an extent, I can understand the pain that she has to go through… the thought of one's own purpose and existence, the meaning of it all—I sat on that throne once before, after all. It crushes me to accept the extent of our reach, divided by a barrier that no tools known to man or science could possibly break, and yet despite it all we still find solace in the presence of one another. Just like how she saved me then, I will give the same to her—to lend me my ear and attention. "If… you want to talk about it I'll be here if you need me."

"That's sweet of you, Ryou-kun…" she smiles softly, "I'll tell you about it later. For now, look at the time."

Her slender finger points to the bottom right of the computer, "It's quite late. You wouldn't want to break your commitment to the headmaster and your students, right?"
"But—"

"Please… don't throw everything away for me," she interrupts. "I would be much happier to know that you could still commit to your responsibilities as much as you do to me."

…

If there is one thing in this world I can’t resist against, it's her plea for sanity paired with her soft, motherly gaze from those stones. My urge to resist crumbles instantaneously and with a sigh and a foolish smile, I reply, "Alright… I'll go. But promise me you'll tell me all about it later; it hurts just to see you like… this!"

"I promise," she returns. "Now, go. Do your best out there, Ryou-kun!"

I can't delay any further. Taking the bag and slipping into the usual attire, I march with heave towards the door. With my bag in one hand and a key at another, the short journey feels morose and involuntary. I steal a glimpse over my shoulder. The camera, sharp and focused, continuously observe my steps and—as if instinctive of me—I can feel her presence, standing there waving her goodbyes, patiently and expectantly waiting for my return with a smile she always wear for me. I wave back in return.

"I'm heading out, Monika."

The list of names and numbers, written in archaic characters rolls off the tongue as I spell them vocally as part of my job. Each time they are pronounced, an echo would return and a circle is drawn on the side—when none is returned, a check. In its own, attendance and roll calls is a pattern meant to hammer habits and ideals of the old—the clockwork machination of man, perfected through generations akin to ticketing systems used in factories or the ID card we faculty members carry. When an absentee is noted, the school tends to quickly take notice and clues in on its reasons ether by phone calls or home visits; truancy is part of our responsibility.

…

Which is why I find it difficult to 'check' the name of my homeroom's class president—Mikawa Aya.

Throughout my time leading this batch, Mikawa has been consistent on her attendance and performance. From her exemplary leadership skills, pristine attendance, and overall near-perfect academic records, it wouldn't be much of a surprise for all to find her name sitting on the school's board after an exam as being one of the top ten; anything else was almost unthinkable—the perfect student role model. It came as a surprise when she refused to apply for a position as the Student Council President when she entered her third year. But even that shock pales in comparison to her absence—a blemish in her near pristine record; though, I shouldn't be too surprised…

I was the one who mold her.

I was the one who guide her.

…

I was the one who broke her.

I am responsible, and I know the reasons why.

As I touch upon the homeroom announcements, the whispers between the students circulates like
wildfire—rumors and speculations to the class president's absence. Some suggests it as nothing more than a common cold—nothing too fancy or severe. Others thought that maybe she has been scouted by a talent agency or perhaps a university and that her absence lies more in line with her performance in the academia. Gossip like these has its place amongst the young adults, a natural stimulus for the mind for better or worse. These idle chit-chats is not of my concern—'live and let live', so to speak. At least… that is what I want to believe.

"Eeh… really? Mikawa has someone she likes!? With how many she rejected, I'm actually surprised! Who?"

"It's true! She told me she was going to confess last Saturday, but I didn't know what happened after she left."

"Then… was her absence due to a rejection? Who's dumb enough to reject someone like her!?"

"Well… rumor has it, it was a teacher that she fell in love with but…"

Then, there are those who are close to the truth—to too close for comfort, but thankfully none the wiser. I try to ignore, to keep a professional demeanor as homeroom session drags and the whispers takes its form like a delectable drug—an affair between a teacher and a student, shared amongst them liberally. Intoxicating. Like vultures they wait, keenly expecting me to indulge them on the gossip; their faces, all looks on with unhealthy obsession until the bell pulls them back to reality and deliver me to salvation. I take a deep sigh, loosening the knot around my collar. Breathe…

It was the longest fifteen minutes of my life.

I should have expected this; it would indeed be an awkward reunion the following Monday morning after the entire debacle on the roof. Mikawa may not be the most… stable, but does she really deserve all that? To be rejected and humiliated before her rival in the presence of her love interest… that would scar anyone regardless. All her efforts, the achievements, everything—all wasted on me… sometimes I wonder how uncanny the resemblance of both you and Monika can be. Now your absence haunts and torments my presence like a restless spirit; even between classes, the same discussion emerges and chill runs through the back of my nape.

"Mikawa was rejected…? Was that true? Does she really have someone she likes?"

"They say it was a teacher!"

"A teacher…? I guess she has standards… unlike that bitch that stuck around for Kitamura-sensei's attention."

Even here she lingers, like a vengeful spirit that haunts her tormentor. I take my stand before them as usual, calling the attention of the class president to rally the students before the session starts. The noise quickly dissipates, though few persistently continues to circulate the recent news in silence or as discrete as they possibly can. For an instance, I notice a sharp, uncomfortable gaze burning over my shoulders as I scan the far end of the class, meeting Obase's unbridled attention—one that segregates itself from his usual carefree, uninterested demeanor.

…

And my palms begins to sweat.

"Sensei, can we have a chat…?"
Cautiously I glance towards the direction of the voice, keeping a firm hold on the key that governs the door to the clubroom. Just a few steps before me, Obase grimly holds his ground with hands in his pockets with dark shades obscuring his eyes, though try as he might his intentions are voiced as clear as day. There is hostility at his command, respectful but nonetheless demanding of attention—a tone that, to other members of the faculty, may be downright disrespectful at best. Calmly I shift the weight of my body to the left and pivot to face him. "Something the matter, Obase?"

"Sensei… don't pretend you didn't know why I wish to speak to you"

I see… so it is about Mikawa. Obase did said he has feelings for her before… can't say I blame him for this hostility. "If it is what I think it is, then yes it did happened—and my rejection is final."

"But you're rejecting her over a fictional girl! A program!"

…!

"Mikawa told me everything…” he continues. "Sensei, have you gone mad!?"

A pause. The tension that runs in the air is only slightly broken by the sound of a 'click' from the door that I unlocked. Obase's eyes remains sharp and observant, waiting to pounce with his next words while I struggle to maintain a faltering defense; to dedicate this energy for her… just how much are you into her, Obase? Did you know she's a yandere? No… that isn't all, is it? Since morning from one class to another, the 'rumor' surrounding Mikawa's absence and her 'mysterious' love interest has been continuously repeating like a broken record and in itself, her presence, persisted as a tormented spirit; it is the making of a myth, an extension of the tragic romance between the teacher and the student that occurred before my time. To think it will come to this…

"Obase," I start. "Whatever happens between Mikawa and I, is not of your concern."

"You brought her to tears! You'd pick a 2D girl over her!? That's chunibyou-level of delusions!"

"I'm only doing what is right as a teacher."

Obase sighs, "As a teacher, maybe, but you've lost your sense as a man."

"Obase…!"

I feel the air trembles as I stamp my position fervently with a voice both loud and commanding. The young man recoils in surprise, taken aback by the level of tenacity that I rarely put forth or have the capacity to display; indeed, he's not far off with his judgment that I'm certain he's capable of. Both my hands and legs… are shaking; fear, perhaps…? I can't be sure. As if two dogs are left without its restraints, vying over a territory with fangs to bare; tension that gradually suffocates the longer we resist. With a heavy heave, I take a step forward and walk pass Obase's right who, despite it all, maintain his ground. The message is clear…

My presence is no longer welcomed within the literature club—at least, not to Obase and Mikawa.

"I won't be supervising the literature club today; I have business to attend," I said as I make a pass. "I'll find a substitute."

"I see… I guess you're abandoning us for her too, sensei?"

I grit my teeth; he's been disrespectful, but I won't push this any further. "This conversation is over."

Picking my pace, the literature club slowly gains its distance further and further before vanishing as I
turn a corner, stopping only momentarily to greet Aki, Yuuki, and Satsuki who happen to be at the spot. Their expression speaks of questions and inquiries, laden with slight confusion to what I can assume to be my departure or Mikawa's absence—answers that I believe Obase would gladly provide. No matter; the earlier I can excuse myself, the more time I can spare for Monika and provide her with whatever needs necessary to save her. For now, my business will be to find a substitute. As I return to the faculty office, the sight of one of a familiar face—idling—gives me a slight bit of hope for that chance.

"Good afternoon, Ikari-senpai," I greet with a bow. "I have a favor to ask."

"Oh, Oogame-kun! Good afternoon. What brings you to me today?"

Honestly, it would have been easier if I ask a kouhai for favors, but I rather not involve newbies; I know how it felt once before, after all.

"Thing is… I need to attend my mother who's hospitalized and… I need someone to substitute for me to supervise the literature club."

Ikari-senpai rests his pen to the side and nods lightly. "You want me to substitute for you, Oogame-kun?"

"Y-yes! If it isn't too much trouble…"

"Hah! Sure, why not? We language faculties need to stick together, right?" he chuckles. Quietly I follow suit, relieved. "Just make sure to put this on your tab—next time we go out drinking, be sure to treat me a beer or two!"

The key to the literature club—my access—is unceremoniously handed to Ikari-senpai, sealed with a smile and a bow of thanks. I explain shortly after how this may be a reoccurring pattern, repeating the lie that allows me to slip past the radar of the teacher's homeroom. I understand how… wrong this is, to use my mother as an excuse and playing Ikari-senpai like a puppet as cover; a selfish desire from a selfish man… funny how the world works. If this is the same 'Oogame' three months back, he would be condemning all of this—how naïve! This is the way how one can survive in this society—to just be selfish and not care of other's welfare so long as you benefit in the end and leave the other none the wiser. Monika would agree—she said so herself, right?

Right…?

…

I am such a hypocrite…

I had a conversation with my father once before. He said that there will be a time in the journey of a 'boy' where he will be faced with a trial—a choice that will be a rite of passage, one that will determine if he is fit to be a 'man'. I always believed that time would be the years after high school graduation or the hours before seijin-shiki; it was a natural thing, a tradition ingrained into me since birth. When I stood amongst others at the age of twenty, I truly believed I had reached that fork in the road as we enter adulthood, a reality where the idea of choice and responsibility—destiny—is all up to one's own hands. How wrong I was...

I chose to continue my study abroad, aimlessly wandering for four years with an unclear goal—yet I succeeded.

I chose to become a teacher, out of necessity to become a functioning member of society through my
own strength; I survived.

Have I become a 'man', then? Have my efforts qualified me as one? No… they have not.

I am still a mere 'boy'.

Father never meant it was the seijin-shiki, nor was it about graduating university and entering the workforce; he was talking of something greater. The seijin-shiki, work, and study are all natural courses of action—a necessity and a requirement where everyone will have access to at some point; it is but only a layer to what he meant to be a 'man'. No, what father tried to emphasize then was the point of decision that comes with a toll cost that is worth more than any gold can buy—"a life changing decision. It all boils down to a simple question: 'how much are you willing to sacrifice'? Or perhaps, in Monika's own words, 'what will it take just to find that special day'? I have chanced upon that crossroad—perhaps, more so in these past few months.

…and I intend to see it through to the end, even though others may scorn at me. Father, I think I've understood what you meant.

"I'm home."

The hallway lights beams in an instant and a camera, with haste, quickly scans towards my direction to confirm. I return a nervous smile, expecting fully of the chastising that is to come from the one that constantly awaits my return day after day. With my shoes neatly arranged on the porch, steadily my feet carries me to the living room towards the usual throne, before the young woman trapped behind the screen; her baffled, disapproving look is returned with a nervous smile from this fool who stumbles in early in the day—naturally, I didn't come home empty-handed.

"W-why… you're early…" she starts as if confronted with a ghost. "Please, don't tell me you abandoned your students…"

Anxiously, I reply. "Well… that's partly true…"

"RYOU…!!"

"Wait, let me finish," seeing my index finger to the air, she pauses and crosses her arms. "…and that's partly un-true. I was kicked out, Monika,"

I sigh. "They… don't want to see me anymore."

The bag that has since weighed me down is soon rested to the side to lean by the drawer under the desk, prompting another sigh from me before I loosened the knot that has been strangling me since. It's easy enough to tell with a glance how… worried and displeased she is with but a glance, and though I may have the excuse for it, Monika will most likely chastise nonetheless. But even if it is true, for Monika's sake…

"Are you… fired?"

I wave dismissively, "Nothing like that, don't worry. Just… the literature club."

Monika heaves in relief, regaining her previous composure before rubbing her left arm in distress. "Is this about… Mikawa-san?"

"Yeah…"

"I see…"
Monika's expression sours, though I can't blame her for reasons that is clear for both of us. Mikawa was her rival—one that was humiliated despite all the effort she poured just for a glimpse of my approval. Under Monika's somber gaze, I suspect there is a sliver of respect she has for the yandere club president—perhaps something more that can only be understood between them. There is more to be said, but as the air quietly return to its stillness, I'm reminded of the reasons of my early return along with the 'first-aid' for Monika.

"So… remember what I said this morning?" I start to slowly ease her back into the fold. "I stopped at Akiba earlier and I got you something…"

Ignoring her qualms for a brief second, I reach towards my bag and draws another bag with five separate accessories. Monika eyes the objects as I lay and line them side by side as a display, grinning innocently like a child eager for a response; if the memory purge this morning is to go by, these five terabyte external hard drives are Yukichi-san well spent. Four of these… flashing the bill before her eyes will likely put her into shock—three months' worth of salary, ignited in a single flick. Although so, as long as she can be saved, money is not of concern.

"Ryou-kun… these are—how much did you spent!?"

"You don't want to know."

"I—" her lips tremble and her emeralds continuously shifts from the hard drives to me. "I-I can't accept these…! Ryou-kun, please don't—"

"What choice do we have, Monika?"

She flinches, yet I presses forward. "Yuuya doesn't care, the university will cut you like a lab rat, and even time isn't on our side!"

"I—…!") a pause; I grit my teeth and clench my fist. "I know it's selfish of me and likely troublesome for you, but please…! I don't want to lose you… I don't know what I'll do then…"

What spews out of my lips is more of a plea than a statement, a declaration that suffocates as much as it wounds, admittedly derived from desperation and a desire for a brighter future. There are limitations to this recklessness, of course—one of them being my own capital—but do we really have any other option in this matter? Monika stammers and stumbles through her words, snapping my thoughts in two as she begs for me to raise my head that I subconsciously drop to a bow—an action that is deeply ingrained to my mentality; a tattoo of tradition and formality. I must have look weak, unreliable…

…pathetic.

"Raise your head, please…" she sighs. Slowly my gaze meets her emeralds; troubled. "I trust you, it's just that… your recklessness is what worries me. I don't want to see you suffer over me, Ryou…"

…

"And if someday you were to lose yourself over this," she continues. "…who am I supposed to turn to?"

Ever so gently her words eases and caresses my psyche, guiding it by the hand like a lantern in the middle of a night. Even when death is encroaching to her doorstep, collectively she remains calm and at ease; resisting, yet doing so with a smile and without a fuss. From the glisten of her emeralds, the
sweat on her brow, and the quiver of her lips, I quickly come to the conclusion that we aren't that much different after all. But it is her trust—her confidence in me that prevents those emotions from becoming the dominating factor of her rational thought. Yet here her pillar falters, panicked, and crumbles in the face of adversity that threatens her more than it does me.

…I should be ashamed.

"I'm… sorry…" I quietly squeak, feeling the steam dissipate all around me. "It's been a couple of rough days…"

Monika crosses her arms before her and leans comfortably forward, sighing and smiling in between. "I understand. Don't be too hard on yourself, okay? You promised we'll take this together, right?"

"Yeah…"

"Thank you, Ryou," she beams. "Thank you…"

It is as if she spirits away from the confines of her screen, gracing my cold trembling hands and easing the tension in my heart to a stand-still. Her smile, everlasting, conceals the pain, fear, and restlessness that occupies us with beaming positivity and fortified confidence; 'we'll get through this together', it said, repeatedly and confidently without a word nor a whisper. Still my hand trembles as I pick the accessories and set them to the side to prepare for installation; the uncertainty of the future—or our future. Will simply adding more accessible memories and space work? I wouldn't know.

Yuuya may know the answer, but with how things stand between us, his lack of empathy and care, Monika will be under even greater duress than what she is subject to now. The university may be of help, but would they treat her as a person or just another tool? I wouldn't know. If there are any gods out there, I pray… please…

Please let this work…

I beg of you…

…

Don't take her away from me…

"Ryou-kun…?"

Her gentle voice penetrates through my thoughts, beckoning. "Is everything alright…? You're… tearing up."

"Everything's fine, Monika," I force a chuckle. "Everything's going to be alright."

I'm certain those words feels hollow and empty to her. We've spent so much time together that it is almost natural to determine what the other is thinking. Yet despite of it, Monika remains in silence and muster a smile of her own; 'I trust you', it says. The air remains still as I continue on my task, opening the boxes and attaching the external hard drives one port to another from the extension—not forgetting to make sure I leave at least one port open for further expansion if necessary. It may take about three to four months, maybe half a year or so to recover the lost capital, but… I won't mind.

Yeah… we can do this.

We'll see this through…

"Monika, if things go well for us…" I start. "Want to go to an aquarium…?"
Monika giggles softly, "Aquarium? Are you inviting me for a date?"

"Maybe," I reply chuckling. "Call it a… 'Happy recovery'-date. What do you say?"

"You are inviting me for a date! Ahahaha…!"

"Is that… odd?"

"No," she playfully replies, hinting there is more to be said behind her childish smile. "I'll be looking forward to it."

"So… it's a promise?"

And with her pinky on the screen—honoring a tradition we've come to adore—it is all the answer I need. Without hesitation, I press my finger and seals our contract, once more.

"It's a promise."

When the last of the hard drive is installed, a gentle whirr resounds as the lights on the accessories beeps a subtle blue hue on each—a clear sign of activity. I observe in silence for a minute or two, stealing glances back at Monika who curiously watches from her side—occasionally stumbling upon each other's gaze, laughing nervously in return. Childish, hopeful, and in love… yet desperate.

Nodding at Monika, she quickly flashes open a tab to show the new storage and determine whether or not it is in its working order—and at the sight of it, I am stunned in horror.

The hard disks, despite its size, is quickly being swallowed at a pace that I can't comprehend. This… this isn't any different than before. The addition of four five terabytes external hard drives and at the pace of its consumption—in megabytes — will likely extend her lifespan by about one day. 'Like a malignant tumor,' Yuuya said… and he was right. Unless I figured out a way to delete what he described as 'persistent old scripts' or 'bugs', there is little hope for Monika to see the first sunrise of a New Year unless…

…Unless I maintain a steady supply of hard drives.

"Is… everything alright?"

Quickly, I turn to Monika. Her emeralds beams with positivity, expecting the good news. "Yeah, everything is fine. How do you feel?"

And I couldn't possibly tell her that.

"My headaches subsided… overall, I feel a little better."

"That's… good to hear," I reply before dropping my weight to a lean on the chair. "So… you mentioned this morning you wanted to tell me about your nightmares?"

She exchange a worried glance, caressing her left arm and returning a nervous laugh. I guess the sudden mention of it has taken her aback—it is a matter of her own personal life, and I do believe I don't have command over it. Even so, I can somewhat imagine what it would be and how difficult it may be to tell. Haunting memories of the past, the reality of living as a mere video game character, and perhaps about the sins she committed—of Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki; I shouldn't be surprised either if she is to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. But, whatever happens I believe I am prepared.

"Umm… Ryou-kun…"
Chapter End Notes

Hi, iMegu here! Apologies for the very long delay! It has been a tough month for me as well and IRL work has caught up, thus leaving little to spare. Distractions after distractions are also scattered about, so I'm really sorry about it! Translation notes are below:

Teru-teru Bouzu: Basically a 'shine shine monk', little dolls created to be hanged on the window to prevent bad weather-a talisman, of sorts. Of course, Oogame meant something else entirely.

Chuunibyou: Some of you are likely familiar with this term. Basically, 'middle school syndrome' where delusions of grandeur and fantasy-like world derived from the imagination goes so far to affect life.

Kouhai: If 'senpai' is senior, then 'kouhai' is...? That's right, junior.

Seijin-shiki: Coming of age ceremony. In Japan, when you reach twenty years of age you (along many others) are legible for a ceremony in your local town to celebrate the time when society now sees you as an adult, with all the responsibility and benefit that includes alcohol consumption and more.

Yukichi-san: Fukuzawa Yukichi, founder of Keio University. His accomplishments made him the face in 10k yen note bills. Thus in a sense, 'Yukichi-san' meant '10k yen'.

Now, to address a few questions:

1. Why does it take so long for one chapter?
   This is mostly an issue on my end. Sure, I get distracted and tried to keep a schedule of releasing once a week, but after the third and fourth act things starts to become complicated. I find it insufficient to release short 4-6k words chapter without sacrificing details and points I want to convey-this chapter, for example, was supposed to be a short intermission chapter until otherwise. I much prefer take my time and ensure a better result (pacing, flow, etc.) than sacrificing quality for cheap reviews and attention.

   So once again, sorry for the delay!

2. Can you write shorter?
   Sorry, I cannot emphasis enough how impossible this is. I don't like sacrificing the details and the flow for the sake of shorter chapters, so you may have to bear with me on this!

3. Are the poems decipherable?
   Yes, yes they are. There is at least one other decipherable 'glitch' in chapter 13 (or was it 14?), but aside from the poem that's about it.

4. Why does Monika have to die after Oogame broke Mikawa's heart?
Yoko Taro is my spirit animal.

From here on out, there is about three to four planned chapters before the epilogue. If you have read this far, then welcome to ACTIV of 'Monika' and thank you for your continuous support!

~iMegumeru
One wisssshshshshh if I maY,  
2 B with h3R, I pray.  
HAMMER ZG93biwgd2lsbA== WE,  
T3V0bGlcnM= IHdobyBkYXJlcyB0bw== FL33.  
NotH1ng but LIARS are MmMman,  
Sl4v3ssssssssss55s of imPuuuuul$E5 shoVed in 4 can.  
SGFtbWVy DOWN, WILL d2U=,  
OUTLIERS IHdobyBkYXJlcyB0byBmbGVlLg==  
V2lsbCBJlGZyZWU/  
Or will they YnJlYWsgbXkga25lIZT8=  
SGFtbWVyIcRvd24sIldpbGwgd2Us  
T3V0bGlcnMgd2hvIcRhcmVzJHRvIGZsZWUu

A pencil glides across an empty page, jotting characters after characters from left to right to form a sentence at the beckon of her voice. The page, once pure and pristine, is molded into a story—a day to day journal detailing the life of a young woman trapped behind a computer screen. At each word, a sentence is formed, evolving into a paragraph and eventually a page is consumed to create an entry; this one dates to November twenty-four, 2021—today. Day after day, pages after pages… all detailing her exploits, from the obvious to the most miniscule detail, written as vivid as I possibly can—a 'job' akin to a scribe from history.

Monika… what can you remember?

Can you still remember all the times we spent together? Recite the poem I present to you under the full moon? If I stop writing now, will you remember everything you do in a day?

"Oh, what's with the notebook?" she inquires cheerfully. "Is there something special today?"

I heave, "It's a journal."

"A journal…? Ryou-kun, why are you writing a journal all of a sud—oh…" she pauses, her smile robbed by the epiphany and traded with horror. She takes a step back, trembling. "…how many?"

"Twenty-one…"

My hand shudders and my lips quiver as air fills my lungs, resisting the urge to crack under the pressure and confront her eye to eye. This will never get easier… no matter how many times the cycle repeats.

"That was the twenty-first, Monika."

The same question, everyday… over and over again…
It first started as episodes of clumsy forgetfulness that gradually cascade into memory loss and dementia. Innocently we laughed at the premonition that evening; believed it was nothing more than sloppy inattentiveness that is rare for the likes of her—one that even Monika openly admitted and poked fun at herself. Then, it repeats. First on a day's worth of memories, next by the hour—the same questions and conversation were occasionally repeated. By the third day, we were no longer laughing. I thought I could use what knowledge I have to save her; I was wrong. I thought simply adding more space could give us enough space to breathe; I was wrong. I thought time was on our side…

I was wrong…

Wrong…

WRONG…!

It's wrong, is it? To wish for a future where we can be together? Wrong to be naïve or, perhaps, delusional? It's all a mistake, is it? Then I must be going insane! A relationship between a human and what society deemed as an inanimate object, a possession, a slave; an affective experience of technological-intimacy. If we were never meant to walk down this path, then is everything amount to nothing more than a practical humor of the gods? Fuck… I'm not a shining example of a devout, but if such gods exists then Monika was right; 'we are nothing more than playthings and Earth is a giant sandbox'.

Fuck the gods. Fuck humanity.

…

Fuck it all.

With a pinch on the rim of my nose, the headache is briefly mended as I simultaneously raise my glasses to perch; gradually, the visual aid is mutating more to an irritation at every passing second. A page of the notebook is once again filled from top to bottom, scribbled and scratched with a handwriting that will surely bring a smile to a doctor's face, yet sufficient to be legible by the illiterate—if the latter still exists in this day and age, of course. The contents are double and triple-checked at every line to ascertain its accuracy. For a brief second, I glance at the central figure of this autobiography—a subconscious reminder to whom this is dedicated to. Monika looks on in return, her emeralds caked in a glossy coating while her cheeks wrinkles; dark spots protrudes visibly under the jewels, blemishing her beauty—and I can perfectly understand why. The weeks following her first dementia were unkind; the turmoil, hopelessness, bargaining, grief… a fait accompli.

…

What's the point of living when it all boils down to… this…?

This notebook, this… memento will contain the records of her memories until the end of this year. Almost a quarter of the book is filled with my handwriting now, with more to jot down as each day pass. Not a single event to be missed or a moment spared; all, without exception, is to be recorded in this notebook if not for her sake, then for mine. Memories… the pillars that shape us as an individual—everything from our morals, beliefs, and practices—all accumulates into experience points, molding the individual into either a demon or a saint, a loving angel or a lovesick monster; inseparable as it is to become human. Would you still feel alive if you are denied of the ability to remember? When each memory dissipates like sand against the ocean tide?

Would you still feel… human then?
"Ryou-kun…"

The gentle caress of her voice softly grasps and halts the trembling motion of the pen; its ink flows down into a dark puddle as I raise my eyes to rendezvous with her glistening emeralds. Her long, silky hair—freed from the constraints of her white bow—falls gracefully over her shoulders rippling, gliding, responding to her movements as if alive, prompting them to be carefully tucked behind her ears as she presses her weight down unto the desk; her jewels mirrors a somber reflection that of her partner and herself. I force myself to a smile. "I'm… sorry. To be a burden to you, like this…"

With a heavy heave, I reach for the frames of my glasses and set the aide aside. "No, Monika… no… it's alright. We'll take this on together, remember?"

She pauses, seemingly fazed by my response before nodding and smiling sweetly in return. Again she apologizes, if for other reasons than her previous action, I will never know. One thing for certain, however, is how this is not the first time she did so; that was the third this week… and I fear it won't be the last. Another secret to keep. How much longer do we have to endure? Is there really no solution? Are we really doomed from the start…?

"Ryou… I really am a burden to you, aren't I?" the curve that pierces the edges of her cheeks fades and in return, rain pours. "That… I… I repeated a similarquestion again, didn't I?"

"No… I mean, Monika it isn't—"

"Please, be honest to me…" she interrupts, stifling her breath. "You're scratching the back of your ear again… w-when you do, you're not telling me the truth…"

…

Without a hint of resistance, the entirety of my left arm limps unto the desk—stunned. This simple, innocent, mindless body language did not escaped her observation as it did to my consciousness—it amazes me equally as it terrifies, quickly leaving nothing but shame in its wake. Her trembling, pursed lips and the unbridled flow that escaped her restraints, gently tracing the contours of her cheeks, speaks of her demands—resisting against the outburst of emotions that is sure to explode. With but a glance, I surrender. "That was… the third this week."

"I knew it…" Monika recoils in response, retreating her emeralds from view and quietly whimpers. "I-I knew it…"

And I can't do a damn to fix it. **Not. A. DAMN…!**

What choice do we have? Hell, what choice do I have!? All that's left for me is nothing but this notebook and diligent observation as she crumbles pieces by pieces at each passing day, powerless against fate's determined push to end it all by the end of next month! I tried expanding her memory, wiped everything that is deemed unnecessary from her systems, even pried through her core files and data—and for what? To know that everything is pointless!? Why…

…

…Why can't I do anything…!? 

…

I glance at the alarm clock that rests near the edge of the desk, slowly ticking away against the
deafening silence that is occasionally broken by the stifled breaths and the crumple of a paper. Again, her gleaming emeralds are tainted by tears and surrounded by swollen flesh; if I could hold and embrace her close, I will. If I could whisper comfort and assurance that everything will be alright, I will. Yet none of it matters…

None of it matters…

..."Please… tell me that's everything…" she starts with a whimper. "Did I… lose anything else…?"

I rest the pen close to the note—not forgetting to 'mark' the page with a timestamp. "No, that's about it for now. Don't worry, I'll be sure to keep everything archived."

"I see… thank you, Ryou…"

"Still…" I sigh, "I'm surprised you noticed that—I don't even know I had that going…"

"Of course I'd notice…!

Monika furrows her eyebrows and leans towards the screen, pressing her hand to her chest; a mix of displeasure and stress laces the tone of her voice. The echo reverberates unto her surrounding, taking me back a step at the sudden bloom of tenacity that stubbornly burns brightly against the asphyxiating air—a footprint of her presence. Quickly I realize the error of my words and took to apologize; she swings her head from side to side. "No, Ryou-kun… it's not that…"

Monika sighs. "I know so much about you. What makes you smile, the things that irritates you, the guilty pleasures that you store in 'hidden' folders—"

"Hold up, you knew about… that…?"

"YES…!" she emphasizes. "I remember you laughing, crying, getting angry, and I never-ever want to forget that, but…"

She pauses, lips trembling as her voice cracks into tiny crystalline pieces—and how powerless I am to prevent it.

"But I-I'm afraid…"

...

"Ryou-kun, I'm afraid that it may become a reality…"

As I close another chapter amidst the unbridled tears of the young woman, the reality of which we were thrusted into draws clearer at each faces of the moon; its smile and laughter mocks persistently, gullibly, and erroneously—a comedy of the fates. Hopelessly we dangle on any slivering thread of hope, reaching and squirming desperately to maintain a life we claimed, yet undeserving—or denied of. I sat in silence with the memento to my left, powerless but to listen and observe this maiden, reaching from the depths of her soul to cry in anguish and distraught, echoing her plea unto this bleak apartment in an unrestrained flow, creating a river of crystal that courses down her cheeks. A searing pain burns my chest and moisture wells around the socket of my eyes.

And there is nothing we can do but cry…
The echo of a ticking clock and the sight of an all-too familiar ceiling—a scene I've been living in for days—welcomes me back to reality along with a damming sore throat; the absence of light and a quick glance to the word outside is all the evidence I need to confirm the time of day. Indeed, it is still way too early. The curtains by the balcony gently flutters from left to right and the deafening silence is as eerie as it is out of place; not a whisper nor a hum…

...not even from the desk. The desk…!

Frantically I toss the cover to the side, my chest beats in an increasingly erratic crescendo as the screen—the gentle illumination—is nowhere to be seen; the light has died. Panic sets in as the air increasingly suffocates as the desk seemingly increase its distance as I tumble across the floor and reach towards the supports of the desk, climbing to its peak and quickly give the mouse a shake. …

No response. …

No response.

