

涼宮ハルヒの驚愕(前)

すずみやはるひのきょうがく・ぜん

イラスト
いとうのいち

谷川流

角川スニーカー文庫

初回限定版





「有希!?」
ハルヒの間に
長門の頭は微細に
動いただけだった。

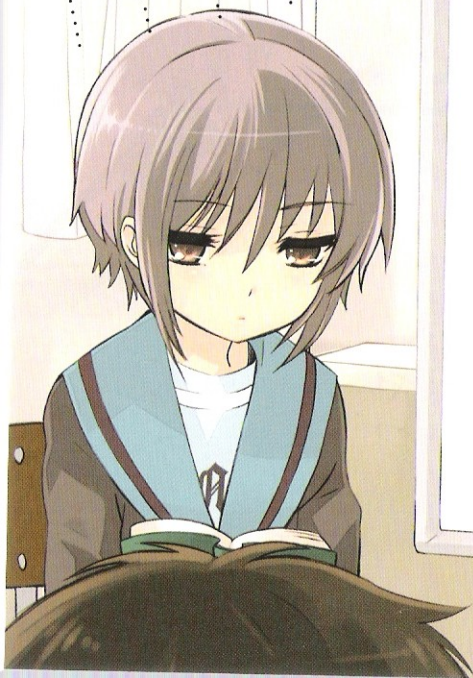


まるで……
俺を待っていたみたい
じゃないか……。



九曜……
なぜ、ここにいます。

「これより
SOS団入団試験、
第二段階を
開始します！」





涼宮ハルヒの驚愕(前)
谷川流 & いとうのいぢ
スタート!

やっ

Table of Contents

Chapter 4	pg. 8
Chapter 5	pg.40
Chapter 6	pg.102

For the Prologue and Chapters 1-3 of this story please refer to

The Dissociation of Haruhi Suzumiya

Chapter 4

α-7

Today was Monday, the first day of the school week, and although nothing out of the ordinary had happened to speak of the walk home from school seemed to be dragging on even longer than usual. Maybe that was due to the fact that my body was still stuck in a semi-relaxed state after spending a lazy Sunday the day before.

The first stretch of the journey wasn't too bad since Haruhi and the others had at least been there to distract me, but now that they had gone their separate ways and I found myself walking this long road alone I found myself afflicted by sudden feelings of loneliness. It would seem that being surrounded by the members of the SOS Brigade has somehow managed to become my normal state. It's not as though I was particularly avoiding this happening but I'm not quite sure what to think of the fact that I have allowed myself to become so thoroughly tainted by this whole sordid affair. It's as though I was testing some dangerous waters with one foot and promptly found myself up to my neck in it.

"Ah, well..."

For no particular reason I stopped walking and turned around. Somehow the spring light seemed to be shining down upon the path more brightly than usual. It could be because the eyes of the freshmen doubling as prospective Brigade members who had dropped by after school had been glittering with such charming innocence. But then again it could have just been the effects of a sunlight-related weather phenomenon.

"It's not like it matters to me." This comment was utterly pointless as well. I sometimes find myself wondering: is there actually any point in talking to yourself if there's nobody else there to hear you? Speech that doesn't convey any information can hardly amount to anything beyond a simple vocal exercise. And just for the record, I don't think I have any particular habit of talking to myself. So I can only presume that my words just now were a feeble attempt at self-persuasion. The fact of the matter is whatever Haruhi may have tainted me with, it happened a long time ago and, even if it were possible for me to wash it out at this late stage, I don't have a single Golgi apparatus' worth of intention of doing so.

As these thoughts went through my head, my homing instincts kicked in, and I once more found myself trudging down the long path home, forcing thoughts of Sasaki, Kuyou and all the other new SOS-Brigade-related irregular factors that had shown up with the new school year firmly away into a deep crevice of my mind, until eventually I reached the end of the day in my own bedroom. All of this had by now become part of my every day timetable and, unsurprisingly enough, today was no different.

In other words...

Nothing much happened today that was worth writing about.

In theory.

β-7

With all the momentum of a rock tumbling from a cliff...would be a slight exaggeration I suppose, but nonetheless the velocity with which Haruhi sped down that hill would have given a world-class athlete a run for his money.

As though dragged along by some invisible net protruding from Haruhi's back, Koizumi, Asahina-san and I rushed likewise down the road from school. By the time we reached Kouyouen Station, and with it level ground, I was thoroughly out of breath. Even Koizumi, who generally seems fresh as a daisy in the worst of situations, was wiping sweat from his brow. That should say it all. As for Asahina-san, she was curled over panting with her hands on her knees.

Which left just one girl standing there unfazed as though she had some kind of radioactive power source hidden somewhere in her body. "What are you stopping for?! We've come this far, haven't we?! Take the last stretch at a run!"

And true to her word, she sprinted off in the direction of Nagato's apartment. Again, her speed was Olympic-worthy and only a professional athlete at the height of his career could have hoped to keep up with her. Sending Koizumi on ahead, I took Asahina-san's bag since she was lagging behind and we headed off after them as fast as seemed physically possible.

"Aahh...haahh..."

After taking care of Asahina-san, whose legs were practically failing beneath her the whole way, I finally arrived to find Haruhi waiting in front of the entrance to the apartment building. The instant she determined that everyone was present she dialed the appropriate buttons on the intercom.

7, 0, 8, enter.

The response came immediately, as though the occupant had been waiting for us to arrive.

"....."

"Yuki, it's me. We're all here to see you."

"....."

First came the sound of the intercom cutting out and then the automatic door swung slowly open.

We bundled in to the elevator which was waiting for us on the ground floor, and Haruhi began repeatedly pressing the "7F" button. It wasn't a particularly large elevator, so it was somewhat cramped with all four of us inside. I could hear Asahina-san's breathing right by my ear. Well, that and the soft rumble of the machinery.

The metal box proceeded upwards at such a ponderous rate that one might almost think somebody was physically hauling it and Haruhi's expression was sour all the way up. It wasn't that she

was in a particularly bad mood; this visage of irritation was simply what her face naturally settled into when she was unsure of what expression to make.

When the elevator door opened onto the seventh floor, Haruhi marched out with an air of impatience, audibly brushing the very air aside, and began repeatedly pressing the doorbell for Room 708.

The lock was unlatched with a speed that suggested the person on the other side had been waiting right beside it and slowly the iron door swung aside. A figure inside was silhouetted against the warm indoor lighting.

"....."

The lone figure framed silently in the rectangle of the doorway was Yuki Nagato, pajama version.

"Are you sure you should be up?"

Her eyes vast and staring, Nagato nodded in response to Haruhi's question. She moved towards the closet to take out slippers for each of us.

"You don't have to do that!" Haruhi, who had kicked off her shoes already, took Nagato by the shoulders and hustled her back into the bedroom. It wasn't only Asahina-san and myself who had visited Nagato's place before. All of us had come here at various points in the past. So, naturally, Haruhi was as familiar as any of us with the layout. I had never set foot in the bedroom myself, the living room and guest room were as far as my ventures had taken me, but that hardly seemed worth worrying about right now.

I stepped into the bedroom, a room which indeed contained nothing but a bed, and before even taking the time to reflect on having entered this untrodden ground, I peered earnestly down at Nagato, who was being laid down into bed by Haruhi.

"....."

Her pale face, staring fixedly up at the ceiling, was as expressionless as ever. There were no obvious signs of fever as well. The only real difference from her usual appearance was the fact that her hair was disarranged from having been lying in bed. My keen eyes were telling me that her eyelids were less open than usual by perhaps two millimeters, but she at least didn't seem to be in any particular pain. And those pajamas weren't exactly flattering either.

I regained a little of my composure. It was only upon doing so that I realized how close I had been to panicking.

Haruhi placed a hand against Nagato's forehead and asked, "Yuki, have you eaten? Does your head hurt?"

Nagato's head shook slightly from left to right upon the pillow.

"You can't just not eat! I thought you might not have since you live here on your own. Hmm..." She placed her remaining hand upon her own forehead. "You do have a slight temperature...Is there an ice pillow in this place?"

Nagato's response was in the negative.

"Oh, well. I'll go and buy you one later. But food comes first. Yuki, I'll use your kitchen and whatever's in your fridge. Okay?"

Without waiting for a response, Haruhi stood up seizing Asahina-san's arm as she headed out of the room. "I'll make you my special rice porridge. Or would my special udon broth be better? Either one of them should take out any cold in a flash. Mikuru-chan, help me out."

"Ah...okay...!" Asahina-san had been staring worriedly at Nagato with a bundle of slippers in her arms for some reason. She hurried along after Haruhi nodding repeatedly until Haruhi stopped short just in front of the door to look back at me and Koizumi, who were still standing motionless like fools in the bedroom.

"You two, get out of the room. It's not nice to stare at a girl when she's sleeping."

"In that case," Koizumi offered, "why don't I go and handle the shopping? An ice pack and some cold medicine...will that do for the time being?"

"Just a minute. I have to make dinner too, so let me just check what's in the fridge. Do you think she'll have any spring onion? We'll need to write out a shopping list. Come with me, Koizumi-kun."

"Very well."

On his way out of the room Koizumi tapped my shoulder lightly and gave me a meaningful sort of look before he disappeared. The room now contained only me, standing blankly with nothing to do, and Nagato, still lying flat on her back in the bed.

I could still hear Haruhi's voice from the kitchen giving some kind of orders to Asahina-san and Koizumi. "Why there's nothing but canned food! That's not going to give her proper nutrition...It's a lack of fresh vegetables that leads to illnesses like this. Mikuru-chan, wash the rice and set up that rice cooker. Oh and that pot while you're at it. And Koizumi-kun, we'll need eggs, spinach, spring onions..."

At times like this it can be good to have Haruhi around. Though she claims it's because she's the Brigade Chief, when it comes to things that have nothing to do with our Brigade activities is where she really shows her class. I know all too well from experience that her cooking skills are second-to- none.

Still, this was no time to be getting distracted by the background noise.

It's best to just ask.

"Nagato?"

"....."

"How are you doing? Pretty much how it looks like?"

"....."

"Can you not speak?"

"I can." Her eyes still staring blankly up at the ceiling, Nagato slowly raised the upper half of her body, quilt and all. The movement was unnaturally direct, with no shift to the left or right. It would put even one of those self-righting dolls to shame.

"Is it because of that Kuyou girl that you've ended up like this?"

"Not necessarily." Nagato's eyes, like polished quartz, gazed directly at me. "However, it is a possibility."

"Don't you think she must have done this? You know..."

Back in the winter, when Nagato had collapsed in that phantom mansion, how exactly had that worked? We had been wandering the mountains in a blizzard for hours and when we finally reached a source of light it turned out to be an inescapable mansion. Nagato had lost her usual clarity at that time. Hadn't that been...

"Heavy load." The words came like a whisper from Nagato's lips and her dim eyes fell downward toward the futon.

Had her body really always been this small? She had only missed a single day of school and yet somehow she seemed to have become terribly thin and fragile.

In a sudden flash of inspiration a thought came to me. "When did it start?" Thinking back on the events of the previous day, I went on. "When was it that you started having to lie down from this fever?"

"Saturday evening."

The day of our first town mystery patrol of the new school year. I was sure there had been nothing wrong with Nagato when I saw her then. Don't tell me this started around the time that I got that call from Sasaki in the bath.

"....."

Nagato didn't respond. Her dim and hazy eyes were gazing in the general direction of my chest. Now that I thought about it something had seemed off. Yesterday...Sunday. I had been called out by Sasaki and met with Kyouko Tachibana, Kuyou Suou and Fujiwara. But there had also been an unusual intruder as well.

Emiri Kimidori-san. A girl who was one school year ahead of me as well as an Integrated Data Thought Entity interface different from both Nagato and Asakura. An organic humanoid who, up until now, had never come out into the open; preferring to always staying in the shadow of Nagato or the Student Council president. There was no way her presence as a part-time worker at that café on that particular day could have been a coincidence. I was sure that Kimidori-san had been keeping watch on Kuyou.

But why? To make sure that she didn't try any strange alien tricks on me, would be the obvious reason. But under normal situations that role would have been Nagato's. Yet Nagato had been nowhere to be seen.

A sudden wave of anger came over me and I had to fight the urge to perform a cross-counter right through my own temple. What an idiot I'd been. I should have seen it back then. Kimidori-san had taken that role because Nagato was out of action. Nagato's backup, Ryouko Asakura, was gone. Though she may be from a different faction, the only Interface remaining in our vicinity was Kimidori-san. That's why she had been there in the café. She was carefully keeping her distance; even going so far as to pose as a waitress.

Nagato's eyes had reached a duller shade than ever. The gleam in them was like that of an ancient coin dug up from the depths of the earth; there was barely any life in them. Their usual shine, like that of a newly-sharpened pencil, was gone completely.

The air in Nagato's bedroom, free of any air-conditioning, was lukewarm. Yet I found myself feeling a different kind of chill. A chill that came not from without, but from within.

"How can I bring you back to normal?"

This illness wasn't something that could be cured by anything as simple as over-the-counter medicine or Haruhi's special cooking. It was an alien virus. The only person who would be able to come up with a vaccine or a cure for a thing like this was Yuki Nagato herself, and she was the one lying here because of it.

"....."

Nagato's now-pale lips remained closed for ten or so seconds before they began to move. "My recovery will not be decided by my own will. That judgment will be made by the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

That useless boss of yours? I'm starting to wish he'd show his face. There's a few frank words I'd like to have with him.

"Impossible. The Data Integration Consciousness is..." Nagato's eyelids slipped down another millimeter or so. ".....unable to make direct contact with organic lifeforms.....that is why I was created....."

And with that, her disheveled head collapsed back down onto the pillow.

"Hey...!"

"I am fine."

I became even more certain that this was no simple fever. The virus afflicting Nagato wasn't something that even a dream team of the world's greatest doctors would have a hope of curing. It was a data offensive from those cosmic horrors known only as the Sky Canopy Domain. They were sealing away Nagato's incredible alien powers by placing this "load" upon her.

"Can we solve this by negotiating with Kuyou?"

