Betrayal. Honoka has suffered from this feeling for two years and it's μ's fault. Finally reaching their limit, Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa move away from Tokyo to begin a new life with new direction, new-found freedom, and new challenges. Rated Mature just in case.

This is a continuation of the short story "Escape," by author nobodD on FanFiction.net

- Inspired by Escape by nobodD
Chapter 1

*Preface:* this story was written between April 2016 and January 2017 and published on FanFiction.net. It is being moved here as I plan on continuing my writing on this site in the future. Original publication dates will be noted before each chapter mostly for my reference. Other than the removal of superfluous author's notes, it will be exactly the same as the FF.net version. Thank you for reading.

**Published 26 April 2016**

A/N: This is a continuation of the story “Escape,” by the prolific FanFiction.net author nobodD. While one could understand this story without reading nobodD’s work, I HIGHLY encourage you to read their story first (if nothing else, because it’s really good).

nobodD was gracious enough to allow me to try to continue their work. I tried to be as true to the original as possible, though I did change one element of the dynamic between the three girls. I leave it to you to decide if my interpretation does the original its full justice.

I hope everyone enjoys my first piece of fan fiction.

*To all who read these lines, my thanks. To all who enjoy these lines, my happiness.*

Chapter 1

*It’s cold.*

A solitary snowflake made its way from the sky to her face, setting itself upon her cold, red nose. Thousands of meters it had fallen from the clouds above, and while many of its brethren had set themselves upon each other in drifts deeper than the young woman’s waist, this flake would gently caress the nose of a girl waiting on the platform a train station.

This train station. Where were they, exactly? Honoka had mentioned something about taking local trains to their destination, rather than express trains or the high-speed shinkansen. ‘If we’re spotted leaving on a local train, the others won’t expect us to travel hours and hours to our final destination. They’ll think we’re just skipping to the next town!’
I guess that’s Honoka for you. Impulsive, carefree, yet when it’s most needed she can dazzle with foresight and guile.

So how far away are we now? They had ridden for a few hours then slept overnight in Shim-Maebashi station so that the next morning they could catch the first train northward. Now standing in a station waiting for their final transfer, Arisa pondered the distance between Tokyo and their current location….. wherever that was.

‘Tokyo is big, so let’s put something even bigger between us and our old lives,’ Honoka had said. Mountains. Towering behemoths that define a region and a lifestyle. A metaphorical wall to keep our old fears and troubles at bay. A literal passage from one way of life to another.

A big city in Hokuriku, an area north of Tokyo on the Sea of Japan. That’s where the girls had agreed to move to, while leaving their precise destination up to Honoka. If only one of them knew exactly where they were going, the less likely it’d be for the information to slip out accidentally.

With four of the five legs of their journey complete, they now waited for that final train to take them home.

*sigh* Just one more train. Then… then we can stop running. Then we can breathe. Then we can...

Arisa felt a small smile form on her lips as the final train in their journey pulled into the station. She lifted her suitcase into the shelf above her seat on the train. 10:30am trains always had few passengers and extra room, so the girls took up a pair of 4-person booths as their own and spread out for the final leg of their journey.

One hour.

Arisa glanced at Yukiho now sitting across from her. Yukiho already looked like she was asleep, just a few minutes into their trip. I wish I could do that so easily.

Inwardly she chastised herself for envying anything about the girl. Yukiho had been her best friend and ally for many years, yet as the months had passed after the three of them became one, Arisa felt… jealousy? No, that’s too negative. She didn’t hate the girl at all - in fact, quite the opposite. Arisa loved Yukiho, possibly more than Yukiho loved her. She wanted to be everything to Yukiho, just like Honoka.
She wanted to be sisters. Connected but independent, for each other but on their own. Unfortunately, as sisters do, she often quarreled with Yukiho. It wasn't out of spite or anger, but in trying to maintain the attention of the girl they both loved.

_I know she loves Honoka, but is it really the same as the love I have for Honoka? Could it ever be completely the same? Why can't we be three together but different? Why does she have to love her sister the way I love her? Can't she just be satisfied with sisterly love and the occasional romantic embrace?_

Covetous. This was Arisa’s true self. She desired complete equality between the three girls to the point that she could seem monopolizing and demanding. She didn’t mean to be that way, it just happened. Yet while she desired relational equality, she often commanded more time and attention in her relationship with Honoka.

It seems she wanted it two ways. _Though_, she thought, _at least I can admit it. I want Honoka for a lover, Yukiho for a sister, and happiness for us all._

Polyamorous relationships are tricky. It’s a small miracle that the three of them found each other in the first place. Another small miracle that they all agreed to be equal among each other - friends, companions, lovers. Each to one another, they gave their mind, body, and soul.

But there was something truly out of the ordinary, even amongst the already out of the ordinary world of polyamory. Honoka and Yukiho were sisters. Literally sisters. Yukiho had spent all 20 of her living years with her sister. Arisa had arrived at year 14, become Yukiho’s lover at 15, and again Honoka’s at 16.

_How can I be jealous of those 14 years when I didn’t even exist in their lives? Maybe that’s why I’m so selfish in wanting to keep Honoka for myself all the time._

She knew it was fair to be a little jealous, but she also realized the danger of letting that harmless feeling grow into something which could only drive the three of them apart.

_To dwell is to make a feeling grow. So I shall dwell upon love._

This is the mantra she had come up with by herself (which she was actually quite proud of). She created it a few months ago when she had gotten into a kerfuffle with Yukiho for… well, who
knows what about. That’s how trivial it was. All she remembered was how she’d focused on some small negative emotion, making it bigger than it was in the first place. Then she didn’t want that feeling anymore, she released it upon Yukiho.

_I’m still sorry, dear sister. I hope one day I can show you that you really are my only true sister._

She leaned forward, pulling her blonde hair behind her ear, and softly kissed Yukiho on the cheek.

All had been forgiven, but Arisa still strove to be better every day. It’s not easy to cure oneself of jealousy within one’s own relationship.

_But anything is worth doing for these two girls. My girls. My lifelong companions._

Arisa smiled and rested her head against the window. Snowbanks and icy ponds filled her vision as they streaked by the train. Seeing winter’s embrace upon the land, she closed her eyes and began to dream of snowflakes falling upon the cherry-colored noses of her two best friends and lovers.

___

If I cry I won’t be strong enough for them.

Yukiho stepped onto the newly-arrived train and promptly collapsed into a heap on one of the benches. Barely having put the suitcase underneath her seat, she curled up like a cat against the train wall and tried desperately to sleep.

Sleep was her safe place. While normally a strong, independent girl, she’d recently seen the deterioration of her older sister - the slow withdrawal from everyday life and happiness. It reminded her of the months that followed their parents’ deaths. It was a time she knew she would never forget, and because of that it constantly reminded her of the strength she needed to keep her sister moving forward every day.

She’d also witnessed the way Arisa fell in love with Honoka and, though she hated to admit it, those two often acted and loved much in the same way that Yukiho and her sister did. This made her feel… left out? Not exactly, but it did feel like something had now come between the two sisters. Sometimes Yukiho would sense this and her needy side would come out. While it’d never really been a problem, Yukiho did have a tendency to be the cuddle-snuggle type. This sometimes caused Arisa’s protective instincts to kick in, demanding more time with Honoka.
A vicious cycle to be sure.

Not that she blamed the blonde - Honoka was amazing and deserved all of the love the two girls could afford to bestow upon her. Honoka herself seemed to teeter between the two sometimes. It must be hard having a girlfriend and a sistergirlfriend.

They all harbored deep emotions that could burst at any time, given the right situation.

So Yuhiko slept.

Not out of indifference or avarice, rather out of love. She tried to be the one constant in the lives of the girls around her. Life could create a hailstorm of emotional destruction, but Yukiho pledged to be a beacon among the stormclouds, directing her lovers to safe harbor.

Time to herself was meant for release. Letting tears flow in front of her girlfriends was out of the question. No matter how angry or distraught they became, she would be steady for them.


I want to be like that for them.

But... Honoka often tells me to be more open about my feelings. I know she’s serious but is that really okay? Where’s the line between expressing my emotions and complaining about life? Why can’t I just keep all that to myself and work it all out in my own time?

Yukiho let out a breath and closed her eyes with force. These thoughts plagued her and prevented sleep more often that she would openly admit. Something to work on for the future, she supposed.

For today, let’s sleep. I need to be strong on our first day together as a new family, in a new home, with a new purpose.
Honoka had been listening to music as the train pulled out of the station. She glanced left towards her two girlfriends sitting across from each other and saw two different expressions.

Yukiho, the model of a girl who could block out whatever part of the world is bothering her and focus on that which is pleasant to her. When the world threatened to crash down upon her, she would resort to cleaning or sleeping; often it happened one after the other. Her ability to consciously remove herself from an unpleasant reality was one of her greatest assets.

Arisa, a fiercely loyal companion whose occasional ire towards her younger girlfriend is only matched by the hidden love she holds for the girl. Honoka had discovered this early in the relationship and made it a point to encourage the growth of these feelings - though occasionally it backfired and handbags ensued. But her desire to amend tattered relationships as soon as possible showed her strength of character.

Honoka could see Arisa as she stared intently upon the visage of Honoka’s sister. A cloud of intense thought swirled across her face, occasionally producing a small smirk or a quick furrow of the brow.

*A penny for your thoughts wouldn’t be enough, Arisa. You’re always thinking about things so intently and completely.*

A smile that could only be described as hopeful sprung upon Arisa’s face and she leaned forward and placed the most gentle of kisses upon Yukiho’s cheek. She lingered for only a moment before returning to her side of the booth and leaning against the window, almost as if she was ashamed of what she’d done.

Eyes not of ice, but of peacefully frozen water stared out of the train window. Blonde locks shifting gently as Arisa drifted into a dream world.

Honoka felt warm. Each day would be better from here on out. She would make sure of it. The girls had worked together to get this far, so she wouldn’t let them fail now.

*But how can I lead these two women who mean so much to me when I can’t even properly lead a group of high school singers? My leadership led to our failure. And our failure led to their betrayal.*
In this new life she needed to transform into that which she longed to be, yet failed to become - a leader, a teacher, a confidant. But how?

*I suppose that’s not a question I can answer staring at my girlfriend on a train.*

But at least she had a goal. As painful and as undesirable as that goal may be, she knew what must occur. If they wanted to live the rest of their lives together they had to move forward with purpose and goals. She could do that if she tried, right? She could try it all again, right?

*Right?*

A long sigh fogged the train window slightly as she tilted her head away from her girlfriends.

Snow-covered mountains. Frost-tipped fields of grain and bush. Winter was slowly releasing its grip from this island. The warmth of spring wind, rain, and sun endeavoring to rid the world of its frigid blanket. Three women casting aside self-inflicted restraints daring to bloom together.

The train began to slow. They’d been in a city for a while, but it seems they were finally--

*Thank you for riding JR East. The next station is the end of the Shin-Etsu Line…*

“I suppose it’s that time,” Honoka murmured to herself.

Standing up took a lot of effort even though it was only 11:30am. She staggered over to her girlfriends and gently rubbed the shoulders of the two girls. Sleepy eyelids gave way to shimmering irises of blueish-gray and sea green.

“Hey… we’re almost there. Let’s get ready, ladies!” Honoka flashed a grin of excitement to encourage the pair. It worked, and the younger girls began collecting their belongings to disembark.
Gathering at the door they waited as the train slowly came to a stop. A small jolt and the sound of air pressure releasing signaled the unlocking of the doors.

For a moment they looked at each other with unsure grins, but upon seeing each other together in this treasured new land, those grins quickly grew into beaming smiles of happiness. Softly giggling, they took a step onto the platform of their new home. A new land.

They looked up and read the station sign:

Welcome to Niigata.
Chapter 2: Scalene

The first few days of their lives in their new hometown were spent in a hotel. It was tempting to get in contact with some of their acquaintances in Tokyo to try and find a couch to sleep on at some friend of a friend's apartment, but the risk was too great. Each day that passed carried with it the likelihood of their former friends spreading the word of their midnight run.

All it would take is one phonecall to the wrong friend whose loyalties were on the fence and all of the planning they had done for the last several months would fall apart. No, it wasn’t even an option to talk to someone from their former home. There was too much that could go wrong.

So for the time being, they stayed at the cheapest hotel they could find for three girls. Fortunately, March was an off season for the area in terms of tourism, so hotel prices were fairly reasonable.

Niigata is famous for three things: rice, sake, and skiing. While the rice industry isn’t exactly a tourist draw, sake and skiing (occasionally at the same time) are a major draw for tourists from all over Japan. Skiing tours are frequent in the area and even the tourists who choose to stay at resort hotels in the mountains eventually make their way into the city for a night or two to enjoy the prolific amounts of sake produced by area breweries.

These small luxuries were tempting to all of the girls. Any time you move to another area, every small new thing you find seems to be big, shiny, and new. While all three girls had skied before and had in the past occasionally partaken in an evening of enjoyable sake, the draw to these events were particularly strong now that they were in an area nationally famous for the quality of both activities.

But one feeling stronger than all of those frivolous desires: settling. A dozen nights in a hotel will
drive anyone to be somewhere else, and while the three of them didn’t mind having their sheets changed every night, it’d undoubtedly be nicer to have their own place.

So after deciding to take a small break and spend their first day relaxing and recovering from their odd travel schedule, they then turned their attention to searching for a viable living space.

They had saved up for months in advance, pooling a sizable amount of money that would keep them alive and able to live in a hotel for up to 2 months if need be. Clearly that wouldn’t be cost effective though, so they resolved to scour the area for the best new home they could find.

Well, “resolved” might be stretching it a bit.

The day before

“It’s already 3 o’clock. Look, I know we said we were going to take it easy today, but we really ought to plan out what we’re doing tomorrow.” Arisa was sitting up on one of the twin beds, her back against the pillows she had propped up against the wall.

Their hotel was simple, if a bit cramped. They’d managed to get a pair of twin beds in a very small room for a reasonable price, but the insulation in the room left something to be desired. As such, they were lounging around the room in sweatshirts and long pants while the small heater tried its best to provide warmth.

Yukiho looked up from her book and nodded slightly in agreement. “Yeah, that’s not a bad idea really. Honoka, what’s the plan for tomorrow?”

Honoka stopped doing the crossword puzzle book she’d picked up at the train station and glanced between the two girls. A slight look of discomfort and unknowing took over her face. “I mean, I don’t know what else we need to talk about. Just like we said this morning, we’re going to each head off and look for apartments. I don’t want to give orders to anyone because you’re all responsible enough to do this in your own way. I don’t want to stunt your creativity.”

Honoka began to look down at her crossword when Arisa spoke up. “That’s not good enough,
Honoka. We need some kind of well laid out plan so we avoid running into each other and covering each other’s tracks.”

“Look, if we’re going to do it your way, the last thing I want to see tomorrow is one of you. Not because I don’t love you, but because we’re supposed to be doing this on our own, like you said.” Arisa gestured towards Honoka and adjusted herself to face a bit more towards the older girl. “All of this talk about being on our own and using our own ‘style of exploration’ is fine, but if we end up talking about the same apartments each night, then what did we really do?”

Honoka’s lack of reaction caused Arisa to speak up. “Come on! It isn’t that hard to just lay out a map and draw lines--”

Honoka shut her book perhaps a bit stronger than she’d intended, but she didn’t back down from the sound. “What, I’m supposed to say ‘hey, don’t go to this area because I’ll get to it eventually.’ or something like that? You might see a building in the distance that catches your eye. What if it’s a good match for us and you avoid it because it’s ‘not in my district’?” Honoka stood up and paced the small hall between the door and the beds.

“The whole situation before we got here took immense creativity from all of us. We had our own parts to take care of, our own secrets to keep, our own jobs to worry about. What makes it any different now that we’re here?” Honoka, while not yelling by any means, was speaking very meticulously, accentuating each word as if it were impossible to disagree with her.

Arisa turned to sit on the edge of the bed. “Because now it’s the three of us working together to make a new life! We need direction and focus, not independence.”

“If we don’t need independence, then why’d we even move away from Tokyo?” Honoka had leaned against the wall with her arms crossed, a slightly serious look on her face.

Asrisa clenched the bedsheets. “So we could all be together. Together, Honoka. Just because for these next few days we won’t see a lot of each other doesn’t mean our goal isn’t a common one.”

Honoka straightened up and put her hands on top of her head, scratching her head out of frustration. Likewise, Arisa had begun to lean back and put her hands over her face in irritation.

Yukiho, seeing an opportunity, spoke up. “Then why don’t we make a schedule, but not a plan. Let’s just say what we’re doing and when we’re doing it. We don’t have phones, but the least we
could do is meet at a certain place at a certain time in order to exchange information on where we’ve been and what we’ve seen.”

The other two stared into space in their own particular fashion, pondering it. Both Honoka and Arisa seemed less that thrilled with the over (or under) planning Yukiho had suggested, but it was better than nothing and maybe it’d appease the other girl.

“It’s a good start. Let’s try it.” Arisa sat back up and looked in Honoka’s direction. Honoka, not one to back down from her occasionally challenging girlfriend, decided it was acceptable. “Alright, whatever you guys want to do we’ll do. Just tell me where and when and I’ll be there.”

*That’s Honoka for you, never willing to give a direction. Doesn't she know we want to follow her?* Arisa thought.

*That’s Arisa for you, always wanting directions. Doesn't she know that I’m not someone she should follow?* Honoka thought.

*I guess I’m the only one who’s going to make any real suggestions here, aren’t I?* Yukiho thought.

Yukiho grabbed her memo pad and quickly scratched a few notes. A minute later, seeming pleased with herself, she beckoned the other two girls to her bed. They moved over to Yukiho and sat on opposite sides of the younger Kousaka.

“Here. This is basic enough to allow freedom, but structured enough to make sure we’re communicating with each other.”

*Apartment hunting: 9:00 - 12:00  
Lunch meeting (the station cafe): 12:30-1:30  
Apartment hunting: 1:30-4:00  
Free time: 4:00-5:30  
Dinner meeting (hotel room): 6:00*

Arisa apparently approved enough, as she pecked the cheek of her younger girlfriend. Honoka took notice and did the same in return. “Thanks for saving us from ourselves, Yukiho,” Honoka said,
leaning against her little sister.

Arisa seemed to sense the same feelings and said the same. “Yeah, thanks for working this out for us. It’ll help a lot I think.”

Yukiho smiled brightly as she had her two favorite people leaning against her shoulders.

*This will work out, I know it!*

To describe Arisa as a bit irritated at the whole situation would be an understatement, so she’d gone to bed early that night and subsequently been the first of them awake the next day. After her shower and morning onigiri, she made her way to the bed with a sleeping Honoka and Yukiho. She sat down next to Honoka and gently caressed her cheek, moving her ginger hair out of the way so the blonde could lean down and plant a sweet kiss on her girlfriend’s cheek. A small groan emerged from Honoka’s lips and she tilted her head slightly in the direction of her young lover. The slight grin on Arisa’s face was irresistible, so she reached up and pulled the girl down with some force, pushing their lips together for a passionate, drawn out kiss.

After a few moments Honoka released the girl and they slowly pulled away from each other.

“You know you didn’t have to get up this early. We have all day,” Honoka said while staring into Arisa’s eyes.

Arisa pulled Honoka’s hand up to her cheek and closing her eyes, leaned against it. She was determined to still be a loving girlfriend, even though Honoka was trying her patience these last 12 hours. “Maybe not, but we need every hour possible. Hurry and get ready so you can start too. We need you to help us today and every day hereafter.”

Honoka groaned again and leaned deeper into her pillow. “You girls are capable of doing anything. You don’t need my help. We can all do this on our own, each at our own pace. You can’t force individuals to work together, ya know?” Honoka rolled over and sat up on the side of the bed next to Arisa, who was looking a bit less loving and a bit more frustrated.
“We’ll get this done, I’ll make sure of it. But we have to do it on our own right now. We’ll cover more ground and be more successful if we search on our own. Not everything has to be done together. Sometimes it only makes things worse when you try to…..” Honoka was slowly looking down and rather concerned.

Arisa knew this look. She’d seen it many times before and she hated it. Even as bothered by Honoka as she was right now, she wasn’t going to let her girlfriend internally berate herself like this. Immediately she grabbed Honoka’s chin and pulled it in her direction.

“Maybe you’re right - we’re better off doing this by ourselves so we can cover more ground. Maybe being overly focused on coordination is going to drive us crazy since we don’t have cell phones now. But don’t try to convince me that just simply trying to work together isn’t important.” Arisa gestured to Yukiho, who was beginning to become restless. “Are you saying the three of us shouldn’t... work together?”

Honoka’s eyes widened as she glanced at her sleepy sister on the bed. “You know I don’t mean that...” she sat up and grabbed her pillow then looked around slowly, almost like she was looking for a safe place to throw it. Not finding one and not wanting to disturb her sister, the looked back at Arisa. “We’re different!” Honoka stood up and walked towards the bathroom, stopping only when Arisa spoke.

“Maybe our reasons for being together are special, but that doesn’t change the fact that we have to work harder to be together than a lot of other relationships. And it took one girl to show the two of us that it’s okay to work together towards something we all want.” Arisa didn’t follow Honoka, instead staying on the bed and staring at her sleeping girlfriend.

Arisa laid back, putting her head on a slightly surprised Yukiho, who had just woken up and was murmuring under the bed sheets. “Aren’t you glad you’re working with the two of us?”

Honoka stared at the two girls she loved most, Yukiho now playing with Arisa’s hair as the blonde girl lay on her stomach. Honoka hated how right Arisa was.

“In that case, let work hard together today. Er... together, but apart.” Honoka furrowed her brow awkwardly. That had made more sense in her head.

Arisa giggled a little bit and got up from the bed, much to the disappointment of Yukiho. She blew a kiss to Yukiho and trotted towards the hotel door. She grabbed Honoka and squeezed her harder than would be considered loving. “Sometimes you make me so angry, but I always melt when you’re cute. It’s not fair.”
After removing herself from Honoka, she smiled enough to show Honoka she was alright, then made her way out the door of the hotel room.

“See you guys for lunch! Happy house hunting!” She exclaimed and headed towards the elevator.

Yukiho stirred from her happy, warm bed and sat upright. She looked at Honoka and smiled. “Good morning, nee-san,” she managed to get out right before a big yawn took over her lips.

Honoka smiled and closed the door to the bathroom. Turning on the water, she took off her sleeping clothes and prepared the shower. She looked into the mirror on the wall as she rested her hands on both sides of the bathroom sink. The face she saw wasn’t as ready to lead these two girls as she’d originally thought.

*Equal and in love, right? That’s what we’d promised to be.* Honoka pushed off the sink and entered the shower, letting the water hit her face full on from the outset. She ran her hands through her hair, making sure all of it was wet.

It’ll work out. We’ll get into a rhythm and they’ll forget about who’s the one making decisions. We all have to work together, so it’s inevitable that we make decisions together. Leaders are overrated anyway.

After her shower she began drying off and turned to see Yukiho coming into the bathroom to take her own shower. Yukiho moved over to Honoka, who was drying her hair while looking in the mirror and from behind she slipped her hands around her older sister’s waist. Pulling the older girl’s wet body closer, she kissed the soft skin between Honoka’s shoulder blades and made her way up to the confluence of her neck, shoulders, and spine.

Honoka, though surprised by the attack, reciprocated in kind by guiding Yukiho’s hands to the front of her hips and holding them there with some force. She reached up and took her sister’s red hair in her right hand while turning her own head to the right. Yukiho’s face was suddenly turned to the left by the force of Honoka’s right hand grip and she now faced her older sister, inches away from a rapidly approaching set of lips. Yukiho looked momentarily confused, as if something she had planned was now being derailed rather quickly.

No longer approaching, lips met, nearly crashing into each other. Honoka turned her body to the right, beginning to face her younger sister. Yukiho’s hands didn’t move, grazing the skin near some now-potentially-dangerous areas on Honoka’s body. A few very soft, short gasps came from
the lips of Honoka’s younger sister as they were now fully embraced facing each other. Honoka backed the younger girl into the bathroom door, grabbing her wrists and pinning them against the door frame. Her lips moved away from Yukiho’s lips and proceeded down her neck, towards her collarbone.

Yukiho was beginning to feel lightheaded from the contact of her sister. Every brush of lips and flick of the tongue was causing colors to flash in front of her eyes. After a few moments of helplessness, Honoka moved back up to her sister’s lips and deposited a long, passionate kiss. After retreating, Honoka smiled and pecked her sister on her forehead.

“I love you so much, Yukiho. Thank you for being here.”

Yukiho blushed and looked at her sister proudly. She saw what she’d wanted to see: a Honoka that was in control because she wanted to be.

“No, thank you, Honoka. You’re the one who brought us here. You lead us down this path.” She smiled and glanced at her wrists, which were still pinned against the bathroom door.

“Whether you admit it or not, you like to lead. And you’re really good at it.” Honoka looked at her own hands, slowly releasing her sister. Yukiho continued, “No matter what you may think about yourself, leadership is your forte. It’s your instinct. Please continue to lead us here, dear nee-san. Please.”

Yukiho stared at her older sister with a look of pleading, encouragement, and desire. Honoka could only stand and breathe. She looked around uncomfortably, realizing that Yukiho now stood between her and the ability to leave the bathroom.

“...I don’t know…. How do....” Honoka wasn’t managing to make a sentence, so Yukiho stepped forward towards her older sister. She wrapped her hands around the girl in a sisterly embrace, placing her head on Honoka’s chest.

“You don’t need to have all of the answers right now, but when the time comes we need you to stand for us and with us. We’ll follow anything you say!” Yukiho gave her sister a comforting smile.

Yukiho squeezed her sister hard and released, making her own way to the shower. A wink and a slightly suggestive smile were the last things Honoka saw as her sister entered the shower.
Honoka left the bathroom and donned her clothes for the day. *Like they’ll ever need me to do anything for them. Just look at how capable they are! And they’re trying to tell me I’M the one who needs to lead?* Honoka looked down at her memo pad. On it was a list of apartment rental agencies for her to visit that she had hastily written the night before.

*Time to go I suppose.* Honoka grabbed her backpack and made her way out of the hotel towards the bus depot.

---

**11:17 am - Honoka**

Honoka’s first four apartment buildings produced no results as the places were either too expensive or didn’t have apartments with adequate space. It’s not like they needed immense amounts of space, just enough to have a living room, a small kitchen, and a bedroom that would fit one queen size bed. Also, something not older than themselves would be a big plus as well. Was that so much to ask?

Apparently it was, because the next two apartments she visited were perfect in the space department but were nearly from the Taisho era.

*Apartments mock me in this city.* Honoka narrowed her gaze at the apartment building in an interesting attempt to intimidate an inanimate object made of metal and wood.

Convinced the building had learned its lesson, or at least felt an intellectual challenge, Honoka noted the time and decided to head to one last building before lunch.

*It’s almost time to meet up with the girls.* She looked for the nearest bus stop and began walking towards the green sign to find the right bus connection to her last apartment before travelling back to the station.
Over sandwiches and coffee, the girls exchanged information about the places they’d visited. While none had been particularly successful in their endeavors, they all seemed fairly upbeat about the prospects of finding something before the end of the week.

Honoka had visited 8 places, Arisa, 7, and Yukiho 5 very large apartments. Each girl had found at least one room which would suffice in a pinch a few weeks from now, so they all wrote these possibilities into the back of their memos.

After finishing their sandwiches and chatting idly for a few minutes, they decided to get up and head out on their next sortie.

Before they parted, Honoka snuck a quick kiss to Yukiho’s cheek. Looking torn between wanting one herself and still being a bit irritated with Honoka, Arisa struggled with her thoughts. But before she could come to a decision Honoka planted a quick peck on her lips, causing the younger girl to blush slightly.

Honoka gave them both a wink and sauntered off to the east.

Taking that as a sign to disperse, Arisa hugged Yukiho briefly before separating and walking west.

Seeing her best friend and lover walk away, Yukiho headed inside the station to cross to the other side of the tracks and explore the south side of the city.

---

2:09 pm - Arisa

*Oh man, this could be it!* Arisa had found a flyer on the window of an apartment leasing agency that fit exactly what they needed and it was within their price range!

Despite the lack of direction from Honoka, she might have lucked out and found something perfect
Okay okay, can’t get ahead of myself here. I still need to tour it and meet with the real estate agent. But she couldn’t help from smiling to herself.

I hate fighting with her. With this out of the way maybe we can spend some more time together, just us. Oh what I’d give to snuggle against her right now. Arisa could practically feel herself burying her face into the chest of her girlfriend, trying to nuzzle her like a dog that seems to think there’s always just a little more room to burrow into.

In the meantime, let’s do this! She opened the door to the apartment agency...

4:12 pm - Yukiho

While talking over lunch, the girls had decided that while they were apartment hunting, they should also be looking at job advertisements everywhere they went. Restaurant service, office front desk management, supermarket checkout clerk… no job was insignificant enough to be ignored. Some of the jobs they saw looked promising, but as with everything else it’d probably take a while before they could secure interviews with the jobs they were interested in.

Yukiho was the first to find something that interested her beyond the usual ‘huh, that’s interesting’ remark. Towards the end of her first day of apartment hunting, she’d retreated to a secondhand bookstore attached to the main train station for some reading and relaxation time. After browsing through a few of her favorite manga series and reading the first couple of volumes of another series, she decided to make her way back home. A poster on the door of the store caught her attention as she exited.

“Part-time position available! Worker needed for 20-30 hours-per-week job. Duties include cashier, stock, and processing of acquired books. Interested individuals should contact management.”

Books, people, not full time… I should file that away for later, Yukiho thought to herself as she copied down the information onto her memo pad next to the list of apartments she’d visited that day along with their prices.
The girls had obviously abandoned their cell phones in Tokyo as part of their escape from their old lives. It felt strange to be without such an obligatory modern convenience, but Yukiho in particular had found the lack of technology liberating over the last week. Nothing to interrupt her, distract her, or make her lose focus. No music blaring through her headphones, only the sounds of the city and its activities.

*I love this place. Big enough to be a city, small enough to be comfortable.* Yukiho couldn’t be happier right now.

Well, if she was with her girlfriends she’d be happier. But for now, she decided to sit on a bench near the south entrance of the station and bask in the bustle of a train station that was quickly approaching rush hour.

---

**4:43 pm - Honoka**

Honoka was standing outside of a 3-story apartment building. She’d seen a flyer for the place on the window of a real estate office a few blocks away. This time was now part of her free time, but she’d thought this place would be perfect so she decided to make her way towards the small apartment building on her way back towards the station.

Apparently someone else had, as well.

Looking up at the second floor Honoka saw a pair of frosty gray eyes staring at her from the outdoor hallway. These eyes were usually a comforting cool embrace, like sliding under freshly washed bed sheets in the summer.

But now they imparted a different feeling - one of distance, hurt, and exasperation.

Those eyes closed and the girl turned away from the second floor balcony, disappearing into the hallway.
Honoka looked down and all of her thoughts began to collide.

Ah…

...

...damnit.
Chapter 3 - Isosceles

Present day

For a split second Honoka actually thought about running away.

For a split second longer Honoka considered other options given that running away was, frankly, a really stupid idea.

*I mean really, where do I think I’m going to go?*

A deep inhale and an equally deeper sigh of resignation allowed her conscious to raise a mental white flag. There was no escaping the wrath of her girlfriend who was, presumably, walking down the stairs of the apartment in front of her at this very moment.

Arisa had developed into an outspoken and confident girl ever since she came to Japan. Honoka had heard stories about Arisa from Eri while they were initially forming Muse four years ago. Arisa, the chipper, genki third year junior high schooler who could, on the best of days, read a 6th grade textbook with minor errors.
Growing up in Russia hadn’t done any favors for the girl who, even though she maintained excellent grades, struggled balancing the Cyrillic alphabet, hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Throw in a fifth form of writing with the standard three years of English required by Japanese high schools and, well, you have the perfect recipe for a linguistically challenged individual.

In spite of her occasional reading and writing errors these days, Arisa had become quite fluent in Japanese and had a knack for being one of the better communicators that Honoka knew. It was Arisa, after all, that approached Honoka about her feelings for the older girl.

Honoka nearly giggled to herself thinking about the past and suddenly realized that Arisa was really taking her time going down the steps of that apartment. Maybe she’s trying to make me think about what kind of a jerk I am right now.

But… that’s not like Arisa. When Arisa has a problem with someone she goes straight to the source; she wouldn’t beat around the bush and make me wait…

Something was wrong. Honoka looked around for the stairwell Arisa would have used to get down from the second floor. Finding it on the right side of the building, she made her way towards the side entrance. She opened the door, turned left, and made her way up the--

There was Arisa between flights of stairs, sitting on the ground with her back against the wall, her right leg extended in front of her and her arms wrapped around her left leg which was pulled up against her chest tightly. She was quiet except for a few stifled sniffs. Honoka felt her heartbeat quicken and slowly took a few steps towards the blonde and pondered the current situation. After another sniff and what Honoka thought was a hiccup, Arisa lifted her head to meet the eyes of the older girl.

Honoka noticed tears running down the cheeks of her girlfriend.

Immediately Honoka began taking the steps two at a time and arrived in front of her girlfriend an instant later. She was prepared to pounce on Arisa and beg her forgiveness. She wanted to grab her, hold her, and refuse to let her go until they worked something out to make everything better.

No no no no… oh Arisa, how did this happen?

But before she could begin her descent to wrap up her girlfriend, Honoka glanced at the outstretched leg in front of her and saw it.
Arisa’s shoe was off and her ankle was beginning to swell.

Honoka’s vision followed the leg up to Arisa’s eyes which began relieving themselves of some extra tears. No sobbing came from the girl, but unsteady breathing and a lost look she hated to see.

_I must fix this._ Honoka’s face gained an expression of seriousness.

Now.

---

**January, 2017 - two months earlier**

Arisa heard her girlfriend walk in the front door. She jumped off the couch and at a brisk pace made her way towards the entryway to the Kousaka apartment.

With the school year only a half dozen weeks from its conclusion and the possibility of moving out of her parents house equidistant, she’d recently been coming over to the Kousaka sisters’ apartment more often. It felt nice to “live” somewhere else for a few hours at a time; almost like a test-run before committing to future plans.

As she approached her girlfriend she noticed something was off. Honoka was often tired after work and it wasn’t unusual for her to come home and collapse on the couch until one (or both) of her girlfriends jumped at the chance to smother her. Play fights would ensue, often ending in kissing, groping, or a delightful and pleasant combination of both.

Today’s tiredness was different, though. It looked like she was bearing an immense emotional weight at the moment. Arisa remembered a time when she looked like this every day - right after the death of the sisters’ parents. It had been just a few months after they had begun dating and it changed both of their lives forever. Honoka for obvious reasons, but Arisa because of the strength she saw Honoka have when her world was completely falling apart.

Arisa fell in love with Honoka even more back then, if that was even possible. But after months of
having to be strong for herself and her sister while also being subject to the daily lashings of an unknown god, Honoka gave out. Every day looked like this. And every day after the first, Arisa had striven to ease that weight from her girlfriend, becoming fiercely loyal to the girl who had become the very reason she wanted to be a better woman.

“Honoka, welcome home!” Arisa endeavored, hoping she was grossly misreading her girlfriend’s mood at the moment.

Honoka looked up. Her eyes were tearing up, but she was not yet crying. A look of hopelessness was there, and she looked more fragile than Arisa had expected.

“Arisa… I’m home…” Honoka barely got out before adding “...for a long time.”

Arisa was confused. “What do you mean ‘for a long time’? Are you on vacation now?” Arisa took a step closer to Honoka and took the bags in-hand that Honoka had been holding. Setting them down off to the side, she watched Honoka take off her shoes and meander slowly out of the entryway.

Honoka strode towards the couch and lowered herself onto the right side, sitting with her body leaning forward and her elbows on either thigh. She looked up to see Arisa now sitting cross-legged in front of her with a look of love, care, and concern. Seeing those eyes of gray pierced the hazy trance that had enveloped her ever since she left work. She immediately felt some small relief as her first tear moved down her right cheek and balanced precariously for a moment before dripping onto the soft rug below.

Upon seeing this Arisa began to sit up, but stopped suddenly as Honoka looked up with a faint grin. She didn’t look herself, but she at least looked better than she had a minute ago at the front door. It’s amazing what vast emotional power a single tear can take from the body; Arisa had never been so thankful to see someone show signs of crying.

Honoka took a deep breath and began, “I won’t have a job February 1st.”

Arisa’s eyes immediately widened as Honoka continued. “Our store didn’t do particularly well over Christmas, even with the surprising number recently popular manga and animes releasing books and DVDs in December. Since we’re a small manga and anime retailer, we sometimes can’t compete with the giveaways and specials that the bigger companies do for the holidays.”
Honoka sat back and brought her feet onto the couch, leaning her body onto the right armrest. She looked up at the ceiling and took another deep breath.

“The owner has 4 stores in the Tokyo area and we’ve had the worst performance among them all in the last three quarters. So, he’s decided to shut down the store and relocate the merchandise to a new branch that will open out in the suburbs - away from the bigger companies that dominate the interior of Tokyo. Even if the new store sells two-thirds the merchandise we did, he’ll still make more money out there because of how cheap rent is compared to here in downtown.”

It made sense. Arisa wasn’t a genius with finances, but it didn’t take a genius to see that the owner didn't make this decision out of malice or disdain for the employees. It was business.

“He tried to convince me to move out to Koganei so I could continue to be the head manager, but…” Honoka looked more serious now “...but there’s no way I’m moving Yukiho just two months before she graduates. And I can’t commute an hour and a half one way every day.” Honoka wrung her hands together, thinking about the conversation she’d had with the owner of her anime and manga store.

Arisa continued to be silent and just sit and listen to her girlfriend. Honoka didn’t often need to vent, so she felt compelled to not interrupt the older girl who was clearly in need of mental release.

“He was so nice about it that it almost made me angry, ya know? Like, he tried everything he could to let me continue the job, even in just a partial role. Heh, he even offered to pay for the commuter pass to get me there so Yukiho didn’t have to be uprooted. But it just wasn’t practical. So we both agreed I couldn’t work for the company any more.”

Honoka opened her arms and outstretched them towards Arisa. “So here we are. You now have a girlfriend who will be unemployed in a week. Congratulations on being in a relationship with a freeloader.” Honoka smiled a small but genuine smile. Arisa couldn’t help but do the same, and she crawled her way towards the open arms of her girlfriend.

Wrapping her arms around Honoka’s waist, she squeezed a little harder than usual as Honoka gently wrapped her own arms around Arisa’s shoulders and back. Her hands began to play with Arisa’s golden hair and Arisa purred playfully, feeling Honoka’s long fingers make their way among her blonde strands.

“So I’m in love with a delinquent.” Arisa spoke up for the first time since they’d both sat down. “I doubt my family could be more irritated by my relationship choices at this point, so this has to be an improvement, right?” Arisa nuzzled Honoka’s stomach with her cheeks and let out a relaxed
“Is that so?” ventured Honoka playfully.

“I mean, I’m already dating the sister of the girl I started dating when I got to high school then kind of broke up with so I could date her sister but then we didn’t really really break up because I found out she’d secretly been kinda lovey-dovey with her own sister so we eventually admitted we all had feelings for each other and made it into a pseudo-three-way-thing where the sex is crazy good because, ya know, three people and stuff.” Somehow Arisa managed to get that out all in one breath.

Honoka gave a slight tug to Arisa’s hair, and bent down to kiss her head. “You really know how to charm a girl, Arisa.” Lips planted on Arisa’s head as the two girls heard footsteps coming from the side of the apartment nearest Honoka’s seat.

As she entered the living room, Yukiho stretched and yawned like a woman who’d slumbered for the entire Showa era. Seeing the two girls together on the couch she decided to join them by sitting on the floor to the right side of Arisa. Not wanting to be left out of an embrace, she wrapped herself around Arisa’s waist and snuggled the blonde as best she could given their current positions.

“G’morning Arisa, nee-san,” a still-sleepy Yukiho muttered under her breath.

“...says the girl taking a nap at 9pm.” Honoka smiled at her sister.

Both girls chuckled at the remark and they all released each other to continue their chat. After a quick look around at each other, Honoka started her story all over again and recapped Yukiho about everything that she’d explained with Arisa. Several times Yukiho grabbed her sister’s leg and squeezed her to offer emotional support, but Honoka was already beginning to feel better about the situation.

“So in the end, I’m jobless. The owner knows all about our… family situation and, as you know, was really generous in hiring me straight out of high school to an entry level management position. He was generous in the end, as well. He’s going to pay me an hourly wage for the vacation time I have left and he’s also giving me a month’s salary as compensation for ‘firing’ me.”

The girls all exchanged looks of relief. Paying the rent and bills for the apartment had always fallen on Honoka, so losing her job was something of great concern for the girls. Yukiho had a part time
job, but she couldn’t work too much because of her impending graduation. Arisa spent a lot of time at the apartment, so she insisted on having a small part time job of her own to contribute to the grocery fund and pitch in for the utilities she used. But both of those jobs combined couldn’t quite cover all of the bills, much less living expenses.

When the Kousaka parents had passed away, the girls had sold the family business and moved into a small apartment in an effort to save money. They had received a sizable lump sum from the sale of the business and had managed to save almost all of it, even after moving expenses (they had a savings account worth about a half year’s salary from Honoka’s current/former job). Now, they did everything they could to never touch it. That money was there for emergencies and life changing events only.

“So you have some time, nee-san.” Yukiho spoke up first in an effort to move the conversation towards the future, rather than recounting the past. “Finish your job, and when you’re done take a few days for yourself. Have a ‘weekend’ and sort out your feelings and options. Nothing good will come from rushing things.”

Honoka gave a contemplative look to the girls. Arisa seemed to agree with Yukiho and though Honoka hated the idea of being jobless, maybe her sister was right. A day or two for myself might give me some focus.

“I wonder how many manga shops are hiring right now,” Honoka mused.

“Why do you want to work at another manga shop, nee-san? Wouldn’t that come with bad memories of this job?”

“Actually, the opposite. I love manga shops, and working at another one would let me continue feeling the joy of going to work every day.”

Arisa looked contemplative. “What is it about manga shops you like so much?”

Honoka adjusted herself to be leaning with her back against the armrest, legs stretched out on the couch. She looked up at the ceiling and half closed her eyes.

“A mangaka creates a universe for their characters to live in. Each day they wake up and get to live in a world of their own creation, with friends of their own creation. Each day they force their line- and-shading friends to deal with unique situations that many of us would have difficulty
comprehending, let alone overcoming. Yet each day, whether it be through great strife or surprising ease, that mangaka finds a way for their friends to do just that: overcome an immense difficulty.”

“In this world we occasionally face comparable difficulties and, one way or another, those difficulties are resolved. Most of the time for the better, but occasionally for the worse. Regardless, resolution inevitably happens in both universes - the invented one and the real one. In this respect, they’re not so different.”

Honoka put her hands behind her head and completely closed her eyes. “But what makes each mangaka’s universe truly different from ours isn’t the actions that take place, it’s their finality. They end. When a mangaka is tired of playing in one universe they move on to another existence. They choose when their current story will end and when their new universe, story, and life will begin. They choose where and how it will begin.”

Honoka sat back up and crossed her legs on the couch. “Every book in that store carries the same potential and freedom. Every time I see a new release I know there’s one more world that’s come into being. Millions of possibilities exist in that store. Millions of chances to live and exist in another place.”

Honoka looked both serious and enthralled with those last few sentences. The girls could see how much that job meant to her.

But Yukiho felt something else beyond her sister’s exposition. Something she couldn’t quite word perfectly…

“Hey, nee-san.” Yukiho looked down trying to find the right way to word her thoughts. “Do you want to move?”

After taking a few seconds to process that question, Honoka immediately waved her hands back and forth as her eyes widened. “No no no, Yukiho! I already told you I can’t move us six weeks before you graduate. I refuse to--”

Yukiho grabbed her sister’s hands in the most loving way possible. “Nee-san, I don’t mean move today. I mean, do you want to move?”

Arisa picked up on the meaning in Yukiho’s words after that and began to look very nervous. “D-do you mean, move… away? Like, after you graduate?”
Yukiho smiled at Arisa’s understanding and nodded happily. “What if we moved after we graduate?” Yukiho grabbed a lock of Arisa’s hair and twirled it between her fingers. “What if you came with us, Arisa?”

Arisa stared at Yukiho almost unbelievingly. She’d suddenly gone from panicking at the idea of her girlfriends moving away to stuttering at the idea of moving with them. Leaving her family. Leaving her life.

“Another place. Another existence… another life…” Arisa muttered, staring into Yukiho’s sea green eyes. Yukiho was looking collected and peaceful, but almost expectant. It was as if she was waiting for Arisa to come to a conclusion. The expectation was heavy yet comforting in some way. Maybe it was just the way the auburn-haired girl was looking at her right now, but she was entrancing.

*When had she gotten so confident and pretty?* Arisa had always felt a preference towards the older Kousaka sister, but right now the look on Yukiho’s face was giving her sister a run for her money.

Then she got it.

“A new life.” Arisa looked towards Honoka. “We could move away. Not to the other side of Tokyo, not even to Saitama. We could move far, far away. We could start over and create a new life for… us.” Honoka looked surprised and slightly scared at the statement, so Arisa looked back at Yukiho only to find a knowing, almost proud look on her face. Yukiho winked at Arisa who immediately began to feel warmth spreading on her cheeks.

Honoka began to shake her head slowly. “There’s so much we don’t know. We’d have to research places we could move that wouldn’t cost too much. We’d have to sell or throw away everything and… one person would take a month to figure all this out, but with all of us working… work…”

A realization dawned upon Honoka. Arisa also suddenly seemed to have a knowing expression. Yukiho looked quite pleased with her girlfriends who were working things through their minds.

*It’s there for life changing events… why can’t we choose to change our lives? Heh, It’s not like I won’t have the free time these days.* Honoka nearly smiled to herself.

After a few moments, Honoka’s expression changed to one of concern. “Arisa, there’s no way I’m going to ask you to… we can’t expect something so drastic as to move away from your family.”
Honoka knew all about losing family and even though Arisa’s relations with her family had been strained at best, she still slept at home a couple times a week. She still talked with her parents, even if just out of propriety. She occasionally spent time with her sister, even though she no longer put her on a pedestal like she’d done years ago.

Honoka looked at Yukiho. “We can’t ask Arisa to start over. I mean, do you realize what we’re even thinking about ourselves? We’d have to disappear. We’d have to completely and totally give up everything here and start from scratch without telling a soul.”

No, Honoka would not ask Arisa to move with them. She loved Arisa totally and without reservation, but nothing in her would ever allow her to ask someone to break ties with their family so completely. Family is still family, no matter how angry one may become with them.

Arisa looked like she was thinking about things very deeply. Yukiho put her hand on Arisa’s back and started to move in small circles. “What is it, Arisa? Nothing you say can stop either of us from loving you.” Yukiho suddenly looked slightly serious. “No matter what, I’ll love you. No matter what, we’re still us. Not Yukiho, Arisa, and Honoka - just us.”

Arisa kept looking down but began to piece things together. “You’ve both supported me more than you ought to have. I should be the one always looking after you.” She looked up and between the girls.

“If you’re serious about this, so am I. To see you happy together - to see us happy together and without any problems - I would move anywhere. Anywhere.”

Arisa stood up and walked to the window. “Tokyo is beautiful, but when I want to see beauty in my life I come here. Not to my room, not to Tokyo Skytree, not to some park. Everything I love most is here.” She gestured towards the sisters who were now leaning against one another.

“And if what I love begins to move,” Arisa motioned out the window, “I will follow love. Even if it costs me what I have here, I will follow love. I will follow you. No cost is too high.”

Arisa beamed a smile towards towards the two sister who were returning bright smiles in kind.
Present day

*Man... she’s sexy when she sweats.*

If this wasn’t the strangest thought Arisa had had all day, it surely came close. Of course, what girl wouldn’t swoon over their lover while they were being carried princess-style? Never mind that it was merely for a few hundred meters just to get to the nearest convenience store to buy ice for her swollen ankle, it was still a comforting feeling to see Honoka looking so determined.

Looking off the second floor balcony of a certain apartment building earlier, she’d seen her girlfriend standing in the parking lot below. She had been taking a short mental break to collect her thoughts, having unsuccessfully toured another apartment, when her girlfriend had walked into the parking lot.

Just as she’d predicted, their paths had crossed. Whether she cared to admit it or not, she and Honoka often came up with the same solutions to many problems. Granted, the way in which those decisions were made were vastly different, but the result was often the same. So there they were again, solving the same problem in a different way with the same result. When she saw Honoka standing there with her trademark look of knowing surprise, Arisa began to seethe with irritation.

After what felt like a pretty long staredown she had turned around to go down the stairs, only to realize she had left her backpack on the ground near the ledge. She began to turn back towards the railing but, upon stepping backwards to reverse her direction, she misjudged the distance between her and the stairs. Her right foot missed... well... everything. She began to turn back towards the railing but, upon stepping backwards to reverse her direction, she misjudged the distance between her and the stairs. Her right foot got caught on the third step and her ankle rolled in an unhealthy direction as she tumbled down the stairs.

The stairs were broken into two short flights between each floor, so she only bounced downwards for six or seven steps. When gravity finally relinquished its grip upon her vertical movement, she found herself in between floors with a couple of light bruises to show for her clumsiness.

“Good job, Russian girl.” Arisa muttered to herself. She began to stand up and immediately found herself sprawled back on the cold cement in tremendous pain. She looked towards the culprit - her right ankle was red and beginning to show signs of swelling. Everything else now seemed superfluous as waves of pain and emotion ripped through her body.

The first bit of anger at her situation were blindsided by the sudden realization that she can’t walk
right now.

*I can’t walk. I’m 2 kilometers from my hotel and I can’t walk.*

Feelings and emotions started to crash down on her left and right, like waves on a beach. She was in a stairwell in an apartment 400 kilometers from everything she knew trying desperately to find a place to live and survive with her girlfriends. A day of searching and investigating had led to nothing and now her anger had led to her own incapacitation.

Tears began to collect in her eyes. She was slowly losing it, losing focus, losing confidence.

At that moment she saw a shadow over her. Honoka was standing to the side of her and looking at her outstretched leg and swollen ankle. Arisa looked up at her beautiful girlfriend who was looking down at her with an expression not of concern or timidity, but of determination.

“I’m going to pick you up,” Honoka said, suddenly looking Arisa straight in the eyes. Her sapphire eyes were penetrating every thought in her head, pushing away clouds and haze that had built up and prevented her from thinking clearly.

“When I pick you up, put your arms around my neck and shoulder. Don’t let go,” Honoka looked down the stairs, evaluating the situation. She then looked back at her girlfriend. “If I tell you I’m putting you down, put your left leg down only. I’ll help you sit down, so don’t put any pressure on your right leg no matter what.”

“I understand,” was all that Arisa could mutter. Before she knew what was happening she had been swept up, ushered down the stairs, and out the door into the parking lot. Honoka’s eyes were thoughtful but focused. She knew exactly where she was going and walked at an impressive pace for someone carrying another human being in their arms.

After a few minutes Arisa could see a convenience store in the distance. Daring to speak up now, she looked at Honoka. “Are we going into the convenience store?”

Honoka looked at her girlfriend with fiercely determined eyes. “Yes. We’ll buy some ice and something to wrap your ankle with. Then we’ll flag down a taxi to take us to the station to meet Yukiho. From the station to the hotel I’ll carry you and then we’ll reevaluate our apartment search schedule for tomorrow.”
Honoka looked in the distance at the approaching convenience store and continued. “You’ll need to stay at the hotel for at least tomorrow. And before you object, no I won’t reconsider. We need you to be healthy and ready to help, so you need to take a day for yourself to rest. I’ll have Yukiho only search areas very close to the station so she can visit you every… 2 hours should be enough. That’ll also let her bring you food and new ice at a regular interval.”

Honoka looked pensive for a moment, then her expression changed to be quite happy. “On a positive note, even if you’re really mad at me right now you can’t run away from me!” A stupid grin graced her face and Arisa couldn’t help but giggle in response.

The convenience store staff were super helpful in not only giving the two girls some extra ice for the bum ankle, but also letting them have some cling wrap to help keep the ice bag on Arisa’s ankle. After borrowing a phone to call for a taxi, Honoka carried her young girlfriend out the front door and set her into the passenger side back seat.

Directing the driver to the station, the girls chatted idly for the few minutes they were in the car.

Upon their arrival at the station Honoka got out and helped Arisa hop up to the sidewalk and let her lean against a light post. After paying the driver, Honoka swept her girlfriend up and walked towards an understandably dumbfounded Yukiho who was approaching at an increasing pace.

“What--” Yukiho started before being cut off.

“Arisa fell down some stairs, which was mostly my fault, and twisted her ankle. We doubled up and went to check out the same apartment complex just like Arisa had predicted we would, which is completely my fault.” Honoka set Arisa down on a bench and Yukiho sat next to her, gently pulling the injured ankle onto her lap. She looked at Arisa with love and concern, but Arisa looked back with an unexpected combination of surprise and happiness.

Honoka took a few steps away from the two while contemplating something. Arisa took the opportunity to reach out to Yukiho, taking her hand and interlacing their fingers. She looked at her younger girlfriend and said very softly, “I… think your sister is back.”

Yukiho looked slightly wide-eyed at the blonde haired girl but her concentration was broken by Honoka, who had done an about face and was now standing with her hand on her hips.

“Tonight we’ll take Arisa back to the hotel and I’ll leave you to help her into the bath, Yukiho.”
Make sure she washes properly, especially around the injury. I’ll go get dinner for all three of us and bring it back to the hotel room. Does gyudon sound good for dinner, ladies?”

Yukiho was still a bit taken aback by everything but she managed to nod her said at the same time Arisa added “Mmm meat!”

Honoka gave a quick smile to the two of them and continued. “We’ll keep close watch on your ankle tonight, Arisa, and every time you or I wake up tonight, Yukiho, we’ll need to make sure Arisa isn’t sleeping in a weird position.”

“Tomorrow we’ll wake up and I’ll set the schedule for the day. For now, know that we’ll start off with me getting breakfast for us all and bringing it back. After breakfast I’ll head out to continue apartment hunting and depending on Arisa’s ankle, Yukiho you’ll probably go out for short ventures as well. However, your number one priority is to care for Arisa tomorrow. Understand?”

Yukiho was beginning to understand Arisa’s comment. This was the Honoka they needed. This was the Honoka that disappeared a few years ago and only occasionally came out for minutes at a time. But this time was different - if she’d been like this since the accident… what a change that would be!

Yukiho was so busy taking in the moment that she forgot to respond to her sister. “Yukiho?” Honoka looked at her sister and stepped closer. “I need you. Arisa needs you more right now. Please help us.” She gave her sister a headpat and smiled.

Yukiho was so happy right now she could jump up and down were it not for the injured person’s leg in her lap. “Of course, nee-san! Anything for us.” She smiled at both girls in turn.

Honoka looked at Arisa and gave similarly stern but kind commands. “Arisa, your job tomorrow is to recover to the best of your ability. If you so much as walk one step, skip one skip, or hop one hop outside of that hotel room tomorrow I will, so help me, instruct Yukiho to tie you down and hold you there. Do you understand me?”

Arisa wasn’t sure if this was the appropriate time to be aroused, all things considered, but she couldn’t help it. Honoka was so sexy when she took command like this. Yukiho seemed to have the same thoughts because before Arisa could muster the correct answer to that question, Yukiho volunteered her own answer.
“I think we should just do that anyway, nee-san.” She looked over at Arisa suggestively.

Honoka picked up on the vibe and stepped towards Arisa, grabbing her chin with two fingers and gently lifting her face up. “Perhaps you’re right,” she said while staring into Arisa’s eyes in a way that would make any girl quiver. “She makes the cutest sounds when… she… can’t… move…”

It was at this point that Arisa realized she wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight. Not because she’d be in pain, but rather because of the fantasies she’s have running through in her mind.

Honoka stepped back and took Arisa in her arms, giving her a quick peck on the lips. A pouting Yukiho stood up and promptly stole a kiss of her own from her sister before planting a kiss on Arisa’s cheek.

“Shall we be off to our room, my pet?” Honoka said in the most sultry voice she could manage.

Arisa’s cheeks went beet red and she suddenly had difficulty swallowing

*Nope. No sleep.*
A/N: This story is set in an actual city in Japan called Niigata. I’ve tried to be as geographically accurate as possible. All buildings, businesses, and city areas that are mentioned in this story do exist in real life.

To all who read these lines, my thanks. To all who enjoy these lines, my happiness.

Chapter 4 - Equilateral

Day 3 in Niigata - 6:55 pm

“Alright, so we’ve really exhausted our options in the area south of the station, haven’t we?” Honoka looked a little concerned as she stared at the map that Yukiho, Arisa, and she surrounded. “What about these areas… Abuminishi and Horinouchi Minami?”

Yukiho shook her head. “I walked around there for a while, but most everything for rent in that area is overpriced because there’s a good high school nearby.”

Honoka looked a bit upset about that and scratched her chin for a moment.

“Maybe that’s a blessing in disguise, though.” Yukiho motioned towards the area surrounding the high school. “There’s a lot of housing in this area, but that’s the thing - there’s a lot of housing. Jobs in an area like this - a primarily residential area - will be pretty hard to come by.”

Arisa nodded. “I see what you’re saying. Maybe we should focus a bit more on finding sections of the city that have a lot of businesses and then kind of spiral our way while looking for apartments.”
Arisa turned the map towards herself and analyzed it briefly. She put a few coins down on the map to use as markers and centered them on a pair of locations.

“Clearly we need to look around the station, but rent is pretty rough. So why not look at a business area right outside - here, this area called Bandai. It’s near a couple of department stores and a mall but far enough from the station that rents might be reasonable enough. Also, here, in Furumachi there seems to be a high concentration of businesses; although that name doesn’t sound promising for finding anything that’s been built in the Heisei era.” (A/N: Furumachi literally translates to ‘old town’)

Yukiho looked at her sister with a smile. “Well that’s two good areas to focus on tomorrow! How about I stay near our hotel and go to Bandai? That way I can be near Arisa and check on her frequently without sacrificing transit time. You can go to Furumachi and--”

Honoka gently put a hand on her sister’s leg, causing Yukiho to stop suddenly. Honoka looked at her and smiled a loving smile before turning to Arisa. “I want you to stay in the hotel with Arisa tomorrow. I’ll start in Bandai tomorrow and whatever I don’t accomplish Arisa can finish for me the next day. She’ll need a light day to ease herself back into physical health anyway.”