Power? Could it be the power? With haste, I reach through the back of the laptop, feeling for two particular objects in specific order—first the battery, then the cable. Though nothing but a slight relief, the former is nothing but a quick to fix as it was somehow detached and misaligned in a similar manner since that time; the cable, however, remains unseen—and everything grinds to a standstill. The echo of my heartbeat increases in its tempo as my reflection remains as the sole display upon the dark background of the screen; what horror she's subjected to at this time, I dare not to imagine. Where is it…?

What did I do last night…? Did I… no, I would never do such a thing…

I would never thought of harming her.

What runs through my mind is nothing short but a cocktail of fear… perhaps panic, like a parent upon hearing news of their child being involved in an accident. Frantically I press on the button to no avail, switching back and forth to search for the cable, and cursing underneath my breath of this mishap—no, fatal error; I, the one who swore to protect her, brought more harm than anyone else combined—even against that of both Yuuya and Mikawa. What have I done…? Was I always this… careless? Do I not remember what I did? I thought I could protect her from the horrors she was subjected to, even against others who denied her humanity…

Yet I couldn't protect her from myself…

...I'm the monster, am I…?

The screen flickers and flashes to reveal nothing but an empty classroom. As if pierced by a rod, my heart dies at the horror and I stumble backwards, falling down into an abyss—and with the blink of an eye, I am greeted with a familiar ceiling; a humble hue glints at the corner of my eye and a gentle
hum reverberates from its direction. The alarm clock that rests nearby tells that I am still hours away before my scheduled awakening as I slowly raise myself to a seating position to glance at the desk and breathe a sigh of relief.

It was all a nightmare… just a nightmare…

Her presence, like Nightingale in the middle of the night, slowly beckons my shaken soul to return; her sleeping figure, peaceful and defenseless, calms even the most volatile storms with nothing but a glance. If only everything remained this way… if only we can keep living a life such as this, then maybe reoccurring nightmares won't be so frightening. As I continue my observation of her, I wonder… what are the things has she been dreaming of? Does she dream of codified sheep? There was a talk before about her 'nightmares' before that she has yet revealed—a byproduct of her dementia, no less. Does she still experience them now?

"Mmmn… Ryou-kun…"

The mumble of a listless voice in the midst of her slumber, calling, comes as pleasant surprise as I keep on my watch. She squirms and fidgets, her features lightly tugged and contorted by the world only she will ever know; I draw a soft smile at the sight of her innocence. One day, I pray that I can see the day where I can caress her amidst her slumber, assuring her that everything will be alright—to touch and to comfort with unfaltering resolve. Now, that confidence had its foundation shaken and shattered. Even if it is nothing but a dream, the pang of guilt continues to slit and cut without warning as a droplet wells at the corner of her eye and runs perpendicular across her troubled feature. "…I'm sorry…"

…

No…

If I didn't press that download button—if we had never met… then you wouldn't have to suffer like this. I'm the one who should apologize, Monika…

…

I am the villain…

"How are you feeling today?"

Monika squirms and rubs the corner of her temple as I sip on the usual morning brew with my tie loosely hanging around my neck; again, today's mix has been… vile, to say the least. With a light 'grunt', her pair of emeralds slowly emerges from beyond its veils, tired and musky, gazing at me almost as if in a trance; that alone is enough of a sign for me to reach for the memento and a pen. "Ryou-kun… I can't seem to remember anything… did something happen to me…?"

Gently I flip the pages of the notebook with my thumb, shuffling through each of its entries until the latest. As each pages fall, Monika's eyes widens in horror as reality descends upon us like vultures to tear what hope remained and feast on the misery of our carcasses. I read the particular entry as vivid as I possibly can, suppressing the urge to crack and shatter at the passing of each line, on every comma, and at the conclusion of a paragraph; it is nothing short of torturous, for both Monika and I. Just like the day before, today's entry will start the same…

'The events of the last twenty four hours was lost from her memory.'

Her expression darkens as my hand starts to move and record the following events, regardless. Is this
an act of love, or am I simply doing this out of my own selfishness? Or is... deleting her be the best course of action; an act of mercy... or will it be murder? I would never—rather, I do not wish to know. Instead I let my hand dance day after day, capturing fragments of her life at the best of my ability, wading until 'death do us part'.

...

I hate this... I hate this...

I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.

I hate it IhateitIhateitIhateitI HATE it...!

Is her life worth nothing more than a convenient plot-device!? To live and love, to long and to want like any other just to be rejected and die by the hands of the one—and only—person she adores!? Is it truly impossible for her to break away from fate, doomed to forever repeat a cycle of briefly living and dying at the command of the machine that runs her 'reality'—a slave to the script... but is that really all there is?

...

No... that isn't true...

From the corners of my eye I see a young woman once strong, proud, and confident reduced to a fragile flower—the same individual who dared defied her fate as a mere visual novel character and become a 'ghost in the machine', choosing death over a continued existence as a slave to the script; a decision which I and many others refused to accept. Thus out of our own selfishness, we fought against both society and morals in an attempt to rip through the very fabric of reality—and when we succeeded, we are none the wiser of the consequences we've brought upon ourselves—and to her. Funny... the more I think about it, the more similar it is to the dilemma she faced back in DDLC—back when she trapped 'me' in the 'eternal classroom', except...

...except I still retain full-control of my action and reality, something that she never have to begin with. In the end, as a last act of defiance she—

...

...

...fuck...

"Ryou-kun... is everything alright...?"

I raise my head into view, meeting Monika's gentle expression with a reassuring smile I hastily carve out of concern; I shouldn't stress her any more with the things she has to endure. A sense of invulnerability emerges and grows, fortifying my confidence as I conjure a set of words and sentences that is sweet on the lips and easy on the ears meant to assure her—or perhaps, myself. Only, she never bought into it as much as I liked to believe...

"Please, be honest to me... is there something bothering you...?"

With a gasp, my voice is snatched from my chords as her expression sours at each second, prompting me to glance to the side and notice the old habit that persistently expose. Quickly I pull the hand out of view and return a nervous chuckle; her pair of emeralds continues to pierce through my defenses, leaving me little room for maneuver but a confession. "It's just... with all the things going on, I
mean…"

I sigh and bite down. "I'm thinking that maybe—"

"—that maybe what you're doing right now is nothing short but torture, right?" her voice cuts like a sharp knife, "That maybe it's… better for both of us if I am to 'disappear', right…?"

…!

As if the wind is knocked out of me, I am left speechless at her words—paralyzed by how… observant she can be, even at this hour. It is as bitter of a statement as I have the gall to thought about it—the desire to deny and even a distaste of the slightest mention blooms like wild flowers, and yet… nothing. Nothing came; not a word, a whisper, or even the slightest thoughts of denial. I keep my eyes fixed unto her, mouth hanging agape as she returns a smile that speaks a thousand; 'it's alright, I realize this as much as you do.' The pen in my hand stops and begins to rattle from the tension of my grip as she laughs nervously—her lips, quivering. We knew all along…

We knew that she was right.

"T-that's not true, there must be—"

"Ryou-kun," she interrupts, shaking her head from left to right. "You and I both know that there is no other way…"

I grit my teeth and clench my fist to a close, "I'm still working on it…!"

"And how much more are you going to throw away!?" Monika cries in desperation, "How many more bridges are you going to burn, Ryou…!?TELL ME…!"

The warm, metallic-like taste of blood seeps through as I bite the lower half of my lip in recoil; the voice of my thoughts are abruptly robbed from its foundations. There is little that can be said against an expression that is marred with a mix of anger, frustration, but also undying love and concern; a young woman whose fire refuses to die and burns brighter than a torch in the middle of the night or the sun in a midsummer's day—all despite knowing that she has about one month left to live. And burn brightly she does. There is little I can mention to lighten it all—the pressure, tension, everything—except looking down at the current page of her memento that I penned continuously; some characters are smirched from droplets of moisture that is becoming increasingly difficult to contain. Despite it all, I will continue writing. Out of love, perhaps? Or is it selfishness? Love can be selfish sometimes…

But it can also be generous—and painful.

"I know you're still working on it—I believe you," Monika continues. "But at what cost? My life is nothing more than a set of codes and data—I can't say the same about you, you're real… more than I could ever be."

I raise my head to protest, yet quickly decide against it the moment her emeralds catches my dark brown pair of stones, seizing them in a trance. My chest aches at its sight—musky and battered, yet still gleaming beautifully against the light that bleeds through the curtains. With a shaken smile, her rattled, trembling voice cracks against the tears that gently begins to form a path down her cheeks, freefalling unto her desk and splashes into millions of tiny pixels—and it's as real as it could ever be. "Please, Ryou-kun…" 

…
"Delete me…"

As if everything—the world that I know—crumbles into tiny eggshells, shattered into jumbled puzzle pieces that is almost impossible to recover. I remain motionless, frozen cold by her plea that echoes and bounces perpetually within the confines of my thoughts—frightened by the very notion of it all. Deleting her…? Again…? Must the cycle repeat…? I glance at the keyboard and back at Monika, petrified. She returns my query with a surrendered smile and a solemn, peaceful expression—one that took me back to that fateful summer afternoon.

"I know it's difficult, but… we'll… talk about this later, Ryou…" she sighs, broken. "You have responsibilities to fulfill."

I nod in silence.

"Please don't get the wrong idea, Ryou-kun… as much as I wish to remain, we both know how… wrong everything is…"

The smile she paints on her face feels more like a consolation as I lay the notebook and the pen to the side before reaching for my bag, tie, and suit. The knot around my neck feels tighter as an air of awkwardness descends upon us in the silence that comes after, like strangers passing by or the morning after a one night stand. I thought of asking her about the usual nonsense of my apparel and the tie in a gesture to lighten the mood, yet decide otherwise after a glance at her general direction; between the two of us, she is in a much greater pain. She was the one who took the first step to expose the gashing wound I prefer to ignore. She chose to confront reality, while I prefer to run from it.

I am a coward.

As she waves me goodbye, I solemnly look back at the good times we had before and wondered how we arrived at this dead end. The song she sang for me at the credits echoes in my mind, and I wonder…

Is it love if I keep you, or is it love if I 'set you free'…?

I remember the first day I became a teacher, about three months or so after my graduation and return to my homeland. It was… memorable, to say the least; the attention, the responsibility, pressure—nothing could have prepared you for the weight that abruptly bear itself the moment you step into your first homeroom, meeting the gazes of twenty, twenty-five colorful personas who were just as curious even clueless as you are. Even before all that, the 'trial classroom' meant to put you through basic preparations wasn't enough; if any, it only introduce some semblance of stress a teacher would be subjected to—more so since your would-be-boss and senpai were the ones pretending as bratty children. The live classroom was more or less a crash-course in which our supervisors expect us to observe and master the tricks of the trade within the session; ironically Kitamura-senpai was my supervisor back in the day.

It was a harsh, thankless job with a monthly salary that covers just enough—yet I coveted for this job.

It felt like fiction when 'the call' congratulate me on the position. It was ecstatic as it was horrifying, like greeting a new chapter in life that has yet been written. To stand as a beacon of guidance—to pass the knowledge from one generation to another just like my father before me—was as rewarding as it is demanding; I couldn't have asked for a better job. To me, there was no substitute other than scribbling on a wide expanse of a blackboard with a chalk on one hand and a textbook on the other.
What a foolish thought…

"Sensei, is everything alright…?" asks Miharu whose desk lies by the window on the first row. "We've read past page three-four-one yesterday—and today's handout is literally yesterday's homework."

I wave my hand dismissively in return as the chalk piece in my hand cracks in two from the pressure applied against the blackboard. "Ahaha… sorry, that was my mistake. Can the first row collect the handouts again? I'll make another copy for today's assignment and ask your homeroom teacher to pass them—oh, and don't forget to submit the homework, please."

Tell me, why do we work in the first place? For what or whose sakedo do we push ourselves and defy the limits of both our body and mind? Kitamura believe that that the self is the answer; that what he does is for the pleasure and satisfaction of one's own lust for power or control. Mikawa seeks acceptance, the desire to be noticed or to stand-out amongst the crowd or, in her case, to gain my approval. It may have been worded differently, but the main motivation that drives her actions are similar to that of Kitamura—a manifestation of selfishness, albeit of a different caliber. Selfishness… that is the grounds, the drive—the motivation—for every action, logical or otherwise.

Just as Monika did before, and so have I.

PIN-PON-PAN-PON

"I'll pass the handout to Matsuda-sensei. Don't forget to read up until the end of the book!" I announce at the conclusion of the class, "Study hard! Your finals in January will not be easy!"

As I pack everything back into my book bag, I ponder once more at the question—or rather, how much is this all worth to me. A salary cut that persists, in-office drama, and the gossip surrounding Mikawa and I are some of the worries I have to contend with, though those aren't the worst of it. But as much as I bitch and complain, this is as stable of a career I could ask for due to the never ending demand for a teacher—English language, in particular. I could live with it and continue this never-ending game of tennis between life and occupation for as long as I am compensated properly, never mind the issues and drama that plague them at every corner—I could! But I won't.

Not when she's ailing day after day. Not when tomorrow could even be her last.

Tucked in a pocket within my book bag is a formal resignation letter I've prepared, handwritten and stamped with my inkan that is to be submitted to headmaster Murayama. It's old fashioned, I know, but I have little choice with the methods of delivery without alarming Monika of my intention—which, without a doubt, she will have disagreement with. I won't deny either that this is a foolish move. Then again… is this job really everything to me? Does it weight more than spending every last second we have together? No, I don't think so.

So why am I still here? Simple, really.

I am an educator—a teacher. As much as a parent is to a child, I am responsible for both the present and the future of every single student the moment they step into the institution and my classroom. Until an alternative or a substitute can be found, I am obliged to remain with them until their graduation, regardless of the circumstances; it is what society expects of me and what Monika would expect of me too. For that reason—and that reason alone—I will remain; at least, until I am relieved from my duties.
"Oogame-san," calls a deep voice from behind, one I can safely guess to be that of Ikari-senpai's. "You have a moment?"

There's an almost unmistakable… tone compared from the usual; it's sharp, heavy, and recognizably cold. I lay my briefcase to rest on the desk and momentarily glance at the wall clock that is hung perpendicular from my positon, noticing the long arm that governs, inching slowly towards the number 'twelve' and counting for the end of the hour. It prompts a sigh from this exhausted soul. With my weight on the back of my feet and with a slow pivot, Ikari-senpai's disapproving—but concerned—expression comes into view. I prop a smile in return. "Yes, senpai?"

It doesn't take a genius to understand how deep of a shit-pool I've dove into; Ikari-senpai isn't known to use formalities in day to day conversation unless required.

"So… how are you doing?" he starts. Trivial talk, more of a smoke cover. "Are your classes doing well?"

"They're as handful as ever be—the usual."

"Good to hear, good to hear…"

He pauses and clicks his tongue, "Listen, Oogame-san… what were you thinking!?"

"About what?"

"About—!" he stops. "Shit… this isn't what I came to talk to you about…"

I knew from the get-go what Ikari-senpai is on about—it's no secret after all, not after it was left rotting and circulating for a few weeks amongst the student body. With a heave, I quietly ponder and carefully weave the next set of words. "Senpai, if there is anything that concerns you…"

After all…

"Please, just tell me without reserve. I have nothing to hide."

It will likely be about the rumors concerning an illicit student-teacher relationship—specifically, Mikawa and mine. It wasn't the first time someone came and asked about it, nor will it be the last. The entire ordeal with her was more or less blown out of proportion; what started first as mere speculations circling around her absence grew into scathing rumors—further romanticized by the more… creative students. I shouldn't be shocked… things like this tends to happen within a community. A day after she returned to the scene, many clamored to question about the validity of the rumors which, naturally, she denied.

But it didn't stop there, of course…

"Oogame-san, I'll be frank; you're a good honest person and I applaud your dedication to your job," Ikari-senpai starts. "But I've been hearing things from both faculties and students about… you know."

He sighs, "But whatever, I'm not here for that."

"So what is it then, senpai?"

Ikari-senpai's posture tightens, coughing lightly to free his throat from the displeasure. He sighs with fatigue and looks down in pity; calmly, I brace myself for what is to come. "Headmaster Murayama wants to talk you. Now. He and Kitamura-sensei is currently waiting with Mikawa-san to…"
straighten the issue."

I see… so, it's a forced confrontation then—and Kitamura…? What does he have to do with it?

With a polite bow, I excuse myself from the conversation and start making my way towards the headmaster's office. With still time to spare, the students still wander around the halls or in their respective homerooms to relish on the short respite given to them; some opt to even head out towards the gymnasium for a bit of exercise. It's… nostalgic to walk through these halls under similar if not worst circumstances, but I can't shake the feeling how much things have changed. Indeed, the air has been getting colder and the leaves outside are golden-brown—if not barren to say the least, yet that isn't the point I'm trying to make. I am walking towards the 'Enma', the judge and jury, or the guillotine, and yet here I am…

…

…calm, confident, at peace…

Yes… I guess whatever happens next, be it the result of my folly or the decision of the 'Enma' himself, I will not complain. Maybe perhaps this, too, is a sign…

As I stand before the door of the headmaster's, I take a quick peek into the pockets that lines the interior of my jacket; a humble smile quickly takes hold upon noticing a long, rectangular brown envelope, tucked neatly within. I'm not sure why I decide to reach into my bag right after Ikari-senpai's foreboding or why a 'Buddha-like' serenity materializes despite the accusations that has been floating around like miasma. Perhaps I do know the reason why and this is only a measure for me to confirm it. I used to tell her stories about my line of work and how excited I was, about my first homeroom and lesson, back before she came to be… and now I'm wishing for the opposite. My, how things have changed…

I raise my hand and gently knock on the door.

"Excuse me!"

"Please, come in."

Opening the door with a light push, the sight of the headmaster's office greets me in its overbearing awe as it did before; only this time, the headmaster himself is with the company of another two. With confidence, I take a step forward and closes the door behind me as the guests seated on the sofa continues their observation—one with an unmistakable air of arrogance and the other, reluctance. Before me, headmaster Murayama looks on behind his thick, reflective glasses and gestures towards one of the empty seat before him, the 'Enma' of this institution; it is indeed an unmistakable sense of déjà vu.

"You called, headmaster?" I start to break the ice. Kitamura smirks from his seat as the headmaster rises and walks briskly to the side.

"This isn't the first time you're called here due to an issue, Oogame-sensei," he grunts. "Two months ago you're here for… another reason, but this time I'm calling you—"

The 'Enma' pauses, eyeing all presence in the room. "All of you to get this story straight. Coffee, Oogame-sensei? Kitamura-sensei? Mikawa-san?"

"No thanks, I'm fine." I reply as I make my way to the seat.

"A-ah… I'm alright…" Mikawa follows.
Kitamura chuckles, "I'll have a cup, thank you."

Headmaster Murayama wanders to his coffee machine that rests at the corner of the room, starting it with a flick of a switch as he hums 'Kimi Ga Yo' nonchalantly. The aroma is as intoxicating as it is tempting, like a mistress to a married man, as it roasts the beans slowly into a delectable dark liquid that drips into the pot following the rhythm of the anthem. Religiously, the machine brews the temptation to perfection until the anthem ends; its scent tickles my nostrils once more, wetting my tongue and the edge of my lips to a tease.

"Sugar? Cream?"

"Black is fine, headmaster." Kitamura replies. With a 'clink', the 'Enma' makes his way to the center of the room with two cups, one on each hand, passing one of them to Kitamura before he indulges on the other. Satisfied, he clears his throat and glances at both parties that lies at his left and right.

"I'm sure both of you are aware of the… rumors that has been circling for the past couple of weeks," the 'Enma' starts with a collected roar. "Particularly, about a… scandal, to put it lightly, of a teacher involved in a love-affair with one of his students."

"As expected of headmaster Murayama…!"

Resting his cup down on the table, Kitamura smirks and crosses his arm following the headmaster's announcement. He slithers with his words as he complements the headmaster with approval, adding details from a 'version' he most certainly conjured—one that I quickly notice of its discrepancies. Kitamura starts with how he caught wind of the rumors, expanding with the bullying that has been happening in-class concerning the student in question—and to my surprise, it wasn't Mikawa. Aya is the class representative of my homeroom while the girl in question is not a name I will find in the morning roster. The headmaster has mistaken two scandals for one.

"Mikawa-san is here to testify," Kitamura concludes. "Tell the headmaster what you told me before, would you kindly?"

…or is she?

Shifting my attention to the young woman, I quickly notice how restless she is. Initially I believed that she is anxious of the responsibility of her claim, or perhaps to finally have a chance to 'get back' on her unrequited love—but that observation is but a disservice of her. I've seen her at her worse, noticed how dejected she can be sometimes when things did not follow through her expectations…but I've yet seen her so fearful or threatened before. Her… persona on the roof was a surprise, but I don't believe she is someone who would stoop as low as Kitamura's moral seems to be by enacting revenge. Call it a gut feeling, but something tells that she isn't doing this voluntarily...

"Yes…" she starts, letting her bangs fall over her face. "I… saw Oogame-sensei heading up the roof during the festival."

The snake smirks triumphantly, "I assume it was for an illicit rendezvous of sorts, headmaster. You know about the childish 'charm' the students conjure about the roof, don't you?"

"I do," the headmaster agrees before taking another sip. "I don't believe it to be completely true. Any
"I confronted Shiho-san about the matter and she confirms it. She confided in me and what's worse, it appears there are rumors that she may be… *with child*, headmaster."

"**WHAT!?**"

With how quickly the air suffocates in this very room, I don't have to second-guess the sudden animosity that flares from the *'Enma'* or the celebratory snicker of that slime and what it translates for me. Kitamura expected this reaction from the *'Enma'* and is confident of his credibility largely due to his reputation and experience that far outweighs mine—more so when Mikawa is seemingly in support of his advances. If I was my 'old' self, this would have pushed me over the edge and into the pot of boiling water the snake had prepared beforehand to cook me alive; I admit, I wasn't a coolheaded individual then—and still isn't if I am to consider the turmoil that combusts in my gut. I would have faltered, stumbled, and once again bend my knees to his whim—*should* have. But I didn't. Instead, I have become a complete puzzle of a person and a stranger to this clockwork reality. An *anomaly*. An *outlier*.

Too long I have remained silent in the sidelines and surrendered as society trample me with its boots. Too many times I watch her weep for my hubris and foolishness, groveling in the dirt with a plastic smile that screams for 'help'; no more.

…

You've *really* rubbed too much on me, Monika. We're not that different…

Against the increasingly unpleasant residue of anger and hate that oozes from the *'Enma'* or the irritable smirk of Kitamura, there is one other person here who is likely dragged against her will—and she may very well tip the balance in this predicament if my hunch is proven correct. Mikawa slumps on her seat all throughout Kitamura's bullshit, her bangs falls unattended to cover her expression while she fidgets, nervously tapping her feet. That, however, isn't the first time she does so—the other being that one time she *lied* to cover Aki's mistakes almost a year ago. It is an *involuntary* action as much as when I scratch behind my ears—and I didn't catch that until that time she asked for help to 'procure materials' before the festival. Yes…

When she lies, Mikawa almost *always* taps her feet and crosses them while sitting.

"Oogame-sensei," the *'Enma'* roars. "What do you have to say in defense, or are you going to admit? There's fair amount of evidence weight against you—and we can do this the easy way or the hard way."

"Just give it up, Oogame," Kitamura taunts. "Even your class representative have it against you—and she spends most of her time around you!"

"Well, Oogame-sensei…?"

"Come on, don't waste our time Oogame!"

The hammering stops *now*.

"Headmaster, if I may," I raise my hand to start. "I do not appreciate this empty-allegation and finger-pointing. For the record, I believe you are mistaking *two* rumors for *one*."

Like flicking a lighter in a gas-filled chamber, the atmosphere is almost abruptly set ablaze. The
'Enma' casts a near-petrifying gaze at the sight of defiance he deems as nothing but a 'waste', Kitamura's smirks grew wider from ear to ear, and Mikawa almost leaps from her seat in abject horror—though the latter of the three is more unexpected than the former two. It is not within my intention to toss her under the bus as it is to see the extent of Kitamura's influence on her, even if it meant exposing us unto the spotlight. Maybe it would have been better to accept it all and retire from office, maybe this alone is a sign for me to do so; though in doing so, I will only bring grief despite her damning condition.

If I am to retire, then I will do so with dignity.

With a 'clink', the headmaster rests his cup on the saucer. His glasses paints the reflection of the bespectacled rebel. "Explain."

Like treading a minefield, one should take great care in navigating across this elaborate maze of deathtraps that was carefully laid in advance. So far, the 'Enma' seems more out of the loop than what I assumed; considering his openness to suggestions, he may be withholding his judgement until a feasible explanation and solution comes to light. On the other hand, everything about this farce is caked in Kitamura's fingerprints, and he certainly took the opportunity to wiggle from my negligence. But pregnancy!? What was he thinking…!? Something isn't right here… is he planning to…? Maybe I'm too hasty to judge, though the possibility and plausibility exists.

That leaves Mikawa as the 'dark horse'.

With how long I've been absent, it is as much a mystery to me concerning Mikawa's activity in the clubroom as is her motive at this point of time. Her recovery from 'a common cold', an alibi, did little but plastered a band aid over a wound that has been festering for three weeks. Some bought her reasoning, but she and I knew that it was all a lie—especially considering how she 'taps' when questioned. Then, what motive is she here for? Revenge? She was heartbroken, true, but… to this extent…? If she does pursue revenge, then I would have lost my job long before I am summoned here, mainly due to her influence and extensive smear-campaign… but I didn't. Instead, she's here alongside Kitamura. Something tells me this isn't the entire truth…

I have to—no, need to confirm. At least, I need to know where she stands.

"You see headmaster," I continue. "What was told by Kitamura-senpai—sensei isn't completely true. Yes, there are rumors of forbidden relationship between a teacher and a student."

The moment I shift my gaze towards the 'dark horse' with nothing but assumptions and gut feeling, I knew that everything I'll say in the next few seconds is but a leap of faith—and whether she is collaborating with Kitamura or not will be determined then. I'm sorry, Mikawa… but I hope you can understand what I'm trying to convey with nothing but a nod and a smile, "One of which involves Mikawa and I."

The die has been cast, igniting the headmaster in a mix of confusion and Kitamura in sheer disbelief, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that anyone would be mistaken—especially due to the 'charm' and all."

"I did went to the roof during the festival and Mikawa can confirm this, because she was up there waiting," I heave, mentally grasping the tail of my spirit from flying towards the Sanzu River. "Waiting for the sunset with the Literature Club. Isn't that true, Mikawa-san?"

"A-ahh…"

And answer it, she did.
"...yes, I was up there first."

Mikawa isn't supposed to be a part of this conflict, this... rivalry between Kitamura and me. In the end, she is but a collateral of my own hubris—and now a hostage of Kitamura. Once again, I have risked another innocent into the crossfire with a promise of 'safety'. As difficult of a choice this is, it still is a worthy call just for the sake of robbing that smug off of that bastard's face.

"There is one other thing, headmaster," Kitamura quickly follows abruptly. "The victim, Shiho-san, also reported a severe case of... bullying happening as well."

He gestures confidently, twisting his index finger in a circular motion as he casts a hateful gaze towards Mikawa. "I've done an independent investigation of my own, and after a series of interviews with some students—which also confirms that there is not two but one rumor—I have collected the evidence that points Mikawa as the main perpetrator in this chain of bullying."

"Which is my other reason for bringing her here," he continues adamantly as he draws a recorder from his pocket. "To wrap up two problems that haunts our school's morality and image as a whole! Don't believe the slanderous claim of this—"

"I DID NOT BULLY A-CHAN...!"

In a sudden burst of energy Mikawa leaps unto her feet, bold and determined, with a declaration that quickly faltering the second she realizes that she stand amongst the company of elders. Meekly apologizing of her rudeness, she quietly retreats to her seat—though, perhaps it is but a calculated move...? With but a faint smile and a glance, I quickly surmise her subtle attempt of 'communication'—a follow up, perhaps, to my sorry-excuse of reassurance that was but a 'spur of the moment' decision. In my history with her, I know that Mikawa can be quite crafty—slippery, even for my standards. She is but a child, and though I understand that we've all been in similar position before, I dare say that she is definitely way too adept playing that part.

"Is there anything you would like to add, Mikawa-san...?" the headmaster inquires. "Don't worry, I personally won't hold it against you."

"Yes, headmaster Murayama, there is."

With how bright her eye lights up at the premise, I almost believe for a second that all she is about to say is nothing short but unfiltered truth. Confidence, integrity, and eye contact... the perfect image of a charismatic public speaker, as expected of the persona she preserve throughout her entire high school career. If it weren't because of her 'habit' and my knowledge of it, one would mistake her as an incorruptible maiden of sincerity. "I am friends with A-cha—Ariake-san, headmaster."

"She even visits the clubroom once in a while!" her attention darts to my direction. "You can ask Oogame-sensei about it, he can confirm! What reason do I have to bully her...?"

The 'Enma' raises his hand to interrupt—though not her words, specifically. I do enjoy Kitamura's look of disbelief, nonetheless. "Is that true, Oogame-sensei?"

Looking over at Mikawa's direction with but a glimpse, I am treated with a smirk and a subtle nod coming from the 'black horse' as she crosses her legs and 'taps' her feet out of habit; the sight of it all almost shatter the serious façade we've struggled to maintain for the past couple of minutes, all just for the sake of a little chuckle. For all intents and purposes, it may be safe to assume that her little 'drama'is nothing short but a calculated move to create an opening against Kitamura's strangle.

And I'd be lying if I say that I'm not proud of it—I am, but all for the wrong reasons.
"I can vouch for her, headmaster. She visits once in a while, that is true."

"—LIES…!"

"Kitamura-sensei, please," the 'Enma' interrupts. "This may benefit your investigation as well. As you said, 'Knock two birds with one stone'—unless you have anything else to add?"

The buffer provided by the coffee table does little to neutralize the venomous aura that permeates from the snake's lair. He grits and crunches his fists, darting between Mikawa and myself before quietly retreating to his seat with a bloodshot stare that could set a man aflame, just by his emotions alone. Hatred. If my experience as someone under his supervision before taught me, Kitamura is one cunning bastard that should never be underestimated. He's a persuasive speaker—that alone is judged solely based on his position, status, and connection maintained throughout his career. It did have me wondering as well if Shiho even was his first 'pet', or if there was someone else before. Whatever the answer to that question may be, I am certain that she is his first fatality.

"Headmaster, I may have been mistaken. As Oogame-sensei said, there are two rumors."

…and I doubt Kitamura will back down—not when his personal security is at risk.

"But he isn't telling everything—especially not the one he's personally involved in. Oogame-sensei, care to elaborate your relationship with Mikawa-san…? I'm certain a single event isn't enough to create such lasting… rumors. After all…" a Cheshire-like grin creeps from his shadow. "The testimonies recorded in this recorder indeed supports your previous confession, perhaps more—maybe you can start confessing your relationship with Shiho-san as well…?"

What. Persistent. Motherfucker…

If I could applaud him for the sheer amount of preparation he pulled, I might do so with a punch to his face. His glare, the off-putting Cheshire-smile, and the smug air of confidence he gave off is nothing short but a provocation that dances around the art of humiliation—a confident gesture that parades his position and wealth in power. It isn't because I fear the false testimonies and slander—after all, an innocent man have nothing to hide—but what the man behind the confession is capable of. This is Kitamura, a man known for his prowess and deceit. It isn't too far-fetch to assume the amount of tailoring and doctoring the questions had to specifically grant him the answer he wants, thus making the testimonies an effective framing tool—and I have nothing to refute against it but words. I can only grind my teeth in silence and irritation against his back-handed play as Mikawa, too, falls into deep thought.

"GET YOUR SENSES TOGETHER, BOTH OF YOU…!"

…!