It was the only thing I could think of. If Nagato is the representative of the Integrated Data Thought Entity, Kuyou is the agent of the Sky Canopy Domain. Communication with her may not be as simple as with Nagato, but I had learned from Sasaki and Kyouko that it was possible. She could definitely speak Japanese, even if only at a very basic level. In which case she ought to be able to understand what I had to say.

"Words..." Her voice was so faint, it could just have easily have been nothing more than a sigh. "Language is difficult. I am not currently fit for communication with another humanoid interface. My capacity for linguistic communication is insufficient."

I knew that to begin with. But your silent nature is an essential part of who you are at this point. For me and for Haruhi as well.

"I....." But Nagato's expressionless face conveyed an evident sense of biting back feelings of bitterness as she went on. "If I as an individual unit had been conferred with social capacities..."

Every facet of her paper-white face expressed an emptiness that was painfully close to an infinitesimally small something.

"The possibility of my being granted tools such as those granted to Ryouko Asakura was not zero. I was not created in that way. I cannot oppose my established index. I will be the way I am.....until the day.....I cease to function....."

Nagato's eyes, closed by around three millimetres or so, stared blankly up at the cold ceiling.

I didn't know what to say. If Nagato and Asakura's positions and identities had been reversed, how would things have turned out? A silent, unsociable, book-loving class rep. And a charming, caring, ever-smiling lone member of the Literature Club.

The picture was obviously wrong. Hell, I couldn't even imagine it. I didn't want to think about being stabbed with a knife by Nagato and saved by Asakura. I was glad, from the bottom of my heart, that the enemy had been Asakura and the ally had been Nagato. I had no doubts about that.

Sorry, Asakura. No need for you to come back from Canada or wherever it is you're meant to have gone. Nagato's all I need. Nagato, Haruhi, and Asahina-san. Those three are enough to fill me so full of happiness that I think I might just burst.

"Tell me, Nagato." I leaned in towards Nagato, shifting my own face closer to hers with its disheveled fringe. "What am I supposed to do? No...what can I do to bring you back?"

"....."

For quite a while, no answer came. Taking her time, Nagato raised her eyes to meet mine, and when she finally spoke, the answer was terribly brief.



"Nothing."

"Nothing?! What's that - "

As I leaned even closer towards her, "What the - ?! Kyon, what are you trying to do to Yuki?!"

There stood Haruhi, an apron tied over the top of her school uniform, with a wooden spoon in one hand, the other hand on her hip, and her eyes like isosceles triangles, fuming with anger. "Why aren't you doing anything to help out?! Koizumi-kun already went out to buy the things we need! I'm sure you can make yourself useful! In fact, you're the one who ought to be doing this kind of work more than any of us! You're the oddjobsman of the Brigade! When it comes to menial labor, you're the first calling

point! Get the plates out, wash the chopsticks, just hurry up and make yourself busy with something! Come on, get on with it!"

Haruhi grabbed me by the nape of the neck and hauled me off to the kitchen like one of those sandbags you use to stave off flooding.

So be it. I'll do whatever you like. As long as Nagato recovers, I'll make whatever food you like. In fact, if there's ever a chance for her to get better, then this is it. The kind of super-nutritional recovery food that Haruhi's likely to make could just be enough to send even an extraterrestrial organism screaming out the door. And the more disgusting, the better. But while I may have been driven almost to tears of joy by Haruhi's cooking in the past, I can't think of one occasion where I've found it unpleasant. I can say that with certainty. Sorry, oh Mother who raised and adored me, but Haruhi's cooking is better than the meals you make.

Not that I can imagine her raising a family, but I'm pretty sure there's no danger of Haruhi's most immediate descendants developing any taste disorders.

Back in the kitchen, Haruhi left the task of monitoring the boiling pot to Asahina-san for the moment, and took a short break to gulp water straight from the tap, before turning back to us. "I'm a little relieved actually. I'd never even considered the idea of Yuki not coming to school, so I was worried that this might be something worse than an ordinary cold. But her fever isn't too high, so if she eats a good meal that's easy on the stomach and gets a good night's rest she should be just fine."

"Yes, it doesn't seem like there will be any need for her to visit the hospital." Koizumi took the opportunity to casually chime in. Everybody here apart from Haruhi was well aware that no human doctor would be of any use to Nagato, but come to think of it, it would be unnatural not to bring up the prospect at all.

"I happen to be personally acquainted with a good doctor, so if it does come to that I can have him prescribe her some excellent medicine."

Wiping her lips with her sleeve, Haruhi went on. "Medicine isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's spirit you really need for these things." Haruhi began to lecture us all. "The reason medicines taste so bad, you know, is to trick the cold germs or viruses or whatever into thinking 'If they're going to start shoving stuff this disgusting in here then I'd better leave'."

"I...Is that really why?"

"Sure is!"

Stop lying to Asahina-san with that air of complete confidence. What if she actually believes you? But I couldn't bring myself to actually voice that retort, and instead retreated to the living room with Koizumi where we sat under the inactive kotatsu and did nothing very much in particular. Koizumi, upon returning with the shopping, had been relieved of duty right away, and as I'd never been given any real responsibilities to begin with, I was let off after doing a few simple tasks such as bringing out the

tableware and doing a little washing up. So the two of us had nothing left to do at this point but watch as Haruhi briskly got on with the actual cooking with the aid of her assistant Asahina-san.

Still, I'd been aware that Haruhi was good at this stuff, but watching her at it now she put any professional housewife to shame. From the ease with which she sliced the vegetables to the way she prepared the dashi¹, I could hardly help but be impressed at how easy she made it all look.

"Oh anyone can do this sort of thing if they get used to it!" So said Haruhi, tasting the contents of the pot from a small dish. "I've been cooking ever since I was in primary school, after all. I'm better than anyone else in my family. Ah Mikuru-chan, pass the soy sauce."

"Here you go!"

Come to think of it, I rarely see Haruhi bring a packed lunch to school. Does her mother not make them for her?

"I'm sure she'd make them if I asked her to, and she does suggest it sometimes, but I turn her down. When I need one, I make it myself." There was a complicated sort of expression on Haruhi's face. "I don't know if I really ought to say this kind of thing, but my mom...my mother, she's got a terrible sense of taste. I think there's something wrong with her tongue. And she always measures the seasoning by eye, and never pays any attention to how long she leaves the fish cooking for so even when she makes the same dish it never tastes the same way twice. Back when I was a kid, I used to think that was normal. I remember thinking that school meals were the tastiest thing in the world. But when I tried making the stuff myself, it turned out absolutely delicious. Ah Mikuru-chan, pass the mirin."

"Here it comes!"

"These days I make half the dinners at home myself. My mother works, you know, so we sort of help each other out. I suppose it's true that there's no better practice than the real deal. Day-to-day diligence is what it takes. Not that I make a point of putting any special effort into it, but when you make it part of your routine you just pick up all the important things. Mikuru-chan, taste this for me. How is it?"

"Let me see! Ahh, it's delicious!"

"You see? This is my personal special vegetable soup. It's got every vitamin from A to Z, perfect for stamina-building! One sip of this stuff should send all your fatigues and aches right off to Saturn's rings!"

Where she got that tagline from I have no idea, but at any rate Haruhi began transferring the contents of the soup into a deep dish while turning off the heat from the pot and removing the lid. My stomach started rumbling at once. This was a smell to bring on hunger.

¹ A class of soup and cooking stock.

"This is made just for Yuki. Kyon, what are you putting on that hungry face for? You're not having any, you know. Help me carry it through to her room, will you? You're not going to get punished for doing that much."

Naturally I was ready to devote myself selflessly to whatever task was at hand. Indeed, I was filled with regret that there was nothing more I could do. I gathered Haruhi's porridge and vegetable soup onto a tray and carried it carefully into Yuki's bedroom. Asahina-san brought the teapot and cup. Koizumi followed behind carrying the herbal medicine that Haruhi had specified and a cup of water, while Haruhi went ahead to open the bedroom door.

"Yuki, it's all ready! Sorry for the wait!"

"....."

Slowly, Nagato lifted herself up and gazed at the four of us with empty eyes.

"Drink the medicine first, all right? It's meant to be drunk before a meal. I picked out the medicine that generally seems to work best from my experience. You can have the food afterwards. There's plenty more where that came from, so eat as much as you like. You didn't have any lunch, right?"

Haruhi's overwhelming positive attitude was wonderful. I could easily see your average cold virus fleeing in the face of this kind of power. Any bacteria with an instinct for self-preservation would be wanting out about now.

"....."

Nagato attempted to get out of bed, but was stopped by Haruhi once again. Koizumi handed over the packet of medicine and the cup, and after gazing at it doubtfully for a moment, Nagato drank it obligingly.

It seemed that Haruhi would have preferred to personally feed Nagato the meal, but Nagato refused and took the bowl and spoon herself. She took a spoonful, and swallowed.

"....."

As Nagato drank down the porridge, barely even chewing at all, Haruhi watched intensely over her with a piercing gaze. She wasn't the only one. Asahina-san, Koizumi and I were all doing the same.

"....."

Nagato was gazing down at the bowl in the manner of one observing the color of an iodine solution poured upon a sample of starch, but eventually she said in a small voice, "Delicious."

"Right. That's good to hear. Keep on eating. Eat it all up! Here's the vegetable soup. I should probably have boiled it for a little longer, but this should be enough to have brought out plenty of flavor."

Taking the dish Haruhi had thrust in front of her, Nagato drank it down. "Delicious."

"You see?" With a look of extraordinary satisfaction on her face, Haruhi watched over Nagato as she ate her meal.

Little by little, Nagato went on eating at a steady rhythm. I have my doubts as to whether she was actually enjoying Haruhi's cooking. While she did seem to be savoring it more than she had when she ate her boil-in-the-bag curry, she could well have actually been forcibly repressing her lack of real appetite. Nagato will eat anything that is presented to her. She will eat even if she doesn't actually need to.

Somehow I found it all difficult to watch. Perhaps it was because Nagato was sitting there in bed clothed in pajamas. Perhaps it was because she was silently eating Haruhi's nutritional meal. Or perhaps it was because even though she was sitting so close that I could reach out and touch her, her presence seemed so much fainter than usual.

"Sorry..." I apologized to nobody in particular. "I'm going to go use the bathroom."

Without waiting for a response from anyone, I left the bedroom and shut myself in the bathroom. Though perhaps it didn't show on the surface, I felt as though if I sat there watching Nagato any longer I might be overcome by a meaningless anger with no identifiable target. I sat myself down upon the tidy little toilet-seat cover, bit softly into the inside of my lips and settled into thought.

For the moment, I at least had the great satisfaction of knowing exactly who I ought to make the first target of my interrogations. I may not know what it was I needed to do, but this was one thing I knew I couldn't ignore.

Something had to be done about that Kuyou girl. It just plain wasn't fair that Nagato was lying bedridden while that damn girl walked about in perfect health. It was a question of imbalance.

I wasn't having any of it. First, I'd have to get in contact with Sasaki, and...

"Ahh...!"

The phone in my blazer pocket suddenly started vibrating and I almost fell right off the toilet seat. I looked down at the display to see who it was that had surprised me with such immaculate timing, and saw that it was an email rather than a call.

"Hmm...?"

The sender's address was an incomprehensible mess of characters. Who on Earth...? I opened up my inbox.

"Huh?"

The screen suddenly went completely black. Don't tell me it was a virus? Crap. I don't want to lose the data I had stored on here...

As I began to panic, I noticed a white cursor blinking in the top-left corner of the black LCD screen, and was struck by a sudden dazing sense of déjà vu. I had seen something like this happen to a computer monitor before.

Moments later, the cursor slid softly to one side, leaving a string of plain characters in its wake. This smooth flow of text, defying any need for character conversion, was familiar as well.

yuki.n> you need not worry

Nagato. So it is you. This was just like the time when Haruhi and I were trapped in that Closed Space together. In which case, I ought to be able to respond in the same way. My thumb darted across the keys. Don't worry? Like hell I won't. This calls for a response. Slowly but surely, I typed in my reply.

"It's those Sky Canopy Domain assholes' fault that you've got this fever right?"

As soon as I had sent the message, another arrived.

yuki.n> yes

Overcome by the enormity of my own carelessness, I felt like freezing my own head in liquid nitrogen and smashing it to pieces with a baseball bat. Damn it all! That Kuyou girl had just looked so harmless, sitting there with her doll-like features next to Kyouko Tachibana. And at the same time I'd been making a stupid assumption that it was only me and Haruhi who they were really interested in. They had contacted me because they wanted to do something about Haruhi's power; I'd made the assumption without ever doubting it. I have a horribly useless one-track mind. Koizumi had told me that Nagato was the greatest asset the SOS Brigade had. I knew he was right; how could I not have seen right away that she would be the first target of any enemy attack?!

yuki.n> i will not allow them to harm you or haruhi suzumiya

My thumb punched rapidly across the buttons in frustration. I don't care about Haruhi and me. We can take care of ourselves, and right now we're just fine. You're the one who's been attacked! You're the one in trouble! Do something about it!

Send. Again, instant response.

yuki.n> this is one of my duti□□□□□□□□ata
integrati□□□□□□sciousnes□□□□□□attempt□□□□□□municat□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□anopy doma

The characters came to an abrupt standstill.

"What's wrong?"

The scant few meters between Nagato's bedroom and this homely bathroom suddenly felt impossibly far. The few seconds that followed seemed like an eternity.

yuki.n> my operat?????æ—†å —å????OE—ă'ă??§ă™?????æ—†å??? —ăOE?????—ă'ă§???

I thought my phone must have broken. At least, I hoped it was the phone.

yuki.n> ????????"ã,OEã?????,æ-#å??? —å??OE-ã'ã???•ã"ã,???"OEã,,æ????????????-#å —
åOE-ã'ã•??

I broke out in a cold sweat. Nagato sending me honest-to-God nonsense was unprecedented. Was her condition really that bad? If it turned out to be incurable, I...I felt as though I might black out any moment. My body went so weak that my hand could easily have slipped and dropped the phone into the toilet, and frankly I couldn't have blamed it if it had.