“Why can’t Yukiho go out tomorrow?” Arisa looked slightly uncomfortable with the idea of Yukiho being in the room with her all day but she could really explain why, even to herself.

Honoka stood up from the bed and stretched a bit before answering. “Who shared a bath with me this evening?”

Arisa blushed and raised her hand slightly.

“And who, in that bathtub, said they got really bored during the day?”

Arisa kept her hand up. “I mean, I was basically here for 8 hours alone with 8 channels to keep me company...”

Honoka turned and faced away from the bed with an innocent smile. “And who admitted that she began looking forward to Yukiho checking in on her eve--”

“OKAY WE CAN STOP RIGHT THERE THANK YOU.” Arisa sulked a bit, blushing even more.
Yukiho looked amused and a little surprised by the exchange that just happened. She reached over and gave Arisa a head pat which only caused the blonde haired girl to blush even more furiously.

“But seriously Yukiho,” Honoka turned back around and addressed her sister, “I want you to stay here and be with Arisa. Morale is as important as health, and it’d be nice for you to take a half day off to help out Arisa. It’ll allow you to rest and Arisa to heal.”

Honoka moved over to the other bed in the room and got under the covers. “Just make sure you don’t get a noise complaint from our neighbors. I know how you can get when you’re really excited, Yukiho. And with Arisa just lying there helpless and forlorn...” Honoka winked at her sister, who was now rapidly closing the distance between the two with a pillow in-hand.

Yukiho raised the pillow like a mace and began to swing downwards only to have her sister roll over and grab her wrist with both hands, pulling Yukiho onto the bed on top of Honoka. Yukiho landed face down on her sister’s lap and immediately realized the compromising position she was in.

But it was too late, as Honoka’s hands immediately went for her sister’s ribcage and began to tickle Yukiho mercilessly. Yukiho writhed, trying hopelessly to fight back but failing miserably. She giggled, cackled, and laughed hysterically while Honoka exacted her will upon Yukiho, who was now kicking wildly and generally attempting movement in all directions at the same time.

After a dozen seconds or so, Honoka relented and allowed Yukiho the pleasure of measured breathing once again. Arisa smiled and shook her head. “I wonder what the hotel staff would do if they got a noise complaint for a beached whale.”

Yukiho looked far from pleased and calmly, while smoothing her hair, sat up and looked at the blonde. “Just remember who’s going to have you locked in this room all day tomorrow...”

Arisa suddenly realized the lack of foresight she’d had when making her comments and began to move underneath the blankets.

“Alright girls, let’s go to bed. We have a plan, so let’s get some rest and do our best again tomorrow.” Honoka rubbed her sister’s back and welcomed her into the bed.

“It’s lonely and cold over here. I’m... I’m kinda jealous of you two.” Arisa admitted,
uncharacteristically. Yukiho and Honoka both looked over at their girlfriend with caring eyes.

“I’ll sleep with you tomorrow night, I promise,” Honoka said, “but you need one more night without one of us running the risk of kicking your ankle accidentally.”

Arisa knew she was right, but still felt a little lonely being left alone two nights in a row. When they first arrived in the hotel, they had decided to shuffle their sleeping arrangements every night so as to allow each other a night with someone else two out of every three nights. The first night had Honoka sleeping alone and Yukiho with Arisa. Now, in their third night in Niigata, Arisa still had yet to sleep beside Honoka and it bothered her a bit.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. “I’ll hold you to it then. Goodnight Honoka, Yukiho.”

“Goodnight!” rang through the hotel room as three girls slowly moved towards their own individual dreamscapes.

---

**Niigata Day 4 - 2:57pm**

Honoka was walking south along the main road leading towards the central station. She’d looked around the Bandai area, just as the girls had decided together the night before. Truth be told, this one day of searching was much more fruitful than the two previous days combined with everyone looking together. Having planned out where to go and *why* they should look there, she found herself much more focused and productive.

She approached a large intersection and climbed the stairs of the overpass that would take her across the street. She stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs and leaned on the railing, looking east down a wide street. A large factory was billowing steam in the distance and she could see the central ward post office and--

**Animate.** A large chain of anime and manga book stores in Japan. A very easy to spot building with its characteristic blue walls and bright anime advertising in each of the display windows.

Here was a temptation. It's times like this that Honoka was tested. What was her true self? How
would she respond to such an invitation?

Honoka sighed to herself as she found herself crossing the overpass and going down the east stairs towards the store. *I guess I’ll buy the girls something to read while I’m in there. They deserve a small comfort anyway. Or at least, that’s what I’m telling myself. I just want to go in!*

As she strode towards the front door she noticed a sign hanging in the front entrance.

*Help Wanted!*

_Do you like manga? Want to be part of a team of people with the same interests as you? We’re hiring! Part time, full time, and seasonal positions available. Inquire with the manager!_

Honoka stared in disbelief for a moment. She finally came to her senses and began to climb the stairs to the second floor, which housed the manga shelves.

She perused for about a half hour, picking out a couple of books that fit the tastes of both Arisa (mostly romance stories with lots of angst but always a happy ending) and Yukiho (magical girls, usually scantily clad, occasionally several at a time). Before checking out she grabbed the latest copy of *Comic Yuri Hime* for herself. *Mmm… it’s been too long since I’ve read stuff like Yuru Yuri and Inugami-san to Nekoyama-san. I need some fluff in my life.*

When she made her way to the checkout counter she was greeted by the cashier and a smile. “Welcome! You can step this way if you’re ready to checkout.”

_She’s kinda cute…*_ Mentally shaking herself from that weird thought, Honoka got down to business.

“Thank you.” She looked at the cashier who was scanning her items and operating the computer at a surprising pace. “Um… this is kind of sudden, but I saw the sign on the front door saying you were hiring. Is there any way I could talk to the manager about the open positions? My name is Kousaka Honoka. I recently moved here and I’m looking for a job. I previously worked at an anime shop in Tokyo as a general manager, so I was hoping to stay in the industry here.”

The cashier looked straight at her with a slightly analytical glance that faded quickly into a soft smile. “The manager is working on something at the moment, but she’ll be free tomorrow between 10am and noon.” The cashier looked down at Honoka’s hands which were now searching her
Honoka extracted her memo pad from her bag and wrote the information down with fervor. “May I have the name of the manager, please?” Honoka looked up with a face of determination and addressed the cashier once more.

The cashier thought for just a moment before saying “Satou. Her name is Satou. When you get here tomorrow please look for me and I’d be happy to take you to the manager’s office!” She gave a sincere smile and gave Honoka the bag that contained books she’d just paid for.

“Kousaka-san, may I ask why you moved here to Niigata?” The cashier’s smile stayed right in place.

“It’s a long story, but basically I’m supporting my little sister and a significant other as well. We couldn’t make it in Tokyo with how expensive the area was, so after she graduated from high school we moved here!” Honoka seemed chipper as ever and she explained everything to the cashier.

The cashier seemed to think deeply about something briefly and then responded, “I see. That’s a lot of responsibility for someone your age… I’m presuming you’re around 20?”

“Exactly, yes. Our parents have passed on so we do what we can. But! It’s not all bad. We have quite a loving family with just the three of us!” Honoka was collecting her things as she chatted, getting ready to endeavor back out into the apartment wilderness that awaited her.

Wow, even given all that she looks really happy thinking about her situation. “Well, I’d say you might have a good chance of getting a job here. We’re looking for someone with experience to be a shift leader… but I didn’t tell you that.” She winked at Honoka and gave a knowing smile.

Honoka looked pleased and gave a perfectly formal bow to the cashier. “Thank you very much! I look forward to seeing you tomorrow!”

The cashier bowed in return. “As do I. Until then, have a nice day!”

Honoka turned to walk out of the store but doubled back briefly.
“Excuse me, but you wouldn’t happen to know of any apartments nearby that are accepting new tenants, would you?”

“I’m sorry, you’re looking for an apartment?” The cashier was now thoroughly confused.

Honoka rubbed her head bashfully. “Yeah, we kinda moved here abruptly and we’ve been living in a hotel for the last four days until we can find an apartment. The other two are at the hotel right now because my significant other twisted their ankle the day after we got here. So I’m out apartment hunting! And I can’t stop until we’ve found a home!” Honoka gave a fist pump and a big smile.

The cashier looked completely amazed at what she’d just heard and after thinking for a moment, shook her head and smiled.

__________________________

Niigata Day 4 - 12:41pm

Arisa was naked.

She lay prostrate on the bed and was on the verge of sweating.

Yukiho, sweat dripping from her brow onto the bare skin below, moved her hands slowly and methodically over the skin of her girlfriend, who she was currently straddling.

Yukiho’s heavy breaths betrayed her. Arisa could sense her girlfriend’s stamina waning and broke the silence that had been in the room for the last ten minutes.

“Yukiho… if you want to stop I won’t be upset. I know it’s only been ten minutes but… it’s felt so… amazing.”
Yukiho wiped sweat from her brow and continued moving her hands.

“I won’t get better at this if I don’t practice. And I want to practice on you.” Arisa suddenly let out a groan from the positioning of Yukiho’s hands. She was hitting all the right spots, that’s for sure.

Arisa turned her head to the left and tried to look at her girlfriend while saying “You know I love you even if you give short, good massages.”

Yukiho dismounted and wiped her face on her shirt. “Yeah, but that TV show made me want to try. And there you were, in all your glory, just asking for it.” Yukiho smiled a bit and went to the bathroom to grab a towel. “It’s not my fault I really got into it and wore myself out fast. Just shows I need more practice if I want to get good at it!” Her voice came from the bathroom where water had now begun to run from the faucet.

Arisa put her shirt and shorts on and lay back down on the bed with her foot slightly elevated. She’d tried to do her best to take care of her ankle, always keeping it up and occasionally icing it, even two days after the initial event that led to her demise. She had been relieved to discover the day after the accident that her injury wasn’t as bad as it’d appeared at first. Even now, two days after, if she all of a sudden needed to escape from a burning building, she would be able to do so with only minimal pain.

Regardless, she was happy to take an extra day to heal and get ready to help the next day. And it was strangely nice to be able to spend time with Yukiho.

*But what do we talk about? TV is boring this time of day.* The truth is that she and Yukiho hadn’t really talked a whole lot by themselves ever since the three of them got together. It’s not like they avoided each other or anything, they just didn’t really act the same way they did back when they were best friends who were dating.

It’s almost like the month between their breakup and the beginning of their polyamorous relationship had stripped them of their ability to conduct friendly conversation. Topics between the two were always fairly serious or were relevant only to the current situation. Conversation for the sake of conversation seemed to have disappeared.

Arisa became curious. Morbidly curious.

“Hey Yukiho… tell me about you and Honoka before you and I started dating. How did that all come about?”
The water stopped running and there was silence for a moment before Yukiho emerged from the bathroom and slowly walked towards the bed, sitting down next to Arisa and crossing her legs without saying a word.

For a moment Arisa wondered if she’d crossed a line she didn’t know existed.

“It wasn’t at all like how you and I started out. You were pretty direct and just flat out confessed to me while we were walking home from school one day. With Honoka and I it took several long nights of conversation and feeling each other out emotionally before we finally realized what we were looking for with each other. After I confessed I was in love with her we just slid into a comfortable relationship. Of course, even then I don’t know if I was really sure about her feelings for me until after we’d been… together for a few weeks.”

Yukiho pulled her legs up to her chest and set her chin down on her knees. “I knew I loved her more than just like a sister loves a sister. And I think I knew that she felt a lot for me. But it wasn’t until a few weeks into the relationship that I understood everything completely. The way she gave me her first kiss and took my own… it was something I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”

“Though I do wish I could have somehow given you another first kiss.”

Arisa suddenly gasped and looked at Yukiho, who was now resting her head on her knees and looking at her while smiling. The look of care and love in Yukiho’s eyes was entrancing.

“You were-- no, you are so special, Arisa. Honoka may have introduced me to love, but you showed me what it was to be attracted to someone. All I ever wanted to do was spend time with you. Heh, so much so that Honoka began to notice.”

Arisa moved around uncomfortably. “I’m sorry for breaking up your sisterly fling.”

Yukiho giggled and shook her head. “Don’t be. I’m not. You and I became best friends so naturally, it made me really happy when you confessed to me. The only reason I asked you to give me the weekend to think about it was for the sake of Honoka.”

“Incidentally, that was the most difficult weekend of my life, Yukiho.” Arisa pouted only half seriously. “You can’t do that to a girl in her last year of junior high school. I was of fragile emotional stability.”
Yukiho reached out and took the hand of her girlfriend. “For which I’m truly sorry. But I did it because I wanted to be with you. I wanted to jump into your arms with a force like your friendship had hit me months before. But I owed it to Honoka to tell her why I wanted to stop being her girlfriend.”

“How we’d talked about this shortly after getting together. We acknowledged that if there was ever a girl, or boy for that matter, that we fell for, we’d support the other. We’ll always be sisters, so why not spread the love?” Yukiho smiled a bright smile and stood up to turn off the TV.

Arisa adjusted her seating arrangement and asked Yukiho to grab her a glass of tea. With two glasses of cold tea poured for the two of them and a small bag of dried mango to share, Yukiho returned to the bed.

“You filled a need I didn't know I had, Arisa. Desire, lust, comfort, fun, even love - those things can be fulfilled by anyone. But you chose me. You sought me out. You didn’t have to love me, but you did. It was such an attractive thing.

Yukiho put down her tea and looked straight at Arisa. “Honoka, for all that I love her, will always be my sister. But you have always given yourself by choice, of your own free will. That will always be special to me. That, I will always cherish.”

Arisa was completely engaged in Yukiho’s story. She hadn’t expected such a gush of honesty and storytelling from Yukiho, the girl who often guards her true heart and emotions. I guess I still don’t completely understand her, even after dating her twice. She smiled to herself inside.

“Why did you break up with me?”

Any tea that had lingered in Arisa’s mouth made a quick, vaporous exit as she expelled air faster than a sneeze. “I beg your pardon?” She didn’t mishear Yukiho, but that was the only thing she could think of to buy herself some time to think about the rather direct question.

“When you broke up with me I didn't completely understand, but I accepted it. I had a feeling you were interested in someone else and because of that I think I just told myself ‘it can’t be helped’. It was a very difficult time for me, but I think I grew a lot because of it. I decided that if I tried my best to be your friend that you'd see me as better than whoever it was you were going to eventually confess to.”
Yukiho chuckled heartily. “But boy was I surprised when it was Honoka.”

“Well I feel like a jerk now,” said Arisa, raising the glass to her mouth and taking a sip of tea. “I guess I broke up with you because I found myself simultaneously attracted to two people. I mean, you two are certainly different people, but there’s something underneath your personalities that’s strangely similar, almost familiar. So in my head, it made sense to be attracted to two sisters.”

“But it was confusing. Was I in love with you just because you were so kind to this transfer student who couldn’t speak Japanese all that well? Was I in love with Honoka just because she was the leader of a super successful idol group? It was all… geez, I was a mess. You didn’t deserve me doing all that to you. So I did what I thought was best - I separated myself from the issues so I could think about it from a neutral standpoint.”

Arisa leaned back, her hands behind her head. Yukiho curled up on the bed next to Arisa and started to stroke her leg supportively.

“I… I don’t know. Maybe a year wasn’t enough to truly know who I was and what we could become. Maybe I should have--”

Yukiho gently pinched Arisa’s leg. “I don’t care. You did what your heart needed. How is looking out for your own feelings a bad thing? The whole experience over those next few months taught me a lot about learning to take life’s ups and downs and about my own feelings. It also taught me that I really can love two people. Equally.”

Arisa looked at Yukiho inquisitively, as if expecting an explanation.

“Ever since you accepted me as part of your relationship I’ve just wanted to be supportive to the both of you. There’s two things I realized I wanted: from Honoka, I wanted to support her and have her rely on me; if she could do that it would make me feel needed.”

“On the other hand, from you…” Yukiho hesitated and looked down, suddenly unconfident. “I know the way Honoka looks at you with desire and complete conviction… and a small part of me wants that. But I know I’ll never get it from her because she can’t give it to me. Our relationship is too different. In the beginning that bothered me, but as we all were together for a while I began to understand what I really wanted was from you. I wanted that same look to come from your eyes and to be directed at me.”
Grabbing the bedsheets in her fists, Yukiho pressed on. “That's why I do everything I can to support you two. I may get 99% of the way there, but I know I'll never be completely your equals.”

Arisa shot up from her resting position at hearing this, slamming her hands down on the bed. “But I want you to be!”

The reaction took Yukiho by surprise as Arisa continued, with a little more evenness in her voice.

“I don’t know how to explain all of this. I mean look there’s a big part of me that… I… I want Honoka all to myself and I don't want to share her at all - for a while I was even jealous of the two of you being sisters, something I can never become with either of you. And then I thought about the way you made me feel for so long as my first love. Then the struggle I had when I realized I loved you both… those feelings made wanting you and Honoka both… well, it was impossible to get through. I felt like a terrible person for wanting Honoka so badly after I'd committed myself to you.”

“Commitment is so important to me, and when I felt that I wasn't keeping that promise of commitment to you, it hurt. It hurt because I knew I would hurt you even more than I would hurt myself. How could I do that to someone? Tell them I love them but also want to say the same words to someone else. And mean it to both people.”

Arisa looked at Yukiho through suddenly watery eyes and extended her hand towards the auburn haired girl. “You're special to me. I never denied it then and I still can't now. I won't now. You'll always be equal in my mind.”

Yukiho was also close to tears as she accepted the outstretched hand of her girlfriend. “I want to believe that because the truth is that I fell even more in love with you after we broke up. Seeing you being so committed to Honoka made me want to experience all of those feelings as well. If possible, I wanted you even more after we weren’t together.”

“Why didn't you say anything then?” Arisa asked while caressing the back of Yukiho’s hand.

“And hurt my sister? And potentially lose you as the friend I already had? The risk was too great.”

“But you still did things with your sister despite that…” Arisa made sure to grin slightly to show Yukiho that she wasn’t angry about those happenings in the slightest.
Yukiho sighed. “That wasn’t the best decision Honoka and I ever made.”

Arisa chuckled. “I mean, I can’t blame you. She’s sexy as hell. I’m just glad Honoka was so forthright with me about the whole situation. I’ll never forget how serious she was when she accepted responsibility for everything. ‘I care for you Arisa, but I also care for my sister. And I can’t change who I am because of who I’m dating. So you need to know: I love my sister as more than just a sister.’ Ahh, she was so handsome in that moment.”

“Oh my gosh, Arisa, I’ve never seen you so dumbfounded as you were then.” Yukiho held back a small giggle.

“I’ve also never seen you so ashamed of something.” Arisa looked less entertained by these thoughts. “I was so confused… I don’t know, maybe hurt, maybe not. I broke up with you and didn’t tell you why. Then a month later I confessed to the sister of the girl I broke up with. Then I found out from her that the both of you did a few naughty things and… well… that happened. How was I to know that in one month you two would become lovers? Let alone for a second time.”

Yukiho blushed slightly but didn’t back down. “Hey, it’s not like we’d never done anything before. We had done a few... things occasionally in the past, but it was mostly emotional. Though when I met you and became friends with you, those things became less frequent. And of course after you confessed to me, well you know we stopped everything then.”

“Of course, I understand that. But when I saw how much you meant to her and how ashamed you looked, I couldn't help but feel sorry that I even got in the way.” Arisa looked out of the window of their hotel room and thought back with a pensive look on her face. “That's part of why I agreed to be a part of all of this - the three of us. The girl that was and is your girlfriend was heartbroken seeing you look so dejected. So I decided that day that I never wanted to see that face again.”

Yukiho was nearly in tears by this point. She reached over and embraced her girlfriend with both hands, giving all of the love she could possibly convey with a simple hug.

“No matter what’s happened to this point, know I love you, Yukiho. You’ve given me so much. Sometimes I may be jealous and monopolizing, but believe me - I feel like that towards you as often as I do towards Honoka. I just haven’t figured out how to let those feelings out yet.” The girls unwrapped themselves and shared a few sniffs as they both tried to recover as best they could.

Yukiho let out a short laugh after realizing something. “Ya know, we never really went through
anything special to start our relationship with the three of us. We just all agreed that we liked each other and we should start being together. Maybe…”

Yukiho looked Arisa in the eyes and hopped off the bed. She got onto her knees next to the bed and put her hands on her legs. “Arisa, Honoka and I have been sisters but we became lovers. I want to be your lover, so much that you would choose me over Honoka. And at the same time, I want to become your sister that you to look to for support. This is my confession. Stay with me forever. I love you. Will you go out with me?”

Arisa finally let go of the tears she’d been holding back to this point. Nodding an affirmative answer to Yukiho, she leaned down and kissed her girlfriend for a long time.

Withdrawing and trying to collect herself, Arisa looked over to a Yukiho still kneeling on the floor.

Yukiho spoke up, “So that’s a yes, right?”

Arisa laughed a cheerful, genuine laugh and threw a pillow in Yukiho’s general direction.

“Of course.”

---

Niigata Day 4 - 7:19pm

“Honoka’s never been this late before, I wonder if she’s okay.” Arisa was kneeling on the bed next to the window and looking outside at the street front. Honoka was usually back around 6:30, their standard end-of-day meeting time. For her to be more than 10 or 20 minutes late was unusual at best.

Yukiho looked calm on the outside, though the same could not be said for the commentary going through her head. “It's not that late yet. Just give her some time.”

All at once the hotel door flew open and there stood the girl of the hour in all her sweaty, heavily
breathing glory.

“I'm home!” She trod through the hotel room dragging an only slightly mortified looking girl behind her. “Oh good, everyone has clothes on.”

“HONOKA” two girls yelled simultaneously. They'd had the sense to get somewhat properly dressed in time for Honoka’s arrival home, just in case she decided to go out to a cafe for dinner or something.

The last thing they expected was to see a fourth girl in the room.

She had slightly longer than shoulder length, straight black hair. While her complexion was quite pale, it didn't seem too unbecoming. In fact, the look she sported was all in all quite Japanese. She stood next to Honoka, just slightly taller than her, and gave off an air of responsibility and cool kindness - all this despite being dragged into the hotel room, not by force, but certainly by surprise.

“Everyone, this is Satou Ayako. Ayako, this is Yukiho and Arisa.” Honoka thrust her hands in the general direction of the girl while doing some light jazz hands.

Ayako looked briefly between the two girls sitting on the bed and did a small bow. “It's a pleasure to meet you both.”

The two younger girls looked uneasily between each other. Finally, Arisa asked the question.

“Nice to meet you too. Um… Honoka, who, may I ask, is Satou-san… exactly?”

Honoka looked quite pleased with herself, as if she was expecting the question. She responded right away.

“She checked me out at the manga store.”

Three girls donned three different expressions; embarrassment, protectiveness, and jealousy.
“Ahh-- that is, she was working the register! So yeah, I went to a manga store and now she’s here!”

This perplexed all present company. Honoka continued.

“And, she's my new boss.”

It took a second for those words to be processed by the younger girls, but once they had filtered through, the realization of what Honoka had meant brought unbridled joy. Both girls let forth a loud squee and hugged each other mightily. Yukiho then bounded up to her sister and gave her an equally intense hug.

After Yukiho released herself, Honoka moved over to the bed next to Arisa and gave her a tender hug.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Honoka?” Ayako chimed in from across the room after shaking the hand of Yukiho who was standing next to her.

“Oh yeah!” She grabbed the hand of Arisa and looked towards Ayako.

“She's also our new upstairs neighbor.”

A few more seconds of processing time.

Followed by pandemonium.

A cafe near Otonokizaka Academy

The day after Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa left Tokyo
“In the middle of the night? Where do they think they’re going?”

Clearly not to Akihabara.

“Let’s all settle down until everyone - oh good, Hanayo and Rin are here. Over here girls!”

“They can’t be gone forever, this is clearly a cry for attention or help or something. We just have to figure out what they want from the clues.”

Right, like Honoka would let that happen.

“What clues, exactly? They left their phones and a lot of belongings behind. There’s nothing we can do to track them, especially if they left by train. If only they’d gone by plane…”

“No way, that’s too expensive for them. They can’t have saved up so much that they’re able to move somewhere, so we just have to figure out where they’re going to an extended stay.”

“What about friends in nearby towns? They probably got in contact with some friends who’ve moved out of town so they could crash some place for a while.”

She wouldn’t do that either. If she doesn’t want to be found, she’d go on her own. She’d lead them to their goal, just like before. Just like she did with us.

“Some of us should go to Eli’s house and look around for what we can find. Others should go to Honoka’s old job and Yukiho’s part time job as well.”

“Wait, Yukiho had a part time job?”

Yup. And so did Arisa. But they don’t need to know that.

“Yeah, I think so.”
“What about Arisa?”

“No way she’d put up with one. She’s too direct and confrontational.”

“She came home late pretty often, but I always figured she was with her girlfriend and Honoka. They hung out a lot. I guess she never got over the whole Honoka and Yukiho thing...”

You’re still denying the fact that all three of them are together? This is just special...

“Regardless, we need to figure this out fast.”

“Do we? If they’re just doing this to get away from life for a while, why not just let them?”

“How do we know they’ll come back?”

“Oh come on, they have to.”

I wouldn’t blame them if they didn’t.

“I don’t know... Honoka was always so serious.”

“And spontaneous and impulsive. She’s seriously random, even with big decisions.”

“I suppose you’re right. I suppose we should do what she wants and go looking for her.”

I suppose I’m a bad friend. To Honoka and to you guys. In the end, I’m not going to help either you or her. At least this time I think I’m making the right choice.

“That’s the best choice, I think.”
“Yeah, me too.”

“Okay ladies, let’s get some answers! Go to a location they frequented and do some detective work! Keep in touch and report everything!”

Seven girls stood up from the table and began talking about how they’d tackle their investigation into the overnight disappearance of three people - two sisters, and the sister of someone in the group. Seven girls walked closer to the door before on realized that someone hadn’t stood up yet.

“Hey, are you coming?”

*I can’t do this. I won’t do this. Not again.*

“No.”

Seven girls stopped very suddenly and looked back at the table.

“Why not?”

*It’s complicated.*
Chapter 5 - Tangent

Niigata Day 4 - 8:02pm

“I still don't understand why you didn’t just tell Honoka that you were the manager. Why have her come back the next day?” Yukiho was mildly confused about the whole situation between Ayako and Honoka and was, like Arisa, trying to process the events of the day that had occurred without her being present.

“Come in and sit down and I’ll try to give you a short summary over tea.” Ayako turned the key to her apartment and opened the door, allowing the three girls to enter. They removed their shoes and entered the 9th floor apartment that Ayako rented in a building just a block away from the Animate store she managed.

The apartment was simple, but slightly spacious for one person by Japanese standards. A short hallway opened into a joint living room/dining room which had a single room attached to the right side with sliding doors. The small kitchen contained a two-burner range, sink, modest counter space, and a chest-high fridge.

“Well, here’s my place. Pardon the single-girl-slightly-otaku decorations. The layout is supposed to be similar to the one you guys will have downstairs.” Ayako made her way to the kitchen and started heating water for tea. “The building’s a little old and the electric bills can be high in winter because it doesn’t exactly have 21st century insulation, but it’s nice enough, decent sized, and the rent is surprisingly reasonable given that we’re just an 8-minute walk from the station.”

The girls all came in and sat around the table at the far end of the room. Next to the table were three full sized bookshelves and another small shelf with a modest TV on top. The bookshelves
were lined with manga - as expected of someone working in an animation superstore - but one also contained an impressive number of doujinshi, taking up nearly three of the five shelves.

“You’re welcome to look at any of them you like,” Ayako said to the girls, and in particular Honoka who was staring at the shelves with a glint in her eyes. “Most of everything in the doujinshi section is pretty good, but I’d stay away from anything written by somebodD.”

Ayako hadn’t known Honoka long enough to know that this kind of ‘warning’ would only pique the ginger’s interest and didn’t notice when Honoka immediately found the first book with the author’s name on it and started to read it. She flipped through the pages, absorbing the impressive drawings contained therein. Wow, the art is amazing - like professional quality. But there’s something...

“Tea time!” Ayako said as she brought a tea pot and four cups over to the table. Honoka quickly put the doujinshi down and turned herself towards the table. She waited as the tea was poured for all four girls and thanked her host before taking a sip. Mmm… it’s been awhile since we’ve had fresh, hot tea.

“Okay, so about the thing with me being a cashier.” Ayako was putting down her cup when she began speaking in an effort to clear up all of the confusion about what happened earlier. “Basically, I was working as a cashier so I could see any potential job seekers before they actually came to do an interview. I wanted to meet them and talk to them without being in a high stress environment.”

She took another quick sip of tea before leaning back and settling in a bit. “In an interview situation everyone is so uptight and stressed… it’s like people want to say the right thing, not the truth. It’s hard to understand the actual person in front of me when I’m doing an interview. Sure, there are some things I need to hear in that kind of environment, but I also need to know the character of the person I’m hiring. So I camped out as a cashier so I could talk to job seekers as equals, not as the manager.”

Arisa nodded in understanding. “That makes sense. I guess even good job candidates might change their personality and actions to fit what they think the manager wants. It’s not lying, but it’s not really being honest either.”

“You’d make a good manager; you’re exactly right.” Ayako gave a quick thumbs up in Arisa’s direction and continued. “Honoka stood out quite a bit from the other people who’d stopped by today. Some of the others I’d met the last few days seemed fair enough and I’d have happily interviewed them, but Honoka had something none of the others did - diligence. She wanted to know the manager’s name, the time she’d be available… usually when I say ‘oh, the manager’s busy’ the people just say ‘thanks anyway’ and come back another time.”
“But Honoka wanted more. She needed more and wouldn’t stop until she had everything she needed to be able to succeed.” Ayako shook her head slightly. “And then she told me just a little about how you guys were living in a hotel until you found a job and apartment. It all seemed pretty crazy to me, but someone willing to just get up and move away like you did? That takes gumption. I like that. That’s the kind of person I want to work with.”

“So there it is. After that she asked me about open apartments and I recalled there being a vacancy in this building, so we went to the office downstairs and put in a formal application.” Ayako smiled and picked up her teacup to take another sip.

Honoka picked up from there. “The building manager said nobody else had applied, so there’s just some formalities to take care of. But we should be able to move into the apartment in two or three days! And then I can start my job a few days after that, right, Ayako?”

Ayako nodded. “Come in whenever you’re settled. Maybe don’t take a week, ya know, but you’ll need a few days to buy furniture and other things anyway. Do what you need to do at home, then come work for me.”

Honoka stiffened up and gave a salute. “Aye aye, Madam Manager.” Her girlfriends giggled at the scene between the two future coworkers as Ayako stared Honoka down, trying to look displeased but failing slightly.

Ayako turned her attention to the other girls. “So what are you two planning to do? Unfortunately we only have one position open at our shop right now.” Arisa and Yukiho exchanged thoughtful glances and Yukiho spoke up first.

“I think we're going to just take it one day at a time. If Honoka's working we can afford to look around and not kill ourselves in the process. Also, now we can afford to be a little more particular about the jobs we apply for instead of just taking whatever is available.”

Arisa nodded in agreement. “I saw a few places with job openings while we searched for apartments, so I'll probably go back to some of the more interesting ones and see what I can do.” She looked down for a moment and then turned to Honoka. “Of course, now we need to go buy furniture and basic stuff for the apartment.”

“Sounds like Yukiho has her first job!” Honoka grinned widely. Arisa didn't look entertained.
“I take offense to that.” Arisa narrowed her eyes slightly.

Honoka just continued to grin. “And I take offense to the way your room looked in Tokyo.”

Ayako leaned back, looking up in a nostalgic way. “Oh to be young and in love.” Ayako winked at Yukiho who giggled in response.

“To be fair, they have similarly poor taste in decorations.” Yukiho went on the offensive.

“HEY,” replied the two in unison.

“Alright kids, settle down.” Ayako sat forward and feigned parental sternness before realizing the futility of the act and once again sat back on the sofa. “And this is why I don't have kids. I'm worthless at discipline. Anyway, before I go to work tomorrow why don't I show you the bus you'll need to take to get to the closest furniture store? You can look around, buy what you need, and have them deliver the furniture on the day you move in. That's what I did when I moved here.”

The three nodded in agreement. The rest of the evening was spent idly chatting and generally enjoying each other's company. At the end of the night the three girls said their goodbyes and went back to the hotel. Upon arriving they found they had a message from the apartment manager.

_Your application for residence has been accepted and you can begin moving in the day after tomorrow. Please stop by the building manager’s office that morning to receive your keys and sign the necessary paperwork. We look forward to your arrival._

_Best regards,_

_The Management_

The three shared a hug and went up to their room for the most peaceful night of sleep they’d had in a very long time.
Niigata Day 5

The morning was spent shopping for furniture at a local furniture and home goods store. For the most part, Arisa and Honoka listened to Yukiho’s suggestions and just went along with everything. Though they’d never fully admit it, Yukiho had a knack for this kind of thing that the both of them didn’t. At all.

So as Yukiho pointed out matching bookshelves, a big bed for the three of them, a desk, a table, and a modest sofa, the other two just kept track of the costs, only objecting when the price was beyond reasonable for three girls living on one income for who knows how long. They could always buy newer, nicer things in the future.

After spending several hours in the store and successfully scheduling their new furniture’s delivery, they all agreed to sit down for a decent lunch and plan the rest of the week. Tomorrow would be for moving in and setting up the apartment. The day after would be for job hunting for the younger girls, while Honoka would do the first grocery run and shop for smaller necessities like cleaning products, hangars, and the like.

Honoka liked this plan. “Is there anything else you girls want to get done today? It’s only two o’clock, after all.”

“I’d like to go back to a place where I saw a job advertised,” Yukiho said. “There’s a used bookstore on the south side of the station that’s hiring a part time worker. That kind of job sounds interesting, so I’d like to check it out.”

Arisa looked impressed. “Nice catch! I think you’d be pretty good at that, given your aptitude for organizing in the apartment. And actually, I’d like to check out one of the jobs I found as well. The city office had an advertisement for a position I think I’d like to check out.”

Honoka had the decency to swallow her food before she commented, even though it nearly killed her. “Arisa, you want to work in the city office? Like, a suit-wearing, paperwork-filing, pencil-pushing civil servant kind of job?” Honoka held back an imaginary tear and dabbed her eyes with an imaginary handkerchief. “My baby’s all grown up now…”

The straw wrapper that Arisa had intended for Honoka’s face instead bounced off her chest and planted itself neatly on top of Honoka's sandwich.
Removing the invasive object, Honoka returned the sandwich to her mouth and resumed eating. Arisa continued. “Anyway, why don't you talk to Ayako about heading to work three days from now? Yukiho and I can alternately take care of things at home and job hunt in our free time.”

Honoka thought about this. It seemed kind of early to leave the girls alone in a new place, but they did need a steady source of income as soon as possible. They wanted to keep their cash reserves as high as possible, just in case, and sitting at home wouldn't help that.

“Alright, I'll drop off a note in Ayako’s mailbox on the way back to the hotel. Mondays are usually pretty light for business most places anyway, so it'll be a good first day to train.” Honoka wrapped up her trash and set it on her tray. “But in the meantime, while you two are out checking out those jobs, I'm going to go back to the hotel and get naked and sit in a hot bath for a very long time.”

Yukiho blushed slightly. “Are you trying to make us follow you, nee-san?”

Honoka grinned slightly and looked off in the distance. “Maaaaaaaybe…”

Arisa shook her head and grabbed Yukiho's wrist before she could be seduced any further. “Off we go, my dear. Remember that she's not the only one who likes to… help you out.”

Yukiho's expression could only be described as seductive bliss.

Niigata Day 8

Monday, April 3, 2017

“Aaaaaaaand that's about it. Everything else you need to know is just organizational and the only way to figure that out is by stocking products. Fortunately for you, our big shipment days are usually Thursday and Sunday, so you just missed a boatload of work. But we still have a few boxes leftover from yesterday, so why don't I leave you to those?” Ayako pointed Honoka towards the stack of a half dozen boxes sitting behind the register counter.
“When you're finished you can come and find me and then call it a day. And of course, if you need anything just come and find me. I'll probably be in the office doing things that I don't really want to do but I'm on salary do I have no choice.” Ayako looked only slightly irritated about this, but shrugged her shoulders and gave Honoka a pat on the back.

Honoka moved towards the box stack and picked up the first box to begin stocking manga and light novels.

This store was just like many other bookstores in Japan. Manga and light novels were in order of publisher, then by the family name of the author, then in alphabetical order by title. This was pretty convenient for her because every box that was shipped to the store tended to come from a specific publisher, thus when she put a box down she probably wouldn't have to move it until it was empty.

*Okay, here we go!*  

Later that day

“Welcome hooooooome!” Two girls flung themselves haphazardly towards the figure of a girl who had just finished her first day of work. Fortunately they approached from opposing sides so as to avoid the potential toppling of Honoka who, even though she was now a Honoka sandwich, was grateful for their foresight.

“You guys have some pent up energy. Shouldn't you have helped each other with that instead of launching it in my direction?”

Yukiho blushed slightly as Arisa grinned and said “Actually, we did both.”

Honoka took that in for a moment as she took in the sight of the two girls wearing only shirts and shorts. “Well I *was* tired but now…”

Arisa looked up at Honoka with a knowing smile. “But now you're… hungry?”
Honoka realized she'd been holding her breath for a few moments and let it out slowly.

Yukiho reached up with her lips and whispered into her sister’s ear “We made pancakes.”

One half of Honoka’s brain wanted to slap both of the girls. Honoka was now hovering between delightfully aroused, and hot and bothered and somebody - somebody - was going to fix that.

The other half really wanted some damn pancakes.

After dinner

The pancakes won.

“Oooouuoooh I'm stuffed!” Honoka sat back on her new sofa and gently patted her food-baby-belly. “You weren't kidding about those pancakes.”

“I told you before - I'm not good for a whole lot in the kitchen, but I can cook western breakfast food better than most. Even for dinner.” Arisa looked proud of herself. “I'll leave the other meals to you and Yukiho.”

Yukiho patted Arisa’s head. “I'm so happy to have a helper in the kitchen.”

Honoka had a sudden realization. “Oh! How'd your job searching go today?”

The two girls smiled brightly. Yukiho started first. “I have a job interview on Thursday morning!”

Arisa followed. “And I have one Thursday afternoon!”
Honoka nearly jumped up, but thought better of it given how much she ate. Instead she just sat up and started clapping. “I'm so proud of you two! Do you have interview clothes? Do we need to go shopping?”

“We've got that taken care of. I need a blouse of some kind and Arisa needs some formal shoes, so we'll head out to a mall tomorrow and get what we need.” Yukiho knew what was coming next so she preempted it. “And we'll only get what we need.”

Honoka looked pleased. “Good girls. I'm so happy you two have found something so soon.”

Arisa looked contemplative. “It's not for sure yet. We'll still need to go out job hunting in the meantime. There's no guarantee we'll get the job just because we got an interview.”

Honoka nodded in reluctant agreement. It's true that they only have interviews right now, nothing concrete. But it's a start.

“Well in celebration of a potential job and only an interview, let's watch... some... anime!” Honoka whipped out a book of DVDs that she had salvaged from her room in Tokyo before they left. She hadn't told the other girls about the DVDs and was waiting for a moment like this to sit and cuddle on the couch while binge watching some of their favorites.

Yukiho looked happy beyond belief. “I can't believe you brought all of those. That has to be at least 100 disks! Did... you bring my favorite? Can we... can we watch it tonight?” She did her best puppy-dog eyes towards Honoka then grabbed Arisa's hands and asked her too. “Please?”

Arisa pulled her closer and hugged her. “Only if you cuddle me during the stressful parts.” Arisa shot a playful tongue at Honoka.

Honoka returned a non-serious glare. “I'll just have to make a Yukiho sandwich on the sofa then.” She opened the DVD book, found the right disk, and put it in the DVD player.

“One serving of Maria-sama ga Miteru coming right up!”
Niigata week 2

Thursday, April 6, 2017

Morning

“I insist. I want you guys to come up for dinner once a week. I'll cook! If you insist on bringing something you can bring some dessert or something.” Ayako looked down at her stomach and pondered. “On second thought…”

Honoka jumped at the chance. “Dessert it is! But really, we should alternate places if we're going to do this every week. I can't have you cleaning your apartment because of us every week.”

“Fine. You're lucky you're cute because otherwise I'd pull the boss card on you.” Ayako gave up trying to force Honoka into anything because it really wasn't working. Actually, Honoka had proven to be both a fast learner and a determined leader. She's got some drive to her, that's for sure. I wonder where she gets that from…

“Anyway, whenever we get off work why don’t you head home and freshen up, grab the kiddos, then make your way upstairs. We can chat and relax while I’m cooking. Sound good? Oh, and this week I’m making dessert and you have no choice. How does homemade melon-pan sound for dessert?”

Honoka’s eyes grew wide and she nearly began salivating on the spot. “If you keep talking to me like that I’m going to have to read up on four-person polyamorous relationships.”

Ayako raised a single eyebrow. “I figured something was up with the three of you. I had a feeling you were in a relationship of some sort, but I couldn’t really figure it out and I didn’t want to ask or be too presumptive. So it’s all three of you, eh?”

Honoka smiled at her manager as she knelt down to pick up a box to unpack and stock. “Yeah, they're my precious girls. I love them both equally and unconditionally. I'd do anything for them. I’ll continue to do everything for them.” Honoka beamed with pride.
“I certainly believe that. If there’s something I’ve learned about you, Honoka, is that you don’t do anything half-heartedly and you say exactly what you mean.” Ayako handed Honoka a box cutter and began helping with the product arrangement.

“It took them helping me get over myself to get back that way. I owe them everything.”

Ayako paused for a moment and analyzed the face of determination in front of her. There’s certainly more to it then that, isn’t there? But for now I’ll let it go. Another time, perhaps.

The two worked hard into the afternoon and were relieved of their duties by the night managers in the later afternoon.

Later that evening

“Thanks for the meal!” The three girls were stuffed to the gills, especially Honoka who had eaten her share of melon-pan and then some.

Ayako had cooked some American-style hamburgers on her stove and the girls each topped them with their favorite veggies and sauces. Arisa went with cheese, onions, and pickles topped with mustard. Yukiho went lighter with avocado, lettuce, and a light mayo. Honoka basically put everything on her burger, except for the sliced bell peppers that Ayako had cut, not knowing how much Honoka hated them.

Regardless, they all enjoyed hamburgers, a side salad, and a good bit of dessert to top it off. Now they were lying around the living room area, comatose from the food.

Except Yukiho. She sat at the dinner table still slowly eating her burger which was nearly finished.

“Hey Yukiho, you’ve been a bit quiet all night. Is everything okay?” Honoka looked concerned for her sister, even from a lying position on the floor.
Yukiho sighed and sat back a bit, lifting her head towards the ceiling. “I had my interview with the bookstore today. I thought it went well, but I guess I wasn’t what they were looking for. I was turned down.”

Honoka sat up and made her way over to her sister, hugging her from behind. “I’m so sorry, Yukiho. Keep doing your best and I’m sure something will work itself out. I have confidence in you, my love.” Honoka planted a kiss on the head of her beloved sister.

“Thanks, nee-san. I guess I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Um… maybe you don’t have to.” Arisa ventured into the conversation.

Three other girls looked mildly confused, Yukiho most of all. “Why’s that?”

Arisa shifted around a bit, half uncomfortably half excitedly. “The job I applied for… well, I was hired.”

Everyone cheered, even Yukiho who was genuinely happy for her girlfriend.

Arisa put up her hand and waved away the noise. “But that’s not all. They were advertising for a part time position, but since I’m fluent in Russian they were thrilled and offered me a full time job working as a helper between the prefectural office and the local Russian embassy.”

Arisa got up and walked over to Yukiho, then got down on her knees and rested her head in Yukiho’s lap. Yukiho couldn’t help but pet the girl and run her hand through her blonde hair.

“I know you tried hard to find a job, but with Honoka working full time and me now having a full time job… well… there’s so much work around the house and… I don’t know…”

Arisa sat up and looked Yukiho in the eyes in an intensely loving and caring way, practically moving Yukiho to tears just from the earnestness in her eyes. “Yukiho, would you be my… er, our housewife? You’re so better than both of us at things like that. You’re a magnificent cook, an amazing organizer, and you keep things so tidy and neat. It would remove such a burden from your sister and I if we could come back to a home you’ve made for us every day.”
“Wearing only an apron would be nice too.” Honoka chose to lighten the situation only because there was another human being between her and Arisa, who was unfazed by the snide comment and was pleading with Yukiho with her eyes.

“I… would I really make a difference? I don’t want to be a burden…” Yukiho was playing around with the idea in her head. It did sound like fun to play house all day. Sure there would be laundry to do every other day and dishes to wash… but what if she really could be helpful like that. Wouldn’t that make life easier?

Honoka rubbed the cheek of her younger sister. “Only you can accept this job offer, Yukiho. Neither of us are going to force you to do anything. And we won’t be upset if you say no. But I really agree with Arisa - you’d be a great help. It’d make every day easier for all of us.”

Yukiho nodded and took a deep breath. “Okay. I accept your offer of being a housewife.” She smiled and took another deep breath. “As for my salary, I’m going to demand heavy petting every weekend without exception. Oh, and I never want to shower alone…”

“Why hello there everyone! I’m glad you’re enjoying yourselves but the single girl who’s still really really enjoying the idea of having a housewife clad only in a maid’s apron is over here on the couch, ya know, in her own apartment and stuff.” Ayako raised her hand in a lazy attempt to be noticed by whomever had turned their heads. “But don’t mind me, I’ll just be over here resigning myself to pints of ice cream, furious masturbation, and fantastic yuri anime every weekend. Okay thanks, I’m done now. Please continue.”

A week later

Niigata week 3

Thursday, April 13, 2017

“So what dessert are you bringing this week, since I didn’t let you bring one last week?” Ayako was starting to get curious about the dessert options tonight. She’d planned to bring over some Mapo Doufo for dinner after learning that all three girls don’t mind spicy food.
“The truth is I don’t even know. Yukiho’s at home cooking away and she wouldn’t tell me before I left this morning even though I really put some… effort into getting it out of her.” Honoka winked and watched Ayako roll her eyes in slight disgust and slight envy. Honoka really enjoyed teasing her apparently-sexually-frustrated manager and neighbor. *I need to make friends and hook her up with someone*, Honoka thought. *She could use it.* “Anyway, I guess you’ll have to just wait and find out, won’t you?”

“Fine fine. I’ll wait. I don’t have to like it though.” Ayako handed Honoka a magazine stack to put out on the shelves that was probably a bit heavier than was safe, but she felt like punishing the younger Kousaka sister by proxy. *Man, I’m weird,* Ayako thought as Honoka walked away carrying the stack, completely oblivious to its potential danger. *She’s pretty weird too. But hey, that’s part of why I hired her.*

After making her way back behind the counter, Honoka went straight back to work sorting and preparing magazines for display. *Geez… I’m too curious for my own good.*

“Hey Honoka, can I ask you a personal question?” Ayako was now sifting through some of the new magazines that were going on sale in the next few days, like Newtype and G’s Denki.

Honoka shrugged. “Of course, you can ask anything you want and I won't get mad, I promise. But if I don't want to answer it I won't.”

Ayako nodded. “That's fair enough.” She neatly stacked some magazines off to the side and stared at them. “Well… I guess I was wondering why. Why… everything. Why Niigata? Why come all the way out here so far away from your home? I know this is kind of forward, but I really like you three. You’re wonderful, loving people and I admire that. I’m really happy to be your neighbor but I’d also like to be your friend.”

“So you don’t have to answer right now, or ever. But… I just wanted you to know that I’m curious about you as a person, not just as a co-worker. I’m also curious about your sister and your girlfriend and eventually I want to know them well enough to ask them about their story too.”

Honoka stared straight ahead. Unlike almost every time before, Ayako could read nothing on Honoka’s face. She was a mask - a face of practiced calm and indifference. Immediately Ayako began wondering if she’d done the wrong thing. *Dammit, me and my stupid curi--*

“Okay.”
Ayako looked back at Honoka, who was smiling and had the smallest semblance of tears in her eyes. Ayako couldn’t tell if Honoka was just saying this to be nice or if she was serious. She decided to backtrack a bit, just in case. “If you don’t want—”

“I want to.” Honoka turned and faced her neighbor, grabbing Ayako’s hands, her expression shifting to determination. “Two people know the entire story and they’re my girlfriends - they lived it. I’ve been holding this inside for years, with nobody else knowing the truth. I’ve never been able to tell the whole story… to anyone…” Honoka took a breath and looked more focused, more understanding.

“I want to let it out. I can’t keep it all inside forever and now, thanks to my family and to you, I feel like here, in this city I can do that. I don’t want to just keep this between myself and my girlfriends…” Honoka paused for a moment and made sure Ayako was looking her straight in the eyes. “I want my best friend to know, too. May I tell you?” Honoka dropped Ayako’s hands, but then reached out a hand as if to shake.

Ayako looked at the outstretched hand and slowly grasped it. Upon doing so, Honoka began to smile and took a deep breath.

“Tonight at dinner I’ll tell you everything. I’ll tell you my life.”

The two shook hands but Honoka didn’t release immediately. “But I have one condition.”

Ayako looked inquisitively at the girl. “Go on.”

“Tell me the same about yourself.”

Ayako laughed and nodded in agreement. “Okay, you got me. I’ll do the same.”

Honoka donned a wily grin. “And make sure you tell me about that author somebodD… I mean, since that’s obviously your doujinshi pseudonym.”

Ayako stopped laughing. Were her jaw not firmly connected to her face, at that moment it would have quite certainly clattered onto the floor.
“How do you…”

Honoka shook Ayako's hand firmly, picked up some magazines, and walked away.

*This girl… I love my new neighbors.*

---

**Two weeks after Honoka’s disappearance**

**Tokyo**

“So that’s it? We’re breaking up? You’re walking out on me and just going off somewhere? Wow, this whole Honoka thing has had a big effect on you, hasn’t it? Why is that, exactly? Why did you make a scene in front of everyone at the cafe two weeks ago?”

She stood quietly in the doorway, ignoring the voice coming from the living room, and began putting on her shoes.

“God, I can’t understand you. I don't know if I’ve ever understood you! And now we can just add one more thing to the long list of things I’ll never be able to understand because you don't talk to me. And so here's Honoka again - even two weeks after she just up and left, she’s causing even more problems. Now it’s affecting me - it’s affecting us. US!”

She turned and grabbed the door handle.

“Do you think this will fix everything? Your parents almost completely disowned you just for dating a girl. What’ll happen now that you’re on your own? Can you keep going to college while you’re working to support yourself? I… I still care about you, you know, come on. Come back in.”

She stepped through the door and didn’t turn around.
“We fight a lot, but I still love you. Come back inside and let’s talk more. Tell me everything again and we can work it out! Why are you willing to throw everything away that we’ve worked for? What did I do to deserve this? Why can we figure—”

She turned back only to say two sentences:

“You couldn’t hear Honoka because you wouldn’t stop talking long enough to let her speak, and now you’re doing the same thing to me. I love you… but I can’t live with you.”

She closed the door.

She walked.

She turned a corner nearly immediately and began walking towards the nearest station.

She continued walking, having been planning this for a week now. She knew what she was going to do. It wasn’t perfect and it wasn’t easy, but it would let her start again.

I wonder if this is how Honoka felt.

Now away from a lot of street lights, she looked up and saw a beautifully starry sky.

Heh, she’s been right about everything.

She walked to the station and boarded a train to her classmate’s neighborhood where she would now live for the rest of the semester.

Time to figure out my life. Time to start again.

She entered the station and walked to the appropriate platform.
Thanks, Honoka. Thank you so much. I hope I can tell you that face-to-face one day.

The doors to the train opened.

She stepped in and sat down.

The doors closed and she was gone.
Chapter 6 - Sine

Niigata week 3

Thursday, April 13, 2017

“I'm not going to try to talk you out of all of this, but I've gotta ask you one thing, Honoka.” Ayako was walking down the street with her coworker after a long day at work. The two had been stocking shelves nearly non-stop after a big shipment of new releases was delivered to their store that morning.

Honoka was cheerfully snacking on the melon pan she'd bought from the convenience store before they walked home. “If it's about this bread spoiling my appetite from dinner, I don't want to hear about it. I have a special stomach for bread!” Honoka said, as intelligibly as someone with half a loaf of bread in their mouth could muster.

Ayako giggled and shook her head. “No no. Look, I've only known you for three weeks, but in that time I've learned not to question your bread habit.” Ayako took a deep breath and continued. “Earlier, when you were talking about telling me your life story, you said you wanted to tell ‘your best friend’ about it. I was wondering about that, actually. Can I be your best friend after just a few weeks of being a coworker and neighbor?”

Honoka chewed the last bit of bread she’d tossed into her mouth. After working on it for a bit, she swallowed and followed it up with a sip from her bottle of tea. “Yeah, that was... abrupt. Sorry for blindsiding you like that. I guess what I meant was... you are the best friend I have here. I mean sure, I have my girlfriends but they're my girlfriends. There's a different feeling when you're
talking to a friend and when you're talking with a relationship partner. While it helps to talk with my girlfriends about anything and everything, I feel like I can gain a different perspective when I talk to a friend; perspective that doesn’t hinge on whether or not I’m going to put out that night after I hear the advice.” Honoka winked a knowing wink that Ayako had grown to both envy and playfully hate.

“I don’t know anyone here besides you, our grandmother-aged next door neighbor, and the other people working with us in the store.” Honoka smiled and opened the door to the foyer of the apartment building for Ayako. “I owe you a lot for getting me this job and helping us get this apartment. But most importantly, I trust you. You've been there for me and my family, so you are the ‘best friend I have’, if that makes any sense.”

Ayako pushed the elevator button and leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. “I understand now. I'm happy you think about me like that. To be honest, I haven't had many close friends since I moved here either, so I'm really happy to have the three of you as friends. I hope we can stay like this for a long time.”

They both wore satisfied grins as they boarded the elevator. Honoka pressed “8” and Ayako pressed “9” and the elevator began to rise.

Just before the 8th floor Honoka gave a sly grin to Ayako. “Did you figure out what's for dessert?”

Ayako narrowed her eyes. “I hadn't thought about it for a while, thanks, but now I will think about it for the next two hours until dinner. Jerk.”

“See you at 7 then!” Honoka did a happy prance out of the elevator and waved to her friend who began to rise one more floor to her own apartment.

Ayako tried to do a tsundere arm cross but failed as she couldn't help but giggle at the joyous grin Honoka was giving her.

Thirty minutes later
“You're going to tell her what?!?!?”

Arisa stood up with an abruptness matched only by Yukiho’s own movement to put herself between her girlfriends.

Yukiho had seen the look on Honoka's face as she started talking to the two of them about her day at work and could tell this wasn't a normal discussion, so she was on her guard. Then, a little bit later in the conversation, when Honoka mentioned that she wanted to tell Ayako about her personal history, Yukiho immediately knew what to do.

She glanced to her right, seeing the expression Arisa's face slowly change from casual interest to surprise and defensiveness. At that moment Arisa rose from the couch. Simultaneously Yukiho moved laterally with the determination of a linebacker and the grace of a dancer.

The battle had begun.

Arisa had a penchant for moving towards things that made her uncomfortable. Unfortunately this meant that when she was in intense conversations, she'd often close the distance between herself and her conversation partner. The practical upshot to this was that she immediately looked more intimidating and passionate about her viewpoint, resulting in her being an excellent debater with a talent for dominating the opponent into submission.

This didn't work on Honoka which, of course, only made her more frustrated. Honoka liked seeing this mixture of frustration and panic on Arisa's usually measured face because she thought it was cute. This meant that while Arisa was getting frustrated, Honoka was just thinking about how adorable the girl was. Sexy times tended to follow, often forcefully initiated by Honoka and with Arisa objecting that her feelings were ‘being ignored by the insensitive, horny monster of a girlfriend I have’ or something like that. Yukiho would join later as the nail in the coffin, the sisters having their way with the adorably overwhelmed blonde.

Seeing as how this conversation would be very important in the grand scheme of things, Yukiho's urge for sexy times was greatly diminished and she felt the need to prevent this eventual clash of humanity. So she acted as a physical barrier between the girls as they… worked things out.

“As I said, at dinner tonight I'm going to tell Ayako about my life up to now. I want her to know about me and how I got here. So I'm asking permission from you and Yukiho. You're a big part of my life and you play as much a part in this story as I do, so I want permission to talk about us as part of the context for my life story.” Honoka stood in the kitchen, cleaning some of the dishes Yukiho had used to make dessert for tonight.
“If you don't want me to talk about you, I won't. I'll figure out a way to just talk about me.”

“And me.” Yukiho spoke up and slightly turned to her sister while still holding Arisa by her shoulders. “You can talk about me, too. I want to be a part of this and, if you don't mind, I'd like to add a few lines here and there when appropriate. She seems like a nice person and is really the only friend I have here right now, so I think it might make me feel better to know that she knows about it.”

She turned back to Arisa who was separating herself from Yukiho to sit down again, putting her hands on her face. Yukiho slid down next to her, leaning on her shoulder. “You don't have to be a part of this, Arisa. If it makes you uncomfortable you can do it on your own and in your own time. Neither of us will ever, ever force you to do anything.” Yukiho wrapped herself around her blonde girlfriend.

“But you're so important to our lives and we're really happy to be associated with you. You don't have to say a word tonight, but do you mind if we talk about you? You're our little treasure and we like showing you off.” Yukiho grinned into Arisa’s shoulder.

Arisa sat silently for a moment and then said “I… I don't mind. I just… are you sure you're both okay with this? Telling someone else about… your parents… and stuff.”

Honoka nodded in an understanding manner. “I know you're trying to protect us from all of those feelings, Arisa. But for me at least, those feelings of sadness and hurt are fading. They're being replaced daily by happy memories; memories of the three of us, memories of the good times at school and with Muse, even memories of the best times with our parents.”

Yukiho agreed. “Exactly. You've helped both of us ease out of mourning and into acceptance. And I think this will be another step, though a big one, in that direction. Another step towards escape from the past.”