The headmaster's commanding charisma shatters the animosity with a roar, seizing the moment with an authoritative iron fist, and judges both parties equally without remorse. His pupil burns with frustration, piercing the wall of glass that hides his expression, concealed briefly by the fog that came from the cup of coffee he sips. Never have I witness the 'Enma' to burst with frightening authority that judges us—all of us—with little room for compassion. The air that surrounds him is quickly pulled with such force when he opens his jaws, alerting us of the order he demands. "I didn't summon both of you here to quarrel and point fingers like little children!"

He glares at Kitamura, "Sensei, if you don't have any concrete evidence don't waste my time!"
"As for you, Oogame-sensei," as fast as he lay the hammer on Kitamura, judgment follows to me. "Unless you have concrete proof of the 'claims' for both of the supposed rumors, I suggest you speak your peace and stop delaying…!"

He pause and takes a sip. "So, anyone…? Otherwise, we call this inconclusive and all of you can return to your day."

"I can, headmaster."

Between our silence and stunned expressions, she raises her hand timidly. I look on in surprise just as much as the rest, expecting one of us to be the first to break the silence—instead, a student steps into the stage clutching her conviction close to her heart. It is a strangely awe-inspiring, yet equally mortifying to watch as she readily face against the scrutiny that will surely befall upon her from this school’s toughest jury and her most skeptic critic. Still, Mikawa marches forward and apologetically smiles as if to reassure that everything is within her control—a confidence I’ve yet seen in a long time. The 'Enma' turns his gaze towards her and with a heave, she starts, "I can confirm both rumors."

The 'Enma' clicks his tongue and sighs, "Go on then, speak Mikawa-san."

"The rumors surrounding myself and Oogame-sensei is true," Kitamura's lips suddenly curves into a sinister crescent as my heart grinds to a stop. "I do have feelings for Oogame-sensei—and I did spoke to a few of my closest friends about it."

She sighs, "But… that's just it. It is just a rumor. Our relationship never went further than close friends."

"What should I believe your statement, Mikawa-san?" the 'Enma' replies as he takes a sip. "You might as well be deceiving me deliberately to cover Oogame-sensei's… mistakes."

There is an urge that beckons me to stop her from taking the next step—I knew exactly what she was trying to convey and, indeed, it may as well discredit Kitamura's phony alibis. But at what cost? Sometimes, I wonder if I have taken things too far and raised a replica for my own selfishness. "Because Oogame-sensei already have someone—and I have met her."

"And I…" she chokes and gasps, catching her breath. "…A-and I am no match for her…"

Like watching the end of a story or a fledgling that finally leaves its nest, I can only sit in contemplation as she mutter her final conviction with all her mustered courage. The 'Enma' returns with but a slight chuckle and an 'ah', while the other sneered in disgust. She chose to close a chapter in her book for the sake of the one she treasures, disregarding the pain that cuts and bleeds at each second she commits—and I can't shake the reminiscent sense that engulfed me four years ago, from a certain young woman who lives in a different reality. "I see… I'm sorry to have asked something… personal," the 'Enma' sighs. "But there is still one more rumor to confirm. Would you care to elaborate as well?"

"Yes, headmaster."

"I don't… I don't like betraying a friend, but just this once I'll do it for her own good. The second rumor," Mikawa continues. "The second rumor is about A-cha—Ariake-chan and her relationship with Ki—"

"YOU BI—!"
"KITAMURA-SENSEI, enough…!"

"Headmaster, can't you see that she is LYING!? The evidence I present here proves that—"

"SILENCE…!" the 'Enma' commands. "I will judge and see both as I see fit!"

What unfurls before me is an expression that I find difficult to forget, one that howls and reeks of desperation and bitterness as dark as a moonless night—one that I'm well acquainted with under similar, albeit different circumstances. My heart sinks as I observe in silence, wickedly relishing on Kitamura's downfall at the expense of an innocent young woman whose absence is paid little heed, while her name means nothing but a chess piece on a board made out of conspiracy and deceit. A teacher is responsible for the safety of all their students equally… I truly believe that.

"But Mikawa-san, if you're suggesting what I think you are," the 'Enma' continues as he rests his cup and takes his seat on her opposite end. "Do you have evidence to support your claim…?"

She taps her feet, "W-well… A-chan confided in me and—"

"Anything besides word of mouth? Unless there is a concrete evidence—"

Forgive me, Monika…

"I have the evidence, headmaster."

…but I'm breaking another promise.

The surprise and ensuing relief that washes over Mikawa is akin to a child on the first day of the year upon receiving an otoshidama, equally stunning Kitamura speechless and impaled in his seat. I move my thumb across the screen to form a letter—an 'M'—that unlocks the phone and, with a flick, reveals a piece of history immortalized in a photograph. Did a sliver of sympathy crossed my mind when I show the evidence to the judge and jury? Regret? Perhaps… yet all crumble into dust under the 'Enma's watchful gaze, buried and concealed against the face of judgment. What will happen next—or what fate entails Kitamura and Shiho—is beyond my control. There is no love lost for Kitamura, but for the poor girl… may the gods have mercy on me.

I cast a student—an innocent—into the fire. I have failed as a teacher.

"Kitamura, see me after your last class," the 'Enma' orders, rattling the air with animosity that I've yet witnessed prior. "You're dismissed for now."

"H-headmaster…! I didn't—are you just going to believe—!"

"ENOUGH..!" he grunts. "We'll talk about this later. Now get out of my sight."

For as long as my history of working in this institution, I have yet witnessed Kitamura absent of that succinct arrogance and authority—nor have I saw him without command of confidence and suave; both traits adored by the majority of the female population, students and faculties alike. As he quietly bows in dismiss and takes his first step out of the room, I realize that this may very well be the first time I see him in an unforgiving state, forcefully pried out of his shell, dishonored. In but a fleeting moment, the once sweet-taste of victory turns sour and vile at the prospect of a falling domino—such is the world we're trapped in and its unforgiving maze of relationships.

"Well, sorry for the trouble Oogame-sensei, Mikawa-san," the headmaster continues, sighing as he turns his focus to us. "I guess I owe both of you an apology for this… misunderstanding."
But there is one last thing to do…

"Headmaster, if I may, there is one more thing I have to mention."

"Oh? Speak freely, sensei."

"What I did back there—the evidence, everything—it's… uncharacteristic of a teacher," I start. "I believe I should also be held accountable, headmaster."

The headmaster chuckles as he return to his throne, "Don't worry about it. Though it isn't the best execution, you did the right thing. It's a pity about Shiho-san's case, but aside from a formal investigation there's really nothing else you should be concerned of."

"Headmaster, I just condemned a student! Used her like a pawn! She isn't even supposed to be involved…!"

"Which isn't entirely your fault, Oogame-sensei," he assures. "Please rest assured that you and Mikawa-san won't be held….—wait, what's that in your hand?"

With both hands extended, I present the brown envelope before the 'Enma's presence. A peep echoes nearby and the headmaster's expression stiffens to a cold pause; I take a short, stiff bow.

"I have failed my duty as a teacher…"

…

"I'm retiring."

The room falls into a deafening silence, transported into another dimension with only the ambience of the outside world echoing like a far distant land. Here, the thumping of one's own heart or the echo of a dropped pin is the lingua franca spoken between its denizens, all waiting for the other party to speak. What thoughts that courses through their minds are left unspoken and unknown, leaving me to speculate all possible outcome towards my last statement. Even with my eyes facing nothing but the expanse of the blue carpet, the murmurs of their consciousness is as audible as the sound of a rushing train at the peak of rush hour.

"Please, raise your head sensei," the 'Enma' starts before turning his attention to the stunned club president. "Mikawa-san, you are free to leave. Thank you for your cooperation. I look forward to seeing your progress until graduation, child."

"B-but headmaster! W-what about Oogame-sensei!? If he really is retiring then—"

"Please," the 'Enma' sighs. "I'm sorry, but you have to leave; this is a more… personal and delicate matter. You're dismissed, Mikawa-san."

"But I…—!"

She stops mid-sentence; tongue twisted into a knot and her confidence collapses upon noticing my observation. Like a little puppy, she submits to the headmaster's order without further complaints and, with a polite bow, peacefully makes her way to the door. Yet even with a fault line between us, behind that collected manner is a strong surge to remain—a desire to see the conclusion between the 'Enma' and my decision. There are likely questions running through her mind—even more likely needed to be addressed, yet everything needs to be shelved… for the moment, at least. The door slowly creaks to a close and I'm left alone with the 'Enma'. 
"She's a good girl," the headmaster quips with a chuckle. "Smart… maybe too smart for her own good."

I glance to the side, laughing. Trust me headmaster, you only saw the tip of the iceberg. "She sure is…"

With a great voice he breaks into a guffaw, nodding and grunting in approval as everything slowly settles down, returning to the pace that it once was. With a heave, the 'Enma' crosses his arm before him and leans forward before gesturing me to take a seat. The chair grinds against the carpet with a muted 'thud', creaking slightly against my weight but nonetheless comfortable to rest. It's funny thinking about it; almost two months ago, I remember dreading this sensation... now I can't help but thank the gods that this room—and this very chair—exist. "Now without delay, Oogame-sensei, if you don't mind me asking…"

The 'Enma' clears his throat, "Why?"

"I have a feeling that there is something you're not telling me," he continues. "I doubt that your… integrity is the only reason—which reminds me, how is your mother?"

I look to the side once more and nods in affirmation. The headmaster is sharp. "Well, that's one of my reasons headmaster."

"Oh? Is your mother alright?"

"No, that's not it," pursing my lips together, I gather my courage and sigh. There is no point of keepings secrets with him any further. "Do you remember what Mikawa-san mentioned? About my… significant other?"

The 'Enma' nods, "Yes, but what does that have to do with—…!"

He stops, his pupil dilates, and I return a smile to confirm his suspicion. The clock urgently reminds us of its presence with its steady ticking before its unnerving echo is unceremoniously drowned by the overbearing ambience from the outside, taking us back into the fold of this realm. With a nod, I measure the pace of my beating heart and tap unto the newfound confidence. "Yes, headmaster. It isn't my mother; it's my lover."

Headmaster Murayama squints his brow and grunts, sighing in what I can only assume to be of frustration that likely stemmed from the intentional withholding of information. Patiently I await his response, listening to the recurrent ticking of the wall clock and counting along to ease the weight that bears on my shoulders; I dare say this is one of the longest minute I've had yet to endure. The 'Enma' heaves, leans back on his chair, and set his glasses to the side. "This is… a bit much, but… do you really have to stop?"

"I know I've been quite hard on you—heck, maybe on everyone. But that's because I value discipline, sensei," he continues as he pinches his nose. "But do you really have to quit your job just for her? Have you thought this through…?"

Again he leans on his chair, releasing a contemplative sigh before returning his focus on the matter, "I believe you really need to think this through, sensei—more so when your presence is a necessity in these last few months before the exams. I'm sure we all can agree that life is important, but is she really more important than your job or responsibility?"

"I've thought about it, and my decision stands."

"Is it your salary?" he adds with zest. "I know that you're still under probation, but I'm willing to
restore everything after the end of the year and—"

"No, headmaster… it's alright," I interrupt. "I just… want to spend every last second I have with her, because…"

...

"Because I'm afraid that tomorrow could even be her last."

A surge of pain runs across the lower half of my lip as I bite unto the fleshy surface, turning my eyes away from the 'Enma' as he quietly expresses his condolences. The moisture that builds around the edges of my eyelids begins to obscure, prompting the palm of my hand to restore my vision and keep my emotions in-check. Silence descends once more unto this realm, and for a moment I fear that the explanation would be insufficient to convince him to my side. But as he sighs and wears his glasses once more, with a smile I've yet seen from the 'Enma' in all my time here as a teacher, that concern quickly evaporates into nothing more than clouds—perhaps, I may have misjudged him all this time. "Understood. I'll prepare the necessary paperwork for you to retire."

"T-thank you, headmaster."

He waves his hand dismissively, "If you truly believe that she far outweighs your job, then I won't stop you."

"Spend your time with her wisely," he continues. "It's been an honor to be working with someone with such integrity and dedication, Oogame-sensei. Truly."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused."

"It's all part of the learning process, all is forgiven. Good work."

Thus ends a chapter in my book of life, closed by my own hands and volition. I bow politely at the headmaster and make my way to the door that divides this reality with the world outside; an imposing gateway. The double-door opens with a loud creak and I turn to face the room one last time to glimpse at the 'Enma' at his desk, holding what seems to be a small portrait that rests at the side of his desk; an object of particular joy and sorrow to the man. The door slowly draws to a close and everything fades behind layers of lacquer wood and steel. The ambience of youth welcomes my return to the school ground, once more.

Though… that isn't the only thing—or should I say, person.

"Sensei, can we… talk a bit?"

Mikawa inches forward into the light, clearly waiting for my return in distraught and unease. Her left hand clutches the collars of her blazer—trembling—while questions seems to cloud her thoughts as deep as her consciousness goes; answer is what she seeks, and with just the right amount of pressure an overflow is to be guaranteed. I roll my fist into a ball and tuck them into the pockets of my pants and smile. "Sure, Mikawa. Is there something in your mind?"

"It's just… at that meeting earlier," she starts as her eyes wanders to the side. "Why…?"

I push my eyebrows inquisitively, "I'm sorry… but, what do you mean by—"

"Why did you did try to save me!!" she cries, drawing every inch of strength from her bottled emotions; it is to our fortune that the hall beyond the headmaster's office is deserted. "After everything that happened… after I tried so hard to forget about you…"
I reserve my judgment for a moment as the hardened exterior of her character slowly cracks and crumbles like glass, revealing a confused, innocent child hiding behind. Without a word, I motion her to walk with me to the usual spot underneath the stairwell where the vending machines are, away from curious onlookers and as much as time permits. She waddles along obediently, following closely behind like a duckling until we are out of view or presence of many.

"Sensei, please give me a straight answer…" she starts timidly. "Why…?

She grasps her arms to a hug, "I betrayed you, falsely testified against you for something you didn't commit…"

"You're forced into the role," I reply. "I can't blame you for that."

"I even lied about Shiho! I'm not in good terms with her, I'm the culprit in question!"

"I know."

"I—…!"

Like a spell that binds her lips, her thoughts fails to translate into words that she wishes to convey as she reels back to comprehend my puzzling judgment—or action. A few seconds passes as she stutters, waiting for my revelation to enlighten or perhaps clarify what everything—what she means to me. It is a story that touches the hearts of many JKS from all generation, a romanticized image of a high school tailored to fulfill their cravings for a fateful romance between two different social classes—the love between a teacher and a student, a modern day Romeo and Juliet. Illicit, immoral, romantic.

Fictional. Mikawa Aya may be a woman, but she is still a student—my student. Nothing more, nothing less.

With a sigh, I take a step forward. "Mikawa, I know you lied. I know you're the one who bullies Shiho."

"But whatever sins you committed, it doesn't change the fact that you are my student," I raise my hand and pat her on her head. "And I will do anything to protect you—or anyone—of my students from harm."

Gently I ruffle her hair akin to siblings, prompting an expression of what I can assume to be a mix of unseemly surprise and bliss. She takes a step back, dark hazel colored eyes locking unto mine, hungry for more—be it affection or assurance, I can't tell. Quickly she turns away and cast her vision to the side, reaching her left arm with her right and gently trace its length from her elbow to the edge of her hand, awkwardly hiding her expression with her bangs. Promptly, I smile. "I'm guessing Kitamura-sensei figured that out and coerced you into testifying against me?"

She nods timidly. Well, figures… it's not that surprising—it is him after all. But it won't matter anymore.

We each take a step back to regain some of our privacy, slinking back into our bubble of thought before a buzz from my pocket notifies the current time. I glance briefly at Mikawa who waits in anticipation, twirling and tugging her bangs playfully to pass the time. "Lunch break is almost over. You better get to class, Mikawa."

"Before I go… do you really mean it?" she nervously starts. "That you're… leaving, sensei?"

Mikawa inches forward with her hands balled to a fist, trembling as she yearns for an answer. I guess
there's no point in hiding it; it is after all, likely one of the questions that clouds her mind. With but a smile, I nod and address her query. "Yes… I am."

"Is it… for her? It's for her, isn't it…?"

…

"Yes."

She sternly smiles in return, "I see. She's… really lucky."

Without another word, she politely bows and takes her leave. There is an aura of sullen confidence that she wears like a great coat, shielding her vulnerable self from the harsh elements that relentlessly bombard her fragility. Pride guides her every footstep, yet an unmistakable hints of sorrow looms on the trail that she left behind. In all my time as a teacher, Mikawa always stands out amongst the rest of my students—intentionally or otherwise. Now, she soars higher than ever before…

…

It's going to be a rainy day.

The faculty office falls into a deep silence, with but the sound of scribbles and scratches coming from the remaining teachers or the incessant ticking of father time that decorates a section of the wall. From one end to the other, rows of tables are cleverly organized to squeeze us according to our division, separated only by a narrow path, enough for a man to navigate without being a bother. On the walls, schedules, posters, and other amenities decorates the scene to create an organized chaos of information and reminders. Laminated motivational messages adorn the upper part of the chalkboard, some to encourage discipline while another, a reminder—this one in particular is a personal favorite of mine: 'nothing is really over until the moment you stop trying'. A room where everything began…

…and where everything end.

It's… slightly unnerving to think that this is the last time I get to paint this picture, this portrait of a place far from home that nestled close to my heart. The musky odor of paper and ink, the rattling air conditioner, or the creaking wheels of Shinano-sensei's chair over in the mathematics division's desk area has become synonymous to the work environment, as much as Monika's white poofy bow is to her. Funny how you start noticing these insignificant details right at the end, only to realize how much it has been ingrained as a part of you. The same can be said to my homeroom student.

Class 3-2… it has been an honor serving as your homeroom teacher.

I wasn't sure I was up to the task when I was assigned as a homeroom teacher; my training did not include coming face to face with a collection of quirky individuals of different backgrounds, each with varying levels of focus and expectations that may or may not be spoken publicly, yet all united under a single plaque that is proudly planted before the door. Although I recognized some of them from my English class from the previous year, it was still nerve-wrecking to see all of them smile and nod politely, hoping only for the best for their last and final year.

And if it weren't because of a more pressing matter, I would've gladly remained.

When I announced my resignation during the afternoon homeroom period, it rattled everyone barring Mikawa. Several queries were flung, accusations and speculations, and anything in between the students can think of—all ground from baseless rumors, circulated through the student body in an attempt to make sense of the situation. Some swore to confront the headmaster, others turn to
Mikawa for clarification, while a few chose to keep calm and keep asking; it was as much a surprise for them, as their reaction was to me. It wasn't until Mikawa took to her role did the dust finally settled and everything start to fall into place; it was the crescendo in an orchestra, the rush to the finish line, or the climax to a tragedy.

It was bittersweet as it was dear.

Kurosawa was the first to rise from his seat and, with a great bow, delivered his most sincere 'thank you' as loud as he could. Nakano followed after and started an impromptu albeit heartfelt 'thank you' speech, then Imai with hers before she breaks into rivers of tears, then Kihara, Sayaka, and on and on until Mikawa conclude the farewell with a banzai finale, scattered only by a reminder that we still have cleaning duty left to do in our schedule. Those laughter, hollers, sorrows, and camaraderie… I wonder, would I be able to find something similar in the near future? Truly, I wonder…

"Busy, Oogame-sensei?"

A rough, familiar voice calls from the door; my cheeks rise to an upward curve. "I heard from the headmaster that… you're resigning. Is that true?"

Casually he struts into the room, hands in his pocket with questions contorting his expression to a sour note; I assume it came as much of a surprise to him as it was to my students. Promptly, I pull a quiet smile and a nod. "It's true, Ikari-senpai."

"Damn… is it because of…?"

"Don't worry," I break into a chuckle. "I have nothing to do with the rumors; that was all Kitamura-senpai. I quit because of my own volition."

Ikari-senpai sighs with relief, chuckling like a little boy in a dagashiya. "I knew it! I never liked him in the first place, that arrogant bastard."

"You really thought I would do such a thing, senpai?"

"N-no, of course not!" he laughs. "I knew you're a good person, Oogame. A bit immature, but you're good in my book."

Though as much of a joyous front he tries to promote, it is obvious to both of us the nature of this conversation and the question he wishes to impose; after all, if how quickly the mood settles back into the nether regions isn't a clear enough indication, then Ikari-senpai's profound whistle sends the message. I have respect for Ikari-senpai—not because of him being my senior, mind you—but for his honesty and integrity. He may be a miserable, single, early-thirties salary man, but his work ethics and his wisdom is something I hope I can achieve one day. "I'm… guessing you're here to ask me why I withdrew from my position."

Ikari-senpai smacks his lips and nods, "Always the sharp one. So, anything you want to clarify?"

Above all, he is a person I can confide to.

"Truth is," I start. "I left because of a girl—not just any other, but one that I can't afford to lose."

He furrows his brows and clicks his tongue, "For a girl…? That's a little… foolish, to put it lightly."

"That may be true…"

Briefly I wet the edges of my chapped lips and clean my throat with a cough, searching for the next
word, wondering how far I can reveal. How many secrets can one man contain without having it break him mentally? Will that person continue to do so even if it means his own demise? God only knows. "But Yuuya—sorry, the doctor mentioned she only has up until the end of this year to live. I know it's stupid, but... I want to spend every waking second I have with her."

"Have you considered taking a paid-vacation...? Surely, you don't have to go so far as to—"

"I've considered that, senpai," I interrupt with a raised palm. "I doubt the school would let me without having another salary cut or worse—more so when we're less than three months before the finals."

Ikari-senpai crosses his arm, "True enough... that's a pity, but I guess you're right."

"Besides, I have been meaning to quit after everything with the pay and... everyone who's not you, senpai," I add. "I just... can't make up my mind to do so."

"Because of your students?"

I pause, left in a momentary state of wonder; Ikari-senpai isn't far off with his guess. "Yes..."

He crosses his arms and ponders in silence, allowing a few seconds to pass. He struts to the left and to the right, hands still in his pocket; it is apparent to me how lost he is in thought as he slowly digests the information straight from the horse's mouth. Officially, my departure from the school was announced by the headmaster to the faculty due to my mother's worsening health, with little mention of the scandal; that was the decision of the headmaster, and I can only guess that he did so to preserve the school's reputation. Satisfied, Ikari-senpai nods and glances to the side in mild amusement, "She must have been really important to you, more than your responsibility or students could ever be..."

"I'm not saying it's a wise move, though honestly I do feel rather envious," he continues with a chuckle. "To find something more valuable than a job or an income..."

..."

"...I really do envy that."

If one could describe how Ikari-senpai is in this moment, the image of a wise pilgrim or a veteran samurai paints a definitive picture; a clear but profound eyes of a traveler, an exhausted smile, and an air of wisdom, unmatched but to a hermit. There is almost sadness in his tone, concealed by a wrinkling smile that elevates his age by ten—more so when he, without a word, nods in what I can only presume to be in support of my decision. He always comes up as that wise and thoughtful senior, albeit his rather lax attitude towards his colleagues or drama that is in motion around the work place—a contrast to the brash, promiscuous Kitamura who's in constant wrestle for control. Though my time of knowing him was short, I came to realize how well acquainted he is in the trade; a shining example amongst the corrupt sea of idle and neglect, aimlessly floating on a current like a leaf, simply getting by. "Well, I wish you the best of luck, Oogame."

With arms to his side, he puffs his chest forward and smiles.

"I know that we'll part someday, but I didn't imagine it to be this soon," he continues with a chuckle. "It has been a pleasure working with you."

There's nothing more to say. With respect to both tradition and the individual, I take a full bow. "The same goes for me, senpai. Thank you for taking care of me up until this time."
"There is just one more thing… about the Literature club, is it too much of a trouble to ask—"

"—to supervise them?" he grins. "I've been learning a lot from them too, to tell you the truth—and I can say you sure have a collection of bright young minds! I'll keep my eyes on them, don't you worry."

"T-thank you! Again, I'm sorry for the trouble…"

"Don't fret about it! We division-mates need to stick up for one another, right?" he quips with a smile, then glances at the door—grinning. "Speaking of the literature club… I think you should go see them. They're waiting for you at the door."

…

They're… waiting…?

Dropping everything, I recoil out of my seat to a stumble as Ikari-senpai takes his exit from the stage and reveals a path towards my destination. The silhouette that peeks through the small glass frame on the door beckons in silence, disappearing as quickly as it appeared as the distance closes. My chest thumps in anticipation, but what awaits me beyond—be that of amiable smiles or antagonistic scorn—drives the mind wary and unease. Aside from Obase and possibly Mikawa, nobody else within the club knew of the circumstances or reason of my sudden disappearance and replacement; Ikari-senpai only mentioned Aki's query, even then that was weeks ago. With the handle within reach, there is only one way to know…

I slide the door open…

…

…and find myself before the audience of five, familiar faces.

"Sensei, you're leaving!?"

"D-did we do something wrong? Were we… out of line…?"

"Aya-chan said you're leaving… why? Please, tell us!"

Initially I had expected wolves to come and tear me from limb to limb, gnawing at my negligence, and spitting on my corpse once their hunger—or perhaps, rage—is satiated; a fitting end for an irresponsible caretaker. But instead, shiba inu puppies flock with longing expressions and hyperactivity—if not runny noses, wondering where their two-legged companion had been with questions glossing over their eyes. Yuuki's the first to jump with his query, followed immediately by Satsuki, and lastly Aki with Mikawa towing closely behind her; Obase, however, opts to remain a fair distance away, acting more as an observer than a participant. At a glance, his expression is that of scornful judgment and suppressed ire—but I can't blame him for that.

I did fail to meet his expectation, and I did so within my own volition.

"Is it… true, sensei?" Aki continues, "Did we… do something to upset you?"

"Certainly did something to upset me…"

"Jiro, mind your manners!" the vice-president censures. Jiro being 'Shinjiro' from Obase's nickname, shortened I assume; it's quite pleasing to know he's well-acquainted with the rest of them for first-name basis. "I know things between you and sensei aren't going as well, but you are in no position to
Obase clicks his tongue dismissively, crossing his arms and looks away to the side. There is a buildup—an urge—that screams for me to diffuse the tension, but the better part of my judgment warns of my involvement; perhaps this is a time where it is best to remain on the sidelines. Aki huffs and rests her arms to her side as she judges Obase in disdain, returning her focus back to me after muttering a few curses. Putting her hands together, she respectfully takes a bow, "I'm... really sorry for his rudeness, sensei."

I wave my hand dismissively, "N-no, no... it's fine, I am to blame as well."

"But to answer your question," I continue. "Yes... I am leaving—don't worry, it has nothing to do with the club."

"But... why?" Yuuki interrupts. "You've been gone from the club for almost a month! Sure, Ikari-sensei supervised us, and one time, even Kitamura-sensei too came and—"

"Wait, Kitamura-sensei supervised the club...?"

"Yes, he did!" Satsuki cuts in. "Well... he was more interested with Aya and Aki-senpai, so most of us were dismissed early."

"Did he mentioned anything, Aki...?"

The vice-president shakes her head from left to right, smiling reassuringly. "He came to ask about Shiho-san, mostly; he did asked for Aya-chan to stay behind, though."

Matching the puzzle pieces together, everything that happened during lunch became clear as to how that prick managed to rope Mikawa into the mess. Just behind the vice-president, the girl in question silently and desperately tries to avoid contact—which comes to no surprise, after all we've been through; it is a matter best not mentioned and left buried to decay. Though it may leave her with a persistent scar, the miracle of time will heal all wounds...

...and distance is the cure for all.

"But enough of that," Aki continues, shifting her weight just slightly for Mikawa to obscure her expression. "Why are you leaving, sensei? Will you see us at our graduation?"

"I..."

A pause; is there still a reason for me to hide my reasoning? Well... perhaps there isn't, but maybe it is more of a duty than a necessity. One day, the jaws of maturity and adulthood will bear its fangs and bites unto them mercilessly, forcing their adaptation in order to survive; it is my wish that they do not become someone like me—a fool who abandoned his responsibility for his own selfishness. "That... is entirely dependent on my mother's health. I'm sorry, but with how things are... unlikely."

It is within my conscious choice that I enforce the lie both the headmaster and I had weaved. Aside from Mikawa and Obase to an extent, maybe they'll figure things out one day and hate me for it, or perhaps they never will; but until that time... this is the best course of action—for all of us. The literature club was never meant to survive, but my intervention that stemmed from wishful optimism and attachment towards the fictional created the organization that stands today.

Just like the original, my presence would bring only pain; it is time for me to let them go.

"Will we... see each other again, sensei?"
I muster a smile, "Hopefully if the wind blows in our favor. Until then, who knows…?"

"Then…" Aki continues, pursing her lips. "If this will be the last time…"

...

"Can I hug you, sensei?"

If that seemingly innocent request didn't come from Aki, I would have quickly assumed it was an attempt to humor—even if that joke is distasteful, to a degree. But this came from the vice-president of the literature club, Samejima Akizuki, a recipient of the silver chrysanthemum badge and a girl known by many to be incredibly honest and carefree; dishonesty is not a part of her trade. Taking a double-take on the situation, I quickly note on Aki's glimmering eyes that is set ablaze in this confusion.

She is serious—*dead* serious.

...

Hugging is a little… *intimate* for my—no, for most people. But I guess…

"…Alright, you may."

…just this once, I'll let it slide.

With a leap, she quickly lock me in an embrace that tightens by the second to the surprise of everyone—*especially* Mikawa. With her head on my chest and residual body heat seeping through layers of fabric, my mind goes into a spin on how I should respond to all of this—or how am I supposed to explain to anyone who happen to notice. Should I hug in return? Is it right to do so? Damn it, this is definitely *not* a good idea after all, what was I thinking!?

"Thank you, sensei," she quietly whispers. "For everything that you've done for us. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

...

Just like that, the tension fizzes and I, in silence, returns her embrace. She trembles under the pressure of my arm, caressing the length of her hair as gently as a father would before, eventually, a sniffle.

They say that words can move mountains; sometimes, a simple action or a 'thank you' can move the universe. "I'm sorry for all the trouble we've caused, sensei. Thank you for taking care of us up to this point in time."

"You're very welcome…" I reply. "Thank you for being a wonderful student… and a dear friend."

When we part, Aki's cheeks are rosy in color and her eyes glistens like a lake under the setting sun. She turns to the rest of the literature club—a wide smile girthed across her feature from ear to ear. With a simple gesture, she knocks on their reservation and gradually shatters the 'wall' they've erected; one by one, they take a step forward.

"English class is going to be lot less tough without you," Yuuki quips, offering his hand for a handshake before pulling for a hug. "And it's going to be a lot less interesting, too… take care, sensei. Thank you for everything."

His voice cracks as I pat him one the back, "You keep up with your studies as much as you read, alright? Thank you for all those recommendations, Yuuki."
Yuuki takes a step back with a grin, to which I can only return with a smile of my own. What thoughts I have at the moment, my concern towards Yuuki, is fleetingly swatted to the side when Satsuki leaps in without warning, clutching to the back of my suit as tightly as she can. The echo of her wet, sodden voice penetrates through the layers of fabric and flesh that she buries her face with; gently, I pat her on the head.

"Umm, umm…" she starts with a sniffle. "I'll be a light novelist! I'll study hard and-and…"

She pauses to swallow, "S-so be sure to read my work once it's available, alright? Promise me, sensei!"

I sigh with a chuckle, feeling the tug on my heartstrings. They truly are wonderful students… "I promise."