But thankfully, before I managed to really break my phone, the top line on the screen changed once more.

yuki.n> need to sleep

The tiny flickering message appeared clearly for a moment, before fading away as though melting. It was a wonderful message...one hundred percent Nagato.

Let me just say this again. Like hell I'm not going to worry. You've got to be kidding me. Sorry, Nagato, but I'm not mature enough to go for that. You must be overestimating me.

Dashing out of the toilet, I sped in a flustered rush straight back into the bedroom.

"Nagato!"

Looking up at my wild expression, Haruhi was taken aback for a moment. But then, "Stop that, Kyon! Keep it down, all right? Yuki just fell asleep." She stared at me with a scowl. "She lay back down as soon as she'd finished her meal and went straight off to sleep."

And, indeed Nagato lay still on the bed with her eyes closed like a princess frozen in ice. Even her breathing was undetectable.

"I think she's really calmed down. It's times like these that living alone isn't good for a person, you know. You need to have other people around, even if you're just sleeping on your own, it's important to be able to hear people moving about in the rest of the house. It just helps you feel comfortable. It doesn't matter who, she just needs someone to - "

I turned my back on Haruhi's reasonable explanation. I wanted to listen, but I just wasn't in the mood for it. It wasn't a conscious act; my body moved on its own.

"Kyon? Where are you - "

Leaving the bedroom at a dash, I only picked up speed as I hurtled through the front door as well. I didn't feel like waiting for the elevator to go down to the ground floor, so I ran down the stairs instead. Passing through the entrance and out of the apartment building, I carried on running with no real aim in mind.

Where would Kuyou be at this hour? No idea. But she had been wearing a Kouyouen Girls Academy School uniform. If she goes to school regularly just like Nagato goes to North High, then Kouyouen was as good a place as any to start. I didn't care what the school security might have to say. I could hop-step-jump around them all day. If I went bursting into the staff room, her address might be listed on the register. If it wasn't then I'd just have to find another way.

At any rate, standing still and doing nothing was the one thing my body wouldn't allow.

Eventually my stride became as loose as if I was wearing winged boots bestowed upon me by some goddess; my useless cardiopulmonary functions had betrayed me and I had run out of breath.

I found myself standing in front of a level crossing. The very level crossing where, about a year ago now, Haruhi had given me a long private speech. Overcome by exhaustion, I concentrated for a while on taking long, deep breaths. My gaze happened to wander over to the opposite side of the crossing, and what I saw there made my gaze and body freeze.

Kuyou Suou.

The enemy who threatened both myself and Nagato stood directly opposite me, across the level crossing as though she had been there all along.

" _____ "

Black uniform. Long, wide hair. And that unfathomably blank expression.

The lights above the crossing gates began to flash. At the same time, the bells that signaled an approaching train began to ring and the gates themselves lazily began to fall.

Why is she...here...? It's as though she was.....waiting for me.....

Kuyou didn't move. She held that same distance from me, the width of a single crossing, and as though she had grown physical roots into the ground, stood stock still, looking less human than a robot hand-crafted out of cardboard boxes.

Clang, clang, clang...The gates had closed completely now, and the rumbling of the line and rushing of air that foretold the coming of a train became louder. My gaze was fixed upon Kuyou, and where hers was focused was a mystery. The timing was impossible. This was no coincidence. She was...She was waiting here for me.

With a burst of wind the train rushed past, concealing Kuyou from view. Though it can hardly have had that many carriages, it seemed almost as though time stood still for those few moments. This horrible sensation, powerful enough that I could have identified the faces of each and every passenger in the train windows that went past, turned into an equally powerful premonition.

As though the future was flashing before my eyes, I felt a sudden conviction that when the train had finished going past Kuyou would no longer be standing on the other side of the line. Somehow she would be standing right behind me instead, reaching out her pale, ghost-like hands...

A terrible delusion.

The train went past. The red warning lights, relieved of their duty, stopped flashing. And the black figure of Kuyou was standing, as ever, on the other side of the gates. Was it a demonstration of surprising patience? An unnerving scene staged for my benefit? Or perhaps she didn't possess such human concepts as these at all...

After waiting for the black-and-yellow bars to return to the upward position, Kuyou finally moved, as though walking across the ocean floor. She walked towards me. I'd sure like to know how she manages to walk without her hair or skirt shifting in the slightest.

Her figure, like an insubstantial holograph, came to a halt a few meters away.

I clenched my fists by my sides. "What the hell did you do to Nagato?"

Kuyou's eyes, like giant glistening marbles, gazed upon me. All my instincts were warning me not to meet that gaze. Those are the kind of eyes that you feel might suck your soul from your body.

Kuyou's brilliantly-colored lips parted. "I wanted to know about humans...No..." Though she stood at a distance, her voice came as if from right beside my ear. "No, that was not...what I wanted to know about..."

She cocked her head to one side. The incredibly human gesture caught me off guard. "What I wanted to know about...was you..."

What?

"Will you join me.....?"

What is she saying?

"I don't mind....." She holds out her hand towards me.

Alien.

Clang, clang, clang...The crossing signal began to ring again. Two red lights, flashing one after the other. Warning that the train was coming...yet to me, it felt as though they were warning of something more terrible than being struck head-on by a speeding train. An emergency situation. What's happening? What is going on? Nothing seems to make sense. What is the meaning of this sudden transformation, as though a lead doll has been brought to life by a witch?

Kuyou's hand is still approaching. Closer, ever closer. The human-shaped hand of a thing inhuman. A being that cannot possibly coexist with humanity, a visibly unknowable entity from beyond the galaxy, beyond human ken. A girl with hair that flutters like wings...

Eyes as black as the new moon. No. Don't look. The world will turn to black.

I want to say "stop", but my mouth refuses to move. This is too pathetic. After coming this far...

"Just give it up."

The voice that stopped Kuyou's hand was not my own. Again, I stood in silent shock. The female voice that echoed from directly behind me was filled with a cool confidence and a subtle, all-encompassing gaiety. It was a voice I had not heard in quite some time, and a voice I couldn't insincerely claim I had ever wanted to hear again.

"I will not permit you to approach him any further. After all..." From right by the nape of my neck, the voice broke into a peal of brief, charming laughter. "This human is my prey. If you mean to take him from me, why I'd rather do this."

An arm reached over my shoulders and past my neck. It wore the female sailor uniform of North High and grasped in its hand was an extremely familiar object. An awful light reflected from its sharpened blade. The tip of the combat knife gripped upside-down in that terrible hand was pointed directly at the base of my throat.

"I can't say I mind myself one way or the other." Her airy laugh made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. A smell so sweet that it could almost be narcotic wafted through the air and into my nostrils. I recognized it all.

"You're..." Finally, I managed to squeeze out the words. "...Asakura...?"

"Yes, that's right. Who else did you expect?"



The unmistakable voice of my one-time fellow classmate of Class 1-5, Ryouko Asakura, rang out from behind me. "Nagato-san is having a little rest at the moment, yes? And thus, you have me. Is there something wrong with that?"

I couldn't turn around. I had the unshakable feeling that if I actually witnessed the figure of Ryouko Asakura standing there behind me then the consequences would be unthinkable. One-time partner of Nagato and member of the Integrated Data Thought Entityradical faction, this girl had attempted to murder me twice, and on the second occasion come incredibly close to succeeding.

On both occasions, I had been saved only due to Nagato's intervention and Nagato was no longer available. Instead, here stood Kuyou. Outrageous. Caught between a wolf and a tiger, and neither one could be reasonably considered an ally. This was the last dilemma I wanted to face.

"An emergency situation was detected. Thus, I appeared. Is that really so strange?" Her sweet voice went on. "After all, I am Nagato-san's backup. If she can't take action, then I'm next in line. Don't you remember?"

If Nagato can't take action...

This was an honest-to-God emergency. So serious that the deleted Asakura could return to life. So dangerous that I needed the help of a murderer.

"Now, that's rather rude of you. I'll have you know I am not a murderess. After all...I haven't killed anyone yet, now have I?"

Then I'd appreciate it if you could move that knife. I can't even swallow with that thing there.

"That's not possible, I'm afraid. As long as she's standing over there, I have to carry out my mission faithfully." A single finger of the hand gripping the knife extended to point in the direction of Kuyou. "A humanoid terminal of the so-called Sky Canopy Domain, I believe? Very intriguing. If you were to die in this situation, I wonder how that girl would react."

She brings up these bone-chilling things in that casual way everytime. She hasn't changed a bit since she was our class rep. No, there's not a damn girl in the world who can pull that off but Ryouko Asakura.

Like a wet cloth left to dry in the blazing desert, I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't even tell whether I was hot or cold. There was only the blade's sharp glint, cold as outer space, and Kuyou's eyes, calm as four stores underground.

Too calm.

A sudden realization came to me. What had happened to the flashing lights of the crossing? Where had the deafening noise of the warning bells gone? Why had the train still not arrived? I opened my eyes. The red signal lights were permanently on. The gates had come to a standstill, diagonally in midair. No wind was blowing. Not a single person walked the streets. Not a single car drove past...

The world was standing still.

The clouds in the distant sky steadfastly maintained their position as well, and when I spotted even a crow fixed in the air mid-flight I finally and belatedly understood. Everything had been frozen.

"What on Earth is going on...?" Asakura let out a sly chuckle. "I don't want anybody interfering in this situation. If I do this, nobody will have to see us at all, you see? Space data manipulation is my specialty. Escape is impossible."

A trap, then. But for who?

"Now then, Kuyou-san." Ever-cheerful, Asakura continued. "Shall we have a nice little conversation? Or would you rather fight? I don't mind. I'd rather like to see what you people can do. That's part of my job, as well."

Kuyou stood motionless and expressionless as always, but...

"...Release that human. Threat level extreme.....Your intent to kill is genuine....." Slowly and carefully Kuyou blinked, and when her black eyes reopened they held a light that I had never seen there before. "It is not you. I have no interest in you. You are not important."

A slight hint of emotion could be detected in Kuyou's voice.

"Well, that's not a very entertaining answer. All right, if that's how you want it." The hand holding the knife shifted, leaving but an afterimage behind. It happened so quickly that my eyes had no hope of following its motion. I recognized the sensation from a previous experience, caught in the middle of an extra dimensional battle between this girl and Nagato in the classroom of Class 1-5. All that I could tell was that Asakura had tossed the knife with a simple flick of her wrist, sending it hurtling towards Kuyou at close to the speed of light. And it was only seconds after the fact that my mind was able to process that much.

"...Threat level increased by two stages." Kuyou muttered the words to herself, her hand clasped around the knife hilt directly in front of her own face. She showed no sign of fear towards the knife that had come almost close enough to touch her nose, and from my perspective, it looked almost as though she was trying to stab herself in the face. The opposite was true.

"...And continuing to rise."

The knife, and Kuyou's arm clasped around it, were vibrating minutely. Oh God. The knife that Asakura had thrown, even after Kuyou had halted its motion, was still trying to stab into her. Kuyou was monstrous enough for having the reflexes to stop that lightspeed knife in midair, but Asakura was more terrifying still. Just how much kinetic energy had she placed behind that knife? I didn't want to think about it.

"Not half bad." There was a tone of admiration in Asakura's voice. "It may have only been a test shot, but I did attack with greater force than my calculated forecast of your capacity. This may become rather interesting."

I could feel the air stirring up behind me. Feeling as though if I looked around, I would see Asakura's hair writhing upward like snakes, I kept my gaze fixed dead ahead. But my ears, I couldn't block.

"Expanding data control range. Deploying offensive data. Shifting to Termination Mode. Requesting authorization for localized combat simulation within limited space for the purpose of analyzing specified target."

That was the best I could make of Asakura's rapid vocalizations, and as soon as I had the surrounding scenery collapsed completely. Like a jigsaw puzzle of an urban scene being shattered into its separate pieces, everything was transformed, and that which lay outside made itself known. For the second time in my life, I found myself surrounded by the twisted geometrical realm that was Asakura's data control zone.

".....Threat level stable." Kuyou's skin, which had been purest white, began to take on a more flushed hue. Her manner of speech was shifting as well.

"Move away from that human." Though she still spoke with an unnaturally unconcerned tone considering the knife that even now stood grasped directly in front of her face...

"You are not worthy of consideration....."

Her sentences were becoming far more intelligible. With a careful, jerking motion, as though taming a wild horse, she slid the knife to one side of her face. Once the blade had reached a sufficient distance not to touch her hair, she cocked her head to one side and released her grip.

The knife that Asakura had thrown assumed once more its original trajectory, speeding off like a missile into the distance, and then...

".....!"

For the third time, and I was getting rather tired of it by now, I stood stunned in astonishment.

A third figure was just visible immediately behind Kuyou. My mind had barely had time to process this information before Asakura's knife sped directly towards the third figure's face with hyper-mach ultrasonic velocity. As though copying Kuyou's earlier response exactly, the figure seized the knife out of the air in the instant before contact. The possessor of this arm which was capable of such acrobatic knife-catching feats...

"Kimidori-san."

...was identified by Asakura at once.

"And what would you be doing all the way out here?" Kimidori-san, in her usual sailor uniform, seemed oddly out of place in this geometric realm. The serene smile on her face was identical to that she wore when accompanying the Student Council president. This profoundly ordinary expression was all very well, but in a world this abnormal it seemed incongruous by very virtue of its normality. Sorry, I'm running out of reasonable ways to describe all this.

Kimidori-san twisted the hand in which she had caught the knife and pointed the blade back in Asakura's direction. "I am here to put a halt to your deviant activities. Your actions are not grounded in the consensus of the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

"Oh? Is that right?"

"Yes. They are not permissible."

"I see. All right, then." All too readily, Asakura gave her agreement, and then...

"Could you give that back now?"

Kimidori-san released her hand and the knife moved through the air. This time it moved at a speed that my kinetic vision could easily follow back towards Asakura. But in the next instant, Asakura muttered something in that rapid, chanting way.

The knife suddenly accelerated and diverted its course to fly straight towards the back of Kuyou's head. This was not a velocity that could be dodged. It was like a steel laser.

"!!"