Arisa sat, nodding her head slowly. She sat up, letting Yukiho slide into her lap, and began running her hands through the girl’s hair. She loved doing this and it had a way of making her feel better about a lot of things. “Okay. If you two are certain about it, then I'll support you. Talk about us; all three of us.”

Honoka clapped and gave a cheerful smile. “Good good! Well, let's get everything set up for tonight.” She began arranging the chairs and table for four people.
A sudden thought hit her and she suddenly went wide-eyed. “Oh, by the way. Ayako also said she was going to tell us about herself. I may have coerced her into it a little bit…” A mischievous grin made its way onto her face. “So it won’t be just the three of us talking. And it may be a long night…”

Arisa hopped up and began to help with the arrangement of furniture. “That’s alright, I can always call in sick to work!”

Yukiho gave a disapproving glare. “That's not what I want to hear from my recently employed girlfriend. I like you employed.”

Arisa looked back at Yukiho. “Oh? You don't like it when I'm here for an entire day and I have you all… to… myself?”

Yukiho's eyes went wide and she had trouble moving for a moment.

“That's what I thought.” Arisa winked and went back to work.

Yukiho, now red in the face, went to change out of her cooking clothes in silence.

2 hours later

“Itadakimasu!”

All four girls began to dig into the meal. Ayako had brought over her supposedly-famous Mapo Doufu and, as the other three girls found out immediately, regardless of its supposed fame the dish was incredibly good. All four barely talked as they sat enjoying the smell of the spices and the texture of the perfectly cooked tofu and meat.
“Man, you’d make a good housewife with cooking like this.” Arisa barely got out the entire sentence before Yukiho smacked her on the shoulder.

“I’m right here, you know.” She glared at Arisa, who looked only slightly sorry for the comments. Yukiho lingered for a moment before turning to Ayako and giving the slightest of bows. “That position is already taken and I’m a damn good housewife. Sorry, Ayako.”

Ayako waved her hands in denial. “Oh don’t worry, I have no intention of becoming a housewife any time soon. Not that anyone would hire me for the job anyway…” Ayako feigned sadness at the thought, but quickly went back to eating the food in front of her.

“Anyway, we might as well talk about the elephant in the room. And since I was the weird girl who decided to be super nosy with my new friends, I’ll take the lead and explain myself first.” Ayako looked triumphant with her left hand on her hip and both chopsticks in her right fist placed upon the table.

Honoka saluted, trying to play along and keep the mood light despite the knowledge that it wouldn’t last. “Aye aye, Captain!”

Ayako nodded once. “At ease, sailor.”

Arisa was cradling her face with one hand and leaning on her elbow. Yukiho was cheerfully eating her dinner.

Ayako took note and continued. “Well, before the natives get restless, let’s start this.”

Ayako leaned back and put on a relaxed expression. “I was born and raised in Yamagata, about a four hour train ride from here. Yamagata is famous for cherries in the summer, snow in the spring, more snow in the fall, and copious amounts of snow in the winter. This led to me spending a lot of time indoors growing up because while I don’t mind the cold, I’m not a big fan of snow.”

“I spent the better part of my formative years reading manga and watching anime, which lead to me trying to reproduce it on my own. This actually helped me in school quite a bit. If there was ever a subject I didn’t understand, like Physics or something, I would draw a manga about it.”

Arisa frowned a bit. “No offense, but that sounds awful.”
Ayako nodded in agreement. “Oh, they were quite awful. The stories were basically some character who was trying to do something but needed to understand the aforementioned subject in order to save the day, save the princess, defeat the bad guy, and so forth. Now in order to do that, I had to research the topic that I and the character didn’t understand. Which led to me understanding it enough to make it part of my story. Which led to high test grades but a questionable social life when several of the stories were discovered by some acquaintances during my second year of high school.”

Honoka smirked. “I see not much has changed.”

Ayako shrugged. “You’re only talkin’ about yourself, ya know.”

“Touche.”

Ayako sat forward and continued. “So anyway, I graduated 7th in the class and decided I wanted to go to college. This didn’t set completely well with my parents who, though not completely opposed to the idea of college, really wanted me to get married to the boy a few houses down who’d always had a crush on me. And subsequently have as many babies as humanly possible. When I told them I’d rather go to college they were resigned but gave the impression that they’d kinda sorta go along with it.”

Ayako hesitated just for a moment, then went on. “But when I told them I was accepted into the Japa Animation and Manga College here in Niigata, they flipped. Accounting, science, teaching, baby making; apparently these are all okay professions, but ‘using a pen to make imaginary friends’ was a no-go.”

Honoka nearly flipped as well. “You go to JAM?! That’s like one of the best schools for manga in the world!” This caught the attention of Yukiho and Arisa as well. They’d heard of the school but had no idea that ‘normal people’ actually got into the school.

“Yeah, actually it’s pretty cool. I started there a year after high school. I knew my parents wouldn’t pay for a manga college, no matter how prestigious, so I told them I wanted to take a year to work. They loved that, so I got a job at the Animate in Yamagata city. Eventually I moved here and, as I suspected, their support dried up.”

Ayako gave a big sigh and leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. “I guess I always figured there’d be something from them. But when I ran out of money to pay for college after my second year, I
had to move into a full-time position with the Animate store here in order to pay the bills, which meant no more college for Ayako!"

She raised a sarcastic fist into the sky, then retreated. “But one of the instructors there pulled some strings and now allows me to go part time in the summers. He said ‘it’d be a loss for the college’ if I quit.” She chuckled at saying those words. “Still the best compliment I’ve ever gotten. At any rate, every summer we got a lot of help at the store for a few months, so I work less hours and do some night classes at the college. Hopefully that’ll allow me to graduate in about 2 more years.”

“So here I am. A college semi-drop out whose parents give the obligatory calls for New Year’s and birthdays and that’s about it.” She surveyed the table and found all three girls transfixed, still listening to her story and waiting for anything else.

“Um… that’s really it. I live a good life with no complaints and I want to be a mangaka when I grow up. Or something like that.” Ayako was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable by their attention. People didn’t usually pay that much attention to her so the feeling of having all of these eyes on her was… different.

Honoka spoke up first. “Wow, you’re awesome.”

Ayako went slightly wide-eyed and blushed slightly. “Hyperbole will get you nowhere, young one. I’m not that special.”

“I think you’re pretty cool.” Yukiho joined the conversation. “You lead a life that you chose. Even if it isn’t ‘perfect’ according to other people, you obviously like it because you haven’t tried to change it. What’s wrong with that?”

Ayako had her hands on her chin and she was leaning with both elbows on the table. “Nothing, I guess.”

“But what about your doujinshi?” Arisa went there.

Ayako raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you know about me too?”

“Shouldn’t I? I read that doujinshi that you lent…” Arisa trailed off and looked at Honoka who was fighting diligently to not look guilty. But failing.
“Honoka didn’t actually borrow that doujinshi from you…” Arisa noticed Honoka rubbing the back of her head.

“I uh…” Honoka stumbled over herself. “I suppose I should give this back to you.” Honoka stood up and retrieved a thin doujinshi from the bookshelf that was mostly empty. She sheepishly brought it over to the dinner table and handed it to Ayako.

“I took this from your apartment the first time we had dinner over there last week. I could tell you never touched about a dozen of those doujinshi and they all happened to have the same author’s name: somebodD. I don’t know why or how I first thought that might be you, but I know how much you cherish your manga and how much you reread them. It seemed odd that you would leave some alone.”

“Well, you could be a detective with that kind of intuition.” Ayako accepted the book and didn’t look upset. “I do doujinshi to keep my skills up as an artist. It also helps pay a few bills, although none of mine have ever sold more than a few hundred. I have some loyal readers and a small following, but nothing special. A few volumes a year makes me happy and keeps me fresh. Feel free to read them any time, just be careful. My professors told me to stick to art because my stories are… lackluster.”

Honoka winced at this admission. “I didn't want to say anything…”

“Don’t sweat it. I never do.” Ayako got up and put the book near her bag then returned to the table. “I’ve always lacked in the storytelling department, mainly because I tend to write about what I see and hear, not about some great and amazing imaginary place in my head. It’s easier to write about life, I think. I also think life is often more interesting than some fiction made up for the purpose of some boring allegory. But my life isn’t super exciting, even if I am enjoying it. Thus my books are heavy on art and light on story and that’s just the way it is.”

Ayako surveyed the table. Seeing no responses and mostly contemplative looks, she turned the tables on everyone. “Alright, your turn. What’s the big secret behind Honoka the mystical?”

Honoka looked straight at Ayako with emotionless eyes. “I… I’ve never told anyone anything that I’m about to tell you. I don’t know how well I’ll handle this. I don’t know if it’ll come out smoothly like a finely-crafted story or if I’m going to struggle to keep myself sane for parts of it. I could break down and retreat into myself. I could feel refreshed and not bat an eye. The point is I don’t know.”

Honoka looked more serious and looked at all three girls in turn. “No matter what, don’t let me
quit. If I stop, help me. But don’t leave me until it’s all out. I get the feeling you'll know when that is. Can you promise me that?”

Four people shared nervous glances and nodded in agreement.

Four people mentally prepared themselves for the worst and hoped for the best.

Four people seemed to get up together and move towards the couch area. Ayako sat on a large pillow on the floor. Honoka took the middle of the couch and her girlfriends flanked her.

Honoka took a deep breath and began.

“When I was a third year high school student our parents died.”

Honoka took a deep breath and seemed fairly steady, all things considered. “They were killed in a car accident while coming home from their 25th wedding anniversary vacation about a month before I graduated from high school. At that time I didn’t have much in the way of classes left. To be honest, had any other student missed as much school time as I did, they might have been held back a year.”

“But since the school principal personally knew me and my family and since I’d been the student council president…” Honoka hesitated and swallowed. “... and since I was the center of our school idol group, I think I got just enough leeway to eek by during those last few weeks.”

Honoka waited for a moment to allow Ayako to jump in and make a quick jab about her being a school idol, but when she looked up she only saw the dark eyes of the older girl staring into her own. She stared not in an aggressive way and not with pity, but with care and understanding and not a hint of a desire to interrupt.

“And so there I was, without any support from a family as well. But now, having graduated, I had to decide a few things. First, I needed to figure out how we were going to support ourselves, Yukiho and I. Obviously with her going into her second year of high school, I needed to find some way to support the two of us while she finished school.”

“So I went to the local manga shop I’d been frequenting since I was old enough to read my first kanji and inquired about a position at the store. The owner knew everything about me and also knew my situation, so he offered to take me on as an apprentice manager. His intention was to
make me the manager of that store once he opened another store and send the current manager to the newly opened branch. Everything worked out - I had steady income to support us and he was able to make another employee happy by moving them closer to their home.”

“I worked that job for two years and loved every minute of it. On the surface there was no real reason for me to leave it, but things happened and business declined and the owner had to shut down the shop I was managing. It wasn’t anybody’s fault, it’s just that the area’s demographics had shifted significantly and now there wasn’t enough business to justify keeping the store open. So we worked out an agreement and he paid me some money for ‘firing’ me and I decided to find a new job.”

“Until I convinced you otherwise.” Yukiho added. “We’d joked about going other places a few times before but it’d never really been all that serious. This seemed like an opportunity to actually do it, though. We could get away from the bad memories and--”

Yukiho stopped abruptly as she looked at Honoka. It was a threshold she wasn’t sure if she wanted to cross. But then Honoka continued, “...and get away from our former friends and family. Away from the girls that betrayed my trust and only thought about themselves. Girls that were my friends but listened to others instead of me.”

Otonokizaka High School

One week after Honoka’s parents’ death

“Eli-chan!!” Kotori squealed as she saw the long, blonde-haired girl walk into the club room. The now-college student Eli Ayase entered the room and smiled brightly at all present.

“Hello everyone! How have you all been?” Eli beamed with a smile that would rival many in the modeling industry.

College had been good for Eli and everyone knew it, including herself. She was already a gorgeous young woman during her high school years, but college had seen her grow another two centimeters and gain some very distinctive angles to her facial structure. Were it not for her desire to become a dance teacher, she could have easily joined a host of modeling agencies and been well off.
As it stood, she enjoyed modeling in a part time role and going to university to learn dance full time. She went to a school that had a good performance arts program and also had a respectable music school. Her girlfriend, the now second year Maki Nishikino, had pledged to go to the same university as her girlfriend once she graduated, so Eli chose a school with the best combination of dance and music so the two could be together as much as possible.

Maki Nishikino. The redhead girl had been confessed to by Eli during the latter’s graduation ceremony. Though initially embarrassed beyond belief, Maki had accepted the profession of love and the two enjoyed an enjoyable relationship that was envied by many. Maki had begun to open up under the care of the older Ayase sister. Though still tsundere by nature, she didn’t always sit out conversations anymore. Rather, she enjoyed being part of casual conversations and often conversed at length with her former Muse members and classmates, smiling more and allowing many people into her life.

It was only around her girlfriend that she somewhat reverted to her former reserved self. Perhaps it was self consciousness at being compared physically the blonde (though she herself was already developing into quite the beauty herself), but she was decidedly the more reserved of the two whenever they were together in public.

Maki stood up and greeted her girlfriend with a chaste hug. “Thanks for coming, love. You know it’ll mean everything to Honoka.”

Eli planted a soft kiss on the redhead’s forehead. “So what’s everyone been up to recently?”

“Umi and I are dating!” Kotori beamed brightly and with an immense amount of pride, a look that was not wholly shared by the bluenette as she sat blushing.

“About time. I thought you two would never figure each other out.” Eli looked relieved.

“Y-you didn’t have to be so forward about it, you know.” Umi said somewhat quietly to her girlfriend. Presently she looked like she was searching for a foxhole nearby but, thanks in part to the lack of wartime conditions in Japan these days, there were none within a reasonable distance.

Kotori snuggled even closer to her uncomfortable girlfriend. “Oh, there there. You know you like it. And not to mention, you don’t complain at home when we--”
“YAY NO-COMPLAINING-UMI IS HERE, okay t-thh-thanks shall we continue? Quickly, if possible?” Umi blurted louder than most people around had expected, including herself.

Kotori was now wearing a pleased smile that was also slightly scary. Everyone seemed to notice this at the same time and quickly tried to bring up various topics in regards to what they’d been doing recently.

With Muse disbanding after the graduation of the original third year members, there had been a normal close friendship between all of the girls but nothing beyond that. Best of friends, the nine girls were. The original second years were now student council member third year students. The original first year trio was now working hard in their studies in this, their second and pivotal year of high school. The third year group had graduated and gone off to do different things.

All of this had occurred organically and without much direction. Now the girls continued their friendships with only the normal chatting at school and the occasional spontaneous karaoke night or gathering at a local cafe. It was all normal for a group of high school friends, but it was also infrequent compared to their Muse days. While before the nine had known everything done every day by every girl, now they struggled to keep up with the whole group.

Thus, on this day specifically chosen to convene and catch up, conversations sprang up all around the room. Hanayo and Rin were both studying hard to enter college in a year. Both girls apparently wanted to go to the same school, but neither really knew what they wanted to do exactly. Both had maternal instincts kicking into high gear, however, and most of the other girls speculated that they’d end up in the education field with young children.

The duo seemed pleased with this assessment and turned their attention to the elder mystic of the group. Nozomi had continued to work at the shrine after she graduated, becoming a full time miko there. She never really felt like college was for her, but instead enjoyed living on the grounds of the shrine and devoting herself to helping those who sought inspiration and relief.

By living and working there, she was able to speak with those who wanted to be spoken to about anything and everything. She could remain silent and reflect with those that merely needed the company of an understanding face. All in all, she loved her life and was unlikely to change anything any time soon. Again, this seemed to please the group immensely and they moved onto the next victim.

Nico. The most difficult girl to pin down had become a responsible adult (!). Though she didn’t completely give up on her dream of being an idol, after graduation she had allowed herself to explore other options beyond performing. After a few applications here and there, she was an assistant to a producer in one of the biggest idol promotion companies in Japan; a company whose
records were wildly successful.

Apparently the producer had enjoyed having her as an assistant and even though the job was temporary for the usual summer surge in performances, he’s chosen to hire her on as a full time employee. It’s not exactly being an idol, but the job was fun and allowed her to live in the world of idols for as long as she had the strength to keep up with it.

This really brought some of the girls to tears, seeing a Nico that was still spunky and fun, but learning to settle down and be a measured adult.

“My how things do change.” Nozomi grinned from behind a few tarot cards.

“One day you’re going to forget those dumb things and you’ll have nothing to hide behind, my friend.” Nico jabbed lightly in return. The girls both smiled at each other and they turned towards Umi, who was now standing up.

Umi cleared her throat and began to look serious. “This is really fun speaking with everyone again, but we only have a few minutes until Honoka gets here. As I’m sure you know, her parents passed away about a week ago in an accident. This is obviously a tragedy and as such should be spoken of with great care, but we must take it into consideration as we make our decision today.”

“We were invited by the Love Live! organization to perform at a 5th anniversary concert. All of the former winners of Live Live! will be attending and performing along with this year’s finalists. Given the special circumstances of former winners having graduated and being elsewhere around the nation or around the world, the organizers made it clear that if any members couldn’t be in attendance it’s perfectly understandable. However, they would like to know in advance who will be attending and performing.”

Umi shuffled around a bit and continued. “We can’t make this decision for Honoka, but we need to support her regardless of the decision she makes. If she wants to do it, let’s greet her enthusiastically. If not… well… we should make sure we’re supportive of that as well. It’ll be touchy and awkward, I’m sure. But we have to do our best to help her and relate with her, even if it’s a situation none of us can truly understand.”

Everyone was nodding in agreement so Umi continued. “In that case, we just need to decide for ourselves. Will we do the performance?”
Eli stood up first. “Yes. With or without Honoka, we should do it. We owe it to our fans and to this school that we have striven so hard to save. This performance isn’t about us, it’s about giving back to those who gave so much to us. I, for one, will do it. I hope you will too.”

Many people mumbled in agreement. Hanayo raised a cautious hand and began. “But shouldn't we ask Honoka first? Maybe she doesn’t want us to perform without her. And it’s not like that’s an unreasonable request…”

Kotori spoke up. “I think you’re both right. Perhaps we should agree to the middle ground: unless Honoka asks us not to perform, we should perform. Regardless, let’s make sure all nine members agree, even if all nine members can’t or don’t perform.”

Everyone showed their agreement that this was for the best and one by one they each agreed to the idea.

“Well in that case…” Umi was cut off by the sound of a light knocking on the clubroom door followed by the door opening to reveal the Muse center and leader, Honoka.

All things considered, she could have looked a lot worse. She definitely looked deprived of sleep, but didn’t look all too unhappy. She was well dressed in clothes that were washed and ironed, thanks in part to Kotori and Umi being at her house every day to help with some things around the house, but generally looked well enough. If someone didn’t know any better, they might assume she was just a high school girl under the weather or lacking sleep because final exams were approaching.

Honoka stepped into the room slowly and smiled a small but seemingly genuine smile as she sat down at the nearest empty seat. The room was tense and not a single one of them wanted to break the silence that had enveloped the room.

Until Honoka did.

Her voice we small. Tragically small. It hadn’t the life of a center, nor the vigor of the girl they knew as Honoka. It was steady, but it lacked all the energy she’d once had.

“Thanks for listening to me today, everyone. Thanks for wanting to be there for me and thanks for everything that each of you have done for me and Yukiho. I love you all.”
Tears were having difficulty staying in their owners’ eyes, though every girl was fighting as hard as they could to stay strong at that moment.

“Umi told me about the performance we were invited to. I’ve been thinking about it the last few days and I think I finally feel good about my decision.”

Everyone relaxed slightly at this statement.

“I want you to perform without me. I want you to perform for me. I want to feel the love and radiance that is Muse music and I want to see you all having the time of your lives.”

“But most importantly, I want you to do it without mentioning me. I don’t know how much attention I can handle right now and while it might bring me joy to hear you call out to me on stage, I can’t guarantee I’ll take it well.”

Honoka stood up slowly and gave everyone a loving look. “So go out there and make me proud. Go be Muse the best way you know how. Nine girls will be there in spirit, even if only eight of us stand on stage.”

With that she slowly stood, then turned and began walking towards the door.

Eli shook her head unexpectedly. She stood up. “Honoka. Muse isn’t Muse unless there are nine members. Remember?” She stopped holding back the tears. “I know it’s selfish, but I want you out there with me. With us. I want to be Muse with you one more time.”

Honoka stood facing the door. She turned around and looked at Eli. “I’m sorry. I can’t be Muse right now.” A single tear rolled down her face before she turned one last time and exited the room.

A sobbing Eli could be heard from the hall.
“I went home that day and felt so good about everything. I was looking forward to seeing my girls on stage and performing for the first time in over a year. They were all so supportive and encouraging for those weeks before and after the meeting. Even what Eli said, though shocking at that moment, eventually settled in the right place in my heart. I knew she meant well. I knew they’d go and make me proud.”

Honoka stood up for a moment and paced a little bit. Stopping, she turned and continued. “But then the performance came.”

“They gave a performance I wouldn’t have expected. It was good, but uninspired. It was technically great and nobody outside of the nine of us would ever know the difference; it was flawless.”

“When they finished they gave smiles that were mostly honest, but not completely. Then right before they walked off stage she said it. That girl said what I didn’t want, what I wasn’t ready for. She looked into the camera and said ‘this performance is for our leader and our friend, Honoka, whose parents tragically passed away recently. Please send her your love, because we’re doing the same right now.’ I’ll never forget those words.”

“They were hollow. They weren’t right. They were forced and they weren’t comforting at all - they were pleading. It made me… almost uncomfortable at first. I didn’t understand them then and I still don’t completely understand them now. All I know is that for weeks after that performance I received fan mail with condolences and well wishes. People thought they were doing the best thing they could for me when, in fact, they were only keeping things the same day by day. I would make progress emotionally in my own time and then come home to find another stack of envelopes all reminding me of what I’d lost.”

Honoka sat down where she was and lay back on the floor, her hand behind her head.

“They did exactly what I told them not to do; what I trusted they wouldn’t do. Then for weeks, even months afterwards they all kept their distance from me, almost like they knew what they did but were ashamed by it.”

She slammed her fists on the floor at her sides harder than any of the other three expected.

“If they knew what they were doing, why do it? And if they did it knowingly, why would they be ashamed?” Honoka’s voice was steadily rising in volume and emotion. “And if they were ashamed
of the action, why did they do it in the first place!? It’s just one big circle of what-the-hell-is-going-on-here! A circle I haven’t been able to figure out in over two years! ”

Honoka sat up but kept looking down as she set her hands in her lap, gently this time, and began speaking slightly softer. “We didn’t talk much after that. I had a tough time that involved some really dark thoughts. If it weren’t for Arisa, I’m not sure what road I’d have taken.”

“I came home one day and she was crying on her bed.” Arisa joined in. “Not heavily, but slow and steady. It was… different somehow. I went to talk to her and ask her what was wrong and… and she said ‘I don’t want to be like this any more’ in a very haunting way. I knew what she was saying, and I couldn’t deal with that.” Arisa’s voice was beginning to break. “So I tackled her.”

Honoka gave an unhappy chuckle. “To be precise you tackled me, slapped me harder than I’ve ever been hit before, pinned my arms above my head, and screamed at me for nearly 10 minutes until Yukiho got home. When Yukiho got inside she came running into the room.”

“I saw Arisa straddling Honoka and the both of them crying and Arisa yelling at Honoka” Yukiho pulled her legs to her chest and leaned against Arisa. “At first I was about to pull you off of her, but then when I heard what you were saying I stopped and just sat on the bed. You kept yelling ‘what happens when you disappear? Is it my turn to feel like this? Is it your sister’s turn? How selfish can you possibly be?’ and then as you said the last part, Honoka turned her head and looked at me.”

Yukiho wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “She looked so lost… I felt so much sadness then, perhaps as much as when our parents died. I wanted to make her feel anything other than what she was feeling then and I wanted to do it immediately. So…”

“We just hugged…”

“…all three of us…”

“…and we cried for a long time.”

Honoka stood up and walked over to the couch and sat next to her girlfriends. They leaned into each other and each slowly lost control one more time.
Yukiho sniffed and shed a single tear.

Arisa stifled a sob and turned into Honoka’s chest.

Honoka put a hand on both of their heads and didn’t even try to hold back.

All at once, three girls erupted in sorrow with a force they hadn’t had to release in years.

Sobs turned into cries, turning into spit-filled choking coughs of pain and grief.

Hands gripped shirts as they frantically tried to cling closer to one another, connecting every part of their body they could.

They convulsed into one another, falling into a heap of hysterical mourning.

Little by little, savage feelings of regret and confusion left with each drop of salty liquid they forced out.

Tears of pain.

Tears of suffering.

Tears of redemption.

Just like that night on the bed two years ago, three girls forced out every emotional burden they’d been carrying.

There was a difference between that time and now.
This time they had a friend nearby to take care of them afterwards.

After the three settled down several long minutes later, Ayako gently and without a spoken word ushered them into their own bed in their own house, tucking them in.

She helped them into their night clothes. She brought a glass of water for the group to share. She drew the curtains and set the room fan to run.

Only after seeing that all three were comfortable and nearing sleep did she turn off the lights and close the bedroom door. She gathered her dishes from dinner and cleaned a few before collecting her things and beginning to head out the door.

As she put on her shoes and prepared to leave, gentle footsteps signaled the approach of a single girl.

Before she could completely turn around Yukiho reached out and grabbed Ayako by the waist, embracing the older girl for the first time. She squeezed solidly, giving Ayako a few butterflies in her stomach as well.

Without looking up, Yukiho spoke with her head against the black-haired girl’s chest.

“Thank you for being there. That’s what Honoka needed. That’s what we all needed.”

Yukiho broke the hug and Ayako patted the younger Kousaka on the head.

“It was my privilege.”

The next morning
Ayako put on her shoes and opened the door. She was going to work knowing that Honoka’s appearance at work would be questionable. She vowed to do everything she could to lift that burden from the girl for a few days.

*She has a story unlike anything.*

As the stepped out the front door, she noticed a small plastic container on the ground with a note on it.

*To Ayako-nee*

*I hope you don’t mind the title. Last night you acted just like a big sister to all of us. Thank you for that. I don’t know how or why you’ve become so close with us, but I hope it never changes.*

*Anyway, here’s two servings of the dessert I made last night. I hope you like tiramisu. Can’t wait to see you at next week’s dinner or even sooner!*

*Yukiho*

Ayako took the dessert inside and put it in her fridge.

She smiled and allowed herself a selfish thought.

*It’s nice to have sisters.*

6 weeks after Honoka’s disappearance

A café in Tokyo
She looks happy. Like, really happy.

Umi Sonoda didn't expect to be sitting in front of the girl and have her be in such a cheerful mood. In fact, that the girl had even agreed to this meeting in the first place was... startling. Umi had suggested it to her girlfriend, Kotori Minami, almost in passing. Maybe it'd be good to meet up again, now that a few weeks have passed since the big breakup event that had sent shockwaves through the Muse friend circle.

One day Umi had found herself muttering out loud in front of her girlfriend. “We haven't seen her in three weeks. I wonder if we should at least call--” is as far as Umi had wondered before Kotori jumped in.

“Yes! I'll call her right now!” And she did just that.

And now, two days later, they were meeting together to... well, to... do what, exactly? Sure, they were all still friends. She thought. Just because a couple breaks up doesn't mean the friends of the former couple are then required to chose a side in those things. Or are they? Some people might argue otherwise. Geez, why do girls have to be so complicated, she thought to herself.

In the end, she and Kotomi just wanted to be there for the girl. They wanted to make sure she was okay, make sure she wasn't lost in the world... they wanted to make sure they weren't going to permanently lose another Muse member.

The day after Honoka's disappearance all eight Muse members had gathered to discuss the previous day's events. They shared who they'd gotten in contact with in their attempt to find Honoka. They shared hypotheses about where the three girls could have disappeared to on such short notice and planned out further attempts to find the location of the three, or at least find someone who knew where they were.

Each of the members of Muse took Honoka’s disappearance in a different way. Some of them were angry while talking about the situation. Most of them cried a little bit. But one of them was silent. Blank. Every minute that passed seemed to make her more irritated, especially when her girlfriend was talking. I guess that's a big part of why the two broke up. They were always an unlikely couple but they seemed to work well together, even given the age gap. But something changed after Honoka's family's accident.

Her only really noticeable outward reaction was when the group seemed pleased with their plans to try to find Honoka and were about to get up to leave.
At that time she closed her eyes and softly mouthed ‘I’m sorry’. She nodded a few times, almost as if confirming something. Then, just as soon as those expressions came, they left; replaced by her trademark guarded look. Nobody, aside from Umi, seemed to have noticed those actions, and if they did they didn't say anything.

And the speech this girl had given to them! Pulling out everything they'd done wrong, laying it all out on the table, even trumpeting her own faults, in regards to Honoka’s situation. She sat, arms crossed, not breaking eye contact for a moment, and spilled her soul to the other seven. Umi and Kotori talked about it later that evening and no matter how hard they tried, the girl’s arguments were impregnable. She'd obviously thought about these things for a very long time and she'd chosen this time to let it all out.

*And now here we are. Kotori and I coming to this meeting, both a nervous wreck, yet there she sits as if she hasn't a care in the world.*

The girl opposite the couple spoke, directly and decisively. “I know what you want to ask me. I also know that you want to tell me how she's doing. Moreover, I know you are both afraid to bring up the topic. So let's get this over with and just get it all out so we can move on to happier topics and have fun.”

Umi and Kotori hesitated momentarily. Sensing this, the other girl tried to reassure them.

“Really, I don't mind. Ask me about the breakup and tell me how Eli is doing. I want you to feel better about it all, because I already do.”

Kotori and Umi looked at each other with matching expressions of both awkwardness and relief.

Kotori spoke first. “Eli is… acting strangely. At times she's dead silent and at other times she's a back to her normal, overly-talkative self. It's like she's conflicted about something and she's over correcting herself. You don't have to go into details, but what happened when you two broke up? I want to help Eli, but she won't talk about it at all. Please… help me understand my friend.”

Kotori pleaded with her eyes. Umi was doing the same. They both hated this. They didn't want to ask her for help, but they needed some perspective on the situation in order to help Eli figure things out.
“Don't worry, I'll tell you anything. I'll tell you about the breakup, my speech at the cafe, my thoughts on Honoka, whatever you want. You actually went out of your way to ask me about my feelings - that's what I've wanted from everyone all along. That's the only thing I care about.”

She took a sip of coffee and noticed that Umi and Kotori were still a bit uneasy.

“So I'll tell you. As long as you promise to act normal around me, that is. We’re still friends, yeah? Let's chat and have coffee like friends do.”

Umi smiled a smile of relief and relaxation. “Of course, Maki. We'll always be friends.”

Maki sat back, crossed her arms and gave a gentle, genuine smile. “I know, and that makes me happy. There have been a lot of misunderstandings in our group, haven’t there? I think none of them have ever been truly malicious, but even the best intended actions really got out of hand. Like trying to put out a grease fire with water.”

“So,” Maki got comfortable and took a sip of coffee, “where should I start?”

Kotori looked visibly more relaxed as well. “Why not from the beginning?”

Maki raised an eyebrow. “If I’m going to start from the beginning, I’m starting from the very beginning. From when Honoka’s parents died.”

All three girls settled in for a long conversation.

つづく

A/N: Ayako’s pseudonym is a reference to nobodD, the author of the inspiration for this story. For the record, Ayako’s ineptitude for writing stories is not intended as a slight towards nobodD. Ayako only has herself to blame for that.
Chapter 7 - Cosine

Mid-June

2.5 months after Honoka’s disappearance

Honoka and Ayako were walking home together, just like most days of the week. From time to time the girls would go home separately, usually because Ayako had some paperwork to do as the head manager of the Animate store, but those times were few and far between.

When Honoka had started working at the store they would walk home together 2-3 times a week. But walking home separately was especially rare now because, even though the scheduling of employees was a task delegated to an assistant manager, as the head manager Ayako had considerable influence over the schedules of employees of the store. Using said influence, about a month ago Ayako had begun the not-so-subtle process of aligning her and Honoka’s schedule. As a result, the pair now headed to and from work together five days a week.

After the life-story conversation that had occurred one night a month ago, Ayako had found herself thinking about her three newest friends quite a bit. For a few hours that night those three unique, complex individuals told a terrible story in perfect harmony. They rekindled old pains and scars partially for her own sake, partially for their own good. Granted, the primary reason was for their own benefit and to help smooth over the hurt they had gone through so many months ago, but there was a part of Ayako that allowed herself to view that evening from a selfish perspective.

Three women of remarkable courage, never having orally recited the lines of their journey through torment and ridicule, told their story to her.
Her. This semi-college-dropout girl who viewed herself with, perhaps, the most neutral of possible attitudes, had won the kind affection of the trio. So much so that they had spilled their most private secrets to her, allowing her a glimpse into their past and current lives.

**Why me?** This thought bore itself into many of her thoughts for days afterwards, but then one day she decided to stop asking that question. Instead, she replaced the question with a thought.

*I’m glad it was me.*

Ayako felt proud. She knew how much she’d helped the girls in giving Honoka a job, helping them find an apartment, and generally helping them settle in their new home. Though not one to gloat, she internally allowed herself to smile about it. That was okay, wasn’t it? If you know you’ve done good for someone, it’s okay to give yourself a quick pat on the back, isn’t it?

*Enough of that. I’m an artist, not a saint.* Regardless, these girls had grown to be precious friends of hers. Something that she would forever be proud of, and that was enough for her.

“Man, I love every other Thursday!” Ayako stretched her arms and twisted her torso as the two of them waited for the stoplight to change in order to cross the street.

Honoka looked at her with a curious glance. “Waainizaah?” she managed to utter with better than half a loaf of melon pan sticking out of her mouth.

Ayako gave her a glance made partly of incredulity but mostly of judgement.

Swallowing quickly, Honoka managed to try again right as the two began crossing the street. “Why is that?” was her question, this time far more intelligibly spoken.

"Because every other Thursday I get to pretend I'm a housewife," Ayako gave a wistful look, lifting her head to catch the eyes of an increasingly unimpressed Honoka, "and I get to cook for my beloved children about whom I care so very much." She did her best to keep up the act of a middle aged housewife for another four or five steps before giving up. “Ugh, that never works on you.”

"Day by day, I feel like I have less of a chance of losing my girlfriends to you. You may have me beat in the looks department, but you really lay it on thick with the cheesy, sappy, feels-y speeches." Honoka devoured the last bit of melon pan that had survived to this point and turned the
corner down the side street which lead to their apartment.

Ayako looked less than amused. "You know, one day I'm going to have a girlfriend to say these things to instead of you and you're going to miss it like crazy."

"You're probably right, actually."

"Well at least you admit it." They both smiled and took the elevator up to their respective floors, Honoka waving goodbye as she went to her apartment to change and relax a bit before going to dinner at her upstairs neighbor's apartment.

Later that evening

"Gochisousama deshita!"

"I'm going to get fat from your cooking, Ayako, and I don't mind one bit." Arisa was barely clinging to consciousness as she slumped in her chair. Her food-induced coma was partially a result of the menchikatsu she just ate, and partially a result of her eating nearly a full two portions of it.

Yukiho looked impressed. "Actually, when I cook at home I usually don't have to prepare a full serving of whatever I cook for Arisa for dinner. She tends to eat light at night. But this..." Yukiho patted the small bulge in her stomach due to her own indulgence, "this could be dangerous if I ever decided to make it. For her and for me."

"You're going to make me blush, you know. I think it's good too, but it's not that good." Ayako started to pick up the plates and take them to the sink. "Regardless, thank you. I'm really happy that you guys enjoy my cooking. It really makes my week."

"If you ever move away, I'm going to find you and move next door." Honoka was only slightly more mobile than her girlfriends and, thus, decided to lend a helping hand to the cleanup efforts.

"Thanks, Honoka." Ayako took the plates from the ginger haired girl and set them in the sink to be cleaned. She furrowed her brow, as if trying to get over a mental hurdle. "Actually... hey, can you do me a favor?" Ayako looked slightly contemplative, as if trying to remember where she put
"Yeah, sure, what's up?"

"Could you go over to the book case and grab the folder that says 'please don't touch' on the side of it? It should be in the vicinity of my doujinshi."

Honoka looked bewildered and could only stare at Ayako for a moment. "This goes against everything my parents ever taught me."

"It's not like you ever payed attention to those orders anyway!" Yukiho volunteered cheerfully.

Honoka stared at her sister for a moment before sighing. "Well, you're not wrong." She started moving towards the bookshelf to look for the folder. "Who labels a folder 'please don't touch' anyway? I mean, that's just asking someone to touch it." She began to carefully rummage through the multitude of doujinshi on the shelf until the folder made itself known to her.

"Wow, it literally says 'please don’t touch'."

“What, did you think I was lying to you?”

Honoka thought for a moment.

“Hey, bring that over here.” Ayako commanded.

“Yes, dear.” Honoka said as she winked to her girlfriends. Neither was particularly amused by the situation.

“Anyway, now that you’re touching it, go ahead and open it with your girlfriends at the table. I want to hear what you guys think about it.”

Ayako was being quite vague about the contents of the folder. Honoka found this a bit curious but thought nothing more of it. Instead, she sat down at the table with her girlfriends flanking her on both sides and carefully opened the folder.
Inside was a collection of manga pages held together by a paperclip. The art was, as with everything that Ayako did, spectacular. The first page was a title page with three girls sitting on a train together and space for a title at the top of the page, though no title had been drawn yet. Conversations were scripted but no names had been written in yet, either.

They began flipping through the first few pages and started to notice something.

*Say, these faces look really familiar…*

“Oh my god.” Yukiho exclaimed very suddenly. Her girlfriends looked at her quickly, surprised at the outburst.

“I knew you’d be the first to notice.” Ayako smiled softly. “So, Yukiho, how do you like yourself as a manga character?”

The other two girls immediately went wide-eyed and looked at the page.

There, in black and white, were the three of them talking to each other on a train.

*“Nee-san, are we going to be alright.”*

*“Of course [blank space], we’re going to be just fine. All three of us.”*

*“We have each other, after all. I’ll be here for both of you and I know you’ll both do the same.”*

*“Thank you nee-san, [blank space]. I believe in you both. I can’t wait to start a new life with you.”*

This was the part that Ayako was dreading and had been dreading since the walk home. Over the last few weeks she’d drawn and drawn and drawn like she’d never drawn before. The story that she’d heard from Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa had inspired her hand more than anything before in her life.

For better or for worse, she’d always drawn from experience rather than from some world created
in her mind. To finally know a story that had never been told - a story of passion, love, desperation - was a feeling that drove her to put pen to paper and bring it to life.

But is it a story that she could tell? Was it something she was allowed to show the world? After all, it wasn’t her story. It belonged to someone else; three people, to be exact.

So here she was, hoping that those three people wouldn’t hate her for daring to reproduce what they had told to her in complete confidence. Even if they wouldn’t let her publish it, she wanted permission to draw it. Think of it as a mental exercise in storytelling, is what she wanted to say to them right now.

But she was still. Completely still, with a dish in her left hand, a wash cloth in her right, and the water slowly trickling from the tap. She was lost in these thoughts when --

“Hey.”

Arisa was less than a foot away from Ayako now, looking up at her with an unreadable expression.

“O-oh, sorry.” She quickly put down the dish and turned off the faucet.

“You had a really… scary look. Not like I was afraid, more like you were almost sad. It scared me.” Arise gently put a hand on Ayako’s back. “Are you okay?”

Ayako put her hands on the front of the sink and leaned forward. “You know what I want to ask you, don’t you?” She took a long, deep breath. “I’m afraid of how you’ll feel if I ask it.”

“Ask.” Honoka stood up, folder in hand, gripping it tightly.

Ayako looked at her with more fear in her heart than she’d ever known.

“Ask.” Honoka said again, a strong look on her face.

Ayako pushed off the sink and stood up straight. She shivered for a quick moment but instantly
pulled herself together. “May I make your story into a doujinshi? I haven’t stopped drawing for nearly two weeks. I come home, draw, go to sleep, wake up, draw some more, go to work, and then repeat. Your story inspires me and I want to put it on paper.”

She walked slowly into the living room. “I don’t care if I draw it only for you, I don’t need to publish it, I just want it to exist. It needs to be told. My mind won’t stop until it has unless… unless… you don’t want it to be told. Then I’ll stop. I promise.”

Honoka looked at the folder, then at her two girlfriends. All three exchanged a knowing glance.

“You can draw it on three conditions.” Honoka handed the folder to Ayako and made sure the taller girl was looking straight at her eyes.

“I’m ready. What conditions?”

“Your art is so beautiful, it makes me inexplicably happy to see myself in a book like this, regardless of the story.” Honoka pointed at the folder. “But condition number one: don’t embellish us. Don’t make us the most desirable girls in the city or whatever. Make us real.”

Ayako nodded. “Fair enough. Condition two?”

“Let us choose the title.”

Ayako half chuckled to herself. “That was part of my plan-B bribe anyway, so okay. Two conditions agreed to. What’s number three?”

Honoka looked at her girlfriends and exchanged a few motions that Ayako couldn’t quite make out, but the three of them seemed to understand perfectly. They all nodded and smiled.

“You must publish it.”

Sharply inhaling, Ayako looked down at the folder and back up at the three other girls who were smiling gently at her.
“Oh man… I love you guys. I-I don’t know if I can… ever say thank you enough.” Ayako looked genuinely near tears for the first time since the four of them had come together.

As if scripted, the three lovers moved towards their friend and embraced her from all sides.

“Do what you do best, Ayako-nee.” Yukiho wrapped her from behind.

“I look forward to reading it when you’re done. And I better be first!” Arisa cheerfully nuzzled Ayako from the side.

“You can take us out to dinner with the profits if it’ll make you feel any better.” Honoka half joked while embracing her friend.

Ayako could only giggle and try to wrap the three of them in unison. “We’ll all go out together regardless of its success. Just putting it on paper is success enough for me.”

“Umm… can I suggest a title?” The three were untangling themselves when Arisa offered the question.

They all exchanged curious glances.

“Yeah, sure, what do you think?”

“Escape.”

Honoka and Yukiho looked at each other and slowly formed grins.

“It’s perfect,” the sisters said in unison.

“I like it.” Ayako gave Arisa a headpat. “It’s perfect.”
Mid-May

6 weeks after Honoka’s disappearance

A café in Tokyo

“So,” Maki got comfortable and took a sip of coffee, “where should I start?”

Kotori looked visibly more relaxed as well. “Why not from the beginning?”

Maki raised an eyebrow. “If I’m going to start from the beginning, I’m starting from the very beginning. From when Honoka’s parents died.”

“I know I wasn’t the friendliest of people my first year in high school,” Maki said with an understanding glance between the two former Muse members in front of her, “but I can promise you one thing: I wanted everyone to like me.”

“Whereas some people will go out of their way to smother their friends with kindness, I’d rather give my kindness from afar. There’s nothing wrong with either approach, in my opinion. After all, each person responds to each display of affection in a different way.”

“I want to be friends with everyone, but I don’t want to exert myself in the process. Why? Because I don’t want other person to do the same to me. I want friends with whom I can sit in the same room with and read a book together. A friend who is always there; someone who is always willing to support you, but waits until you really need it.”

“I don’t want my friends to keep me from falling down. I want them to help me back up and support me when I do fall down, because I will fall. And I want to learn from that fall.”
Maki looked down at her cup of chai. “Most importantly, I don’t want a blanket for a friend: I want a pillow.”

“Honoka used to be a big, comfortable winter blanket to us all, but when her parents died she became a pillow. She didn’t become any less friendly or useful, as many of you thought, instead she just changed the way she gave and accepted kindness. She gave and wanted support in a different way.”

“The day after the meeting we had for the Love Live! reunion concert, she randomly came into the music room. It didn’t bother me and she didn’t say anything other than ‘hello’, so I just went about my business.

“For the next few weeks, until her graduation, I let her sit in the music room when I was practicing piano. I know you found her in there a few times towards the end of the year when you were helping her do paperwork and homework that allowed her to graduate.”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think she came because she knew I wouldn’t do more than what she wanted. I didn’t talk to her because I was scared to, but maybe that silent company was what she needed.”

Maki gave a small frown. “Don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying I knew what I was doing and most of the time I was really stressed out about what to do or not do. But I just decided to give kindness the best way I knew how - when it was asked for, never more. Fortunately for her and for me, I think that was exactly what she wanted. Eventually we began chatting a little bit here and there, all while I would play piano, and it really made me happy. She trusted me.”

“I don’t know how much help I was at that time, but I still did it. Just seeing her grin from time to time was enough. Those grins made me smile, something I didn’t do a lot back then. The two weeks between our meeting and her graduation were tough, but I was proud of how she got through it day by day.”

Maki let out a long, strenuous sigh.

“Then the concert came.”
Love Live! Reunion Concert

A week after Honoka’s graduation

Backstage, before Muse’s performance

Maki was trying to figure out her girlfriend. Again.

As much as she loved the blonde girl, Eli could be a handful when she had her mind on something. She often got very very focused and, right before she made a decision or came to a conclusion, she became pretty intense and would continue that intensity until the very end.

She’d had that same intensity when she decided that a school idol group would be detrimental to Otonokizaka High School in the first place. That same drive and determination was present when she did everything she could to shut down the group.

Fortunately for her and everyone else, Eli finally found someone more determined than herself. Honoka had put an end to everyone’s resistance by sheer determination and had won the hearts of eight other girls in the process.

That’s why Maki was worried. Nothing should be bothering Eli this much right now. They were going to perform as a group of eight for the first time, sure, but they’d practiced formations and harmonies well into the night for the last week. It was going to be great. Maybe not perfect like back in the old days, but it would be something they could be proud of.

“Talk to me, Eli.”

Eli stared into the distance, completely blank.

Maki sighed. She rubbed the back of the taller girl and just tried to be there for her. Hopefully whatever was going on would be resolved by the time they went on stage 20 minutes from now.
Suddenly Eli looked at Maki.

“Maki. We need to do something for Honoka.”

Maki processed that statement for a moment.

“We’ve got to acknowledge her somehow. Her fans need to know about her pain.”

“Whoa, I thought we agreed not to do anything.” Maki was getting really nervous about this conversation. “I mean, that’s what Honoka herself asked for. Be Muse without her, right?”

Eli shook her head. “Is that what she really wants? Really?”

Maki couldn’t say anything.

“Remember when Honoka quit the group? Remember when Kotori decided to leave the country? None of us knew what to do, myself included. I took a chance and went to talk to her. Then, after everyone else also chipped in, we got her to realize that Kotori wanted Honoka to keep her here.”

“What if that’s what Honoka wants from us now? What if her saying ‘be Muse without me’ is her way of wanting to see if we’ll come and ‘save’ her, just like she went and ‘saved’ Kotori? I can’t help but think that we need to do something for her, to save her from the rut of sadness and sorrow she’s in.”

Maki thought about it. Eli’s reasoning wasn’t really that bad, actually. It was risky, that’s for sure, but it wasn’t founded on pure speculation. After all, Eli was actually able to connect with Honoka back when Honoka had quit Muse, having visited the Kousaka household and given Honoka the inspiration to continue singing and eventually go after Kotori.

“I-I don’t know Eli… it’s such a big risk… is it worth it? Can’t we try another way?”

Eli looked more determined than ever now. “I believe this will help Honoka. I want to do it. I’ll do it, I’ll take responsibility for it.”
Maki knew that look on Eli’s face. There was probably no stopping her now.

*I hope you’re right, my love. For all of our sakes.*

They walked to the meeting point and met up with the other six Muse members. They were all wearing uniforms reminiscent of their *Sunny Day Song* uniforms, though slightly less colorful given the quickness with which they had to be made. All in all, they still looked fantastic.

Each girl carried an energy they hadn’t felt in a long time. Each was smiling and giddy and ready to perform. They sat, envisioning their last great performance.

Except one of them.

“Three minute to show time! Get ready, Muse!” The stagehand shouted from across the backstage waiting area.

Eli stood up with a determined. “Girls, I need to tell you something…”

__________________________

**After the performance**

Eight girls walked back to the dressing room.

None of them smiled. None of them laughed. None of them chatted about how great the performance was. None of them responded to all of the well wishes from the other idol groups backstage.

They entered the dressing room and sat down. None of them began to change.
“We took a big risk.”

Umi.

“Yeah. I hope we were right.”

Kotori.

“If I’m right, it’ll be fine. If not, I’ll take the blame.”

Eli.

“No.”

Maki.

Eli looked up at her young girlfriend. “No?”

“No.” Maki stood up and paced slowly. “Not if you’re wrong: if we’re wrong. Us, together. We all agreed to this, regardless of how spur-of-the-moment it was. You’re not going to shoulder the blame by yourself because you wouldn’t reap the rewards by yourself either.”

Eli looked back down at the floor.

“But…” Maki looked out at the group, “we’d better be right. If not...”

“If not, we probably lost Honoka for a long time.” Nico spoke up. “Selfish as it may sound, that’s something the five of you are going to have to deal with. The three of us have jobs or universities to go to. But you’re here. You’ll see it firsthand.”

“But don’t think we’re not available.” Nozomi stood up and donned a motherly face. “If it works, I
want us all to promise that we’ll call one another more often and be the nine girls of Muse. If it
doesn’t work, then we’ll need to be nine even more.” She turned to the youngest girls. “Rely on us,
rely on each other.”

The girls began to change into their street clothes, each hoping for the best.

“I’ll go check on her. I understand you all want to shoulder this with me, but I want to at least be
the one to see her if it does go bad. And, selfishly, I hope I’m the one who can give her a big hug if
it did the trick. I want to see that smile again.” Eli smiled and looked a bit more lively.

“I’ll go with you, Eli.” Maki grabbed her girlfriend’s hand. “Let’s go see her and make sure she’s
happy. It’s what we all want.”

The mood lifted considerably and all eight nodded in agreement.

Rin jumped up with a fist in the air. “Okaaaaaay!!! Muuuuuse RESTART!”

“OOOOOOOO!!!!!”

Two days later

Kousaka residence

Maki and Eli walked to the front door of Honoka’s house, preparing for the worst and hoping for
the best.

Looking among each other briefly, they nodded and Eli reached out for the doorbell.

Ding-dong.
Silence.

Both girls shuffled about in a very uncomfortable way.

Silence.

Maki looked up at the house in front of her. Fear was building by the moment.

Quiet steps began coming their way. The two looked at each other, sharing a hopeful smile.

The door opened.

Eli gasped and looked like she was seeing a ghost.

Maki could only stare with wide eyes at the girl who had opened the door.

“She doesn’t want to see you. Especially you, nee-san.”

Arisa.

“A-Arisa?! What a-are you doing h-here?” Eli wanted to run, Maki could tell. So she grabbed her girlfriend’s hand and held the blonde in place.

“I’m with my girlfriend, just like you. Except I’m at home, unlike you.” Arisa stared with dead eyes at her older sister. Usually Eli had a presence of authority and an aura of determination, but at this moment the shorter blonde sister was completely dominating everyone present. No human would avoid her ire today.

Eli dared to try. “Arisa! You’re at the Kousaka house, not the Ayase house. What the hell are you talking a--?”

“Exactly, nee-san. I’m at home.” Arisa continued to stand perfectly in the middle of the doorway with her arms crossed and her stance even.
Eli pressed further. “Arisa, I want to see Honoka and if you won’t let me I’ll have to call Yukiho. I
don’t want to call your girlfriend just because—”

“If you’re going to call my girlfriend, you should probably call Honoka, not Yukiho.” Arisa’s eyes
pierced her sister’s.

you’ve been with Yukiho and Honoka’s just… well… they’re special, but you’re in love w—”

“I’m in love with Honoka! Don’t you dare try to tell me who I love and don’t love. You never
bothered to notice when I was going through troubles with Yukiho and apparently you didn’t notice
that we broke up, either. So why should I tell you I’ve been dating Honoka for the last few
months? It’s not like I need your approval.”

Eli was completely speechless. Maki could do nothing for her other than hold her hand and be
there by her side. She was witnessing the split of sisters, something no one should ever have to see
or be a part of.

“I’m sorry for being so blunt, Maki.” Arisa’s cold glare softened to an almost sheepish visage. “I
know you’re here to support your girlfriend… I can’t hold that against you. Thanks for looking out
for my sister, I really do appreciate it.”

“N-no problem. I’m sorry for intruding on you like this.” Maki was bewildered by the young girl.
She knew the two Ayase sisters were on slightly shaky grounds, but she never had any idea it’d
come to a head like this. She secretly wondered if it was partly her fault for taking Eli away from
her little sister so often with dates and “study sessions” in Eli’s dorm.

“Anyway, I’d like to ask that you leave now. Please understand, I’m only asking because Maki is
here. If you were you alone I’d close the door and walk away, nee-san. But I respect Maki.”

Her armor broke just slightly enough that Eli and Maki could see her falter. “A-and even though
I’m sure you had good intentions with what you said on TV… it caused untold pain. Even I don’t
understand yet. But I’m going to try.”

The scene between the three was an emotional wasteland. It hurt Maki just to stand there and she
couldn’t imagine how Eli was feeling right now.
“Fine. Tell Honoka and your girlfriend that I’m sorry. And that I’ll be back.” Eli looked a bit more determined and collected in the end.

“Because I really do believe you’re sorry, I’ll tell my girlfriend and Yukiho. But I can’t promise they’ll forgive you.”

Eli and Arisa exchanged intense glances before Eli slowly turned to walk away.

Maki looked at Arisa for a split second longer. She saw Arisa mouth four words.

Thank you.

I’m sorry.

6 weeks after Honoka’s disappearance

A café in Tokyo

“Eli was wrong, obviously.” Umi looked out the window at a student in the school uniform passing by the cafe. “But that doesn’t explain your breakup. What happened?”

Maki peered into her empty tea cup. “That’s when it began, I think. Our breakup lasted two years. Two long, long years.”

“Eli knew within hours just how badly her gamble had failed. That’s why she met with everyone and tried to get them to meet up with Honoka as a group and apologize. We all said no, but she still kept trying to get individuals to go and just be around Honoka. Eli couldn’t stop gambling with Honoka’s feelings because she was so determined to help her.”
“It’s tragic. She was only ever trying to help, I truly believe that. But she never accepted that the best thing for Honoka was solitude. Only through self reflection was Honoka ever able to get better, we all saw that in the months after the performance when she would very rarely show up to things we’d invite her to.”

“That’s why Eli never went to those things - she felt too guilty. She knew what she did and she knew that everyone else had turned her down when she tried to fix things afterwards. We said no to her and she wasn’t ready for that.”

“Then the Arisa thing.” Maki stretched her arms out and let out a sigh. “Eli just never accepted what she saw. She couldn’t. She knew all about Honoka and Yukiho being a… thing… but Arisa had apparently kept her relationship with Honoka a secret from everyone but those two sisters. Even her own sister.”

“I guess I can’t blame Arisa. It’s awkward enough become involved with your older sister’s friend who is two years older than you. Now, imagine that girl was also involved in an incestual relationship immediately prior. And finally, consider that that relationship may not have actually ended, but instead your beloved little sister is now involved in a three-way relationship with two sisters who’ve done who-knows-what with each other.”

Umi shifted uncomfortably. “When you put it like that…”

Maki could only shrug. “So after that she started to panic. That side of her that wants and needs control over her life just exploded. She couldn’t control her sister. She couldn’t control her friends. So she started to become more intense, more demanding, and more… involved with everyone she met. And not in a good way.”

“I mean… it wasn’t all bad, obviously, otherwise it wouldn’t have lasted those two years. But it was slow rising. Like the frog that dies because it’s in boiling water without knowing it.”

Maki leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling.

“You know those relationships where… it’s great at the beginning and slowly things get worse? Yet those problems are so slow to develop that you become accustomed to it and never really realize how bad of a situation you’re in until one day something happens and…and you just snap.”

Maki looked down at the table. Kotori reached out her hands and took Maki’s hand in hers, softly
caressing it.

“It’s not your fault, Maki. Eli was the one who changed.”

“And it’s not Eli’s fault, either.” Umi sat up straight and crossed her arms. “I wonder if guessing wrong about Honoka led to her needing to guess right other times. Any time she had to choose between several options, she needed to guess right so much that she was willing to influence the situation and the people around her to make her guesses right.”

“You guys know her better than I did.” Maki half smiled to herself. “But I know I can’t blame myself, thanks you guys. I don’t blame myself. Millions of people have been in the same situation as me. Millions of people have changed, just like Eli. It doesn’t make me weak for not noticing, just like it doesn’t make her bad for changing.”

“In the end, we’re not right for each other. Maybe if something changes in the future we can try again, but right now it’s not going to happen.” Maki stretched her hands above her head. “I’ve got two and a half years of school left, then I’m off on my own. If it’s with Eli, I’d be happy. If it’s not… then I guess I have another life journey ahead of me.”

“Music school is so much fun and I’ve had some free time recently so I’ve tried my hand at drawing and art. I’m also part of a reading club at the university.”

Maki gave a big smile. “I’m happy now. I’m sad that I’m happy without Eli, if that makes any sense, but it can’t be helped right now.”

“We’ll do what we can for Eli, don’t worry about her.” Umi gave a reassuring smile to the redhead. “If nothing else, I hope we can all continue to be friends. I hope we can continue just like we did in high school.”

“I do too.” Maki smiled. “Want to get another cup of tea? My reading club is meeting in this cafe in about a half hour, you can read with us.”

“What are you guys reading?” Kotori looked more interested than Umi expected.

“Um actually…” Maki looked slightly uncomfortable. “…it’s mostly romance… stuff…”
Umi blushed. Kotori smiled widely. Maki was somewhere in between.

“I-I think we’ll be okay this time around, isn’t that right Kotori?” Umi was looking like she wanted to leave. Quickly.

“But I want to--” Kotori was cut off by a hand pulling her from her chair.

“Thanks, Maki. Seriously. I promise we’ll do what we can for Eli.” Umi guided Kotori towards the door.

“Thanks, girls. You know where you can find me if you ever need me. I’ll be here!” Maki smiled widely and waved at the pair leaving the cafe.

Mid-July

3.5 months after Honoka’s disappearance

“So… are you happy with it?” Arisa was looking at the completed doujinshi entitled Escape, by the artist somebodD, also known as their neighbor, Ayako.