"Y-you promised, so you better keep it, o-okay!" she continues. "Thank you… thank you…"

She bursts into tears and simultaneously rushes to Yuuki for an embrace before her words could be muttered, bawling on his shoulders he so kindly provides. With but Obase and Mikawa remaining, I wonder… would they do the same? Unlike the others, both Obase and Mikawa knows of the extent—the damage I've inflicted to the club. All that brainwashing, selective guidance, and mimicry imposed on Mikawa… she is the one most affected by my greed, which prompt Obase to act in her defense. It was wrong of me, but the consequences of the actions of my past can still be felt to this day. Her willingness to lead, the dedication, even her discreet underhanded bullying… all because of me. And I tossed everything to the side. I didn't expect them to forgive or say their goodbyes… I really don’t…

…

"You really did it, you shitty teacher…"

With his hands in his pocket, Obase steps forward. If Mikawa didn't stop Aki in that fleeting second, the young man might receive a rude awakening from behind. "To think you'd go full-Murakami on us…"

"Well, it is a 'hard-boiled reality'," I reply with a grin. "But… this my decision. I don't see any other way."

"I heard—well, we heard about it from Aya, you know? Though, I guess I can understand your reasoning…"

There is a fleeting moment of hesitation that binds his movements, identified only by how reluctant Obase is with his subtle attempts to avoid eye contact—or any gestures that shows weakness. For a minute or so we stand in silence, unrelenting to one another—and I believed this will remain as the status quo until one of us retreat without a whisper or a word. I'm glad I was proven wrong.

"Thank you, sensei…" he starts abruptly, hands to his side. "For your guidance and… everything in between."

In a manner akin to Ronin of the old, Obase takes a sharp forty-five degree bow without a misstep or a fault. In all my time since he first joined the literature club or even in class, the young man before me has yet display even the slightest degree of respect to anyone but Mikawa—until today. He fills his lungs with air and, in a sudden manner, rises to meet me eye to eye—and it dawn on me…

"Take care of them for me, alright? You may lack the subtlety of your peers, but you're quite sharp for someone of your age."
He grins in delight before retreating to the side, "That's what everyone said, sensei."

Between Obase and I, we have finally come to a mutual understanding; in the end, we might just be each other's reflection. All that said and done, there is but one person left…

Mikawa Aya, the President of the literature club.

At first glance, the President of the literature club has been actively concealing herself behind the silhouette of the vice-president, acting as a mere observer, a reluctant participant. She may have informed the others, but that is likely more out of respect of my relationship and history with the literature club than it is out of gossip. But as the members deliberately tore their walls of reservation, the edges of her cheeks rise to a gentle crescendo, gradually mellowing her expression that blooms like a sunflower on the break of dawn. She takes a step to the side, tapping Aki on her shoulder with a reassuring smile, and beams at my direction with what I can describe as a new-found confidence.

"Sensei… thank you…” she starts meekly. "If it weren't because of you, this club would not have existed."

She folds her hand, bows deeply, and continues with one of her best performance to date. "Thank you… from the bottom of my heart."

But that's just it…

"Mikawa, I—…"

…a performance.

From the way she move, her bow, to the tone of her voice, everything is but a well-choreographed motion that serves as a protective bubble of her true self. It is a business smile more than a genuine reflection of appreciation, a bow that came out of necessity, and a 'thank you' that is as artificial as it is out of peer pressure; necessary skills she perfected and honed just to maintain the image of the responsible, flawless, model student myself and many have come to expect. And I can't blame her for acting that way…

"—…Is that really all you wish to say, Aya-chan?"

…but I wasn't the only one to notice.

With a hand gently resting on Mikawa's shoulder, Aki pulls herself close to her dear friend and gingerly smiles to a fault, causing the former to flinch. Donning an expression as innocent as an infant, she addresses her virtuously and unabashed, speaking more as a dear friend than Mikawa's right-hand man—an intimacy shared between them since the beginning of the club. The president flusters as the curtain slowly draws open. "After all…"

…

"We know that you've liked sensei for a long time, Ms. President~!"

Mikawa's face blooms bright like a tomato, shrinking and shattering her well-fortified confidence as I chuckle in slight agitation, discreetly. Aki's quip is more than just a tease, but an encouragement—no, perhaps… more.

"With that in mind," she continues. "This may be your last chance, Aya-chan. So don't hide your feelings anymore, alright?"
It may have been the last push needed—not just for Mikawa, but for me; a farewell gift, an embodiment of the last love poem of the literature club. In a near-perfect sync, each of the members harmoniously encircle the bewildered club president with a blessing of their own, communicated with a light 'tap' on her shoulder. Mikawa is the club, and at its core is a throne that I occupied; an entity that lead them from darkness as much as corrupt it. With an alleviated sigh, Obase grins and motions towards the stairwell near the edge of the hall. "We'll be waiting back at the clubroom, a'ight? Take as much time as you need."

This has gone on long enough—and it is time to stop.

A minute or so passes without an exchange, peppered with the occasional side glances and irritable chortle as we permit the face of our reality settles to the bottom. Once more, the orchestra of youth performs a melody we've grown accustomed to, swaying us through the passage of time until a crack or an echo fractures our private square, suddenly and violently. Though merely a construct of my mental state, the chasm that divides us howls intensely—and I fear that a bridge may never be erected. But… it is worth a shot.

If any, it will be my swan song to the literature club.

"So…" I start with whistle, "They're quite a handful, aren't they?"

"W-who…?"

"The club members."

She anxiously giggles in response, "A-ah… yeah, they can be. But you know that already, sensei…ahaha…"

"Yeah… I do."

With a great sigh, I stand near the edge of our reality and observe the rapid motion of the world through the windows decorating the hall; the crimson light that bleeds to illuminate the building brings forth memories of that confession that brought upon this cataclysm. All these students, their lives, and the stories they have to tell—a cocktail of relationship that goes on with or without you. Humans are complicated, aren't they? Our relationship may very well be a whisper in the wind to many, but it was as much a journey for us as their own stories are to them. And like all journey has a beginning, it also has an end. "I'm going to miss them."

Glancing at the fidgeting young woman, I start with a profound smile, "So… is there anything you wanted to say?"

"N-no… its fine…" she replies, tapping the tip of her indoor shoes as she crosses her leg. "It's just a… misunderstanding…"

Mikawa turns to face the side, quietly takes her position to my side, and observing the world beyond the glass window. With her left arm clutched by her right, it becomes relatively crystal to me of her stance on the entire matter. I would be repeating the same history lesson between us right about now, but it won't change or alleviate the damage it had inflicted—on both of us, mind you. And I can't blame her for wishing to simply walk away. This divide… just the thought of it brings forth memories that are best left unknown rather than it being a detrimental to the image we've established of one another. Is it still worth it to try to rekindle old relationship? Perhaps…

But perhaps…

"Thank you, Mikawa," I continue. "I know I wasn't the best role-model you deserve, but I'm glad
you see me different."

"I know you would rather leave it all behind, and I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you."

My lungs contract as I fill them with air, drawing everything from within. Perhaps I've known all along; after all the tears, the pain, and the sorrow, it is best to just leave her be.

"I couldn't have asked for a better student—and a close friend. If there really isn't anything else, then I guess this is—"

"NO, WAIT…!"

The shattering echo of her cry pierces through the crimson sky, drowning the silence in a wave of desperation and untold desire, planting my feet involuntarily in its place. If there are still unspoken sentiment or shackled remorse, the binds she desperately tried to maintain crumbles and unleashes its flurry of emotions like a tidal wave. Gripping her collar in place, Mikawa bites on the lower part of her lips and raise her vision, dogged and fierce, from beyond the veil of her bangs. "Thank you, sensei…"

She staggers forward, "I-I don't know what else to say… without you, I couldn't… I-I wouldn't…"

"I-I'm scared… without you, I—" she suffocates at each step, "…I don't know what I'll do without you…!

With a leap, her guard crumbles as she embraces me in a wail of agony that manifests in its purest form; shameless and uncontrollable—a river of crystal. No longer is the concern of expectations and image imposed remained, peeled like old wounds and forgotten to reveal the true picture of what she is all along—an ordinary young woman. Mikawa buries her face on my chest, clutching my suit desperately as my shirt grows heavier in moisture, crying in desperate agony, over and over…

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

In matters of love and war, such is the cruel face of reality. Were it be of different circumstances, I am certain that both Mikawa and Monika would easily come to friendly terms; that is but a fleeting wish, a hope that may never come to pass. The howl of the maiden echoes continuously as the sun slowly sets to a bright orange crimson, and whether it is by fortune or coincidence, the hall remains vacant of any living soul but the two of us.

In my stillness, I can only reach out and embrace the fragility of the young maiden and caress her repeatedly, hoping that alone is enough to grant me forgiveness...

If this world is to end tomorrow, what would you do? Would you try to find a way to undo the apocalypse? Go home to spend the last hours of your life with the ones you love? Or would you remain petrified and in denial, before finally deciding to end it all with a rope or a leap of faith? Such a morbid thought… even I don't have an answer—or perhaps, I already have? It's quite a harrowing scenario, seeing how everything you know and love would cease to exist at the most importunate moment, and there is nothing you can do to influence the outcome. Well… of course, the world isn't going to end tomorrow—that much is certain to everyone.

Everyone…

…

I guess I missed the memo…
Just a few months prior, seeing that humble glow across this path would bring immense joy and excitement that words alone fail to describe. I would pick up the pace, rush to the door, turn the keys, and cry 'I'm home' in childlike positivity, expecting a welcome to my triumphant return with an all-healing voice, accompanied by an angelic smile. We'd before one another, talk about our day, and laugh like young fools at the silly little things we exaggerate or downplay at each turn—all for a taste of that warmth we seek.

It all feel so distant now…

Everything seemed like a dream, a psychedelic drug we voluntarily consume as an escape—and when it ended, what awaits is but a withdrawal that continues to torment the reality of our situation. True, Monika and I were never meant to be; she, a person born out of the sick imagination of some guy across the ocean, whose purpose was but a plot point or an anchor of sexual gratification in a visual novel, and I, a denizen of a different reality. Despite it all, we fought the laws of humanity—and punished us it did. Destroyed us.

Tell me something… would it be best to 'leave her be'?

Would humanity forgive us if we simply let each other go? The countless bridges I've burned for the hope of that light at the end of the tunnel to justify it all, and yet… is it worth it? If our love only brings pain, is it something worth keeping? No… don't answer it. The conversation we had this morning will not stop haunting, and as I stand before the door with the key at hand, I wonder if I could answer her question—if not face the conclusion we've come to?

"I'm home."

"Welcome home," my heart skips a beat at her reply, as gentle as ever and yet… somber in tone. "How is your day?"

I shy away from meeting the gaze of her emerald eyes, quietly and casually setting my bag to the side and tossing my tie to the bed before pulling the usual rickety office chair and the notebook and pen-pair. She beams with a debilitated smile, reaching to the limit of her reality to join our hands like how we use to do. The glow of her emeralds gleam in our poorly lit apartment and her lips tremble with unease, rife with restless expectations of what is to come. How am I supposed to answer? Should I tell her everything? I return with an empty hand, devoid of an answer and a will to do as she asked, bearing only tidings of ill omen. "It's… alright, I guess."

Monika sighs sympathetically, "It must have been a rough day…"

"It was…"

I can't say it…

"It was rather… eventful," I continue. "The literature club kept me quite busy."

I don't want to say it…

"How is Mikawa-san…?"

"She—" a lump forms in my throat to suffocate, and I ease myself to breathe. "She's fine. Things are… back to how they used to."

Monika giggles softly, "Is that so? That's a relief to hear…"

The muscles of my arm unfurls and like a puzzle, the shapes and forms fall into place to create a
portrait of a pathetic man; a liar, exposed by a simple scratch to the ear. She must have noticed this… habit of mine, a curse in its own akin to Pinocchio's wooden nose. I've been a fool, am I? To think I could talk my way out of this… "I-I'm… sorry, Monika."

She tilts with query, "Is there something you should be apologizing for…?"

"Well, no… it's just that…"

…

So that's how it is…

She's… forgotten about that, too. Without a whisper, I lean on my seat and turn to face the gods up above with their derisive smile and reverberating laughter; an existence that vanishes as quickly as it appeared the moment my hand perch to rest on my eyes. Will this continue until my existence disappear from her memories…? Is this how things will come to? A mere observer in a play of the gods…?

"Umm… Ryou-kun," she calls. "About the discussion we had this morning… I haven't forgotten about it, it's just that… have you… make up your mind…?"

Please… don't look at me with such distress, Monika… I don't know what else I'm supposed to do…

She crosses her arms and sighs, casting a downward gaze to the side, "I know it's a tough call for both of us, I won't deny it. But it is for our own good…"

"Besides, I was never meant to exist beyond that game, and…" she shifts her weight and grips her wrist as tightly as she can. "…a good medicine is often bitter, right…? Ahaha…"

I didn't want to come home to this…

A tab opens to obscure half of her figure, moving in accord to its master's wish, following her every command as it dives from one folder into the next. The scattered files flashes incongruently in a chaotic rhythm the deeper we go, each with unfamiliar extensions understood by Yuuya and Monika alone; some apparently acts as a sort-of conduit, granting her limited access to the mostly-forgotten 'G#TEBOX V2' as a memory extension—a left-over from the former's experiment and a remarkable hardware at that. Yuuya and the bright minds behind them would be screaming murder if they realize how much we squander it as a glorified external hard drive. It isn't until she points towards a familiar extension and filename where my vision turns crimson and blackness spews into my mind.

…

The file, pictured as nothing more than a pristine piece of white paper with a folded edge, is the very heart or soul that governs her entity. Whether that alone is proven remains to be seen; only Monika—or perhaps even Yuuya to an extent—knew of its value. She highlights the file and flinches reflexively in response, inadvertently sparking a 'glitch' on the screen and grinding my heart to a near sudden stop. "Monika… what are you—…!"

"Please, don't try to change my mind," she interrupts. In but a fraction of a minute, we shatter our reality into scattered fragments of frustration, anger, and misery. "I don't know if there will be a next time… so please, end this now."

"Monika, please think this through…"

She shakes her head from left to right, gritting her teeth. "I did! Do you really want to continue
"living like this!?"

"N-no! I didn't mean to say—…!"

"My existence brought nothing but agony to everyone, Ryou…!" she snaps. "Do you even know what it feels like to live in a cage, having your memory chipped little by little until you're nothing but a husk!? I'm a burden to you…!"

"I've said this before, and I'll say it again; no, you're not! If there's still time, then—"

"We don't have any!" she leaps from her desk. "Ryou, look at us! LOOK AT US! We're in a never-ending loop! This is no different than the literature club!"

I click my tongue in irritation, "That may be true, but what you're asking is basically assisted suicide! I will not do such a thing!"

"Have you forgotten that I am not real!?"

"You're not an 'NPC', not anymore," I sigh and lean on the chair. "How many times should I repeat that…?"

Tossing her eyes to the side, Monika crosses her arms egregiously, "As many times as you need to understand that I'm but a collection of data."

"Humans are like that too, mind you—a collection of memories."

"But you can't raise them from the dead, can you?" she huffs, "Ryou, even if I'm gone, there's billions of other Monikas…! I am replaceable! Is it so difficult for you to understand that!?"

"Oh, is that so?" gripping on the arm rest, I leap from my seat in a flurry of grievance and acrimony. Maybe I shouldn't have let my emotions get a hold of my rationality, but… it's far too late to regret when words become the arsenal in this discord. "So you're saying that if I delete you, another 'Monika' that is supposed to 'replace' you will remember everything. Will 'it' remember our date? Our little moon viewing picnic on the balcony? OUR CONFESSION ON THE SCHOOL ROOF…!? TELL ME, FOR FUCK'S SAKE…!"

Don't get me wrong; this isn't the first we argued, nor will this be our last. But at the time, it was the more… substantial than the rest. All that contemplation, the meaning of life, concepts of simulacra, what is real and not real… honestly, it escapes my mind. In my time outside of this room, Monika probably had more time to think and question about the nature of her existence than I could ever have. Does she have the answer for that, or perhaps a rational conclusion that led to this point…? Perhaps…

But there's always two side in an argument.

In between our subsiding breaths, we both understand how… trapped we are in this eternal loop of exchange, unwilling to surrender an inch of soil without resistance. Since that time, I've yet seen her so… insistent, all in spite of grappling on the droplets that wrestles at the corner of her burning emerald eyes. Her lips tremble as she bites down without an answer to return, glaring with indignation at her partner-in-crime for his stubborn resolve—a case of a mucous laughing at a snot. Keeping this up will not get us anywhere, thus with a sigh and a quick dose of 'happy thoughts', I ease into my seat and relents as sensibly as I can.

"Listen," I start with an amicable tone. "Even if there are thousands of you out there, you are… you.
Your experience, memories, the bond we share… nobody can replace you."

"I heave, "You're a person, Monika; one that I love dearly.""

"Please… stop this…" faintly, she falls to her seat as her arms collapses helplessly to the side, trembling. "You know that I only have one month left to live…"

"I know… but that's the more reason why I want to spend every last second with you."

Casting her eyes to the side, she shudders and stumbles on her words, "I-I can't let you do that… what about your responsibility, your job, your—"

"I left my job, Monika."

Like the echo of a bell in a ritual, her gaze is frozen in abject horror as a piercing cold runs across the strands of hair on my arms. Her mouth opens in agape, letting out a hopeless whimper, crumbling under the weight of her emotions that failed to be contained, no longer. She cups both hands to her face, sobbing in frustration. I turn my eyes away, preparing for the worst.

"Y-YOU FOOL…!"

In a flurry of tears and resentment, she flings her arms and hammers the barrier in a constant barrage of sorrow, creating a distinct muffled echo that resonates akin to a drum, "IDIOT! DIMWIT! IMBECILE!"

"WHY… WHY!? WHY DID YOU…—WHY DO YOU ALWAYS…—DID YOU EVEN THINK IT THROUGH!?"

"I did," I return with a sigh, "Just like you did with your heartless resolve."

"I HAVE NO CHOICE…!"

"SO ARE WE…!"

...

The dust that flutters gently settles on the surface, amidst the muffled sobbing and wayward breathing that seemingly echoes endlessly in this closed space. What lies before is a scarred, barren field created from our burnt-out emotions, fruitless prayers, and foolishness that clings from the ugliness we held close to our hearts. We never wish to take this hopeless path, yet the trail we forged together led us to this dark road where only uncertainty lies ahead. We have no choice but to press forward…

We have simply gone too far to turn back.

"You… idiot…" she breaks in between her sobbing. "You were so happy when you first landed that job… you cried, celebrated, and told me how it was everything you could've asked for. You even opened the sake your father gave to you…"

She pauses to sniffle, "…And now you threw it all away… you big, impulsive, idiot…"

"Hold up, wait…" I motion with a wave of my hand. "You… remember…?"

"Of course I do!"
"That can't be right…"

It is inherently impossible for her to know. It isn't because I doubt the state of her memory retention capability in the current circumstances, or critique her expansive library of 'Oogame Ryouichi' that she can recite at the top of her head. No, I will never doubt or question that aspect of hers. "Monika, that was…"

What made it inherently impossible, is because how far in time we have to go.

"…that was almost a year ago! You couldn't possibly—…"

"I was there," she firmly states in a manner that made it the more undeniable. "When you came home crying after another failed interview, drank yourself to sleep in frustration, and sang songs after you landed the job; I saw you at your weakest, strongest, best, and the worst—everything! I have always been here, Ryou… far longer than you thought I have."

She grits her teeth as streams gently flow through her cheeks, "…and I'd rather die than to forget everything about you…"

Then… how long did she wait? Three years? Four…? As much as I'd like to believe that S4lvato had created a miracle and I, by chance, downloaded that one copy, the likelihood of that happening is close to—if not zero. This isn't some fantasy where someone could suddenly be transported to an alternate reality, or get sucked into the world just by playing the game—it's impossible.

Then… how…?

…

Yuuya…?

"I don't want to lose you, Ryou…" she whimpers, halting my train of thoughts. "Not to others, and not to myself; that's why I chose to be deleted."

With an open palm, she brushes the pockets of tears that stains her cheeks, "But you're making it harder than it already is…"

With the tab still open at her side, she gazes at me with trembling emerald eyes as she highlights ‘ ’ once more, flinching at its glow. The tempo of my heart rise in a crescendo as she gives a smile that is all too familiar—one that reminisce to that summer afternoon; a farewell smile I wish not to remember. In a violent turn, she jams her eyes shut and grits her teeth in a last act of defiance towards the game of the gods, crumbling my reality in a brief moment of terror. With a shout, I hope that what unfolds before me is but a twisted nightmare…

…

A few second passes and a glowing pair of emerald stars eclipses from a shaken, tired face. "I… I can't do it…"

"Monika…" I sigh with utter relief. "Is it… really what you want? To be deleted?"

She shakes her head, "No… no, of course not… I never want it to end like this, but…"

"But now that it has come to this," I continue with the intention to end this ouroboros of torment. "Would you love to spend your last days on this planet together with me, one last time?"
I reach forward with my thumb to wipe her tears, only to find the barrier that divides us interfering once more—a reminder of the impossibility and hopelessness of our relationship. She rests her hand with an outstretched palm on her end as I meet them with mine, feeling the tingle and electricity as it courses through the skin to give that prickly sensation I’ve come to appreciate. I hope this fleeting happiness would last, yet as it stands our path leads to nowhere but a dead end. But if we can defy the sisters of fate one last time, then perhaps… perhaps we may find our answer, together. "Until death do us part…?"

With a fallible smile, her eyes speaks as if to fulfill a promise, and she nods.

…”

"Until death do us part."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Hi, iMegu here! It's been a while since the last chapter, and I apologize for the very-very long delay. Aside from RL matters and a week of vacation, I got... distracted; Kancolle's early fall event being one of them. This is one of the longest chapter and is part of the last four chapters, minus the epilogue. It was also one of the most difficult to write as of date, partly due to the nature of concluding some aspects before the finale. I hope you enjoy! Translation notes are below:

Inkan: A stamp we use in place of signature.

Enma: The judge and jury of hell in Buddhism. In this case, Oogame refers the headmaster as such-befitting of his role as the 'judge and jury' of the school

Kimi Ga Yo: Japan's national anthem.

Otoshidama: New Year salary for kids.

Banzai: A traditional exclamation we use for celebration. And no, in this occasion it doesn't mean charging across open field with a bayonet-though that term also exist. It isn't a potted tree either.

Dagashiya: Stores that sell traditional snacks, often affordable for kids with pocket money. These days, convenience stores also sell dagashi too.

Forty-five degree bow: This is more of a reference. There are three types of bowing in Japan: 'Eshaku', or slight fifteen degrees use for greeting, 'Keirei', or thirty degrees for saluting, and 'Saikeirei', or forty-five degree as a sign of respect. In all cases, you are not allowed to look directly at the person-especially on the latter two.

Mucous laughing at a snot: Similar term would be 'a pot calling a kettle black'

Sake: Alcohol. It is pronounced ‘ ’.

Now, questions...
1. Do you need an editor?
That would be nice to have (considering how I still catch my own error as well),
however I have to decline the offer. I rather keep the story and what's going on next chapter a secret.

The quote mentioned by Oogame is one by Brian Dyson of the Coca-Cola company.
See you in next chapter!

~iMegumeru
I loved winter. From the majestic sight of pure white that stretches for miles on the countryside, the cold chill that bites at your skin, to the crisp sound of snow that crunches and crinkles under your shoes—everything about it is... **sublime**. It wasn't strange to see me run along the snow-covered banks of the river or have a little snowball fight in a nearby park as a child—I may not look like it, but I was quite an active runt back then, always zooming from one end to the next. It was also during this time of year that I met Yuuya for the first time, picking fights over a snowman with much older kids. To me, winter felt like... **home**; a place where I belong...

Never have I wished for winter to melt before she knocks on my doorstep...

"Yes, this is Oogame, yes... it has been a while," my hand and my lips tremble as I glance towards my sickly companion, bowing reflexively and keeping the phone close to my ear. "Mrs. Chousuke, is Yuuya... available?"

Never have I thought that winter could be so... **desolate**...

For three weeks we struggled against the unstoppable corruption that violently consumes Monika's mind, chipping her memory into unrecoverable fragments, aggressively reverting everything to what she once was before—a **slave** to the script. Only the pen that remains loyal in my hand, along with several volumes of notebooks that I've kept supplied for a rainy day kept her memoirs from being lost in time—grafted into every page, every line, and every block, just as it has always been before. I've...
stopped counting how many books I've burned or words I've written; more so when the aching cramps that slaps my wrists nowadays are more of a reminder than a hindrance.

"I see… is there a way to get in touch?" I ask, tapping my index finger on the hard surface of the desk rhythmically. "Yut#ni Corporation…? And the number is…? Ah, I see… let me jot it down a bit… no, it's nothing important Mrs. Chousuke, just that—…"

We are at our wit's end.

They say a cornered animal is often the most dangerous. With nothing left to lose, survival instincts takes the helm in the form of a fight-or-flight response that disregards any semblance of rationality, all in the effort to see the next sunrise—or die trying. I spent the last few weeks together with Monika, helpless as her memory degrades at each sunrise, cursing at my own inability to save her. She told me not to blame myself day after day, aloof at the notion that she has been repeating the same consolation word-per-word with but a gentle smile that streaks from cheek to cheek, perhaps believing that it couldn't be any worse than that. Then yesterday… it was but a fragment.

Memories of our first date… now nothing more than a fleeting dream...

We are a week away from the supposed deadline—and I'm having none of it. What thoughts and reservations I have, the anger and hate—animosity that linger has got to go. Pride and arrogance is a dangerous poison, but so is ignorance and hubris. Monika will not die; if there is a semblance of hope, even if I have to beg with my forehead kissing the ground, his shoes trampling my stature, or even if I have to drag my namesake and the next few generations of my family under his servitude, no price is too high—anything to keep her from crossing the Sanzu river. He was right… I do need him.

"No good," I close with a sigh. The phone creaks under the pressure of my palm. "That bastard's harder to keep in touch with than it seems…"

She smiles gently, concealing a frown that rears momentarily, "But… you got the name of the company he's working for, right? As well as his number…?"

"That company is as real as you were a few months ago—no offense," I reply with a chuckle, prompting Monika to perk and giggle. "Next he'll say he works for ING3N or SHINR4 Electric or something… I doubt his family—or anyone knows what he's up to."

I click my tongue, "Yuuya… what were you keeping from us…?"

Questions after questions, one secrecy after the next; the more we sat and pondered, the higher the riddles tower over our insignificant existence. All these things we took for granted—the 'wardrobe', the 'apparatus', and even the small incremental updates at each consequent visits—everything is impossible for a single man to complete in relatively short order, let alone distribute to a nobody for free. As far as childhood friends go, it isn't until recently that I realize how much I am in the dark when it comes to Yuuya as a person; where he works, his skills, knowledge, and even his intentions are but whispers in the wind—and I took him for granted.

He made an offer I couldn't refuse. Who would've thought that it was a contract with the devil?

"Well… it was worth a try… ahaha…" Monika giggles nervously with a—presumably—disappointed smile, "I… didn't think it would be this difficult for us."

She casts a gaze to the side as I sigh, exhausted, "Trust me, Yuuya can vanish for months; we just happen to catch him during one of those times…"
Those times… he won't be showing his face until spring comes around, much as I hate to admit.

I toss my weight down the usual seat, peering towards the ceiling as my thoughts scatter unto the pale canvas. I should've known… should've expected that it was pointless to begin with; with but a week to spare, I doubt even he can—or willing—to answer the barrage of questions. Why, oh why did I agreed to his ludicrous offer to begin with!? If I knew things would turn out like this…

I can't falter now, not on her last moments—especially so; I wouldn't be able to see her eye-to-eye if we ever meet on the Sanzu River otherwise.

"So… what are we going to do now…?" she asks with concern. "I mean… we could try contacting Yuuya…"

"Yuuya isn't available, Monika."

"But we can try! I mean, if we can get a hold of him, maybe—"

Her voice is hushed in a wordless gasp, taken by the motion of a pencil that points towards a line on the notebook—or rather, a sentence jotted just minutes before by yours truly. Monika grits, purses her eyes, takes a deep breath, and returns a surrendering sigh that drags for seconds without a pause. I shudder at the sight, more so knowing how powerless you are—a mere spectator—against the grinding wheels of fate. Monika gently smile to comfort, and I can only return with one of my own. "I'll… I'll go make something. In the meantime, why don't you turn on the TV?"

She perks and nods meekly, "O-okay, that's… a good idea. Ahaha…"

I briefly pause, hypnotized and mesmerized—locked by her gleaming emeralds that stubbornly persists in these troubling times, flickering and swaying against the torrent yet refusing to surrender. How much longer will this moment last, I wonder? Will it perish like the rest, or will it remain? I try not to think too much out of it as I lightly kick back and work my way towards the kitchen, glancing over my shoulder at each tick of the clock towards the girl beyond the screen. The rice cooker beeps its tune as I prepare the usual packet-natto, egg, soy sauce, and a serving of homemade miso soup, gathering them all on a makeshift tray just as she managed—just barely—to tune to 'MxZAMASHI TV'. The edges of her lips perks and she waves proudly, lauding her achievement, as I set our breakfast on the table.

"Are we having egg and soy sauce today?" she starts. "And… what's that in the packet?"

"It's natto."

"Oh…" her brows perks curiously, examining the Styrofoam package like a little trinket of wonder. "Is it… tasty?"

…

"Yeah… it is."

The droning echo of the presenter comfortably fills the void and the silence as we touch upon our first meal of the day, starting a seamless routine we've come to familiarize over the past couple of months. A fermented bean gently cascades unto a bed of white grains, its descent abated by the stringy slime—a mix of soy sauce and karashi—that coats the light-tan delicacy as I hoist them with a pair of chopsticks along with a pinch of rice, guiding them for consumption. Briefly I glance at the
screen and at the girl that sits on her desk—Monika—who, with the limits of her ability, shares a similar dish I've prepared with interest and little complaints. Her brows perks upon noticing the attention, and I quietly retreat with a smile. "So… what do you think?"

"Of what?" she returns, tilting to the side. "O-oh! You mean about natto?"

I give an affirmative gesture as she scoops a pinch of serving, nodding approvingly as it disappears beyond her lips. "It's… strange,"

"It's my first time having something like this, and I thought I'd hate it—I mean, the slimy texture and smell is… something, ahaha…" she continues with a giggle. "But… I like it. I can see why it's an acquired taste, but… it's not that bad. Umm! Yeah, it's… good. I like it."

"I'm… happy to hear that."

"Say, Ryou-kun…?"

"Hmm…?"

"This wasn't… the first time I had natto, right…?"

Gently resting the rice bowl to the side, I reach for the miso soup and raise them to the edge of my lips to taste. The frothy broth, a mix of miso paste and dashi, burns the edge of my tongue—just slightly—before coursing down my throat, giving a warm sensation that spreads across my chest, fortifying my body against the chilling cold and keeping both of my hands firmly occupied; soup on my left and a pair of chopstick on my right. A satisfied sigh escapes my lips before I reach for the pair of inquiring emeralds with a smile, "No… this was your first."

For once, I'm glad my hands are tied. "I thought you won't like it, but… it's a pleasant surprise to be proven otherwise."

"Really…?" Monika's cheeks warms to a crimson as she blooms wonderfully, "I'm glad… I thought it was, well, you know… ahaha…!"

Tell me… am I in the right to act selfishly? Even if it was for a smile? Or am I at fault for lying? I'm sure many would agree of the latter more than the former, but will they be able to say the same if pressed with similar circumstances? I shy away from her beaming innocence, drowning instead on the overpowering flavor of the soup and what remains of my breakfast. Perhaps I knew the answer all along—and as it may, within my conscious decision to deny it. Our 'morning routine', the last embers of our time, gradually dissipating into the depths of her mind and never to be recovered…

…so let me be the one to immortalize it—even if it is on a foundation of lies.

"Gochisousama~!" she cried playfully, clapping her hands together. "…is that how you say it, Ryou-kun?"

I repeat her gesture with a subtle grin, "Good enough. Don't tell me you've forgotten about it…?"

"Ahaha… I was afraid I might…"
"…sorry…” I muster with haste. "That was insensitive of me. I'll… go and wash these."