I could barely believe my eyes. In one instant, it looked as though Kuyou's figure had suddenly become two-dimensional, and in the next she had vanished from sight completely. It was as though the Kuyou standing before me had been nothing but a cardboard cutout, about a millimeter thick, and that cutout had suddenly been flipped through ninety degrees. Distracted by this unnerving phenomenon, I failed to comprehend the new destination of the knife until I saw it in Asakura's hand. It was gripped right-way up back in its original position, ready to slice open my throat at any moment.

As soon as I did realize what had happened, a stream of sweat erupted from the top of my head. If Asakura hadn't caught it when she did, the flying blade would without a doubt have pierced straight through the base of my neck. This went beyond terror.

Asakura voiced a doubtful question. "Did she escape?"

Hold it, you're ignoring what just happened to me?

"No." Kimidori-san shook her head, and lifted her chin to gaze up into the sky. "She is here."

Kuyou plummeted down before us. As though lowered from offstage by some kind of rope, she landed in a perfectly upright position. With one hand she grabbed the wrist of Asakura's knife-wielding arm while bringing the fingers of the other hand together for a jab and motionlessly unleashing it.

Towards what?

Towards my face.

"?!"

Everything was moving so fast I felt utterly exhausted. And yet there was not a thing that I could do. It was only after the fact that I was able to comprehend anything that occurred here and this was happening now.

A rush of air hit my fringe like a solid object. I couldn't help but close my eyes tight. Bad move. When I hurriedly opened them in the next instant the following scene met my eyes.

Kuyou's hand had come to rest only millimeters from my brow, and the only reason it had stopped there was that Asakura's hand was clasped around its black-uniformed wrist. In one hand she held an actual blade; in the other, an equally deadly hand. And like an idiot, there I stood trapped in between this outwardly human but inwardly demonic pair of combatants. Let me say it once more: I felt pathetic.

Was this the second time today that Asakura had literally saved my life? Seriously? Is there not something wrong with this picture?

"Kuyou-san." There was an air of teasing in Asakura's voice. "What is it that you want with this human? Do you want to kill him? Or do you want him to live?"

Kuyou's eyes regarded me as one might regard a sandbag. Her eyes were like blades themselves as their gaze bored into me, but then they shifted to an area beside my head. That's where, I presume, Asakura's face is.

".....Meaning of query unclear. Define 'human'. Define 'kill'. Define 'live'." She went on, in a voice that seemed to come from some kind of speaker somewhere rather than any actual vocal cords.

".....Define 'Integrated Data Thought Entity'. Clarify." She muttered the words as though to herself before, in a manner that could only be called 'dramatic', altering her expression.

Kuyou was smiling. It was a resplendent and beautiful smile. Though it seemed more like a perfectly-executed simulation of a smile than an expression of any actual emotion, the visage was nonetheless striking enough to infect even the most timid of men with that disease known as love at first sight. None but I could have resisted it. The likes of Taniguchi, unaware of the circumstances, would have been floored in an instant. All words were wiped clear from my mind as Asakura began her brazen response.

"My, what a lovely face you have there, Kuyou-san. But I think this is quite enough, don't you? I have no intention of yielding one inch to the Sky Canopy Domain. The life or death of this human is no exception to that."

Each with both hands trapped in this strange interlocking embrace, Kuyou and Asakura were continuing their conversation.

...What the hell are these people even talking about...?! I was becoming more and more frustrated.

Now, let me just make something clear. I'm ordinarily a very kind-hearted person. For instance, there was the occasion when my little sister took my favorite scarf and tried to wrap it around Shamisen as a joke. Shamisen, entirely unimpressed by the whole affair, responded as any cat would by flailing tooth and claw in every direction until the scarf was reduced to an unidentifiable mess of wool and fiber. Then I was understanding enough to let the both of them off with no worse than a poke to the forehead. That's the kind of guy I am.

When you've managed to drive a guy like that into a proper rage, you know things are getting serious.

Yeah. I get it. Anyone with the nerve to stand in the middle of this outrageous situation with a smile on their face is out of their mind. The fact that the three girls standing here right now are all from outer space just serves to prove my point. I'm the only sane one here. That's why I'm scared out of my skin. Got a problem with that?

".....Define 'Sky Canopy Domain'."

Paying no attention to the words that could have come from one of those online chatterbots but were instead emanating from the world's most exquisite smile, Asakura made her own pronouncement.

"Initiating offensive data assault."

The ground beneath us began to foam. Along with a bubbling sound like boiling water, it gave the impression that we were standing in a poisonous swamp. Next, Asakura's knife melted into nothing, like crystallized sand. Kuyou's hand, its wrist held in place by Asakura's, was then engulfed in some kind of bluish-white mosaic. A grid of miniscule hexagons spread up the arm with astonishing speed, but in the next instant Kuyou's figure seemed once more to become two-dimensional and, another instant later, she was but a fine vertical line in the air.

Bong!

"Ngh...?!"

A deafening metallic chime, like two gigantic tuning forks being struck against one another right beside my ear, rang through the air and I instinctively squeezed my eyes tight shut. But the chime disappeared as quickly as it had come, and everything went as silent as if some giant hand had wiped the notes clean out of the air.

"....."

When I found the nerve to tentatively open my eyes once more, Kuyou was nowhere to be seen. The only figure standing before me was Kimidori-san. And the unnerving presence of a certain girl lurking right behind my back was as clear as ever.

The unsettling world of geometric figures was swept away, and with the return of our earlier surroundings, of the street by the railway line, my world was finally restored to some semblance of normality, but I was well beyond being surprised by these developments any longer.

"Is she really gone this time?" Asakura's questioning voice came from behind me and, in front of me, Kimidori-san responded.

"The data containment field that you had constructed was penetrated by an unidentified stream of concentrated data. I am currently in the process of tracking the path of the target in question, and repairing the surrounding space."

"A physical dimensional shift in her bodily data...clearly their terminals take a different form to ours. They have no need for authorization."

"It would seem that she was not created for the primary purpose of communicating with human beings. In fact, I would speculate that she was most likely constructed as an interpretation platform for communication with our own kind. Most likely even her interest in Haruhi Suzumiya-san was derived from observation and anticipation of the movements of the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

"I find it hard to believe that she was a simple terminal at all. She deconstructed my offensive data without any need for decoding."

"Their logical foundation differs from our own so analysis of the algorithms of the domain with which she is connected will be necessary to effect fatal damage."

"Well, I'll leave that to you, Kimidori-san. You must have been able to obtain a fair amount of data from this encounter, yes? As far as I can see, while we may not be able to eliminate the data itself, destruction of the physical terminal should be entirely possible. Would it not be a good idea to pick up the pieces and use those to determine the overall structure of the platform?"

"Unauthorized action is not permissible."

"Oh, you sound just like Nagato-san. Still, I rather think Nagato-san will be more accommodating to my ideas in her present state."

"I will put a stop to your activities. The Integrated Data Thought Entity will not permit them."

"Oh?" Asakura put on an air of surprise. "And since when did you become the Integrated Data Thought Entity representative?"

"The Interface designated by the personal name Yuki Nagato has transferred a portion of her autonomous judgment capacities to myself. She proposed this of her own accord and the transfer was authorized by the central will of the Integrated Data Thought Entity. My actions are in conformation with the consensus of the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

"Consensus? You mean those good-for-nothing conservatives always trying to preserve the status quo? Or are you trying to label me a minority party?"

"Both."

Asakura gave a nasty sort of laugh in that model-student voice of hers. "My behavior patterns are unchanged from my former station. They have yet to be overwritten."

"You are a backup unit that was deployed purely as an emergency measure. Nagato and myself have merely conceded in a professional capacity that your deployment was a necessary measure in the limited context of this emergency. Your potential usefulness was marginally greater than the threat you present."

"Should I be thanking you, then? Seeing as it's thanks to you that I've returned."

"I have been granted the authority to cancel your data integration."

"So there's no point in my trying to fight you, then. Fair enough. I only plan on acting according to my own will. Nagato-san taught me that, you know. That's where exactly the potential for independent evolution truly lies. Didn't you know, Kimidori-san? She has long ceased to be a simple terminal. In which case, don't you think that we too might hold that same potential?"

Screw that. Nagato alone is more than enough for me, thanks. Sure, I'll thank you for protecting me from Kuyou's attack. But let me just make this perfectly clear: Nagato is all I need. Asakura, I don't need you.

"How terribly harsh." Asakura was visibly enjoying herself.

And let me say this, too. Do you have to keep holding this ridiculous debate quite literally around me? It's giving me a headache just listening to all this crap.

"Well, you heard the man Kimidori-san."

And one more thing. If you've got the spare time to show up in a place like this and hang around pointing knives at me, then why don't you damn well go and make Nagato some food? Just like you used to the last time I saw you.

"Is that any way to talk to the girl who just saved your life from an evil alien monster?" The smiling tone in Asakura's voice never wavered. It didn't sound in the slightest as though she had taken any actual offence.

"Well, I'm sorry, but the question of maintaining this form for any extended period is out of my hands. If you have any complaints in that area, I'd suggest you direct them to our lovely senpai over there and the dominant faction of the Integrated Data Thought Entity. Why don't you try asking Nagato-san? If she agrees to it, why I might even be able to come back from Canada."

I'll pass. I don't see much hope of getting Haruhi to accept a development like that, after all. You just enjoy your little excursion.

"Really? That's a pity." Once again giving her usual rippling laugh, Asakura went on. "Well, I'm afraid it's about time for my temporary deployment to come to an end. Call me again any time. I'll be ready and waiting. As long as Little Miss Scary over there doesn't step in to intervene of course."

Not having any recollection of having called her in the first place, I stayed silent. Asakura's voice moved even closer. "Nagato-san and I are like reflections in a mirror. Can you understand that? I'm much more akin to Nagato-san than Kimidori-san is. The Interface you're looking at right now won't lift a finger to help you. Her job is, after all, merely to observe."

I could feel a warm breath against the back of my ear. "Why don't you turn around, hmm? Can we not at least say our goodbyes face-to-face?"

Like hell I'm going to do that. What if I turned around and saw you standing there with that ordinary class-rep smile you always used to wear? It might wipe the fear clean out of my mind. I might be taken in by that friendly smile you always did so well. As far as I'm concerned, you and Kuyou aren't all that different.

"You really are so awfully rude. Very well...goodbye, then. Until we meet again."

Even after her voice died down and her presence vanished, I was still reluctant to move a muscle. It had become a test of endurance.

Kimidori-san, too, stood watching me without saying a word. I noticed the skirt of her uniform begin to flutter in the wind, and as soon as I did, the sound of the crossing bells started up again. I jumped about five millimeters off the ground. The red signal lights flashed and the gates came down. The clouds in the distance drifted on by and the crow flew off to find its nest.

All the sounds of the city were back. Time was on the move once more.

Kimidori-san began softly walking in my direction and came to a halt facing me at the perfect distance. I wondered whether she was going to give me some kind of explanation but, no matter how I waited, her lips didn't move from that constant Student Council Secretary smile.

"Kimidori-san."

"Yes."

"That girl...That Kuyou girl...what exactly is she? I can't make sense of her at all. There's no rhyme or reason in the things she does and says. Is that because she's not human?"

"The principles governing the Sky Canopy Domain are beyond comprehension. We have yet to even reach a conclusion as to whether they have an autonomous consciousness. We cannot even state for certain that they can be strictly classified as a living being."

The stiffness of her explanation was a little depressing.

...Right. I see. Well that would be a problem, wouldn't it? I have my own problems to deal with. But there's one thing that I have to say now while I have the opportunity.

"Can't you at least do something about Nagato's fever?"

"Nagato-san has been assigned a special task. Her task is to establish high-level communication with the Sky Canopy Domain itself."

"Nagato's bedridden. She can't even move. You call that a mission?"

Kimidori-san's face seemed to be smiling at me while actually staring off into the distance. "Her task is to establish a higher level of communication which does not rely upon language. This is a mission which would be fundamentally impossible for a human being to achieve. For the first time, we have established a measure of physical contact with their kind. It may be indirect, but it is a huge development in comparison to the complete mutual comprehension failure that has plagued us in the past. Nagato-san is serving the role of relay between our kind and theirs. Even now, she is actively fulfilling that function. Please watch over her."

"And you think that's an excuse for forcing all this on her?" It took all the effort I had to keep that sentence from becoming an exclamation. I was staring daggers at Kimidori-san's unconcerned features, serene as Japanese dandelions dancing in the spring breeze.

"Can't you or Asakura do it instead?"

"It was Nagato-san with whom they first established contact. She is the interface with the closest proximity to Suzumiya-san. I would consider their choice to be extremely logical." Her calm, composed responses were making my head really start to hurt.

In other words, you're telling me to just leave her alone? I guess the Integrated Data Thought Entity really is made up of nothing but worthless assholes. It must have been a proper miracle that someone like Nagato was sent here and happened to be the first one of you people I met. Hell, if Asakura and Nagato's positions had been reversed, or if it had been Kimidori-san there in the Literature Club, I would never have made it this far. It was all thanks to Nagato. That damn word "interface" can go get lost somewhere around the orbit of Neptune. I'm starting to feel like it wasn't just "an alien" that Haruhi wanted in the SOS Brigade. Instead it was Yuki Nagato herself. Dominant faction, radical faction, I don't care which, either damn one of you try showing yourselves to Haruhi. And then let her weigh you up against Nagato. I'm sure Haruhi would have the sense to pick Nagato every time.

"Please forgive me." Kimidori-san bowed ever-so-properly in my direction. "There is very little that I am able to do. The limitations imposed upon me prevent any deviation from this course. If you have any other matters to discuss I will be happy to be of assistance."

As this gentle upperclassman walked past me, she bowed her head once more, before heading off in the direction of the station. I knew full well that there was no point going after her. I could tell too that these aliens were trying to accomplish something that was beyond my ability to properly understand. But there was one last thing I wanted to say.

"This is the Earth. It isn't some playground for aliens, all right?"

My words disappeared into a gust of the spring breeze, and Kimidori-san had already walked out of sight. And yet...

"Such a very.....entertaining joke."

I couldn't tell whose words they were. Whether it was Kuyou, Asakura, Kimidori-san, or somebody else entirely, I couldn't decide. But I have a hard time believing that those words I thought I heard were simply my mind inventing a human voice from the sound of the wind blowing past my ears.