“I’m really proud of it. Honestly. I’m always proud of my work, but there’s something special about this one that makes me really happy. I hope you guys enjoy it.” Ayako was sitting with a small cup of Japanese sake in her hand. She didn’t drink often, but usually celebrated the completion of a doujinshi with a bottle of her favorite sake.

Several minutes passed.

15 minutes passed.
“Wow.” Yukiho was the first to finish.

“Man…” Arisa was second.

Honoka reread several pages and was the last to finish. She gently closed the book and set it on the table. She stood up and walked over to her friend who now had her right arm and forehead planted firmly on the table. Ayako looked to the side and saw blue eyes staring at her. Gently, Honoka helped the girl up from the chair, relieving the taller girl of the empty cup which was dangling dangerously between her long fingers, and stood directly in front of her.

Staring at Ayako while grabbing her shoulders, Honoka spoke.

“Thank you. It is perfect.”

Ayako wanted to cry. For some reason those word assaulted her heart and gave her emotions like she’d never experienced before while writing doujinshi.

“I’m… I’m glad you guys like it. I hope I did you justice.” Ayako wiped a single tear from her eye.

“You did.”

Late July

4 months after Honoka’s disappearance

Honoka’s apartment

Finally done!
Thursdays were for two things in the new Kousaka household - thoroughly cleaning the living room and eating food with their upstairs neighbor.

The former was done so everyone had a clean place with which to relax while Yukiho was preparing dinner. She’d taken it upon herself to be the caretaker of the other two girls and while she was initially hesitant to do so, now she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Giving her girls a nice place to come home to and relax was her first priority. It gave her great pleasure to see the apartment in perfect order for her girlfriends and the regular guest they invited over every other Thursday.

And now, having completed her cleaning tasks, she could sit down and do some homework she’d been wanting to accomplish.

*But first, let’s check the email*.

Absentmindedly, Yukiho typed in her email address to the---

*Oh shoot, I spelled it wrong. My own name, haha. Oh man, I ju...... whoa....*

Yukiho had mis-typed her name quite badly, instead typing ‘Yahiko’ into the search bar (not even her email login!). But what came up on the instant search amazed her.

*Yahiko shrine… Yahiko mountain…*

Her eyes glanced over the pictures of an 8th-century shrine and a mountain next to the ocean.

*Beautiful… eh? EH?! It’s just south of Niigata?! One hour by train on the Echigo Line.*

Yukiho had an idea.
Late July

4 months after Honoka’s disappearance

Honoka’s workplace

Honoka was packing up, getting ready to leave work. It hadn’t been an overly busy day, but there was a fair share of customers, especially at the end of the day for some reason.

Typical college students. Gotta delay studying over the weekend, eh?

Ayako approached and waved. “About ready to go?”

“Sure am. I’ll be about five minutes then I’ll be ready.”

“Good, same here.”

“Excuse me, Ayako!” A voice rang from across the store. Ayako looked at the approaching employee.

“Oh hey, Haruka. Miss me when I took a few days off earlier this week? Sorry, I always do that after I release a new book. Partly because of the hangover, partly because I’m a nervous wreck.” She half laughed.

“Anyway, how’s life over there in the doujinshi department? Did you miss me?” Ayako gave a wink that apparently had a surprisingly positive impact on the freshman college girl from the doujinshi department of the store.

The girl looked very awkward now. “Actually, it’s about your new doujinshi… um… I just wanted to ask, how many did you print?”
Ayako didn’t like where this was going.

As a doujinshi artist, all printing costs were covered by the artist. Knowing how many to print was an art in and of itself. Online reviews of your doujinshi would be the life or death of a book. Printing a lot could go one of two ways: if reviews are good, you sell extra. If reviews are bad, you’re stuck with a lot of paper in your apartment that’s going nowhere.

The very best doujinshi circles might sell 5,000 copies of their works and that number of copies effectively puts you in demigod status. But 95% of doujinshi circles are really happy just to break the 100 mark. Established, but not popular circles might dare for 250. Ayako had successfully sold the magic 100 a couple of times and once been really close to 200.

For Ayako to be asked this early about the number of copies she made… things weren’t looking good.

“Uh… I went ahead and printed 200. I really like this one, so I decided to be ambitious.” She stroked a non-existent chin beard. “Maybe I messed up.”

“Um… well… here.” Harkua gave her smartphone to Ayako.

On the screen was the website of their online store, brought up to the page for her doujinshi.

*Escape, by somebodD*

*Reviews: 12*

*Average rating: 4.9/5.0*

*Top Review: pendragon1113 (TOP-50 REVIEWER)*

*Overall score: 5.0 out of 5.0*

“This is a masterpiece. somebodD, an artist whose previous works have been filled with excellent
art but middle-school-level storytelling, has come of age. They have created, in my opinion the
doujinshi of the year so far. Do yourself a favor and buy a copy of ‘Escape’ because it’s bound to
go down in doujinshi lore as a classic example of a story of redemption and love…”

“Holy shit.” Ayako immediately felt bad for letting that out in front of the young girl and tried to
compose herself.

“Pendragon1113 is one of the most respected reviewers of doujinshi online… they always go to
Comiket and buy hundreds of books. You’re really lucky if they even pick yours up, but your sales
can stop immediately if they give a bad review.”

Ayako was in complete shock. “I got a 5 out of 5…”

“We sold out of the 25 we have in-store and almost all of the 50 reserved for online. We need
more.” The young store clerk was pulling out a memo pad to get exact numbers. “Yeah… you’re
definitely going to have to print more.”

“How many more? I have 100 more at my apartment. I gave away the last 25 to a few fellow otaku
friends and fellow doujinshi authors.” Atako started trying to figure out how to get those other 100
to the store tomorrow.

“Actually, the online store has a back-order list of 61. And that’s just orders from today. That
review was posted last night, so we’ll likely be getting more orders over the next few days. Also,
the Corporate Buying department called and asked for a standard deployment shipment to be
spread out among other stores nationwide…” The doujinshi clerk was scribbling on her notepad
like crazy.

“So... that’s 100 for the head office… and for the online orders… popular ones are ordered for
about 2 weeks solid… a few more for the store…” Haruka started doing math in her head.

“With the anticipated sales from online and the demand from HQ, could you print another 300?”
Haruka looked uneasy. “Wait, 500 might be safer, actually. With this much popularity you’re
probably going to get an invitation from Comiket to attend the fair next month and with stellar
reviews like this, you’ll easily sell another 200 a day there… so I predict… hmmm…”

“You might want to print 1000. Just to cover your bases.”
Ayako eventually remembered to keep breathing and turned towards Honoka.

“Told you it was perfect.” Honoka smiled and gave a thumbs up.

Ayako sat down.

Honoka looked thoughtful for a moment. “Oh hey, when you come back from Comiket next month you’ll have to take us all out to dinner! You’ll be able to afford it.” Honoka winked and went to finish her work for the day.

Ayako stared at the floor.

“Holy…”
To all who read these lines, my thanks. To all who enjoy these lines, my happiness.

Chapter 8 - Tetrahedron

August 2

5 months after Honoka's disappearance

The Niigata apartment

Arisa opened the door to her apartment and deposited her belongings onto the shelf in the entryway. She removed her shoes and aligned them neatly on the floor next to the others. Taking care to note that Honoka’s shoes were still missing, she hurried into the living room to find Yukiho laying down on the couch...

...completely naked.

Arisa stared for a moment, taking in the pale white skin of her lover and best friend. Slightly disheveled auburn hair surrounded her head like a mane as she lay exposed to the world. Breathing gently but steadily, Yukiho hadn’t stirred in the moments since Arisa had arrived.

I could get used to this, Arisa admitted to herself as she slowly moved towards the figure lying on the sofa. A mischievous grin made its way onto her face as knelt down on the right side of the sleeping sister. Arisa took care to find her favorite spot just below Yukiho’s right collarbone at the top of her breast and slowly began to move her tongue over Yukiho's skin in light circles.

Yukiho’s body responded to her most sensitive spot being caressed and she began to breathe deeply. Sensing this movement, Arisa began to press her lips to the spot and kissed the area with vigor, mixing her lips and tongue as she widened the area upon which she was focused.
Yukiho was now coming to, so Arisa moved to the final stage. Simultaneously she began aggressively sucking on the sensitive spot while moving her right hand to caress the breast which had been ignored to this point, dragging her fingers across every inch of milky skin. All the while, her left hand made its way around the back of Yukiho’s head and grabbed the girl by her hair.

This triple attack on her senses had jolted Yukiho out of sleep and into a world of pleasurable confusion. Her eyes opened widely and she tried to look down to see who and what was doing such blissful things to her, but a hand was holding her head in place with a gentle firmness that prevented any movement or awareness of her surroundings.

Minutes passed as hands, tongue, and lips made their way over the body of the girl on the couch and in a single moment, white light consumed her. Fire grew inside her and detonated, spreading like a tsunami down her legs and up her arms, to the tips of her toes and fingers. Wave after wave washed over her body until finally she reached a fiery balance.

Breathing heavily, she lost all desire for movement. At that moment Arisa stood up, wiping her mouth, and moved to straddle the helpless girl in front of her.

“I’m home,” Arisa said as she planted a chaste kiss on the forehead of her girlfriend.

“I’m… in heaven,” Yukiho somehow managed to get out.

Arisa giggled and gave her girlfriend another kiss. “Come on, let’s get you dressed and let’s talk about our plans for tomorrow.”

Yukiho reluctantly moved, or at least she tried to. Eventually her body complied and began the long, arduous five meter journey to her dresser to find some clothes.

“So, did you pick up the gifts for Honoka?” Arisa was changing out of her work clothes and into something comfortable so she could lounge around for the rest of the evening.

Yukiho took a break from doing the same search for comfy clothes and reached for an inconspicuous looking plastic bag with two boxes inside. One box was the shape of a tissue box and was only wrapped in simple red wrapping paper. The other resembled a cylindrical pyramid with its top point removed and was about 15 centimeters in diameter. The silver wrapping paper and vibrant gold bow made it very distinctive from the other box.
Arisa stared for a few moments then nodded contently. “Very well done. That’s going to be perfect. I’m glad I asked you to do this because I couldn’t have done it nearly as well.”

Yukiho blushed faintly and put the boxes into the bag and then into her underwear drawer for safekeeping. “You know, flattery will get you everywhere.” Yukiho turned and winked at the girl she loved and they both resumed dressing themselves.

“I reconfirmed the reservations for the hotel, the restaurant, and I’ve purchased the tickets for the train ride there and back. I tried to get tickets for the aerial tramway but they only sell them at the stations at the top and bottom of the mountain. I also called to--”

Yukiho’s dissertation was halted abruptly by lips pressing against her own. After a few moments Arisa broke the kiss and grabbed the hands of the slightly shorter girl.

“When I told you before ‘I’ll leave it to you’ I said so because I trusted you to go over everything better than I’d ever be able to do. You’ve done that with both the gifts and the planning. I trust you. Thank you for doing all of this.”

Arisa stared into Yukiho’s sea green eyes and smiled gently, stroking a lock of hair that had fallen in front of her face. Yukiho took a deep breath and smiled, leaning forward to hug the blonde.

“I hope she likes everything. It’s the least we can do for her.” Yukiho nuzzled Arisa’s shoulder. Arisa wrapped one arm around her and put one hand gently on the back of her head to pet her.

“She will. She would love anything, but with how much effort you’ve put in--”

Yukiho leaned back and gave a stern look to her girlfriend. “WE. WE put in. I had an idea and you told me to go for it. Then you had an idea for gifts and we both helped make it happen. This is from US.”

Arisa could only smile and nod. “Of course, you’re right. It’s always ‘we’ and ‘us’ and that’s what makes us special.”

Yukiho smiled in agreement and winked. “Good girl. Now, help me put away the laundry before
Later that evening

“I’m hooooooooome!”

Honoka flew through the hallway and practically threw herself onto the bed. She’d been told to go ahead so Ayako could conduct a managerial meeting that evening, thus she walked, or rather ran home by herself.

“Welcome home love!” A kiss on the cheek.

“Nice to see you, sweetie!” A kiss on the other cheek.

*It’s good to be me*, Honoka thought.

“Waaaaaaaaah! I can’t believe I’ve got three days off in a row! This is the first time since I got the job I’ve gotten so lucky. I wonder why now, of all times? I mean, Ayako is heading off to Tokyo on the 6th and I won’t be working those three days until she leaves… something’s strange.”

Two girls did everything in their power to look innocent.

But it wasn’t their silence or their lack of acting skill that led Honoka to sense something suspicious about the situation, but rather the card that was lying on the bed on her pillow.

*To Honoka*

A card? Why is there a card on her pillow?
“A card? Why is there a card on my pillow?” Honoka asked the most obvious question possible.

Yukiho looked as conspicuously innocent as possible. “Oooooohhhh that’s for me to know and for you to find out.” She glanced in the direction of the card.

Honoka took the hint and moved up to the pillow to begin opening the card. It was a white envelope with blue writing on the front that had been written in a rather fair hand. *Yukiho’s been practicing her calligraphy I see.*

She removed the card which had a simple navy blue front cover with a reddish-pink heart in the middle. Opening the card she read the message contained inside.

*Our love,*

*You’re cordially invited to accompany us on a journey to a local landmark and vacation area. Your train shall depart at 2:00pm on the morrow. Please pack clothes for two days, as well as an extra set of clothes suitable for outdoor activities.*

*We look forward to escorting you for the next two and a half days as we celebrate your birthday.*

*With undying affection,*

*The two of us*

Honoka decided to read the card again just to make sure she understood everything when a sudden realization hit her.

“Holy crap, it’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“Ayako won’t be needing you at work for the next few days because she and another manager are covering for the work you’d need to do.” Arisa moved over and sat next to Honoka on the bed. “We talked to her about it one day when you were at work and she was out to lunch… or so she told you.”
Yukiho snuck up behind her sister and wrapped her arms around the girl. “So you’re free of responsibility for the next three days and you won’t have to make up any work when you get back. Think of it as a fair exchange for covering for Ayako while she’s in Tokyo at Comiket for two days.”

Honoka was still processing everything and trying to understand the scope of what the pair had arranged for her. One thing did concern her.

“What about money? How can we afford to stay in a hotel for two nights and do all of this… stuff… you have planned?”

Yukiho nodded in understanding. “Ever since we moved here I’ve done everything possible to rely completely on your income for our expenses. Though I’ve had to use part of Arisa’s salary from time to time, we’ve basically been living on about two thirds of the money we’ve made for the last few months. We’ve saved quite a bit and, had we wanted to, this vacation could have been about five times longer.”

Honoka was impressed. “This is why I let you take care of finances. Running a store is one thing, it’s just buying and selling, but personal finances are something else. I’m so glad we have you.”

The three came together for a warm embrace. *Our first vacation together, and my birthday on top of it all! This is so much more than I could have hoped for.*

After releasing themselves, both of Honoka’s girlfriends looked at her with expressions of love.

“Happy birthday, Honoka!”

---

**August 3**

**Honoka’s birthday**
The train arrived at Yahiko station around 3:15 in the afternoon on a hot summer day. Yahiko village was a little more than an hour away from Niigata by local train. The girls had spent their time on the train talking about little frivolities from their workplace or social interactions with coworkers and friends. Mostly, the three were looking forward to a long weekend away from their responsibilities so this was an opportunity to get their work related complaints off their chest before officially starting their vacation.

Arisa and Yukiho had kept the plans entirely to themselves the whole time, even last night, much to the dismay of Honoka. Honoka, who couldn’t stand to be left in the dark even for 24 hours, and tried various ways of “extracting” the information from her girlfriends. Unfortunately (fortunately?), several sweaty hours later the three were exhausted from their efforts, but Honoka still had no more information than she had started with.

Soon, however, everything would be revealed, as the three exited the train and entered the small station. Though smallish in floor space, the station was nonetheless well traveled and was thus well-kept. The facade was white and red and resembled a traditional Shinto shrine, complete with its own torii \[ A/N: a “gate” in front of a Shinto shrine, often orange \]. Exiting the station revealed to them the beauty of the town in front of them.

To the west there was a park, kilometers wide with rolling hills, vast numbers of Japanese maple trees, and a rocky creek winding its way through the middle. A trail through the center of the park followed the creek and made its way towards the numerous onsens and hotels.

To the north and east the village spread, making its way up a gentle slope towards the mountain from which the village took its name. Dozens of shops were selling various souvenirs, local food specialties, and crafts. It was an old rural Japanese town that had been infused with just enough modern qualities to be traditional yet comfortable.

They hailed a taxi and made their way into the village to their hotel. The traditional Japanese style hotel was located at the foot of the mountain, just a ten minute walk from the famous Yahiko shrine.

As they walked into the lobby they were embraced by an ambiance of eras gone by. This traditional inn might as well have been constructed of nostalgia alone; dark wooden posts framed every wall, tatami flooring spanned most rooms, a garden could be seen through the courtyard windows, and every staff member was dressed impeccably in a modest kimono.

Honoka was floored. “Wait, how much did we pay for this?”
Yukiho gave a small pout. “Whatever you're thinking, it's most certainly less. We're here on a Thursday in the middle of the summer a few weeks before most people's summer vacations. This is the epitome of the off season.”

“Yukiho was very thorough about her planning, so stop worrying! You know what we wouldn't have done anything to endanger our family.” Arisa nudged up against Honoka's shoulder and gave her a calming expression.

“Ah, you're right. I'm just… this is so great, you guys. Thank you.”

“Don't thank us yet. You haven't seen the onsen in the hotel.” With those words, Yukiho made her way to the check-in counter and proceeded with the business at hand.

After going through the check-in process the trio was led to their room on the second floor of the building in the wing closest to the onsen.

“Breakfast is included with your stay and is served from 6am until 9am. You purchased the dinner plan, so the staff is available to serve you the evening meal in your room between 5pm and 9pm. Just call the kitchen and the meal will arrive 30 minutes later. If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to call us at any time of the day. We hope you enjoy your stay with us.” The hostess bowed deeply and made her way back down the hall towards the hotel foyer.

The girls excitedly set down their things so they could look around the room. It was a traditional Japanese style room with tatami lining the entire floor with the exception of a small sunroom which housed two chairs and a small table. In the center of the main room sat a moderately sized table with floor chairs set neatly on all four sides. For sleeping, futons were folded neatly in the closet nearby. Though traditional in style, it still had some comforts of modern technology with a reasonably sized air conditioner, a small TV, and a small refrigerator.

“Well, our evening is free. What shall we do first, onee-san?”

Honoka thought for a moment. There were some shops she’d seen while walking to the hotel that she was interested in looking through, but the idea of lounging on an onsen was equally powerful. She was torn.

“How does a brief shopping excursion sound?” Arisa offered, noting Honoka’s deep thoughts. “After that, we can freshen up in the onsen and relax for the rest of the night. We need to be well-
rested for tomorrow anyway.”

“You know me so well, Arisa.” Honoka patted the blonde girl on her head.

“I know, we should, like, date or something.” Arisa gave a wink to her older girlfriend.

“Alright ladies, off we go shopping! I want to hurry up so we can get back and soak for the rest of the night!” Yukiho lead the charge out the door and into town for the afternoon.

August 4

Yahiko village

The morning started with a scrumptious breakfast provided by the hotel. They were served a well balanced meal featuring wild mountain vegetables tempura-style, eggs cooked in the hot springs, a variety of baked fish, high quality koshihikari rice, and pickled daikon.

The girls took their time, eating a respectable portion because they were about to hike up a 634 meter high mountain, among other things today. After sufficiently stuffing themselves on the delicious spread, they went back to their room and changed into their day clothes.

First, the girls made their way to Yahiko Shrine, entering the shrine grounds and washing their hands at the temizuya [ A/N: a water container for cleaning one’s hands and mouth before praying at a shrine ] before moving towards the 1300 year old shrine itself.

After approaching the shrine the girls bowed twice, clapped twice, then began to pray their own individual prayers. Finishing, they each bowed once more and began their walk to the foot of the mountain trail.

Making their way up the mountain proved easier than they’d expected. The trails were usually wide enough to walk three abreast so they could chat and banter as they pleased. Occasionally the
trail opened up so they could see their progress as they moved higher in altitude. Though it was August and fairly hot, the majority of the trail was in the shade thus making for a reasonably pleasant hike.

Two hours and many bottles of water later, the girls reached the summit and stared in awe at the sight before them.

Facing east they could see the flat plains of the coastal part of Niigata prefecture with rice paddies reaching as far as the eye could see. Turning around, they could see the Sea of Japan, whose waves had for millennia lapped at the base of the mountain. The string of four solitary mountains isolated on the coast provided for an awe-inspiring and unique view.

The summit had a decently flat top which allowed for a few buildings, including a small gift shop and restaurant as well as a children's play area. They settled down on a flat piece of ground with a view of the sea near a building which housed the aerial tramway station they’d be using to make their way down the mountain later. Spreading out a small blanket in the shade of a tree, the girls set down for a long, relaxing picnic.

“You know, I’m really regretting not buying that tonkatsu lunch plate that you got, Yukiho.” Arisa admitted.

“If you’re good maybe I’ll feed it to you...” Yukiho raised an eyebrow “…with my lips.”

“Well? Oh hi, this is the birthday girl over here just, ya know, minding my own business. Certainly not wanting to be fed by her sexy girlfriends or anything like that. Nope. Not this birthday girl.”

In a strange twist of events, Honoka’s sarcasm actually worked and all of a sudden she was being set upon by two girls with offerings of food between their lips. Unfortunately she had only one mouth.

“Youkiho, I’m only eating Arisa’s first because it’s melting,” Honoka warned her sister as she took the bit of an ice cream bar that Arisa had presented. Arisa had a tendency towards eating dessert first, a quirk that had alway puzzled the Kousaka sisters. Must be a Russian thing Honoka had mused on more than one occasion.

“How did you manage to get ice cream up here in 30 degree weather, anyway? It’s summer, for
heaven's sake.” Yukiho was actually puzzled.

“There’s a vending machine in the tram station back there. You guys were engaged with staring out at the ocean, and meanwhile I was dying of heat stroke. So I bought us some cold drinks and myself an ice cream bar that I had no intention of sharing. None at all. Obviously. Jeez.”

The sarcasm was dripping faster than her ice cream which was, at the present, threatening to do just that on the blanket. Thus, Arisa made quick work of the balance of the ice cream bar.

The three ate their respective lunches and lounged around for a long time. Eventually, the conversation came to a peaceful lull. After having talked about everything and nothing for an hour, they had run the conversation well dry.

After a few minutes of feeling the mood and situation, Yukiho glanced at Arisa. Arisa nodded and began speaking.

“Honoka, we've been living here for four months now. How do you feel, now that we're settled in here?”

Honoka thought about it for a moment. “I like it here. It's comfortable, big enough, the restaurants are better than anything in Tokyo… it feels like a place that I'd visit for a vacation sometime and always say to myself ‘it'd be nice to live there’ or something like that. Yet, here we are. We live here.”

“I guess what I'm wanting to know is,” Arisa took a deep breath “is here our forever? Are we happy here?”

“We came here trying to escape, but we never really thought about what we'd do five, ten, twenty years down the road.” Yukiho looked out to the ocean's horizon. “I'm happy here. I'd like to make a life here with you two. How do you feel, Honoka?”

Yukiho not calling her ‘onee-san’ was strange. It was a very serious side of Yukiho that Honoka rarely saw. “I do like it here, Arisa. And yes, Yukiho, I think I could make a life here.”

Arisa looked over to Yukiho. With an understanding expression, Yukiho sat up and began rummaging through her backpack. Honoka took notice and quipped, “Got more dessert in there for
“Dessert yes,” Yukiho said as the withdrew two very different looking presents from her backpack, “but not edible desserts. Two things to finish off the meal for you, love.”

Yukiho handed one present, the plainly wrapped one, to Arisa and kept the other.

“I want to make a life with you, Honoka. I want to be more than a girlfriend to you and Yukiho. I want to commit myself to supporting you for the rest of my life. You've given me greater happiness than anything else in my entire life.”

Yukiho smiled at Arisa. “And I, too, want to make a life with you, Honoka. Though I'm your sister by blood, I'm your lover by choice. I choose to be with you for the rest of my life, if you'll allow me.

“This,” Yukiho held out the ornately-wrapped present and sat it directly in front of a now cross-legged Honoka, “is from one of us. It is a symbol of our love for you. Please accept it.”

Honoka was staring with wide eyes at the gift in front of her, switching back and forth between the wrapping and her sister who was kneeling in front of her in a formal seiza-style. As she leaned down to pick up the present, Arisa started.

“This,” Arisa held out the plainly-wrapped present and sat it directly in front of the still cross-legged Honoka, “is from one of us. It is a symbol of our love for you. Please accept it.”

Another declaration. Honoka eyes didn't know where to look and were being especially entranced by the Russian girl in front of her who was attempting with all her might to sit in the formal Japanese style. Honoka knew just how uncomfortable that position could be when done for extended periods of time, so she began to hastily but delicately unwrap the first of the presents from the red, plain box.

She removed the outer wrapping and opened the box to find a… box.

A ring box.
Now shaking ever so slightly, she opened the box to find a simple but beautiful silver ring inside. She removed the ring from the box and inspected its details. It was clearly high quality, but ever so simple. A bright shine came from the ring except… something inside the ring. An inscription?!
Peering closer, Honoka read the words.

*Your eternal companion*

‘Eternal’

A word the carried immense weight and commitment. Honoka was failing at keeping her emotions in check but redoubled her efforts when she remembered she had another box to open.

“T-thank you Arisa…”

“Are you sure it’s from me?”

Honoka wasn’t expecting that question. She’d opened the gift she was given by Arisa, after all. How could it not be from her?

“You gave it to me, so I’m pretty sure…” Honoka was getting really confused.

“Why not open the other one?” Arisa pointed out the other package in front of Honoka.

Honoka hesitantly reached for the next box and began opening it. The ornate wrapping was a bit more difficult to open than the previous gift, but soon she was able to open the oddly-shaped box. From the box she pulled… another box.

Another ring box.

Opening the box she found what appeared to be an identical ring, silver and polished. Removing the ring from the box she instinctively looked to find another inscription inside the ring. Her instincts were rewarded when she found an inscription in the same place.
‘Eternal’

Once again, the word hit her heart with an emotion unlike anything she’d felt before.

“So who gave you that ring?” Yukiho was peering at her sister with inquisitive eyes. “Are you ready to declare one of us your lover and the other your companion?”

“Do you even want to know who gave you each ring?” Arisa was crawling closer to Honoka by the moment.

“Or can you accept that each ring was from both of us - that both are equally true for us both?” Yukiho was also closing the distance between them.

“Honoka… I’m committed to you forever. Will you take me?” Yukiho kneeled mere centre wrest from her sister.

“Honoka… I’m committed to you forever. Will you take me?” Arisa kneeled equally close, next to Yukiho.

Honoka had no doubt how she would answer those questions. She was truly happy.

“I will.”

Both girls reached out for a ring. Collecting the two rings in their right hands, they turned towards each other and embraced with the other hand. The two connected in a soft kiss while their hands that held the rings also connected between their bodies.

After a few moments they separated, each having one hand with a ring inside. Which ring? Did they switch? Who had each one to begin with anyway? Honoka’s mind raced.

“Close your eyes, Honoka.”
Eyes closed.

“Hold out both of your hands.”

Hands outstretched.

Gently, two girls put rings on the ring fingers of their older girlfriend.

“When you put these rings on every morning, know that you carry us both with you. That we are a part of your emotions and physical being.”

“The rings, like us, are equal but not identical. Please wear them with pride, aware of their individuality.”

“As you wear the rings you will show the world that you are unashamed to be possessed by two other women. And then when you come home at night…”

The two girls embraced Honoka from both sides.

“...two bodies will remind you with flesh of that which you have been reminded all day by silver.”

Honoka felt everything.

There was no other way to explain the emotions she was experiencing right now. It was joy, it was passion, it was happiness, it was the tears that were beginning to roll down her cheeks. All of it together gave her a feeling… of love. Of more than love.

Of these two women.

She didn’t even try to speak, instead she just embraced her companions and softly wept with them on her shoulders.
August 5

A train bound for Niigata

*What an amazing weekend with these gir--- no, with these women.* Honoka had made a decision last night as she was soaking in one of the onsen in their hotel.

All this time she’d been referring to Arisa and Yukiho as ‘her girls’. While there was nothing wrong with the affectionate title, Honoka felt like they deserved more credit than that and decided that whenever possible she would refer to them as women.

*They’re 18, both going to turn 19 within the next few months. They’re still young, just as I am. But they’ve gone through more than most women at this stage in their lives. I think it’s time I recognize that and treat them as such.*

The profession of devotion they’d given her at the top of the mountain yesterday only further drove home the point - she was in love with two amazing women and she wanted to give them every respect they deserved.

Now, as she sat on the train bound for their home, she relished being able to sit with the two in front of her. The two women leaned against each other, supporting one another as they slept.

*Just like them. Always there for each other, even in their dreams.*

*I have to be a part of that. We’re a family, now more than ever, and the family has to lean on each other at all times. If someone tries to do it on their own, the whole shape collapses.*

*A three-sided house. Our happy love triangle.*
Honoka smiled and leaned against the window, peering at the passing rice paddies as she slowly drifted off to sleep.

*Ya know... they were beautiful in their own way when they were snow-covered. But after the thaw, they're even more beautiful when they're warm and thriving with life.*

Later that evening

**Niigata**

“Ayako, you’ve gone over that list three times since I’ve gotten here and who knows how many times before I got here. You have everything. It’s time to sleep so you don’t kill yourself with worry.”

It was Honoka’s turn to be the motherly figure as she stood in the living room of Ayako’s apartment. She’d come over unannounced a few hours after the three of them had gotten back to their apartment just to see how Ayako was doing in her preparations for tomorrow.

Little did she know that Ayako was in full panic mode, compulsively checking everything she had packed... well, who knows how many times.

“Okay okay... it’s just that, I’ve never had to send my comics ahead of me. I can’t exactly carry 800 copies of a book with me on the shinkansen. It’s weird only bringing my suitcase.” Ayako was pacing at only a slightly slower pace after Honoka’s admonishment.

“I’m telling you, if you don’t go to bed I swear to you I’ll bring my girlfriends up here and flirt with them until you kick us out. And then we’ll make out on the way out the door...” Honoka’s hands moved towards her phone until Ayako went wide-eyed.

“NO, no really no, that’s okay. I’ve watched plenty of porn already today and it did nothing to help me calm down, really.” She stood still for the first moment since Honoka had arrived and actually appeared to be serious for a moment. “I can do this. I will do this.”
Honoka went over and took her friend by the hand and led her over to the couch. “You’re going to have fun. You’re going to sell a lot of copies of your story. You’re going to be more popular than ever.” Honoka gently ran her fingers through Ayako’s long black hair trying to calm the girl down a bit.

“And when you get back, you’re going to tell us all about it over dinner the following Thursday. And two days later, we’re all going to go to the beach and have fun together. Okay? Have fun while you can, girl.” Honoka gave her a pat on the leg and stood up.

“Honoka… I don’t… I just… you guys have done so much…”

Honoka bent over and put a finger on the black-haired girl’s lips. “We’ve both done a lot for each other.” She removed the finger and put her hands on her hips. “And that’s why we’re the best of friends. Go to sleep, silly girl. Then get on the train tomorrow and have the time of your life.”

Ayako sighed deeply and nodded. “Okay. I’ll be sure to text you whenever I can.”

“You’d better. I want pictures with all of the cute girls you’re going to meet.”

Ayako chuckled deeply. “Now now, you won’t get those pictures, lady. I keep those for myself.” She gave a wink and stood up to head towards her bedroom.

“I’d hope so. For my relationship’s sake. Anyway, have a good night. Catch ya in a few days!” Honoka waved as she put on her shoes to make her way back downstairs to her apartment.

“Thanks again, Honoka. I’ll be sure to bring home a girl to share.” She stuck out a tongue at the retreating ginger.

The door closed and Ayako stood alone in her bedroom.

She made herself ready for bed and laid in bed. As she drifted off to sleep, the same thoughts raced through her mind.
I can do this. I will do this.
Chapter 9 - Composite Angle

August 7

5 months after Honoka’s disappearance

Tokyo

Ayako stood in front of Tokyo Big Sight and took in the view of the crowd waiting to get into the famous Tokyo convention center. As a member of a doujinshi circle, she was allowed entry along with all of the other writers and artists that would sell their wares at this edition of Comiket.

The sea of doujinshi lovers waiting to get in was quite a sight to behold. Tens of thousands of people were waiting to go into an exhibition center that holds the accomplishments of the best amateur and semi-professional artists in Japan.

And she was one of those artists.

Granted, as with anyone else who wanted to sell their wares at this convention, it only took an application and a few thousand yen to secure a spot at the prestigious event. However, those with works whose quality was not worthy of the event would be told exactly that by the attendees. The critics were never harsh, yet usually honest or even blunt. The truth about something you love is difficult to handle for many people.
Like Ayako.

She had often been told that her works were visually inspiring and intellectually perspiring - that is to say, it took a lot of effort and determination to make it through the dialogue but her art would save the day. Fortunately for her, this time she needn’t worry about such things. She’d been blessed with a story that had literally written itself. All she had to do was reproduce it in an artistic fashion.

She had done so with a painstaking determination to adhere to realism and the truths she had been told. Nothing was exaggerated just to create a better story or unnecessary drama. This story was real and unedited. She held nothing back except the names of those involved, having chosen pseudonyms with her friends one night over dinner, and a few small details the girls had wanted to keep a secret, such as the true location of the story.

And with that desire for perfection, she had nearly achieved it. Or at least, that’s what her critics had said. She wasn’t sure what to believe herself, but when enough people tell you the same thing you eventually start to believe it yourself. Such was the situation with Ayako as she had been told that her latest story, *Escape*, was among the best in the industry for this year.

What praise to receive! After a few years of being a slightly-above-average doujinshi maker she had ascended, even if just for these few months, into a realm where few people could say they’d been. The best and brightest in the business were reaching out to her to congratulate her on an instant success.

She had sold around 400 (!) copies of her latest story between stores and online retailers so far, and more orders came every day. Selling 1000 copies now seemed like a reasonable expectation rather than a pipe dream. Only the top few percent of artists could say they’d done that in their careers, much less in a single volume.

So for now, for this moment in time, she chose to accept everything. She’d be the happy, humble artist whose works had surprisingly taken off. If someone asked her advice, she’d give something. If someone wanted to know about her, she’d tell. This was her best opportunity to give back to the community that had finally given her a moment of glory and accomplishment.

Alright. Come to me, my friends. Let’s do this!

Making her way back into the building, she took the escalator up to the exhibition hall and started towards her booth. She had arrived earlier than many other artists, so she took her time and set everything up so she could relax for a little while before the convention began.
Her booth was fairly simple, sporting a white tablecloth, a half-meter square sign with her pseudonym and doujinshi title on a pole, and a handmade poster hanging from the front. The poster had a large picture of the three characters from the doujinshi she'd made. Emblazoning the left side in a very artistically sweeping fashion was the word *Escape*.

Sitting down in the chair behind her booth, she looked at the boxes of her doujinshi piled on the floor. This was the dangerous point for her; nothing to do but think and let her doubts fester.

*Did I go too far? 800 is...*

Her thought process was interrupted by a quiet “Um... excuse me?”

Looking up, she saw an average height girl with an ambiance of confidence about her, but also gentleness. She couldn’t be more than 20 years old and she was clutching a copy of---

Of Ayako’s doujinshi!

“Aa-- ah, hello! Um, how are you?” Ayako struggled for words after seeing her own work in the hands of someone else. She'd sold many copies of her works before, but never had someone brought a previously purchased copy *with* them to a convention. Also, a fellow doujinshi artist?!

“I'm fine, thanks. You look really nervous, I have to say. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Me? Oh no, it's okay. This is just my first time doing something this big.” Ayako relaxed a bit at having a normal conversation with a fellow artist. There was still a few minutes until the general public would be let inside, so the artists themselves we doing a bit of shopping among their peers.

“This is my tenth. I know you're going to be just fine, so hang in there!” The girl reached out and held the copy of *Escape* in front of Ayako. “You really wrote something special. You're going to sell a thousand of these, I know it. Congratulations on your success so far, by the way.”

She put the doujinshi down on the table. “And... if you don't mind, would you be willing to sign this copy for me?”
Ayako went blank for a moment before she spoke. “Y-yeah, sure. Who should I say it's to?”

“I just use my internet handle: pendragon1113”

Ayako let that one sink in for a moment.

“YOU’RE----”

“Yes I am.” She said with just enough force to break Ayako out of her surprise and motioning her to sit back down. “And I don't tell a lot of people that, so please keep it to yourself. It's not like it's a big secret, I just don't want to advertise it, ya know?”

“I introduce myself to artists I like because I want you to know that I'm not just some imaginary face behind a computer screen. I'm a real person, just like everyone else here. I write fairly average doujinshi, just like everyone else here. I buy and read stuff, just like everyone else.”

The famous reviewer leaned on the table with one hand. “What I’m trying to say is this: your story reached a person and made them happy. I hope you can appreciate it more knowing that it affected a real human being, and that every person who comes through those doors today has a chance to feel the same emotions. You’re doing that to them. You’re making them feel alive.”

Ayako thought hard about those words. It’s true, the most renowned people in any profession are often lifted high above everyone else, but in the end they’re still human beings with lives, troubles, and feelings. This girl wanted to make sure people knew she's still a person like the rest of everyone there.

What a strong woman. I hope I can end up like that.

“Thank you. I’ll try to remember all of that today… while I have fun, of course. It was a pleasure to meet you, your dragon-ness.” Ayako gave a sarcastic bow and a wink before she opened the doujinshi to sign the back page.

To the illustrious pendragon - may your wings take you everywhere you've dreamt.
Handing it back to the girl, Ayako was feeling completely relaxed.

“Wow, so you can write when you want to. I think you've changed, Ms. somebodD.” The renowned reviewer and artist started to walk away. “Have fun! It's going to be a blast.”

Ayako waved in the direction of the departing girl. *I've changed, eh?*

A few minutes later an announcement rang out telling everyone that the front doors were opening and that the first wave of attendees would be let in momentarily.

*Okay! Here. We. Go!*

The first day of Comiket came to an end and Ayako was exhausted. Having brought 800 copies of her currently popular work, she sold just short of 600 on the first day. For an independent artist without support from any other artists or circles, this could only be regarded as a resounding success.

She'd been busy the entire 10 hours of the convention, selling several dozen copies of her doujinshi every hour. At one point in the middle of the day she was selling faster than one copy per minute - a pace that was both mentally and physically taxing for the young woman.

After cleaning her area and making sure to collect everything she'd need in her hotel room, she made her way to the monorail that would take her out of Odaiba. She changed trains at Hamamatsucho station and took the Yamanote line to Shibuya, where her hotel was.

She was well aware of the possibility that this could be be a once in a lifetime event as an artist at Comiket, so she decided to splurge a little bit and stay at a nicer hotel than a single traveler would normally use. She settled on the Dormy Inn at Shibuya due to its location in a thriving and exciting part of the city, as well as the onsen on the top floor of the hotel.

*But mainly the onsen*, she thought to herself as she set her things down in her hotel room. Standing
and selling merchandise was tough enough at her retail job, but doing it behind a desk for over ten hours at a loud convention was something else entirely.

*I need a bath, a long soak, some sake, and sleep. Probably in that order.*

She changed into her bathrobe and made her way up the elevator to the top floor of the hotel. Upon arriving in the onsen area she disrobed and placed her belongings in a locker before entering the onsen itself.

The room was rather spacious, holding eight separate personal cleaning stalls on the near wall, and contained a large bath in the middle of the room that could easily accommodate twenty patrons with plenty of room for personal space. The room was decorated in a cool gray-ish navy blue tile with light gray grout between the tiles. In each corner of the room was a tropical plant of some species that gave just a little green to the room.

Noting that there were only two other people in the room, both of which were soaking at the opposite end of the bath area, she made her way to the cleaning area to wash herself before entering the public bath.

As she was finishing up, she noticed the door opening and a few more hotel guests stepping through the door. They looked to be very young, probably college aged, and as they came in they giggled and chatted with each other about… something she couldn't quite make out.

*It's nice to be a girl that likes girls.*

She couldn’t help but peek out of the corner of her eye at the women who strode into the room with her. They were certainly young and even though Ayako herself was only 23, she couldn't help but feel like a dirty old man for observing the girls.

*This is the problem with having a conscience. Still, the eye candy is nice.*

Ayako rinsed herself and made her way towards the end of the bath nearest the entryway so as to pass as close to the next guest as possible. She walked by the newcomers and observed as many of them as possible in a surreptitious way before moving to enter the large bath nearby.

“Nice to meet you too,” one of the girls said just loud enough for Ayako to hear.
Now bearing a slight blush due to her ogling being noticed, Ayako moved a little quicker into the bath and began to relax.

That is, until a few minutes later when the girls we ready to enter the bath as well. Most of them spread out just far enough away from each other to have some personal space but close enough to continue talking. One of them, having her choice of anywhere among a nearly 30 square meter bath, chose to sit less than 50 centimeters from the left side of Ayako.

Ayako couldn’t help but be a little nervous at the forwardness of a move like that. Onsen manners were observed by even the most brusque and blunt of Japanese people. Personal space was a sacred place and something that should not be taken lightly. Yet this woman charged forth into enemy territory with the bravado of a marauding warrior.

...except now that Ayako looked at her, she noticed the girl was blushing like crazy.

So cute...

The girl started to talk softly. “Sorry about earlier. Those girls are members of the same university club with me… I got… protective when I saw someone… running their eyes over them like that. But they are kind of cute… so… I guess I understand.” She sank low into the water.

Ayako was surprised at the honesty of the girl. “Well… I'm sorry for being as rude as I was. I hardly ever get to stay at a hotel like this, but I guess I'm enjoying myself too much.”

“They're all taken, just so you know,” said the girl who was now relaxing a bit next to Ayako.

Like she read my mind. I wonder if she's reading this right now.

Ayako tried her luck. “Can't be much harm in observing, can there?”

The girl next to Ayako was also looking at the other college girls in the room. “Those five are my friends and club mates… but you're right. They're quite nice to look at, I'll admit.”
The girl adjusted her seating style and looked at Ayako. “What brings you to the interesting part of this hotel in the interesting part of this city?”

Aaaaaand now I get to explain that I’m otaku. Lovely. How to avoid the question…

“I’m an artist and I’m in town for the weekend trying to sell a few of my pieces.” Ayako chose not to lie but not to tell the entire truth. How long until she asks enough questions to find me out? She looks like the investigative type, I wonder if I can work some word magic to keep my secret safe.

“An artist? So you’re here for Comiket?”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

The girl laughed at Ayako but tried to hold back a bit for her sake. “Wow, your face just ran a marathon in the space of two sentences.” She began to wipe a tear from her eye, perhaps in jest or perhaps in genuine entertainment.

“Anyway, I figured you’re here for Comiket because I am too. I don’t know why I got that vibe from your ‘artist’ line, but I understand why you’d come out with it so don’t worry about it. Actually, I think that’s a great way to talk about your work without outright flying the otaku flag. I can respect that.”

Ayako visibly relaxed but still sank a bit deeper into the hot water that enveloped her. “Yeah well, this is my first time at a hotel like this and I got nervous seeing cute girls walk into the bath with me. What can I say?”

The girl nodded, seeming to understand. “So, you’re an artist at Comiket. Having any success?”

“Actually yeah, I’m really happy. I’ve published a dozen or so doujinshi before now, but I’ve never had anything become as successful as my latest work. It’s been a lot of fun to see so many people not only enjoying it, but also coming to the convention specifically to buy it. They knew about it before and made a point to come get it… I mean that’s…it’s so awesome.”

“That’s super cool.” The girl twirled a bit of her hair with her right hand. “I guess you always hear about artists who go to a convention and are disappointed they sold a half dozen copies of their ‘beloved masterpiece’ they’ve fallen in love with. It sounds like this work’s greatness stands on its
Ayako looked curiously towards the girl. “Have you written doujinshi before? You have a surprisingly good perspective on these things.”

She chuckled slightly. “No, I haven’t. But I've written a lot of music in my lifetime so I can understand how people's opinions of your work can affect how much it means to you.”

“As for doujinshi, I’ve actually been a fan of doujinshi for just a few years. I'm part of a doujinshi club at my university with those other five; though, we call it the “Amateur Literature Club” because of publicity reasons and college rules and whatnot.”

Ayako was impressed. “That's pretty cool. So I assume you guys are here to buy some ‘study material’ for your club? Where's your university located?”

“Oh we go to school here in Tokyo, though the school is about an hour train ride from Comiket. Combined with the fact that a few of them aren't from Tokyo, we figured it'd be easier to get a hotel and pretend we're on vacation. It's summer break for us anyway.”

“That's pretty awesome. You guys should drop by my table tomorrow and check out my book. It'd be pretty cool to have my book in a club room somewhere, catalogued for generations to come.” Ayako laughed but the other girl looked thoughtful.

“Yeah, maybe we could come by your table and see what you have. If it’s good, we might buy one.” She put a finger to her cheek and asked, “You said your work was kind of popular… have you sold the ‘magic’ 100 yet?”

Ayako’s smile was one of pride but slight embarrassment. “Between sales in my local Animate, online sales, and today's sales at Comiket, I’m a few dozen short of 1000 sold.”

For the first time since Ayako met her, the girl seemed at a loss for words. Though not in awe, she was visibly impressed. “Wow… you’re serious, aren’t you? 1000 is remarkable, most people would dream of that total for a career.”

She turned back away from Ayako and looked to be thinking seriously. “Alright, what booth are you in? We need come visit you on our way in if you’re that popular. Also, how many copies do
“I’ve got just a little over 200 left to sell and I’m in booth A51. How many of you will there be tomorrow?”

“Well there’s me and everyone else here, so a total of six members. Would you mind saving a couple for us? I can guarantee we’d buy at least one.”

Ayako smiled and nodded. “Of course, I’d really like it if a college club were able to have one for future members to read. I like the idea of reading my works years from now… it’s kind of like time travelling.”

“Great! Then you can expect us sometime before lunch. Oh! There’s at least one girl who is studying art and is interested in making manga and or doujinshi one day. If she has some questions, would you mind her bothering you for a few minutes sometime?”

Ayako put a hand in the air. “I cannot be held accountable for my flirtation, but I do promise to answer any questions she has to the best of my ability.”

“The first part of that answer was questionable, but I’ll let it slide due to the second part.” The girl stood up and began to make her way towards the locker room.

“Care to join us up here again tomorrow night? I think some of the other girls wanted to sneak in some sake in a tea container.” Ayako’s new friend looked slightly exasperated by her fellow club members. She shook her head and sighed.

“How can I say no to girls and sake?” Ayako joked.

“Most people can’t. Catch ya tomorrow.” The girl waved and went out the door.

Ayako watched her figure depart from the room and then closed her eyes. They’re always taken, aren’t they. Uggghhh…. I guess this is why they invented alcohol.

Wait. She said they were taken… she didn’t say...
Wait.

What was her name?

Ayako placed a single palm on her face and shook her head.

The next day

The second day of Comiket was up and running and Ayako was steadily selling her doujinshi at a comparable rate to the previous day. From the looks of it she'd be sold out just after lunchtime, which didn't bother her at all. She could close up shop and clear her table with just enough time to walk around the convention center for an hour or two before she went back to the hotel for the night.

All in all, this weekend couldn't have been more successful. Literally hundreds of fans come to her table proclaiming their love for her newest work and wishing her good luck in the future. So many new faces that she'd never seen before and even a few of her long time fans took time out of their lives to come to see her and buy her new work.

What a feeling, to be seen as a success by so many people.

About a hour into the second day, the girls from the club that were staying at her hotel came by Ayako's table.

“Yo. How's it going today?” It was the girl from last night. She was wearing a black blouse that was nearly sleeveless, as well as some light gray capris that hugged every inch of her body.

“A lot better now, thanks.” This was not a lie. “Are these your junior club members that you were mentioning are into lascivious stories and the likes?” This was a lie.
“I’ll have you know that we’re quite pure, regardless of the stories we may read.” A different girl called out to Ayako as everyone laughed.

“Yeah, I’m as pure as your bedroom,” Ayako’s acquaintance said, thus shattering any semblance of propriety that may or may not have actually been there in the first place.

“What you and your girlfriend do is none of my business, thank you.” A third girl retorted without so much as turning her head. “At any rate, we’d love to purchase one of your books to put in our club library!”

“I heard about your newest work from one of my friends who came yesterday. I can't wait to read it!” Another club member had made her way towards the table looking quite fangirl-ish.

“I'm really happy you're looking forward to it! Thank you very much!” Ayako exchanged the book for a 1000 yen note and then gave the girl some change. “If any of you ladies need anything, I'll be here until about 2pm. Feel free to come by anytime and ask anything you like.”

“Thanks, hun!” The fangirlish club member was being quite bubbly. “We're gonna go pick up a few more things for the club. I heard you’re going to be at our private sake party at the hotel, yeah?”

Ayako nodded vigorously. “That's not even a question. See you sometime later!”

A few of the club girls had apparently already made their way to do some other shopping for their club room. The bubbly one looked surprised, but still waved at Ayako and followed the group.

For the next few hours Ayako had a steady stream of business that allowed her to completely sell out of her doujinshi at around 1:30 in the afternoon.

*Success! 800 copies sold here! Over 1200 total!*  

Ayako did a little dance in her head. That number didn't really compute at the moment but she had a feeling she'd come to terms with everything that happened this weekend while she was soaking tonight.
Wanting to look around and do some shopping for herself, Ayako quickly cleaned her area. She folded her table cloth, wiped down the table, accounted for all of her personal belongings, and folded up her advertising posters. Seeing that everything was neat and in order, she went towards a side room where artists were allowed to store their belongings during business hours.

Now with her hands free and only her shoulder bag in hand, she moved back onto the floor of the convention area. Passing by her table, she noticed she had forgotten two of her own books and went to pick them up.

*Ahhhh, these are the one I set aside for that college club. I forgot all about those. If I see them again I should give these to the cuter ones.*

Putting the doujinshi into her own bag, she started towards an area she was inter---

*wham*

Someone nearly tackled Ayako as they ran into her at breakneck speed. She lost her balance and nearly fell, but was quickly grabbed by the person who had run into her in the first place.

“Oh my god, are you alright? I'm so sorry-- I-- I didn't mean to hit youUUU oh my god it's you! You're who I’ve been looking for.”

Words flew out of the mouth of the assailant and Ayako had a hard time processing everything so quickly. “Wait, slow down for a second. First, I'm alright so no worries.” Ayako stood up on her own and tried to tidy herself up.

“Now, second of all…” Ayako took a good look at the heavily breathing person who ran her over and finally realized it was the girl from the hotel last night, “...oh, hey it's you! How did you guys get on with everything today? Did you buy some good works for your club collection?”

“Yeah, we did. Actually, we we reading a few of them during lunch a few minutes ago. And then… I read yours. I need to ask you some questions. Also, I need to buy one of those copies. I know you're sold out so I'll pay whatever you want, even if you have to print more, I'll pay for that. But I need a copy!”

These was something about this girl that make Ayako a little uncomfortable. It wasn't the
forwardness of her mannerisms or even the desperation of trying to obtain the doujinshi itself. There was something… else… like the girl was about to lose her composure for some reason. Or like she’d seen an actual ghost and had irrefutable proof of the matter but wasn’t sure exactly what to do next. Something was different from the relaxed, in-control girl she had met last night.

“Okay… how about I just give you this copy.” Ayako retrieved one of the two copies from her bag and gave it to the panicking girl.

For a moment the girl stood there in disbelief before she slowly took the doujinshi in both hands, holding it gently as if she were afraid it would turn to ash in her hands.

“Are you sure? I-- I can pay for it.” The girl offered with as steady a voice as she could muster, which wasn't really all that steady.

Ayako pondered for a moment and then looked as though she'd been struck with a bit of insight. “Ah! So you must be the girl that you were talking about! You had mentioned that someone was an artist and might have questions, so this all makes more sense now. You were just trying to play coy, you little devil.”

This girl is mysterious… and adorable… I wouldn't mind her being my arm candy for the next hour or so.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don't you walk around the convention with me for a while? We can chat and you can ask me anything you want. I'll accept your time and company as payment for the book. I've got a thing for redheads anyway.” Ayako winked as cutely as possible, hoping her scheme would work out.

The other girl looked a little puzzled for a moment and then said “Yeah… yeah, that's me. The girl with questions. Sorry for playing it off to be someone else… oh, and sorry for not introducing myself.”

She composed herself and brushed her red hair behind her right shoulder. Striking violet eyes fixated themselves on Ayako's face and a slight smile graced her feminine visage.

“My name is Maki. Nice to meet you.”
Two hours earlier

Maki had been looking forward to this day for weeks. As she waited in line to be able to enter Comiket with her five other club members, she wondered what it would be like at the world’s largest doujinshi market. This was her first time at an event like this and she was a little overwhelmed.

“Hey, you okay, Maki-chan?” One of her more energetic club members prodded her with an elbow, drawing out of the daze she’d been in.

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. Just kind of taking it all in. I’m really happy to be here with you guys. Thanks for everything today.” Maki smiled sincerely at the other five girls.

“Oh come on Maki! We’re not even inside yet and here you are giving speeches and thanking everyone. Let’s have some fun!”

Just then the crowd started moving forward and everyone began moving towards the entryway. Comiket day two was underway!

The first hour was spent wandering aimlessly and generally getting a feel for the convention center. This was the first time that Maki and three of the other five club members had ever been to Comiket, so the more experienced girls made sure to lead everyone else around and explain the setup.

After they’d had some fun and visited random booths, the older girls decided on a plan of action until lunch. For the next two hours they’d visit some of this year’s popular doujinshi artists in an effort to obtain some examples of popular doujinshi for this year. The idea was to attend every Comiket and create a ‘sample box’ of doujinshi that happened to be popular at the time, so that way future club members would look back at previous years with reasonable certainty about popularity trends in the doujinshi world.

Truth be told, for a club that was basically about reading doujinshi about love and drama, this was a spectacularly well thought out plan.
As they made their way from booth to booth they stopped at a smaller table with a very well drawn advertising poster hanging from the front.

_Escape, by somewodD_

It wasn’t a name that Maki recognized, but this was the booth that was being tended by the girl from last night.

Maki recognized her by looks, so she waved and spoke up. “Yo. How's it going today?”

The other girl seemed to recognize her and responded with a cute grin and a small wave back. “A lot better now, thanks.” She gave a glance to the other girls in Maki’s club. “Are these your junior club members that you were mentioning are into lascivious stories and the likes?”

Before she could answer another club member spoke up. “I’ll have you know that we’re quite pure, regardless of the stories we may read.”

“Yeah, I’m as pure as your bedroom,” Maki said, going along with the jabs.

“What you and your girlfriend do is none of my business, thank you.” one of the other members said towards Maki.

_Oh... yeah... my non-girlfriend..._

Had that club member turned her head she would have seen Maki’s face and probably would have seen the struggle Maki was having after that comment. The truth was that, even though Maki was happy to be out of the overbearing relationship with Eli, Maki wasn’t completely over Eli.

_Eli..._

Some days were better than others, to be honest. Some days she would think about Eli and the way she would so often guilt trip Maki into things because she didn’t know how else to convince the redhead to do something. Maki was glad those were gone.
But sometimes she would think about how caring Eli was whenever Maki was truly hurt, especially at the hands of someone or something else. Nobody took better care of a sick person than Ayase Eli - nobody. That warmth and protection, that need for closeness was something Maki wanted every day and even though Eli would only give it when it was needed, Maki still missed it.

All of this thinking had only made Maki more self aware of her increasingly emotional state of mind, so she slowly turned and walked towards what she thought would be the next booth.

One of the other club members noticed this and started following Maki. “Is everything alright, Nishikino-san? Hey, what’s wrong…”

By that time the entire group had begun to catch up with her and most girls were a little concerned for Maki.

“…I just need a moment, thanks. I’m fine, really.” Maki tried to compose herself.

The girl who’d made the comment caught up with her and approached Maki. “Hey Maki-chan, what’s going on? Everything alright? Did I say something I shouldn’t have, because if I did I’m really sorry.” The look on her face right now was one of true concern. She clearly had no idea about Maki’s personal life and what had transpired in Maki’s relationship as of late.

“No really, I’m fine. The truth is I… my girlfriend situation is different than it was a while ago.” Maki sighed and tried to clear her mind. “Look, if you want to ask me about it later tonight, I wouldn’t mind sharing, really. I could probably use the chat. But right now… isn’t a good time. We’re here for fun, not for serious conversations.” Maki was slowly moving back towards a good mental balance.

“And besides, now we have to finish this list of tables to hit before we get lunch! No food until we finish ladies!” Maki raised an imaginary sword as she moved the group towards the next table to buy more doujinshi.

Breaking for lunch, the girls in Maki’s doujinshi club all sat down and broke open their lunch boxes while simultaneously opening their bags of doujinshi to read while eating. It was to be a
mostly silent lunch.

They all read various copies of the books they’d bought before passing each in turn to the person on their left. Each book made its way around the group over the course of the next hour or so.

Maki had always loved romance and drama novels, but in high school Honoka had introduced Maki to the manga collection she had and Maki began to enjoy reading manga on a more frequent basis. This led to developing her own taste in the medium and that taste ended up being romance yuri, with bonus points for drama and angst.

When Maki picked up her next doujinshi she had nearly finished eating lunch, having only a single cherry tomato left in her lunch box.

Escape.

She opened the book and began to read.

Woooow. This art is really something. The detail is of professional quality, that’s for sure. And these characters are so life-like.

The characters in the doujinshi talked about where they’ll go to escape their past.

I’m sure there’s a few people I know who’d like to do the same. Maybe even me, if I’m honest.

The characters left at midnight without telling their friends or relatives.

This is some serious stuff. Heavy themes… and it feels so… real.

The characters, having discussed their betrayals in the past, got off a train in a snowy city next to the sea.

Three girls on a journey to escape their past… never wanting to be seen again.
Three girls?

The three girls found a place to live and began to release their past struggles from their hearts.