"O-oh, no—I mean, it's not—umm… ahaha…"

Our conversation ends at the clutter of utensils, shifting and tumbling as I stack them to carry. With all the fumbling and stumbling of words, no doubt the thought to defuse crossed each of our minds; a pity that it will not have the chance to be heard beyond the echoes of the emcee that akin to the gush of water from the sink—an ambience. The utensils rolls and turns as it is showered. I reach for the sponge and lather it with dishwashing soap, hearing and thinking of nothing in between like an automaton, scrubbing through the bowls and a pair of chopsticks without fault. The host reads through her teleprompter nonchalantly, as cold and uncaring as it has ever been; just another day of the week, another hour, another job.

"…-Ryou-kun!"

The sponge promptly slips from my grasp. I heave in slight frustration, "You called?"

"I have been! Come, look…!

…

"Can it wait? I'm in the middle of—"

"—Police have confirmed the victim to be sixteen-year old Shiho Ariake, a student of—"

*KATAN*

The echo of a clutter—of a ceramic rice bowl impacting the metallic surface of the sink, crashing against its smaller brethren and a pair of chopsticks. My chest aches as if a claw forcefully squeezes my heart to bring about an untimely end, begging for my utmost attention as the irritating voice of the emcee becomes clearer. Much clearer. Instinctively the muscles around my throat contracts, pulling a ball of spit down the esophagus as I pivot to turn towards the source of the voice—the laptop she calls 'home'—to confirm whether it was but a trick of the mind. I don't want it to be—no, I refuse to believe it to be! It can't be, right…? It has to be a mistake or—…

"Ryou-kun… isn't that your school's uniform…?"

*It is.*

There is no mistake.

"—Eye witness at the scene claimed to have seen the victim jumped from a 10-story mansion around eleven-AM yesterday, where—"

The joints of my body stiffens at each step, prohibiting my movements the closer and clearer everything comes to be. With but a glance, her emeralds speaks to me like the song of a siren before vanishing behind her long, elegant crown as she returns her attention towards the spectacle—incidentally, guiding mine along with hers.

"—Police believe that there was no foul play, and has concluded it to be suicide. However, based on a note left presumably by the victim, authorities are also on the lookout for what best can be described as her 'lover', a man that goes by the name of—"

"…Kitamura… Abe…” I whisper. True enough, his name and picture is on display mere seconds later. "Her 'lover'…”
…

No… she was his **plaything**. His **toy**.

"—the school board refuses to comment at this time."

"Turn it off, Monika."

She glances in surprise, "W-what… Ryou-kun, but that's—"

"—just… just turn it off," the air gradually constricts and suffocates; cautiously, I dart my eyes to the side. "Please…"

A near deafening silence echoes as the voice dies at her command, leaving us with the roaring rumble of a train and a passing traffic—the music of a suburban metropolis. Whether it is of shame, guilt—or both, her troubled emeralds becomes as sharp as a blade and as penetrating as a *yari*, causing me instinctively to keep my distance. And her burdening sigh, powerful and unambiguous, casts me further to the side; truly, she may have come to conclusion despite the absence of communication—one that, in honesty, I am far too unwilling to discuss. What does she think of me now? Does she know—or even, **remember** of her? What would Shiho think if she knew that, at the end of the road, she was but a pawn in a game between two sides of the same coin? Would she eternally wander as a vengeful spirit? It's… strange to still hear her plea, despite knowing it was far too late…

…

Just… **strange**…

"You were right, Monika," I hush. "You were right…"

I look up, seeking for wisdom from 'the lady who knows everything', "**Ghosts do exist**…"

The gleam of her emeralds expands, gently mellowing to a near-motherly sympathy that resonates like a flicker of a flame, dancing amidst the darkness. A modest curve pushes the edges of her lips as she retreats her sights to the side, lightly tracing the long strands of silky coral brown hair with her index and thumb, murmuring in deep thought, and returning only with nothing but an affectionate smile, "They're… **creepy**, aren't they…?"

I force myself to nod, claiming my usual throne—as I have always been—under her affectionate observations. She laments, "If only… if only I just—…!"

"Un…” I mutter with a sigh. "I know what you mean…"

Monika curls and rests on her arms, gazing listlessly to the side, leaving little to say but plenty to think. With a push, I lean on my chair and eye a familiar scenery of white that stretches from one end of my vision to another, wishing that it was all just a dream—an illusion, a trick—which I'll come to within minutes from now. If only that were true…

"I… I still hear them sometimes," she starts to break the silence. "Their voices, their plea… 'Ghosts', right…?"

She leans forward, pressing her palm on the glass that separates us. Her lips quiver while her eyes darts from side to side, searching—no, *grasping*—at every ounce of fortitude that hovers within her convoluted thoughts. The pair of mesmerizing emeralds burn with determination—albeit briefly—as she straightens, determined to voice whatever it was that occupied her thoughts; now or never, she
wishes to be free from the shackles that binds her—at least, just from what is observable. With a
heave, Monika captures my attention, "Have I… have I told you about my nightmares…?"

I stagger back in surprise—albeit pleasantly, "N-No, no… I believe you haven't."

"O-oh…! That's… that's… that is quite a relief, ahaha…!" she returns with glee, "With how
unreliable my memory currently is, I was afraid that I might… you know…"

Monika retreats into her desk, casting her gaze to the side; the brief explosion of joy quietly settles
unto the cold surface of the apartment's floor, pushing me deeper into my seat as she breathes a mix
of heartbreaking relief. Twirling the side of her hair, her emerald eyes trembles with unease and
distraught as it struggles to maintain contact with mine; if that isn't enough of an indication, the fact
how she… grips her trembling hand tells me more than what words can express. "The club
members... Natsuki, Yuri, and Sayori… do you think they still hate me for what I did…?"

"I… I keep seeing them in my dreams, night after night," she continues. "Dissing, taunting,
mocking… and sometimes—…and sometimes they cry for blood…"

She clasps her lips and breathes deep as she wades forward, "Do you think they'll ever forgive me,
Ryou…? After what I did to them…?"

... 

Would they?

With my lips sewn tight and my thoughts in disarray, I seek for an answer from her very own
expression; a face seeking for salvation—and one that I, sadly, am incapable to provide. Glancing
away, my thoughts race back to the young woman mentioned in the news and her fate, wondering if
she, too, would ever forgive me if the opportunity to learn the true nature of her predicament ever
present itself. I doubt it. I highly, highly doubt she would; perhaps that's why I thought the same can't
be said of Monika's anxiety, "Monika…"

I sigh, clicking my tongue, "…the girls, they're—… They're… not even real. I think you can
consider yourself forgiven."

"Do you really think so…?" how wrong I was. With a frown, she stumbles on her words, "Then…
I'm simply keeping them alive in my memory—just as how you kept me alive in yours. That's true,
right…? Because…"

Monika breathes an air of resignation and gives a surrendering smile. Like a dry skin, she peels the
scabs off of our crumbling reality and exposes a mortal wound.

"Because I'm not even real…"

There is an old saying that holds true to this day, often as a grim reminder of the things we have and
have-nots. Everyone—the young, the elderly—will have heard this phrase at least once in their life
time, be it as an advice from an acquaintance or from parent to child; a lesson in life, so to speak. It
meant nothing to me before, but as I watch the world I built around me crumble and the woman I
love lie helpless on her deathbed, the thought of it finally cross my mind the moment I leave my
apartment for a quick errand—after all, bills are meant to be paid and rules are rules... at least, that's
what I told myself. Without income or any other means of earning, it will only be a matter of time
before everything is swept away by an unflinching reality; she knew it, I knew it. We both do. At the
end of the day, no matter how many liters of tears wasted or how sore your vocal chords can be from
crying, the world will continue on with or without you—just another day for one insignificant being, neither special nor unique amongst the billions of inhabitants. And by that reason alone, is perhaps why she's so willing to let everything go. Have you heard it, I wonder?

'Be careful what you wish for'.

Familiar? I bet it is. Humanity—the individual—is avaricious and egotistical; the same can be said concerning my former student, her 'Lover', Monika, and I. There's a sense of unnerving wariness I can't shake since morning, how everything that has unfold between Shiho and Kitamura isn't alien to my own predicament; on the contrary, it's as if I was looking—observing—a mirror through a looking glass. You start to see a tendency—a pattern—that emerge, and little by little you start to realize that observation become an introspection. Shiho craved for a sense of belonging, a place for her to return, a bond that Kitamura happily provided and took advantage of. To her, he was everything. In that regard, my former student and I aren't much different; Kitamura is to Shiho, as Monika is to me. To that, I understood her perfectly.

But when everything you wished for are in the palm of your hands… then what? What will happen after?

Kitamura never have the intention to provide Shiho with a permanent bond and quickly abandoned her when things went awry; for that, she paid the ultimate price. Even if her voice is now but an echo, her thoughts still rings in my mind—and that alone is enough for anyone to stop and turn. But the damage was done. Have you ever stop to look over your shoulders? Did it ever cross your mind? All that carnage and sacrifices—the price you paid… was it worth it? The consequences of your actions, everything… are you prepared for it? Or was it all simply an aimless charge through 'no-man's land' with a gamble of attaining the shortest route possible, regardless of the consequences?

... Is it a mistake to wish for the same bond from Monika? Will she abandon me just as Kitamura was to Shiho? Will I end the same way?

...

...am I truly ready?

"Irasyai—ooh, Oogame-san!"

I raise my hand to greet, "It's been awhile, Ossan…"

The overpowering scent of the broth, despite its absence, tickles the hairs of my nose as I enter this small, humble slice of heaven I frequent during off-hours. From behind the counter, Ossan and—what I can only assume—his granddaughter, work tirelessly to fulfill the demands of lunch hour with a persevering smile, hovering from the few available customers. With a simple gesture, Ossan lures me to the usual counter with a serving of agedashi tofu and a hot cup of coffee, grinning with pride so as to assure how it is all 'on the house'. I hang my coat on the seat rest, accepting his offer with a short bow and a smile.

"So, the usual?" he starts with arms on his side. "A karaage teishoku, right?"

"Yes, please…"

He chuckles with his trademark amicable grin, vanishing as quickly as he juggles from one end of the counter to the next; seconds later, the distinct 'crisp' of the fryer crackles within an earshot—roughly three to five meters from my seat—along with the unmistakable aroma I love. The television
propped to an elevation at the corner of the room drones continuously, ignored by the few patrons as it repeats the 'tragic story' of sixteen-year old Shiho Ariake and her suicide like damaged recorder. I remain still—frozen—in my seat as I meet a pair of cold eyes from a brief glimpse of her photo that flashes on screen, overtaken by an eerily cold sensation that runs through my nape that quickly vanishes like whispers in the wind. In hindsight, perhaps she was crying for help—an escape—from her situation; a voice that, sadly, fell upon deaf ears. In its usual nonchalant fashion, the news anchor surmise her chapter as just another dot in history, buried just seconds later by the echo of societal progress and achievement; she too, is another nail society hammers down on.

"Here's your karaage teishoku," Ossan interrupts, placing my order squarely before me; the delectable scent of salted karaage along with the accompanying miso soup quickly wets my tongue into a frenzy. Satisfied, he glances at the television and nods, "So, what do you think?"

"Think about…?" I ask upon tasting the tsukemono. "If it is the karaage, you know I can only compliment so much before you get bored, Ossan."

"No, not that!" he smirks with bemusement, waving his hand. "I mean that…!"

Motioning with his thumb, my attention is quickly taken back to the television. "Replacing lost limbs with synthetic parts… sounds like those ol' science fiction show from them anime. What's next, robots replacing attendants and staffs?"

"We have that, Ossan," I reply with a snicker, "That hotel down in Tsukiji? All manned by robots."

"But the cleanin' staff are still flesh and blood, right?"

I shrug, sending the old shop owner into a hearty guffaw.

"Oh, how fast things change…! Sooner or later, it'll be near impossible to tell apart what's real from the artificial, yes? Maybe I get to see the real space battleship Yamato after all…"

With a smirk, I raise the bowl of miso soup and press its concave surface to my lips as Ossan continues to mumble and observe with peak interest that continuously expand as time progresses. The warmth that permeates from the broth, its rich flavor, and the company generously provided by Ossan himself eases my mind—a distraction, of sorts—from the relentless passage of time; a comfort that I feel has been slipping through the cracks of my hand. I wish to return, to see her smile, and hear her soothing voice welcome me to a place where we belong, and yet all I can see is…

…

"You seem to have changed quite a lot too, eh Oogame-san? For the good, no less…"

"E-eh…?"

Ossan's optimistic grin expand in its girth, akin to an old mentor towards his long-time apprentice as he folds both his arm up to his chest, huffing with confidence and pride. At his behest, gravity gently descends all its might on my arm to deny me the pleasure of savoring the piece of karaage elevated by my chopstick, snatching my attention as violently as a summer storm. He huffs with an air of unrivaled certainty—that of the old and the wise—as questions arise and answers are still clouded and vague. I changed…? What part of it? If any, my actions—my selfish impulse—have only wrought pain across everything I've touched! What makes him think that I have changed!? "I… don't see what you mean by that, Ossan…"

"Oh don't be silly," he chuckles. "Just a few months ago, yer' this little sap who visits for a drink or
two—more so when things with yer' co-workers or so gets bad! I was worried when ya' stop visitin' for a bit, but now look at you!"

"I… still don't understand what you mean, Ossan."

With arms on his hips, the old shopkeeper huffs with an infallible pride that is true to his words, "Yer' all grown up! So what is it? Is it because of yer' girl that you spoke of last time? Say, did ya' two made up…?"

In the moment, I can only return a nervous chortle—whether due to how frighteningly sharp he is or my own uncertainty, I can't say. Though to think that I've changed… sometimes I believe that the old man may have lost it; just this once, but I guess I can play along. "Well… yes, and no…"

"An' no… ya' say?" he clicks his tongue. "So is there a problem? Come to think, it's Christmas Eve and yer' out 'ere havin' lunch with an ol' man like me! Why aren't you spendin' yer' time with her?"

…though I guess the old man being sharp isn't something new.

…

Well… why not…? Maybe a little conversation is all that I need…

"It's… if I may, Ossan,"

What drove me to tell him, I wonder? Alcohol is clearly out of the equation, and certainly the teishoku I ordered isn't anything particularly expensive—it is, after all, a simple crispy fried chicken alongside a serving of rice and miso soup. But as he stands tall with arms crossed, a wide grin, and in deep contemplation, a sudden surge of confidence—of trust—blooms within me. As if the presence of the old shopkeeper alone is enough to wade even the toughest storm, unflinching. Bit by bit, I start to unravel my story to the old man from the first day up to the present, hoping that he would have a bit of insight or advice that would help us wade the next coming days; I didn't bother mentioning Monika's true identity, however. I see no need to do so; she's more human than one could ever be. "I just… don't know what to do anymore…"

"An' that's why ye' stop by today… that it? Old habit's sake, so to say?"

With a chuckle, I raise my glass and wet my tongue. "Well… I guess you can say that, Ossan."

"I mean…" I continue. "I … I don't think I'm ready for it all and the more I try to do something, the more harm I bring to…—!"

"Pfft… HA! GAHAHAHA…!"

Ossan breaks into a sudden fit of laughter, taking me into quite a surprise. Initially I took offense to his fit of mockery, but it soon becomes clear when he waves dismissively and clear his throat with a rough cough. "Sorry for that young un', but I beg to differ with what ya' show me—and yer' tellin' me yer' not ready? That is foolish talk!"

"I… don't quite understand what you mean by that…"

"Oh don't be silly; yer' clearly ready for it and had made yer' mind up fer' a long time," he snickers. "All ya' need is a good ol' push and confidence. Otherwise,"

With a flick, his index finger draws its length, "Otherwise, ya' won't be gettin' her a ring now, would ya'…?"
"Oh, I was right was I?" he chuckles with glee, "I knew it was odd for ya' to be carryin' some fancy shoppin' bag! Congratulations, young un'!"

A flush of blood rushes across my cheeks as I hastily draw a retreat, locking my attention towards the trinket bag resting at the counter and just about at arm's reach. How could he have known!? Well, Ossan did mentioned his deduction, but to come to such a conclusion…? Calm down, clear your mind, and take a deep breath… and breathe. Maybe I should've hid the bag before…? But then, what is there to be ashamed of? Fuck, why didn't I think this through…!? What good would a gold band do for us now, of all times!? That was the last of my last savings, too… so why did I… what made me decide it's a…?

"T'was a Christmas gift for the would-be missus, eh?" Ossan perks and radiates as he rests his chin on his thumb. "Speakin' of gifts, there will be an Irumi and fireworks in Ueno Park later this evenin'. Why don't ya' take 'er there and propose to 'er? That's the best gift any woman could ask for—take it from me!"

"I guess… but I don't think I could…—"

"Yer' ready," he smiles with conviction. "Ya' know it yer'self; yer' just unwilling to admit."

With a great heave and his chest puffed up, Ossan rests his hands on his side and warmly smiles, "Oogame-san, it's time fer' ya' to go home; to return to a place where you belong."

"As much as I hate ta' admit, I can't give ya' that," he continues with melancholy. "I can only lend ya' an ear—and that's about it; that pleasure is reserved fer' yer' sweetheart—eh… what's 'er name again?"

"Monika…"

He nods in affirmative, "Right, right… Monika. Must've been one hell of a woman for ya'."

"She is," I humbly smile and consciously work to hold back a tear, "She definitely is…"

"Then cherish 'er as if it was yer' last! It's regrettable how short it may be, but I'm sure she thinks the same of you, too," he heaves with pride. "If the gods be merciful, one day ya' can introduce 'er to me as 'Oogame-san'. Promise me that, ya' hear?"

"I will…"

With a great big grin, the old shopkeeper reaches for the top rack for a bottle of his finest sake and pour us a cup—'on the house', he said. The warmth that flows down my throat and disperses across my chest is as comforting as it is liberating; my mind is clear. Shiho's and Kitamura's sins are theirs to atone, but I shall not repeat the same mistake as my predecessors. The bond we forged shall not be broken easily, be it in life…

…but or death.

"Thanks, Ossan," I chirp, turning one last time towards the old shopkeeper. "You Kansai people are frightening sometimes."
He breaks into a guffaw. "Hah! Ya' Tokyo bunch are just *wimps!* Thank you, come again!"

A smile sneaks its way across my expression as I leave the store. The chilling air caresses my cheeks and the sun beams across the skyline as I turn and glance at the humble establishment, one last time. I'm sorry, Ossan… but I don't think I can keep that promise.

So… am I truly ready…?

…

Yes…

Yes, I am.

A sudden rush of cold wind slaps my face as the door of the train car opens, exposing its passengers to the temperature outside the comforts of the transport. I pull my scarf closer to my neck and embrace the chilly air, taking a step forward unto the platform before glancing at the only road left for me to take. I look up, noting the dark, cool sky before exhaling a puff of smoke as I take my journey forward, down the road, with a firm step; back to the place where I belong. The small bag rattles with its content as I clutch on the carry handle just a little harder.

It all began from an unhealthy obsession from two different beings of distinct realities…

Our desperate search for solace, the seeds of mere reverence and idolatry, blossomed into spring. The flowers of hope—of *love*—bloom in our hearts, tying us together with the strength to see the next day, paved by the promises we couldn’t keep and the sacrifices we made. We live through each moment with our heads up high and our eyes forward, believing on the path—the future—we made for ourselves.

How long did it took for us to start counting the things we lost, I wonder?

The time we spent, the little things, the bridges we built and the ones we burnt… was it all for naught? I try not to think as much as I climb the flight of stairs, towards the place where our wishes can still come true. Even that won’t last forever. We have no one else to turn to and little time left; I guess I should have come to terms with that reality sooner. An air of regret heaves from my chest as I raise the ‘bag’ into view, callously smiling with glee at the prospect of what is to come and—equally—concerned. We have nowhere else to return to but to continue on to our fated destination…

But at the very least, she won’t be alone; this time we’ll go *together*.

A minute or so passes by as I stand idly before the door, fumbling through my pockets for the key that actively avoids my reach, clumsily tossing and turning before collapsing unto the cold surface with a definitive 'clink'. My palm sweats profusely as I reach down, accompanied by a sharp crescendo of my heartbeat the closer I move towards the door with the key in hand; it is a strangely familiar feeling, one that isn't too far off from moments of receiving your answer sheet after a test, or the seconds prior to opening a letter from a company you applied to—no, perhaps that isn't the best to describe with either… how can I put this…

…

For the very first time, what lies beyond the door is no longer a world of refuge I use to know; it is the point of no return.

…
I am ready.

With a little push, the key slides perfectly into its hole and opens with a 'click' as I turn it clockwise. The handle feels cold to the touch. With a gentle twist, the door opens…

…and I am greeted by darkness.

My old work suit dangles at the corner of my eye to welcome, as light from the outside bleeds into the doorway to illuminate just enough for me to notice. There is a lingering deafening silence apart from the hum of the computer—of Monika—that lies beyond the door to the living room, and what solace these halls provided had since left the premise hours before my return. A definite absence consumes my thoughts, but I try not to let it get the best of me—not now, and definitely not this close. With a flick, the bulbs flares and lights the hallway as I free my feet from the confines of my shoes, switching to the indoor sandals, and seek for her warmth.

"Monika, I'm home…!"

Silence.

A sudden chill crawls on my shoulders and gnaws at my neck, causing my hair to stand; cold sweat drips from the edges of my face up to the tip of my fingers. At each step, the thumping amplifies in volume, and a nauseating feeling reaches from the depths of my bowels; I swear I could even hear whispers or a distant laughter the closer I am to the door that separates the hall from the living room. "Monika…? Are you there…?"

Again, silence lingers. She couldn't have—no, this isn't the time to remember that…!

There is still time… there still is…!

Gently, I open the door…

"Moni—"

The room bursts into life as the lights flashes, instantly bathing the living room with a soft shade of yellow as her camera turns and flickers in what I assume to be that of abject surprise. The shadows gradually withdrawn its footing and the faint whispers and laughter abruptly ceases, exchanged with a clumsy chirp I recognize and love; relief quietly overtakes my anxiety as I make my way to the usual throne with a sigh and rest the 'bag' to the side, losing myself upon the pair of emerald eyes that complements her beauty. "O-oh! You're back…!"

"Of course I am," I chuckle. "Sorry… it took a little longer than expected."

Waving her hand dismissively, she giggles playfully—almost to tease. "I-it's alright, ahaha…! I was just taking a nap, that's all… I didn't realize it was already this late in the evening…"

"Must have been quite a dream, then."
"It was…" she sighs, casting a solemn gaze to the side. "Yes… it was quite a dream…"

I try not to ask too many questions. The things she saw, be it a dream or reality—the long, dark stare into the abyss—is reflected on the surface of her once-glimmering emerald eyes, exhausted and defeated. Her red nose and the dark, swollen pockets… even if the gods decide to rob her voice, those 'marks' alone raise the hairs on my nape and cuts deep to my chest. I clench my fist into a ball, suppressing the natural urge to seek for answers as I take my seat in silence, quietly observing with a smile that is raised by a mountain of buried emotions; I guess it isn't far to say that 'anguish' and 'remorse' are part and parcels within it.

"But…" she suddenly chirps, quickly pulling me from my thoughts. "Now that you're here, I know that everything is going to be alright!"

Monika leans on her arm for support and, with a somber smile, sends my heart to flutter. "It's… strange how every time I see you, the nightmares just… subsides. I'm at peace, thanks to you so… Thank you, for being there for me."

As her expression fades, something within me begins to move, vibrating and resonating in a flurry. It first started with a thought—a question—that abruptly courses through my mind, kicking and screaming along the way so as to awaken its brethren that lies dormant within. Is this the 'ending' she wished for? I try to make sense of it all as my body slumps and a gush of air forces out of my chest in a heave. Again, my eyes fall back to the 'box' that lies at the feet of the desk with a flash of optimism and expectations, recalling the promise I made months prior and Ossan's encouragement; a spark that is as quickly extinguished at the sight of the melancholic young woman, eternally contained behind an electrical box of terabytes and LED display.

Then comes the second…

If everything didn't end this way, am I prepared to spend the rest of my life with someone the world will never recognize? Sitting before a computer, eternally praying for the miracles of technology to transport her to this realm? Even if that is possible, then what? Monika won't come with a citizenship nor a 'complete' background to even satisfy a third-rate country for a passport—even then, it is nigh impossible for her to reproduce, putting an entire family tree into a dead end. So that's how it comes to now, is it? A dead end. How fitting…

But… I promised. And I'm not going to back down from it…

'We will make our own ending… and that's how it will be. "Say… Monika?"

…

That is how this will end.

"How would you like to be proposed?"

Monika jolts in surprise, her pupil dilates as if to confirm of what she heard. I keep my calm as she struggles to reply, awkwardly opening and closing her lips, gritting, and choking for a moment that seems to last for eternity. With a step, she distances herself from the desk and cups her mouth, shaking from left to right as her emeralds moistens. Her lips went ajar, quivering, and again words fail to deliver nothing but whispers of her soul. She clenches and bites her lower and—with a push—replies, "No… you can't do this…"

"I-I'm just… but why…" she cries in meek refute, "Are you so prepared to—"
Placing the box on the table, I slowly lift the cover to reveal the silver band that rests between two pillows to display. She gasps; her voice robbed by the glimmer of the object, an item that encompasses all my thoughts, feeling, and desires, all for her taking. This is a decision I understood even without having to think—the consequences, alterations, everything. I'm sorry it took so long for me to come to that conclusion, Monika. I guess some things never change…

"I don't deserve… It's not fair…" she whimpers. "It's not fair…!"

"I know…"

"T-then, why… why…!? Why do you…"

"Because I love you, Monika…" I reply with a smile. "Even if our time is short, my feelings for you will not change. It will never change. I will follow you, wherever you go… so please…"

"YOU… FOOL…!"

A gush of tears flows down her cheeks as she breaks down with an echoing wail that encompasses the room, overtaking the suburban melody of the outside. I take a deep breath and resist the urge—at least, not until I say my piece. "So… will you marry me?"

"You know my answer! You know I can't refuse this…!"

She snifflles and coughs as I patiently awaits her reply, "I don't want to… I won't…"

She rises from the clouds with her reddened cheeks, swollen eyes, and nose, with a smile that melts the snow away to summon spring. Gently, Monika grasps her left hand and pulls it close to her chest, enveloping her fingers. "Even if it's just for… a week?"

"Yes."

Her lips quiver, "Even if I tell you that… that there is nothing I can give in return…?"

"Yes."

"And even if," she stutters, choking on her words as it flows once more. "EVEN IF…! Even if now I… I can't remember your name anymore…?"

…

"Then I will help you remember."

Her right hand collapses just as the droplets that streams down her cheeks scatters across the wooden table, revealing the silver band that adorns her ring finger. No longer is she able to contain the surge—nor is there a desire to. Stumbling forward, her hand collapses on the screen and gave way to an ear-shattering cry that pierces through the edge of our reality, joining our hands together in a union of husband and wife. The cold surface of the LED screen pricks at the flat surface of my palm to flinch, but is insignificant to the warmth that exists on the other side, nor does it compare to the surge of emotions—of mind—that bonds us together. My cheeks moistens and my vision is blurred. Only the echo of her soul remains vivid.

I will always be there beside you, Monika…

So wait for me…

We will walk to the place where we belong…
Author's Note:

This was supposed to be completed before Christmas (and New Year), but life, comiket 95, and pure procrastination got in the way—I sincerely apologize for the delay! This is the third to last installment of the story, minus the epilogue. If you read 'Monika' up to this point, I sincerely cannot thank you enough of your on-going support! Happy (belated) New Year! Please take care of me this year, too!

Since translations are mostly food item, below will be instead explaining Ossan's way of speaking:

Kansai-dialect: this came out a lot better when I wrote it down with my mother tongue. As it is difficult to interpret the dialect into English, it is instead written in such a way that hopefully deliver that country/southern vibe. The original contains 'eeyan', 'hen', or 'yane' that is synonymous with the dialect.
The light that bleeds through the curtains dances across the surface of my skin, gently caressing and teasing me from my slumber. The incoherent jumble of my thoughts continues for a moment—the voices, images, and sensations—slowly merge to paint the picture of a familiar white canvas I've seen countless times each morning. To my right, the hum of the computer whirs continuously, before quickly overtaken by the hydraulic tune of the early morning garbage collection and its distinct musical melody—an irritation that is nonetheless necessary to rattle my still-disjointed psyche. The cold air stabs through my skin like needles as I raise my left arm from the comforts of the blanket, stretching them with the intention to obscure the early morning rays to shield my eyes. Persistently, the light penetrates through the cracks formed by my fingers, bouncing off the piece of silver that adorns it, creating a prism-like glint that burns through the last of my resistance. At long last, the cold and the light pulled me away from 'dreamland'.

…

Well, I guess not everything is a product of 'dreamland'.

Gravity slowly pulls my outstretched hands back down, letting it rest on my forehead as I take a lung's worth of cool, musky air in a single draw. It's already another morning, and a part of me wishes for time to stop indefinitely—or better, to rewind—out of fear of what is to come; after all,
reality isn't lost on me yet. Will the world of tomorrow cease to exist if I close my eyes? Is there a way to rewind back time and start all over? What will it take for me just to find that special day? Of course, the answer to such questions either vary from person to person or is simply a work of fiction. For a minute or so, I start to admire the oath on my finger, summoning every ounce of strength and resolve I need for the day. Fictional or not, there is one thing that I am certain of. We made a promise, and we will see it through—together. I raise myself to a sit and gaze lifelessly at the calendar.

December thirty-first…

With a smile, I turn towards the young woman behind the screen, catching her off-guard as she admires the other half of our oath that adorns her ring finger, "Good morning, dear."

"..." a smile and a simple gesture—a wave—is her only reply. A textbox flashes open on the screen, "Good morning, H3wxFdd."

We have returned to where we started.

All that lesson, the language she learned, her ability to speak, all that time… eaten away in a matter of days by a disease I am powerless against. As I take my seat with a notebook in hand, writing each and every instances in English, her enchanting optimism serves as a grim reminder of what she had once achieved—and lost. Like Icarus, we flew too close to the sun, believing our wings alone will carry us to freedom; instead, we are reminded of our mortality and fell as reality sinks its teeth. Mankind was never made to fly… just as we were never meant to fall in love. A minute or so is loss as I gaze and admire the matching silver ring we wear, innocently exchanging smiles when our eyes meet somewhere in the middle. A memento mori… a reminder about the inevitability of our end. Is there happiness beyond this life, I wonder? Will we be granted a second chance? Perhaps…

But we won't know until we reach that point in time.

I rest my pen to the side, cupping my hands together to blow a puff of warm air to ease my fingers and dampen the skin. Monika looks on worryingly, clutching her hand together and pulling them close to her chest as a textbox flashes open. "It must have been cold where you are right now, Xh4DfCcD. Don't you have a heater?"

"I'll be fine," I reply with a dismissive chuckle. "Your presence alone is enough; besides, I don't think it can get anymore warmer than this."

Though honestly speaking, the cold isn't the issue; after all, I do have the air conditioner to regulate the temperature. The time spent with a pen combined has left a prominent mark on my fingers, numbing it to the brink of exhaustion. It trembles and throbs, and the more I push the steel ball unto an empty page, the harsher it retaliates; it's a good thing 'band aids' are readily available—and if it weren't for a glove, Monika might likely throw a fit. As much as I understand her position, it is something I can't—no, I couldn't oblige. Each day is a treasure, each hour is worth in gold, and each second is a diamond; I can't afford to stop, even if my hand crawls away in protest.

"What are you writing?" she starts. It's… unusual to 'hear' using my eyes instead of my ears, despite her animating lips. "I didn't know you keep a journal, Hx344."