Mobile phones always have the tendency of ringing when you least expect them. This time was no different. As I dragged my heavy legs up the path towards Nagato's apartment, it was a call from Haruhi that stopped me in my tracks.

"Honestly! Where on Earth have you gone to?! Were you lured away by a demon's voice or something?! Mikuru-chan was so surprised when you just ran out like that!"

"Yeah...sorry. I haven't gone that far. I'll be back soon."

"Let's hear a proper reason."

"...Oh, you know. I realized I hadn't brought anything for Nagato. I thought I'd go and buy a can of peaches or something."

"What century are you living in? Make it a basket of fruit. No, actually, there's no need to go all that far, it's not like Yuki's in hospital or anything. Just buy some orange juice. One hundred and twenty percent pure fruit juice."

I'd like to hear where I'm going to find orange juice like that.

"Then a hundred percent will do. And you'd better be back within three minutes. Got that? Over!" She hung up on me without any further ado, but I didn't get mad. It was hardly the first time.

Right now, Haruhi's one-sided, straight-to-the-point, entirely self-centered way of doing things was just what I needed to stabilize my mind a little. This was how Haruhi was meant to be. If she wasn't, she could hardly hope to serve as the leader of a group as outrageous as the SOS Brigade.

I headed down to the supermarket by the station and wandered through the aisles as though I was sleepwalking. I purchased the bottle of 100% California orange juice that Haruhi had specified and walked in a rather sullen state back to Nagato's apartment building. Reaching the automatic door, I dialed through to Nagato's room. Haruhi picked up the intercom and let me in.

By the time I got back to Nagato's apartment, I'd overrun Haruhi's time limit by two minutes or so. But our glorious leader made no comment, simply taking the bottle of orange juice from me and passing it straight on to Asahina-san.

"Put this in the fridge. All right, Mikuru-chan?"

"Okay!"

Used to being ordered about by Haruhi by now, Asahina-san hurried off in the direction of the kitchen. Damn, that girl is adorable. This is the kind of thing that puts her in my *Top 3 People Who Must Be Protected From Harm At All Costs*.

"How's Nagato?"

"She opened her eyes for a little while just now, but now she's gone back to sleep. So no going into the bedroom, got that? It's just creepy to stare at people when they're sleeping."

There was an odd look on Haruhi's face, but she stayed silent for a period of four minutes or so before finally coming out with what was bothering her.

"Something like this has happened before, hasn't it? Yuki had a fever, and all of us were having to look after her. It was just a hallucination, but for some reason it all still seems so real..."

That would be because it was. The "shared hallucination" explanation was just a piece of bull that Koizumi pulled out of his ass. Not that I could explain that to Haruhi, so I kept my mouth shut.

Almost as though praying for something, Haruhi went on. "It's just like back then, right? Once we got back to Tsuruya-san's villa, Yuki got better in no time. It was just a nasty reaction to the cold up on the slopes. It's the beginning of spring now, and they do say that the turning points between seasons are the easiest times to get a little under the weather. This could just be a kind of hay fever."

It sounded as though she was trying to convince herself. "Yeah. It won't be anything serious. Give her a few days, and she'll be good as new."

This is the point where I feel like interrupting with an "Oh yeah, says who?" but unfortunately the answer would have to be "me". I envy Koizumi his way with words sometimes. No matter how crazy a situation gets, he always finds some clever excuse to wrap it up all nice and neatly. That's one guy who's going to Hades for sure.

The closed door to the bedroom may as well have been covered in yellow-and-black "Keep Out" tape, so I headed straight through to the living room. Koizumi was under the kotatsu, and as I came in he glanced over.

"Where did you go?"

"A place as nasty as one of your closed spaces."

"So it would seem." He rested both elbows onto the kotatsu table. "I received reports that there were sightings of both Kuyou Suou and Kimidori-san." He indicated the mobile phone lying on the floor beside him. "Only for the briefest of instants, but from the look on your face, I would venture that it was more than just a chance encounter."

"Yeah." I'm not sure if I even know who's an ally and who's an enemy any more. God knows what all those damn aliens are up to. Kuyou, Asakura, and Kimidori-san may all look human enough, but they're monsters, pure and simple. Sure, some humans can come out with the craziest of stuff from time to time, but at least you can work out the reasoning behind it. Nobody knows what goes on in a monster's mind. The stuff they do comes so far out of left-field, it feels like they're NPCs in some badly-scripted RPG. And it doesn't help that their stats are broken as all hell.

"Is there really nothing we can do?"

"Oh, I assure you I will do everything in my power. Who knows what I may find if I provoke Kyouko Tachibana in the right ways, but I'm afraid prospects don't seem high as things stand. I don't believe there is any connection between her faction and Nagato's current condition. Kyouko Tachibana and her associates have chosen the wrong person to ally themselves with. Kuyou Suou is not someone

who will respond to reason. It is ridiculous for humans to hope to understand an entity beyond the comprehension of even the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

Then what about the time-travelers? That annoying asshole Fujiwara didn't seem to be afraid of Kuyou, at the very least. Ugh, I can't believe I'm thinking of turning to him for help. We don't know what the hell his agenda is, either.

"Yes, it seems clear enough that his objective is not a simple case of observing Suzumiya-san. In fact, I could say that of both factions of time-travelers. Though I doubt our own Asahina-san has been made aware of that particular fact." Koizumi's eyes shifted over to one side, settling upon Asahina-san, who was attending to the washing-up in the kitchen. Haruhi was with her as well, making herself as busy as ever pouring the contents of the soup-pot into containers, packing away the leftover ingredients, and so on.

"Right, I've decided. Until Yuki gets better, I'm coming here every day to make her dinner. I don't care what anybody else says. Even if Yuki herself tells me not to, I'm still coming." It was an unnecessarily loud pronouncement, considering Haruhi was only talking to herself, but she sought approval from no-one.

You really are the most self-centered girl in the galaxy. And I hope you never change.

After digging out a spare key from Lord-knows-where, Haruhi closed and locked the door to Nagato's apartment, and slipped the key into her skirt pocket like it was a fragment of gold dust. Having left Room 708 and the sleeping Nagato behind, we decided to go our separate ways after leaving the apartment building.

"The SOS Brigade won't be meeting for a while, all right?" Looking back up at the apartment we had just left, there was irritation in Haruhi's eyes under the fading twilight. "Until Yuki comes back to school, nobody needs to go to the clubroom. We'll come here instead. To Yuki's. Mikuru-chan, I'll be needing your help again tomorrow."

"O - Of course!"

I almost shed a tear at the sight of Asahina-san nodding with such meekness and sincerity. Damn. It looked like Haruhi and Asahina-san were fully determined to take up the task of looking after Nagato in the days to come. For once, there were no excuses from Haruhi about how this was her duty as Brigade chief. She knew this wasn't the time.

And I knew there was something that I could do, as well. No, something that only I could do. I had to get back home as fast as I could, and get in contact with a certain individual. The only one of our new group of acquaintances whose telephone number I actually knew.

"Sorry I took so long to respond, Kyon. I was in the middle of a cram school session, so my phone was turned off. I got your message. Could we meet tomorrow evening after school hours, yes? I don't have cram school tomorrow, so I suppose I can be at Kitaguchi Station by about half past four. Of course

I'll pass the message on to the other three as well. I'd be willing to bet that they'll all be happy to come. I think they may have been waiting for you to get in contact with me. Kyon, you seem to be rather worked up, but I would suggest you try to calm down before tomorrow afternoon.

It could well be the case that this reaction of yours is a part of whatever they're planning. Not that I'd know anything about it, you understand. It's just that that's what I would do if I was in their position. Well then, see you tomorrow. Good night.

- Your Friend"

Chapter 5

α-8

The next day was Tuesday.

It's all thanks to my eyes having decided to begin the day's work before my alarm clock that I was able to take a bit of a load off my heart by walking at a slow pace up the big hill to school. Despite the immutable scenery of students walking to school, the sight of a few freshmen completely focused on the task of climbing the hill reminded me of myself from a year ago. It's only right now that I can walk to school so leisurely; next month, this task would only become the most troubling matter in my mind.

For no reason at all, I yawned and stood there staring blankly.

Why? It was another morning that wasn't exciting in the least, yet it brought strange feelings.

Ever since the suspicious-looking meeting with Sasaki, we haven't contacted each other. Despite this, we met again on Saturday, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about. But it was this fact in particular that was suspicious. Knowing clearly that they would set traps for me but not knowing when they were going to make their move really put me ill at ease. My impression of Kuyou Suou and the nameless time traveler tells me that when that pair got started, they'll be even more vicious than that kidnapper Kyoko Tachibana-san. So I can't help but stay on guard. That future bastard's inclination not to reveal his face in front of everyone is also reason for concern. Even though I'm certain from Sasaki's tone that he's back in this time period, I don't know whether he'll make a move soon or not. It looks like the rationale of people from the future is quite convoluted. That includes Asahina-san (big). Last time he only watched Kyoko Tachibana perform a kidnapping. Will he get Kuyou to stab someone this time?

I sighed in the way the Student Council president does. Continuing to think about this was a pointless endeavor. It's better to go greet the brigade leader in the classroom first. Wait, when did that become a part of my daily school routine?

When I was about to take another step up the hill, someone patted me on the shoulder.

“Good morning.”

It turned out to be Koizumi. I didn't know it was possible to run into him any time but after school. Wait a second. This couldn't be the first time, right?

“Yes.”

Koizumi and I, who echoed his greeting, walked onwards. He had a light smile as if he had successfully awoken someone from cryogenic sleep or if he was a starship pilot who had his destination planet right in front of him.

“Your eyes look deep in thought. Did something happen?”

Regardless of whether something happened, since I'm always faced with the problem of climbing the hill day after day, I can't help but carry this expression. Why are you beaming? Aren't you the principal victim of Haruhi's emotional instability?

"That would be correct."

The handsome man straight out of a magazine said with overflowing elegance:

"The once frequent Closed Space occurrences have recently become sparse, which makes me much more at ease. Perhaps Suzumiya-san has been overly troubled by the recruitment of freshmen and, for a short while at least, has unwittingly forgotten about the pressures facing her."

I sighed and shook my head. Haruhi, you really are a simpleton.

"Even though simplicity also has its own set of intricacies, we have no way of controlling them. Not even Suzumiya-san at the helm can control them so we passengers are even more powerless. It's just that I really find it hard to believe there are so many people who want to join the SOS Brigade."

My apologies are sent to those eleven likable freshmen. I know you didn't come to get ordered about by Haruhi; it's just that you're the best toys she can come up with.

"Even though I really wish the present circumstances would go on, it will only last a week at best. Let's see out of the people who came to the clubroom yesterday how many will dare come back today. Then we'll know how it turns out."

Do you want to make a bet? I.....Let's just assume six will come back, okay? As long as the number dwindles by half every day, by the end of the week no one will be left.

"Six really is a reasonable number. I will bet five and below then."

Very well, the loser has to buy the drinks.

Passing through the school gate and arriving on the school grounds, I remembered the matter that had just been bothering me.

"All right then, Koizumi. Is it okay to ignore the others like this? Kuyou, Kyoko Tachibana and that nameless time-traveler..."

"And Sasaki-san as well.....Right?"

Koizumi's light smile was like a serene May sky after days of continuous rain.

"Right now, I'm not sure yet. Our people have considered that option since they haven't taken action yet and since different communications with them are still in progress, it's not yet time to have them under constant surveillance."

Having reached the shoe lockers, Koizumi pointed in my direction and said, "It's very likely their key person is the time-traveler. Kyoko Tachibana is responsible for running her Organization. If the alien came to Earth for a vacation, then I guess that would be fine. However, once the rival is a time-traveler from the future the matter becomes very serious. His goals aren't as specific as Kyoko Tachibana's nor as blurred as that alien's. That means they're harder for one to predict. Maybe you would be more effective at this task of finding details."

The wayside chat ended thus. I trust Koizumi with his perfect attendance record, as he left by saying "See you after school". I hurried towards my indoor shoes.

I got to my shoe locker and opened it resolutely.

Inside were only a pair of dirty shoes; there was no message from the future.

Look how eagerly I'm willing to run towards any sign of unusualness. It really wasn't nice what Asahina-san (big) was doing. I trust her next greeting will again be "I haven't seen you in a long time".

In class that day, Haruhi was excited to no end. It was as if she would simply drift away if she wasn't bolted down. However I should mention that she wasn't the only person whose mind wasn't in school work. Ultimately, how many freshmen joining the brigade affected mine and Koizumi's wallets. After hearing her lay down the imperial edict yesterday, how many lunatics would dare return knocking on the door?

The one I cared a bit about was the female student dressed in a freshly washed uniform, as if it'd been sent out to be cleaned, which was so wide that it looked like it would almost slide down her shoulders. After seeing her reaction yesterday, she was the only one I thought would return. Despite not showing any distinctive mark other than a hairpin with an emblem of a faint smile, that girl, who was moe in a different manner than Mikuru, actually managed to remain calm as Mount Fuji in the monsters' den that was the SOS Brigade room. Maybe it's only because I remember her appearance that I've come to this conclusion. What did the other freshmen look like? My mind drew a blank. But that only confirmed that, out of the rest, none were particularly prominent.

Our school was lax on rules, but we didn't often see new students dressing out of uniform. At most, we'd see ugly red socks or someone altering the uniform into an unacceptable state right after school started. However, once the discipline and clean-up squad working under the Student Council's orders got started, none lasted very long. Haruhi disdained students who would go to this degree of pretending to be strange and wouldn't at all consider imitating them. She'd be even more likely to sneer at people who pretend to be big and flaunt their power and prestige. She would tell them to go home.

Who Haruhi was looking for wasn't one of those lightweights who only followed current memes to try to shock others, but rather people who were innately strange such that oddness was one of their attributes. Even though Asahina-san was an exception, in the end she wasn't an airhead. From this, one can see that Haruhi may actually be a master at reading people. After the new semester began, Haruhi must have already run her eyes through all the freshmen classrooms, but wasn't able to find half a

student who piqued her fancy. That's to say, the victim list currently remains at zero; making me feel extremely at ease. Even if there was someone who could pass Haruhi's entrance exams, it would still mean that that someone must still be a normal person who couldn't be any more normal. Speaking of this, that type of person must be the most pitiful creature to let themselves get taken in by our brigade leader, brigade members, and myself, and to be forced to bear the heavy burden that had previously fallen on my doorstep.