*A girl whose leadership disappeared after her parents died, a girl who left her sister out of hurt, and a girl who’s in an incestuous relationship with her sister but also with her best friend.*

The three find a place and begin a new life together.

Maki was shaking.

Maki was holding the book much tighter than she should.

Maki was breathing far too fast as she finished the doujinshi.

*No.*

*No...*

Maki finished the book and slowly turned and looked at the artist’s thanks page. It read:

“The author would like to thank: My deepest thanks to the original inspirations for this story for allowing me to draw it. You are my friends and I will love you all forever. Thank you for allowing your inspirational story to be told to the world and for coming to my home to share it.”

They went to her hometown.

*Who? Who is actually this ‘they’? I’m saying ‘they’ like I actually know... the characters in this...*
Tears were threatening to intrude upon Maki’s face.

She closed the book and looked at the cover.

A girl with medium length hair, a bit taller than the sister to her side, and a blonde looking girl on her other arm… though this was all hard to tell in black and white. But still…

*I have to know.*

“I’m going for a walk real quick. I’ll text one of you and catch up with you a bit later, okay?” Maki didn’t wait for a response, instead she put the book down and forgot about her lunchbox and moved quickly towards the booth from which she obtained the doujinshi she had just read.

At nearly a sprint, Maki tried to find the table where they’d been when they bought the doujinshi earlier. She moved in the direction of single artists and their smaller tables, choosing aisle A. Searching left and right, looking at table after tab--

*slam*

She nearly ran over someone as she was running but managed to catch the girl in her arms as she stopped quickly.

*I’m an idiot, geez. Come on, Maki. Get it together.*

“Oh my god, are you alright? I’m so sorry-- I-- I didn’t mean to hit youuuUUU oh my god it's you! You're who I’ve been looking for.”

Maki tried hard to string the correct words together but they weren’t all coming out at the right pace. Maki was flustered, a state that she wasn’t often in these days, all thanks to this story.

The cool, nerdy, cute girl that wrote *Escape* stood before Maki. “Wait, slow down for a second. First, I'm alright so no worries.” Now, second of all…”
Maki was trying not to look like an olympic runner who’d just finished a race, but the truth is that she didn’t run a whole lot these days so she was a bit out of shape to be sprinting like she was.

“...oh, hey it's you! How did you guys get on with everything today? Did you buy some good works for your club collection?” The artist looked really friendly and genuinely interested in Maki and the club.

Maki took a few deep breaths and tried to continue the conversation. “Yeah, we did. Actually, we were reading a few of them during lunch a few minutes ago. And then… I read yours.”

Oh god, what do I do now? I can’t just ask her “Hey, do you know a Honoka by any chance?” There’s got to be something to ease into that...

Suddenly, a plan occurred to Maki. “I need to ask you some questions. Also, I need to buy one of those copies. I know you're sold out so I'll pay whatever you want, even if you have to print more, I'll pay for that. But I need a copy!” Maki was bordering on fanaticism in her head and she hoped it didn’t show in her voice.

Ayako studied her for a moment but then seemed to come to a conclusion. “Okay… how about I just give you this copy.” Ayako retrieved one of the two copies from her bag and gave it to Maki.

There it is… wait… no, I need to pay her for this or something.

“Are you sure? I-- I can pay for it.”

Ayako seemed to consider an idea before finally reaching a happy conclusion and smiling as if she'd solved a puzzle. “Ah! So you must be the girl that you were talking about! You had mentioned that someone was an artist and might have questions, so this all makes more sense now. You were just trying to play coy, you little devil.” Ayako winked at Maki in a friendly way.

That’s definitely not me, that’s one of my club mates. I love doujinshi, but I’m pretty darn average as an artist. I wouldn’t try to do one of these in a million years...

“I’ll tell you what. Why don't you walk around the convention with me for a while? We can chat and you can ask me anything you want. I'll accept your time and company as payment for the book. I've got a thing for redheads anyway.” Ayako winked in a cute way that made Maki’s heart flutter
just slightly

That’s it… I can follow her around and try to get it out of her… she’s got to be willing to tell an ‘aspiring artist’ about a few of her secrets…

“Yeah… yeah, that's me. The girl with questions. Sorry for playing it off to be someone else… oh, and sorry for not introducing myself.” Maki tried to look as professional and serious as possible. A little sex appeal wouldn’t hurt either.

She composed herself and brushed her red hair behind her right shoulder. Striking violet eyes fixated themselves on Ayako's face and a slight smile graced her feminine visage.

“My name is Maki. Nice to meet you.”

*My name is Maki, and I’m going to make you give up your secrets.*

*I'm going to find Honoka.*
Chapter 10 - Convergent Lines

Comiket Day 2

Maki and Ayako began walking around the convention area and observing many of the shops, stalls, and tables scattered throughout the enormous hall. In a crowd like this it would be easy to get lost and, if you so chose, to lose others. Knowing this, Maki made an effort to move them as far away from her fellow club members as possible.

I need to be alone, to make her think only about me. I have to get her to trust me as fast as possible and to tell me everything about that doujinshi of hers.

“So,” Ayako broke up Maki’s line of thinking, “what kind of doujinshi are you into? I know you liked mine, and thanks again by the way, but what does your personal collection include?”

There were two ways to go about this for Maki. First, she could tell the truth; be completely honest with all of her likes, dislikes, personal history, everything. Then, all she’d have to do is insert her ‘aspiring artist’ schtick to make inroads into Ayako’s personal and professional world. On the other hand, she could try to paint herself as someone that Ayako would want to know; having similar but not exactly the same interests, for example.

I'm a terrible liar, though. Probably safer to just be myself and try for one small lie rather than the whole shebang.

“Well, to be honest I didn't read much manga or doujinshi until a few years ago.” Maki was
perusing a booth and trying to be a bit mysterious to the older girl who seemed to be interested in her. “A friend of mine gave me my first manga when I was a second year high schooler and I really got into it after that. Doujinshi came along later when I entered university last year.”

“So… I guess my preferences are still developing. In our club we mostly read romance and drama and angst-filled-romantic-dramas… and…” Maki was turning a faint shade of pink “...we mostly read yuri. I think I like that most, to be honest.”

Ayako couldn't help but stare at the younger girl pretending to look at a doujinshi she just found and trying to hide her blushing cheeks and keep her eyes averted from Ayako’s.

So. Freaking. Cute.

“Well, I guess we share similar tastes. Though, I can only stand so much angst and drama. After that I need some comedy or just straight up lewdness in my life.” Ayako was completely unashamed of her taste in manga and doujinshi. She knew she was kind of weird and that didn't bother her. Not to mention, putting it all out there like that allowed her to figure out if the person she was talking to really wanted to be her friend in the first place.

“Lewd, eh?” Maki was sporting an only slightly judgmental face.

“A girl can be lonely and single, can't she?” Ayako grabbed Maki by the hand and started leading her towards a different aisle. “Come on, we're going to get you something funny, something lewd, and something hilariously lewd.”

Maki tried to object. “I-I don't have much money so I don't know now if I should really…” Even as her sentence faded she knew what was about to happen.

“Don't worry, as of today I do have some money. And I like introducing people to new feelings and ideas, so think of this as a gift from a teacher to a student.” Ayako looked down at their entwined hands. “Actually, that's kind of hot.” She winked at Maki and began searching for the booth she wanted.

After an hour of walking, talking, buying, laughing, and generally having a good time, Maki was unfortunately not much closer to her goal. She had enjoyed her time spent with Ayako immensely, but every time the topic of Ayako’s personal life came up there would be a few bits of information exchanged and then the conversation would veer elsewhere.
But there was good news: Ayako did confirm some key information that led Maki to believe that the characters in Ayako’s story were totally and undeniably Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa. She found out that the characters were real and that their personalities and appearances were similar to the real people; that their relationship as a group of three was true; and that these mystery people had arrived in her hometown at the same time Honoka disappeared.

But broaching the topic of personal information was something else entirely. It was something that, if done the wrong way, would only push the girl farther away and raises suspicions as to why she was asking.

But I can't let this opportunity get away. How do I do this? God, I'm not going to break into her room and I can't…

“Maaaaan I'm tired!” Ayako stretched and gave a big yawn. “That onsen is going to feel sooooo good tonight! Are you are your lady friends still planning to bring some… ‘Tea’ into the bath with you tonight?” Ayako had a mischievous grin on her face.

……….That’s it.

“I-I think so. I was planning on doing it myself anyway.” She gave a small lie. “You know, we could all bring something and pass it around and have a really good time.”

Ayako smiled and clapped her hands three times. “Yes! That’s a great idea! Bring your favorite beverage and share with the group! Can you organize that with the club?”

“Sure, but let's make sure we meet up at a later hour so the other hotel guests are asleep and not reporting us for that breach of etiquette.”

And so I can get you drunk out of your mind.

“Okay, sounds great! So how about we split up for now so you can collect your minions and then I'll catch you at the onsen at… midnight?”

Maki nodded and gave the most genuine smile she'd given all day. “It's a date! I'm really looking
forward to drinking with you.”

_Really looking forward to it._

“Hey it's Maki! She's back!”

“Sheeeey Maki-chan, where have you been? We got worried about you.”

“Yeah, we were about to go to the lost children table and have them page you over the intercom. You left your phone!”

The bubbly club member handed Maki her phone and her lunch box she'd left on the floor earlier.

Maki stared at her club members and seemed to come to a decision.

“Girls. I need your help. I want to explain everything and I want to tell you something about my past that I've never told anyone. Will you listen to me? It might take a while and… I don't know… how well I might handle it.” Maki slowly lowered her eyes and tried to keep herself steady.

The five girls exchanged concerned glances before the bubbly one stepped forward and wrapped herself around Maki.

“If my cute kouhai, the closet tsundere Maki-chan, is asking for help then it must be serious. I'll help you with anything.”

“Me too!”

“Of course I will!”
“What do you need, senpai?”

Maki felt warm.

*It's nice to have friends.*

Gently breaking away from the hug, she crossed her arms and thought for a moment.

“What I need is three things: I need to tell you a story, I need you to do some acting, and I need you to help me get someone drunk.”

Maki looked around at the convention center. “But we'd better do all of this at the hotel, I think.”

---

**Later that night**

**Maki's hotel room**

“So that's pretty much it. Honoka went away and none of us have any idea where she went. Fast forward a few months and now here's this doujinshi. ‘Maki picked up *Escape* and waved it. ‘It's like I've been given one final chance and I can't afford to give that chance up. If not for me, then for the rest of Muse. She needs to know that we think about her, miss her, and want to just see her again, even if we're never friends again.’

After listening to Maki tell the story of Honoka and Muse, the five girls in the room with Maki were in various states of composure. The two girls younger than Maki were both sobbing silently while her fellow second years were completely engrossed in the story. Her senpai was contemplative and distant, very different from her usual bubbly personality.

She was also the first to speak up. “You know, the worst part about this story is that everyone's actions are fairly reasonable. Like, I can't blame anyone for what they did. It just sucks all around.”
“It’s true. I think that's part of what has made it so painful for me. None of this was completely the work of any one person, so we all bore equal blame. And we deserved it.” Maki laid back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

One of the younger girls ventured, “So, you said you wanted our help. How can we help with this?”

“I don’t really have a plan past tonight, but the long and short of it is this: I need to know where Ayako lives and what she does. If I have a location and a job then I can… I can do… something. I'm not sure what yet. I had this idea that I could go to that place, wherever it is, and just start looking but… now I'm not sure.”

“What if you just followed her home?” One of the other girls asked.

It was a fair question. It would really cut down on the necessary information gathering needed, but it was also pretty risky.

“But what if she lost track of the girl halfway there? Then she'd be stranded without any idea of how to find her again.” Another girl made a great point.

“How about both?” The bubbly girl was deep in thought and talking at the floor. “What if we got enough info from her tonight, like her hometown and her place of business, then you followed her home tomorrow? That way in the worst case scenario you know where her final destination would be and you could focus on getting there without worrying about losing her.”

Maki’s eyes got wider and she sat up. “That… might be the answer. I've got a week left in summer vacation. I can spend that week looking around and if I can't find her after a week, then I come home and try again some time. As many times as it takes. But at least I'll finally know where to look.”

Bubbly girl looked happy. “So now the easy part - get a girl drunk and chat her up! She's pretty cute in a geeky-older-sister kind of way anyway, so that shouldn't be a problem.”

“And I swear on my life,” Maki raised her right hand “that I will never speak of what happens in the onsen tonight. Your significant others will never know.”
All of the girls also raised their hands. “We swear” rang around the room in various ways.

“Now we wait until midnight… ugh this is going to be a long four hours.” Maki laid back down and covered her face with a pillow.

Later that night

Even though this was to be a night of inquisition, the girls in the book club were quite happy to be drinking and relaxing in the onsen. How easy of the job was this? Drink, make sure the other girl is drinking too, flirt a bit, and let Maki and their senpai ask the questions. They had decided that all of the girls being mercilessly interested in Ayako would be a bit too forward and might raise suspicions, so they left the dirty work to their senior and Maki.

Maki had decided she wouldn't drink and that every time some sake was poured into her glass she would insist on drinking with Ayako at the same time… and then conveniently miss her mouth. Clear liquid into the clear liquid bath - the perfect plan.

*May the alcohol gods forgive me. But it's for the greater good.*

The night was progressing well and everyone was drinking, relaxing, and generally having a darn good time. Everyone was chatting casually, everyone engaging each other in random conversation when Maki gave a subtle signal to the rest of the group.

They'd all agreed that at some point, when Ayako was well on the road to drunkenness, Maki would signal them and they'd slowly break into two groups - Ayako, Maki, and the club senior in one group and everyone else in the other group. The goal was to appear social but also let Ayako feel comfortable enough to share some personal information with just a small group.

*It's now or never, so let's go for it.*

One of the other girls got up to use the bathroom to the other three went with her, leaving the three
older girls in the bath alone. “We'll be back in a little while. We're gonna grab some sports drinks while we're out so we don't feel like crap tomorrow!”

“Grab one for us while you're at it!” The bubbly senpai waved at the girls leaving the room.

“You've got a nice club, you know, I mean, they're nice to look at and stuff but they're really really nice girls too, ya know?” Ayako was clearly moving from tipsy to drunk with very little to stop her. It didn't help, of course, that Maki and her senpai were refilling the poor girl’s cup at an alarming rate.

“Yeah, they're good girls. I wish my girlfriend was as nice as them… most of the time.” Maki's senpai gave a wink and took another drink herself.

“Yeah well, at least you have a girlfriend. I'm all alone in my apartment every night, except when my friends come over… like all three of them, haha!” Ayako tossed back another swig of a rather delicious sake that she'd brought from her room.

“You should try to make more friends, Ayako. You're really likable and I'm sure there's plenty of girls you'd get along with in your hometown.” Maki steered the conversation a bit.

“Nah, not a chance. I'm kind of otaku and I'd rather spend my weekend reading and drawing. Everyone in that damn town loves going out hiking and going to sports events and concerts and stuff. Though they do love drinking and that helps. Maybe I could find a nice sporty girl who's looking for a quirky housewife or something…”

Ayako leaned her head back against the wall of the bath. “I went on a blind date earlier this year around March. Ugh, that was awful. She was really nice and stuff, but we were nothing alike at all. She took me to some soccer game where she yelled her lung out and then we went out for a long bike ride along the Shinano River… the bike ride was fine but… I'm so out of shape!”

_The Shinano River. Japan's longest river... so she lives in Nagano or Niigata prefecture! Hell yes, we're making progress!_

“That's awful! I'm so sorry. What happened next as you were bicycling along the river?” trying to keep Ayako talking for as long as she could.
Let her dig her own grave.

Ayako took another sip of her sake. “It was so embarrassing to be on a bike for 15 kilometers and be sweaty and stinky and having to work had to keep up with the other girl. Although…” Ayako gained a faint blush. “… when we got to the beach she just stripped and dove right in. She said it was to clean herself off and invited me in, but I knew what it was for. It was dark and… well, we may not have gotten along on the date but afterwards was fun.”

Beach. Mouth of the river so... god I should have paid attention in geography class...

Maki’s senpai gave her the bottle of sake. “You should check out this sake, Maki. It's really good, don’t you think? Perhaps we should remember the location of the brewery and take a trip there sometime.” The bubbly girl was looking quite intensely between Maki and the bottle, hinting at something.

Maki read the bottle: Imayotsukasa brewery, Kagamigaoka, Chuo ward, Niigata city.

Niigata.

The city of Niigata.

YES, THAT’S WHERE THE SHINANO RIVER ENDS. Thank you for paying attention in social studies, senpai!

“I'll be sure to bring more of that stuff if we ever meet up again. I'm glad you girls like it, it's my favorite brewery.” Ayako was leaning dangerously and looked like she may not have a lot more in the energy tank.

Crunch time. I need her job. Now.

“Ayako, I've gotta be honest. I'd love to do doujinshi but I need to be an adult too, ya know? I just don't think there are good options for jobs that can support me while I draw. And I wish I could go to school too…” Maki was trailing off, hoping Ayako would pick up where she left off.
“Hey girl, you can do anything if you try!” Ayako nearly yelled the last few words and pointed - or tried to point in Maki's general direction. “There are plenty of jobs out there that can support you while you do everything you want to do in life. I mean, I'm doing it now ya know.”

With Ayako’s speech slurring, Maki had to make a final push and quickly. “Yeah but like… I don't know… I just can't figure out any jobs that would help me in becoming a better artist.” It was painful for Maki to lie like this and she promised herself she'd apologize profusely to Ayako one day, but it was necessary today.

“Oh come on Maki, you're smaaaaart! Think about it… w-what are you trying to make? Doujinshi! So work where there's doujinshi! That's what I did, anyway. Work for an anime and manga store or something for a while. They're niiice places.”

Almost there. Just a little more.

“Oh? I usually go to Toranoana for my manga and doujinshi. Where would you recommend?”

Ayako waved a hand frantically. “Noooo no no no, Toranoana isn't where you wanna work or shopppp. I'm biased because I work for Animate. We're rivals, ya knowwww. I can't let a cute girl like you go work for the enemy!” She stuck out her tongue and giggled drunkenly.

There it is. Animate in Niigata. God, I'm so sorry for your hangover tomorrow, Ayako.

Maki and her senpai exchanged one more glance and the bubbly girl took the hint. “Wow, I feel kinda tipsy. We should probably get out and find those girls and their sports drinks. What do you say, Ayako? I'll help you to your hotel room.”

“Aw, okay. But Maki could also go especially since she's single and you're not and I'm single and since two single people make a not single that would be great because I'm single and stuff.” Ayako pouted as she unsteadily began to climb out of the bath.

“That's exactly why I'm going and she's not. Gotta look after my kouhais, ya know?” The older girl winked at Maki who was making her way out of the tub. She mouthed towards the redhead Good luck.

With a smile she was off, collecting her things and going to her hotel room to pack up and sleep.
I need to sleep for tomorrow so I can wake up before Ayako and follow her to the station. I'll pack everything and... god there's so much to carry.

When she got back to her room, she noticed that her two roommates were asleep and that they left a note for her. “Maki - don't worry about anything other than your clothes. We'll take care of everything else. Go wherever it is you're going, we'll be waiting for you when you get back.”

She had the best friends in the world. With that off her mind, she slipped into bed and set an alarm to wake up at 7am, three hours before the checkout deadline. Just in case.

Ayako, I'm sorry that I'll be stalking you tomorrow. I'm sorry again for the hangover you're going to have in the morning. And most of all, I'm sorry for when you see my face at your front door. I swear, it wasn't you who broke your friends’ trust.

It was me.

Maki woke up at 7, took a quick shower, then got ready to leave. She was about to place a letter in one of her clubmates bags when she heard a gentle knock on the door. Making her way over to the door she opened it and saw her senpai standing there in her pajamas.

“Morning sleepyhead.” Maki said in jest.

“Hey. I just wanted to make sure you were away and okay.” The usually bubbly girl wiped her eyes. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Maki looked at the letter in her hand. She'd written it last night and was about to entrust it with her kouhais... however...

“Yeah, there is.” Maki held out the letter. “This is a letter to my ex girlfriend. Don't worry, it's nothing sensitive and if you read it I wouldn't be upset. You know most of the backstory anyway. Her address is on the front, but I'd like someone to actually hand it to her since I can't. It would
mean a lot to me if you would deliver it to her. She doesn't live terribly far from campus and if you need train fare I can--"

The girl grabbed the envelope and hugged Maki. “Of course I'll take it for you. Stop worrying about the small things. Friends do small things for free, okay?” She let go of Maki and moved away from the door.

“Honoka's not here; she's somewhere out there. So… what are you waiting for?”

Maki nodded and grabbed her bag. “I want to buy everyone dinner when I get back. At least let me do that?”

“Fine, but only if you come back with good news.” The girl winked and waved at Maki to get going.

Maki made her way downstairs and went out the front door of the hotel. She found a cafe nearby the hotel with a good view of the front door, so she sat and ordered a coffee and waited for Ayako to wake up and leave.

After an hour and a half, around 9am, Ayako walked out of the hotel lobby with her suitcase in tow. For as much as she drank the night before she looked relatively good, though the sports drink in her right hand implied otherwise. Maki settled in about 50 meters behind the girl and followed her the kilometer from the hotel to Shibuya station.

They entered the station and Maki saw Ayako make her way through the entrance to the Toei Subway station at Shibuya. Down the stairs to the station platforms they went, Maki lagging behind safely. They boarded the next train for Ueno station and rode it with Maki just one train car behind Ayako.

Now came the really difficult part. Maki had to exit the Ueno subway station and enter the Ueno Japan Rail station. On top of that, she needed to buy a ticket for the same train that Ayako would leave on and it could be any of the next three trains. Too early and she's have to wait in Niigata station, which could cause any number of problems and would significantly increase her chances of being caught. Too late and Ayako would be lost for the day and Maki would have to try to find her at her workplace the next day - a very dangerous proposition. She needed to be able to corner Ayako at home.
Maki was straining to see screen of Ayako’s ticket vending machine but was unable to see the two buttons at the bottom. Fortunately, she knew that train times were listed from the soonest at the bottom so she’d be able to make an educated guess about whatever Ayako chose.

Ayako made her way to the ticket machine and studied the schedule. She looked thoughtful for a moment before checking her phone for the time. With a shrug, she pushed a button.

*It must be the next train or the train after because I didn’t see the button she pushed…*

Maki had intentionally decided to wait in line for a different machine near Ayako’s and turned away as soon as she learned what she could. Ayako stepped away and a few moments later it was Maki’s turn to buy tickets.

*The next train or the one after… the next train would guarantee me seeing her, but it could be risky and I’d have a good chance of being caught. The later train is high risk high reward because I could miss her entirely or follow her perfectly.*

Maki thought about Ayako and the little she knew about the girl.

*She seems to takes things easy and not too seriously. She wouldn't want to be pressed to get on a train in 20 minutes when she could take the next one in 50 minutes…*

With that, Maki chose the second train, leaving at 12:45pm, and hoped for the best.

---

**Several hours later**

**Elsewhere in Tokyo**

The doorbell rang.
There was nothing particularly odd about Eli's doorbell ringing as she occasionally had friends and classmates over for various reasons, but usually she would remember inviting someone over on a weekday.

*I guess I have been a little out of sorts in the last month or two... ever since...*

She got off the couch and put on a shawl to make herself slightly more presentable, then opened the front door.

Standing in front of her was an average height girl with an air of happiness about her. She stood there, her hands clasped in front of her holding a piece of paper of some sort.

“Can I help you?” Eli wasn't used to strangers at her front door, living in a part of town that was a little off the beaten path, so she was caught off guard a bit.

“Hello. I'm... well, that's not important really. I'm here to give you something. It was given to me by a friend and she told me to hand it to you and only you. She said you'd understand.” The girl reached out with the letter in hand as she said all of this with a bubbly air to her voice.

Eli slowly reached out and took the letter, turning it over to see--

Maki's handwriting!

“Where did you--” Eli started, but the girl was already turning around to walk away. “Hey, I need to ask you about Maki! Wait a second!”

The girl took a few steps away from Eli before the stopped for a moment and turned around to face Eli. “I'm not Maki. I can't answer questions about her. Maybe she wants to answer your questions in due time; when she wants to answer them, not when you want the answers.” She pointed to the letter. “That's more than you've had from her in a long time, if I'm not mistaken. Why don't you start with that? Maybe it'll answer some of your questions.”

With that, the girl quickly turned and walked away from the house toward the main road. Eli could only stand and stare at the girl as she walked away.
“Thank you!” Eli finally yelled and bowed deeply, feeling genuinely appreciative of the girl delivering the letter. The other girl turned just enough to make eye contact and nod at Eli.

Eli made her way back into her apartment and sat down on the couch, her hands trembling with the letter held between both hands. She saw the front of the letter and reread it.

For Eli, from Maki

She took a deep breath and slowly opened the envelope. Pulling out the letter, she opened the two pages contained within and began to read.

Eli,

I'm sorry. When I left you I did so without any warning. Whether or not that was fair to you is something I didn't take into account. I ask your forgiveness for the way in which I handled the situation.

But I cannot apologize for the action itself. I know we've recently exchanged messages about that day from time to time, but you need to know that it isn't something I regret. My life has regained a feeling of positivity and self identity that I didn't have back then.

Actually, for those reasons I have to say thank you. Thank you for not endlessly searching for me and hounding me about it. Thank you for letting me live on my own and in my own way. Whether it was intentional or not, you gave me the space I needed to be able to love myself again. I respect and owe you for that.

I don't hate you, Eli. In fact, I love you. I just don't know if I love you the way I used to.

I don't know if we should try again. I don't know if we should stay apart forever. I don't know if there's something in between. I don't know anything. That's why I want to reconnect with you sometime in the coming weeks. I want to see you, talk to you, and find out if what we had could be salvaged… or if we should each try again with someone else.

As Eli turned to the next page she could feel herself losing control. She wiped tears from both of her eyes before she continued to read.
With that in mind, I want you to start by reconnecting with all of the former Muse members. I know you chat with Umi and Kotori from time to time, but I want us all to come together and talk through the past so we can get over it and move on. We need to find those carefree, child like feelings we once had together.

As you read this I'm on a train out of Tokyo and I'll be gone for a while. I wanted to tell you what I'm doing and to not just disappear like Honoka did many months ago. I won't tell you where I'm going, but you deserve to know that I'm leaving. And I hope, if things go right, I can come back with a clear head and an open heart.

In the last few days I've learned a few things, but the most important thing is this: I think I know where Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa are. And I'm going to find them.

I'm going partly for my own sake and partly for the sake of Muse. I want to know if Honoka is gone forever or if we can all come together again in the future. I want to know if Yukiho is following her sister in her journey or if she wants to start her own life. And I want to see Arisa. I want to find the sister you love and care for. I'm going to tell her you love her and that no matter how many times you argue and fight, that you will never stop loving her.

I'm going to find them and even if they don't come back, I want to make sure they are truly happy… because… I believe that's what's most important. If they're happy but we can never be friends again, I'll be content knowing at least they're happy.

I will come back. I promise. Wait for me. Hope for us.

With love,

Maki

Somewhere in the middle of the second page Eli stopped crying. Her heart felt a thousand feelings, most of which she didn't understand yet. But her love had spoken to her. Maki reached out and told Eli all that was on her mind. She comforted Eli, told her harsh truths, and didn't make any excuses.

And then that last part… so she found Honoka, huh… I don't know why, but if anyone could have done it it would have been Maki. I hope she's right.
Eli set down the letter and went to the kitchen to pour herself some tea. On her way there she saw her cell phone on the counter and stopped. She thought about Maki’s letter and sighed. *Maybe I should do what she tells me for once.*

Picking up the phone she dialed a number.

“Hi, Umi. It's Eli.”

The blue haired girl on the other end of the line sounded surprised. “Eli! You called me-- I mean, I'm glad you called me. It's… it's really nice to hear you. I'm happy.”

Eli leaned on the counter. “Yeah… I'm glad I'm calling people too. But hey, I have something important to talk with you about and I'd like it if we could gather as many of the Muse members as possible. Can you help me, please?”

A short pause was followed by “O-of course, Eli! I'm free tomorrow and I know Kotori is as well. We'll find a way to set something up, okay? Leave it to me.”

Eli smiled for the first time in a while. “Thanks, Umi. You're the best.”

---

**Niigata**

**Two hours after Maki left Tokyo**

Maki guessed wrong.

She went up to the platform ahead of time in order to watch out for Ayako. It was risky, but she made sure to put on some sunglasses and a sun hat in an attempt to appear unrecognizable but not too suspicious.
In the end, she watched helplessly as Ayako boarded the train immediately before hers.

_Dammit._

Maki took out her cell phone and began to do research. She knew that Ayako worked at an Animate in Niigata, so she'd have to find out which one it was and go from there. Worst case, she could wait in front of a store tomorrow morning before it opens and then go from there.

Finally, Maki got lucky.

_There's only one Animate in Niigata!_

This came as an immense relief to the redhead. She wouldn't have to camp outside a host of stores over the course of a week to find the girl she was looking for. Just one store in one city. She could do this.

With a small smile she got up from the bench and walked to a convenience store to buy some snacks for the train journey that would begin shortly.

_To the west coast we go._

---

_Niigata Station_

_Three hours later_

If this was indeed the place Honoka and the others had chosen to live, they chose a good city. Maki had never been a fan of summer and much preferred a cool fall afternoon. She tended to stay inside during the summer and read a lot, so being in a city a bit farther north made this mid-August afternoon tolerable; a fair 25 C, rather than the stifling 32 C in Tokyo.
Making her way out of the station she checked the map on her phone and found the Animate. Being only a 10 minute walk from the station, she decided to go ahead and scout out the store before she got down to business tomorrow. Nobody in their right mind would be ambitious enough to go to work after sitting on a train for two hours and simultaneously suffering from a hangover, so Maki felt no fear in giving the store a quick look over.

She walked down a few backstreets just in case, turning twice before reaching the Animate store. She walked into the three story building and took the stairs up to the second floor. Losing herself for a moment, she started perusing the magazine rack and checking out this month’s manga collections.

Finally coming to her senses, she started looking around the store and memorizing the layout. There were no stairs other than the ones she came up and there appeared to be no other entry to the staircase other than the door she came through. One way in and one way out. This would be a great help in cornering Ayako when she made her appearance.

Maki was walking back towards the entrance to walk down the stairs and check out the outside when she glanced at the checkout counter.

Honoka.

Maki immediately thrust herself behind a shelf and stared at the books in front of her. It didn’t matter that they were. Nothing mattered because of what she just saw - who she just saw.

Honoka.

She was there. She also worked at this store? She and Ayako worked together! Which means that if they work together then Ayako definitely knows where Honoka lives and…

They might go to work together in the morning or walk home together at night. So I would never be able to see Ayako without also seeing Honoka too…

Panic began to grip Maki.

Oh god, what am I doing here…
Maki was feeling overcome from just seeing her fellow Muse member for the first time in half a year. Things were starting to come apart.

Why did she come here? What is the real purpose of seeing Honoka, or Yukiho, or Arisa? Will she actually be of any help to Muse or to Honoka? Will seeing Maki only bring back the worst memories of Honoka’s life?

Maki needed to leave. Now.

She peeked around the corner and saw Honoka helping a customer check out. She waited until Honoka turned around to grab something and then suddenly, but without running, Maki made a break for the door.

She nearly ran down the stairs, then scampered through the front door and back out into the parking lot which occupied the first floor of the building. She walked out from under the building and onto the street sidewalk. She took a few deep breaths, unsuccessfully trying to calm herself down. In an effort to help this out she leaned up against the building, slumping down into a ball and wrapping her arms around her knees.

Tears were coming.

*She was here. All this time, Honoka was here. This place… in some random city in Japan… living a life of her own…*

*I wasn’t ready for this…*

“Holy shit, Maki.”

Maki knew that voice. It wasn’t a voice she wanted to hear because with that voice, her entire poorly thought out plan completely vanished in an instant.

“Maki… what are you doing here?”
Maki looked up with tears in her eyes, desperately trying not to cry.

And failing.

“A-Ayako… I… I-aaahhh… I’m here… I just… … oh… oh god…”

Impossible.

This whole situation was impossible. To speak her mind right now was impossible.

So she quit trying and cried. Sobbing into her knees, she let it go.

“No, Maki, sweetie you can’t do this here. Come on.” Ayako grabbed the redhead by her arms and forced her to her feet. “I live just a few buildings down from here. Let’s go.”

Not giving her any choice on the matter, Ayako grabbed Maki by the shoulder and walked her towards the apartment building. Maki, crying for most of the journey there, barely noticed where they were going and just let herself be guided.

They rode the elevator up to the 9th floor of the building and entered Ayako’s apartment. Maki was led to the couch in the center of the living room where she was told to sit. Ayako sat next to her and then gently pulled Maki’s head into her lap, letting the younger girl lay out on the couch.

Ayako gently stroked Maki’s hair for a while until she completely calmed down. She didn’t say anything until she was absolutely sure Maki had calmed down and could think clearly.

“Maki… I have to know the truth about why you’re here. And… about you. I promise I won’t get angry and judge you, but I need to know everything.” Ayako sighed. “I don’t know why I had a bad feeling about waking up this morning, but I guess… well, here we are.”

Maki wiped her eyes and sat up. “I’m… sorry… for everything. I lied to you and… I used you and I shouldn’t have. I just needed to know where you lived.”
Ayako raised an eyebrow. “I’m flattered, but I didn’t think you were that interested in me, to be honest.”

Maki let out an ironic chuckle. “I’m not, actually. I mean, you’re really pretty and I like you I… I like you as a person and that’s why it hurt to lie to you. So… what I mean is, I was interested in you for what you knew. To be precise, who you knew. Who you still know.”

Maki looked away for a moment before making a push. “You work with Honoka.”

The color drained from Ayako’s face. Comprehension slowly gathered in her mind as a million questions raced and fought against each other for an exit.

Maki tried to intervene. “I came here looking for her. I needed to find her and i’m sure you know why. But… now that I’m here… now that I accidentally saw her already - saw her happily working away in that store - I’m not sure I even want to see her any more.”

That wasn’t what Ayako expected. “Wait… are you part of the group that Honoka and the girls were running away from? The school idol group? You’re a central part of Honoka’s past life that she tried to get away from?”

“Yes.” Maki decided to take responsibility.

Ayako pressed on. “And you’re one of the ones that went through with that awful plan at the concert that basically tore Honoka to shreds emotionally.”

“Yes.” Maki was hurting again.

“And you figured out Honoka was here just by instinct from my doujinshi?”

“Yes.” Maki was falling apart.

“And you went through all of that bullshit at Comiket and the hotel just to come and find and see Honoka?”
“...yes.” Maki could only lower her eyes and remember to breathe.

Ayako suddenly grabbed the redhead by her chin and forced Maki’s eyes to lock with her own.

With a force Maki didn’t expect, Ayako raised her voice like a scolding mother. “And now that you’re finally here - you went through all of that shit to get here just to see her or to apologize or to beg forgiveness or to say hello or SOMETHING… and now you’re not sure if you even want to see her?”

Ayako cupped Maki’s face with both hands. “Have you lost your damn mind?”

Wait… what… ?

What is she… saying… ?

Maki was scared. Not of Ayako, though her intensity would scare anyone in the same situation. Maki now realized just how scared she was of meeting Honoka again and finding out… anything. Maki was afraid of everything.

She was afraid of rejection...

...of hate...

...and of finality.

In this current purgatory between friendship and distrust she didn’t have to risk the danger of knowing which way Honoka felt. She couldn’t dare to desire the reward because she couldn’t bear to suffer the emotional consequences.

“Why are you here?” Ayako continued staring at the girl in front of her, though her hands had left Maki’s face and made their way to her shoulders.
“If you’re here to ask forgiveness, okay. If you’re here to say goodbye, okay. Your reasons for being here don’t matter; it only matters that you actually know why you’re here. You won’t gain anything from anyone until you know that.”

She was right and Maki knew it, too. Maki needed to figure it out and she needed to figure it out fast.

She put her hands on her face and leaned forward. “What should I do…”

Ayako looked up and then down again and sighed. “You should stay here.”

“That… wasn’t the answer I was expecting… or asking for.” Maki looked inquisitively at the older, black haired girl.

“I know Honoka. I know how loving and loyal she is. If Honoka considered you a friend at any point, I don’t think she chose wrong. She can make some bad decisions but from what I know about her I don’t think she’s ever chosen a bad friend. It’s one of the reasons I work so hard to be loyal to her and those girls… to deserve that trust…”

Ayako stood up and paced slowly. “You know the Honoka of high school and her past life, but I know the Honoka of the last six months and her new life. And based on the Honoka I know, I think her loyalties to anyone would never waver unless someone was guilty of something truly despicable.”

Maki sat back on the couch. “What we did was pretty awful. I wouldn’t be surprised if she never wanted to see us again.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Scratching her head, Ayako considered this. “But that’s not for you or I to decide. All we can do is show her is that the girl you are now is different from the girl you were then; just like she’s trying so hard to be the new Honoka, you’re a new Maki.”

Maki looked puzzled. “What do you mean ‘show her’?”

Ayako stopped pacing. “Stay here. Stay here for a day or two and let’s figure this all out. I know where Honoka lives and, if you want, I’ll lead you there.”
“Actually,” Ayako faced Maki with the look of a parent preparing to give an ultimatum, “I’ll bring her here to my apartment. But ONLY if you figure out what you want from her. Otherwise, you’d only hurt the girls, yourself, and… you’d destroy my friendship with all three of them.”

Maki thought for a moment. It was a serious proposition and one she couldn’t take lightly. But at least in the meantime she’d have a friend to talk it all over with and a roof over her head for two days.

Ayako stared at Maki with a serious face but inside she was pleading with any spirit that would listen. Do it Maki… please do it for Honoka… neither of you deserve to feel like this any more…

“Alright. I’ll stay.”
Chapter 11 - Parallel Postulate

The next morning

Maki didn't sleep well. Having grown up in a family of doctors came with certain privileges, such as having comfortable over-sized beds her entire life. She hardly ever slept on futons and even in her single occupancy dormitory she had the pleasure of a full-size bed. As a consequence, the nights she actually did sleep on futons were filled with tossing and turning.

Though, to be fair, this night was one that would cause anyone stress. She had basically run away from home with little to no planning, hoping to find the answers as she went along in a city that was over 300 kilometers from her on-campus dormitory. What she was going to do when she got there and what her actual purpose for going was were things she hadn't fully considered.

But something drove her to a goal that she wasn't fully aware of. At the end of this journey from one coast the the other was something she desired - needed, even. She'd gone on this journey basically on a whim and even though she had a breakdown along the way last night, some part of her already felt a little better about everything.

In the letter that Maki had written Eli she wrote about wanting to make sure that the three girls were safe and happy. The visual realization that Honoka had been in this place all along had hit Maki like a train, but even if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes - even if she'd only received a letter from Honoka herself saying that everything was okay - that alone might have made Maki feel like their friend wasn't completely lost in the world and that somehow she'd be okay.

So in the end, Maki had already accomplished something. Her feelings of guilt had been partially assuaged and, if necessary, she could conceivably go home right now and share the news. She
found them. They're fine. Let's move on.

But Ayako’s insistence that she stay and see the girls was… surprising. Actually, it was staggering. By her own words, if Honoka or Arisa or Yukiho somehow found out that Ayako had led Maki to them, regardless of her intentions Ayako would be in serious danger of losing her three young friends. And even worse, especially for Maki, after that happened the cycle might just begin again in a new town, in a new time, with new problems.

That couldn't happen. Maki couldn't lose them again, not when it was entirely up to her whether or not they would run again. No, this time she'd stand up to them and force the issue.

Somehow.

Maki rolled over to her right shoulder only to find a pair of dark brown eyes partially hidden by strands of long, black hair staring right back at her.

“Good morning, Maki. I'd ask you how you slept, but judging by the look on your face I think I know the answer already.” Ayako was lying on her left shoulder in her own futon just to the right of Maki.

She sat up and stretched, her pastel blue nightgown rising up to reveal the pale white skin on her lower back. Maki's eyes were wandering and she caught herself thinking about the past.

*I never got to see this side of Eli. I always woke up before her and whenever she woke up before me she was about as cute as an ogre with a hangover. She walked to the bathroom like one, too.*

Maki couldn't help but smile just slightly. Ayako took notice and gave a sly grin. “Oh, so you're a morning girl when it comes to those kinds of thoughts, eh?”

Fortunately it was kind of dark in the room so Ayako couldn't see the cayenne red color racing across Maki's face. Even so, she rolled away from Ayako just in case

“I was thinking n-nothing of the sort, thank you. As if anyone would find you cute, hmph.”
As soon as those words left her mouth she immediately felt some regret. This entire journey was a result of being too careless with words and yet here she was, acting like some high school tsundere without a care for any of the consequences.

_Dammit, I'm an idiot._

Maki rolled back over to apologize to Ayako.

“Ayako, I'm so--”

As she rolled onto her back Maki found herself immediately under a lot of pressure, as if there was a body holding her down, and she was physically unable to say a word.

“Stop.”

Ayako was straddling Maki’s waist and had her right hand over Maki’s mouth. Maki began to struggle a bit which only caused Ayako to use her other hand to grab Maki’s right wrist and pin it to the floor above the red haired girl’s head. Releasing her hand from Maki’s mouth, Ayako grabbed Maki’s other wrist and moved it next to the other wrist above her head.

Ayako’s face was hovering inches from Maki’s face. Maki could feel the heat emanating from Ayako’s breath and she slowly inhaled and exhaled. While the older girl’s breathing was slow and steady, Maki’s was rapidly picking up speed and she stared into the deep brown eyes that were invading her mind.

_W-w-what did I do?!? Oh my god..._

“Maki. Did you mean what you said?”

Maki was having difficulty with… well, everything. Breathing, thinking, speaking. Everything was a blur right now.

“Maki. Did you mean what you said? Answer me.”
Maki barely shook her head. “No…… n-no I--”

“Then why would you say it?” Ayako’s words were intimidatingly smooth and calm.

“I d-don't kn--”

Ayako pulled Maki’s wrists down to her sides. She forced Maki’s hands under her own back and then moved herself up farther on Maki’s chest, effectively pinning Maki while leaving her own hands free. She leaned down, bracing herself with her left and placing her right hand on Maki’s cheek, caressing it gently.

“We're going to be spending a lot of time together today, aren't we babe. So let's lay down the ground rules for the next 24 hours or so, shall we?”

Maki could barely believe what was happening.

“Maki, I have one rule for the two of us today - we must always say what we mean and nothing else. We're going to be alone in this apartment for the rest of the day to think through this situation together, but if you lie to me or even if you don't tell the whole truth… it's going to be a waste of our time. And it'll be dangerous, given the stakes. I want to help you and if I'm going to do that I need to know that you're always being honest and saying what you truly feel. Don't tell me what I want to hear, tell me what's real.”

“Give me blunt truths, nothing else.”

She had a point. Maki had a tendency to put on a face when she was confronted by difficult situations and this one would be particularly difficult. She needed to grow up today. Fast.

“The same goes for me, so I'll prove that I'm willing to do what I'm asking of you,” Ayako offered.

Ayako once again covered Maki’s mouth with her hand, but this time she drew her lips close and pressed them forward, kissing the back of her own hand. After a few moments she drew back.
“Maki, you're adorable. I know that some of what you did with me in Tokyo was an act and that you were trying to get something out of me. I know you probably mixed a few exaggerations with your truths in order to talk with me... but I don't care. I had so much fun talking with you and being around you those two days. You're cute and confident and driven... but shy... and I'm kinda crushing on you.”

Oh great, as if it wasn't hard enough to breathe with a girl straddling her, now she was being pseudo-confessed to?! What the hell is going on?!

“I also know about your recent breakup... one of the girls in the onsen at the hotel mentioned it. She told me not to hurt you or be a jerk or something. I know your emotions are probably in a haze right now between Honoka and your girlfriend situation. Most of all, I know you're here for something other than me. I know you're going through an emotional struggle.”

“So I mean all of this: I intend to focus on nothing other than the relationship between you and those three women we both love so much. I'll tell you everything about their time here and I want you to do the same for me. Tell me everything from your perspective. Let's find a way to end this game of hide and seek together.”

Ayako sat up and removed herself from the younger girl and slowly stood. Maki removed her arms from under her back and sat up cross legged. She looked up at the black haired girl standing in front of her.

Ayako crossed her arms and softened her gaze. “And when we’re finished, when everything has settled down, let’s you and I have a drink together and become friends. Hopefully with them, yeah?”

Ayako sure did know how to push another girl’s buttons in all the right ways. It was scary.

“I promise I'll try. I promise.”

Ayako smiled. “That's good enough for me.”

“But, right now I could use a shower.” Maki, too, started to stand.

“Oh trust me, I know.”
“HEY.”

“We're saying what we mean today, remember?”

A pillow flew across the room.

Ayako and Maki spent the better part of the day sitting around and talking about the three girls that were, unbeknownst to Maki, living directly below them. They didn’t go out for fear of the off chance that they’d encounter the girls. Maki agreed to this on the grounds that, though there was an infinitesimal chance of this, the chance still existed. Ayako suggested this on the grounds that the girls were far closer to them than she would ever admit to Maki and the chance of seeing any of the three was probably higher than not.

Instead, Ayako ordered delivery for lunch, making sure to order hefty portions so they could eat the same thing for dinner. They settled on a delivery bento service and ordered some huge plates of tonkatsu and fried rice.

After lunch they got down to business. Maki suggested she tell her side of the story first so as not to have her own memories affected by new information. Maki started talking about the days before and after the death of Honoka and Yukiho’s parents and the effects it had on the group of friends. She tried to include all of the relevant details about Honoka’s attitude towards her while she was grieving and going to school in order to graduate. She told what she knew about Arisa joining the two sisters to make a polyamorous relationship and the denial the Eli displayed when talking to her sister.

Then she retold the story about the Love Live! reunion concert. She recounted the details of the minutes leading up to the show and how Eli had introduced her idea to the group with such confidence and fervor… only to have the entire plan blow up a few days later when she went to the Kousaka residence and was turned away. Not to mention having her own little sister effectively disavow their familial relationship.

She explained everything she knew about the night when the three girls actually left the city. She talked about the meetings and discussions the girls had had intermittently during the following days and how she seemed to be the only one who had an attitude of ‘well that figures’ as opposed
to the others wanting to run off into the middle of nowhere to find them. The idea of young adult
girls with such trying life experiences running away from home without a plan was ridiculous to
her.

Finally, Maki explained just how spur-of-the-moment everything was with Ayako. She recalled all
of the events that occurred during the weekend at Comiket and how she slowly came to the
realization of what she was reading when she read Ayako’s doujinshi. And then the train ride
followed by the encounter with Honoka at Animate… and now here.

“It’s interesting, ya know.” Ayako stood up and went to the fridge to grab some more tea for the
two of them. “A vast majority of your story lines up with Honoka’s side of it. In fact, I’d venture to
say that you two see the whole situation with pretty much the same perspective.”

This perplexed Maki. “So what you’re saying is that after all that, after almost three years of angst,
the two of us have the same mindset about the whole thing?”

“I said nothing of the sort.” Ayako handed a bottle of tea to Maki. “I said you have the same
perspective about it. You see the past much in the same way that Honoka and Yukiho and Arisa
do. Factually, the four of you are on the same page. It seems to me that’s a good thing.”

“I’m not sure I follow.” Maki opened the bottle and took a swig.

“The problem here is that, aside from the action of Eli saying what she did at the concert, the
actions taken by everyone aren’t inherently wrong. It wasn’t wrong for all of you to try to make up
with her the way you did. It wasn’t wrong to slowly reach out to her; it wasn’t wrong for the three
of them to shut themselves away from you; it wasn’t wrong for them to run away; and it wasn’t
wrong for you to seek them out.”

Ayako pointed vaguely in the direction of Tokyo. “There’s a girl 300km away who made a truly
awful decision and made the biggest mistake she’s likely to make in her life. It sucks and there’s no
way to get around that, but nothing else anyone did was wrong.”

“It’s what wasn’t done that’s the problem.”

Maki tried to talk out her thoughts in order to understand. “We did everything right… so then, we
just didn’t do it at the right time? Like, we should have left her alone when we apologized. We
should have been quiet when we were talking. We should have gone to her when we didn’t.”
Basically, we got everything backwards. The actions themselves weren't wrong, but the timing was… I think I see what you're getting at…”

Ayako nodded. “From my perspective, that’s how I see it. It’s not exact science that everything was reversed, but that’s the gist of it. As a result, the two groups of you grew apart because everything you did to each other was, because of timing, almost the worst thing that could happen. Even those three girls - they know how Muse is. They know that the members of Muse would go to hell and back for each other. They should have known the eight of you would go out of your ways to check in and they should have communicated that better with you, but somehow it never happened. It seems like only at the end, right before they left, did some of Muse begin to understand that their timing was off. By then it was too late.”

“And intent means nothing without results.” Maki leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes. “Actions don’t matter if you have nothing to show for it. All of these actions… all of these attempts to do something positive and yet nothing really came of it. I can’t help but feel this situation would have been inevitable unless we did the exact right things at the exact right time.”

“And that’s different from the rest of our lives how, exactly?” Ayako crossed her arms and leaned against the wall while sitting on the floor. “If one thing hadn’t gone as well as it did last weekend, would you be here? If you had chosen a different hotel for your club to stay in last weekend, would you be here? If you’d gone to a different university last year, would you be here?”

“Once again, it’s not about what you did. It’s about what you didn’t do. You’ve got to realize that, Maki.”

Maki slammed a fist on the arm of the couch. “I do, Ayako! But every time we did something it was wrong. Now I’m here again, guessing about what I should do next. How do I know that what I’m going to do next is right or wrong? If I don’t know, isn’t it better to do something I know and am more comfortable with? Or just not do it… at all…” Maki was becoming quite aware of her own words.

“See? You’ve become accustomed to the vicious cycle. You do something - it’s wrong - you want to do something else - second guess your new idea - revert to something familiar because it makes you feel better - you do something similar to what you did before - it’s wrong.”

It made simple sense and that’s what made it both sad and irritating to Maki. She stood up, squeezing the helpless plastic tea bottle in her right hand. She went over to the window and stared outside at the sun-filled western sky. So they’d overthought everything from day one, huh?
Well, given that’s what Eli did to begin with… I guess it makes a stupid kind of sense. Thinking too much with your mind while trying to understand someone's heart. People’s feelings aren’t a puzzle to be decoded or a map you have to read, they’re like a piece of music that can be expressed and interpreted in a million ways.

Maki looked down and turned around to face the room. “She needs to know that we finally understand… doesn’t she? She needs to see that I understand everything we’ve done to her and that I’m sorry for it. We don't need to push her forward, she needs to take that step herself.”

Ayako gave a small hum of agreement. “You're probably right. And she needs to know that you’re willing to suffer in your own way… well, maybe ‘suffer’ is the wrong word here…”

Ayako took a sip of tea and seemed to have clearer idea of what to say. “In life, if you think you did something wrong and you turn yourself in for it, you’re showing that you're willing to suffer the consequences, right? You must be, otherwise you wouldn't have admitted your crime. So basically, if Honoka sees that you’re willing to ‘turn yourself in’ then maybe - just maybe - she’d be willing to at least start over with you. Maybe she could begin to trust you again.”

“That's… ahhhh the word ‘maybe’ is rearing its ugly head a lot here.” Maki walked over and sat back down on the couch. “There's a lot more uncertainty in this than I usually care to have in my life.”

“Oh don't worry, there's more where that came from.” Ayako gave a small sarcastic smile. “There are three girls in that relationship. What if one of them doesn't want to forgive you? The dynamic between the girls is going to be very, very complicated and if one of them is different from the others, we might have another relationship issue on our hands.”

“Maybe Arisa really wants to go make up with her sister but the other two want to stay here. Maybe Yukiho realizes she was just going along with her sister the entire time and wants to make her own way in life. Maybe Honoka has a change of heart but the other two are happier in their new life here. Worst of all, maybe Honoka can't forgive you but the other two want to.” Ayako put her hands up in surrender. “Maki, this could split them. Forever.”

Ordinarily, hearing apocalyptic possibilities revolving around the relationships of her friends would have driven her to tears, but Maki had endured this conversation for hours and there was very little that could phase her anymore. And probably very few tears she could cry.

Lucky for me, I guess.
“Ayako, all of this is not very reassuring, you know. And it certainly doesn't make me feel any better.”

“Good, it shouldn't. It's not supposed to. This city is their sanctuary - their secret hideaway. They came here half a year ago to start a new life and, for all intents and purposes, they've succeeded. They have jobs, schedules, responsibilities, they're starting to make friends, and most of all they seem happy.”

Ayako stood up from the floor and sat down on the couch next to Maki. “This is their sanctuary and by merely knocking on the door you're letting them know that they've been discovered. Even if it's by one person, even if it's by the most liked person they know, someone knows about them. And that's dangerous. That's when they start to think again - fight or flight?”

Maki closed her eyes and let everything fade to gray for a moment.

All of these possibilities, some of them good, some of them neutral, and a lot of them bad; they appeared in Maki's mind like a giant tree branching from the moment Maki chose to knock on that door. Which branch would she choose?

*Fight or flight.*

*Huh. That would be different.*

“You know, I think I understand… life in general a lot better now.”

“How’s that, Maki?”

“Every decision I make has a million possibilities. None are black and none are white. Some are right, some are wrong, some are both. Aristotelian logic can't truly explain the outcome of a problem or situation in this world. In the same way, it cannot accurately define the way I actually make my decision in those situations.”

Ayako squinted a bit. “Look, babe, I'm gonna be completely honest here. I go to a college where people learn to make funny pictures for a living and I was really crap at philosophy in high school,
so can I have the talking-to-a-12-year-old version of that sentence?”

Maki started twirling her hair. “A tree is a tree. It is not a cat. A cat is a cat. Everything about it is cat-like. It cannot possibly be two things at once, like a cat and a tree - this Aristotelian logic. Yet here we are, both of us suggesting that apologizing to Honoka is the best thing to do for me and our friends while also admitting that it could ruin her relationship with those two girls. It's good and bad. It's morally wrong and morally acceptable. My solution is also a problem - both things at the same time.”

“So you want to avoid it, just in case?”

“No. Not any more.” Maki looked at Ayako with a strong gaze. “I'm done doing the same things over and over again. I have to change my actions. I have to throw myself at her mercy, to give her the choice for a change. Eight girls in Tokyo miss the leader that brought us all together with her energy and passion. We're also missing that girl’s supportive and enthusiastic sister. On top of that Eli is missing her sister! That's why I have to do this, despite how much I may try to talk myself out of it.”

“Okay, Maki. Then we're doing this.”

“Yeah….. we're doing this.”

Ayako stood up and walked to the kitchen and removed a bottle from the refrigerator. She reached into the nearby shelves and withdrew two small cups.

“Well, I have two bits of good news for you, Maki.”

“Hit me.”

Ayako tossed a cup at Maki who fortunately dropped it on the couch rather than the floor.

“That's not what I meant and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ayako plopped herself next to Maki and opened the bottle, pouring herself and Maki
a bit of sake.

“Good news number one: Yukiho, Arisa, and Honoka come over here every other Thursday night for dinner. Guess what tomorrow is?”

“It’s Wednesday, actually.”

“Precisely! This week we moved the day up so we can chat about my trip to Tokyo and all that, so fortunately for you they’ll be here tomorrow evening. All three of them.”

Maki’s heart twisted a bit. It was getting real.

“What’s the second good news?” Maki tossed back the shot of sake in her cup.

“The other good news is that this is only the first of two bottles I have in the fridge. Let’s drink tonight and try to forget about tomorrow. We can worry about it when we get there.” Ayako tossed back her own shot and poured two more.

“Oh, but before we lose ourselves to this rather delicious bottle… where did I buy this again? This is fantastic stuff… Anyway, I have to work from 11 to 6 tomorrow. So you’ll be on your own for a bit. You’re going to need to head out somewhere around 5 just in case the girls show up early. There’s a cafe just two blocks away that they never visit. You should be safe there.”

“After all that,” Ayako swirled the liquid in her small sake cup, “you’ll need to knock on my door at 6:30. No earlier. They get here at 6:15 and we eat at 7. I need you here before then. I’ll let you in and then I’ll wait outside for as long as it takes.”

“Wait, you won’t be in there with me?!” Maki nearly jumped out the window that very moment.

“I can’t, Maki. I’m not a part of your past. I’ll come back in once your past is settled because then I get to worry about my own present and future. Assuming none of them run out the door, that is. Then I might try to tackle them or something.”

Maki gave a resigned sigh. “I guess you’re right. I mean, I’m still not sure what I’m going to
“Maybe you should keep it that way. Do what you think is right at the time, not what you’ve brooded over for days on end. That’s what got you guys in trouble in the first place - over thinking things.”

Alright.

I can do this.

“Cheers to you, Ayako. You’ve been a friend to four strangers in need now. Thank you.” Maki winked and smiled and took a sip.

Ayako faintly blushed and tried to take a long drink to cover it up.

The next day

5:15 pm

Ayako had never been this efficient at unboxing and sorting books in her life.

In a desperate attempt to distract herself from the inevitable collision of worlds at the end of the day, she had thrown herself into her work. It was a good thing too. It was Wednesday, which could only mean that a mountain of boxes would show up at her store’s front doorstep. Wednesday was the biggest shipment day of the week and nobody liked it.

Until today, that is. Ayako had an excuse to work herself silly and nobody would question it too much. Perhaps a few quizzical glances, but other than that she’d just look like a manager hard at work.
“Hey Ayako, are you alright? You’ve been pretty serious today.”

Figures. Honoka would be the one, wouldn’t she?

Honoka had come up from behind Ayako and leaned onto the counter next to her. She looked at Ayako with a soft, caring gaze that nearly broke her just from the sincerity.

But that’s why we all love her, isn’t it? Oh Honoka… if only you knew…

“Yeah, I’m fine. To be honest, I drank a lot last night and woke up with a bit of a hangover. Combine that with the emotional hangover from Comiket and… well… I’ve been trying to distract myself a lot today.”

And none of that was a lie. Good job, me!

Honoka stared for a long moment before reaching over and rubbing Ayako’s back. “Celebratory sake, eh? That’s my Ayako! I’m glad you’re just in pain physically, not emotionally.”

“Thank… you…?” Ayako said as Honoka giggled and helped to empty the box that Ayako was working on.