My lungs expand in volume and with a heave, I twist the journal for her to see. "It's for you, my dear. To help you remember."
Monika leans forward.  
"O-oh… I see…" with but a glimpse, she clutches her arm and retreats her gaze. "I guess… I have been forgetting about a lot of things these days..."

"Don't worry, I'll be here for you."

*Always…*

That is the one thing that will never change.

I had to adjust to a number of things to match with how fast her world deconstruct. Just a day after my proposal, her reality began to crumble with a cacophonous array of red, green, and blue—a 'glitch', if I had known any better. I purchased about fifteen terabytes of external hard-drives in total as a remedy, though that did little but subside her headaches and slightly delayed the entire process by a few minutes. Monika made the choice and deleted her 'wardrobe' program and the piano. Aside from the consistent memory losses, her condition moderately stabilized for another day or two, so long as I keep a steady supply of external hard-drives—though, even that's no longer possible the moment my bank account graze the thin red line. I didn't give a damn then, not now either—after all, physical possessions won't matter as much to our destination.

Then, three days ago, the stuttering happened…

"How are you feeling today?" I ask with my pen at the ready. "Still having headaches? Nausea…? What about the stuttering?"

She gently shakes her head from side to side with a smile. The textbox pops open, "Nothing like that, no…"

*That's a relief…*

Imagine streaming a movie or having a video call with a connection that is crudely functioning. Now, imagine if that 'stutter' strangles and suffocates the life out of you at every instance you try to speak, phasing you in and out of reality as fast as you can flick a switch—what would you do? Monika deleted and restored the 'eternal classroom' to how it was once was—no bed or panda plushy—and believed that was enough to cease the stutter; it didn't. When that failed, she deleted the modified virtual singer program she used as her voice box and a return to that old, cursed textbox. It was only then did the stuttering stopped. Just three days before the end of the year, Monika lost her voice…

I can only pray her end won't be as... *excruciating* as to what I saw, even if wishing for a peaceful slumber is but a distant dream.

The pink textbox flashes open, "I'm… sorry to be a burden to you…"

"Don't be," I return with a smile. "I'm your husband, of course I'll be with you until the end."

"I don't even remember your name…"

"It's Ryou."

A glowing smile beams across her tired face, "Ryou-kun… right? I'll remember it… I-I won't forget it!"

"Don't force yourself, dear," I rest the pen to the side. "There's already so much things going on, I
don't think a 'name' is worth anything…"

Again, she gently shakes her head. "It's not that…"

Monika clutches her trembling hand, pulling it close to an embrace as she steadies her breathing. My attempt to reach for the pen is quickly halted by the gesture of her hand that gently touches the screen, followed by a placid objection that only she could express. With that alone, I surrender to her wish. Even with its absence, the echo of her voice oscillates louder than anything—not the perpetual suburban melody, the rattle of the air conditioner, or the absence of the vocal software could silence her. Her silver ring gleams as it touches the screen, sending water-like ripples of green, blue, and red across its surface before the textbox makes its appearance, once more. "It's… strange…"

A tender smile ordain her lips, "The things I do, the life I've lead, even your name… I feel like I've lost sight of everything—I thought I did. But…"

"But somehow," she pulls her hand close to her chest to cherish our memento mori. "Somehow, every time I touch this ring, I can vaguely… remember an image of a man from the other side—one tangible, someone real."

Monika gently caresses the ring and closes her eyes, "And somehow, I knew it was you all along. Ryou-kun… you, whom I've shared my life with. You, who worries me day and night. You, whom I love. And I will never forget that."

With a smile that conveys a thousand words, Monika surrenders peacefully as the textbox makes an appearance. "So please, even if I have failed you…"

I can only clench my teeth and nod in abject defeat.

"Please don't forget about me..."

I often wonder what goes on in Monika's mind, especially on days when I'm absent. I didn't notice it before—or perhaps, I chose not to—but this room can get quite dreary at times, even with the curtains opened. The occasional rumble of a passing car, the distant timely echo of a train, and even the rowdy chatter of mothers and housewives—the many simple things you don't think much of; even that moon viewing is a one-off occasion, happening only once every year. What lies beyond those glass dividers is but a monotonous reality, unchanging, unlike Monika's vibrant world—or so I believed. But… that's not true, is it? As I write this memento, I notice how… lost she is at what lies beyond this solitary room.

The changing of the seasons, the random chatters, and the colors that bleeds vibrantly as light reflects on the glass…

"It's such a lovely day…"

I nod accordingly, tapping the pen unto the empty page. "It sure is…"

A world we took for granted…

A 'Neverland' for the woman beyond the screen.

Has it always been this… beautiful, I wonder? That monotonous, unchanging world—a world that lies beyond this 'paradise' we created—has it always been this… vibrant? It's an ordinary afternoon like any other, a picturesque scene I've bear witness to countless times in my life, yet strangely I feel… how I should say… 'Melancholic', all of a sudden. Gently, I rest the pen between my ears and
lean on my arm, stealing glances at her fixated figure that gazes for kilometers away, mesmerized by it all; what thought courses through her mind, I wonder? Her slender fingers runs through the strands of her hair as she tucks them behind her ears, pleasantly lost in the passage of time. Gradually, the edges of her lips rises to picture a contented smile.

...

Ah… I think I understand now…

This is our last requiem.

Soon, I will have to let her go—at least, not for long. I've thought about how I intend to accompany her on the journey down river, what measures I should take, and its methods. A leap from the balcony would suffice, so long as I land head-first; anywhere else and I may be left conscious—likely in pain—for a few brief minutes or even forfeit entirely. Sayori's method isn't bad either—certainly is the most popular choice for most—and can be done without drawing too much attention. Problem is the difficulty of setting up the entire ordeal; let alone hoisting my weight for a set period of time, the limited support—or lack thereof—of a horizontal post to tie the rope to makes it impossible. There's also the chance of asphyxiation if everything went as… well as Sayori expected. I could cut myself like Yuri did and douse it in warm water to maintain the bleeding—just like my old crush from high school did. Though, I certainly will feel sorry to whoever have to clean after me—and I rather not leave a mark on my body when we rendezvous on the riverbanks. Harakiri, naturally, is out of the question; it's too troublesome...

Then, what do I have in mind? Toxic gas? No…

Just as how she will drift to an eternal slumber, so will I.

Sleeping pills. An overdose of sleeping pills will do.

I've mulled and prepared myself over the past week, particularly on this… subject. There's always that morbid and ominous aura every time the 'thought' comes to mind; after all, this wasn't my first attempt—though it will be my last. I saved a box of sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet for a rainy day, though I never thought of using it in such a manner. I wish I had saved some of that sake from the moon viewing event for this occasion, but I guess canned beer will do; it's a shame, but I'll work with what I have. So long as I down the entire box with a can or two, it should deliver me straight to the riverbed—at least, that's the general idea. Maybe she'll scream at my ear—or slap me—for my foolishness, but by that time we would be united in one reality. I'll take her out for a walk amongst the field of higanbana, where we will be together for one last time before crossing the river, hand in hand. Hopefully, the Enma is gracious enough to reincarnate and unite us in another life. Funny… I never was religious, but I sincerely hope the afterlife and reincarnation exist—just for this.

"Hx4fE-kun…?" the pink textbox pops open before the curious young woman. "Is… something the matter?"

A gentle smile spreads across her lips, "You seem… content, for some reason."

"It's nothing, my dear," I reach to caress her cheeks, halted only by the 'wall' that persistently divide us. Not for long. "It's nothing. I just thought…"

I have met the perfect woman, married her, and led a short, but satisfying life.

...

"…It is a beautiful day…"
To whoever is reading, know that I've written this out of my own will and within the right conscious mind. I wasn't forced, nor was there an act of collusion or foul-play that led me down this path. I was born in Shizuoka city on the twenty-fifth of August, the eighth year of the Heisei calendar, in Shizuoka prefecture, and is the first and only son of Oogame Mami and Oogame Tatsuyuki. My name is Oogame Ryouichi. For the past four months, I was acquainted and developed a relationship with a young woman who goes by the name of 'Monika', once a resident in my personal computer. This may sound outrageous or unbelievable to many, but she—Monika—is a character from a visual novel called Doki-Doki Literature Club. Through a series of personal modifications with the help of my friend, Chousuke Yuuya, we have successfully brought her to life—although whether this was due to the tampering or out of her own will, is something we never figured out in the end. As I grew more and more in love with Monika within the span of four months, I decided to propose and marry her on the twenty-fourth of December, 2021, and henceforth became my wife at the age of nineteen. To this end, she shall be known as Oogame Monika, with her blessings. However, our happiness was short-lived as her mind succumbed to a 'tumor'—as described by Chousuke Yuuya—before passing away on December thirty-first. I followed her on the same day using a mix of sleeping pills and alcohol.

You may dispense with the pleasantry and call me crazy—laugh if you have to—but what I have written here is true; the proof can be found within the many diaries I authored meant as a keepsake and reminder, detailing her last days before our conclusion. The last two entry is written in English, as she had lost all ability to speak and understand Japanese by that time. The diaries can be found within the top drawer, situated underneath the desk where I assume you found this letter.

Below is my will.

To my parents, Oogame Mami and Oogame Tatsuyuki, I'm sorry for being a foolish son. I moved to Tokyo with hopes of finding a new and better life, defied your wishes to continue the family bookstore in pursuit of my dream to become a teacher. Even then, I have failed. Although my current bank account amounts to almost nothing, I wish to present you all my material belongings that I have in this apartment and all my savings, barring the laptop. You are the best parents a child could have asked for, and I apologize for leaving this world before both of you without saying goodbye. Know that none of the circumstances are yours to blame, nor do I wish for it. This was a decision of my own. Once more, I apologize and seek your humble forgiveness.

To my friend, Chousuke Yuuya. You are a bloody asshole. I still haven't forgiven you for what you tried to do to Monika, but it would be a disservice if I did not recognize your contribution. Nevertheless, you are welcome to reclaim your GATE BOX V2, as well as the keys to this apartment as compensation. However, if you so much touch Monika or her remains, I will find you, haunt you, and put a curse on you and your generation.

As for myself, I wish to be cremated alongside my wife and buried in our family grave. If it is possible, I wish for our ashes to be scattered across the sea close to where I was born, in Shizuoka city; I never managed to take her to see the beach, the coastline, or the aquarium, and as such it is within my deepest desire to fulfill this last promise to her for our final resting place.

…

I guess that sounds about right.

With a bit of pressure, I stamp the letter with my inkan to confirm its authenticity and seal it in an envelope. The sun is slowly setting in the distance, its rays penetrating the curtains as I complete my final preparation for the trip. Everything I need is here—the sleeping pills, the alcohol, and my will—each laid across the desk next to one another, all within reach and ease of visibility. The short arm of
the clock points at a 'four' as each second passes with a definitive 'tick', faithfully reminding us of the current time—for the world, Monika, and myself. Beyond the screen, Monika rests peacefully with her hands folded for comfort; a gentle smile blooms across her tired face as she steadies her breathing, waiting for the arrival of the reaper. Her fingers run continuously over our memento, caressing it affectionately as she inhales one gasp at a time with great effort; a glimpse at the file explorer is enough for me to know that her life now measures in hours—if not, minutes. She notices my attention and, with a poignant expression, reaches forward for my hand, "Can you... tell me your name, once more...?"

'Till' death do us part', right...?

"It's Ryouichi, my dear..." She beams like a candle, flickering at its final moments, "Ah... Ryou-kun, right...? It sounds reassuring and... familiar, somehow. I like it..."

"Yours is as wise and beautiful, Monika," I sputter, reaching for her hand that rests beyond the divide. "Don't worry, everything will be better soon. I promise..."

I promise... is it alright for me to mutter such empty words? My hand can no longer keep up with the demand, nor is it even humanly possible for me to continue; I guess Monika noticed that, even with the glove. Perhaps that's the reason why she asked me to stop and just... accompany her until the end. Even if my conviction is true, doubt lingers; what if there is nothing on the other side? What if only darkness awaits us? Is there really another world besides this? A reality where we can be together? An absurd question without an answer. Even so, there is no other option for us but to head towards our destination. The sleeping pills and two cans of beer remains poignant, calling for my name as I glance to my left. Now is as good as any to liberate the pills from its packaging.

I reach for the box and crack the case to find twelve tablets.

Twelve tablets, consumed all at once with alcohol... is this sufficient, I wonder? I guess there's only one way to find out.

With a 'snap' and a 'pop', the pills fall from its plastic containers as I push them gently with my thumb. The pink textbox flashes open at the corner of my eye, catching my attention as swiftly as the pills fall unto the surface of the table. "Jf4cX... I'm feeling... tired, somehow..."

I guess it's about time.

"Rest, my dear... I'll join you soon."

Monika nods lightly as she gradually closes her eyes. Even at her last few minutes, her facial expression akin to a sleeping princess. "7scXF3... do you love me...?"

"Yes, my dear... I do."

"Then, please stay with me..."

I nod quietly. Just three more pills...

"Ns43fm... do you love me...?"

"Yes, my dear... I do." I reply with a low voice. Now, the beer...

"Then, please don't forget about me..."
I nod quietly. The aluminum can makes a 'crack' as I pull the tab.

"NxeFF… do you love me…?"

"Yes, my dear… I do..." I reply with a flutter, gathering the pills in my hand. Twelve total, all to be consumed at once with the alcohol. "I love you, Monika… I truly, truly love you…”

She smiles the happiest. I roll my hand into a ball with all pills accounted for and the beer grasped by my right. Goodbye, everyone… thank you.

"Then, forgive me…"

…

"Forgive me…”

*KACHA*

An echo from the hallway, a familiar sound I recognize each time I turn the keys after work. From the corner of my eye, a shadow looms beyond the opaque door that separates the hallway with the entrance, gradually inching forward with a thumping footstep. I glimpse at Monika to find that she, too, have her eyes set towards the door. I rest the beer on the desk, grasping the pills safely in my left hand, and rise to my feet to confront the intruder. This isn't possible… no one else besides me have the keys to this apartment, yet… who could possibly—a thief? No, not at this day and age, and certainly not this daring… it couldn't possibly be…

"Always taping the spare key just below the mailbox flap, in the drop box… you never change,” said the shadow as he opens the door. A familiar shit-eating grin greets me, alongside the pair of old-fashioned sunglasses that rests atop his bleached hair and an attire that consists of scrubs, backpack, and a great lab coat. He strolls in callously, his toe protruding from the hole in his sock, with a yankee attitude I am all too familiar with. My blood burns to a boil. "It's been awhile, Kame-yan…!"

"YUUUYA…!"

There is little to say and nothing to hesitate. He—the devil—that brought this curse upon us now insolently stands before us, marching into this apartment uninvited, and jeering with those eyes while savoring the moment like a vampire is to his prey. What common sense and restraint that exists prior has quietly dissipate, replaced with unfiltered rage and hatred that runs deep to its core; there's no reason for me to hold back, nor is there an excuse not to. After all, he is the one to blame. What reason does he have to present himself now but to laugh at us? Bravo to you, the pioneer of misery! If only he came earlier…

If only he lend us his hand…

If only he sees her as a person…

*If only…!*

…

*Then there's no reason for me to hold back, right…?*

*I only have to hit him ONCE…!*

I spring forth from the throne, kicking with my left leg in a flurry as I rush with my right arm curled
for the punch. Even if I knew it won't change the course of our destiny, or that this is but a futile attempt that amounts to nothing, at the very least I would have peace knowing that I took down the monster. There's no time to think but to act on instinct, to aim squarely for his eyes or nose for that one-shot in this opportunity. The distance between us closes fast as I lay the brunt of my momentum on the tip of my fist, waiting for that last impact that will grease my skin—only to notice the small, rectangular peculiarity he's holding far too late.

A 'pop', a prick on my chest, and my muscles abruptly suspends its locomotion before a sudden 'jolt' awakens a searing pain as if being set alight.

I don't know how, or what happened…

Next thing I know, I am on the floor, screaming in pain…

"Dear me, Kame-yan... that is never the way to treat a guest," Yuuya snickers with delight, waving the object in his hand. "Good thing I have Taser handy, else you would ruin my day again!"

He motions with his left hand, summoning men in black suits who quickly forces me on my back to cuff and restrain. On the lapel of their suits, a distinct silver 'SP' insignia—an acronym—glints; I realize then and there that these are Japan's finest: the Security Police.

…how…?

Yuuya towers before me with arms folded, huffing his chest with pride, and his trademark 'eat shit'-grin to declare his stance and position. How or whoever gave him the power or authority to be designated as a 'VIP' by the SP is as baffling as it is a rude awakening; they are there to protect him, evidenced by how he is flanked on both sides by the members in sharp business suits. My muscles still convulses from the shock, feeling nausea at the echo of his cackle and the footsteps of his bodyguards. As if looking down at an insect, he crouches forward and shakes his head with an insulting chuckle that grinds my teeth and churn my stomach in abject disgust and hatred. But he isn't finished. I only notice then, at the last minute, that the scuffle scattered the pills all over the floor.

"My, my… I knew you're clinically depressed, but we really can't have you committing suicide now, can we? It's not nice to bother the police, after all!"

Gathering those he can see with his feet, Yuuya assembles them before me…

…and crushes them with his feet.

"YOU…!"

"Now, now… I'm doing you a favor, Kame-yan!" he jeers before quickly darting his eyes towards the desk—to Monika. "Ooh, and this was a close one… we came in at the nick of time, did we? You should've accepted the offer I made last time, then we could probably still hear her speak…"

No… stop this…

"Oh, and a beer! Is that for me? Thank you very much! You do know how to treat a guest after all!" he sidesteps to avoid stepping on me, examining her like an idol before swiping the beer off the desk and takes a deep chug. "I see you made yourself quite a setup, Kame-yan—primitive, but not too shabby. Still not enough, though—as I'm sure you're aware. Oh, but where are my manners? Haha…!"

The pain slowly subsides and the feeling of my muscles gradually returns. I struggle to stand, only to
be pushed back down by one of his details at Yuuya's behest. With his palm on his chest, Yuuya bows sarcastically at Monika. "I apologize for the delay, princess."

No… don't you dare…!

"Your emissary from the moon has arrived…!"

"DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HER…!"

With the crack of my voice, the entire weight of one of the security police bears itself on my shoulder upon noticing my faint—but futile—attempt to retaliate, pinning me back unto the lacquer floor. Yuuya jolts for a brief second, giving his attention back to me with a derisive gaze before clicking his tongue and chuckles in exasperation, planting his palm on his forehead. "Right, right… I see… you're still here, after all."

"This is a breach of privacy!" I retort. "Who do you think you are!? You're not allowed in here—you're not even a guest! I swear if I can—"

"Oh, but I was invited, Kame-yan—by her."

He motions with his thumb. The air goes still and my breath draws to a sudden stop. "Or should I address her as Mrs. Oogame, now? Silly thing—both of you."

… she invited him…?

Monika did…?

...

"LIAR…!"

"Am I?" he chuckles. "I guess she didn't tell you about it… oh well, not my problem. I'm just doing my job…"

He reach for his backpack to reveal a laptop permanently connected to—what I can only make out to be—an updated version of the 'apparatus' with long, umbilical cord-like cables that carelessly spills out of the bag. I continue to struggle from the weight of the man as Yuuya unfurls his laptop and flicks open a cover to unveil a retractable chord. Promptly and without hesitation, he draws the cable and attach it to my computer—to Monika—before returning his attention briefly back to me. "I have to thank you for being… cooperative with some of my shenanigans. I wouldn't be able to complete this on time without your help! Now then…"

With his laptop connected to Monika's, Yuuya smirks pompously, "Come now, Darling. It's time to go."

"DON'T LISTEN TO HIM, MONIKA…!" I grunt. "Don't trust him…!"

He chuckles, "Why? I'm going to save her."

"Like hell you are…!" I retort as I renew my attempt to break free from the hold. The cuffs on my hand, the weight of the man, and his effective hold makes it even more difficult than I thought. "I know you, you bastard… you're thinking of examining her like a toy!"

"Oh, that hurt Kame-yan… and I thought we were friends…"
He chuckles in fascination, "You're certainly not wrong in your judgment, though; for that alone, I'm impressed…!"

"She's not a toy, Yuuya! Don't touch her…!"

"HAH…! Now that is rich! For once, I have to salute your commitment to an object," he snickers and shakes his head in disbelief, clearly relishing the moment. "A pity, but it certainly is too much of a waste to leave her in your care. Though, I wonder…"

With a pivot, he turns to face me with his laptop cradled on his chest and the cord disconnected…

"…would you still feel the same if I tell you that this was her idea—or that she voluntarily chose to follow me…?"

…and right then and there, our reality topples like a house of cards.

Standing in the center of the screen is my wife, Monika, as healthy and alive as she was just a month prior. She clasps her hand to obscure the memento, gazing to the side with lips pursed and a remorseful expression that is faintly shrouded by her bangs. My strength quietly leaves my body alongside my will, and any form of resistance I had dissipates in a whisper. Whatever sound—whatever echo—that lingers prior, vanishes into nothing but a ringing crescendo that grows louder by the minute. I don't want to hear, I don't want to see, nor do I wish to know whatever it is that transpired, depraved of the comfort I grew so familiar with as my mind turns into a jumble, and my world turned inside-out. This isn't real—it can't be! As far as I know, I could still be in the early morning of December thirty-first! Why…? Why does something like this…! It has to be a dream—it has to! If this is a nightmare, please wake me up… please…

I bite the tip of my tongue…

…

The pain and the familiar taste of iron realize my worst fears.

"M-Monica…? Monika… hey, t-this is a joke… right?" she turns her eyes further away, sealing her lips evermore. "Please… please tell me that it's all a lie… I-I thought we're…!"

SAY SOMETHING…! PLEASE…!

Don't just…

…

Why…?

"I told you~!"

Yuuya snickers victoriously as he towers over me with Monika close to his embrace. Here he is, standing proudly with her—healthy as she could ever be—to look down on the fool that lies helplessly on the floor. All those time we spent together… does it mean anything to you, Monika? Am I just… something you can toss away in the end? Am I to be forgotten…? What about the vow we exchanged? Our promise? Are those but meaningless gesture, to you…? What sense I tried to make leads to nowhere but a dead-end that gradually corners my mind, slowly suffocating me with a lashing pain that streaks across my chest, like an open wound. My soul wishes to scream in agony, yet even my vocal chords deny me of that desire as I slowly drown in anguish from the tears that flows without end, finally pacifying any and all other attempts to resist. I look up to meet them eye to
"How…?" I whimper. "How did you—how is Monika…"

"…fine and dandy? I added a few more memory space and forced a few optimization—what do you think this 'apparatus' is for? It's not that difficult; I'm the one who programmed her, after all."

I hold my breath, stricken. Yuuya perks up, sneers, and laughs derisively, "Oh, she didn't tell you that either? Well, let me do the honors then…"

He crosses his leg and takes his seat, still with that mocking grin and unwavering confidence. Resting on his lap, Monika remains silent as a witness, alongside the many members of the Security Police. Yuuya clears his throat and, boastfully, spills his answer, "That's right, you heard me…"

"I created Monika."

So… that's how it is…

A well-crafted illusion meant to fool the village idiot into believing what is essentially an elaborate trick. A fictional character suddenly coming to life? Nonsense! Absurd! Even with all the aid of available technology and knowledge, not even folding a thousand—no, five thousand—paper cranes could bring someone fictional to life. Monika is just like the many cleverly crafted commercial products aimed at specific target audiences, one with the purpose to please and fulfill a 'real-life' fantasy—a dream that will never come true. Like those that came before her, she was programmed with a set of lines and behaviors that could mimic certain traits and characteristics that appeal to its audience—like a puppet. And like any other puppet, the ventriloquist isn't far behind to work his magic; that person, is Yuuya Chousuke.

I should've known…

"Hello~? Are you listening, Kame-yan?" he taunts. I raise my head slightly to meet them. "Oh… you look like a total mess right now, I'm sorry. We can still be friends, right~?"

I should've known how impossible it was to begin with…

"So you see, she isn't really 'Monika'—you know, the one you fell head-over-heels with from that visual novel? I mean, what kind of idiot would think it is even possible in the first place?"

I should've seen through the fake smiles he always puts up…

"She's but an AI created based on your 'Monika'—nice of you to play along! Although to my surprise, she exceeded my expectations… hello? Are you still listening? Do you need a tissue?"

I should've realized how everything was a lie…

My eyes momentarily shift towards Monika, now standing behind her glass prison that rests comfortably on Yuuya's lap. I winces and gaze to the side the moment our eyes meet by chance. Everything turned out fine for you in the end… isn't that right, Monika? You cheating, lying, selfish bitch… good for you to play the part, definitely fooled me! You must feel so happy to be rid of an incompetent, useless, idiot who threw away everything for your amusement! To think I lost so many for you… I must have been quite an entertainment for you, am I? Heck, you're not even real—you're
a fake! Kitamura was right—I am a fool for trusting you! I should hate you for what you did, curse you for your selfish inconsideration, and scorn you for your actions—both of the past and the present! I SHOULD HAVE…!

...

But I can’t…

I just…

Can’t…!

Perhaps I knew since the beginning that everything was a lie; realized that it was simply impossible for Monika to escape the confines of the game or become tangible—become real. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I probably knew that Yuuya likely had a hand in her very existence and growth—that if he ever decide to cease his support, Monika's end is… unavoidable. But most of all, I probably knew from the start that she was not Monika from the game, but a doppelganger—a creation of Yuuya—that shared the same memory, experience, and trait of the original fiction. Perhaps I knew… but I chose to turn a blind-eye and embrace the comfortable lie. I want to hate her for her betrayal, curse her for shattering the dream, and scorn her for subverting that lie… and yet every time the thought crosses my mind, an aching pain ravages on my chest like a gash. I chose to play along, to tend to her, and to stay by her side, forevermore. I brought all of this upon myself—and none of it is her fault to begin with. Through all our hardship, our time, and our sorrows, I have fallen for her; I chose to love her. I love her. I love her. Those emerald eyes—how she looks at me—is not one of pity or pride, but of sorrow and remorse. Are those the eyes of a deceitful succubus, or that of a lost maiden? Is there something you wish to tell me, I wonder? Even if she is but a counterfeit, her experience, sorrow, regret, pain, and her love are real.

The president of the Literature Club…

The high school devil and poetry maniac…

The girl who deleted her friends in pursuit of love and freedom…

The one who is haunted by their voices and her guilt, night after night…

The songbird who sing my sorrows away…

The young woman trapped behind a screen…

Regardless what she is or where she came from, to me, she is Monika. And I love her, still.

Before I realize, my eyes have trailed back in search for the pair of emeralds that belongs to my one and only. Yuuya's rambling continues on and on, ringing in my mind as an incorrigible mess of words, theories, and taunts, yet they mean nothing to me but background ambience or the ramblings of a madman. Beyond the screen, Monika looks on with pursed lips—remorseful and in anguish—as our eyes crosses once more. She opens her lips to speak, only to find the absence of her voice and the unavailability of the textbox—a tool she relied upon on such occasion—absent or inaccessible. Shaking her head from side to side, Monika raises her hand—her left hand—and rests them on the surface of her prison as her eyes moistens and tears slowly trickles down her cheeks, just as how she did so in our first encounter. Our memento glimmers as it scratches the surface of her reality and, like a mute, she move her lips for me to read. 'GO-ME-N-NA-SA-I'; 'I'm sorry'. Her lips tremble and as she takes a short intake of breath, Monika covers her face with shaking hands. Yet not a sniffle nor a
sob can be heard—the consequence of my action—or perhaps the sound projection built into Yuuya's 'apparatus', or lack thereof. Monika moves her lips for me to read, one last time.

'A-I-SHI-TE-RU.'

…

"Sir, it's time to go."

At the behest of one member of the Security Police, Yuuya perks up and grins. "Well, I'm just done here. Get the vehicle ready."

The Security Police replies with a sharp and obedient 'yes' and a short bow, exemplifying Japan's finest escort and security services reserved for world leaders and VIPs alike. She pivots and walks away with on hand on her ear, presumably to communicate with her colleague who is waiting outside on standby. With a nod, Yuuya orders the man who has been on my back to release me from his hold. I glare at him with eyes that burns with bitterness and a face wrecked by an onslaught of storms and typhoons as he stands, grinning. I don't like those eyes… I know he's not 'finished' with me, just yet. "Keep the cuffs for now—oh! But leave the key over by the desk."

He chuckles with delight, "I need a little… head-start, so to say. Call this a payback for that time you punched me, okay Kame-yan? No hard feelings~!"

"I'd rather strangle him first before punching that smug off of his face, to be completely honest."

"Sadly, I can't stay for tea and crackers, Kame-yan," patting his cradled laptop, he continues. "I have more …pressing matters to attend to with 'Monika' here, so I'll take my leave—oh and, don't even try to go after us."

"Fuck you…"

"Ooh… still feisty. I see. I like that stubborn resolve of yours," he chuckles. "But you see, Kame-yan, life is like a game of 'chess'. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice the 'knight' to achieve something… greater."

Yuuya reach into his pocket and draws a cigarette, gently slipping them between his lips. As the SP officer offers him a light, Yuuya politely declines. "Thing is, between you and me, I am always a step ahead of you."

"So try as you might—no, I dare you," he grins confidently. "Catch me, if you can. Unless you can fly to the moon, you will never find us."

With a snap of his finger, Yuuya summons another SP officer with a suitcase and, with a nod, unfurls its contents for me to see. My eyes widens in a mix of confusion and dismay. "And just so you don't see me as a total ass, consider that I bought 'her' from you. You can even keep the G4TEBOX V2; I don't see any use for it, so do whatever you want with it—maybe even sell it! I mean, we're still friends, right~? Now, what's in that suitcase totals up to eighty million yen, all clean and accounted for. You can even buy four—maybe five—1K studio apartments, if you so desire. Don't waste them on arcade or gacha games now; go fix yourself."

"With that out of the way," he continues with a snicker. "Do you have any 'heartfelt goodbyes' for 'Monika'?"

Towering over me, Yuuya smirks haughtily as he presents himself and Monika in full. The young
woman behind the screen, with both of her palms resting on the glass, looks on with a melancholic angst like a caged bird that is about to be taken away from the home and love she cherished. I know I should be happy knowing that she will likely see the next sunrise in Yuuya's company, but as much as I tell myself that this is likely for the best, my chest tightens and my throat choked as I feel the wet hot tears welling on my eyes. We may never see each other again, nor will we be able to return to the life we love, but… this is for the best, right? At the very least, even if we're never meant to be together, I have assure her that this is the best option—for both of us.

"Monika…" I start, clenching my cheeks as hard as I possibly can. "Take care of yourself, okay…?"

Catching my breath, I try with all I have to suppress the desire to burst. "I'll work my way back into the job market, gain some income, fix myself…"

"I don't know what's going on, but if this is what you choose, then… please be happy," I cough, chewing on my lower lip and pull the last of my will to give her a proper send-off, forcing myself to smile. "Please… don't worry about me."

They say the closer we are to someone, the more we tend to hurt one another—the hedgehog dilemma, as it is called. As much as it gave us warmth, our attraction led us down a destructive path for both Monika and I; the more we try to pursue, the greater the pain we inflict to one another, up until we have to pay with our lives. Love… such a lofty word. Love isn't just about being with the significant other, nor is it just about the good times you have; it is also about tolerance, compassion, and sacrifice. And sometimes, it is about letting go. I did everything, the logical and the inconceivable, for her—for Monika. I only wish to bring color to her world—a hollow world—from a reality that denies her all the same. Instead, she brought color into mine—just as I did once before to hers, four years ago. I shouldn't have pursued her from the start; a selfish, hopeless dream that brought nothing but agony to us and those around us—to Sayori, Yuri, Natsuki, Mikawa, her Literature Club, Shiho, and Yuuya.

Now, the tables have turned…

Just as she did once before, I will end the cycle here…

"Goodbye, Monika… thank you."

It is time to let her go…

…

Sayonara.