In the end, these were only words; I still wasn't looking forward to it.

In passing, I should mention that it was thanks to Haruhi's pre-quiz math tutoring that I was able to perfectly work out today's math quiz. Even though I regret that showing my majesty on the testing stage for once was due to my reliance on knowledge the brigade leader shoved down my throat, it's too late to quibble about that now. I just hope that Haruhi is extra careful not to follow in the footsteps of how Prometheus spent his tragic final years when he showed humans how to wield fire.

But in the end no matter which god it turns out is running things, one shouldn't count on mere ropes to tie up Haruhi.

I don't know what the direction the wind is blowing, but Haruhi actually wasn't sprinting towards the clubroom at lightning speed. Instead, she remained obediently in the classroom. To prevent obstructing the daily clean up, she went over to the lectern and called me over.

What's happening? There shouldn't be a test tomorrow, right? Or did you hear from an inside source there would be a pop quiz?

"I'm waiting for freshmen to gather in the clubroom first."

Haruhi happily showed a crooked-mouth smile.

"A good performance always shows up at the very end or doesn't show up at all. Waiting in the room for freshmen to arrive is only mildly interesting. Wouldn't that be a waste of time? So instead I'm making a grand entrance at the very end in a display of splendor and majesty that befits a brigade leader. I can also conveniently eliminate those who arrive later than me."

Wasn't this your intention to begin with? With all due respect, how many minutes late do you intend to arrive? When that time comes, you can use *One of these Days*² as your entrance music, right?

"Looks like you can come up with a few good ideas on occasion too. But there's no need to draw particular attention to this. To show up at the clubroom with no particularly important matter and a boombox would be inexpedient."

It's good that I didn't bring this up during the morning break or otherwise. If I began imagining what it would be like holding a boombox following Haruhi, I'd get chills down my spine. I'm not a wrestler playing the part of a villain going on stage to show-off, so don't order me around like a luchador.

² A song from the British band Pink Floyd.

Haruhi, after giving an expression of polite refusal, looked up at the clock. "Being half an hour late should be enough. Waiting is also a kind of test, but asking the brigade leader to wait would come at considerable cost. Kyon, are you listening? I'm talking about you!"

This is why I've repeatedly gotten fined and obediently paid. Over half of my allowance has been digested by the stomachs of Asahina-san and you.

"It's your own fault. Time is money. By spending only 5 minutes, you can conveniently look back through hundreds of years of history. Your minuscule amount of money isn't worth anything at all."

Moved to action, Haruhi pulled out of her bag the textbook used for World History class. "Which class are you choosing for Humanities? I've already decided on World History. You should pick this class too. World History is really good. The things we learn about are much more exquisite than in Japanese History class. Look, isn't the Treaty of Westphalia³ much more poetic than Buke shohatto⁴?"

Picking at problems Japanese people had, Haruhi continued. "For your sake, I'll start reviewing material from Grade 1 to pass the time. What? What kind of face is that? Seeing as how you're a brigade member, I'll even waive your tuition fees."

My face was only the normal reaction to a strange person who wants to lecture people when they have nothing better to do. Willing to make some sacrifice just to keep her quiet is the proper expression here, so I unenthusiastically took out my textbook, opened it to the page Haruhi had and turned back the clock in my mind to Mesopotamia's time.

"To learn history all you have to do is rote memorization, so it's very easy. You also don't have to pay much attention to the precise year. As long as you memorize the sequence of events, what certain historical persons were thinking and what they did, you'll be completely fine. For example, let's talk about the Pyramids. This type of indescribable building was constructed by Ancient Egyptians who were either bored to the point of spitting out blood or just wanted to show their grandsons their opulence."

I don't think this matter was anything more than someone being respected to god status and this fellow being extremely capricious in wanting to build something, so it was only by ignoring the advice of the people closest to them and being stubborn to the end that the Pyramids were ultimately built. Speaking of modern history, this type of person is right in front of me.

"I wouldn't ever build something so obstructive. But now that you mention it, how about I raise an SOS Brigade monument on the school grounds before I graduate? We can decide on the appearance right now. What kind of stone should we use? Marble? Granite isn't bad either."

³ A Holy Roman Empire internal dispute eventually drew in all of Europe into a 30 year long war. In the end, the treaty was used to settle the dispute.

⁴ An edict laid down by Tokugawa specifying the number feudal lords to attend court and placed stringent restrictions on feudal lords listing their rights and obligations in a code of conduct. Literally translates to "Various Points of Laws for Warrior Houses".

It looks like she wants the SOS Brigade to be immortalized. Could it be that the Pyramids were also built for this reason? Was the ancient Egyptians' goal to leave some proof of existence for future generations that they used slabs of stone that took buckets of tears and sweat to move?

"Spot on, Kyon." Haruhi appeared as if she saw a student who'd understood what an analogy was for the first time. "Studying history demands this kind of thinking and causes much more brain activity than when you're force-fed stuff. It's also one of the keys to memorization. Looks like you've finally begun to understand. My painstaking tutoring hasn't been in vain."

Okay, okay, okay, I admit you're a good teacher who also helped me a lot in the end-of-year exams. That young spectacled kid will definitely become a gifted youngster after having you as a personal tutor. He will actually become so gifted; he'll invent a time machine.

I'm firmly convinced that even though the spectacled kid devoted all his attention to taking care of the Golden Coin turtle, he wouldn't bring up the matter to Haruhi. Despite my curiosity as to what he named the turtle, I couldn't ask Haruhi. Maybe someday I'll catch her talking about it.

I don't know if feelings in Haruhi's conscience for showing majesty and care for subordinates were aroused by pity for the workhorse of the SOS Brigade who was so used to being in the bottom of the class, but she became even more fervent than Okabe-sensei hoping to pave the way for advancement in my studies. It's a shame that no matter how passionate the lesson, it would just end up being as futile as the efforts of the current PE teacher.

Still in the classroom that was currently being cleaned up, I stood beside Haruhi near the lectern receiving a supplementary lesson in World History. Did I get caught up in a love for literature too? Right now, I was forced to enjoy Haruhi's instruction and could only circle keywords in the textbook with red ink without any deeper understanding. I had no choice but to accept everything she said as fact.

Faced with an offensive launched by a student at the top of the class, I could only woefully mumble "yes, yes" repeatedly and get swallowed by the shark along with some seawater, letting myself get slowly digested in Haruhi's stomach.

Since I didn't want to become some part that passes through her stomach, I was obliged to pull myself together. For my own sake, the work of cramming all that world history into my head ultimately served my own ends.

"The places and people that will appear on the exam are essentially fixed, so it's fine as long as you memorize these. Even if you are only half certain you can remember them, as long as you have some recollection of these names, the exam shouldn't be any problem for you. Though the easiest way would be to let yourself fall in love with history, you're completely naturally deficient at learning test-taking techniques. Thusly I don't look forward to seeing your results. Maybe you should talk to Yuki about the exam next time? She'll likely recommend some interesting historical fiction for you."

Does she have the historical fiction genre in her collection? Now mythology, I do remember seeing there.

“Those are fine to begin with, especially if you want to learn about how interesting human nature can be. As long as you puff up your chest and take the first step, knowledge that falls into the domain of the World History expert can wait. Are you listening carefully? Someone said long ago, 'This is the most important time of your life, because the knowledge you painstakingly learn will accompany you for the rest of your life.' The direction you take in life is also often determined during this time. If you don't foster an interest in your teens when your brain cells are the most active, I bet you'll regret it later on.”

After Haruhi spoke with such fervor and assurance as if looking back at her youth ten years from now, she continued with World History. Even though it was mostly anecdotes that would fall into the category of trivia, it was far more intriguing than Economics class. Every sentence burned deeply into my brain, so maybe Haruhi really did have talent in implanting knowledge into blockheads.

This brigade leader definitely wasn't a flower vase. Her mental and physical faculties were impressive even compared to past prime ministers. She was just a bit too despotic.

“I think this should be enough.” Haruhi put the textbook in her bag. “Freshmen should have gathered in the clubroom by now. Kyon, let's go make our grand entrance. Pay close attention to the faces of the enthusiastic and energetic underclassmen who've decided to show up today too. My instinct tells me there are six who haven't been eliminated. Yesterday's test wasn't anything at all, so at most five would have been ruled out.”

If I didn't guess wrong, then Koizumi would have to cough up the money. Was it really this easy? If there were six students present at best, that would suggest five students and below meant there weren't many mysterious students among the freshmen. However the way I see it, listening to a rude and unreasonable speech should have brought the number of freshmen who were only curious about the brigade close to zero. It's better if they were immediately brought to zero, because this way, I would be liberated from these worrisome details and could go back to basking under the sun.....

After being shoved out the classroom and then dragged to the clubroom, I immediately noticed book-loving Nagato reading silently, Asahina-san pouring tea into paper cups in costume, Koizumi playing cards by himself, and—

Having entered the tiger's lair were exactly six freshmen.

Three boys and three girls.

Now wasn't the time to celebrate winning the bet over Koizumi. Was this really happening? I didn't imagine there would be so many dauntless students wanting to join the SOS Brigade. This could be trouble.

Be that as it may, our brigade leader who was whole-heartedly satisfied, took a big breath to fill up her lungs and said in a clear voice of a volume that would not lose out to a full orchestra at practice, “Very good, it looks like I misjudged you. I thought for sure there'd only be one in ten remaining. This year's freshmen are really quite something. Now then—!”

Haruhi tossed her bag at me and sped towards the brigade leader's seat with lightning speed.

"I officially announce that the 2nd phase of the SOS Brigade entrance exam has begun!"

Having said this, she immediately took from the drawer a "Main Examiner" armband. "Right now is the written exam! Hey, you don't have to be so nervous. It only consists of a personality test and questionnaire type questions—that's all. Even though it won't directly affect your admission, it may be used as supplementary reference. Regarding personal information, I will be the one managing it so you can rest assured that it definitely won't be divulged to any teachers, students or other brigade members."

Haruhi's eyes were like an underwater volcano that couldn't be cooled. She really was a blazing young girl. "So Kyon, Koizumi-kun and Mikuru-chan, you should all leave for a moment. Ah, with Yuki here it will be fine. Come freshmen, seat yourselves far away from each other. Move quickly— Ah, there aren't enough seats. Kyon, hurry, go borrow some."

I followed her orders without uttering a word. It's because a despot never gets questioned that they become a despot who has wreaked havoc in the Literature clubroom for over a year now to the point that they completely treat it as their own. I hope the Student Council president will put in more effort so she won't put up a sign claiming this as her property even after she has graduated.

Koizumi, Asahina-san and I stepped into the hallway and stared blankly at the closed door. Haruhi must consider Nagato to be an invisible person to let her remain in the room. She doesn't really think she was a piece of leftover furniture from the Literature Club, does she?

"I'll go get some water—"

The upperclassman held the teapot close to her. The tap-tap sounds of her indoor shoes disappeared near the stairs. Gazing after her maid costume until she was gone, I wanted to save some time, so I tossed my bag into the clubroom and did the same thing I did yesterday—I went to the nearest clubroom to borrow some steel pipe chairs. If I knew I'd be doing this again, I wouldn't have returned them.

Just when I'd decided I would ask the Computer Society first, Koizumi gracefully raised one of his hands and said:

"I've already borrowed the chairs. I thought you and Suzumiya-san wouldn't be arriving early, so I walked around here. I've placed them over there; it looks like you didn't notice."

I ignored the bad taste in my mouth and took a look around. Indeed, there were five neatly folded chairs lined up on the side of the hallway.

"Why didn't you say something sooner? That way I wouldn't have wasted so much time."

"Actually you can't say it was a waste."

Koizumi's face drew close to me.

“We waited for half an hour after school. How did you and Suzumiya-san spend this time? I'm really curious to know.”

Even if you used your mysterious gaze on me—as if the orbits of Mars and Earth had overlapped for the first time in ten thousand years—it would still end in futility. Nothing happened. Haruhi would never do something so shallow.

I cleared my throat and said, “She seems to regard making people wait as a special quality, so this time she intentionally waited until the freshmen had all assembled before showing up. All I did was play along with her fancy.”

“Compared to when we meet in front of the station where the likelihood of her arriving late is extremely low, you almost get the feeling that she puts a lot of effort on getting there before you. I can't help but think that she's fine with making anyone wait except you.”

I think that's a matter of ego. The first time I got there first, that was the time where all three of you were late, I still ended up footing the bill. I don't think she has any intention of spending money on me.

“I don't think you can put it that way. When Suzumiya-san goes out and it's just you two, I don't think she'll ask you to pay every time. At worst, you would each pay for yourselves. I don't know how she behaved before, but I'm certain she'll behave like this now. Would you like to give a shot?”

I do want to hear you explain how your hypothesis can be tested.

“It's very simple. Pick a lucky day and call Suzumiya-san up to say, 'Sunday's a boring day. Want to go somewhere and have some fun?' Of course, you can ignore Asahina-san, Nagato-san and myself. You two can go wherever you want. So how about it?”

I thought about it for a while.

“You aren't trying to get me to go on a date with Haruhi, are you? Are you serious?”

“Strange, I don't recall having used a word like 'date'. But seeing as how you're already thinking of that, I personally don't have anything against it. I'm curious as to what you're thinking. How about occasionally going to a movie with the brigade leader and getting to know her a little better? Or better yet, why not just stay far away as possible from the SOS Brigade, regard yourselves as normal high school students and do some normal holiday activities? Maybe you'll discover something new.”

The gaze Koizumi stared at me with resembled the look one gave a nestling just leaving its nest for the first time and it pissed me off, naturally drawing my retort.

“If I really did as you said, it would be too reckless. I'm afraid I would have to ask you immediately afterwards to fix the situation. Even if the Earth stopped rotating, I wouldn't go on a date with her. If I did go on a date, it would mean I had become ill without being aware that I was ill. If that happens, please do me a favor by stepping in and giving me a good slap to the face to wake me up.”