Well, I’d rather her have that idea than anything else.

Ayako was beginning to feel the pressure from the upcoming night and apparently this was the time it had chosen to show itself to the world.

“Regardless, why don’t you head home a bit early and rehydrate? You’ve worked super hard today and the stock is almost finished before the last shift even gets here. That’s something to be proud of.”

Usually Ayako wasn’t one to take up an offer like that, but today was quite an exception.

“Yeah… maybe you’re right. I could use a sports drink and a quick sit on the couch before I start
making dinner for you kids.”

“Who are you calling a kid, old lady?”

“And who’s cooking dinner for you, little Honoka?”

“You are, oh lovely, youthful upstairs neighbor of mine!”

“That’s more like it.” Ayako removed her apron and tossed it at Honoka. “I’ll see you later, then.”

“See ya in an hour!”

Ayako made her way out of the store and opened her phone to check for messages from Maki.

16:50 - NISHIKINO - Ayako, I’m going to the cafe like you said. I took a pair of mangas from your shelf because there’s no way I’m going to sit there for an hour and have nothing to read. If it gets damaged I’ll pay you for it.

17:11 - NISHIKINO - God, this is going to feel like forever, isn’t it? I’m sorry for messaging you again but I just needed to do something other than read because otherwise I’d down this chai tea in about three gulps.

Only two messages from Maki. To be honest, less than she’d expected.

17:21 - sent - Hey Maki, I’m on my way home. Got off early. The plan is still on. If you want to text me between now and 6 that’s fine, but after then I’m only replying to emergencies. I can’t have them getting suspicious.

Ayako got on the elevator and pressed the button for her floor.

17:24 - NISHIKINO - This’ll be the last one, then. I should probably lose myself in these books. It won’t do any good to think or talk now. Thank you for everything. No matter how this works out, I owe you a lot.
17:25 - NISHIKINO - And… I’ll take you up on your offer to go out for drinks sometime. I think… it’d be nice.

17:26 - NISHIKINO - k, bye

Ayako smiled a big, beaming smile and opened the door to her apartment. She slowly changed into more comfortable clothes before deciding to sit down for a bit.

*Man, that girl is too cute and too good for… well, for me, to begin with. And a long list of other people.*

She took a few deep breaths and let out a big sigh.

“Alright world, let’s see what you have in store for us today. Surprise me.”

---

Ayako’s apartment

Ayako’s perspective

6:17pm

“We’re here!”

Three girls nearly bounded into the room looking around for their favorite neighbor. She was found in the living room, putting plates down on the table in front of the couch. Ayako wisely put down the stack of other things she had in her hands as the younger girls ran up to her and hugged her from both sides.
“Why hello there, ladies! So I take a trip to Tokyo and immediately upon my return I’m given an offering of two virginal young girls?”

“Wrong on all accounts, actually. Especially that last bit.” Honoka gave a wink that caused blushed to form on the faces of her younger girlfriends. “They’re here because they love you and want to hear about your trip to Tokyo. I’m here for the food!”

Ayako jokingly sneered at Honoka. “At least your priorities are in order.”

Ayako detached herself from the hugging duo and made her way to the kitchen. She brought out some napkins and some garnishes that didn’t look familiar to any of the three guests. Furthermore, the girls were usually greeted at the front door by the smell of something delicious emanating from the kitchen. Today there was nothing.

“So, what’s for dinner, Ayako?” Arisa was the first to speak up and ask the question that was hanging over everyone’s head.

Ayako put down the things in her hands and turned to the three girls.

“I uh… I have a confession to make…”

The other three looked on with a bit of concern beginning to appear on their faces.

“I was really lazy… and kind of distracted from things revolving around Comiket and all that… so I didn’t make dinner tonight. Instead I ordered pizza for all of us. I know it’s expensive and kind of unhealthy, but I haven’t had it in a while and needed some comfort food. Do you girls mind?”

Yukiho looked at Arisa and nearly couldn’t contain herself laughing. Arisa looked slightly put off and Honoka was covering her mouth to giggle politely.

“Uhhh… please help the self-conscious old maid here… what’s going on?” Ayako was more confused than she’d anticipated being.

“It’s nothing.” Arisa deadpanned.
“Hehehehe, it’s everything-g-gahahaha!” Yukiho needed help.

Honoka only covered her face with her palm.

_For what it’s worth, this atmosphere bodes well for the inevitable interruption that’s due to arrive in a few minutes, _Ayako couldn't help but think._

“It’s long story, but the short version is this.” Honoka went to Arisa and hugged her from behind. “Arisa has never had pizza. Yukiho and I found this out yesterday when we were playing a perfectly innocent round of Never-Have-I-Ever while having something quite delicious to drink.”

Arisa didn’t look entirely pleased or unhappy either. Perhaps it was the combination of embarrassment and being in the arms of her lover that put her in such a state of confusion.

“We told her we’d suggest to you that we have pizza tonight, but she said she’d feel guilty. Like, it’d be an insult to your cooking. And then we teased her about how she doesn’t eat much here anyway so she already gives off that impression… and then she started to panic about that… and we kept insisting we suggest it to you…” Honoka was also starting to lose it.

Yukiho had sufficiently recovered by now and tried to help out. “But, we never actually did. We figured we would save it as a surprise for Arisa’s birthday in October. But… well… here we are!”

Ayako couldn’t help but begin to giggle, herself. This whole situation was beyond belief.

Here she was, having the time of her life with her three best buddies, knowing that soon it would be interrupted by--

A doorbell ringing.

Ayako frowned more than she intended.

The girls all looked at her and exchanged looks of excitement as the tall, black haired girl slowly
made her way to the door, presumably to open it for the delivery person.

“That’s amazing timing.” Arisa noted.

Ayako continued her walk towards the door. Slowly. Deliberately.

She approached the door and reached for the door handle.

She opened the door.

“Hey there.”

“Hey.”

She felt the person at the door step forward and embrace her. Surprised, she slowly wrapped her arms around the shorter girl and got pulled tight against her body.

“Thank you, Ayako. I’m happy I met you.”

Ayako was beginning to feel tears.

“You’re almost at the finish line, Maki. Cross it. Find your future.”

The girl let go and moved past her without looking back. With strength and confidence.

Ayako let the door close behind her.

Ayako stood outside of her apartment facing the evening sky.
She took a few steps down the hall and stepped into the stairwell. She looked out over the handrail towards the painted dusk on the horizon and took a long, deep breath.

*May the gods keep us all company tonight.*

She sat down against the wall and pulled her knees up to her body. She rested her head on her arms.

And cried.

And cried.

---

**Maki’s perspective**

Maki closed her phone and tried to distract herself with the manga she had procured from Ayako’s apartment. In hindsight she should have chosen something different. She figured she would want to read something romantic and light, but now that she was here in the moment she couldn’t get into it.

*Something with more drama or action would have been better.*

She was sipping on her chai tea and trying to get through *Yagate Kimi ni Naru* when her reminder alarm went off.

6:20

*Time to go, I suppose.*

She returned her mug to the counter and made her way back to the apartment building. Arriving a few minutes early, she boarded the elevator and went up to the 9th floor.
Strange. I thought I’d be a mess but yet… it feels… like the end of a long, long journey.

I can finally see the end.

I’m going to be okay. No matter what.

6:29

She stepped towards the front door to Ayako’s apartment and checked her phone one final time.

6:30

Maki took a deep breath and pressed the doorbell once.

Seconds passed.

Soft footsteps approached.

The door slowly swung open and she could see the silhouette of the tall, beautiful, black haired girl in front of her. She saw Ayako’s face slip into the light and saw a girl who looked completely helpless. This was the expression of someone whose future was completely out of her own hands.

I’m sorry Ayako.

“Hey there.”

“Hey.”

Maki stepped forward and wrapped herself around the girl. She put every ounce of love she could
spare into the hug, a small thanks for a world of help.

“Thank you, Ayako. I’m happy I met you.”

Maki was beginning to feel tears.

“You’re almost at the finish line, Maki. Cross it. Find your future.”

Not my future. Our future.

Maki let go and moved past Ayako without looking back. With strength and confidence. With a determination to suffer anything that would come her way.

She knew she’d break. But that’s okay. She probably deserved it anyway.

She knew she’d want to give up. But who wouldn’t? Strength given to her by her new friend would carry her through to the end.

She knew she’d want to run away. But she wouldn’t. This was a defining moment in her life.

She stepped out of the doorway and heard the door close behind her. Striding into the living room she looked around and saw three girls.

Arisa was wide eyed.

Yukiho had covered her mouth with both hands.

Honoka was… changing. What started as terror was slowly morphing into an anger unlike normal anger. It was the anger that a mother bear displays when her cubs are being threatened. It was protective. Maternal. The anger that could only be paired with an equal amount of love for that which was now in danger.
Maki was afraid, but refused to let it show. Maki took the deepest breath of her life and exhaled. She stared straight at Honoka not with avarice, but with sadness and shame.

“Honoka.”

Honoka’s resolve waivered slightly.

“We were wrong - I was wrong. About everything. I don’t know what you want from me and I don’t know if you need anything from me… frankly, I don’t know anything.”

Maki slowly got down on her knees and sat back on her heels.

“But that's why I will listen. I want to hear your voice. I want to feel the way I’ve made you feel. I want to know everything you’re willing to tell me.”

She leaned forward, putting her hands down on the floor in front of her and facing straight down.

“I want you to hurt me. Because I deserve all of it.”

Maki leaned farther forward, resting her forehead on the floor. She could see nothing, so she closed her eyes.

And began to cry.

“I miss you and I love you! All of you, Honoka… Yukiho… Arisa… I’m s-sorry for everything and… I… just want… t-to see you ag-gain…”

Only tears.

Crying with no sound. Total loss of control. Seemingly nothing could find its way out of her body that was now prone, at the mercy of the women in front of her.
God help me.

God help them.

“You.”

Heavy breathing.

“aaaAAA YOU! WHY ARE YOU HERE?!”

Honoka’s voice was nearly a shrill.

“You! You’re what we ran from, what we ESCAPED from this entire time! We’ve been living a peaceful life, a happy life without having to deal with the SHIT you girls fed us for two years. TWO YEARS NISHIKINO.”

She’s not using my name…

“This… this is wrong. SO wrong. What did these girls do to deserve you coming here and ruining their lives again? Huh? ANSWER ME. Why did you invade our happy lives? Just to make yourself feel better? To help your own conscience? I hope you’re happy, because now WE’RE NOT.”

Footsteps. Irregular. Someone was pacing now.

Her crying slowed but didn't stop.

Let it out Honoka. I deserve it. You deserve it.

“God WHY. We’ve been so happy here without you! Every day I wake up and I’m not reminded of the past I lived through. It was always someone who was willing to take time out of their awfully busy day JUST to come find me and tell me how sorry they were about my parents. ‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me my parents are dead. I’d nearly forgotten but now I remember.’ is what I wanted to say. Maybe I should have!”
Say it now, then. Say it to me because I’m one of those people who did it to you.

“I finally found peace here, you know? Every day I live a new life and I don’t have to answer those stupid questions. ‘Oh Honoka, how are you today? Are you any better?’ NO I’M NOT because you keep reminding me that I’M NOT OKAY and maybe I NEVER WILL BE.”

You can be. You have been. You still can be.

“AAAAHH WHY? Why did you come? Why are you here? WHY aren’t you answering me?! STAND UP FOR YOURSELF AND SAY SOMETHING YOU COWARD!”

Quick footsteps.

Someone gasped.

A lot of footsteps.

“NO!”

Suddenly Maki was hit by something.

Something with much greater mass and force than she could have imagined.

She inhaled sharply.

“STOP!!!!”

Oh my god… did she just…

________________________
Honoka’s perspective

“Honoka.”

Honoka felt herself bordering on hysteria and panic.

“We were wrong - I was wrong. About everything. I don’t know what you want from me and I don’t know if you need anything from me… frankly, I don’t know anything.”

Maki slowly got down on her knees and sat back on her heels.

*What is she doing? Why is she here? W-what’s going on here?*

“But that’s why I will listen. I want to hear your voice. I want to feel the way I’ve made you feel. I want to know everything you’re willing to tell me.”

*Tell you? You’re the ones that told me. Told me about me. Why change now?*

Maki leaned forward, putting her hands down on the floor in front of her and facing straight down.

“I want you to hurt me. Because I deserve all of it.”

*Hurt you? I couldn’t possibly find a way hurt you the way you’ve hurt me!!!!*

Maki leaned farther forward, resting her forehead on the floor.

“I miss you and I love you! All of you, Honoka… Yukiho… Arisa… I’m s-sorry for everything and… I… just want… t-to see you ag-gain…”
Love me? How dare.... You’re sorry?!?! Like sorry makes up for years of suffering you... you... YOU...

“You.”

Honoka was getting worked up, unsure of what feeling it was that she was actually feeling.

“aaaAAA YOU! WHY ARE YOU HERE?!”

Honoka’s voice was nearly a shrill and surprised even herself. But it didn't matter. The floodgates were opening.

“You! You’re what we ran from, what we ESCAPED from this entire time! We’ve been living a peaceful life, a happy life without having to deal with the SHIT you girls fed us for two years. TWO YEARS NISHIKINO.”

_I don’t know you anymore. How dare you call me by MY name! And my sister and Arisa! As if you know anything about us._

“This… this is wrong. SO wrong. What did these girls do to deserve you coming here and ruining their lives again? Huh? ANSWER ME. Why did you invade our happy lives? Just to make yourself feel better? To help your own conscience? I hope you’re happy, because now WE’RE NOT.”

Honoka couldn’t stand still any longer. There was so much going on in her head and she still wasn’t sure what it was that she was feeling. It was pain, it was anger, it was hurt, it was love, it was irritation, it was panic, it was hysteria. Everything was wrong. She wasn't thinking any more, only doing. She couldn't stop.

_What’s going on here… what am I... why is this happening to me?_

“God WHY. We’ve been so happy here without you! Every day I wake up and I’m not reminded of the past I lived through. It was always someone who was willing to take time out of their awfully busy day JUST to come find me and tell me how sorry they were about my parents. ‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me my parents are dead. I’d nearly forgotten but now I remember.’ is what I wanted
to say. Maybe I should have!”

*Should I have? Wait - wait, this needs to slow down… I can’t… god, these stupid memories of her and this girls…… AAAAHH WHY IS SHE HERE?*

“I finally found peace here, you know? Every day I live a new life and I don’t have to answer those stupid questions. ‘Oh Honoka, how are you today? Are you any better?’ NO I’M NOT because you keep reminding me that I’M NOT OKAY and maybe I NEVER WILL BE.”

*Was I okay here? Maybe, who knows? No. Never. I’ll never be okay any more. I’m only okay without you, Maki! WITHOUT YOU, MAKI!!! YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE!!!!!!*

“AAAAHH WHY? Why did you come? Why are you here? WHY aren’t you answering me?! STAND UP FOR YOURSELF AND SAY SOMETHING YOU COWARD!”

Looking back, Honoka would always say she had no clear memory of what happened next. The next moments flowed through the reality of her mind like a flooded river powerfully flows through a wide riverbed.

As she suddenly stopped pacing, her hands kept moving, searching. Finally they found what they were looking for and seized upon it.

*Is this it? Is this the end?*

It felt… heavier than she thought it would be. It felt solid, like a tree trunk. It felt like something that could forever end the pain she was exuding, the horror she was experiencing.

*I just… I wanted to feel loved…*

It surged with power. The power to destroy the intruder.

*Is this love? Am I giving it as much as I’ve taken it?*
In both hands it was effortlessly raised above her head.

*Oh, Maki.*

Someone gasped.

“NO!”

A lot of footsteps.

“STOP!!!”

Suddenly Honoka was hit by something.

Something with much greater mass and force than she could have imagined.

She inhaled sharply.

*Oh my god… did she just…*

---

**Yukiho’s perspective**

“Honoka.”

Yukiho stopped listening.
She couldn’t listen. All she could do was stare at her older sister, her lover, and try to understand what was happening.

Honoka looked at… Maki… Maki! She was here! How? Why? What was happening?

Honoka’s face was scary. It was like she was calculating the best way to defend herself from an wolf that had suddenly appeared in her own house.

“I miss you and I love you! All of you, Honoka… Yukiho… Arisa… I’m s-sorry for everything and… I… just want… t-to see you ag-gain…”

Maki… you came all the way here…

“You.”

Honoka snapped. Yukiho could see it and could only brace herself for what was about to happen. She’d only seen it one other time - the night of the reunion concert when Eli had said those things on TV.

That night Honoka snapped and we were too afraid to do anything… she just… left herself…

“aaaAAA YOU! WHY ARE YOU HERE?!”

There it was. The same sounds that came out that night many years ago. It was here again and now… now… what was going to happen?

“You! You’re what we ran from, what we ESCAPED from this entire time! We’ve been living a peaceful life, a happy life without having to deal with the SHIT you girls fed us for two years. TWO YEARS NISHIKINO.”

Nishikino? Have you ever called her that, Honoka? What’s going on in your head… why can’t we just… listen… or talk…
“This… this is wrong. SO wrong. What did these girls do to deserve you coming here and ruining their lives again? Huh? ANSWER ME. Why did you invade our happy lives? Just to make yourself feel better? To help your own conscience? I hope you’re happy, because now WE’RE NOT.”

We? Wait, what does she mean ‘we’ when she’s talking? Honoka, we are us, but we’ve never spoken for each other like this before. I know you’re protecting us from life but…

“God WHY. We’ve been so happy here without you! Every day I wake up and I’m not reminded of the past I lived through. It was always someone who was willing to take time out of their awfully busy day JUST to come find me and tell me how sorry they were about my parents. ‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me my parents are dead. I’d nearly forgotten but now I remember.’ is what I wanted to say. Maybe I should have!”

No. Honoka we can’t do that. We’re past that, aren’t we? We gave up those regrets and should-haves when we left. We decided to start again and try to begin a new life.

But…

Why can’t she be a part of it?

Why do we have to be alone?

Why can’t we try?

“I finally found peace here, you know? Every day I live a new life and I don’t have to answer those stupid questions, ‘Oh Honoka, how are you today? Are you any better?’ NO I’M NOT because you keep reminding me that I’M NOT OKAY and maybe I NEVER WILL BE.”

But you are. This isn’t anger about mom and dad, it’s anger at eight girls who made a mistake.

Why couldn’t we leave that behind too?

“AAAAHH WHY? Why did you come? Why are you here? WHY aren’t you answering me?! STAND UP FOR YOURSELF AND SAY SOMETHING YOU COWARD!”
Yukiho saw Honoka stop her frantic pacing around the room and reach for--

*Oh god… no… Honoka…*

*Don’t…*

Yukiho gasped.

She ran.

She took a straight line.

“NO!”

She ignored that word and did the only thing she felt strongly about right now.

*I’m sorry Maki!*

She threw herself on top of Maki and screamed.

“STOP!!!!”

-------------------------

**Arisa’s perspective**

“Honoka.”
Maki…

Maki, how did you get here? How did you know? How did you find out?

Arisa couldn’t listen. Of all the people that could have come, this was the worst.

Nishikino Maki.

Her sister’s girlfriend. The girl that protected her from her sister when she was dating Honoka. The girl that stood up for her when Eli and Arisa had fights and dragged the older sister away so they wouldn’t continue their verbal battles. A softening force between two angry girls.

This girl. The girl who was always trying so hard to make Eli a better woman and… failing… but not noticing… because Eli found a way to make it all her fault…

Maki…

I guess… I guess it had to be you, didn't it?

“I miss you and I love you! All of you, Honoka… Yukiho… Arisa… I’m s-sorry for everything and… I… just want… t-to see you ag-gain…”

Maki… you’ve always been the best girl in Muse, haven’t you? For all I love Honoka, you’ve done more for my sister than… probably anyone…

“You.”

Honoka snapped.

Arisa was now looking directly at Honoka. It was happening again. It was like that night.
This... could be bad.

“aaaAAA YOU! WHY ARE YOU HERE?!”

This is bad.

“You! You’re what we ran from, what we ESCAPED from this entire time! We’ve been living a peaceful life, a happy life without having to deal with the SHIT you girls fed us for two years. TWO YEARS NISHIKINO.”

Whoa, Honoka. Where did that come from?

“This... this is wrong. SO wrong. What did these girls do to deserve you coming here and ruining their lives again? Huh? ANSWER ME. Why did you invade our happy lives? Just to make yourself feel better? To help your own conscience? I hope you’re happy, because now WE’RE NOT.”

I... I’m still happy, Honoka. Don’t you see? They can’t take away our happiness any more. We left that behind, right? We gave up those feelings. We’re different than we were.

We’re... new. We’re us.

“God WHY. We’ve been so happy here without you! Every day I wake up and I’m not reminded of the past I lived through. It was always someone who was willing to take time out of their awfully busy day JUST to come find me and tell me how sorry they were about my parents. ‘Yeah, thanks for reminding me my parents are dead. I’d nearly forgotten but now I remember.’ is what I wanted to say. Maybe I should have!”

You don’t mean that, Honoka. You’re too nice for that. You might say it, but you’d never mean it because you can’t be mean. That’s why this right now isn’t you.

This isn’t you.
So why are you doing this? Don’t let your anger for your past overcome your love for us now, Honoka.

“I finally found peace here, you know? Every day I live a new life and I don’t have to answer those stupid questions. ‘Oh Honoka, how are you today? Are you any better?’ NO I’M NOT because you keep reminding me that I’M NOT OKAY and maybe I NEVER WILL BE.”

Are you? Aren’t we? Honoka, this isn’t right. We need to talk…

“AAAAHH WHY? Why did you come? Why are you here? WHY aren’t you answering me?! STAND UP FOR YOURSELF AND SAY SOMETHING YOU COWARD!”

This has to stop. Listen to her.

Let’s talk.

Let all of us talk and listen and try again…

Arisa stepped towards Honoka. She opened her mouth to say something and help settle her down.

Smoothly and suddenly, Honoka reached out to grab--

No.

No, Honoka.

NO, HONOKA.

Yukiho gasped.

Arisa ran.
We're ending this.

She took a straight line.

“NO!”

She yelled that word louder than she’d ever yelled anything in her life.

Because you'll never forgive yourself.

“STOP!!!!”

Arisa heard Yukiho scream and move swiftly towards the prone Maki.

Thank you, Yukiho.

I’m sorry, Honoka. This will hurt.

With all the force she could muster she slammed herself into Honoka, wrapping her arms around the waist of her lover and driving her onto the floor of the apartment.

I’m sorry, Honoka.

But now you won't hurt.

Now you'll heal.
Sierpinski Triangle

Published 15 September 2016

To all who read these lines, my thanks. To all who enjoy these lines, my happiness.

Chapter 12 - Sierpinski Triangle

“Maki, are you okay?”

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING HONOKA?”

Sobbing.

“Why… why… whyyyy!!”

“Honoka, calm down love. You're going to hurt yourself.”

Banging on the floor. Struggling.

“Maki, Maki! Are you alright?”

Maki opened her eyes and felt the weight of a body being removed from her. She looked up and saw the concerned face of Yukiho.

Yukiho!
“Arisa get off! Get off of me!”

Yukiho gave Maki a quick look to make sure she was alright and then crawled towards Honoka.

“Honoka, I'm going to hold you here until you stop. Please!”

Honoka couldn't stop. Crying, flailing, breathing. It was like a panic attack that she had brought upon herself through a flurry of angry words and actions.

“Just get… off… Yukiho, help me!”

Yukiho came over to help Arisa who was sitting on top of Honoka and preventing the older girl from standing. They were going back and forth trying to grab each other's arms, neither having too much success. Yukiho approached the pile but wasn't sure how to help, so she instinctively grabbed Honoka by the cheeks and held her still, hovering inches above her face.

Honoka looked up at Yukiho, her little sister's gaze one both of love and of command.

“Honoka. End this.”

With three words Honoka slowed her struggle and her body seemed to relax. Yukiho didn't break her stare for even a moment, pouring calmness and restraint into the visage of her beloved older sister.

Her breathing slowed, her limbs relaxed. With a last, long deep breath she seemed to return to some semblance of normality. As she stared up into the eyes of Yukiho she had a moment of clarity amidst the raging clouds of uncertainty in her mind.

_Yukiho... you've really grown up..._ 

Fresh tears formed in the corners of Honoka's eyes as Yukiho loosened her grip on Honoka's
cheeks and started to pet her hair. Arisa cautiously sat up and let go of Honoka’s arms in order to give her some room to breathe and calm down. She didn’t, however, get off of Honoka. Instead she sat, straddling Honoka’s hips.

All the while Maki lay slightly curled up on the floor, still trying to process everything that had just happened. Yukiho had thrown herself on Maki… why? What could have happened to make Yukiho want to protect Maki?

She protected me…? What… why would she…

Fresh tears on a second face as Maki began trying to comprehend what had transpired.

“Yukiho…” Maki sniffed and wiped her eyes. “You nearly tackled me earlier. Why did you do that?”

Arisa didn’t let Yukiho respond. “Because Honoka was about to hit you.”

Hit me?

She… oh… my god. She was that angry at me? She wants me to go away that badly?

I never should have done this. I never should have come here!

“She grabbed the body pillow from the couch and was about to swing it at you.” Yukiho looked over at Arisa who was straddling Honoka on the ground and holding her hands down.

Wait.

She grabbed… a… what?

Something didn’t make sense.
“A… pillow?” Maki’s brain was slowly computing everything that had just happened.

Yukiho pointed to the large body pillow that had been dropped on the floor in the process of Honoka being tackled by Arisa.

“Let her up, Arisa.” Maki looked at Arisa until the blonde looked back. “Please, if it was a pillo--”

Arisa’s head snapped towards Maki and she spoke with a surprisingly forceful voice. “I don’t care if it was a peacock’s feather or a steel pole, she tried to hit you. I’m not letting her go down that path. I know more about Honoka than all but two people in the world, and I know that going through with an action like that would haunt her for a very long time… whatever the tool, the intention matters most. It would haunt all three of us…”

Arisa looked down at Honoka and spoke a little softer with an air of recollection. “Just like after the accident… when I held her down until she promised not to do anything to hurt herself, I’m prepared to sit here all night. I don’t trust her right now… I want the real Honoka back. Our Honoka. The Honoka we promised ourselves to in this new life we made together...”

Maki decided to tread carefully. The bond between these girls was closer than anything Maki’s ever had with anyone in her life. Arisa had legitimate reasons for her actions and Maki didn’t want to imply anything different.

“I know you may not trust her right now, but I do trust her.” Maki tried to speak gently and with deference. “I’ve always trusted her. It’s Honoka that doesn’t trust me… and… and as of late I’m beginning to understand why she doesn’t trust me. She needs to know that.”

Honoka’s crying had softened to a faint, intermittent sob. Arisa looked down at the girl. Seeing her softened, almost defeated expression and feeling that she wasn’t resisting at all, Arisa took one last look at Maki. Sighing and seeming to trust the red headed girl, she dismounted Honoka, allowing her to slowly sit up and cross her legs.

Maki spoke with extreme care. “I… don’t understand everything. But I know how we screwed up. How I screwed up. We didn’t listen to you. We just kept talking and filling your voice with our words. Contrary to what we all thought at the time, we didn’t abandon you; we smothered you. We suffocated you.”

Honoka’s eyes didn’t meet Maki’s. They couldn’t.
Maki kneeled and sat back on her heels again. “Honoka, I’m sorry I didn’t listen then. Maybe it’s too late, maybe it’s too little, but I want to listen now. Even if you want me to never speak to you again, I want to listen to you this one last time. Tell me everything. Anything. Nothing. It’s up to you.”

Honoka closed her eyes and tried to prevent herself from starting to cry again.

“You may not consider me a friend, Honoka, but you will forever be my center. I will follow you. Please guide me now… please… help me be a better woman in your eyes… senpai… please…”

The oppressive silence that engulfed the room was unlike anything they’d experienced before. There was so much that they wanted to say, each of them, but none of them dared open their mouth for fear that they’d get it wrong. Except one.

“Maki.”

Honoka spoke. At last. And a little louder than anyone had anticipated.

Maki had to remember to answer.

“Y-yes?”

Maki could barely breathe. It was all going to end here. This was the path that Maki chose and even after all of her effort just to get here, she was going to los--

Wait.

She said ‘Maki’

Maki looked up at Honoka, who was looking back with an unreadable expression.
“Don’t call me senpai.”

Maki winced.

“...sorry…”

Honoka gave the slightest hint of a smile.

“There’s no seniority in Muse… remember, Maki?”

Maki looked up at Honoka staring at her. The expression was difficult to understand but it wasn’t angry or scared or even sad. It was… tired.

“I’m sorry I almost hit you with the pillow, Maki. I’m… not really sure why I did that. But… I regret it.”

Maki didn’t speak for fear of… everything.

“I think we all need to talk. A lot.” Yukiho offered.

Arisa nodded. “Yeah, it’s going to be a long night.”

Maki spoke up. “Maybe… we should go get Ayako. She’s out in the hallway somewhere, or at least that’s where she said she’d be.”

“I’ll go.” Honoka declared with some confidence returning to her voice. Everyone looked at her with a questioning expression. “I don’t know what’s going on between her and Maki, but I know that she deserves to hear all of this.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, so Honoka stood up and walked towards the front door, opening it and stepping outside.
As the door closed Maki could only look at the floor. This turned out nothing like she ever could have imagined and she was reeling, trying to understand everything going through her head while also trying to keep everyone else’s feelings in mind.

A soft hand on her shoulder pulled Maki out of her trance. Maki looked up to see bright blonde locks near her face.

“Hey, Maki? I know this might sound strange given everything that’s gone on tonight but…” Arisa gave Maki a gentle look and a helping hand to stand up.

“...I’m glad you’re here.”

Ayako was running out of tears and, fortunately for her, she was almost finished crying. She knew the four of them would take a long time to work things out. Fortunately for her, this meant she had almost collected herself by this time.

15 minutes. They’d been in there, alone, for 15 minutes.

Who knew 15 minutes could feel like an entire night. Well, when there’s two years of buildup behind a conversation it makes sense that it’d take a while.

She couldn’t help but laugh slightly to herself.

I should have told Maki to leave the manga outside when she came into the apartment.

A door opening. This was it.

Ayako slowly began to stand up. As she stood up she heard only one set of footsteps.

Oh no... Maki, you poor girl...
Suddenly and without seeing a face, she was enveloped by a fast approaching hug.

“Thank you Ayako.”

She heard Honoka’s voice. Like music.

“You did a brave thing, bringing Maki here like this.” Honoka had Ayako in a hug that wouldn’t allow either of them to see each others’ face. Ayako figured that was probably intentional, so she didn’t try to force anything and instead allowed Honoka to say and do as she pleased.

“Thank you for bringing my friend here. I… can’t say that word to her yet, ‘friend’… I’m still confused about some things… but I do feel it… the friendship… and I want to feel it more, like it was before. It’s going to take some time, but… I think it’ll be worth it.” Honoka reached her hand farther behind Ayako’s back, grabbing her shirt and squeezing a bit harder.

“I… don’t really understand what’s happening right now. I don’t understand my feelings, how they can be so angry but so happy at the same time. I see an enemy and a friend. It’s like I’m fighting myself. I don’t like it. But I want to fix it. I want the happy feelings to win the war in my heart.”

Honoka mostly let go of Ayako, her hands lingering on the older girl’s hips. She looked down, unable to hold eye contact. “So… come with me, please. Talk with us. We’ve each got a story to tell and questions to answer and… I want you to hear it because you’re special to all of us - all four of us, apparently.”

Any tears that Ayako had left were now slowly coming out, but they were on her cheeks for a much different reason that the ones that lingered from before.

These were tears of happiness.

“Of course, Honoka. Anything for you girls.”
The five of them sat inside Ayako’s apartment in various places. Honoka, with her girlfriends flanking her, sat on the couch. Ayako pulled out a pair of floor pillows for her and Maki to sit on and while they were arranging themselves, Yukiho had gone into the kitchen to make some tea for everyone.

Nobody said much to each other, just polite things about who would sit where and if everyone was sufficiently comfortable. Eventually they all sat down in their positions and the burden of beginning the conversation started to linger over everyone.

Sensing the need for a starting point, Ayako stood up. “I am truly sorry.” She suddenly bowed at a nearly perfect 90 degree angle with her hands at her side. “I got drunk in Tokyo and tried to hit on Maki and ended up spilling some info about your whereabouts. After that I went behind your back, Yukiho, Arisa, Honoka. I gave Maki information about where you lived and how to see you and I didn't ask your permission about such a sensitive subject. All in all, for betraying your trust and telling your secrets, I am truly, deeply sorry.”

The girls on the couch looked at each other and exchanged looks of understanding. Arisa spoke up first. “I think, even without knowing the exact circumstances behind all of that, you don't need to apologize. You've earned our trust many times, so I think we can spare some trust for your actions. But regardless of that, thank you. Apology accepted.”

Honoka furrowed her brow slightly. “Now stop bowing, you're making us uncomfortable. Since when did you get all formal?”

“I got a lot of practice when I was asking my professors for deadline extensions.” Ayako stood up, giving a small grin and sitting back down. “But seriously, I don't know where you guys want to start with all of this, but I think I'm the unknown factor here. I connected you two through a series of ridiculous events, so I think I should tell my story first and then you can ask any questions you want after that. Is that alright?”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Yukiho added, “And maybe, since it's kind of late and we all have work tomorrow, we should stop after that. If we get into everything tonight we'll be up forever. Not to mention, I know it'd help me approach all of this with a more reasonable mind if I got a good night's sleep first. Honoka, Maki, would you be okay with that? I think it depends on you two most.”

Maki's eyes made their way to Honoka's. They both had slightly uneasy faces.
“I want Honoka to make this decision. I'll do whatever makes her happy.” Maki didn't break eye contact, but tried to show the sincerity in her words.

“Okay, thank you.” Honoka looked at Yukiho. “I think that's a good idea. We can get the big things out of the way tonight and then work out the details tomorrow after work.”

“You're not going to work, Honoka.” Ayako slipped into the conversation. “I called work right after you left and said you need to be out for a day for personal reasons. The other workers were so ecstatic with how well you handled the store while I was gone, they were happy to find ways to cover for you.”

Honoka began to object. “No, Ayako, I can't do that right after you just got back into tow--”

“It's done, Honoka. They've already got it covered. Take the day off and do more important things here at home.”

“Ayako, I know you're trying to help me but I--”

Arisa sat forward and interrupted her girlfriend. “Honoka I will, so help me, tackle you again. Do what Ayako is saying. I'm going to call into work also, so we can all be together and talk.”

Honoka was outnumbered and frowned like a child who knew that they had just been punished for perfectly legitimate reasons. Sighing, she squeezed the pillow she was holding and muttered into it, mostly intelligibly. “Fine, I'll stay home.”

Yukiho patted her head. “Good sister.”

Ayako giggled. “Are you enjoying my body pillow, Honoka? I didn't know you felt that way about Kongou-sama.”

Honoka looked at the thing she was holding. She hadn't paid much attention to the pillow in her hands since sitting down. She'd only felt the need to hold something that she could squeeze and find comfort in during the upcoming conversation. Now, holding it up and looking at it, she noticed that it was a body pillow with a very scantily-clad, vulnerable-looking Kongou from Kantai Collection.
“Why the hell do you have a body pillow like this?” Honoka, now wide-eyed, was embarrassed just looking at the image on the pillow. She quickly turned it around so she couldn't see the character.

“Hey, a single girl is allowed to be lonely and desperate, okay?” Ayako pouted and folded her arms.

“I think it's cute,” said Yukiho in a suspiciously innocent, honest way.

“It wasn't cute when Honoka was wielding it like a mace earlier.” Arisa frowned.

“Who'd have figured Ayako was into the busty-types?” Yukiho was looking genuinely surprised.

In complete disbelief at the surreal situation that was unfolding in front of her, Maki attempted to get everyone back to the major topic.

“Battleships with boobs aside, Ayako… can you explain your side of the story in this… triangle?”

“Aye aye, Admiral!” Ayako looked happy as ever, Maki thought.

*Just like her, I guess. And it's probably for the best. We could all use a smile right now.*

For the next hour Ayako recounted her experiences with Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa when they originally arrived in Niigata. She explained how they became friends, the weekly dinner parties, and the fact that the girls literally lived one floor below where they were talking right now. She talked about working together with Honoka, how the three of them had opened up to her about their story, and eventually her desire to draw the story of their relationship.

Which led to the topic of the weekend of Comiket. Her neighbors actually hadn’t heard much about the event itself, so Yukiho, Arisa, and Honoka probed her with questions that didn’t always relate to the central topic. In the end, that proved to be good for everyone involved. It helped to give more context to the way Ayako and Maki met. Maki also chimed in with a few of her own perspectives about the event in order to fill in the gaps in the story.
In the end, after all of the questions had been answered, they sat back and took it all in.

“It was an amazing coincidence. But not an impossible one, I suppose.” Arisa seemed at peace with Ayako and Maki meeting like they did. “I mean, it makes sense that someone we knew would see Ayako’s work. Who knew it’d be one of the eight Muse members, though?”

“Yeah…” Yukiho was leaning against her sister. “Life just works like that sometimes though, doesn’t it?”

Everyone murmured an agreement. With Ayako’s soul bared for the world to see, she took this opportunity to extricate herself from the rest of the conversation.

“Ladies, I’ve heard both of your stories from each of you. And as much as I have honestly enjoyed talking about this, I feel like you should tell your own stories to each other alone. If I’m there I’ll just get in the way. Or I’ll be a ‘safe person’ to talk to in that conversation. I don’t want to be that and you don’t want me to be that. You need this to be… real… and uncompromising.”

Ayako crossed her arms. “Tell each other the truth and figure all of this out. I love all four of you to death and I’d be the happiest Ayako in the world if you could all be happy in your own ways. And then when you’ve figured things out, hopefully, in the end, all of us can at least be friends after all of this. And that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Giving those who deserve your friendship a chance?”

Honoka nodded and agreed first. “Maybe you’re right. It’s kind of scary to say some of these things in my head… but I know that none of you will judge me.” She looked at Maki. “And now I know all of you will listen. And that makes it worth saying.”

“So when should we all meet up?” Arisa asked.

“How about for lunch? I can cook and we can chat and eat!” Yukiho looked really happy at the opportunity to play housewife.

Maki tentatively shook her head. “That’s okay with me. How about you, Honoka?”

“Also fine by me. I’ll show you around our apartment… even though it’s basically the same as this
one. But hey, you’ll be our first house guest aside from Ayako.” Honoka looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, that’s settled. I guess we should all probably go get some sleep, yeah?”

“Not a bad idea. I’ll be at your place at noon, then?” Maki was starting to feel more upbeat.

“I’m looking forward to it. Oh, and Maki?”

Maki looked up at her senior. “Yes, Honoka?”

“You talked about how you want to listen, and that makes me happy. But I also want to do the same. I need to do the same. It’s only fair between friends, yeah?” Honoka relaxed into a faint smile.

Maki felt relief come over her like a warm blanket in winter. “Of course, Honoka. I’ll tell you anything you want.”

“Will you tell me anything I want?” Ayako inquired with a clearly evident ulterior motive.

Maki answered carefully. “...maybe?”

Ayako looked directly at Maki. “Earlier, when we were talking about the Kongou body pillow that has… other uses… how did you know Kongou is a battleship?”

The realization that she'd given away a little too much information earlier slowly dawned upon her and Maki soon sported a beet-red face.

“I'll have you know… a single girl with interest in c-certain kinds of doujinshi is allowed to be lonely and desperate and read those certain things for… r-research purposes, okay?”

Yukiho put a hand to her face and giggled. Honoka put her face in the pillow. Arisa leaned forward into a double facepalm.

Ayako donned a devilish grin. “I can give you some recommendations if y--”
“I’m FINE now thank you!”

The next day

Lunch was served and the girls, minus Ayako who had gone to work in order to give them some privacy, soon got down to business. They had decided the night before that the best way to approach the upcoming discussion was to each take a turn and give their own perspectives on the time between the Kousaka parents’ deaths and when the three left Tokyo. Later, after their histories had been laid out, they would address the kerfuffle that occurred last night.

They were chatting about nothing in particular and finishing their lunches when Honoka spoke up.

“I think we shouldn't talk about the past.”

Arisa nearly choked on her avocado ham sandwich.

“Honoka, why not? That's half of the point of today.” Yukiho looked concerned.

Honoka put a hand up in understanding. “I know, I know. I just… I was thinking last night while I was trying to sleep. Maki said she understands why I went into seclusion and also why we all left. After everything she said to us last night, I’m inclined to believe her. She may have made mistakes in the past, but I've never known Maki to be a liar.”

Honoka turned towards Maki. “I'm sure that over time everything will come out. But the truth is, I don't need to know your reasons for your actions. You did what you thought was right and, as much as I may want to, I can't be angry about that any more. The time to be angry has come and gone. I'll answer whatever you want, Maki, but I don't need to hear about the past - I've been there and lived through it. And I don't want to again.”

It made some sense to Maki. Honoka was always a forward-looking person with a need to move on from anything that troubled her. She was unable to do that with her parents’ situation only because
of the actions of others - Maki and seven others, to be exact.

“That's… so like you, Honoka.” Maki smiled a reminiscent smile. “Advance. Move forward. I'm glad that instinct hasn't disappeared. It's one of the reasons I joined Muse to begin with. I always wanted to have the same drive for tomorrow as you did.”

“That Honoka exists here in our new home.” Yukiho stated, motioning towards Arisa and winking. “It took a sprained ankle and a whole lot of fighting in a hotel room for it to come back… but she's back.”

“I'll have to hear that story another time.” Maki sighed. “I made mistakes and I you know that I know. You're willing to forgive me, for which I'm thankful. After all that, I guess there's no point in reliving the past, so that's fine by me.”

“Good, I was hoping you'd say that. And you're right, Maki. I do… forgive you. I… I'm not…” Honoka grabbed her napkin and started playing with it absentmindedly. “I'm not sure where I am with our friendship and all that, but… maybe it doesn't matter. Some people talk about ‘starting over’ or ‘picking up where we left off’ with friendships, but I think it's more complex than that. Forget titles. Let's just spend time together and become better friends. Can we do that?”

“I'd be happy to.” Maki and everyone around the table shared a smile. With a few words, the air seemed to lift as everyone felt an emotional burden disappear.

A few moments later Arisa was stroking her chin in a contemplative manner. “I know we need to talk about last night, but… I don't know, I feel like this apartment might not help that. In a way it's our safe place, our home. I think we'd have a clearer mindset if we were somewhere else.”

“I agree. Why don't we take a bus to the beach? We can lay out a blanket and watch the sunset in a few hours.” Yukiho stood up and started towards the kitchen. “I'll make some snacks to take with us!”

With everyone agreeing to the plan, they cleaned their lunch plates from the table and collected a few things before setting out to the closest bus stop that would take them to the downtown area and onto the beachside.

On the bus, Arisa and Yukiho started pointing out important landmarks to Maki and helping her familiarize herself with the area. They traveled over Bandai Bridge, through downtown, and then
past the city office where Arisa worked. They got off the bus at a stop near Gokoku Shrine, which was very close to the beach, then walked through the shrine grounds and a small wooded area before arriving at the oceanfront.

They walked down the hill and spread out a blanket on a patch of sand. They had most of the shore to choose from as there were few people in this area of the beach. Yukiho couldn't help but take off her shoes and run down to the shore to stand among the gentle oncoming waves for a few moments before slowly making her way back to the blankets were the other three girls were now lounging.

“So about last night…” Maki was keen to get this conversation started. She felt like there was less for her to talk about, actually. Rather, the three girls in front of her had a lot to discuss among themselves. Three women with completely different reactions to her intrusion. She was responsible for those reactions, so she decided to help them through it no matter how long it took.

Anger, protectiveness, suspicion, disbelief, sadness, resignation, relief, exhaustion - all of these emotions played on the faces of the three girls at some point last night for reasons that all of them didn't completely understand.

“Earlier, when I explained why I came here to find you, I also talked a little about my thought process from last night. I know you all need to get some things off your chest, so if it's alright with you I'll just interject when appropriate. Or if you want to ask me any questions, that's okay too.”

Honoka nodded. “Yeah, I think we got most of that. And you're right… we each owe each other an explanation about last night. So… I'll go first since I was the one who was most… explosive.”

Honoka sat back on her hands. “Oh boy… last night was… nothing I would have ever dreamed. When I first saw Maki I wanted to run away. There's no doubt that, if there was a back door to that apartment and we weren't on the ninth floor, I would have dashed. But I couldn't. I was cornered and couldn't escape. I think that's why I never really blew up in front of anyone back in Tokyo, now that I think about it.”

“In Tokyo I could release in other ways. I could seclude myself or go to work or, as you can see with me living here, I could escape. That room had no escape. So my instincts said ‘it's time to fight’ and… I did. Everything I could think of came out. And, truthfully, I felt better near the end. I felt like getting all of that out was good and it was genuinely making me feel relief. And yet…”

Honoka adjusted herself, clearly feeling uncomfortable. “...and yet I still… I kept going. I reached for that pillow. I think… some part of me fought it. I wasn't comfortable and even though I clearly meant to do it, I wasn't okay with it. But I still grabbed it and… and it… it went up so easily… so
easy. I was upset how easy it was. Why was I doing this?”

Honoka leaned her head into Arisa’s lap. “And then you saved me. And I couldn't accept it. There you were, one more time, keeping me from doing something I would regret. I'm sorry you had to do that, Arisa. But thank you for doing it.”

Arisa started to pet Honoka's head. “Of course, I'd do that and more for you, love.”

“Last night, what were you thinking, Arisa?” Yukiho asked, scooting closer to her two lovers.

Arisa looked up, continuing to caress the auburn locks in her lap. “I think, in the beginning it was a lot of ‘well that figures’ about Maki. Because I saw Maki nearly every day for a year, I got to know a lot about her. She was always really nice to me and wanting my approval for being with Eli. We didn’t interact a whole lot, but seeing how Maki handled my sister as she started her spin into possessiveness and controlling… it was enough for me to grow to trust her.”

“I didn’t really think it would be a problem for Maki to show up, honestly. I guess that was me being blind to you, Honoka. I’m sorry for that.” Arisa patted the back of the older girl who was now curled up into the lap of her blonde girlfriend.

“When I saw Honoka raise the pillow, I launched myself at her because I didn’t want her to go the route she was going. So I just did what I thought what I thought was right. I couldn’t let her break the little bit of friendship we’d left when we moved away. We didn't burn bridges - we left everything intact as it was.”

“What initially brought me out of my trance was when Honoka talked about how Maki coming here changed how happy we were. I kept thinking to myself ‘Well, I’m happy and I know you are so what’s the problem?’ Maybe that’s simplistic, but… we’re happy here, right? Nobody can take that away. This is our home. We left behind those feelings and regrets.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is…” Arisa struggled to come up with the right words. “I feel like I’m stronger now. Yukiho, you’ve made me stronger by allowing me to be your equal in love. Honoka, you’ve made me stronger by leading us here and providing for us. With this strength of solidarity and love, who cares if everyone from our past shows up at our front door?”

“We’re happy. We’re together. We’re safe. I don’t know what else I want out of life.”
Honoka squeezed Arisa’s leg but didn’t say a word.

Maki wanted to stay silent, but couldn’t. “Thank you for your kind words. I’m sorry I couldn’t… I wasn’t able to save your sister from the path she took.”

Arisa firmly shook her head. “I saw the pain you suffered for her sake. You didn’t deserve the things she did to you. If anything, I feel sorry for you more than anyone except Honoka. You can’t help falling for someone. Don’t ever apologize for loving anyone, no matter who it is. Eli is… was… a kind girl. Maybe she will be again one day.”

“I think she can,” Yukiho offered. “She’s confused. We were too, though in a different way. But we worked through it, right? So hopefully she can too. I think she can. I choose to believe she can.”

Maki began twirling her hair. “Yukiho… you did something… I never would have expected last night. Covering me like that … what was going through your head?”

“Geez… what wasn’t going through my head?” Yukiho leaned against Arisa and nuzzled the shoulder of the blonde haired girl. “To be blunt, during the beginning of Honoka’s yelling I kind of resigned myself to witnessing the severance of your relationship forever.”

“I saw how Honoka reacted in private when Eli said those things on TV. I saw how she reacted every time she was invited to outings and confronted by various members of Muse after the incident. Those first reactions were pretty brutal. Over time they got less and less jarring and after a few months those startling reactions became startlingly small. It was like she gave up on… everything.”

Yukiho squeezed the arm of her lover and best friend. “Honoka was always our protector, but when she started talking for us last night I felt like something was… off… not Honoka-like. I don’t know how to explain it, but I could feel something wrong. It wasn’t the actions she took or even the words she spoke, but the spirit she spoke with - that’s what made me think something was wrong.”

“And when I figured out what was about to happen, I did the only thing I knew to do - I protected that which Honoka cared for most in that situation. Maki did nothing wrong last night. She existed within a room at the same time we did. Really, what’s wrong with that?”

Three girls huddled together, bound by much more than the arms and legs that entangled them.
They really are one, aren’t they? Maki observed to herself. I think I’m actually jealous. I want someone to understand me like that.

Honoka was nodding off to sleep in the lap of her girlfriend. Her girlfriends noticed and shared a giggle. Maki couldn't help but smile as well.

“It’s been a long day or two, hasn’t it? Why don’t you girls go home and be together for the night?” Maki offered. “We’ve talked a lot today and I think I understand a lot more about you than I did just a day ago.”

“And,” Maki ventured, “I think I’m happy you all moved away.”

Three girls gave expressions that expected an explanation.

“What I mean is, I think you’ve really found yourselves here. Not that this particular city has done anything special as much as the fact that you’re here of your own accord and completely reliant on yourselves. You live for yourselves, not anyone else. It’s made you even more unique than you were before and, honestly, it makes me want to know you even more. I… like what you’ve become.”

Three girls relaxed their expressions and settled their feelings.

I’m glad. Thought Honoka.

I like it too. Yukiho admitted to herself.

It’s the best. Arisa thought.

They didn’t need to say it. They felt it.
After a half hour of idle chat and enjoyment, the happy trio decided to heed Maki’s suggestion and head for home. They packed up their belongings and started for the bus stop.

Maki decided she wanted to stay and watch the sunset to clear her mind and relax.

“Are you sure you can make it back to the apartment, Maki?” Yukiho’s motherly instincts were kicking in.

“Really, I’ll be okay.” Maki waves her off. “Not to mention, a few minutes ago I got a text from Ayako. She’s off work and I think she’s going to make her way over here.”

Honoka couldn't help but grin. “Now don’t stay out too late, you hear?”

Maki giggled. “Yes, mom. I promise I’ll be home by midnight.”

Everyone waved at each other and the three lovers disappeared into the woods near the beach.

Maki sat on the small blanket the others had left for her. She contemplated the whole situation that had just unravelled.

She was now on somewhat good terms with Honoka and she felt confident that, provided they did so in a reasonable and contrite fashion, the other members of Muse could eventually continue their friendship with Honoka. Even if the path to this point had been difficult, the end result was as good as she could have hoped for.

She lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes, trying to clear her mind.

When she opened her eyes she saw a tall, pretty girl standing nearly directly over her. She was wearing tan pants and a blue polo shirt; exactly the things that an Animate employee would wear.

Ayako.
Confident, friendly eyes met Maki’s purple orbs. For a moment Maki didn’t know what to do.

“Miss me?”

Ayako. Trite as ever.

“No.”

“I love it when a girl lies to me.”

“Yeah, well, get used to it.” Maki sat up and made room for Ayako, who was already preparing to sit down on the blanket next to her.

“I thought you’d be more friendly, Maki-chan. You just made up with a girl you’ve been on bad terms with for two years and opened the door to potentially reconnecting the nine members of your group. Take some time to be happy, yeah?”

Maki put her head down and stared at the blanket, deep in thought.

Damn. Ayako thought. That was pretty reckless, wasn’t it? Maybe I jumped to conclusions.

“Hey, Maki… sorry about that. I…”

Maki shook her head. “No, don’t be. You’re right. I should be happy. I actually accomplished what I set out to do. But here I am. I regained three friends that I had lost… but now I realize that I’m still less one friend from where I was a few months ago…”

Ayako looked at the redhead who was now staring at the horizon. A soft breeze gently moved scarlet curls that matched the blazing clouds hovering above the setting sun. Cream skin, cheeks that seemed soft as they were attractive filled out the face that was yearning to find completion.

Oh Maki… what brought you here into my life…
Ayako was alone in her own thoughts.

And why do you have this effect on me...

With the sun having set on the horizon, there was only a few minutes of daylight left. Ayako saw the orange and red of the dusk and, having taken perspective of the empty beach, made her move.

She stood up, removing her shirt and pants, and was down to her underwear in a flash.

Maki took a glance to her right only to find that Ayako had shed the clothes which didn’t do her shapely body any justice whatsoever.

Wait, wwwwwhat am I thinking?!

Doing everything she could not to collapse from shock, she released her surprise with a question.

“W-w-what are you doing, Ayako?!!”

“Going for a swim. Care to join?”

Maki looked at the outstretched hand of Ayako. She thought for a very long moment and met the eyes of the girl four years her senior. Something, who knows what, allowed her to feel some trust. So she took the hand and stood up.

Ayako winked and made her way towards the sea. Maki stood there, watching the girl as she approached the water. As Ayako neared the salty sea she dropped her remaining clothes and quickly made her way into the water.

Maki watched a bare silhouette enter the ocean and disappear.

Conflicting thoughts abounded in Maki’s mind but she found herself removing her street clothes
and standing around only in her underwear. Moving towards the waterline, mostly for fear of being seen by someone, she saw Ayako’s undergarments. She’d reached the point of no return.

*What am I doing...*

Moments later, without anything covering her, she was completely submerged in the Sea of Japan.

*Cool. Cooler than I expected. But really nice in summer.*

Maki slowly swam in the shallow water and was beginning to really enjoy the feeling of cool water caressing her skin when, all of a sudden, a familiar shape surfaced and appeared mere feet in front of her. Ayako’s black hair was wet and sleek down her back as she turned to look at the redhead.

Taking this opportunity to tease her a bit, Ayako grabbed Maki and, laughing like an idiot, pulled the younger girl underwater. After a second or two of playful jostling Ayako brought her back up for air. Maki looked less than pleased as she tried to catch her breath. Ayako moved closer to the girl and slowly tried to pull the stray strands of hair from the face of the redhead.

Maki frowned and tried to shoo Ayako away, but instead Ayako grabbed her wrists and pulled them down. Ayako thought that maybe she should leave her alone for a bit to avoid any further scowls. Instead, and against anyone’s better judgement, she moved Maki’s hands downwards and pulled Maki forward towards her body.

Now with her hands wrapped around the waist of the taller girl, Maki was blushing like crazy as their bodies brushed underwater. Ayako actually looked embarrassed as well, slightly loosening her grip on the wrists of the pianist in front of her.

“Maki… I… god, what the hell am I doing?”

Ayako released her grip on Maki’s wrists and moved back slightly, trying to give her some room. Maki couldn’t say anything. She was trying so hard to understand the feelings in the eyes of a girl who was practiced at putting on a face of jest and light heartedness in all situations. Yet here she was, with a troubled look. Maybe even… sad?

*What’s wrong, Ayako? Tell me...*
Maki was surprised to realize just what she was asking of the girl in her head.

With her right hand, Maki reached up and moved black hair behind the left ear of the girl in front of her. This movement caused Ayako to look up and give Maki her full attention.

Eyes met. Ayako chose to continue.

“Maki… I’m… you’re…” Ayako took a deep breath. “I’m attracted to you. I think you’re so courageous. You’re so driven to make good with this friend of yours… she’s so lucky to have a friend like you, even if you didn’t get along. I wish I had that determination.”

Ayako gently grabbed the hands of the blushing redhead in front of her and played between Maki’s long fingers. “I don’t know why, but I want to get to know you more. I want to share experiences with you. I want… more than I should ask for…”

Ayako let go of the hands in front of her and sunk in the water down to her chin. “What the hell… I'm attracted to you and I feel so guilty for it! I’ve known you for what - 4 days? How can I possibly compete against someone back home you've known for so long? I don't even know what I'm saying any more!”

Maki interrupted. “Ayako… stop for a second…”

Ayako looked up at purple eyes.

Maki sank lower in the water and matched the height of Ayako’s eyes. She struggled to maintain eye contact as she spoke softly.

“Ayako, I think I might like you.”

For the first time in a long time, Ayako couldn’t speak.

“I think. I know that’s not very helpful but…”
Ayako’s expression shifted to concern for her young friend. “Tell me. Anything.”

Maki collected her thoughts for a moment. “The truth is, with everything going on I’m not too sure about any part of my life. Frankly, now that everything is mostly settled here I’m even less sure about how I feel towards Eli. Going against her kind of kept me going in those last few months, as unhealthy as that is. But… she’s respected my wishes so far. She’s let me go off on my own. I never would have imagined that before our breakup.”

“I have someone back home who says they love me, but I don’t know. I gave two years of my life to her, but I don’t know how much I believe it anymore when she says she loves me. It’s just… there’s still those lingering thoughts, ya know?”

Ayako looked down into the dark water surrounding them. Two girls, standing in water up to their chests a few meters off shore.

“May I chase after you?”

Maki blinked a few times.

“Chase?”

Ayako turned away, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“I know you’re not totally free. But I want you. And I’m willing to chase after the hand of the girl I want. Even if I failed, I feel like I’d be lucky having a friend like you. Even if it’s long distance.”

Ayako turned around again and moved closer to Maki.

“So I’ll ask you again. May I chase after you?”

*She’s serious.* Maki thought. *Scarily serious.*
Maki looked up at the darkening sky, seeing the first stars appear on the eastern horizon.

*I want to be happy.*

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Maki answered.

“Okay.”

Ayako perked up and breathed in sharply.

“I can’t promise anything. I don’t know what going back home will be like for me. I don’t know what seeing Eli again will be like. I don’t know if I’ll ever fall for you, but I know that… I’m interested in you. And I’d like to continue talking to you and seeing you on a regular basis.

“So please… chase me…”

Maki turned to swim towards the shore before looking back for a moment.

“I think I’d like it if you won the race.”

Maki swam towards the shore and began to put on her clothes.