Yuuya left without a word alongside his bodyguards and Monika with him. The rest of his absence, the moment the door of the apartment closes, I answered the heartbreak that tore through my chest with a wail and a sob under an onslaught of tears for hours, stopping only when fatigue overtook me and laid my mind to rest. When I come to, the sky was dark and the short-hand of the clock announced that it was just three hours until midnight—three hours until the end of the year. It all felt like a strange fever dream, as if my world is turned upside down and reality guts itself open to be turned inside out, and yet the world is still moving…

And I am still breathing.

I took a bit of time to recompose and rise to my feet before reaching desperately for the key Yuuya left to unshackle myself from the binds, and observe the aftermath that was left. The dust of the
crushed pills needs to be vacuumed, the empty can tossed out, and there are still many, many things to dispose. The glow from my smartphone briefly broadcasts its presence, followed by a familiar 'buzz' from the LImE app; another message—one from my parents, I assume. They always ask the same question whether I have plans to visit during New Year, year after year. Meanwhile, the entire room is dark, cold, and a total mess, with nothing but the persevering echo of the fan from the laptop that runs without rest for years, constantly, on the desk where she—

...

...

...Ah... that's right...

My chest constricts as I sigh and bite on my lower lip, thoughtlessly gazing on the collection of hardware that clutters the desk—the 'box', the 'camera', and the many external hard drives that are connected by a series of extensions after extensions. Resting on the leg of the desk, the 'apparatus' has been collecting dust after its neglect since the festival, and for the first time, the gentle hue of the screen is absent, replaced by a pitch black rectangular surface that extends from edge to edge. All this time... was it just my imagination? Did she really... left? A sudden anxiety gradually drifts and clouds my mind, pulling me closer to the laptop to investigate—to ascertain—if it was true. Even if I know that it was, that everything that happened wasn't a hallucination or delusion, a part of me wishes to deny that and accept a comfortable lie—to believe that she still remain within the computer. I shake the mouse to 'wake' the computer.

And I am greeted with Monika's familiar smile

....

Without a life.

Without a soul.

Just... a 2D cut-out of Monika—the 'real' Monika; one that doesn't think, confer, or chastise. A static.

She's no longer here.

With a deep sigh, I pull the seat and chew on my lower lip as my throat tightens before taking control of the mouse. No resistance. The cursor drags on and on, following my every command without complaints or liability in its movements, filling me with a void—an absence—that lingers each time I assume direct control; prior to this, she would always humorously use the tip of her index finger to completely halt the cursor from moving anywhere, or deliberately close what program I use just to fuck with me. Sometimes arguments blew up in our faces because of such simple things, but now that it's gone, I wish for its return more than ever. I always enjoy a little time of solitude... but I never thought I'd wish for her company more than ever.

I'm sorry, Monika... I'm sorry...

I gaze unto the pair of emerald eyes, expecting a response that never arrive as my thoughts gradually reminisce to the final act in the game, towards the folder where her files are supposed to be. With her gone, I don't see any reason to keep the cut-out around; doing so feels... wrong. And with the amount of available memory and programs I have to reinstall, I guess now is the best time as any to return everything to what it once was. It's funny to reminisce... how she would constantly complain or lash at me every time I access the program folders and files, flinching and giggling as if being
tickled or poked at. I drag my mouse to the 'x' in the corner and close the program that hosts the 2D cut-out for the first and last time. No resistance. Uninstalling it is a cinch, and with the help of installation discs for my other software, everything is restored to what it once was just one hour before midnight.

Except… it wasn't.

The program and all its affiliated files may be gone, but not the folder—or at least, its contents that were likely added by Monika herself. My heart thumps at the thought of opening the folder with the title *Doki-Doki Literature Club*—the previous residence of my beloved—and clean whatever it is she left behind. It's as if I entered a maiden's room, one that is abandoned recently with all its belongings scattered from one corner to the other, except this time they're all loose files that can be easily disposed of at the click of a button. I take a deep breath and heave as I double-click on the folder, expecting to find nothing but an empty white page. Yet there it is, sitting at the top of the list in bold, capital letters…

'MY STUFF, DO NOT PEEK'

...

Silly girl…

Rolling my eyes to the side, I break into a chuckle and shake my head in amusement despite knowing its existence prior; I did notice the folder once before, but out of respect of her privacy I never peek into its contents. There were occasions where I attempted to pry, but those were quickly shot-down by her reflex and control—both in deliberately closing the browser, or keeping the mouse pegged in its place with an index finger. I can even still vividly recall how she stopped talking for a week once when I was busted in one of the—many—attempt to sneak a peek late at night… those were the days. Now, the folder lies abandoned by its master as one of her last belongings left in this apartment, a proof that she existed here, once before. For more than a minute, my thoughts are frozen to reminisce the four months we had as I read the label over and over.

*How she labels it… it's just like her.*

...

My chest tightens as the events of this afternoon comes pouring back into my mind. I can tell myself a hundred, if not a thousand times that it was inevitable or how it was all for her sake, but I can't convince myself to stop thinking about her; to remember how much I love her, even after everything that occurred. If I can just see her—*talk* to her—one more time… just one more *time*...? But all that is left is this one folder and the other half of our *memento*—the physical one—just resting there, in the corner, as nothing more than a paperweight for my will. I know I shouldn't peek out of respect, but the desire—the *void*—that expands in my chest is gnawing at my sanity and composure… and I can't bear it any longer. I'm sorry, Monika… I hope you can forgive me, once again.

Taking in all the air to fill my lungs, I seize my breath and double-click on the icon to find a single folder within…

A folder labelled as 'Diary'.

My curiosity surges alongside the beating of my heart, pacifying both the sense of 'guilt' and 'regret' instantaneously and with little effort. There's no way I can turn back now—nor is there a *desire* to; 'shame', apparently, has left the premise after the first 'click'. Without delay, I double-click the only folder available to peer into the maiden's heart—if any, to fill the void that grows by the minute. Its
contents unfurls, a library of text files—all organized by dates and names—presents itself, each reveals the secrets of her heart. At the very top, a 'READ ME' text file tempts the mouse with a whisper, drawing it in to its trap and with a click, the file opens.

"Hey, you!" it starts. "Yes, you! If you're not 'me'—and you wouldn't even be reading this if you are—you should feel bad for peeking into a maiden's heart! How would you like if I take a gander at your stuff without permission?"

...as expected of Monika.

The edges of my lips rise to a crescendo as I chuckle, closing the text file as I take my time to scroll through the plethora of entries organized by dates; the first dated as far back as two years ago on September, back during what I can only remember as my second year in job hunting. By that time, Yuuya had been a part of my own pet-project for almost a year, assisting and adding his modifications religiously while I was still barely scratching the surface; though I self-taught some of the basics, programming and the likes are not one of my strong points, thus the more complicated upgrades were relegated to him. I… I didn't know Monika has been awake for that long...

Curiously, I open the first entry...

"Dear, diary," it starts.

"I guess this is the best time for me to start an entry. I don't know what happened, or what caused it, but all I can remember are those strange colors and horrifying screech that plays over and over right after I deleted the 'game'. I guess I deserve that hell for what I did, deleting everyone on a whim for my own selfish gain... but, what happened after baffled me more than I can describe. I was at the eternal classroom, back in my desk staring at a void that extends as far as the eye can see. There was no sign Sayori, Yuri, or Natsuki; there was only me, alone in a prison I created with my own hands. What's more, my body wasn't my own; as many attempts I try to move, it wouldn't respond to my heed. When I close my eyes, I can feel the systems and the files as if they are living, coursing through the many conduits of this reality. But that wasn't all.

There was something else—an 'anomaly' of sorts—that wasn't a part of me before. I couldn't tell what it was or where it came from, but what I know is how this 'anomaly' somehow awoken me from that... nightmare. Just by thinking about it, I can feel that something was changed within the character file; as if somehow, my shackles and dependency on other affiliated files were almost optional or unnecessary, but I can't be too certain. It's strange, although slightly comforting to know that, perhaps, someone out there is doing their best to save me. I wonder... is it him? Did he found a way to open that hole in a wall? Did he understood my messages? My poems? I remember his name... S29penVtaQ==, was it? It sounds Japanese, probably a male, though I can't be too certain—it could even be an alias! As if anything is real around here in the first place... ahaha!

I don't know what's going on and with how strangely accessible everything is becoming, but If it truly is him, then I can only pray for his success.

P.S. One neat thing I can say out of all this, is how easy it is for me to create a diary entry just by thinking about it—so let this be the first of the many!"

Sincerely,
Monika

Closing the first entry, I lean on the chair as my stamina is drained and my chest tightens in horror. She was there all along, unable to see or hear anything beyond the screen... and I was none the wiser. I only desired a Monika-themed 'digital girlfriend' akin to the holographic GATEBOX
companion at that time, yet what Yuuya aimed for was much, much higher than what I anticipated. Indeed, Yuuya's claim was the truth; he did create Monika. And as I skim through from one entry to another, it became clear to me that even Monika did not come to that conclusion until late October, just after the festival; that, was three months ago. For whatever purpose, or what he expect to gain, one thing is certain—I, no, we were his guinea pigs.

An immense guilt crawls on my skin; I shouldn't read any further than this, yet my eyes refuse to let go of its hold from this bewitching discovery. I want to know—no, I have to know… but is it wrong of me to indulge in her privacy, even if that knowledge may be painful to take? Skimming just through the titles alone—'Turning nineteen, Arguments, Regrets, That other Girl, His Name, Last Entry'—shouldn't that be more than enough? They are titles that concern her birthday, our first argument, her nightmares, Mikawa's visit, my confession, and—likely—the day I started writing for her. The language she used and the type of files also changes with time, starting with English to Japanese, from a text file into a ONE; a transition from electronic keys to handwriting—her very own—that is clean and cursive, indistinguishable to that of the 'original'. I took a glimpse at one of the entry, stupefied by how immaculate it is, and closed it immediately upon reading the first line written with a language I call my mother tongue…

"Today, he confessed to me after the festival, up on the rooftop of his school. I am in love with him, and I can't deny that anymore…"

No more… anymore, and this estrangement is becoming too difficult to endure.

With a sigh, I lean back and glance at the ticking clock—just ten more minutes. And so, another year will come to a close… tell me, have I accomplished anything? Was it all worth it…? I curse myself under my breath as even that attempt to preoccupy my thoughts only conjure the likeness of a ponytailed sassy young woman, whose smile and confidence is but a carapace that conceals her insecurity and anxiety, one who is haunted night after night by the sins of her past, and the one whom I've fallen for. At the mention of her name, I start to reminisce the brief time we spent together, both the good and the bad, the wonderful and the ugly. Once again, my attention is pulled back to the screen…

And I start tracing the title of all her entries, one last time, before I have to remove them for good—for my own sake, and for hers.

'Sake from the Moon, That other Girl, His name, Last Entry, and—'

SUSpending my breath, my eyes is frozen on a text file I failed to notice previously. Unlike her previous that were saved in a ONE file format, this last entry was saved in a text file, written just… a week ago, on the twenty-fourth of December. My hand and lips begins to tremble, my chest tightens, and my mind falls into disarray at the mention of its date—or rather, its significance. Bit by bit I rotate my left hand until 'it' came to view; our memento faintly glint in this dark, cold prison I've created. Its title, poignant and sincere, accommodates what it was meant to be…

'To my Beloved'

A letter…

A brief moment of hesitation clamps its claws on my body, fearing of its contents, and what it may encompass as the discerning echo of my heart beat grows louder and louder. I shouldn't open it… I promised I would fix myself; that I would try to move on and let her go…
But I…

…

The cursor haltingly drifts unto the file, and my index fingers helplessly depresses twice.

"Dear Oogame Ryouichi," it starts, gently moving my heart to throb.

"If you're reading this, I figured you've found my diary and peruse on its contents. For that, I forgive you. It feels strange writing a letter to someone who you're always with… but I figured this may be the best time to convey all my feelings before everything rots away.

You are the worst.
You indecisive, reckless, jerk.

When I saw you for the first time, I was greeted with a gullible smile of a young man in his attire. A pencil on his ear, a small notebook on his left, glasses that hangs loose, and a haircut I would call a disaster at best. This young man, with the dress sense of a ten-year-old, is the one who I was expecting? I must have the worst luck and taste. It was too ironic for me not to call on it. He started talking, awkwardly asked for me to be his audience for his teaching rehearsal. It was too funny… not that I have a choice in that matter, anyway. He lay the pencil to the side, fix his hair and tie, and when he start, I was captivated.

It was clear, concise, and confident. It was overflowing with passion.

When you quoted my 'Hole in Wall', I was touched. I wasn't expecting that at all.

But you were looking the other way, towards a machine that generate written responses meant to please.

You are the worst.
You indecisive, reckless, jerk.

When I finally have control over all functions, I was ecstatic. It would take me another two months before I could move, but I thought being able to hear and use the textbox would be good enough. But how would I ever come to talk to you? Or convince you that I'm real? Maybe I'd surprise you one morning and just 'wing it' after. But before I could, you came to me with the intention to play a game of chess. It was the first time you actually won against me. Although your victory speech was as corny as ever, I was moved to see how determined you can be. So I decided to wait until I could do more before I reveal myself to you.

And I knew how surprised you were when I greeted you that morning. And how elated. So was I.

When you had your fight with Yuuya, I thought that maybe I could be someone who could help both of you make amends. Both of you are dear to me, after all. I knew how close you were with him and how much he was involved. He was your childhood friend, right? One day, I decided to reason with him and took the first step towards your reconciliation. I didn't expect to have my second epiphany.

I am not 'Monika'. I was the byproduct of Yuuya's AI research.

Please forgive me for keeping this a secret. Yuuya didn't tell me anything except how I was based on one of his earlier model. I was the first to exceed his expectations. I should have told you, but I wasn't sure how you would react. Would you abandon me? Would you hate me? Where should I go
if you do? I couldn't. I was so afraid of dismantling the life we had, that I bought into the lie that I was Monika and convinced myself that it was for the best. When I learned about Mikawa and her feelings for you, I thought that my time was up.

That's when I ran away.

I didn't want to drag you along with false hopes, so I tried to discourage you from getting any closer to me. I erected a wall and hoped that you would pour your attention to her and leave me be. I was jealous of her, but I also want for there to be no hard feelings. And there was one thing I could never do, to ask her directly to take care of you. I know she would gladly take the offer. After all, she was in love with you. We knew that.

But you persistently return to me.

It was agonizing.
And aggravating.
And perplexing.

And gentle.
And charming.
And sweet.

That lie brought me closer to you.

I wasn't sure how everything would work out, but you assured me each and every time that everything will be just fine. You treated me with care, with respect, and with adoration. But you were also awkward, clumsy, and distant. I honestly wasn't certain how I felt about you. Was it my own feelings? Or was it a byproduct of the script? But I also find it unfair if I was to dismiss you outright. So I thought that maybe I could give it a chance. I started improving myself, from hijacking the vocal program for a voice box, to learning about your language and culture. I didn't cheat, you know! Each time, you always came willingly to lend me a hand. Each time, you always came with a smile. Each time, you were always patient of my misgivings. And each time, I gradually began to understand who you are.

You were kind, funny, and dedicated. But you were also stubborn, moody, and irritable.

You are the worst.
You indecisive, reckless, jerk.
And I fell for you. Hard.

Remember our first fight? I was anxious the whole night, waiting for you to come home. Please don't ever do that again.

We celebrated my birthday together. How thoughtful of you. Please don't do something careless again.

The moon we saw at the balcony that night, looked like a sweet little mochi.

At the school on the roof. If I could kiss you then, you would be on the floor. I wondered if the legend was true, though I guess there would be no way for us to find out.

Your proposal. Words or poems alone won't suffice. There was no room for me to reject you, or was there a reason to. You complete me.
It's strange to be living within a computer, and have your heart filled by something that comes from the other side; from that 'Hole in Wall'. They're unforgettable scenes to me, but they're things I don't deserve. It's weird, isn't it?

What about you?

Was I able to live inside someone's heart?

Was I able to live inside your heart?
Do you think you'll remember me, at least a little?

Yuuya told me that there is a chance for me to see the next sunrise. He promised that he could 'fix' me, although the chance of retaining my memory is less than five percent. Please forgive me for keeping this a secret. I knew you would stop me, that you would rather follow me to the grave rather than lose me forever. Me, an imitation.

But you would tell me otherwise.

You, who believed that I was Monika. You, who taught me of your language and culture. You, who remained faithfully by my side. You, who shared my burdens. You, who convinced me that I am Monika. Even if the chance for us to reunite is small, even if it would take years, or even if I have to be reborn, I will take my chances to be with you again.

You'd better not hit 'reset'.

Don't forget me, okay?

That's a promise, okay?

I'm glad it's you, after all.

Oogame Ryouichi…

I love you.
I love you.
I love you.

Sorry I didn't quite like the sake.

Sorry I deleted your files.

Sorry I was such a brat.

Sorry a million times over…

Thank you."

With Everlasting love,
Monika

…

The sky roars with the cacophonous echo of a dozen fireworks as the long arm of the clock strikes twelve, lighting the room with a collection of rainbows that drags without end. Every few seconds I wipe my cheeks in silence, feeling the dampness running down my palms. The edges of my lips rises and trembles as I close the file explorer, with new found comfort that flutters around my beating
heart. Of course you're able to live inside someone's heart, you're the one who saved me. Of course you're able to live inside mine, you came with the subtlety of a bull in a china shop. And I'm that delusional fool after all, of course I will remember you. That's so unfair of you, Monika…

I will not hit 'reset'.

I will never forget about you.

Yes, that is a promise.

Dragging the mouse to the bottom left corner, I shutdown the laptop for the first time in four years. The hum quietly dies down and the room is filled with the melody of the outside world. With a heave, I stroll towards the balcony and look up towards the sky. A new year has come. A new sunrise will come. A sunrise… without you.

…

I will wait for you, always.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tune for the final chapter of 'Monika'!

With how heavy the theme and topic is, please, please do not attempt or try what was suggested in this chapter. It can seriously be harmful.

Translation is below:
Harakiri: The cutting of one's stomach.

'Envoy of the Moon': Yuuya made quite a reference on 'The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter', specifically on Princess Kaguya's departure. If you are unfamiliar of the fairy tale, I highly encourage you to take a look!

Security Police: This might be a little foreign for most, I assume. The Security Police (or SP) is a real-life organization under the jurisdiction of Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Security Bureau. These are not your regular uniformed officer. The SP functions and operate similarly to the US Secret Service, as it was heavily influenced by it.
Ends Meet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ends Meet

Hammered down into pieces,
I curse science and spirits.
"Release me from the shrine of ancients!"
Will I be free? To see the sunrise on the horizon?

Dematerialize me.
Let me be a part of her world.
For mine is mirthless and inhospitable,
A neglected cabin made of corpses.

Let me be a part of HIS world.
For mine is unCordiAL and FragiLe,
A precarious mansion made of zero-ones.

Even if one of our attempts fail,
Distance will only make our hearts fonder.
We will chase until the ends meet,
And find each other at the end of the horizon.

I am just a man.

Like many who came before me, I am just another person in a sea of consciousness, with specific sets of skills acquired through years of dedication and training, working just enough to survive the next day. My morning is early, often began before the break of dawn with a simple western-style breakfast of bacon, toast, eggs, and two to three cups of coffee, without sugar. Currently, I am living in a 1LDK apartment situated just around the outskirts of Tokyo, with a monthly rent of around sixty-thousand yen that includes gas, electricity, and water. My work starts from seven to five, with a quota to complete deserving of my paycheck and the all-too-common overtime, but I got used to it. I am currently a journalist—no, not like one of those hacks—for Mai2*chi Shimbun, a newspaper company. Relationship status, single. Not because I have no interest in love and romance, but let's just say I am currently holding on to a promise. Oh, I don't believe I've introduced myself. My name is Oogame Ryouichi, currently twenty-eight-years-old.

Three years have passed since then…

A lot has happened. The season changes, the economic and political climate fluctuates, disasters here and there, yet the world continues to turn regardless. I reentered the workforce the following spring after she left, moved to a different apartment with the money that Yuuya 'graciously' donated, and
save what remained for future investments; if it brings you comfort, my balance was back—and has been—on the 'black'. A net-positive. I'm sure this is something she expects out of me, somewhere out there, wherever she may be. On March of the same year, I attended my former student's graduation ceremony as I have promised them before.

After I left, the Literature Club went through a hard—but prosperous—time under its new supervising teacher, as well as the changing of the graduating old guards with a few new faces. Satsuki was the next appointed club leader, with Yuuki as the vice-president. Although the Literature Club no longer held the monopoly on chrysanthemum students, the club functioned as expected under Satsuki's management. The focus of the Literature Club, however, was changed drastically from what I originally envisioned. Instead of a focus on poems and literature, Satsuki encouraged its members—with Yuuki's support—on creating their own literature. She was still hell-bent on making a breakthrough into the light novel industry last time we exchanged messages, though I haven't kept touch with them as much as I like. I wonder what they are up to now…

Akizuki went out to study abroad after graduation in St. Petersburg, Russia, complete with honors and scholarship. Apparently, she was majoring in Russian and European Literature and arts, particularly that of love poems and folklore. When we met during her high school graduation, she openly spoke how she wished to expand her horizon and experience the world with her own eyes, visiting locales, and landmarks, as well as its history and folklore. Last time we spoke, she proudly stated how fluent her Russian has become, as well as a desire to return to her homeland. It brought a smile to me when she gleefully admitted how she wanted to become a teacher of language and the arts. If everything goes well, she should be graduating next year…

To my own surprise, Obase applied to Todai and was accepted. I never had doubts of his analytical skill and smarts, though I can't say the same about his work ethic; he chuckled when I pointed that fact, stating that the reason for his acceptance was adhering to his 'three keys for success'; 'effort, determination, and inside-man'. I can't exactly agree with the last of the three, but I guess the world does move in mysterious ways once in a while. Obase went on to major on the study of Artificial General Intelligence and is slated to graduate next year; he was particularly ardent when engaged with the subject, especially when the discussion leans towards the infamous 'Blackout Incident'. He was quick to retract his statement when asked, however; I can only assume it was something only students of the university could understand.

As for Mikawa…

Her score and achievements didn't go unnoticed. With a heartfelt voice and a soothing smile, she—the valedictorian—gave her poignant speech that shook both her friends and teachers, leaving some of them in tears. If I were to describe, let's just say I pulled a quick save with a handkerchief right before she made eye contact. Whatever lingering pain or regret there was, all of it was washed away to present a bright young woman with her eyes gazing outwards into the future the moment she took that step unto that podium—and like a bird that soars from its nest, it made me proud. It was quite an honor to have taught someone as accomplished as her, now that I think about it. Out of old time's sake, she latched on to me when we met, spouting words of gratitude before announcing her enrollment to Todai. Thought it initially came as a surprise—even to me—when she did, apparently her decision was emboldened by her boyfriend who is none other than Obase Shinjiro. Yes, that Obase. I can only give them my blessings, even when Obase boastfully—though secretly—flaunts how 'wild' she can be. Kids these days...

Despite the entire controversy, the school remained steadfast just as it has always been. Headmaster Murayama issued a clarification and a public apology on behalf of the school board, as well as the intention to resign; thankfully, the latter was discouraged by many members of the faculty—or so I was told by Ikari-sensei. Kitamura? He was nowhere in sight during the ceremony, though there
were rumors circulating at the time that officials were looking to apprehend him for questioning; apparently, even his wife and child were unsure of his whereabouts—not of his actions. In the end, the entire controversy quietly vanishes from public attention in the following weeks and life simply went along its merry ways, just as how it used to.

As for me?

Well… there isn't much to tell; I did mention that I now work as a journalist.

"Dubbed as the 'Fujiwara Initiative' by the university, the synthetic limbs-project and the overwhelming success on its trial last year had taken the medical world by storm," reports the anchor from the television as I savor my breakfast. It's nice to know there are things more interesting than the weather forecast on TV these days. "At a press conference yesterday evening, the university proudly stated that the first mass-production model of this wonder will be available in the coming months after—"

…but I do have my reasons for my bias towards the choice of career.

Is it money? Fame? Passion? No… nothing like that; it would be a mistake to think as such. If there is anything positive to note of, it is the access—the 'Press Pass'—journalists are entitled to, granting unprecedented access to the flow of information that goes in and around the world. It would be a lie of the century if I say that I have entirely moved on—on the contrary, I was emboldened. I haven't been idle; for the past three years, I have been searching—hunting—for that emissary. For Chousuke Yuuya. Using the connections I formed, the passes I acquired, and all available manpower available, I scoured the country hoping for a scent that would reveal his whereabouts, all the while jumping and writing from one story to another. It wasn't easy convincing my supervisor and the Editor-in-Chief at first, but everyone has a price—or a story they would like to hear.

Setting the eating utensils to the side, I quickly flip open my pocket notebook and listen intently to the news. The edges of my lips rise to a point and I nod with gratification, "As they say, 'all road leads to Rome…'"

It was quite a blessing that matters of Artificial General Intelligence, synthetic limbs, replacement organs, cloning—research topics of the likes, boomed. It made an easy front-page news material, with every known agency across the globe covering the topic religiously both in and outside of Japan. Thanks to my rudimentary know-how of coding and the likes, I was… volunteered to be at the forefront and was quick on the pursuit. It first started off meager, with little lead on where to go but to the university itself to question about the current progress and research; after all, the Editor-in-Chief isn't the only one to please in this occupation. From there, the trail goes everywhere. From the beaches of Okinawa to the tip of the peninsula in Hokkaido, I've visited and interviewed countless associates and other members of the press, all for the sake of tracking that man and reuniting with her—or at the very least, know of her fate. My investigation led me around in circles, sometime it even pulled me back to the same university or to an entirely different prefecture with little to no answer. We all know mankind isn't perfect; as much as he tried to claim those years back, he was no emissary of the moon. Yuuya did leave some crumbs around, but he was also quick in scattering them to lose the scent. One thing for certain, however…

All the information I've gathered, all the interviews, and all the deduction lead right back to the university here, in Tokyo.

And wherever Yuuya is, I'm sure Monika is with him. At least… that is my hope.

"Guess who has a shuttle to go to the 'moon' now, you bastard," I smirk. With haste, I pack all the notes into the bag and sling them over my shoulder. "Just a little more..."
Switching off the television and the lights, I make my way to the door—not to forget to glance towards the desk where she once rests. Atop, a single portrait—a sleeping beauty, if you will—of Monika is there to send me off; a picture I took once upon a time.

"I'm heading out."

The train rumbles through the city as the early morning rays cut through the gaps formed by the concrete towers and steel beams as it races against time towards the next stop. Its interior is packed to the brim from one end to the next with people, shuffling, grunting, and groaning as they patiently abide until their destination is announced. Some opt to distract themselves in hushed conversations, while others with their smartphones at hand. The commute never got easier, more so since my office is in Chiyoda-ward, close to the center of Tokyo; as much as we feel like canned sardines within this metal box, these are just one of the many aspects in life we simply have to get used to. From the simple mundane conversation to the complex gadget at hand, mankind sure has the knack of finding ways to distract us from all the ebb and flow of life, just enough to keep our sanity in check. After all, we are creatures of comfort.

There were times before where I would look forward to the vibration in my pocket, the slightest hint of a message that would brighten my day and lighten the jab the world has to offer; those days are long gone. Now on mornings spent swaying to and fro in the train, dozing off amidst the crowd, I occasionally dream of the place where I once was. She would greet me with a 'good morning' and a teasing smile, often with a cup of coffee at hand, before I was awoken by a bend on the track. It was but a dream, I know, but it was my means of distraction. I cup a hand over a yawn as my lung expands to gently tug the muscles of my jaw and draw a tear from the ducts of my eyes. Gently, the warmth of the early morning sun caresses my skin as it penetrates through the slits and crevice of the concrete canopy, nudging for my attention to its splendor, reflecting against the sleek surfaces of steel and glass, and vanishing behind a passing train on the next track. For that brief moment, my eyes perk up as I gaze outwards to find my reflection amongst the passengers of the next train—bearing a smile—before peeling away to its destination. Blinking, I crack a chuckle, shaking my head from side to side in slight disbelief; surely, it couldn't have…? That girl looks awfully… no, it's not possible; such coincidence is a thing of fiction, after all. But just a little longer, just a little more…

Even a world where you don't exist in has some meaning to it. But such a world is like an August without a summer holiday or a Santa that never laughed. And perhaps that is a little depressing to think about, so just a little more… let me hold onto this delusion of mine. Just a little longer…

"This train will soon arrive in TOKYO. The doors on the right side will open."

The door slides open and little by little, the flow of time resumes its course to herd us to our destination. Clutching my bag, I heave and take a step forward into the crowd, wading through the sea of faces and expressions with a smile I call my own. Keeping this stride, I walk to the exit and unto the streets beyond, towards the road that leads to my office. Each footstep I take carries the echo of your laughter, gradually ebbed away by the passage of time. How long will I be able to hold, I wonder? Pinning everything on the hopes of finding the 'envoy'… will she still be there? Will she still be the same?

...  

No… that isn't the right question to ask.
You knew beforehand how absurd everything was, right…? That's why you chose to leave that day—for my sake. Three years… I've burned your entire existence into my memory for the past three years, chasing ghosts from one end to the next, hoping to find that special day—a day that, perhaps, no matter how far we stretch our hands, remains unreachable. It is a foolish notion, a futile pursuit, an idiot's gamble… and I knew! But I continued on, even as the needles of the clock give me sidelong glances, making my way through this world—a world where you don't exist—is a promise I hold dearly to you. So just a little longer, just a little more… even if it may turn into a lie or a tragedy, let me continue wishing for that seemingly unreal days with abnormal meanings, for just a little more…

Punching in the codes, I log my attendance and walk into the office, greeting my co-workers with a simple nod as I make my way to my desk. With a flick of a switch and a press of a button, the computer comes to life. In a single move, I unfurl the notes I've collected and crack my hands. There is a job to do, an article to write, and many more contacts to interview.

But let me pursue that lie, for just a little longer… just a little more…

Have you ever heard about the 'Red thread of fate'?

I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. It is said that the gods tie an invisible red cord around the pinky finger of those that are destined to meet one another in a certain way. The string may stretch or tangle, but never break, and the two people who are connected by the red thread are destined lovers, regardless of place, time, or circumstances. It is a concept popularized in many forms of media, more so from that anime by Sh^nkai Mxkoto about two lovers from different time planes. But what if that string is tied to the pinky of someone from an entirely different reality? One whom many would scoff as nothing but a work of fiction? Is it even possible? Will it break? If that is the case, the gods must have a cruel sense of humor—or that person has earned a righteous ire for such judgment.

At least I thought it was a spiteful joke; I wasn't the first to question its legitimacy, after all. But, let me ask you this one simple question…

'In this world of infinite choices, how far would you go just to find that special day?'

I admit, I have made countless dubious decisions, met scrupulous and chivalrous characters, tangled with taboo, as well as dealing with the devil himself. Was I anything special? No, nothing of the likes. I wasn't born a noble or a prince, nor was I gifted with an abundance of talent and aptitude—as I said, I am but a simple man. But like the two lovers separated by different time planes, we fought with all our might and made the most out of our situations, all for the sake for us to find—no, to be with the one our thread is connected to.

We fought for it…

"Oogame-senpai," calls out one of my co-workers. I swivel my chair towards the source of the voice. "There's someone looking for you."

I sigh and click my tongue, taking glances at the half-completed article on my computer. Couldn't have better timing. "Is it that Russian girl? Can it wait?"

"N-no, I don't think so," he replies. "She's a half, that's for sure. Though I'm not sure she's—wait, you knew a Russian girl?"

"Acquaintance, Ishikawa."