“As you wish. However, I must say this is completely the opposite of what I wish to see happen...”
Koizumi's merry expression appeared as if he wanted to add something, but.....

“Kyon! How long are you going to take with the chairs?!”

Haruhi's loud voice burst from the room. Koizumi and I shrugged our shoulders simultaneously like mimes who also happened to be twins and turned towards the folded chairs in the hallway.

Before leaving the clubroom door, I could hear the “whirring” sound of the printer. What the heck was she printing?

The answer should be easy to figure out.

Q1: What was the aspiration behind the formation of the SOS Brigade?

Q2: What can you contribute to the SOS Brigade?

Q3: Out of aliens, time-travelers, sliders and espers, which do you like best?

Q4: Why do you like them the best?

Q5: Write down a personal encounter with something mysterious.

Q6: Write down your favorite idiom.

Q7: If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?

Q8: Last question. Please express your resolve in wanting to join the SOS Brigade.

Extra: If you brought an item you like very much, here's an opportunity to earn some bonus points. Please bring the item to me.

The words that the nearly-out-of-ink printer eked out while trying to linger on with its last breath of life looked like this. So this was the written examination.

After Koizumi and I had finished setting all the chairs and let the freshmen sit down, Haruhi placed an exam paper in front of them.

“The exam time is limited to 30 minutes. There are no word count restrictions. You can write on the back if you want. People caught looking at another person's exam will be immediately disqualified. Use your own brain to do a bit of original thinking.”

She then extended the pointer with a whoosh.

“Begin!”

Only Haruhi and Nagato had the right to watch over the freshmen eager to follow her instructions, so Koizumi and I were once more driven into the hallway. I conveniently snatched an extra copy of the written exam that got printed.

“Stick this on the door.”

In the end, with a tone of unwillingness to listen to any objections, Haruhi left me with a piece of paper with “KEEP OUT!” scrawled on it and shut the door.

With no choice but to put up the warning sign with thumbtacks, I closed the door and was once again left standing as if petrified in the hallway. I gave Koizumi the exam paper that I had difficulty getting my hands on.

“What kinds of questions are these?”

“That's true.” Koizumi skimmed over the paper once and said while rubbing his chin, “This is relatively similar to a real exam. The questions themselves aren't too difficult, so the answers are naturally easy to come up with. Trying to get a high mark shouldn't take too much thought.”

In an exuberant mood, he lightly flicked the exam paper. “This is a type of reasoning test. What Suzumiya-san wants to know is how the applicant reasons and tends to answer questions. From the answers, she can determine the applicant's level of thought, so it's a test of one's ability to reason. Of course, it's very likely she's using this as the main test rather than as a supplementary reference.”

It should be the main test since she didn't spend a considerable amount of time devising the questions.

I snatched the exam back from Koizumi. “But how should the questions be answered to curry Haruhi's favor? I don't think I could figure it out. What can you tell from someone's favorite idiom?”

“I myself am pretty interested in Question 3. ‘Out of the ones listed, which one do you like the most?’”

Out of aliens, time-travelers, sliders and espers, which do you like best.....

“It's a bit too abstract, isn't it?” I turned my back towards Koizumi's probing smile. “What are we comparing? Each one is different. As long as you add the qualifier 'the most useful type', then the question becomes fairly easy to answer.”

“Huh? Be sure to explain your logic to me.”

You have to look at the problem closely here. Trying to answer it in one go won't work. Broadly speaking, it's got to be Nagato's type. But we don't have any idea of what Nagato and the rest of the aliens are thinking. Time-travelers from the future who can effortlessly shuttle back and forth between time periods are easily worth all the gold in the world. Unlike Koizumi's limits, they have precognition about locations and times so it's very convenient for them to realize the essence of a matter in a split

second. Let's just say they all have their weaknesses. I'm only certain that I don't prefer sliders, since I have a feeling they don't possess any advantages.

While I was examining the exam questions in detail to pass some time, the water nymph Asahina-san returned with a sloshing teapot. "Ah, are we forbidden to enter?"

"It seems that way."

I took the devastated upperclassman's jade teapot and leaned against the wall to avoid looking like a poor sap that got sent into the hallway as punishment.

"I don't know if there's enough time to boil water and make tea for everyone....."

Asahina-san gazed at the clubroom door with a worried expression that really evoked tender feelings towards her. Despite wanting to keep the beautiful image of an upperclassman insistent on preparing the tea in my mind, staying like this for half an hour seemed a bit pointless. So I had to think of a good place to go.

"How about going to the cafeteria? Even though the cafeteria's already closed, we can get some coffee from the vending machine."

Since Koizumi took out some beef jerky, neither Asahina-san nor I wanted to offend his hospitality. I was surprised he had such a practical plan. The last phrase was particularly persuasive.

Koizumi lightly winked at me and said, "Besides, I still owe you from the bet."

I'd have forgotten if you didn't bring it up.

We left the clubroom walking beside each other and patronized the vending machine outside the cafeteria with a visit. After everyone had a cup, we sat around a round table on the terrace. Spring's cherry blossoms were less and less of a match for the flourishing greenery. During this time last year, I definitely would not have imagined I would be sitting together with these kinds of people.

With this, I let the sweet tang of hot café au lait make a swirl in my mouth...

"Kyon-kun, do you know what the entrance exam is testing freshmen on?"

While listening to Asahina-san pose such a question while using her paper cup of black tea to warm her hands, I immediately passed her the exam paper in my pocket.

"So this is the exam? I really wouldn't be able to handle it since I have no idea what kind of talent she's looking for."

"Huh?"

The upperclassman stared at the ground looking like a little girl in seventh grade battling the memorization of the 9x9 multiplication table. The sight was absolutely heart-warming.

"It's truly strange." Koizumi tilted his head elegantly. The paper cup in his hands forthwith appeared as if it were valuable Meissen porcelain from Germany. "It's not too bad. It's only expressing your feelings and thoughts of the current circumstances. Having twenty minutes with the three of us gathered together without any distractions, isn't this a blessing hard to come by?"

Koizumi put on an elegant smile.

"Don't you think so?"

Of course I've thought about it. In tumultuous times, I've already spent countless time together with Nagato and Asahina-san. When trouble comes, Koizumi's appearance however becomes rarer than that of a supporting actor. Normally, occasions for an esper to shine are few and far between. At most, he can play the hero for a few seconds like that time with the giant cave cricket. Nevertheless, the entity called the Organization really did put a lot of effort into the abduction case. I really can't thank them enough.

Originally, I thought I agreed with the time-traveler Asahina-san's views on two or three things about Haruhi. However, I changed my mind after listening to Koizumi's mindless chatter. The upperclassman's sip-sip sounds of drinking her black tea didn't seem to contend with his assertions.

Regarding Haruhi's supernatural powers, world transformations, and news about hostile forces, nothing was said. What was said fell entirely within the subject of school life with occasionally a joke one of us heard from a teacher or a student, interesting new board games to buy, etc. This must be what one would call "cheerful talk".

Asahina-san sometimes smiled and sometimes nodded her head as if deeply absorbed in thought. This was all that happened. If a passerby chanced upon this scene, they'd have seen nothing more than an upperclassman hanging out with a couple of underclassmen. Maybe one could even argue that for we who were trying to pass some time, this was the correct way to spend such time.



No matter if it was with a time-traveler or an esper it's completely irrelevant. A couple of companions engaged in underground brigade activities...maybe this would be a better way to describe the scene.

Whether time is valuable or cheap, it's only during free time that I am liberated from having to consider various types of calamities. I don't have to worry about the appearance of a new kind of alien, time-traveler, or even being menaced by Haruhi's new ideas. Despite feeling regretful Nagato couldn't be with us, I recalled that Haruhi couldn't be left by herself for thirty whole minutes.

Evidently, I still couldn't picture the SOS Brigade getting a sixth member. I also couldn't imagine the sight of losing Nagato, Koizumi, or Asahina-san.

Suddenly, I wanted to refute the person who first said "Lady Luck was a fickle mistress". In the world, there are actually some things that have remained constant since ancient times. For example, my memory of that night. The memory of Haruhi and I with regards to what happened may not have been captured in a photo, but it was nevertheless something we would never forget.

As Asahina-san's smile was covering up treasured thoughts in the depths of her mind, I couldn't help but feel a sense of melancholy. In less than a year, we would be moving forward to the third year of high school.

However, the present moment inscribed itself into our collective memories. It was one that could never be erased since it resided in the minds of my fellow students and myself. It had to be this way.

While in deep reflection, I downed the café au lait in one gulp, which had cooled by now. Despite it having been Koizumi's treat, I wasn't in the mood to particularly rejoice over the fact nor did the drink taste particularly toothsome.

Nevertheless, it was a source of pleasure.

The present me still had the energy to enjoy these small things.

Ten minutes after the allotted half hour for the exam, we returned to the clubroom only to see a satisfied brigade leader flipping through the returned exam papers like an emperor satisfied that her commands had been carried out. Aside from Nagato who was even more transparent than an invisible person, no one was left.

"Where are the freshmen?"

To my inquiry, Haruhi replied, "They all went home. After the written exam ended, I told them no matter whether they thought they passed or failed, they all had to come back tomorrow. I think I'll keep everyone for now except those who were only half interested."

"How do you determine whether they passed or not?"

Haruhi neatly tapped the stack of returned exams on the table until it was flush. "I definitely wouldn't use this type of exam to determine new brigade members. These questions don't even have proper answers, although I will give first consideration to those who answered in the most interesting manner."

Looks like she only wanted to make them jump through a hoop. This actually gave an opportunity to the applicants who felt obliged to impress the brigade leader, while only adding a little trouble to the rest.

"Idiot. I obviously have my reasons. I'm telling you that attending the exam in itself was a test of motivation. The ones who got discouraged by this little trouble will automatically eliminate themselves by not showing up tomorrow, won't they?"

This is only one type of test. Wouldn't the applicant screening process be a bit too simple then?

"I wanted to make some tea for them." Being of one mind to help freshmen in some way, Asahina-san said, "Have they gone already? What a shame."

I couldn't help but sympathize with the group of freshmen applicants who had gone two days without being able to enjoy the upperclassman's handiwork.

As I was busy gazing at Asahina-san who was immediately boiling the water, Haruhi began once more.

“Kyon, I recruited you as a brigade member without you having to meet any preconditions, so you should feel grateful.” Haruhi sat cross-legged on a chair. “If you keep continuing to make trouble like this, be careful or you might get outpaced by a new member and get kicked right out the door. Because the only ones who can pass my final examination must certainly be super-gifted talents. However, I want to leave the verbal exam to the very end.”

Haruhi took out a red-ink pen, and said while she was marking the exams and occasionally writing something on them:

“Does anyone want to try my verbal exam right now? If you answer well, I'll consider giving you a promotion. It's also good practice for a job interview.”

No matter how you put it, it wouldn't have been close to a normal company's interview protocol. Even if Haruhi herself was interviewed by the boss, it's not like her answers would have met the hiring standard. Now if one got criticized in a mock interview by someone like that, wouldn't the impression left behind be too horrible?

“Pardon me for not wanting to take part.”

“Really?”

Haruhi's mood wasn't affected in the slightest and she merrily returned to diligently going through the exam papers. To be honest, it did seem fairly interesting, so I asked, “Haruhi, let me take a look too. I'm pretty interested to see the stuff those rascals wrote.”

“That's not possible.”

Without hesitation, Haruhi said, “It would betray my responsibility of keeping their information a secret. They have personal information written on it, so of course I wouldn't casually let someone else see it. In the end, new members are determined by me, so there'd be no point in letting you see it anyways.”

Her big, sparkling eyes took a glance at me. “I especially can't show it to curious people within our own brigade. Choosing new members is the brigade leader's job.”

I could only suppress the idea that had just come over me. Oh well, looks like the brigade leader was pulling rank on the matter of choosing new members and completely ignoring any opinions we may have given. Aside from recruiting Nagato and me essentially at first glance, Asahina-san and Koizumi entered the brigade through imperial appointment.

Back to the matter at hand, how many out of today's 6 applicants can keep up with what Haruhi referred to as “the final examination”?

“Huh?”

I was watching the upperclassman from behind pouring the hot water into the tea pot, when I suddenly realized something. Were all six of today's applicants also from yesterday's group of eleven? There shouldn't have been anyone showing up for the first time, right? Since those who wanted to join the brigade may not have wanted to appear on the scene at exactly the same time, doesn't that mean the dropout rate wasn't 50%?

I tried to connect recollections I dug up from memory.

That's right, did that female student come today? I mean the one from yesterday who looked like someone I knew and had drawn my gaze for a moment. If it weren't for having been forced out of the clubroom right away, I could've taken my time to more closely examine the six faces using the opportunity afforded me by the writing of the exam.

It was really something I took to heart.

Koizumi took out a pack of UNO and began to shuffle the deck. Even without thinking, I knew that watching him deal cards wouldn't make amends for my loss. After Asahina-san placed the freshly brewed tea overflowing with a great aroma on the table, we three idle people began a round of cards. But my head felt like it carried some unexplained added weight. This type of test will end in thirty seconds. Is this how being unable to answer a super-simple question must feel like?

Quite subconsciously, I gazed at Nagato.

The Literature Club president who read books non-stop while sitting motionlessly in a chair that didn't depart even 1mm from the floor. It wasn't hard to imagine that during the exam, she also regarded herself as a bronze statue. However, since Nagato didn't move nor utter a sound, it meant that the world was still at peace. Or at least that out of the freshmen wanting to join the brigade, there weren't any who were from the Sky Canopy Domain like Kuyou, the kind of being you were too afraid to even flatter.

“.....”

In the space of an eighth rest, Nagato stopped flipping through pages as if she found a typo. She raised her eyelids by a distance on the scale of millimeters.

With eyes looking like a stone tablet that had just had morning dew wiped off, she looked at me for a while. Then, as if nothing had happened at all, she let her eyes drop back to the pages of the book.