Tokyo

A cafe in Ochanomizu

The blue eyes of a blonde haired girl surveyed her friends leaving the cafe. They had spoken for
only a half hour, but much was accomplished and much was settled. For now, anyway.

“Maki knows where Honoka is…”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t chase her?”

“I didn’t chase her when she broke up with me, as much as I wanted to. Why start now?”

“I thought you were in love with her. Weren’t you happy?”

“I was in the beginning. Towards the end? I don’t think I actually know. Whether I did or not then, I do now. I love her. But I don’t think she feels the same way anymore.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Two distinctly different ways. I’m happy that she’s out and being the bold Maki she used to be; the Maki I fell in love with. On the other hand, seeing her so free without me makes me feel like I am the worst kind of person. I suppressed that in her. What the hell was I doing for so long? How could I have messed up so badly with two girls I called my friends?

“It seems like you have a good perspective on things now, at least. You ought to give yourself a little credit for that.”

“Thanks. You’ve been helpful with that.”

“So, will you try to move on?”

“I guess I have to, at least a little. If we can make up, I’d be so happy. But I also can’t shut out the world just because I’m focused on one girl. That wouldn’t be fair to myself or my feelings. The problem is figuring out how to move on.”
“I can help with that.”

Blue eyes widened as soft lips met her own.

*She’s… kissing me…*
Two weeks after Honoka’s disappearance

Tokyo

I can't believe this! She’s going to just break up like this, take her things and not say anything. She's not even listening to me! You will listen to me, Maki!

“Do you think this will fix everything? Your parents almost completely disowned you just for dating a girl. What’ll happen now that you’re on your own? Can you keep going to college while you’re working to support yourself? I… I still care about you, you know, come on. Come back in.”

She's not stopping. Not even flinching. Wait… this is wrong… is she really going to leave, just like that? No, Maki. Don't do this… I can't let...

“We fight a lot, but I still love you. Come back inside and let’s talk more. Tell me everything again and we can work it out! Why are you willing to throw everything away that we’ve worked for? What did I do to deserve this? Why can’t we figure—”
Maki turned around and looked at Eli with remarkably calm eyes.

“You couldn’t hear Honoka because you wouldn't stop talking long enough to let her speak, and now you’re doing the same thing to me. I love you… but I can’t live with you.”

Maki turned away from Eli and began walking without even turning around again. Eli didn't say a word - she couldn't. There was nothing to say because no one was there.

No one.

*She's... gone...*

Eli continued to stand in the doorway of her apartment, darkness surrounding her save for a single streetlight a few meters away, as if spotlighting her solitude. Only her eyes moved as she searched the streets in front of her, hoping Maki would change her mind and make her way back.

For ten minutes Eli stood in the cool spring air, not daring to move in case her young lover came back into view. But it was all for naught. She wouldn't return. Eli hoped beyond hope that Maki would somehow appear around that corner, but she knew it would never happen.

*She's actually gone.*

She slowly turned and opened the door to her apartment. Stepping inside, she closed the door and leaned against it, sliding down on to the floor and sitting against the cold steel behind her. What was there to do now? At least Maki had had the courtesy to do it on a Friday night so Eli could have the weekend to figure things out before she went back to school on Monday.

*Even in the worst situations, you find a small way to give kindness. This is why I love you, Maki.*

Eli was slipping more and more into a daze, so much that even she could recognize the danger.

*I need help. Please... someone...*
She got up and went to her phone. Dialing a number, she put the phone up to her ear. Not even two rings later a voice came through the line.

“Elicchi! What's wrong, sweetie?”

“Nozomi… I’m… oh god, what’s happening…” Eli was starting to lose the composure that she had miraculously maintained to this point.

“It’s okay Eli, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Let me change and then I’ll be on my way.”

“Wait… Nozomi, let me come to you. I can’t… be here right now.”

“Then I’ll wait for you at the bottom of the stairs. Hurry, Eli.”

“See you soon.”

*How did she know…*

Eli hung up and started to put on some warmer clothes to walk in. It was a twenty minute walk to Nozomi’s shrine at a reasonable pace. Even though spring was beginning to show itself during the day in Tokyo, the nights were still chilly and it was only getting later.

Deciding on some comfortable jeans, a long sleeve shirt, a jacket, and some tennis shoes, she made her way out the door and down the long road to Kanda shrine. Normally she'd take the subway line two stops from Korakuen to Ochanomizu station, but it was late enough that the subway was running only sporadically. Since it was just a little over a kilometer on foot, she decided to walk.

Walking through the bright lights of north central Tokyo this late at night was surreal. The city still seemed alive with lights, cars, and flashing signs, but it was late enough that there were few pedestrians. Much like her own mind, the city was on autopilot. Everyone was moving with a purpose, oblivious to everything else around them.

Turning the corner on the second of four turns she’d make, she was suddenly taken out of her trance by force as she heard a single word.
“Elicchi!”

Nozomi was out of breath in front of her, clearly having sprinted most of the way from her shrine to meet Eli there. Nozomi looked at Eli and saw the face of someone who was irrevocably changed.

_Oh my poor Elicchi…_

At first she was slightly hesitant but then Nozomi seemed to make a decision as she suddenly opened her arms wide.

“Eli…”

Eli felt the first tears escape her eyes and she found herself moving slowly into the arms in front of her. Reaching out, she wrapped her arms around the waist of the purple haired girl in front of her. She slowly squeezed, feeling Nozomi’s arms wrap themselves around her in return and matching her own embrace’s vigor.

“Nozomi… I… I lost her…”

Nozomi pulled Eli’s head against her shoulder and rested her own head on Eli’s. Eli began to sob into her and she could feel the tears starting to wet her shirt. Not saying a word, she poured every bit of love and comfort into their hug that she possibly could.

It felt like forever that the two stood on a street corner embracing, feeling, letting go. Nozomi felt a tear of her own move down her cheek as she felt her friend’s pain flowing through her trembling body.

Nozomi was petting her best friend’s head, running her hands through the long blonde hair. “Elicchi. Come stay with me tonight. And tomorrow. As long as you need, you’re welcome in my home.”

Eli only nodded, but slowly released Nozomi. The two grabbed hands and started walking towards the shrine.
Upon entering the living quarters of the shrine Nozomi went to work, ordering her friend to take a relaxing bath before anything else happened. Eli consented and went to the bathroom to clean up and collect herself.

When she was sure Eli had entered the bath, Nozomi picked up her phone and made a quick phone call. Three rings. Four.

“Hello?”

“Hey Maki, it’s me.”

“Is she safe?”

“Yeah, she’s going to stay with me tonight. Um… thanks for calling me beforehand… telling me that you were going to do this. Elicchi’s been my best friend for a long time and I… thank you for thinking of her.”

“I’m sorry Nozomi. Forgive me for hurting her. I still love her but… it’s complicated…”

“I know you’d never do something without a reason. And… I also know she’s not the only one hurting right now. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No… but I really do appreciate it Nozomi. You’re doing more than I could ask.”

“Keep in touch, Maki. I know I push your buttons pretty often, but I care for you and Eli both. So don’t be afraid to ask for anything.”

“I won’t, I promise. Take care of her, that’s all I want.”
“I will. You have my word.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

Nozomi heard a click on the line.

_That girl is… something. What did Eli do to her to make her so determined and calculated in breaking up? Well… another day, perhaps._

Putting those questions aside, Nozomi set about making tea and setting up two futons so the two of them could sleep whenever it was needed. It’d also be a comfortable conversation place should Eli feel the need to get some things out of her head that night.

Just as she was setting down the completed pot of tea, Eli made her way out of the bathroom clad in some comfortable looking bed clothes lent by Nozomi. Though still clearly troubled with eyes red from crying, probably a little more while in the bath, the blonde did look freshened up and a slightly more composed than before.

Eli spotted the tea sitting on the table and made her way over, taking a seat in the place she always sat when she visited her best friend. Nozomi allowed herself a small grin at their familiarity and habits, then sat beside her friend, not saying a word; merely pouring tea and serving a cup to the both of them.

The best tasting tea in the world is made up of a mixture of pure, clean water and a blend of tea leaves from a variety of locales, depending on the preference of the individual. But Nozomi firmly believed that the best tea for the soul is comprised of a third ingredient: self reflection. Thus she didn’t say a word as the two sat in silence, their thoughts different but equally soothing in their own ways.

Eventually, Eli dared break the comfortable quiet. “Maki… broke up with me. I came home from coaching my Friday night dance class and she was waiting in the living room, sitting on the couch. She was already wearing a jacket and had a single bag sitting next to her. I guess… she probably moved her other things earlier in the day. I don’t know, to be honest.”

“I came in and ask why she was wearing a jacket and she just asked me to sit down. I could tell something was off, but I wasn’t prepared for… she…”
Eli dropped her head and tried to hold back tears. “Elicchi… you don’t have to if you don’t want to…”

Eli wiped her eyes and shook her head. “I have to.”

Taking a deep breath, she started again. “I never sat down, I just stood in front of her. Eventually she looked up at me, straight in the eye, and said ‘I don’t want to be with you any more.’ After she said it, nothing on her face changed. It was like she knew what she was going to say and she didn’t have any problem at all saying it. It… surprised me. Hadn’t Maki always been the one that would say something and then be embarrassed right afterwards? Or at least show some kind of emotion?”

“To see her so decisive about it was… such a shock, I couldn’t stop asking her questions. Every time I asked something she would come back with an answer, like it didn’t even require thinking on her part. Why was she doing this, does she really mean it, why can’t we try to fix things… she just answered clearly and without a second thought.”

“Do you think she’d planned it all along?” Nozomi asked, knowing full well that it was at least somewhat planned.

“Would she have? I mean, as far as I could tell we were doing just fine. Sure, we had our occasional fights and whatnot but doesn’t every couple do that? We fixed things afterwards and we got along.”

“I just keep asking myself, why? What happened that could have brought on such a sudden breakup? There were no hints, no warnings…”

Nozomi took a sip of tea. “Are you sure? Think about her actions. Nothing was different?”

Eli swirled the little tea that was left in her cup. What really had gone on lately? Had Maki been any different?

“Oh.

“Actually… ever since the rest of Muse had that meeting at the cafe… you know, when Maki had gone on a diatribe about how everyone was wrong for wanting to go find Honoka? When she sat there and lectured the group about… what did she say? ‘Not paying attention to the feelings of a
guy they all cared about’ or something?”

Or something? Elicchi, were you paying attention to her at all?

“Ugh, it was so… not Maki, ya know? And the things she said only caused more hurt among the group. What did all of that accomplish, really? Ah! I remember what she said, that part about ‘both the girl and the solution to her problems were right in front of them but they couldn’t stop talking and thinking long enough to let her… “

Eli stopped mid-sentence. She looked down at her tea cup before slowly putting it on the table in front of her. As she put her hands in her lap, Nozomi reached over to grasp her hands as if sensing that Eli had just had an epiphany.

“Maki… wasn’t just talking about us and Honoka… was she?”

A single tear drop.

Nozomi looked at Eli, knowing that Eli had just figured it out. Eli looked back, hoping that she’d find Nozomi with a smile that showed she had misunderstood something.

No smile appeared.

“She was… talking to me too… about us… I couldn’t s-stop…”

Before Nozomi could even try to wrap Eli in another hug, the blonde nearly launched herself at her best friend and began crying harder than she had all night.

“I DID THIS! It was me!”

Nozomi, while doing everything she could to comfort her friend, allowed herself to feel some comfort of her own. Her friend was starting to figure everything out.

She understands now. Thank the gods. Maybe now she can finally help herself and see all of this
with new eyes.

The two wept together and held each other closely well into the night.

---

**Three months after Honoka’s disappearance**

**Kanda Shrine**

Nozomi was cleaning up after a wedding that has just occurred at the shrine that morning. Most of the wedding and reception equipment had been put away and she was now straightening up the inner part of the shrine itself, putting away the equipment used by the head priest. Feeling that the room was mostly in order, she walked out into the courtyard to sweep the grounds.

Starting from the front of the courtyard was her tradition, so she moved out the torii gate with her broom.

“Nozomi!”

She heard a voice coming from the road. Kotori was waving at her and smiling brilliantly while holding the hand of Umi, who was in a nearly constant state of embarrassment while holding hands with her girlfriend.

Nozomi waved back gently and waited for the two to approach her. She was wearing her traditional miko garb with a white top and red bottom. The couple approaching her were clearly enjoying their weekend and had a few shopping bags in tow.

“Hey Nozomi!” Kotori trotted to Nozomi’s side.

“Hey girl, how is my favorite couple doing today?”
Umi blushed faintly at the word ‘couple’ but ventured on. “We’re fine, thank you very much. How was the wedding this morning?”

Nozomi smiled in genuine happiness. “Come on, you know it’s my favorite thing in the world. Weddings are so full of happiness, joy… and hope. It makes my week!”

“I’m so glad you’re happy!” Kotori beamed. “I’m sorry we invited you shopping at an inconvenient time. We should have called earlier.”

Nozomi shrugged. “Don’t be. We can do it another time.”

Umi shifted her stance slightly. “So Nozomi… how are you?”

“I just told you, the wedding was so perfect!”

Umi managed to look stern for a moment and folded her arms. “Nozomi… we mean how are you? Please, everyone knows you’re single-handedly keeping Eli sane right now and you have been for two months. We were all there in the beginning, but after those first couple of weeks you took over completely and have been incredible. That will have an effect on anyone, regardless of how much they care for someone.”

Kotori touched Nozomi’s arm. “Nozomi, you don’t need to share any details. We just want to make sure you’re okay. For your sake and for Eli’s. If you have troubles it’ll affect her too, you know.”

They were both right. In her high school days Nozomi would have pulled out a deck of tarot cards and put on an act to imply that she knew much more than she really did and everyone should just stop worrying. Although she still had the urge to play off her problems, these days she resisted that urge when it was somewhat serious.

Letting down her guard, she confessed. “It’s… tough. I am more tired than I used to be, and that’s why I was truly sorry to decline the invitation to shop with you. But I’m not pushing myself too hard. I’ve been honest with myself and any time I haven’t been able to give 100% for Elicchi, I’ve passed her off to you guys. Granted, it’s only been like twice…”

Umi nodded. “But, that’s enough for me to trust that you know your limits. Thank you for looking
out for yourself, and for her.”

Nozomi smiled… strangely. “It’s what best friends do for each other. You two would know that about yourself, yeah? You were best friends before you were lovers.”

Umi blushed at the word ‘lovers’ as Kotori found her hand and entangled them again.

“I agree, Nozomi! Isn’t my best friend the cutest blue-haired girl in the world? It just makes me want to…” Kotori was intentionally overdoing it to get--

*hnnmph*

Umi’s face exploded with red as she turned and crossed her arms.

--to get that response.

“Sooon cute!” both Kotori and Nozomi squealed.

“I’m not inviting either of you to go shopping ever again! Good day to you, Toujou-san.” Umi walked away from the shrine out of sheer embarrassment.

Kotori and Nozomi giggled at the mention of Nozomi’s family name as they gave each other a parting hug. Kotori then waved as she skipped towards her girlfriend and prepared to capture her from behind. “You two love birds take care!” Nozomi yelled after them.

Nozomi loved seeing those two as a couple. She’d tried to get them together multiple times both in high school and shortly thereafter, unfortunately failing each time. The archer just couldn't wrap her head around the fact that she actually liked girls and that another girl would, in fact, return those feelings of attraction.

Kotori, for her part, was persistent. She’d finally broken through Umi’s armor one winter evening a couple of months ago when the two were sharing a kotatsu and some cherries. Apparently Umi couldn’t stop staring at Kotori’s totally-not-intentionally-seductive method of dipping a cherry in whipped cream and cleaning it ever so slowly with the tip of her tongue before eating it. A dozen
cherries later the two were sharing cherry flavored kisses under the kotatsu while Umi tearfully confessed everything she’d ever thought about Kotori.

*If they were any more adorable I might hate them. But, no luck.*

Nozomi made her way inside the shrine complex and into her room. It’d been a long day and she was just glad to be sitting. Even though the sun was still an hour or so from setting, she crawled over and grabbed her futon from the closet, laying it out with just a sheet so she could lay down for a quick nap. She grabbed her cell phone and sprawled out on the mat when noticed she had a text message.

**MESSAGE**

1 hr ago

ELICCHI: hey Nozomi, i’m out of my meetings now. the last few days had been good but i’m kinda down today. can i come over?

Nozomi sighed, staring straight at the ceiling. She momentarily set the phone down next to her before she picked it back up and texted her friend.

**ME:** yeah, come on. i just finished with the wedding here and i’m taking a short break.

Nozomi stood up again, unhappy to be vertical.

**ELICCHI:** sure u don’t mind? i can wait until tomorrow.

**ME:** of course not! get over here you silly girl!

**ELICCHI:** thanks, lady. you’re the best and you always have been.

Nozomi put down the phone and started to change clothes. She thought back to Umi and Kotori’s warning but decided today would be okay.

*Always, huh?*
She donned some sweatpants and a light t-shirt resembling something she’d usually sleep in. She decided if she couldn’t be sleeping, she could at least be comfortable.

She sat down and couldn’t stop her own thoughts.

*Always... the best...*

---

**Four months after Honoka's disappearance**

**Eli's apartment**

“Any plans yet, Elicchi?”

“Mmmm... not really. I have a few obligations with my internship, but I'm otherwise fairly free. The idea of traveling is appealing, but nothing’s really struck my fancy as of yet. Yourself?”

“Obon festival will be a little busy, but on opposite sides of the holiday I usually get some time to myself. If you go anywhere, let me know. I'd love to invade your space--- er, I mean I'd love to join you.” Nozomi have a wink and a smile.

Eli smiled back. She was so happy that summer holidays were coming soon. At the end of next week she'd be free for two months of relaxation!

Well, kind of. She’d end up traveling a little to help coach a troupe of dancers she'd been working with as part of her university internship this semester, but save for a pair of weekends around the beginning and end of the break, she was relatively free. She'd thought about what she could do and decided she wanted to spend a lot of that time with Nozomi, if possible, so this conversation was a way for her to feel out Nozomi’s feelings on the matter.
“Oh, by the way, I chatted with Maki again last night via text. It's starting to get easier for me. I think it’s getting easier for her as well, though the conversations are still pretty short.”

“Again? That's three times this week and it's only Friday!” Nozomi's expression shifted quickly from smiling at the joy of summer to concern for her best friend.

“Yeah well…. I can't say I'm upset about it. It's nice talking with her again…”

Nozomi glanced around, clearly thinking about something.

Maki and Eli had started to exchange text messages and emails on occasion in the last few weeks. Initially she was really scared at the idea of trying to contact her ex who had almost fallen off the face of the earth in her eyes, but upon reaching out to the redhead Eli was surprised to end up having a civil texting conversation for ten minutes one night earlier this month.

Ten minutes. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Eli to understand that Maki wasn't against contact and, by her own admission a week later, wasn't against meeting up sometime for coffee or a meal. It seemed they'd both had long enough to digest the breakup and now they were ready to start talking things over.

Eli had told Nozomi about the messages the next day and Nozomi nearly exploded. Perhaps it was her motherly nature, but she immediately started an investigation with Eli. She asked what they talked about, who started it, why now, are you sure you're okay with this, do you want me to be with you next time…

If Eli was honest, it was the most uncomfortable she could ever remember Nozomi being around her. Eli didn't completely understand her best friend sometimes, but when she saw her the next day just as happy and jovial as ever, Eli decided it was just Nozomi's protective side coming out.

“What's wrong, Nozomi? I thought you said these conversations might be good for me...”

“I did. And I thought they would be, but I didn't expect them to be so often…”

Eli gave a questioning glance. “I'm not sure I understand, Nozomi.”
Nozomi shook her head slightly. “It’s nothing. I guess I was hoping you’d ease yourself into it to protect yourself. But… if you're already this comfortable with talking to her, then that's great, yeah?”

Eli gave a small smile. “Yeah… I'm happy about it.”

After a long silence, Nozomi stood up and stretched. “Hey, I'm beat from this week. Mind if I take a bath and borrow some of your comfy clothes?”

“Wear your own comfy clothes! You've left enough here lately.” Eli stuck out her tongue.

“But my clothes don't smell like you…” Nozomi pouted and gave her best puppy dog eyes.

Eli blushed. “Geez, stop saying things like that. Save it for your future boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever.” Eli laughed and got up. “Fine, I'll grab something for you.”

Nozomi was already walking towards the bathroom. “Nah, it's okay. I'll get my own stuff.”

The pace with which Nozomi walked was surprising, but Eli sat back down and tried to finish the little homework she had left.

After twenty minutes and mild irritation at the complexity of her homework, Eli finished everything. Hearing the water still running, she figured Nozomi was taking a shower instead of a bath. Her apartment had a bathroom with a shower next to the bath, so she decided to steal the bath from Nozomi while she was showering.

She disrobed and tossed her clothes into her room. The two of them had been to so many onsen and public baths together in their lives, sharing the bathroom in Eli's apartment was no big deal at all. In fact, it was quite familiar to them. Much more than it had ever been with Maki, who had preferred modesty most of the time, unless they were in bed.

Eli knocked on the door gently and announced her entrance as she opened the door.

“Hey Nozomi, I'm gonna come in wi--”
“ELIIIIIII!!”

At the scream Eli stopped suddenly as she saw Nozomi sitting on the floor of the shower. The girl's knees were pulled to her chest and her breaths were labored as she looked down between her chest and legs and screamed.

“Nozomi! What's wrong!? Are you okay!?” Eli quickly stepped into the shower room and closed the door behind her. Nozomi lifted her face, clearly stunned.

She wasn't hurt. She was crying.

“Eli...cchi…”

Eli immediately kneeled down in front of Nozomi and pulled her close, embracing her as the water ran steadily over the top of their bodies.

“Elicchi... I'm... s-sorry…”

Nozomi’s perspective

“What's wrong, Nozomi? I thought you said these conversations might be good for me...”

_I did say that, but I thought they'd be good for you in a different way... for closure, not for hope._

“I did. And I thought they would be, but I didn't expect them to be so often…”
Eli gave a questioning glance. “I'm not sure I understand, Nozomi.”

I know you don't, Elicchi. It's okay.

Nozomi shook her head slightly. “It’s nothing. I guess I was hoping you'd ease yourself into it to protect yourself. But… if you're already this comfortable with talking to her, then that's great, yeah?”

Eli gave a small smile. “Yeah… I'm happy about it.”

In the past, Nozomi had done everything she could to keep her thoughts to herself. She'd been having trouble with that lately, though, especially now that Eli and Maki were talking again. She couldn't let herself think out loud; it wouldn't be fair to her best friend who was clearly not over her ex. In fact, the situation seemed quite the opposite. She longed for the younger girl.

Maki's winning again. Just like she always did.

Geez, stop thinking Nozomi. What the hell is wrong with you? What kind of a friend are you for actually wishing for your best friend to be single?

Nozomi glanced up at the face of the blonde who was in another world, thinking about her former girlfriend with the slightest of smiles.

You're the worst, Nozomi.

Nozomi needed to escape. She was starting to get too negative towards herself, something that could be healthy in moderation but toxic in high concentrations. She stood up much faster than she’d intended to.

“Hey, I'm beat from this week. Mind if I take a bath and borrow some of your comfy clothes?”

“Wear your own comfy clothes! You've left enough here lately.” Eli stuck out her tongue.
“But my clothes don't smell like you…” Nozomi pouted and gave her best puppy dog eyes.

*That was a mistake. Please buy that joke... even though it's not a joke.*

Eli blushed. “Geez, stop saying things like that. Save it for your future boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever.” Eli laughed and got up. “Fine, I'll grab something for you.”

*Did she just... blush at...*

It was getting worse.

*No no no no no god no no no....*

Nozomi nearly forgot to respond as she headed for the bathroom. “Nah, it's okay. I'll get my own stuff.”

Nozomi nearly jogged to the bathroom, using a quick pace so as to get under the water as soon as possible. She needed a place to release. She needed a place to hide.

She'd been like this much more often these days and these feelings were starting come out at dangerous times. She wasn't able to control her emotions with the poker face she used to have back in high school any more. Whether it was conscious or not, she'd become much more up front with her friends about her feelings and emotions.

Though that wasn't very helpful right now.

Turning on the shower, she let it warm up while she removed her clothes and then stepped under the hot, steaming water.

*She doesn't understand me. It was probably my fault a long time ago but now... I know she's still recovering from her breakup with Maki but...*

*And that blush! What was that all about?! Was she really embarrassed by me wanting to...*
I mean, the fact that I really do wear her clothes because of the smell is kind of weird, I admit. But what if she actually...

She leaned against the wall. Nozomi was going in circles again and it was driving her crazy. She lived a blessed life in everything not emotion-related, but it was threatening to ruin her friendship if she allowed it to be set free.

Nozomi... Elicchi doesn't love you... she loves someone else.

She loves...

...someone else...

...dammit.

She slid down the bathroom wall and held her knees against her chest.

And started crying.

“S-she loves… someone else…”

She let it all out. Just like she had a dozen times during high school and a dozen more since Eli had confessed to Maki. It was time for her periodic purge of all of the desperate, primal longing she had for the girl she dared to call her best friend.

But because of a single blush from the girl she dared desire, this time was bad. Very bad.

Best friend...

Friend...
No, this time was the worst.

She took a deep, deep breath. And let it out.

“ELIIIIIII!!”

“Nozomi! What's wrong!? Are you okay!?”

Nozomi looked up with surprise and terror as she saw the girl whose name she’d just screamed standing nude in front of her.

Oh no…

She couldn’t pretend she saw a spider or tripped and fell… she was stuck with no escape. There was no way to explain this.

Oh no oh no oh no oh no...

“Eli...cchi…”

Eli immediately kneeled down in front of Nozomi and pulled her close, embracing her as the water ran steadily over the top of their bodies.

“Elicchi… I'm… s-sorry…”

I really am… please believe me.

“W-what, why are you sorry? Oh babe, come on. Talk to me. Tell me.”
Nozomi wanted to. Desperately.

But she couldn't. She was afraid of what would come out of her mouth given how weak she felt at the moment.

This… is for you, Elicchi… I won’t say anything because I can't… for you...

So instead, she just cried as hard and as uncontrolled as she ever had in her life. And it felt amazing. There she was, as she had been many times, letting out everything that had built up inside of her, but this time someone was there to help her. Someone was there not to ask her questions or snap her out of it, but to hold her and comfort her.

It was everything she'd ever wanted. And it only made her cry harder.

Eli was holding her and petting her head gently. “Hey, Nozomi. Let's dry you off and go lay down. You don't need to talk… just lay with me.”

Nozomi only nodded and Eli slowly unwrapped herself. They both dried off and put on some night clothes - Eli forced Nozomi to wear some borrowed clothes, throwing Nozomi's sleepwear into the depths of Eli's closet.

Nozomi allowed herself a small chuckle. “I may never find those again now.”

“Hush you, and lay down.”

Nozomi lay down on Eli's bed and Eli joined her by her side. Eli nudged Nozomi onto her left shoulder and Eli wrapped herself around the purple haired girl yet again.

“I don't know what's going on and I don't need to if you don't want to tell me. But you've been there for me every day for a long time, so now it's my turn. You'll always be my best friend, no matter what you may say or do.”

Is that so? I wonder.
No, that was too dangerous to wonder about. Not right now.

“Thank you, Elicchi. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Nozomi.”

I know you do. I really do know it. But we’re different, you and I.

I'm IN love with you, Eli. I have been forever.

Four and a half months after Honoka’s disappearance

Kotori’s apartment

“The irony of Eli calling the two of you to go out with me is staggering.” Nozomi was walking into an apartment with her favorite Muse couple after a long afternoon of shopping for absolutely nothing in particular.

“Friends will help friends, as you well know. Think of it as payback for not taking better care of yourself, Nozomi.” Umi gave a friendly but somewhat serious finger wave to Nozomi.

“Trust me, I think I learned my lesson after spending an hour in that fabric and sewing shop with you and Kotori.” Nozomi winked at Kotori who was already sneering back at her. “But seriously, thanks again for taking me shopping, Umi, Kotori. I really needed the time away from the shrine.”

Umi set down her shopping bags and closed the door to Kotori’s apartment. “It’s never a problem. To be frank, it was nice to have another person along for the trip. I like shopping, but not the way Kotori does.”
Kotori pouted. “But you come along all of the time.”

Umi turned her head slightly and mumbled. “Because you’re so cute when you’re happily browsing all of those shops.”

“Get a roooooom!” Nozomi said before reconsidering. “Oh shoot, this is your room. Awkward….”

Kotori skipped over to her girlfriend and planted a kiss on her cheek. “I love you, Umiwoomi!”

Tomatoes would envy the vibrant shade of Umi was now wearing on her face. “I’M GOING TO MY ROOM.” She grabbed her shopping bags and went back into another room of the apartment.

“That’s our room, dear.” Kotori couldn't get enough of teasing her girlfriend.

Kotori set about making dinner and Nozomi relaxed on the couch, reading a book she’d just bought while on her shopping trip with the couple. After a half hour, Umi emerged from the bedroom looking fairly refreshed and joined Nozomi on the couch with a book of her own. The three went about their own business until Kotori called them up to the dinner table for the evening meal.

“Look… I know I’ve been avoiding the issue today, so I understand if you want to ask some questions about what happened with me and Eli.” Nozomi tried to avoid any discomfort in most areas of her life, so she decided a preemptive strike would benefit everyone this evening. “Really, it’s okay.”

Umi looked relieved. “I don’t think we have any questions other than just wanting to know what happened. Would you be willing to give us a basic idea?”

Nozomi considered for a moment and agreed to tell her story.

She explained the stressful day she’d had on the day when she broke down in front of Eli. She told about how she’d ended up allowing Eli to come over when she wasn’t feeling all that up for it and the emotional stress it put upon her. Then about Eli teasing her…
At this point, Nozomi began leaving out a lot of details, especially about her mental state and the actual reasons for her break down - namely unrequited love.

_They don’t need to know that. It’s my problem, not theirs._

“In the end it was my fault. I took on too much, just like you’d warned me not to a few weeks before. I admit my mistake and apologize for ignoring your advice.” Nozomi gave a small bow.

Kotori stared at her with unusually inquisitive and expectant eyes. Umi noticed this and suddenly cleared her throat. “Well hey, this dinner was great. Kotori, love, I’m going to go to our room for a moment and take care of something I should have done when we got home. I’ll be back in about ten minutes. Sorry Nozomi, will you excuse me please?”

“Of course, your house your rules!” Nozomi smiled as Umi stood up and took everyone’s plates to the kitchen before heading to the back of the apartment and closing the door to their room.

Kotori was still staring at Nozomi, but suddenly stood up and made her way to the kitchen. Nozomi was unusually uncomfortable right now and she couldn’t explain why.

“Hey Nozomi, could you bring me that plate from the middle of the table that Umi forgot?”

Nozomi grabbed it and stood up. “Sure, yeah.” She walked to the kitchen and handed it to Kotori, who took the plate and set it down in the sink.

Before she could fully turn away from Kotori she found that a hand had placed itself on either of her shoulders and she was being turned back to face Kotori - who was looking down and seemed to be trying to compose herself.

“What are you doing, Nozomi?”

...huh?

“Why are you doing this to yourself?
Kotori looked up with an intensity Nozomi would have never expected from the girl. She was looking straight into Nozomi’s eyes as if determined to extract the answers to her questions through willpower alone.

“What!”

“WHY, Nozomi? Why haven’t you told Eli?”

“Why haven’t you confessed to Eli?”

Nozomi was pushed surprisingly forcefully against the wall of Kotori’s apartment by the girl herself.

“WHY, Nozomi? Why haven’t you told Eli?”

Nozomi was in trouble. Kotori knew. Or was she bluffing? It would be the bluff of a lifetime if she was.

“What s-should I tell her, Kotori?” Nozomi was in trouble. Kotori knew. Or was she bluffing? It would be the bluff of a lifetime if she was.

“That you’re in love with her. That she’s all you think about. That you’re dying inside because of her and that she’s the only thing that wakes you up every day. Just the thought of seeing her at the end of the day allows you untold pleasure and happiness from dawn to dusk. That you’ve loved her for a long time.”

Kotori released Nozomi’s shoulders. “Any of those will do, Nozomi. All would be better.”

Kotori crossed her arms and looked down and to the side. “I know the eyes you have. I know those eyes because they’re the same eyes I looked in the mirror and saw for a year or more. I wanted to tell Umi so many things… so many sweet nothings… I wanted to share so many hugs and kisses
“You long to be something other than the reliable best friend you’ve always been. You have done your best every day for that girl and she’s noticed it every time. EVERY time she noticed your actions on her behalf, and EVERY time she didn’t actually understand WHY you did what you did.”

Kotori grabbed Nozomi again, getting uncomfortably close to the older girl. “You have to tell her, Nozomi. You can’t live like this. Is the possibility of rejection really worse than an eternal loveless purgatory?”

“B-but Maki and Eli are… they’re…”

“They’re what? Estranged and broken up for a quarter of a year? Nozomi, sometimes in life it’s okay to be selfish. If Maki wanted Eli for herself she could show up to Eli’s front door, say a few words, and have that girl back in her arms within 30 seconds. For Maki, it really is that easy.”

Kotori made sure Nozomi was looking directly at her. “Is that what you want? Or do you want the chance to win the princess for yourself?”

Kotori backed off and let Nozomi have some room to herself.

“I’m sorry, Nozomi. But I knew everything the moment you started talking about that night with you and Eli. I’ve been there. But you can’t sit around forever and wonder what might happen when you can find out for yourself through your own actions.”

“Look… I don’t know if it’s ‘right’ to confess to Eli. But I don’t think it’s wrong, Nozomi. And given how long you’ve felt like this… I think even Maki would understand.”

Nozomi was speechless for one of the few times in her life. There was nothing she could say. Kotori had been right about everything and there wasn’t a single thing she could try to counter with. It really was that simple. But that didn’t make it any easier.

“You don’t need to do it tonight or tomorrow, just… think about it. You deserve to be happy just like Eli does. And who knows… maybe you’re the one who could give her that happiness.”
Kotori leaned in and gave the taller girl a hug. “Not matter what, we both love you.”

“Yeah, we do.” Umi had apparently arrived earlier and was standing in the living room with her arms crossed. “We want to see everyone as happy as possible, and that includes you.”

Nozomi felt tears starting to form in her eyes.

*I love my friends.*

Nozomi laughed to herself at the thought.

*I guess I could start by telling them.*

“I really love you guys, you know.”

Three girls smiled together.

“I need to tell her.”

---

**Five months after Honoka’s disappearance**

**Eli’s apartment**

Nozomi and Eli sat on the couch of Eli’s apartment. Eli was still holding the letter she received from Maki by way of that bubbly looking girl earlier. She had read it out loud to Nozomi, not wanting to part with it. Afterwards they sat in quiet contemplation, trying to digest what they’d just read together.
Nozomi exhaled. “I don’t know why, but it kind of figures that Maki would be the one to find Honoka, if she actually does it.”

“I thought the same thing. She’s always been like that.”

Today wasn’t going as planned. Nozomi had intended to invite herself over on this lazy summer afternoon and, if her resolve held, she was going to tell Eli everything; a full confession of love.

But it wasn’t to be. Eli had received a mysterious letter earlier in the day and had called Umi and Kotori to talk about it with them. They claimed to be busy, probably for Nozomi’s sake, and instead Eli called Nozomi who was happy to come over. Or so she thought.

Nozomi steered back to the topic at hand. “Well, do you think we should convene everyone and let them know?”

Eli thought for a moment. “It can’t hurt. It is speculation, but if Maki speculates she usually has a good reason for doing it.”

Even Nozomi couldn’t downplay the younger girl’s intuition. For all Nozomi knew, she was having a sandwich with Honoka this very second.

“Yeah, let’s call everyone.”

One of those phone calls

“Hey Nico, it’s Nozomi.”

“Hey there you! What’s up?”
Nozomi took a very deep breath.

“I have a favor to ask. One that would mean so much to me that I’d never ask a favor of you again if you so required.”

Silence for a moment.

“Geez, Nozomi. Way to get all serious right at the beginning of our traditional phone sparring contest. Of course I’ll help you, you don’t even need to ask. What’s going on?”

“I need you to ask some questions for me…”

The next day

A cafe in Ochanomizu

The blue eyes of a blonde haired girl surveyed her friends leaving the cafe. They had spoken for only a half hour, but much was accomplished and much was settled. For now, anyway.

“Maki knows where Honoka is…” Nico, who had stayed behind for a moment with Eli and Nozomi, seemed unsurprised by this.

“Yeah.” Eli shrugged and took a sip of her coffee.

Nico put her hands on her hips and gave Eli a look of surprise. “And you didn’t chase her?”

“I didn’t chase her when she broke up with me, as much as I wanted to. Why start now?”
“I thought you were in love with her. Weren’t you happy?”

“I was in the beginning. Towards the end? I don’t think I actually know. Whether I did or not then, I do now. I love her. But I don’t think she feels the same way anymore.”

Nico seemed to understand. “How does that make you feel?”

“Two distinctly different ways. I’m happy that she’s out and being the bold Maki she used to be; the Maki I fell in love with. On the other hand, seeing her so free without me makes me feel like I am the worst kind of person. I suppressed that in her. What the hell was I doing for so long? How could I have messed up so badly with two girls I called my friends?

Nozomi interjected into the conversation. “It seems like you have a good perspective on things now, at least. You ought to give yourself a little credit for that.”

“Thanks. You’ve been helpful with that.”

Nico pressed the issue, bluntly. “So, will you try to move on?”

“Ya know, I guess I have to, at least a little. If we could make up, I think I’d be happy. But I also can’t shut out the world just because I’m focused on one girl. That wouldn’t be fair to myself or my feelings. The problem is figuring out how to move on.”

Nico wished for instant telepathy.

*Now, Nozomi.*

“I can help with that.”

Blue eyes widened as soft lips met.

In an instant, Nozomi had leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on the lips of her crush.
Before the two could part, Nico quickly walked away while smiling to herself.

*Go get her, Nozomi.*

After several seconds of the greatest sensation Nozomi had ever felt, Nozomi slowly pulled away from the face of her best friend.

“Eli, I need to tell you something…”

“I am completely and totally in love with you.”

Eli gasped and held her hand in front of her mouth.

“I'm… not sorry for this, Eli. I had to. I held myself back throughout high school and I regretted it. I held myself back when things weren't going well with you and Maki because I respected the both of you too much as friends to try anything.”

Nozomi moved closer to Eli on the bench seat, her voice becoming more and more desperate and her eyes beginning to tear up. “I've wanted you for so long and to finally have a chance… after years of watching, I can't watch any more. I want you. I want you even if you don't want me, but you need to know I feel like this.”

Eli was understandably stunned. She was desperately searching for something to hold onto emotionally, so Nozomi reached over and intertwined their fingers, smiling gently.

Eli had trouble speaking. “Nozomi… this is… so much… I don't know…”

“You don't need to know now. Seek what you need to seek. I'll be here for you just like always, watching over you the best way I know how. But if you can't find what you want elsewhere…”

“Please, let me love you. Please love me in return. You don't have to try hard for me, you don't have to become anything you aren't. Just you being you is already enough for me. Just being loved
by you would be enough for me.”

Eli felt…

What am I feeling?

This girl… this precious girl… my best friend…

Nozomi put her hand to Eli’s cheek and gently caressed her. “Eli, one lifetime wouldn't give me enough time to lavish you with the love I’ve felt since the day I met you. I only want the chance if you’ll give it to me willingly.”

Eli’s eyes met Nozomi’s loving emerald gaze.

She’s so amazing and she always has been.

How long has she suffered, doing all of these things for me not just because she's my friend… but because she's… loved me?

Eli smiled.

This girl. This beautiful, wonderful girl.

“Let me think. Please?”

Nozomi smiled happily. “As long as you need.”

She's always so amazing, Nozomi.

I think, just maybe…
I might love this girl...
Chapter 14 - Incongruent

Maki’s sixth day in Niigata

Honoka sat on the couch of Ayako’s apartment while the other four girls were playing a round of some card game Honoka didn’t completely understand. The game wasn’t of much interest to her, so she decided to pour herself a serving from Ayako’s stash of sake and read.

She spent the better part of the evening splitting her attention between drawings, drinks, and discourse. Originally she’d been reading some of Ayako’s various doujinshi but at some point along the line she picked up Escape, the doujinshi that Ayako had drawn based around the story of Honoka, Arisa, and Yukiho.

Reading over the lines, taking in the drawings, enjoying the pictorial representation of her girlfriends; it was only the second time she’d read the book and it was all so surreal. Seeing her personal experiences like this, from the perspective of some narrator, allowed her mind to absorb the scenario and experience her own life in a different way. Between the rush of nostalgia and the second serving of sake, she found herself with the book open in her lap, her head leaning back and staring at the ceiling.

It all changed when we came here. We had time to work everything out.

The pictures moved into scenes from their first days. They struggled, they fought, they cried, they loved…
They came together. They survived.

They thrived.

And now here we are. Happy. Thanks to that happiness we were able to accept and reconnect with Maki.

Honoka looked over at the table. Four girls were laughing, saying something about making up rules as they went along. Ayako said something along the lines of ‘I can’t believe you’d accuse me of such treachery’ while Maki wore a face that was one of exasperation and impatience - more often seen while the redhead was in the presence of Nico.

Back when those two neeeearly got together. Who knew they were just good friends who bickered in public and were actually interested in other people? But seriously, those science babies would have been adorable - short, obstinate, motherly, genius babies.

Oh Nico…

Ah, but then Eli made the move. A strong one, at that! Confessing to an underclassman at your own graduation? In front of all of those people, many of which had fawned over you for years? That’s forward, even for Eli.

Eli…

Honoka found herself struck by her own thoughts. Something in her head clicked.

Hm.

I wonder… why?

After all that happened these last few months, now I’m thinking about the good times. I’m remembering the fun things we did. I’m…
Oh wow.

I'm missing them.

I'm missing them? Or the times? Are the two mutually exclusive? I guess they don't have to be. And there's nothing wrong with missing someone, even if they've wronged you. It's like remembering the good times you had with an ex; even if you broke up under bad circumstances, that doesn't negate the good times.

So yeah... I guess I miss them.

“Honoka, are you okay?” Yukiho looked over at her sister,

Honoka noticed the way she was - staring at the ceiling with a book open on her lap. She readjusted herself and crossed her legs.

“Yes, sorry? I wasn’t paying attention.”

“No worries, it’s okay. You just looked really deep in thought. Painfully deep... actually, maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No no, it’s fine. I was..... I was thinking…” Honoka trailed off, taking a sip from her glass.

“Hmmm, what about?” Arisa looked interested.

Honoka looked at the ceiling again.

“I think I want to go back to Tokyo.”

The entire room was silent.
Honoka put down the glass and crossed her arms and sat back on the couch. “I think I want to go back to Tokyo for a day. Like, not to stay overnight. Just to go and say hello. Just to show everyone that I’m -- no -- that we’re okay. I think it’ be nice.”

Arisa stood up in a frenzy. “Whoa whoa, you want do do what?! Honoka, we left Tokyo because we didn’t want to be around those people any more! Because they were the ones continuing the problems that we were trying so desperately to solve on our own! And now that we’re here, now that we’re happy, you want to go back and pop your head in the door and announce that we’re alive and well?”

“Yeah, I think I do.” Honoka looked at Arisa with hazy eyes. Like she was looking at her but not seeing her.

Arisa started walking around the table towards Honoka. Yukiho stood up too, but made her way in between the two girls… just in case.

“No, Honoka. No! Look at where you’ve lead us! You lead us to a new life where we can make our own happiness without others getting in the way. Why change that now? Why give them a reason to interfere with our lives again?” Arisa was breathing faster, looking almost scared.

Yukiho grabbed Arisa’s right hand and held it to her chest. “Love, she did just say ‘I think’. It’s just an idea, right Honoka?”

“Mmm. An idea. But… I think maybe it’s a good one.” Honoka still looked a bit out of herself; like she was still replaying the past in her mind.

“See? It’s just a thought, Arisa. Nothing’s been decided.” Yukiho tried to console her girlfriend.

“But what if it ends up being a decision? I don’t want anyone to go to Tokyo. I don’t want anyone back home to find out where we are. I don’t want to connect those two parts of our life.”

Honoka looked back at Arisa. “Why do you or I get to make the decision one way or the other? Who gets to decide when and if we do connect our two lives? What happens if I want to and you two don’t, or vice versa?”
Honoka’s eyes saddened. “I feel like I just figured out the last big hurdle of us moving here. And I’m sorry I brought it up so abruptly, Arisa, Yukiho. I’m sorry I upset you, Arisa. But it really was just a thought and I think it’s one we should think about.”

Arisa looked a lot more calm, having pulled Yukiho into a side-hug. “Yeah… yeah… sorry about that. You surprised the hell out of me, Honoka. But I was serious, too. I don’t think it’s a good idea. Maybe not forever, but for a long time I think we need to stay away. We need to make our own lives and they need to make theirs.”

Yukiho looked up at Arisa. “Can we really stay apart that long? At some point someone will find us - don’t you think we should recontact them on our own schedule, not on theirs?”

Arisa frowned. “You’re taking her side?”

“I’m not taking any side!” Yukiho protested strongly and pulled away from Arisa. “I think you’re both right in your own way. But I also think we need to come to a consensus about this. And I think we need to do it sooner than later.”

Honoka nodded slowly. “She’s probably right. Not exactly the kind of thinking I wanted to do with a weekend starting tomorrow…. fortunately I have work to distract me.”

Ayako spoke up. “I’ll be happy to give you as much work as you’d like so you don’t have a split second to think about anything!”

“On second thought, maybe I’ll call out of work.”

“Bad Honoka. No off day for you.” Ayako stood up and made her way to the toilet.

“If you need a…. Not-part-of-the-relationship person to talk to, I don’t mind listening to anything you want to talk about.” Maki shyly volunteered her services. “If you’re okay with me, that is.”

“For me too?” Arisa asked.

“Of course, for anyone.”
The three lovers exchanged glances. Maki suddenly realized what she’d gotten herself into.

“Looks like tomorrow will be a day of counseling by Dr. Nishikino!” Ayako made her reappearance while still re-tying her loungewear.

“Coming from you it sounds more like I’m a daytime talk show crock of a counselor, so please never say that again.” Maki looked back over her shoulder and stuck out her tongue.

“How rude.” Ayako went into her room. “I’ll just be in here trying not to make noise while I read lewd comics. Holler if you need me!”

“I… didn’t need to hear that…” Maki shook her head.

“But you liked it!”

“Weren’t you going to your room?”

Ayako squinted and stuck her tongue out before sliding the door to her room closed.

“Well,” Honoka got back on track, “mind if I call you tomorrow night after I get off work, Maki? Let’s go out and hang out for a bit. I’ll show you my favorite place for Honoka-to-herself time.”

“Fine by me. You ladies have a request?” Maki looked over at the younger girls.

“We were planning on going out together tomorrow… but I don’t mind if you come along. Is that okay, Arisa? I’m sorry we won’t be alone anymore.” Yukiho looked up at the blonde girl.

Arisa shrugged. “Sure, why not? We have our whole lives to be alone. We can spare a day for a friend who’s helping us anyway. Maki, could you meet us at our apartment around 9:30?”

“I’ll be there.”
“Great. Well… on that note, maybe we ought to head downstairs and go to bed. One of us has work tomorrow, isn’t that right Honoka, darling?” Arisa shot a wink at her girlfriend.

“Moooooooo I don’t wanna goooooooo…”

“Yeah yeah, let’s go to bed. If you’re good Maybe I’ll tuck you in.” Arisa giggled as she started towards to door.

“I’d rather I do the tucking, thank you.”

A thought crossed Honoka’s mind. “Or the two of us could pair up for a little bit of tucking… someone… else… into bed…”

Arisa and Honoka’s eyes met and then made their way to Yukiho, like lions surrounding a young gazelle. Yukiho now looked both aroused and scared.

_The troubles and pleasures of being the plaything of two girls’ desires._ Maki thought. _What a life._

“Go you three, before I choke on the mood.”

“Goodnight Maki!” Two girls cheered and headed for the door.

“G-goodnight… Maki…” One girl stood for a second, collecting herself. “I hope I’m awake enough to see you tomorrow.”

“So do I, Yukiho.”

_The next day_
Maki stared out the window of a bus that was rumbling through the downtown area of Niigata. She sat behind her two riding companions which were currently sharing a cold orange juice, sipping through two straws that were protruding from the bottle’s opening. The three girls were on their way to the city aquarium, placed quaintly on a road that runs along the coast of the Sea of Japan.

It was Saturday and as she was a civil servant, Arisa had the day off. Yukiho took the opportunity to suggest that she and Arisa should go out for the afternoon since Honoka and Ayako would be working evening shifts that day. Arisa loved the idea and put forward the aquarium as a place to enjoy being out and about without having to suffer through the dog days of summer while doing it.

Of course, last night’s events put a spin on events as Maki would now be joining them on their pseudo-date. That morning Maki arrived at the door right on time, asking once again if it was really alright to barge in on their alone time.

“Of course, Maki.” Yukiho was the first to reassure her. “I think we’ve got a lot on our minds after last night. Let’s work through it together.”

Thus, that morning the three packed Arisa's backpack with some snacks and drinks and headed off to the station. From there it was an easy twenty minute ride through the city to the coast. Maki had originally thought about quickly sitting next to one of the girls just to see if they'd pout, but she decided to allow the lovebirds some time to themselves since they didn't often get to go out just the two of them.

Maki marveled at the dynamic between each of the “couples” within the three girls’ relationship. Undoubtedly, it took a lot of hard work to ensure that their relationship stayed healthy from all angles, but it was still impressive that they were all as close as they were.

Moving away from outside influences probably helped with that. You start working for each other instead of others.

Maki sat back in the seat and looked at the empty seat across the way.

I wonder if Eli and I could have done the same thing, going away for a while and thinking about only ourselves. Would that have fixed us?

I didn’t want to hurt… I mean, she didn’t deserve for me to breakup with her the way I did, did she?
“This is the face of the Maki I knew for so long.” Arisa had turned around and was poking Maki’s right cheek. “And I'm not sure I like it. It's the ‘I'm dealing with something related to Eli’ face, and it doesn't suit you.”

Maki make a playful attempt to bite the finger that was lodged into her cheek and Arisa pulled away. “Sorry, I just got to thinking-”

“Bad habits die hard, I see.”

Maki glared with a smile. “Someone's become quite the feisty little babushka after moving out to the hinterlands.”

Yukiho couldn't suppress her giggles any longer, much to Arisa's annoyance.

“Hey, I've tackled someone once this week; don't make me do it again.” Arisa attempted to sound intimidating, but that's hard to do when the people you're addressing are currently laughing.

“Okay, okay love. There there.” Yukiho started to pet her blonde girlfriend who was mostly unamused at the exchange.

The bus pulled up to the entrance of the aquarium and they all disembarked. They purchased tickets and made their way into the aquarium, deciding to take a leisurely circle around the building.

They took their time and made a point to appreciate the variety of saltwater fish that were kept in the modest-sized aquarium. After a while, they purchased drinks from a vending machine and sat down in front of the penguin area to watch the antics of the sub-arctic animals.

Maki chose a milk tea, Arisa an Orangina, and Yukiho a lemonade. Sitting and watching the penguins, Yukiho and Arisa couldn't help but lean against each other.

*Man, I want to be that cute with someone.*
After a few moments Arisa noticed the redhead staring at them and donned a playful scowl.

“Yes, Maki-senpai? Anything you'd like to share with the class?”

“Oh nothing, you guys are just cute.” Maki sighed and sat forward on the bench. “In all honesty, back on the bus I was thinking about how the three of you coming out here was so go for your relationship. It makes me wonder if I needed to get farther away from Eli in order to fix all of that mess.”

This piqued Yukiho's interest. “Come to any conclusions?”

“Hmm… not yet. It's strange really. When I was in Tokyo I slowly worked towards independence from Eli's influence. After a few months I felt confident that I had removed myself from her emotional gasp, so to speak. So I started texting with her again but… that may have been a mistake. Those conversations got longer because they felt comfortable, familiar. I think I let down my guard.”

“But then I was saved. I went to Comiket and met Ayako and all of a sudden I had something to focus on. Now I'm here and ever since I've arrived I haven't thought about Eli at all.”

Maki took a sip of her milk tea. “So that presents a conundrum: I know I was happier after I left Eli. But am I happier without Eli, or am I happier without my relationship with Eli? If it's the former then it makes sense that I'd feel at ease here, physically separated from her. If it's the latter and I'm just happy without the relationship, then why do I feel so comfortable here? And why don't I want to leave?”

Yukiho raised an eyebrow. “You're sure then has nothing to do with Ayako?”

Maki shook her head. “No, I'm not sure at all. Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn't. I'm not sure-- wait, w-what do you mean Ayako?” Maki was instantly flustered.

“Oh come on Maki, I can see how you look at her.”
Arisa chuckled. “And we can definitely see the way she looks at you. Especially when you’re walking away from her and her eyes work their way downward…”

Maki stood up suddenly. “I need to throw my bottle away, be right back!” She started moving away from the two giggling girls at a surprising pace, trying to get that mental image out of her head.

*Does she really do that?!?! She is the lewd type but... AHH stop brain!!!*

Taking a moment to collect herself after throwing her bottle away, Maki returned to the penguin exhibit and sat down next to the other girls.

Crossing her leg and twirling her hair in a familiar fashion, she calmed herself and redirected the conversation. “Anyway, enough about me. We were supposed to be talking about you guys and what Honoka brought up last night.”

“Hey Maki,” Arisa said abruptly, sounding more serious than before. “.....thanks.”

“For what?”

“For taking care of my sister for so long. You... you took care of her when I couldn't. No, you took care of her when I wouldn't.”

Arisa locked eyes with Maki, clearly in pain. “Knowing that Eli was with you... and seeing how loyal you were to her while still trying to be loyal to Honoka as well... it really made me worry less.”

“I loved her then and I still love her now, but there was no way I could be around her because of how controlling she became. Maybe I could have helped her understand, maybe I could been more understanding myself...”

“But I left Eli. I told her I wasn’t her sister anymore, which was a terrible thing to do. The realist side of me knows I was justified in doing it and for being so absolute with the break, but the emotional part of me felt like I failed to help her understand my feelings for Honoka and Yukiho.”
Maki put a hand on Arisa's back. “She didn't *want* to understand. It was her choice. She tried to control the situation, just like she tried to with Honoka and eventually me. But, if I could be allowed to defend her for just a moment…”

Maki uncrossed her leg and started rubbing Arisa's back. “She thinks about you often. She always has. Eli never talked about ‘Honoka leaving’ or whatever, she always said ‘Arisa and them’. You were always first on her mind, no matter how you treated each other. I'm not saying she was right in what she did, but I don't believe she was ever angry at the girl named Arisa - she was upset she couldn’t solve your problems for you.”

Arisa sighed. “I guess that's the root of all of her problems, isn't it?”

Yukiho spoke up with a smile. “Hopefully she's working through those problems, just like everyone else is. Just like we need to…”

Arisa looked displeased. “I guess we can’t avoid it any longer.”

“Arisa, I’ll be straightforward.” Maki sat back on the bench. “Give me your best reason for not going to Tokyo. Because I’m pretty sure I can give you a better reason TO go.”

Arisa looked a bit taken back by Maki’s challenge, but quickly recovered. “I’ll give you as many as you want. Let’s start with the fact that I’m simply happy here and I don’t want to go. But if you need more than that, how about this: everything that made me and my family unhappy is in Tokyo. To merge my past with my present… I can't allow them to become the same thing. I refuse to risk my happiness for a chance to reclaim friendships that apparently mattered very little to begin with.”

Maki was unmoved. “So you’ll hide in your happy place, just to be safe?”

Arisa was firm without yelling. “I will *live* in my happy place and try to make others happy because I love them! I want to be loved, is that so wrong? I want to share my love with people that matter to me, is *that* so wrong?”

“Not at all,” Maki sat forward and got much closer to Arisa, “but you’re missing something - or rather, someone.”

“I have Honoka, I have Yukiho, as of late we have Ayako. Hell, we have you right now! Pray tell,
“You said it yourself earlier, Arisa. You played your own trump card. I believe your exact words were ‘I loved her then and I still love her now’ just a few minutes ago.” Maki grabbed Arisa’s hand. “You can tell me I’m wrong, but I don’t think you will. If you could regain a sister, if you could at least start the process of forgiving her… would you?”

“Maybe she’s right, love.” Yukiho was embracing her girlfriend gently from behind. “Maybe you… maybe we don’t have to merge our past and present. Maybe we can just connect them. We don’t have to force things. What’s wrong with the possibilities?”

Arisa felt a single tear making its way down her cheek. “I’m scared is what’s wrong.”

“Of what, love?”

“Of… her influence… of the others affecting us… making us want to go back, to abandon what we have here”

Yukiho’s hand gently grabbed Arisa’s chin and moved it towards her own face. “Do you really think any one girl is going to come between me and you? I don’t care how bossy she is, how much she thinks she can affect you, or what language she speaks.”

Yukiho squeezed Arisa’s chin. “I’m going to win. You’re mine. I’m yours. Got it?”

It took a moment for Arisa to nod in agreement and by that point Yukiho was wiping the tear from Arisa’s face.

“Good, I’m glad we understand each other.” Yukiho let go of her girlfriend and hugged her. “We still need to think about it. But know that I will protect you from everything, and I know Honoka will as well.”

Arisa thought for a moment. “If Honoka's going to protect anyone we should be sure to have a body pillow nearby… just in case.”
The three girls erupted in laughter.

“Hey, how about the dolphin show?” Arisa jumped out of her seat. “Last one there sits alone on the bus!”

The three stood up and jogged towards the outdoor part of the aquarium.

And Maki let Yukiho win the race.

Later that evening

Honoka's apartment

Honoka burst through the front door.

“I'm hooooooooooome!”

“And now the entire prefecture knows, thank you.” Yukiho said while washing dishes in the kitchen. “Did you bring it?”

Honoka squinted as she peeked around the corner at her sister. “I'm not sure if I want to give it to you any more with that kind of response to me coming home.”

“And who just cooked your dinner?”

“The book is right here!” Honoka held up a blue bag with a new manga volume for her sister.