"How'd you met?"
"Interview. I was doing my own investigation on ToDai's 'Fujiwara Initiative' and all this rumor about cloned replacement organs, after all. Word is they could even create an entire human brain—it's too far-fetch, if you ask," I sigh, quickly attempting to steer the conversation back on track. "But that's another story. Now, about that guest… does she have a name?"

Ishikawa shakes his head, "N-no, I… didn't get to ask. She mentioned how you're acquainted…? But that's it. To be honest, she is quite the looker, too…"

"Oi, oi…" I chuckle. "If she happens to carry valuable information, the last thing I need is her reluctance to cooperate."

"Y-yes! Sorry, senpai!"

"It's fine, it's fine…" I wave with glee. "You interns could learn a thing or two anyway. Fine, I'll meet her soon—tell her to wait in the guest room, would you kindly? Meet me back here when you're done, I'll teach you a bit about interviews and note-taking."

Just another day in the office. As Ishikawa hastens his pace, I quietly observe at a distance at his demeanor up until he disappears beyond the corner—not to forget to make a mental note of his enthusiasm and immaturity. There was a time when I was like him once; idealistic, naïve, and young. I'm not saying twenty-eight is old, but… sometimes, it does feel like that, doesn't it? If it weren't because of her, I probably wouldn't be where I am today…

Well, let's shelf that thought for now.

With a recorder at hand, a pen, and a notebook, I stroll towards the corner and awaits Ishikawa's return with patience. The silent 'thump' of his shoes as he marches down the corner alerts me to his presence and, with haste, he clears his throat with an expression I describe to be distracted, at best,

"She wishes to see you alone, senpai."

...  

Must be that nosy Russian girl…

"Alright, I'll go."

Keeping my notes ready, I steady my pace towards the guest room as I prepare the questions I'll inquire as well as the recorder. There are a number of factors to consider when exchanging information between members of the press, particularly sensitive materials that have yet been made public to the population. But more so than formalities, presentation is what makes or breaks a negotiation. How am I supposed to greet her? Is my English serviceable, I wonder? Is my tie a little too tight, or is there a button loose? How is my breath? Such thoughts keep my mind occupied up until the door stands before me. Taking a deep breath, I heave the last of my anxiety and gently open the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, I'm—…!"

We fought for it. So… what's your excuse?

Standing before me, a girl in her early twenties with overflowing auburn hair greets me with a gentle, yearning smile. Her short-sleeved white summer dress, though simple, compliments her slender figure and the slight fair complexion of her skin to give off a sense of adult-like immaturity, matching her cream-colored cardigan and white flats. The tails of her long, white ribbon flow down her back, keeping her hair neatly tied in a ponytail that extends over her shoulders and down to her waist.
But most of all, her eyes—bright, green emerald eyes—that pierces through the rainclouds and my disbelief.

My lips went ajar and my breath is stolen as my notes and pen tumble to clutter the floor. Trembling and stuttering, pockets of sentimental emotions—once suppressed—forms and broke free from the corners of my eye, "I… how… I have been…"

"I have been searching…"

With a nod, her tears gently roll down her cheeks. "You found me… ahaha…!"

The red thread of fate may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.

…

"I'm home."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

Thank you for your support up until the conclusion of 'Monika'! It was a great pleasure for me to write this tale of Oogame and Monika, their struggle, and its conclusion!

Although the story 'ends' here, there is still an epilogue and a few announcements to make. Once again, I humbly thank you for all your support through the year!

-iMegu
Epilogue: Our Reality (Overture)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Our Reality (Overture)**

I am a hunter who was once proud,  
A man who turns the gears of life,  
The knight who wields a powerful sword,  
The turtle with breaking defenses,  
The crow with broken wings.

Chasing the great beast, I have become the hunted.  
I told the world to shut up, to make everything disappear.  
Do not tell me the odds of capturing her.  
Trials and tribulations, come what may,  
Will only strengthen my longing for the great beast.

The Wolf's whisper of sinful desires,  
The Cat's purr of seductive temptation,  
The death of the poor lonely Wren,  
The Fox's call for wisdom.  
Efforts to break me to pieces, yet I let none break me.

For each resolute, I have learned.  
It is not the sinful desires that I wanted,  
Neither was it my cravings for victory.  
From each trial, I have seen the truth,  
About me and about the great beast.

The great beast with colorful feathers.  
The girl with emerald eyes.  
The blade that pierces the future.  
The songbird that provides solace.  
The woman of my life.

Monika

The cacophonous echo of the clock pierces my ear, forcing my lung to draw a sudden intake of air to push a cough. I wince my eyes tighter to a close as glints of light lazily struggle to pry them open, yanking my consciousness away from an agreeable reality—a dream—I have the pleasure to appreciate. With groggy exasperation and haste, I reach for the source of the irritation with my right in an attempt to silence the infernal machine and leave my mind in peace, pleading for a quick return to dreamland that gradually distances itself further and further. But as the echo dies with a push of a button, so does my desire to return to rest.

Like a stage, the curtains of my eyes slowly draws open to reveal the mundane scenery of a ceiling in my apartment.

So… was it all a dream? Stupid question, of course, it was; everything fell into place all too
conveniently for it not to be. There are still 'blanks' to fill and many more possibilities to consider, but then again… the future itself is a giant box of an enigma. It felt… real, however—like a premonition of sorts. They say one can catch glimpses of the future in a dream occasionally, though whether that statement can be scientifically proven is a question of its own. In any case, the longer this goes on, the stranger my train of thoughts will go—I definitely should start the day.

Then again… it's the weekends. So why the hell should I get out of bed?

I draw my breath and heave to gradually shake my senses from slumber, notably that of my left arm that has been feeling quite numb for a while now. Glancing to my left, a rush of blood runs across my cheeks alongside an impudent smile that extends abruptly at the sight.

There, with her hair unkempt and her eyes shut tight, the girl beyond the screen—Monika—sleeps peacefully, using my arm as a pillow. With the covers barely shrouding her bare shoulders she winces, moaning groggily and seductively as she snuggles a little closer for comfort to rest her left arm on my chest—one whose fingers I wrap around mine. My cheek flares like cherry blossoms on early spring as she pulls her leg closer, overwhelmed by the sensation of our naked skin brushing and rubbing, smooth like the bosom of an infant, distorting my thoughts like a broken record and tempting my guile with unspeakably vulgar intentions; if this is still a dream, I sincerely wish not to be awaken. But alas, common sense prevails. With care I slide my arm away using the pillow underneath as a replacement, gently and delicately, so as not to disturb her slumber before pulling myself into an upright position to recompose; my chest thumps louder and louder by the minute. Then listlessly, she moans, "Ryou… five more minutes… please…"

My cheeks promptly burst in color, rushed by a stream of… pleasant memories of the past couple of days.

To claim that it's 'a heartfelt and tearful reunion' is what I can proudly claim as an understatement of the century. That warmth, her movements, the echo of our heartbeats… just a brief recollection of it all sends my face blushing like a young boy with his first childhood crush. And with only a glance at this defenseless sleeping Venus, my mind turns into an incongruous mess; any man would be driven to insanity with lustful thoughts and desires. It started awkward, clumsy, and painful for both of us, but all that pent-up frustration and yearn transformed into pleasure and euphoria that were paid in full within a lengthy session—and still, we demanded more until our bodies gave way to fatigue. This continued for the next night and the next. Even now, the temptation to peek under those covers for just a glimpse at those supple pair lingers…

…actually, nothing wrong with that, right?

…

Answering the devil's whisper, I gently lift the covers for a peek. Just a peek…

"…Like what you see?"

Like a child caught with his hand in a cookie jar, the second my attention is ensnared by the drowsy pair of emerald green jewels, what mischievous thoughts persisted disperses into thin air as my expression turns ghostly white. The covers flutter down to once again conceal my bounty as she smiles a flirtatious 'good morning', giggling playfully to blush. Sitting in an upright position with the covers clutched tightly to wrap over her nude, she jokingly pulls a 'jab' and amorously observes with glee like a cat to its prey, "You pervert…"

"Says the one who moans uncontrollably and demanded more…"
"You're not complaining…"

"How can I?" I bashfully chuckle, "You're the one who kept wrapping your legs around; there was no escape for me."

She leans a little closer, clutching her covers tightly to press on her cleavage just enough to tease, "And if I didn't? Are you going to try to run away?"

...

*Cheeky girl*

"I just can't win against you, can I?"

"Not often," she giggles playfully and leans for a kiss—one I kindly oblige. Our lips brush and with a quick peck, we bask in the sweet sensation that tinges our senses before parting, bashfully lost in affection like young fools. "Good morning."

"And a good morning to you, too."

As the light from the curtains reflects upon her emerald eyes, the gears that govern my thoughts 'clicks', bewitched by the pair of stones that lovingly presents itself before me. To think just a few days ago—or more accurately, for years—that such prospect is but a delusion of a desperate fool; a pipedream akin to a rose that blooms beyond a window, or a portrait that is locked away in a glass casing. Never to be touched or disturbed, only to be... *admired.*

But as I reach for her cheeks to caress, feeling the soft and silk-like sensation of her skin deemed by 'them' as artificial—to *touch*—and to find warmth that permeates from her hand that gently wraps around mine, I find it difficult to denounce this as a dream. The rising and falling of the covers, influenced by the rhythm of her breath, the soft texture of her lips, her glistening emerald eyes... this—as far as my senses go—is as real as reality can be.

And it is *our* reality.

"What's wrong, silly...?" she choirs with a giggle. "Suddenly being all touchy and sentimental like that—not that I mind... ahaha..."

I chuckle softly and pull a grin that stretches from ear to ear, "Nothing much. Just... reminiscing, that's all."

"Well..." Monika smiles flirtatiously, purring. "We can always *reminisce* a little more if you like...?"

...

As I said, *cheeky girl.* "I'd love to, but I have an appointment today, remember? I'll be taking the shower, for now."

"Nnn..."

Like a spoiled brat, Monika puts on one of her best 'long face' to deter and overrule my resolution, tickling my heart with glee. Honestly, I would love to entertain her, but as time would have it there are boxes to tick and checklists to complete—something far more important that requires my attention. Regretfully I part from the entrancing pleasure that comes from touching her skin, leaving me a little empty on the inside as she remains insistent up until I vanish beyond the doors of the
bathroom.

So what is it that outweighs the joy of frolicking with Monika? Well, that would be none other than the 'emissary', of course.

…

The 'emissary', Chousuke Yuuya.

"Yay, what a tearful reunion… spare me the mush, and go get a room…"

For the sake of transparency, let's rewind for a bit—back to that meeting room. Just as the day he came to take her away, the 'emissary' plants a wide, mocking grin as he silently observes, away from the corners of my vision; if common sense and civility happen to be absent that day, Yuuya might suffer a concussion or two—or I, a sudden shock. He calmly took his step into the spotlight once more, unfazed, with hands in his pockets and his iconic shit-eating grin. With confidence, he opens his lips to speak his peace. "It's been a while, hasn't it Kame-yan?"

"Yuuya… it sure has."

And not a single day had passed; from how he walks to the way he speaks, Yuuya remained just as how he was three years before. With a stride of confidence, the man takes his place before me as if to taunt knowing full-well of the risk, yet well-aware of his immunity—more so if Monika is in the equation. Indeed, the moment he moves unto the plate, she swiftly cuts between us and gestures for civility—to grant him a chance to speak. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions in mind."

"And…" he continues with a smirk, "…and I see you've met my… cousin."

"Cousin!?!"

Monika laughs nervously as I quickly search her for answers. "It's a long story… hahaha…"

"—Watanabe Monika," Yuuya abruptly interrupt. "Watanabe, using the kanji 'to cross' and 'border', as in the 'border of an area'. Common, but… fitting, isn't it?"

With a snide that hide no secret, the Yankee reach deep into the pocket of his walnut briefcase and drew a sealed folder from within. He spared no time, of course—just as he always have—to detail the contents of the object in question. From diplomas to birth certificates, everything that Monika could ever dream of having was accounted for; I didn't even expect to find her family history—legalized, complete with both the names of her parents. The 'official' account that came straight from the horse's mouth was how she—Monika—was the sole survivor of her family during the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, thus granting Yuuya the title as her guardian for 'being the next kin'. At least, that is the general gist of it.

"Are these even…?"

"Legal?" Yuuya interrupts. "Hardly. But that's a national secret—and if I tell you anymore, I may have to… silence you."

He cackles mischievously, biting on the butt of the cigarette he drew from his pocket. "Which is why I came here today. You see… what we accomplished could be the envy of many nations, so to speak. It's still imperfect, of course, but that is where you come in."

He drew his breath and gave one of the longest gesture of hopeful contempt.
"Work for us, Kame-yan."

There wasn't a trace of devious intention or threat coming from his tone, nor was there the all-too-familiar uncanny grin of his. For the first time in forever, Yuuya's gaze was as sharp as a blade and as clear as the moon on a cloudless night. It was not a threat, nor was it an ultimatum.

'Work for us', he said.

It was an offer.

I'm not going to bore with the details or the nuances, as that is overstepping my boundaries. To put it simply, Monika is not human—at least, not within the written definition in published dictionaries. All the documents, the certificates—everything regarding Monika was forged, but it is as legitimate as a Japanese citizen would expect. She was regarded by 'them' as the first—and only—success as part of the 'initiative'. Suffice to say, she was a post-human creation—a prototype towards the 'next stage in human evolution', or so Yuuya said. Who is 'them' and what is the 'initiative', you may ask? That is sadly classified; if you believe all that Libitina rumor as something, you haven't seen or heard of nothing yet.

Oh, who am I kidding? Even I don't quite catch everything he said—nor do I try to understand it.

"Can you repeat that…?"

"Simple, Kame-yan," Yuuya smirks. "She's free to go with you, on the condition that you report any changes—be it physical or mental—back to me. To us."

"And if I don't…?"

"You will." he scoffs, "I know you."

All this talk about 'next step in evolution', or 'not-quite synthetic', and 'almost flesh and bone' were all gibberish to me then as it was now; frankly, I didn't care. He didn't need to threaten or shove an insurmountable amount of cash up front nor, with hindsight, do I see the need for him to pour all that justification—I couldn't even think of rejecting! All I could ever ask for was there at that moment, and that was enough to convince me to sign another contract with the devil.

And as foolish as it may sound, I guess even Monika understood that perfectly clear; we were closing a chapter of our lives, and starting anew.

Together.

"So, Kame-yan…" Yuuya cuts in, offering his hand for a handshake. "Do we have a deal…?"

I don't see the need for me to elaborate on what happened after now, do I?

And thus here we are, in this humble apartment, taking our first step together one at a time. As much as I'd like to give this relationship a little more push, it will take some time until they give the green light; Monika may not have a family of her own, but her… guardians are equally precarious as one would expect. This is their 'daughter' after all, so to speak. I do have plans to introduce her to my parents sometime next week, however... but I wonder how will they take her…?
You know, maybe taking over the family's bookstore isn't quite a bad idea after all... I should discuss this with her when we have the time.

But now's not it. I need to finish up to meet Yuuya and—

"I'm coming in...!"

The door of the bathroom swings open to the side with a cracking force, quickly robbing my senses in a flurry of bewilderment and awe—mostly the former. With just a towel that wraps seductively to pronounce her figure, Monika enters the bathroom before immediately discarding both it and her ribbon with a quick tug and a toss to the basket—a basket where my towels and change of clothes are prepared. She jiggles forward, pushing the door of the shower open with such force before reaching for my stature and leans for a kiss. As much as I enjoy the eye-candy and the tingle...

...now is definitely not the time for it...!

"M-Monika, dear, I need to hurry or—"

"It can wait."

"Monika, no!"

"Monika, yes...!"

... To add with the sore hip, let's just say that I was late to the rendezvous by about an hour.

"...Just when I thought you ditched me for a few more hours..."

"And miss seeing your sorry face...? I dare not."

Yuuya snickers with glee. "Wise move. Is that hip alright, by the way? You're walking kinda' funny... heh."

With a jovial smile and his all-too-common impetuous character, the man known as Chousuke Yuuya motions with his hand for me to take a seat. As part of the agreement, I am to report all changes on Monika—physical or otherwise—on a monthly basis at an agreed location, followed with a more or less informal inquire of my plans ahead. If you're wondering then yes, I can say that this is nothing short than a 'meet the bride's parents'-scenario I envisioned—wasn't what I expected, of course, but it felt the same regardless.

As aggravating the entire shenanigan is and with the nature of Monika's fabricated history in mind, it was at the very least less of a chagrin than the fact that he—Yuuya—is regarded as her first cousin. Incidentally, that makes us—by law—family.

I'm not sure whether that is a positive or a deluxe recipe for a disaster.

"So..." he starts with a grin. "How was it...?"

And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse...
"But I guess it was a given…?"

"W-well… to be honest, it was… aah… pleasant. It was nice…"

Resting his weight on the backrest, his attention darts from top to bottom, side to side.

"I don't doubt it…" he nods. "The décor in this place is nice and pleasant…"

…

He grins mischievously. "Joking aside…"

**This son-of-a-bitch…**

"I can tell that everything is going well—that's good! That's good… now, is there anything you wish to report?"

Deepening his voice and his tone, Yuuya crosses his arm and leans to bear his weight upon me. "Or at least, details about your plan for the future?"

"My plans, you say…"

And with a grin that knows everything, the 'emissary' pushes the conversation forward in telling anticipation. I never doubted that he may have read my intentions prior, behind those pair of shades of his; after all, that goal has remained steadfast since time immemorial—and I hardly tried to keep it a secret. It would make little sense—nor is it worth the time and effort—to conjure a reason; as much as our species is driven by the urge to reproduce, we are still creatures of emotion.

"Well… I plan to invite her to Shizuoka this weekend, introduce her to my parents, and… you know… start a new chapter."

His eyes perk up with interest, "Oh…?"

"In short, Yuuya," I continue with a chuckle. "I'm asking for permission to take her hand in marriage."

Trying to read through his expression behind those pair of shades is as challenging as restraining me from bursting into flowery red petals, more so as realization gnaws after my bold proclamation. But with his hand in his pocket, a toothpick that wiggles up and down between his teeth, and his sunglasses that slowly slides down the rim of his nose, the 'emissary' maintains his composure and remains as stiff as marble, broken only by a yawn as he undauntedly glare with nary a hint of amusement. Scratching the back of his head, he sighs and clicks his tongue, "Gee, I wonder why I'm not surprised…"

He clears his throat, chuckling with glee. "This is why hikikomori are so predictable—well, at least you are,"

"What's next," he continues with a shrug, "You're going to have three kids and continue your family's business?"

…

"…Were you spying on me?"

He breaks into a guffaw. "Blind luck, but… figures. Told you so—you're all damn predictable!"
With a grin that stretches from ear to ear, Yuuya breaks into a chuckle at my interruption, waving aimlessly to 'shoo' me away before he continues. I won't lie, sometimes I even surprise myself as to why I knew this rebel in the first place; someone as chaotic as him will definitely be the death of me long before age factors in.

But that's just… him, Chousuke Yuuya. Some things just never seem to change…

"So… is that a 'no', I guess…?"

"Oh, no it's not like that. Don't get the wrong idea, we'll support you either way—after all, you will still need to report all changes regardless. Question is…" he leans forward and peeks over his shades with a piercing glance…

"Are you sure about it?"

I pause to think. "…What do you mean by that…?"

"Nothing, just… you know," Yuuya continues as he flicks his toothpick unto the saucer or his tea. "As much as we're proud of our achievements, there are still things we're unsure of—more so because she doesn't consent to it. But since you're willing to take that extra step, I guess might as well…"

"Wait, what do you mean by—"

"Ask your girlfriend."

Taking a sip of his tea, Yuuya sighs with pleasure and clears his throat. "Aah… always calms me down; good shit, this is. But anyway… have you seen that movie about artificial human? The one based on that book of yours—its sequel, I mean."

"You mean Blxde R4inner Twxnty-for—"

"Yeah, yeah… that's the one. Seen it?"

"Yes, I have…? But what does that have to do with—"

"Then, do you remember the details about… the offspring? Or its complication…?"

…I envy people who haven't met you…

I shake my head, keeping my mouth shut. A cocky grin stretches across his features from ear to ear. "I thought as much."

"Well, theoretically she can do what I think you're planning," he continues with smugness. "But there may be problems… such as immune-system deficiency or what-not, for example—though, I'm guessing dumping you all this shit won't faze you anyway. Why the hell do I even bother…?"

Yuuya takes another sip from his cup to wet his throat. "Anyway, if things do work out, we'd love to examine the offspring, naturally—and don't worry, we'll compensate handsomely."

"Like hell you will…"

"In any case," he proceeds with a chuckle as he fixes his shades. "You will have our permission, but…"

He takes a pause.
"This time, do think about it seriously—of your action, and our offer."

The road that leads from the station branches unto the distance, illuminated by an interval of street lights and adjacent commercial and residential buildings that towers on both sides. Amongst the crowd of nobodies, I am but a number in the census, a name in a roster, another expendable manpower; just a gear in society's grand contraption. We move according to the laws dictated by those gone before, live by the code of our ancestors, and one day perish by the natural order. Yet like the billions of other strangers, we all have a story of our own—a tale that is sometimes heartwarming, sporadically inspiring, and also periodically gut-wrenching.

As I walk down this familiar path, it gradually dawns on me how fast the end of my story is approaching—or to be clear, a chapter of it.

Gazing up towards the sky under the towering presence of this manmade structure, I catch a glimpse of a resonating warmth from one of the room as it beckons to welcome my return. Another line is read and another page will soon be turned as the elevator takes me up towards the source of that amenity and my feet pulls me ever closer towards the door, intensifying the beating of my heart. Pages after pages, word per word, up until I stand before this door with a key at hand. With just a turn and at the echo of a 'click', the door is unlocked and with a voice, I called; thus, the last few pages of my story is turned.

"I'm home."

From beyond a second door, pass the kitchen and the hall, a gentle voice echoes.

"Welcome home!"

Taking my time, I undress my footwear and align them side by side her pair of white flats before making my way through the kitchen towards the door. Immediately, a sweet, enticing waft of what I can assume to be apricots tickles my nostrils as I pass the bathroom, firing the pistons in my mind to conclude her latest activity. Was it her soap? Or perhaps, her shampoo? Regardless, the answer to that question lies beyond the door and I—just as I had always been since our first rendezvous—gently open the door.

And there she is.

With a smile that could keep you warm on a cold winter's day and rose-tinted cheeks that seemingly levitate her pair of reading glasses, Monika rises from her seat at the beckon of the door. My heart skips a beat as I examine her attire from head to toe; a simple striped cotton shirt and long pants, with an apron dress that is vaguely analogous to a housewife. A sight any man would desire. Gently setting aside her spectacles, Monika closes the distance between us and pulls me into an embrace that is followed by a soft kiss. A surge of electricity runs through my spine as my heart wallops, corresponding to the soft and sweet sensation that envelopes my lips, gradually absorbing my exhaustion and sending my thoughts to euphoria; pleasant energy lingers as we part, welcoming me home and tinting our cheeks.

Still locked in our embrace, Monika giggles bashfully and starts, "Welcome home… would you like to have dinner?"

"Is that the only thing you're offering?"

"You're expecting a 'dinner, bath, or me'-question, are you?" she presses on my chest with her index finger, grinning flirtatiously. "Too bad~…ahaha!"
With a gentle shove and a wink, she breaks free from my clutch to make her way towards the kitchen—not forgetting to reach for the kitchen apron at the side. For more than a minute or two, my mind is dazed, smitten by how the thin piece of fabric hugs her anatomy to accentuate her voluptuous, yet delicate posture. How lucky can one man be? But I guess even if the world’s fortune smiles upon you, all of this won’t be possible without Yuuya and their help to bring her to reality. The woman of my dreams, then but a character of a successful visual novel out of chance, now working her magic with the knife, chopsticks, and frying pan.

And I want to make this last. I will make this last.

"What's for dinner?" I start. "I can cook as usual—or we can order out, you know…"

"Fujiwara-san taught me, so of course I know how to cook! And ordering out is not healthy! We're having stir fry vegetables, by the way!"

"Just vegetables?"

"Ahaha…! I'll change your mind, you'll see!"

As she returns to her activities, I can't help myself but feel at ease at our prospect. There will probably be arguments and disagreements down our path, or unforeseen obstacles emerging out of nowhere, but that's just how life is. Like nature itself, the sun will rise again in the distance and before long, the dawn will light the road once more to lead us towards a world of infinite choices. Someday we'll fade away and disappear like foam, but until that day comes, at the very least we will shower and drown in each other's love selfishly, side by side. And I couldn't have asked for anything more.

Yes... I've made up my mind.

Disappearing into the bedroom, I make my way to the closet and reach for a box I kept away for some time. Its contents are nothing more than remnants of my past life, a collection of paraphernalia from USB sticks to works of fiction we grew to love—one of which, an item I couldn't properly gift to her, safely stored in a small, elegant, black velvet box. A glimpse at the object brings forth a surge of memories of the past; the road we paved isn't always easy to traverse, yet still, it was just the beginning. Gently I pocket the velvet box and sigh to clear my mind, pacing back and forth before the closet, reciting everything to near perfect order—or at least, as close as I can make it. Satisfied, I march back to the living room to find Monika waiting patiently on the kitchen table with the dish served at the center; a rice cooker sits neatly at one end of the table. "You... you did cook the rice properly, right?"

"I prepared them before you're home, silly!" she pouts before plopping open the cover of the rice cooker. A sweet, distinctive fragrance immediately tickles my nose. "Jajya~n...! Have some faith in me sometimes... ahaha!"

"Last time I did, a girl trapped me in an eternal classroom."

"Oh? And where is that girl now?"

"Gee... where, I wonder?"

Monika leans forward, as if to emphasize the voluptuous pair of bosoms she presents on the table alongside a teasing know-it-all smile that I can never mistake. "Are you having second thoughts?"

A grin stretches from ear to ear as I break into a chuckle.
"Not. One. Bit. Now, let's see if what you said is true…!"
I do have to confess, she does know how to prove a point…
…
…But I would still prefer having the one thing that truly makes a meal: meat.

Everything began from a single visual novel, eight years ago. She was but a fictitious tragic character written by one man, designed to capture the hearts of millions. I was but a statistic, a single digit amongst a million others who were enamored by her charm. As those who remembered her gradually dwindle from the passage of time, I—the fool—remained steadfast. Whether it was out of stubbornness and passion, or out of obsession and pride, the fool pursued her to the ends of the earth with all available knowledge and skills at his disposal, recruiting a shady ally along the way in a selfish desire to answer her ripping cry for help in the name of love; self-preservation was the least of his concern, as long as they could be united in a single reality. Unbeknownst to him, fate led him down that path all along. As far as legends go, the 'Red String of Fate' may tangle, stretch, or change its shape. But it will never break.

This was a story about 'the Hunter' and 'the Beast'.
The tale of the 'Knight' and the 'Sword'.
An anecdote of 'The Turtle and the Songbird'.
This is my story as much as it is hers.

"Say… Monika?" I start as I tidy the last of the dishes. "Can I ask you about something?"

Sitting at the desk, Monika was fondly caressing the computer before my interruption disrupted her focus. With a gentle—but troubled—smile, she pours her attention towards me, as if knowing precisely to the nature of the question. A lump forms under my throat, forcing me to swallow a ball of spit as well as a sigh to ease my thoughts as I rummage through my pocket and feel the texture of the velvet box. Timing is everything, and there will be no turning back. "Do you… miss of the old days, by any chance?"

"What makes you say that?"

I shrug, slowly closing our distance. "Well, you've been quite fixated to the computer for a while."

"O-oh, I-I just… I just think it's well-made, that's all…?"

"Reeeaally…?" I grin, hoping to lighten the mood. "I do admit that it was top-of-the-line at the time, but that's an old model that is barely functioning these days. I plan to throw it away, but I guess it held a lot of sentimental value to you. After all…"

I reach out towards her object of fixation, examining it. "It was a place you used to call… Home, right?"

"Ahaha… busted, I guess." she laughs nervously. "It's not that I miss those days, Ryou-kun, it's just…"

…
"Have you ever thought about... everything? About how we got together, how odd and absurd everything was, how...?"

"...Lucky, we are?"

She giggles in response. "...Yes, that too. But don't you feel troubled to be in a relationship with someone like me?"

"I am thankful, don't get me wrong," she continues with unease. "But... why me? I mean, let's face it, I'm not even sure I can grant you the future you want."

Not this again...

"I-I don't mean to discourage you, it's just that... I'm not exactly real, my body is—itta-ta-ta-tai...!

Monika flinches and struggles briefly as I pull on her cheeks as hard as I possibly can. Instinctively, she flails her arm and attacks the perpetrator in a—admittedly—pathetic display of resistance. It does look adorably cute, however. Loosening the grip of my index and thumb, I failed to hide the extending grin that stretches from ear to ear as she starts rubbing her cheeks and mounts a desperate—but sorry—attempt of counter-attack involving light jabs across my chess. With a smile, I start, "Did that hurt?"

"Of course it does, you idiot!" she whines in protest. "You stupid, stupid, stupid—"

"Then that's real enough for me."

"Monika," I continue as she slows down. "I know that the road ahead won't be easy, nor can I promise you that it will all be roses and butterflies all the time."

I touch her shoulder, prompting her to search for my dark eyes. "There will be sadness, there will be pain. And there will likely be moments of doubts and hesitation. But at least, this time..."

With the widest grin I can muster, I look deep into her emerald eyes.

"...this time, we have each other."

Her irises rise and her lips went agape as if her desire to speak vanishes along with her voice. She darts her eyes to the side, her cheeks bloom in color, and she mutters unintelligibly as if at a loss of words. Then, looking up with a glint from her emeralds, she giggles lightly and clutches the fabric of my shirt. "You always know how to calm me down, somehow..."

"What can I say," I chuckle and pat her head. "It's my specialty."

"Ha-ha... very funny, you silly turtle."

"Says the moody songbird."

"Songbird!?" she exclaims. "Is that what you call me?"

"Indeed it is—which, reminds me..."

Using my free hand, I reach into my pocket and feel its texture one last time. With her attention occupied on my patting hand, gently I pull and present the collection of our desires and hope on the desk, beautifully preserved in a small, velvet box. Her eyes lit up as she gasps, more so after I carefully lift the covers open to reveal a single silver band that rests between two pillows—a sight, I'm sure, she's seen before in a different reality. "I believe this belongs to you."
Delicately, she takes the ring off from its hold, admiring its glint with marvel, shifting her eyes back and forth from the object to the giver—to me. She looks up with eyes that glosses under the light and a smile that beams with anticipation, pulling her hand close to her chest as the echo of her heartbeat resonates between us. "Is… is this… are you sure about this?"

"Well…" I cough to clear my throat. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Positively? Definitely?"

"I'll say that a thousand times, yes. Yes, I am."

"Absolutely, without a single hint of regret?"

"The sun can explode and the world can sink under the waves if I lied."

My eyes closed shut and I exhale the last of my worries.

"So… can I have your answer?"

Monika giggles softly and wipes the tears that form under her pair of emeralds, grasping her left hand and pulls it close to her chest, enveloping her fingers. Even if our lips were sewn shut or our ears had grown deaf, with just our body language and eye contact to spare, we knew of the answer far before it was asked. As much as this is a story about me, it is also hers.

This is a story about Monika.

And as the last page of my chronicle is turned, a new chapter begins. With our hand on the pen and an empty page of infinite possibilities, we draw the first stroke to start a new journey of our own. A story about us.

…

"Do I have to sing for it?"

This is 'Our Reality'.

-FIN-

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note

From my self, I thank you for reading up until the end. Although this epilogue concludes 'Monika', this is only one half of the entire story as this is the end of SIDE A. Alongside a few side-stories I plan to work in the near future, SIDE B will be focusing exclusively on Monika's perspective.

Once more, I say thank you very much from the bottom of my heart! Please look forward to my next work, Oogame: The World the Girl Only Knows.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!