“Dang, you've got her whipped good, Yukiho. I need to learn from you.” Maki was laying on the
couch reading the third volume of *Akuma no Riddle* while waiting for dinner.

“You need to learn how to be a better houseguest, methinks.” Honoka tossed her work apron at Maki, who batted it out of the way. “Anyway, after dinner do you want to go somewhere with me? I don't have work tomorrow so I wanna go to the 24-hour game center tonight. Yukiho isn't much into game centers and Arisa doesn’t like to throw off her sleep schedule so I usually go alone.”

“Sure, sounds good to me. I haven't been to a game center in ages!” Maki looked around for her purse. “I wonder if I even brought my game pass for Project Diva…”

“Vocaloid fan still, eh?” Honoka smiled. “I'm glad your tastes haven't changed. Anyway, we can catch a free taxi van from the station that runs every half hour. And if you don't have your card, I have mine. Though I don't play Project Diva nearly as much as you do, probably.”

Arisa poked her head out of the bedroom. “The next time you have a Saturday or Sunday off I demand a girlfriend date there. We haven't played games together in so long. Even though I suck at most of them.”

“Yes, dear. And you’re quite good at some of them, you know.” Honoka gave a wink and a smile.

“Whipped by two girls… Honoka, I fear for your freedom.”

Maki ducked a pillow that was playfully tossed at her.

An hour later

A local game center

Honoka and Maki entered the multi-storey game center and went straight for the music games on the second floor. The first floor of the building was mostly UFO prize games with a fair number of medallion-style games. The second floor was comprised of music games, RPG games, shooters,
and a few other kinds of games both girls failed to recognize.

It was around 9pm and the number of patrons in the store had begun to diminish from the usual weekend evening rush, so they were able to find a Project Diva machine that was unused. Putting their things down next to the game, they each pulled out their game cards and got change from the change machine.

“You up first, Honoka?”

“Sure, thanks. Gotta feel good about myself before you get your turn and I’m brought back down to earth.” Honoka gave a wink and put a coin in the machine.

“Yeah, whatever. You’re not as bad as you make yourself out to be, you know. I do beat you most of the time, but you’re not that far behind me.” Maki sat on the bench next to the game station.

“Hmmm…. what song to play first…” Honoka perused the song choices thoughtfully.

“Ah, here we go! I'll do *Rolling Girl* for my first song.”

Maki raised an eyebrow. “Starting with a song by Wowaka? Feeling ambitious tonight, I see.”

Honoka shrugged, pressed a few buttons, chose a level and a few other options, then got ready for the first round. The song started and she began pressing each of the four gameplay buttons in time with the song. After a few minutes and some stressful combos, Honoka finished.

“Hey, that was damn good! Okay Honkers, you’ve been practicing haven’t you?”

“Maaaaaybe. You got me into this game, ya know. It’s one of the few things that I took with me from Tokyo - my love for games. The first few times I came here I couldn’t play. I didn’t like what it reminded me of; no offense. It wasn’t *you* so much as *that place* that it reminded me of.”

Honoka sat down on the bench and Maki got up to take her turn.
“But eventually I was able to separate this game from Tokyo. It’s here, in my hands. My past life was something I left behind and no matter how much something here may remind me of my past, I am here and it isn’t.”

Maki tapped a few of the buttons and chose her song. “Sounds like you were a little better able emotionally separate yourself into this new life of yours than your girlfriends.”

“Maybe… geez, Maki. You’re starting with Leia? Look, we’re here to have fun, not try for carpal tunnel. Pace yourself.”

“Pssshhhh.” Maki got down to business and started the round. Honoka watched at the redhead moved along with the music, feeling the rhythm in her body. She hit notes with both hands, sometimes two with one hand, moving her hands rapidly across the play area in front of her. She nailed several long combos before finishing with a literal twist and a flourish, spinning in place before hitting the last note.

“Show off.” Honoka stood up for her next turn.

“Somebody's gotta put you in your place, young lady. Well -- actually, it looks like those two have already put you there with how whipped you sounded earlier.”

“Hey, it’s not being ‘whipped’ if it’s voluntary.” Honoka retrieved a water bottle from her bag and tossed it with some vigor towards Maki. “I ask a lot of those two and they give to me willingly. Others call it ‘whipped’ but I call it committed -- it’s showing them how much their feelings and actions mean to me, no matter when and where. They come first.”

“Does them coming first include going against your instincts and not going back to Tokyo like you think you want to?”

Honoka stood in silence, leaning against the game machine. “I’m… not sure.”

Maki took a drink from the water bottle and decided to keep quiet. There had to be a lot going on in the mind of the older girl and Maki had long since promised to listen more than she spoke during her time in town. Now was the time to put that into practice.

After a long minute Honoka spoke again. “I want to do what’s best for us, but I’m also willing to
let us enter into situations where we might make mistakes. Trying to circumvent your future mistakes and problems is just another form of control. There's nothing wrong with controlling certain things, especially here in the present. But... how can I say this...”

“I don’t want to control my future because you never actually reach the future. When the future comes, it’s not the future any more; it’s the present. Instead, I want to help steer my present for a better everything -- past, present, and future.”

“So you won’t force it?” Maki stood up and paced. “But it sounds like you think going to Tokyo is the best direction to steer your life. What happens if those girls resist again?”

“Then I’ll wait until they’re ready and I’ll prepare to deal with the consequences.” Honoka turned and put another coin in the game machine. “But I won’t stand idle while either of them try to put off the inevitable. I’ll keep bringing it up because I think it’s important.”

Honoka played another song, markedly more difficult than the last one. Maki was genuinely impressed at Honoka’s improved skill at the game. She had closed the gap between the two’s skill considerably in the last few months.

*She chose ‘Love is War’ as her song.*

How appropriate.

Honoka made it through the very difficult song and panting, turned to face Maki. “We can’t be a secret forever. The time will come sooner or later, but we do have the chance to choose when that time is.”

“Last night I started thinking about Nico and Eli and all I thought of were the happy memories we shared. Nothing was ugly or angry. And then I got thinking... what if you or Ayako or someone got mad at me for something I did and I knew it was my fault... and then what if one day they left without saying anything. How would I feel?”

Honoka rested her hands on the game console and leaned forward. “I don’t regret my actions for coming here. I feel completely justified. But I don't want my happiness to cause others unhappiness. After all this time, I feel like I at least owe those girls a hug and an explanation. Not a justification, just an explanation.”
Maki walked towards Honoka’s side. “Then you know what you have to do. You have to convince one girl that no matter what happens in Tokyo, everything’s going to be okay. That connecting your past and present isn’t merging them.”

Honoka sighed and raised an eyebrow. “That’s… rather insightful, Maki. But probably easier said than done.”

Maki laughed. “Kinda like that song you just played, that was awesome. Let me give it one more go and then let’s play something else. Preferably something where I’m actually still better than you.”

“You’re on, little girl.”

**Ayako's apartment**

**The next morning**

Maki wasn't usually one to complain about the sun intruding into her bedroom in the morning. In fact, as far as alarms went the slow seeping of sunlight through the window was fairly tame in the grand scheme of things. It's like a warm embrace rousing you from your peaceful dreams.

But what she wasn't used to was complete darkness followed suddenly by a blinding beam of light that seemed to encompass her entire being. Such was the feeling as Ayako violently thrust open the curtains to her bedroom, jolting Maki awake.

Maki groaned and grabbed her pillow to pull it over her head. “Urrrnrgnnn what are you doing, Ayako?”

“How about you wake up? Letting light into my dungeon of dreams. Anyway, you should wake up.” Ayako walked over to Maki’s floor mat and tried to remove the pillow from over the younger girl’s face. Maki was having none of it.
“Sleep. I want sleep.” Maki said in a muffled voice through her pillow.

“And I want a sandwich, but neither of us are getting what we want now are we? It's 10am, Maki. Time to take your place among the living.”

Maki released the pillow, hoping Ayako would fall over from her continued pulling. No luck. So she put her arm over her eyes and decided to continue complaining in the hopes that Ayako would give up and go away.

“I went to bed at 4. Give me a break.”

Ayako tossed the pillow back at Maki. “Whose fault is that? Probably the girl that was at a game center for four hours in the middle of the night and then came home and read manga for a few hours.”

Maki groaned and rolled over, realizing she wasn't going to be allowed to go back to bed. “Fine, I'm getting up. Why are you waking me up, anyway?”

Ayako grabbed a few things from the living room and started putting them away in the closet. Apparently she'd been up doing laundry this morning.

“I want to go out to lunch with you and then we're going to meet up with the other three later this afternoon. They said they wanted to chat about… stuff.”

“Ah… probably *that* stuff…”

Ayako rubbed her neck. “Yeah… probably…”

Maki stood up, walking over to the taller girl. “I don't think you need to worry about it, Ayako. I think they're working things out on their own and doing it pretty well. At least, that's what I saw yesterday and last night from them. They seem… I think they agree, but in different ways.”

Ayako looked solemn, lost in her own thoughts. Maki put a hand on her shoulder. “Ayako… you're worried they're going to leave, aren't you?”
Ayako chuckled and shook her head. “Am I really that transparent?”

Maki hugged from behind, resting her head on black hair. “Only when you’re talking about people you care about. Never change that.”

Maki couldn’t see the immense blush running across Ayako’s face at that moment, but she had an idea it was there. Ayako put a hand on the hands wrapping her from behind.

“Thanks, Maki. If you tell me not to, I won’t.”

“Good. Now close the window and let me go back to sleep.”

“No, you're mine for the next few hours and I plan on taking advantage of that.” Ayako turned around and poked her on the forehead.

“Taking advantage of a college girl? How bold.” Maki winked and made her way towards the shower.

Maki… I will never be able to win a word battle with you, will I?

Three hours later

Toyano Lagoon Park

Ayako handed Maki a beer out of the convenience store plastic bag and then pulled one out for herself. The two were sitting on a blanket in a wooded area near a pond in a very large park south of the city center. It was only a 15 minute bus ride from the south side of Niigata station and was spacious enough that they could find a spot on the shade to avoid the later summer heat.
They had gone to lunch at a ramen restaurant near the station called Hamakita. Ayako was a big fan of ramen, especially tonkotsu pork broth style ramen, and this shop served this style exclusively. Maki usually went more for miso style but she didn’t mind changing things up once in awhile.

After their lunch they went to the park to meet up with the downstairs trio.

“Ya know, I’ve been wondering.” Ayako took a sip of beer from the white, black, and gold can. “I call other groups of family members by their family name, like ‘the Higuchis’ or ‘the Suzukis’ for example. But I don’t know how to collectively address our three friends. I know they aren’t married or anything, but I feel like we should be able to say something shorter than ‘Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa’ every time. Thoughts.”

Maki pondered this. “Never really thought about it, to be honest. If I’m talking about them I just say ‘them’ and that’s all. But I guess it is a good point. What would I say if I wanted to invite them over for dinner? ‘Hey, let’s have those three inseparable girls from downstairs up for dinner tonight’ or something like that?”

Ayako grinned devilishly. “Already planning on inviting them up to an apartment that you share with me, eh? And you said I was being bold.”

Maki blushed slightly. “Stop it. I was just giving an example. Butthead.”

“Hello middle school insults! Oh how I’ve missed thee!”

Maki swung her beer-free hand in the general direction of Ayako who managed to avoid the harmless impact. Just about this time three girls could be seen in the distance headed straight for the blanket being shared by Ayako and Maki.

“You could always ask them, you know. They’re your friends.” Maki took a long sip of beer. “They’ve probably never thought about it either.”

“Nah, that would be kind of embarrassing actually. I’ll just come up with something silly and attach it to them without their knowledge.”

Maki smirked as the three girls approached and called out to them. “HEY LADIES! WHAT DO
Ayako nearly spilled her and Maki’s beer as she launched herself towards the redhead, trying in vain to cover her mouth. Between the incredibly random question and the reaction that Ayako had given in response to said question, the three girls decided to ignore it and sit down like nothing had ever happened.

“Nice to see you two lovebirds also.” Arisa greeted the two.

“We’re not… love… BIRDS.” Maki struggled to remove Ayako from her while responding to the blonde’s statement. “I hate this strange girl, to be honest.”

“Now now, Maki.” Honoka said, feeling amused. “You sound just like you did when you were back in high school. And who’s your best friend now?”

Maki’s silence told the story as she pretended to take the world’s longest sip of beer.

Everyone had a laugh at the situation and they all settled down for an afternoon of fun and joviality. Everyone had a beverage and snack of choice, sharing everything they had with each other.

Conversations ranged from general work topics, as most adult conversations tend to do, to good manga they’ve read lately, to the new anime season slated to start in less than a month. Yukiho was thrilled to talk about the impending second season of *Citrus* while Arisa was more interested in the third and final season of *Hibike! Euphonium*.

“Reina and Kumiko are finally going to get together, I just know it. The yuri is strong with them.” Arisa looked a bit more excited than someone should over the possibility of two anime characters falling in love with each other.

Yukiho huffed at the thought. “As if KyoAni would ever go down that path. Not that I wouldn’t like to see it, mind you.”

“I need to get a new TV, mine is crap back in the dormitory.” Maki thought about how she’d be able to afford one but couldn’t figure it out.
All four girls looked suddenly more solemn.

*That’s right. She’s going back, isn’t she? I mean… I guess she has to. She has school and everything…*

As if sensing the moment, Maki’s phone rang with a text message. Maki took out the phone and looked at the screen.

*FROM: Eli*

Maki took a deep breath and opened the phone to read the message.

*hey maki. I hadn’t heard from you in a while and i just wanted to see if you’re okay. you don’t have to respond if I’m being too intrusive. but it’d be nice to hear from you. call me if you can?*

Maki looked up at all four girls. They knew.

“No point in hiding it. Here, anyone want to read it?”

Maki moved the phone towards the other girls. Nobody dared take it until Ayako reached out, took the phone, and looked at the screen. She analyzed the message and then looked at the icon at the top of the screen that showed Eli’s face. It was the first time she’d seen Eli’s photograph.

“I have to compete with that…” Ayako said under her breath with immense feelings of self consciousness.

“What was that?” Maki tilted her head.

“Nothing, just… it seems benign enough. Maybe you should call her.” Ayako gave the phone back to Maki.
Everyone sat in silence for a long time. Finally Honoka spoke up.

“You need to go back, don’t you? You’ve been here a week. You’ve seen a lot and helped a lot but… you have your own life to get back to. You have people who care for you and you have people you care for. And, of course, you have school in a few weeks.”

Maki sighed. “Yeah… I really should head back in a day or two. But… I don’t want to. I’m happy with you guys. Thanks for that.”

“Anything for Maki-chan!” Yukiho chimed in and winked. “You’d do anything for us too, I know it.”

“Yeah, I would. I won’t ever give you up again. I know how bad it feels to lose you.”

Honoka whispered something to Arisa who looked serious for a moment and then nodded, giving Honoka a peck on the cheek. Honoka repeated the same actions to Yukiho who also thought deeply for a second and then nodded, smiling.

“Maki.” Honoka turned around and grabbed something out of her bag. “I have a favor to ask of you and it would leave me in your debt if you’d do it.”

Maki looked scared to accept but there was nothing else she could do. “Of course, Honoka. Ask me anything.”

“Will you please deliver this letter to all seven of the other members of Muse? Only give it to all eight of you at the same time. There are eight copies of the same letter in here. It’s from the three of us to the eight of you.”

Maki nodded and reached out to grab the large envelope. “I’ll do exactly as you say. I promise.”

“I know you will. I trust you, Maki. Thank you.”

Maki looked at the envelop in her hands and felt an immense amount of responsibility on her shoulders. It was intimidating.
“May I ask… generally speaking, what is the letter about?”

The three girls smiled together and Honoka spoke. “It’s a letter to all of you that you can read whenever you open it. But at the end it tells you something very important.”

Honoka hugged the two girls that leaned against her.

“It lists the address of the cafe where Arisa, Yukiho, and I will be waiting to meet with the rest of Muse two weeks from today.”

A/N: Chapter 15, will be the end of the main story line of Triangles. HOWEVER, I will continue writing additional story lines from time to time. I have at least two more small story arcs I want to write with a minimum of two chapters each, but I guess they’re more like an OVA in anime. Or something. I’ll leave to up to you to decide.
Chapter 15 - Circles

On a train to Tokyo

Thirteen days before Honoka’s return to Tokyo

Two hours.

It typically took about two hours for the Joetsu Shinkansen bullet train to make its way from Niigata to the Japanese capital of Tokyo. Two hours for Maki to start texting her fellow Muse members to tell them that she had something very important to give them.

That morning she’d decided that she should talk to the girls about the letter in person, one or two at a time, rather than in a big group. Group think was what got them into trouble in the first place, after all. After sending out a text message to each of the members she settled into her seat and waited for their replies.

Kotori was the first to respond and responded on behalf of herself and Umi. They'd meet up with Maki later that evening and asked where they should meet. Maki suggested she go to their house, as it wasn't too far out of the way for her. Kotori agreed and the plans were set.

Eli replied next.

Oh boy... just how are we going to do this?
Maki was a bit more hesitant in dealing with Eli. This would be the first time they'd meet in person since they broke up several months ago and Maki was worried about a lot more than talking about the letter the girls had sent.

Maki opened the message.

Eli: i'm glad you're coming back home. i know this might be awkward for both of us so what if you, me, and nozomi all meet? we can talk about… other things another time.

Maki sighed an enormous sigh of relief. This would probably be for the best. Ideally she'd like to work things out with Eli as soon as possible, but doing so before the Honoka meeting would probably be an impossible task and would also risk more strife at a time when nobody in Muse needed more.

Maki messaged back her agreement and set up a time to meet with the two near Kanda shrine after she'd met with Kotori and Umi.

Hanayo and Rin sent a message saying that they were shopping near Tokyo station anyway so they could meet her nearby as soon as she arrived.

Nico finally replied after a half hour, saying she was sorry but she had meetings all day and she wouldn't be able to meet unless it was late.

Maki: You could come over to my dorm after work if you want. I know your train home stops at the station nearest me. Or I could meet you at the station. Your choice.

Nico: Oh? Finally inviting me over to the dorm room? After all this time you're ready to make all of those high school rumors true?

Maki: …

Nico: In retrospect, that joke wasn't as funny as I'd hoped. Anyway, I'll stop by but it won't be until near 11. That okay?
Maki: Fine by me. I'm sure I'll still be wide awake from the train rides anyway.

Nico: Cool. See you then. Welcome home.

Maki stared out the window at the lush green landscape on the western side of the Japanese Alps. After a few minutes the train entered a long series of tunnels that plunged the window into darkness for the next half hour.

I wonder… how will everyone take this? It's been almost half a year since the three of them disappeared without a trace. I wonder if everyone still feels the same way they did back then. Maybe someone will be angry, like “oh so you can disappear and reappear at will and expect us to be happy you're back?”

Maki twirled her hair as she watched the lights of the tunnel pass one by one. Surely that wouldn't happen. Surely everyone would be relieved to see them again and just want to catch up without any pretense.

Surely….. right?

Maki decided it was a good time to take a quick nap and prepare for a long day of playing messenger.

Tokyo Station

Upon exiting Tokyo station Maki realized that she'd made a disastrous mistake in regards to her first meeting. She told Rin and Hanayo the exact exit she'd be using from the station in an effort to make meeting up with them as stress free as possible. Upon reflection, however, she failed to take two things into account:

First, she had her hands full, pulling a wheeled suitcase with one hand and carrying a large bag of personal items in the other.
Second, Rin’s attempt to hug Maki while approaching at a preposterous speed ensured that Maki would, in fact, be unable to keep the aforementioned items in her hands while remaining vertical.

“Maaaaaaaki-chaaaaaan!!!” Rin’s voice pierced the crowd in front of the station as she bore down upon Maki at a pace that was far from reasonable.

Maki briefly considered performing a feint to sidestep the oncoming catgirl. But she liked her friends and wanted to avoid practicing judo in public, so instead she tried to drop her bag and suitcase before Rin made it to her.

Unsuccessfully.

Rin gripped and hugged Maki, the bag making a *kerpunk* sound as it hit the cement. The suitcase merely fell with an unsatisfactory *plop* to voice its objections to such ill-treatment.

“MakiMakiMakiMakiMakiMaki!!” Rin squeezed and tried to jump repeatedly. Hanayo was huffing and puffing as she finally approached the scene, clearly out of breath from trying to keep up with her energetic partner.

“ Rin-chan! D-don’t kill Maki-chan!” Hanayo tried to pry her best friend from her recently returned friend. “She said she has something important to tell us, right Maki?”

Maki nodded, as she was hardly able to move air at the moment much less speak. Noticing this, Rin removed herself from the readhead and Maki let out a large breath of air.

“I love you too, Rin, but really… people can’t be squeezed like stuffed toys, you know.” Maki smoothed out her hair and tried to make her appearance less disheveled. “And yes, I do have something important in my bag. Can we sit down somewhere?”

Hanayo nodded vigorously. “There’s a coffee shop a block away that’s never too crowded. Let’s go there.”

They all helped collect the items that had fallen out of Maki’s bag and made their way towards the shop. Rin insisted on carrying something since she caused everything to spill. Maki was too tired
protest so she let her have the heavy suitcase. Rin didn't seem to even notice the weight as she dragged the suitcase merrily.

Sitting down in the coffee shop, they all ordered a beverage and relaxed for a moment. They chatted idly until the drinks came, after which Maki removed the letters from her bag. She showed Rin and Hanayo the stack of eight letters from Honoka and the girls.

“What are those?” Rin asked while tilting her head slightly.

Maki looked her dead in the eyes and said, “Letters from Honoka, each with the name of a member of Muse on it.”

“You didn't read it before?” Hanayo asked.

“No, my instructions from the three of them were to only give it to everyone at the same time.” Maki took a sip of chai tea. “Basically, if you want to know what they have to say you need to meet with the rest of us next weekend, six days from today.”

“So you DID find them!” Rin said a bit too loudly.

“Yeah… I did. I spent a week with them. It's…. a long story.”

At this point Hanayo had her hand over her mouth. Upon seeing this, Rin became concerned and put an arms around her best friend.

“Maki… you found them… I’m so happy, Maki. They’re okay, aren’t they?” Hanayo was nearing tears and didn’t look to be slowing down anytime soon.

Maki smiled gently and grabbed Hanayo’s hand. “Yeah, they’re actually doing really well. They’re happy and safe.”

Hanayo put her head on Rin’s shoulder and tried to stifle her sobs. “I’m happy. They’re happy and they’re okay, so everything’s going to be okay. Everything is okay.”
Maki couldn’t help but admire the simplicity of Hanayo’s concern for her friend. It was absolute and unconditional. Wherever Honoka, Arisa, and Yukiho were, as long as they were happy and safe then that was okay with Hanayo. Pure friendship.

“Kayo-chin, let’s meet with everyone next weekend. Where at, Maki?” Rin looked pumped up and ready for it to be next weekend already.

“I… hadn’t thought about it, to be honest.” Maki struggled to think of where a convenient location would be for everyone.

“W-what about the cafe that’s near the shrine? Kanda Shrine?” Hanayo was recovering and was only interrupted by intermittent sniffles. “We can meet in the cafe and then go to the shrine and then we can pray for a good resolution to whatever happens in the letter. We can pray for Muse.”

Pure friendship.

“Alright, let’s do it.” Maki made a note to ask Nozomi for permission to invade the shrine afterwards, but she already knew what the answer would be.

“Then I’ll see you ladies in a few days. I have to go pass the message to five more girls today.” Maki stood up and started to collect her things.

This time is was Hanayo who came over to hug Maki. “Thank you, Maki. For finding them. For helping them. Maybe we can be Muse again some day because of you.”

Rin jumped up and put a fist in the sky. “Kayo-chin, we never stopped being Muse! We’ll always be Muse, no matter where we go!”

Maki shook her head and smiled, then hugged Hanayo back.
Later that night in Maki's dorm

“Everything went great. Everyone said they'd meet up next weekend to open the letters together, so we're all set. Now we just pass the few days until then…” Maki was laying on her bed for the first time in several weeks as she talked to Nico in her dorm room. She stared at the ceiling, a lot on her mind.

“I don't believe you.” Nico was looking at the complicated face of her underclassman. “Not the meeting part, but the ‘everything went great’ part you threw out there. What happened? Was it Eli?”

Maki continued to stare at the ceiling. “It was… fine, not great. We didn't fight. We didn't laugh. It was the first time I'd seen her in at least four months, maybe more. Nozomi was there so that made it a little better… I think. It kept us from doing something embarrassing I suppose.”

Maki looked over at her short friend who hadn't moved since she asked the question.

“Nico… I thought I would feel like I missed her a lot. I thought… I thought I would care more. No no, it's not that I don't care I just…” Maki was gripping the sheets of her bed. Nico came and sat next to her on the bed.

“She was the same as she's always been in my mind. Beautiful, awe inspiring, and surprisingly gentle. Yet… I didn't feel anything. It was like meeting up with a friend you left on bad terms but forgot why you even fought. It was awkward and I was happy to see her but…”

“You're not in love with her any more, are you Maki?” Nico brushed the hair off of her friend's face.

Maki put her face into the pillow for a moment before taking a deep breath and screaming into the pillow.

Nico almost grabbed Maki's shoulder to give her a gentle squeeze for encouragement, but decided not to once Maki sat herself up next to Nico.
"I'm the worst, Nico. I left her. Then I left her alone. For months. Then I left again, going who knows where else to… to…" Maki didn't finish her sentence.

Nico glanced curiously into the girl's eyes. "Maki, did you meet someone where you went?"

Maki looked down at the bed, red locks hanging in front of a face that was starting to form tears. Her silence told the story.

Nico was surprised. Maki didn't seem like the kind of girl to fall for someone over the course of a week and a half, yet here they were.

"Maki, look girl, you can't be ashamed of feeling a certain way about someone. You like who you like, loved who you loved, and everything in between. The fact that you felt like this so quickly has to tell you something, right?"

Maki didn't move much, just slinking herself down onto Nico's shoulder. "I'm not sorry for feeling like this towards someone… but I am sorry I don't feel like it towards Eli any more. I think even Nozomi noticed. The way she was looking at me while Eli and I talked was… confusing. It was like she could tell I wasn't interested in Eli any more, and she was concerned that Eli couldn't see that fact."

Nico leaned her head onto Maki's. "Maki, you don't think Nozomi is…"

"What, trying to get with Eli? Wouldn't surprise me. You should have seen the way Nozomi looked at us for the first few weeks after Eli confessed to me. A few times I was actually scared. At the time I thought it was just her being overly motherly towards Eli like usual. But now, I'm not so sure it wasn't jealousy…"

Nico grabbed Maki's chin and made her look up. "That means you have one final responsibility towards Eli. You need to make sure she knows you don't want her any more."

Maki looked surprised. "Nico, that's pretty callous."

"What is? Setting someone free? Letting them have to opportunity to fall in love because they're not hung up on you any more? Letting a girl who's been waiting god knows how many years to confess to Eli because she finally won't have to feel guilty about it? Explain to me the fallout part,
because I only see generosity.”

Maki couldn't say anything. Nico was right about everything. She had to make sure Eli knew that she was free to do as she liked. That they both were.

“Alright. I'll try to take care of it before the meeting with Honoka. Maybe before our own meeting next week.”

Nico patted Maki's head. “Good girl. You're growing up every day, aren't you?”

Maki smirked. “Don't you wish you could say the same?”

Nico glared. “Why am I friends with you?”

The following Saturday

7 days before Honoka's return to Tokyo

“...and finally, after a little over a week, I came back here. So that’s what I’ve been doing the last several months.” Maki took a long, slow sip from her cup of chai. “Anyway, thanks for meeting a little early, Eli. It's been nice to be able to talk with just the two of us.”

“I'm really happy too, Maki. Thanks for telling me about how things went after our... break. And thanks for making sure Nozomi was there for me all of those times, even last weekend when you came back. It would have been... difficult, emotionally, for me had she not been there afterwards.”

“I'm sorry that I couldn't be the one to help you in some of those times... but I'm happy Nozomi was there too.”
Eli looked down into her lap, twisting her fingers together uncomfortably. She had been doing it off and on for the duration of their half hour conversation. This was a far cry from the aristocratic-in-appearance Eli that reigned over the student council of Otonokizaka several years ago. So much had changed in such a short time.

But... she looks happier than I feared she might be. Maybe a little gun-shy about what she says, but that can heal with time. I want to make sure it does. I still want to be her friend.

“Nozomi... she’s been...” Eli was having a lot of trouble coming up with the right words. “She's been a great friend... and... I really couldn't have done a lot lately without her. She so selfless towards me...”

Ah... here it comes.

Maki had thought long and hard about how to approach this topic. Like Nico said, she needed to finalize everything for the benefit of both of them. They needed to be free to love again, no matter who it was.

“Is she good to you?” Maki leaned forward, elbows on the table, and looked at her former lover directly in the eyes. Eli’s eyes were wide, her hands still in her lap. “It's okay Eli. I promise it's okay. All I want to know is if she's good to you. Because you deserve someone who will make you feel like a princess, nothing less. Even if it’s not me making you happy.”

The question sent a shock through Eli. She suddenly remembered to breathe and found herself slightly short of breath. “Yeah... Maki... she's been nothing but good to me. And you. She confessed to me knowing I still loved you and didn't ask for anything else or desire to get in our way. Just that I knew was enough for her. She even told me not to think about her and just focus on fixing you and I.”

Eli’s expression softened a little and she looked off to the side. “After she told me, she didn't change at all - not her actions or her words. I guess that's how I knew...”

“She loves you?”

Eli nodded slowly. “Yeah... she does.”
Maki took a deep breath and leaned back. “Then let her.”

Eli looked up, smiling and nodding with a tear in each eye. Maki looked out the window briefly and handed over her handkerchief. “Here, fix all that before people come in. I can see Kotori coming. I don't want them to think I broke your heart again, or this will get really awkward really quickly.”

Eli laughed and dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief. “I'm going to run to the restroom just to be sure.”

“I'll hold off the horde.”

Eli made her way away from the table and a few seconds later the other girls began filing in.

“Maki!” Kotori chirped cheerfully as she walked in the door being held open by Umi.

“Quite the charming prince you’ve got, being all chivalrous like that.” Maki teased a lightly blushing Umi.

*That girl will never get used to the teasing.*

Hugs, greetings, screams of happiness could be heard throughout the cafe as one by one each of the eight girls arrived and sat down for their meeting. They each ordered in turn and talked about their work weeks and what that pain in the butt coworker did this week. A few of them tried to initiate some small talk, but after a while the air turned expectant and eyes began slowly drifting towards Maki and the messenger bag she had by her side.

Sensing everyone’s attention shift, Maki rummaged through her bag and brought forth a stack of eight individually labeled letters. Kotori was the first to gasp slightly as she recognized the handwriting on the front.

“Maki… you really did find…”
“Yeah. I did. I spent a week or so in their new home, wherever that may be. I’m sorry, you can hold whatever you like against me but I’ll never speak of their new home without their permission. I was the one who spoiled their secret to begin with, after all…”

Umi put a hand on Maki’s shoulder. “I think I can speak for us all when I say that we’re incredibly curious and even a bit jealous, but we also understand your situation and wouldn’t ever honestly ask you to tell us. Don’t worry.”

Maki nodded and smiled. “Thanks for understanding. Well, here they are. Take the one with your name on it, please. I don’t know if they all contain the same letter but just to be sure…”

Everyone passed around the envelopes until they all had the correctly labeled one in front of them.

“This is from Honoka to you. You can now do as you wish.”

A few opened theirs immediately and withdrew a single piece of standard letter paper. A few others watched and then followed suit. Each of the eight, now with paper in hand, read the lines addressed to them.

Dearest Muse,

Long time no see! Well, that’s our fault mainly. We unapologetically left secretly and in a hurry because we knew what we had to do to get our lives in order - be alone with each other. At the time there was no hesitation in our minds. We planned it for two months, scraping together every yen we possibly could in order to be completely free of Tokyo.

That’s right, Tokyo. We didn’t choose to leave Umi or Hanayo or any particular name at all; we chose to leave the life that we had built in Tokyo. The city, the memories, the living situations, the people… the relationships. It was our decision and we stand by it.

However, we also realize that in creating a world of our own absent of all that we’d once had, we took with us a part of your world. We’re not claiming to be so important as to cause trauma to anyone - your lives don’t revolve around us. But we severed a large number of relationships without any warning. Relationships that mattered to us and, we hope, you.

For that carelessness, we truly apologize.
In the half year since, we have built a life of our own and we are living very happily. We are working, playing, laughing, making new friends, and living as three equals in love. Three people in love - it’s not an easy thing for someone to relate to, granted, but I hope you’ll trust that each of us are here of our own volition. Thanks to our new home we’ve been granted a chance at a life of our own making. Even if it isn’t perfect, it’s ours.

But over time we’ve come to realize just how much we can’t Escape from our past. We may run from it, but our past still exists. And if it didn’t exist we wouldn’t be where we are, as happy as we are. We need to face it, even if we don’t embrace it.

We also need to acknowledge that we don’t want some parts of our past to stay only in the past forever. Namely, you eight. You who meant so much to us before and still do now. We want to reconnect with you.

It’s selfish of us. We chose to end everything so abruptly and now here we are, abruptly asking to see you all once again. This isn’t something we expect you to be happy about so quickly. Rather, we’re asking for your presence as a favor.

It won’t be the same... it can’t be... but it doesn’t need to be. It can be wonderful and beautiful in and of itself, independent of what may have happened before.

One week from today, let’s meet at the same cafe you eight met at after we left (you know, where Maki gave you a piece of her mind [sorry Maki!] ). Let’s meet at 1pm and start a new future with all eleven of us, together. If you choose not to come we completely understand. It’s us who left, not you. It’s us who acted so freely with our relationships. But please think about us in the future. We’ll meet you anytime, anywhere.

We have only one request about the meeting - don’t be afraid to talk to us. We’ve come to accept much of our past and talk about it freely these days. It’s a part of us and we can’t change it. We may not like it, but it’s done. Finished. And those memories are helping us make a brighter future.

So let’s meet again, shall we? Let’s be friends.

With love,

Arisa

Honoka
By the time Maki finished reading the letter for the second time, most of the girls had started chatting about it. At first the mumbles started out undecided, trying to take in everything they’d just read, but as everyone’s thoughts became more solidified they realized what they’d just read.

“Honoka’s coming home!”

“Visiting, didn't you read it? Although they didn't say for how long.”

“But still… the fact that all three girls are happy and safe, that’s… that’s what really matters.”

“I hope they come for the weekend. I want to go shopping with Yukiho again!”

“I wonder what kind of omiyage they’ll bring…”

“Rin! They've been gone for months and you’re worried about souvenirs?!”

This went on for some time, everyone excited about the prospect of catching up with their old friends. It was almost like nothing had ever happened.

These girls could never truly be angry with the three of them. I'm sure serious conversations will be had but… I think everything could be okay.

Thank heavens. Maki thought, still looking at the letter. The phrase ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ has never had more meaning to me than in the moments before I read this.

“I’ll talk to the manager about renting out the cafe for a few hours.” Kotori mentioned to Umi, who was agreeing thoughtfully.

“Eeeehhh! Renting the entire place? That’s gotta cost like a week’s worth of pay!” Hanayo objected at the thought of so willfully parting for such amounts of money.
“Well…” Kotori said sheepishly “…my latest line of clothes really took off… and I have a lot of extra money. But nevermind that! I want to make it comfortable for all of us, so we can be ourselves without having to worry about anyone else. Just the eleven of us.”

“Seems fine enough to me.” Nico shrugged. “It’s her money, let her do what she wants.”

Kotori was taking notes on a notepad. “Okay, I’ll make a reservation and ask for coffee and tea and snacks for eleven people.”

“Ten.”

Everyone suddenly became very, very quiet.

“Make it for ten.”

Eli was holding the letter in front of her, but her eyes looked past it.

“I won’t go.”

She folded the letter, put it back in the envelope, and gave it to Maki. Before anyone could even formulate a question, she stood up and walked out the door.

It was quiet for a very long time. Everyone looked around, trying to process what had just happened.

The sounds of the other customers in the background faded into a drone.

No.

*She can’t. She won’t. I… I won’t let-
“I’ll take care of this.” Nozomi stood up, determined.

Oh wow. I didn’t expect...

“But I’ll need your help, Maki. Please?”

Maki looked up at the face of her senpai. Determined, but nervous. Angry and concerned. Ready to take on the beast that was an Eli who’d made a decision.

Yeah, she loves her.

I’m glad.

“Let’s go, Nozomi.” Maki grabbed her things and started to leave with Nozomi. “We’ll handle this, girls. And Kotori? Make the reservation for eleven.”

Kotori nodded and despite the current situation, everyone else seemed more at ease as the unlikely partners went out the door to find Eli.

The two of them walked through the parking lot and down a few side roads before getting on the street towards Eli’s house. They couldn’t see Eli in the distance, so they assumed Eli had taken a different path home or just hadn’t gone home at all.

They slowed down, not sure where they were going or what they should do now, but they needed the walk to sort things out. Maki broke the silence. “Any idea what to do, Nozomi?”

“I… was about to ask the same thing. Frankly, I just made a show in there to convince everyone else that we’d be able to fix this and not to worry…”

Maki raised an eyebrow. “Not that I don’t appreciate the air of confidence you instilled in the group, but that’s a bit of a problem.”

“I guess… I do have a crazy idea… but it’s going to require a lot of trust from you… and someone
Maki thought for a moment. “Nozomi, I might trust you more than almost anyone else in that room. Why else would I have left Eli in your care? And now seeing the way you look at her…”

Nozomi caught her breath. “I… I just…”

“I know, Nozomi. It’s okay, really. I’m happy she’s happy and, the more I think about it, I’m happy that you’re happy. So just keep being who you are for her.”

Nozomi couldn’t come up with any words to say to her underclassman.

“So, let’s hear this crazy idea of yours, Nozomi.”

Later that day

Yukiho was lying on the couch in her apartment, sweating. She was having a hard time breathing as she panted from all of the effort she'd given in the last fifteen minutes. Her eyelids were trying to close on their own and she was barely able to focus. Her body felt heavy and so did Arisa’s, who was now lying on top of her dripping with sweat of her own.

Arisa tried to speak “That was… you've gotten so good at that, Yukiho. Must be all the times we practiced.”

“I’m just trying to learn from everything you've taught me, Arisa.”

Yukiho pushed Arisa off of her and onto the couch as she stood up to stretch. She walked into the bathroom and grabbed a towel to wipe herself off.
“We should really have tickle fights more often, don’t you think?” Yukiho tossed a towel at Arisa.

“Yeah, we should. But we usually start and then someone touches someone else in a certain place and then all of a sudden we’re having sex. Again.” Arisa wiped herself with the towel and threw it back at her girlfriend.

“Oh, like you mind.” Yukiho stuck out her tongue and took the towel into the bathroom to put in the washer.

Arisa’s cell phone buzzed with a text message from across the room. She sighed and got up to check it.

The screen said: Maki-chan

Hm. Arisa thought to herself. Didn’t expect to hear from her before next weekend.

Arisa opened the phone and read the message.

Maki: Arisa, can you talk right now? I need to talk to you and I really need you to be alone. I know this sounds suspicious, but I’m begging you to trust me.

Arisa read it twice.

That’s not like Maki.

Arisa: I suppose. Give me a few minutes to figure something out and then I’ll call you. I’ll warn you Maki, I don’t like the sound of this already.

Arisa put down the phone and tried to figure out a way to be alone for a few minutes.

Yukiho’s voice came from the other room. “Hey Arisa, I’m gonna take a long shower. Wanna
join?"

Yes and no.

“I'm gonna take down the garbage while I'm all hot and sweaty. You go ahead and maybe I'll join you later.”

Please buy that.

“Okay, good idea. Thanks for helping around the house! I'll be sure to reward you later…”

Arisa went ahead and collected some garbage from around the living room and bagged it up with the other garbage. It wasn't in her nature to lie to anyone, even if it was a small one, so she felt obliged to actually do what she said she'd do. Grabbing the bag and walking out the door, she dialed Maki.

“Arisa, thanks for calling on short notice.”

“Sure, what's up Maki?”

“I need… we need a favor.”

Arisa furrowed her brow. “Maki, if you're around the others I don't want to talk right now.”

“I'm not, I promise. But I need to ask this on behalf of myself and Nozomi. And… and Eli.”

Arisa said nothing at first. She pushed the elevator button for the ground floor. Finally, half way there she replied. “I'll listen.”

“Come to Tokyo tonight.”
“I beg your pardon?”

“Eli won't go to the meeting next weekend. She's the only one who said no. I thought… well, actually Nozomi thought you could talk to her and convince her to go. She thought that if you were to show up and talk to Eli before the meeting then Eli wouldn't feel so overwhelmed. She's probably thinking a lot about you, but then add in the fact that she'll be seeing Honoka again… I don't think she's ready for both. If you spent some time with her, maybe-”

“Maki.”

Arisa sighed. This wasn't the way she was expecting to reconnect with her sister. She'd been mentally preparing to try this next weekend, but to have it thrust on her like this was asking a lot.

On the other hand, it would allow the two of them to be alone. In the past when they were alone they argued, when they were with others their conflict merely simmered, waiting to boil over the next time they were alone.

_Maybe this would be a good test. If we can't be alone in a room together, there's no way we'll get anywhere. She won't be honest and upfront._

_I probably won't either._

“You still there, Arisa?”

Arisa tossed the bag into the garbage receptacle. “Yeah, I'm here. Maki, I can't go. In truth it's not a bad idea. And I can't really blame you for calling me. But there's no way I could get there.” Arisa entered the elevator again.

“I'll pay for you, Arisa. I'll buy your ticket and you can stay with me overnight.”

Arisa arrived back on her floor, and walked in silence until she was standing outside her apartment.

“It's not about the money, Maki. I've got enough. But what do I tell Honoka and Yukiho? I refuse to lie to make this happen, and if I go to Tokyo before them then what's the point? We want to
“Tell them you're staying with a friend overnight. I'm your friend, right? Tell them you'll be back tomorrow evening and suggest they spend some ‘sister time’ together, that way they'll have their minds on other things.”

“Maki… I want to help my sister, but going to Tokyo is… is it the only option?”

“I don't know, probably not. But I'm sure it's the one with the best chance of success.”

“I'll… have to think about it. I want Eli to go to the meeting as well and maybe talking to her beforehand would be better… but I think this is stretching the truth too much.”

“It's not.” Yukiho, wrapped in a towel, stepped out the door. “You know our bathroom has a window to the outside, right?”

Arisa hung her head.


“Maki, it's okay. She heard a lot but I think she's agreeing with you.”

Yukiho nodded. “Yes, I am. Do what you need to do. If you think it's important I trust you. No need to lie. I'll tell Honoka and I'll tell her the truth - you went to Tokyo to talk to your sister. That's a connection and relationship that's a lot different than the one between the three of us and Muse. Remember, I'm a little sister too. Of anyone else, I think I could understand.”

Arisa leaned against the wall and looked out at the city. *I'm not ready for this.*

*But she won't be either. In the end, maybe that's fair.*

“Alright Maki, I'll be on the next Shinkansen I can catch. I can be in Tokyo in about three hours.”
“I'll meet you at Ochanomizu station. Thank you, Arisa.”

“Thank you, Maki. Thanks for asking me to do something crazy.”

Arisa hung up the phone and looked at her girlfriend. “Sweetie………”

Arisa opened her mouth a few times but no other words came, so Yukiho grabbed Arisa's hand and guided her into the apartment. Sitting down on the couch, the lay Arisa down into her lap. Yukiho started playing with her blonde hair and petting her head for several long minutes.

“You're never going to feel good about this until you do it. Make that choice. I'll be here when you get home, no matter what happens.” They lay like this for a few more minutes before Yukiho leaned down and kissed Arisa's cheek.

She then smirked and helped Arisa up. “But before you go, take a shower. You taste like sweat.”

Around 9pm that night

Near Eli’s apartment

Arisa and Maki met at Ochanomizu station and set out for the 20 minute walk to Eli’s apartment. Nozomi had insisted on not being there to see Arisa, but said she wanted to be around in case Eli took a turn for the worse. So Maki agreed to text her and let her know when Arisa had gone into the apartment… assuming Eli would let her in in the first place. They’d then talk on the phone and decide if they should hang around nearby, just in case.

Only a few minutes from their destination, Maki felt an obligation to cheer up or cheer on her friend.
“Arisa… you’re gonna be fine. S-she’s going to be happy to see you…”

*Smooth, Maki.*

“Oh god, I’m terrible at this. Look, Arisa, is there anything I can do for you right now?”

Arisa giggled slightly and shook her head. “The fact that I’m not walking alone is more than enough for me. Thank you, Maki.”

“On the train I got to thinking that maybe this is for the best - meeting her first, that is. Honoka sent me a text message around the time I was transferring at Tokyo station. It just said ‘I love you and I’m so proud of you for becoming the woman you are.’”

“I feel like a woman when I put on that suit jacket and skirt and go to the city office to help foreign residents and travelling government officials. I feel like a woman when the two women I love lavish their attention on me and play with me at home. I even feel like a woman when we all help cook dinner and sit around in pyjamas and watch really bad ecchi anime.”

“Walking towards the apartment of the person who I told ‘you’re not my sister anymore’ I don’t feel like a woman. Right now I feel like a little girl looking for her big sister after the little girl ran away from home for a few hours because the big sister was mean. The difference is that it’s been over a half year since I ran away. Yet… I still feel that apprehension like a little girl; I hope onee-chan will still love me and cook dinner for me and I’ll say I’m sorry and she’ll hold me and tell me everything’s going to be alright.”

Arisa stopped, the apartment now in sight. She turned to Maki and looked to be on the brink of tears.

“What do I do Maki? I’m scared. I’m truly, completely scared. I love her and I want to see her again and she’s right there but every step closer makes me want to run away again.”

Maki moved forward and stopped in front of her. “Give me your cell phone.”

Arisa looked at her for a moment and then, with fumbling hands, gave it to Maki. The redhead
opened the phone and went to the text message section. She opened the most recent text from Honoka. She held it faced towards Arisa.

“Read it out loud.”

Arisa sniffed and looked at the screen. “I love you and I’m so proud of you for becoming the woman you are.”

“The most important woman in your life thinks this highly of you. With this kind of confidence from the people that mean the most to you, how can you fail? Show your sister the woman you’ve become and she’ll forever think of you as both - her cute, grown up little sister.” Maki held out the phone until Arisa took it back from her.

Arisa looked at the screen and then turned the power off on the phone. “Maki… if things go wrong or if they go right but awkwardly, can I stay with you tonight?”

“That goes without saying.” Maki rubbed the hair of the blonde in front of her. “Just send me a message either way.”

“Yes, mom.” Arisa smiled a little and then started walking towards the apartment.

As Arisa made her way to the door, Maki quietly moved between Eli’s apartment and the neighboring building. She wanted to be near just in case the worst happened. She heard the doorbell and footsteps. More footsteps. The door unlocked and opened.

A gasp.

“Onee-chan… сколько лет, сколько зим. Я скучал по тебе.”

Crying.

“Onee-chan, p-p-please… please don’t cry…”
“Arisa!!”

Two voices crying, both muffled. Both lost in each other.

Both joyous.

Maki slipped behind the building and into an alley before making her way back towards the station to go home. She wasn’t needed there any more. As she moved away she heard the two move inside and close the door.

*Good luck, you two. I love you both.*

Maki dialed Nozomi and shared the news. They shared a happy sigh of relief and bade each other goodnight.

Maki slept alone in her dorm that night.

**Maki’s dorm room**

**The night before Honoka’s return**

“I really have! I’ve reeeeeeally tried to leave them alone for the last few days, but they kept inviting me over to their place and drinking with me… and you know an invitation to drink is not something Ayako has the willpower to turn down. I swear, the tension in that apartment built by the day. Tonight felt like the night before a wedding, I swear. Ugh. I hope I was a positive force… or at least an awkwardly funny one, anyway.”

Maki giggled away as she sat on her bed against the wall of her dorm. Ayako was explaining how the past few days had been in Niigata between her and the trio. Meanwhile, Maki tried to take care
of a few things she needed to do before the next school term started up again in two weeks.

“If there’s something you don’t lack it’s the ability to make others laugh with your inability to be funny.” Maki started cracking up over the phone.

Ayako gave a ‘hmmph’ and tried to make pitiful noises over the phone line, which did nothing to quell Maki’s laughing. “Maki, your maniacal laughter treads heavily upon on my dreams. I am hurt.”

Maki calmed herself a bit and sighed. “Quoting Yeats while trying to maintain some semblance of dignity doesn’t suit you.” Maki giggled again. “But, I appreciate your attempts. It’s why I like you so much.”

“Oh? A profession of love his late into the evening? That emotional story you told about Arisa and her sister making up together must have gone to your head.”

Maki lay down on the bed, her feet hanging off the side. “It’s not what I imagined that night would end up being like, and I make no apologies for waxing on about it. Seeing Arisa the next day before she went back home was… amazing. She beamed. She was the woman Honoka proclaimed her to be. And the fact that they not only made up, but that Arisa was able to convince Eli to go to the meeting tomorrow? She’s a brilliant one, that little Russian girl.”

“Sounds like I have competition now.” Maki could feel Ayako’s teasing grin over the line.

“No. You don’t.”

The silence from Ayako was telling and Maki smiled for her part.

“Hey Ayako?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you.”
“I miss you too, Maki.”

“There’s… a three day weekend at the end of September, about a month from now. Would you mind if I visited? It’d be nice to see you again.”

“O-of course! My mansion is your mansion.” The glee in Ayako’s voice was hardly masked. “We’ll chat about it a week or so in advance… see what we can come up with to do together.”

Maki continued to smile. “Thanks, I’m looking forward to it. And thanks again for tonight. I really needed someone to talk to before tomorrow. I’m glad it was you.”

“I’m always a phone call or train ride away. As often as I think about you Maki, I’d be happier to hear your voice than imagine your face.”

*She’s good when she wants to be, isn’t she?*

Maki closed her eyes. “I should get to bed… not that I’ll sleep much.”

“ Probably a good idea. Goodnight, Maki.”

“Goodnight, Ayako. I’ll call you sometime tomorrow night.”

Maki hung up the phone and lay in bed without moving an inch for a long time before she fell asleep.
The three girls settled into their seats on the Shinkansen bullet train and prepared for their two hour trip to Tokyo. They brought along a small suitcase with a set of clothes in case they stayed overnight. They hadn’t settled on whether or not they’d actually stay the night - it would all depend on how the meeting went.

Maki had implied that the letter was well received but refused to go into any details other than the fact that all eight Muse members would attend the meeting. That in and of itself was a positive thing, so they decided to think positively and plan for the best.

The train pulled out of the station and soon they were travelling at 240 km/h in the direction of Tokyo, listening to the train conductor make their customary announcement.

*Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard the Joetsu Shinkansen. This is a MAX Toki super-express bound for Tokyo with stops at...*

The three were all focusing on different things. Arisa was playing Kancolle on her phone, Yukiho had the latest light novel from her favorite author, and Honoka sat reading a copy of their doujinshi - Escape.

*It feels like we’ve come full circle now...*

Half an hour into their journey Yukiho leaned onto the shoulder of her sister who was sitting between her and Arisa. Arisa stopped looking out the window and, smiling, leaned against her older partner.

“Honoka… do you think it’ll be the same when we come back home?” Yukiho was playing with the strands of Honoka’s hair that hung to the sides. “Will we really be able to carry on like we have been?” Arisa snuggled in closer as well, showing her unspoken concerns as well.

Honoka almost immediately shook her head, but also smiled softly. “No… no, my loves, nothing will be the same as it was. But it doesn’t have to be.”
“Friendship isn’t a straight line drawn on a white page. Friendship is more like a road. It’s a winding road with hills and valleys, rough goings, and smooth curves that change the scenery.”

“Sometimes you have to take other roads to get to where you want to be. You get off those roads and look for the next one to take, but that doesn’t make the roads you’ve taken any less valuable.”

Honoka embraced her two companions. “I’m happy with this road now, and I’m happy that you are both riding along with me. I hope that the girls will be a part of our new path and that we can go forward together because any road is better with friends.”

The three of them sat in silence for a long time, embracing. Letting the future draw nearer with every moment that passed.

And so…

Two hours later, the three girls stood in front of a cafe in the heart of Tokyo and looked at the door just meters away.

This was the moment.

This was the time.

This was their future.

“I love you both.” Honoka held the hands of her partners and led them towards the door.

The door swung open and two staff welcomed them to the cafe. In front of the three girls were eight faces, each smiling, each unique, each nervous, each reminiscent, each happy.

“Hello, everyone. We missed you!”
Three and a half years later

Ayako’s apartment

Maki put down the manuscript and smiled.

“Ayako, it was perfect. When you said you were going to make a novel out of your Escape doujinshi series I didn't think you’d be able to capture it so well. You’ve really outdone yourself.” Maki meant every word she said.

Ayako looked over from the table with joy on her face for only a moment. “Thanks but… hey, there’s like 30 pages left. You aren’t going to read the rest of it? That’s the big reunion!”

Maki looked at the tome in front of her and shook her head. “No, I’m not. I don’t need to. I lived it.”

Maki stood up and walked around the room, stretching her legs. “I remember everyone getting all teary eyed from the beginning and hardly having the opportunity to ever fully collect themselves. I remember Eli and Arisa speaking to each other like nothing had ever happened, just sitting next to each other, hugging, speaking Russian when they wanted to go off into their own little world. Just being sisters.”

“I remember Rin and Hanayo nearly tackling Yukiho and jumping up and down because ‘their precious kouhai’ had finally returned. And Rin’s look of utter disbelief when Yukiho handed omiyage to Hanayo. I remember Kotori completely losing it when she saw Honoka and running straight into her arms before anyone else could, Umi close behind with only a few less tears.”

“I remember the hug that Eli and I exchanged while we were waiting for the three of them to arrive; how cordial and friendly it was, with no animosity. I remember the moment I admitted to her that there was someone I was interested in; how her face was briefly blank but slowly changed to the same face she gave when I did a dance perfectly at a Muse practice back in high school - the proud senpai seeing her kouhai grow up in front of her. It’s partly why she’s still my best friend.”
Maki sat back down and crossed her legs. “Ayako, I remember everything. It was perfect. And that’s how I want to remember it.”

Ayako leaned back in her chair at the kitchen table. “Okay, okay, I get it. Do you remember coming back to Niigata?”

Maki frowned. “The heck kind of a question is that, of course I remember!”

Ayako looked slightly sheepish. “Have you ever wanted to read about it from my perspective?”

“Ayako… I thought this novel was about Honoka, Yukiho, and Arisa. You’re really going to talk about yourself at the end?!”

“It’s most certainly about them - I don’t exist for the entire first third of the story. Come on, a girl’s allowed to have a happy ending, isn’t she?”

“Ayako I gave you a happy ending last night, can’t you be happy with that?” Maki smirked at the black-haired girl at the table whose skin tone was now becoming redder by the moment.

Maki laughed aloud. “Alright alright, I’ll read the last part.”

Ayako’s apartment

Seven months after Honoka’s return to Tokyo

“If I have to play another round of Settlers of Catan some friendships might end. I never win this game!” Honoka put her hands on her face and watched the others continue to play along happily.
“It’s not our fault you have no talent for the conquest of irrelevant cardboard game tiles.” Yukiho stuck out her tongue and giggled.

“We should have ganged up on Ayako anyway, she’s the one with the prospective roommate coming in a few minutes.” Arisa pondered aloud.

“That’s alright, Honoka can take my spot whenever she comes.” Akayo winked at the girl sitting opposite her. “But seriously, thanks for coming over while I talk to the applicant. It’s kind of weird having a roommate interview but you can’t be too careful, right?”

“We understand completely.” Arisa patted her on the back. “As soon as she arrives we’ll just play our game and you can go in the other room and chat with her.”

Yukiho spoke up. “By the way, how did Maki take the news of you wanting a roommate? You’re pretty much girlfriends now so she had to have some say in it.”

“Yeah, I talked with her and she was surprisingly supportive from the get-go. She even edited the ad I placed and everything. Maybe she thinks I’m lonely or something? But she said she trusts me, which is something nobody has ever said to me before when it comes to me and other women so that was nice.”

The doorbell suddenly rang and everyone looked towards the lady of the house.

“Well, here goes. Have fun losing twice in one day, Honoka.”

Ayako gave Honoka her cards and game pieces and after putting on her slippers, walked to the front door. She took a deep breath and opened the door while trying to wear a welcoming smile.

“Welcome!”

“Hey Ayako.”
Maki.

Maki?

“So I’m here about the roommate ad you placed.”

“M… Maki?”

“Nice to see you too, love.”

“Welcome home, Maki!” Three voices came in unison from behind Ayako.

Ayako blinked. “Home?”

“Hey Maki, you want me and Arisa to grab your things from downstairs? Honoka’s busy uncorking the wine in the kitchen right now.” Yukiho was trying to squeeze past the unmoving Ayako.

“Yeah, sure. Thanks ladies!” The two went out the front door, Maki and Ayako still standing staring at each other.

Another blink. “Wait… what?”

“I arrived this morning so I left my things with them downstairs in their apartment. I didn’t want to arrive too early for our roommate interview so I figured I could do some shopping and--”

“W-w-w-whoaaaaa-w-wwwwwwwhat’s going on?” Ayako was slowly regaining brain function.

“I’m here to interview for the roommate position… like I said.” Maki smiled an innocent smile.

“Whose voice was that on the phone when I got the call about the ad?”
Maki chuckled. “Oh, that’s my friend Nico. She’s kind of a trip but she’s a fantastic actor when she needs to be. Really helped me out.”

“W-why? Like, why are you here? Not that I’m upset I just…you start school in two weeks, Maki.”

“Yeah, about that…” Maki twirled her hair. “I’m transferring to a school in town to finish my music degree. They have a good arranging program here, so I took the entrance exam and passed. I’ll start in three weeks.”

Maki stepped closer to Ayako, head down, and gently grabbed the vest that Ayako was wearing. “I was hoping I could spend those two years here with you…if you’ll have me.”

Maki suddenly pulled the taller girl close, stood up on her tiptoes and kissed Ayako.

After their release Ayako looked down bashfully. “On one condition.”

“Yes?”

Ayako looked at Maki and ran her hand through her hair.

“You have to do that to me every day.”

“Deal.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!