Nothing more was necessary to ease my anxiety. As long as Nagato was in the clubroom cracking through book spines, the world wouldn't be thrown into a plot as poisonous as mandrake extract. Haruhi was working hard at evaluating exam papers. Koizumi, Asahina-san and I with nothing better to do, played cards to pass the time.

Even though I felt a bit sorry for freshmen who were going to join the brigade, regardless of whether they were truly interested in the brigade or not, it was good that you could take some burden off of me by having some fun playing with Haruhi.

If possible, I hoped three could return tomorrow. Despite the cruel admission process probably leading to high dropout rates, this number was still respectable. A huge drop in numbers however would only make Haruhi depressed sooner. Oh, freshmen. All you have to do is to endure until this weekend.

β-8

The next day was Tuesday.

The anatomy of the human brain is truly marvelous. Despite rolling in bed for a good while to finally fall asleep, my body still wouldn't let me waste time under my blanket. It's all thanks to my eyelids automatically opening before the alarm clock went off that I was able to walk a slow pace to school up that big hill which really punished your heart. However, my mind wasn't in that same leisurely mood. Passing the entirety of my first year completely focused on the task of climbing the hill, I allowed myself to meld into the boring, unoriginal scene around me of students commuting to school. Walking at a pace slightly faster than normal, I passed through the school gate.

Going like this, my mood will only get more and more ponderous. The best thing to do would be a relief of my pressure. Therefore, my first step was to pour out my grievances to Haruhi.

Arriving at the classroom, I noticed Haruhi's seat was empty. It looked like I really arrived too early. Despite the number of things I wanted to say outnumbering the stars, what I actually could say seemed pitiful in comparison. This wasn't even a matter of having a limited vocabulary. I could now completely understand how Asahina-san feels being forced to explain matters she couldn't explain through words. Should she use body language? Or how about pictures?

The answer to both questions is a resounding no. Let's just say it's all okay if I can't explain something like that. Simply said, as long as Nagato returns to a part of our normal everyday life, everything will be at peace. Of course, the sooner that day arrives the better, because the longer Nagato's fever lasts, the greater Haruhi's suspicion will become. To cure Nagato's illness, there's no telling what Haruhi would do.

As I said, even if everything went back to the day of the entrance ceremony in our first year, I wouldn't have felt it was out of place. It's only that I didn't want to be sent back to the starting point at all, gasping for breath like an ox. I'm not sure I could have enjoyed a perfect first year, so I conclude by saying that I enjoy the company I am currently with. It wasn't with few difficulties that we had made it this far, so how could we let such a year go to waste? I will definitely make it to the finish line hand-in-hand with everyone.

"Oh, so that's it."

I sat down on a stiff, rattling school chair and immediately thought of the solution. Even though I subconsciously discovered that I was exceedingly restless with anxiety, having made this self-discovery

made me proud of myself. To make a long story short, I was only terribly afraid that a person close to me would disappear.

Thinking back, this wasn't the first time. When Haruhi disappeared, I was sent into a flurry of confusion. It was because the world had been remade in a completely topsy-turvy way, but I won't go into detail right now. Asahina-san was kidnapped right in front of my eyes and now Nagato is unable to go to school...these matters really made me go through a lot of trouble. These events definitely happened, despite there not having been any evidence.

That same argument can be used last year as well. If time went back to a year ago and I again had to listen to Haruhi's self-introduction, made all the more shocking by the fact that she never uttered a word that didn't shock people, along with the fact that I consider my silly caprice to have been due to my youth and energy, I think the likelihood of my striking a conversation with Haruhi again would only be 50%. I would even go as far as say that my playing a supporting role in her brigade was the result of an accident. It seemed I could have just as easily spent my days with Haruhi Suzumiya leisurely in class 1-5 without having much to do with sidekicks like Taniguchi, and I wouldn't have been dragged by my collar to the Literature Club room. I wouldn't have met Nagato, wouldn't have seen Nagato without her glasses, wouldn't have seen Asahina-san's safe return from her kidnappers, Koizumi wouldn't have transferred to our school, and no one would have taken part in the Remote Island Mystery or made that foolish film. We would have spent our time leisurely, getting carried along by the stream. Indifferent, without any ups and downs, seeking tranquility and inaction, I would have become a normal high school 2nd year student.

Having said so much, in the end it was just a "possibility". In two shakes of a lamb's tail, I realized how pointless it was to imagine such a scenario since the likelihood of it happening was zero. Reality was what it was and no matter how you looked at it, nothing would change.

Now please don't ask which scenario I would prefer. I don't really have the time to hesitate when the answer is obvious.

With this, I took up my share of responsibility. I vowed not to rely on a more capable person to do what I could not. Even though I didn't have the glib Koizumi has, I could at least deliberate this much.

Last year, when Nagato fainted at Tsuruya's ski resort, Koizumi's mind played a big part in solving the problem. But this time it seemed a bit beyond his powers. If he had the capability to stop the peculiar alien life form Kuyou who had suddenly appeared, he would have taken action already.

Regarding Nagato, it was also because she had to obey the Integrated Data Thought Entity's orders that landed Haruhi and me in a situation neither of us could be too pleased about. Aside from Haruhi being among the people who could still repair the situation, there was just me.

I owe Nagato a lot for things that have happened until now. If I didn't take this opportunity and step up, where would the collective face of the human race be? No way would I lower my head in front of the knife-wielding Asakura or the mysteriously appearing and disappearing Kimidori. Furthermore, my middle school classmate Sasaki also falls into that category. Despite referring to herself as a "close friend",

Sasaki seemed a tad strange for both Haruhi and I. However, she was still much more normal compared to the other characters related with this matter. Sasaki and I have spent enough time together to have complete faith in each other, so I believe this type of slander wouldn't move her at all. Our relationship was completely platonic and I didn't pay any attention to the biological differences that existed between us. Sasaki regarded me this way too and it will remain like this forever.

Fortunately I mailed a Happy New Years card to her, so she was still looking forward to laughing and having fun with me at this year's student reunion. One could say that Sasaki simply has a talent to make all problems disappear and return to the socializing of our middle school days. Of this I was certain.

It was only now that I truly realized Sasaki really was a close friend. Even if we met ten years from now, Sasaki would still call "Hey, Kyon" and start chatting. She was a rare person like this and wouldn't get tricked by Kyoko Tachibana or Fujiwara. She was a normal human with both feet steady on the ground.

Even if Kyoko Tachibana, Fujiwara, and Kuyou began an all-out war against Koizumi, Asahina-san, and Nagato, Sasaki still wouldn't be my enemy. She was my old friend and middle school classmate, nothing more. Kyoko Tachibana, Fujiwara and Kuyou...you've really met your match. The Sasaki I know isn't just some plain, ordinary human and someone you can win over to your side with a few nice sounding words. Deep inside, she's someone harder to deal with than myself, even more stubborn than Haruhi, and a firm adherent to empiricism.

After having convinced myself, I recovered a peace of mind. Everything was set; the only part missing was Haruhi.

When the bell rang marking the prep period before the first class, Haruhi still hadn't appeared. I didn't imagine there would be an occasion where even she would be facing a time of crisis. I silently fixed my gaze on the blackboard letting my back experience the feelings brought on by the emptiness behind me.

Class was about to start. I proclaim that everything that's happened didn't actually start the moment when I first opened my eyes lying on my bed today, but when Haruhi was sitting beside me and I customarily turned my head. The passage of a whole year was like an unwritten provision, one that compressed 365 days into a single day.

Based on my biological clock, today was the longest day in history.

Hold on, Nagato. We'll definitely come up with a way to make you better. What about the Sky Canopy Domain's damn robot Kuyou Suou? She was the only enemy we absolutely had to defeat. The time-traveler we could handle after that.

When I had laid down my determination on the difficult matter, the bell rang signifying the end of the class meeting period. It was only until the bell finished ringing that Haruhi finally appeared, entering the classroom almost at the same time as Okabe-sensei. What was different today was that she passed through the backdoor of the classroom slowly. Her expression also wasn't very brisk.

Once Haruhi sat down, she noticed my gaze right away and returned a meaningful glance. From the pocket of her uniform, she retrieved a key and returned it in a flash, but this had already told me enough.

"I dropped by to see Yuki on the way."

In the brief time between the homeroom and the first period, Haruhi was able to explain:

"I wanted to cook her some breakfast, so I let myself in."

"Then what happened?"

"You mean with Yuki? She was sleeping. The moment when I opened the door to take a look at her, she got up and made some eye contact with me, then went back to a peaceful sleep. I didn't want to wake her up, so I left after cooking breakfast. Ah, her fever seemed like it wasn't too serious, but getting more rest is still the best course of action."

"That's true."

Haruhi softly sighed.

"Seeing Yuki lying down like this, I really want to..." She hesitated for a few seconds, then continued in a softer tone, "I really want to hold her tightly in my arms. Don't misunderstand me. It's just a feeling that only if I hugged her would her illness be cured. But it's totally unreasonable. Why do you think I have this kind of feeling?"



Haruhi propped up her head and turned towards me. Her expression wasn't one of worry, but of sullenness. I don't know how, but I could almost see what Haruhi was feeling, which made me jittery as well. However, it must have been a case of mistaken perception on my part. Even if I had hit the 0.01% chance and gotten it right, don't even mention the thought of giving Haruhi a hug.

Regardless of what the main reason was, I'm certain that Haruhi and I were seeing eye to eye. Koizumi and Asahina-san as well.

A Nagato skipping and jumping about...This kind of description doesn't seem quite fitting. Anyways, my point is no one wanted to see Nagato sickly and bed-ridden for a moment longer. The Literature Club room was the place most suited to her. Even if she moved there to live full-time, it wouldn't have bothered me; there were plenty of facilities for her to use. Missing Nagato from the clubroom was like missing Jesus from the Last Supper; it would have been gloomy and dismal.

Returning to the matter at hand, there was something I absolutely had to report to Haruhi. I might even catch Haruhi having a stupid expression on her face. It was only the Biology teacher's arrival that made me unable to open my mouth.

Looks like the ten minutes before the next class began would provide me with long enough time. Since just a single sentence was able to worry me so, obviously the length of speech didn't have anything to do with its importance.

After a class where I couldn't absorb nor memorize anything had ended, I immediately turned my head to seek the advice of the brigade leader.

"I have something I want to talk to you about."

"What?" Haruhi lifted her eyebrows. She looked at me with two eyes which grew slightly bigger. "Can you say it here? If it's a secret, we can talk about it on the roof or the emergency escape stairs."

"It's not necessary. Are you going to see Nagato this afternoon too?"

"Of course."

"I only want to say this. By chance, I have some matter to attend to today, so I can't go over to visit the patient even though I'm really worried about her condition..."

Just as I was searching for any signs of Haruhi becoming upset and uneasy, her eyes and eyebrows suddenly returned to their previous state.

"Oh, so that's it." She rubbed her jaw. I didn't know what she was sizing up. "What's the matter? It's not Shamisen shedding hair, is it?"

I didn't have time to reply when Haruhi continued, "No, that's impossible. It must be something you have to do, something comparable to..."

I wasn't born with the ability to make up nonsense and improvise on the spot, so I stood there for a while like a wooden plank.

"Forget it, who cares. Whether you come or not, it's the same anyways. Always dragging everyone in tow even when no invitation had been made must be a bit embarrassing to Yuki. Anyways, Mikuru and I are enough to cook the meal. At the very least, I'll be there with her."

Her train of thought again moved forward another few meters.

"That's right. Uh huh. Correct. If we did that, it probably wouldn't be good. Right, that's what we'll do."

It was as if her brain had gotten rewired.

"Neither side can be neglected."

Whispering, Haruhi seemed to have arrived at a decision, pressing her head close to my face. "Today you don't have to come. Koizumi doesn't as well. Mikuru and I going to Yuki's house is enough. She probably hasn't bathed in two days, so I want to help scrub her body. If there are any guys around,

they would actually add to the hassle. It's no big matter; just a common cold is all. Having a good rest to recuperate is the most important thing."

Haruhi sat down. Then she got an idea and stood up again.

"We have to let Koizumi in on this plan first. Even though it's not good to pass the responsibility to the vice brigade leader, he's definitely qualified. Looks like I still can't turn a blind eye to it."

Having spouted a mouthful of riddles revealing she had horrible ideas in mind, with a big grin on her face, Haruhi stormed out of the classroom like a puff of smoke. The speed at which she changed her plans and carried out her resolve was comparable to the speed of atomic particles.

After having seen a bottlenose dolphin launch a raid on an unsuspecting school of sardines, Taniguchi's evil smile perfectly collided with my glance as it returned to its original direction. "Hey, Kyon. What was it that you talked to Suzumiya so intently about? You don't intend to finally start paying taxes⁵? You traitor."

I completely don't understand what you're talking about. Anyways up until now, the only tax I've had to pay is the consumption tax.

Even though Taniguchi wasn't so blind as to miss my hands shooing him away, he continued the "ku-ke-ke" laugh of some strange bird.

"The way I see it, even if someone went through everyone on Earth, the only person who could last a whole year beside Suzumiya would still be just you. Now that you can easily break the longest-lasting person record every day, why not just stay like this forever? Kyon, you have a gift for getting along with strange people. Of this, I'm certainly not mistaken."

The way I see, you've made hundreds of mistakes. Every single one of your exams shows this.

"Aren't you the same? Exams aren't the only means of demonstrating your talent."

Only successful human talents can say these things. Furthermore, the results determine everything. When it comes out of the mouths of people like us who haven't achieved anything, all it does is serve as an excuse for avoiding reality.

"Maybe." As usual, Taniguchi affectionately hung on my shoulders. "Nevertheless, I just need to examine these matters for a moment and it becomes crystal clear. You're really close with Suzumiya. With Asahina-san, it's something completely different. Doesn't it work well this way? Eh?"

Eh your sister.

I lifted Taniguchi's hand and said, "What about you? Have you swindled any naive freshmen girls?"

⁵ In the original Japanese, this can also be construed as becoming married.

"Those things come later. There's still plenty of time before summer vacation. First comes Golden Week, where I have to hurry and do some short-term work to see if I can meet any good female students. What's really true is that 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'." Taniguchi kept his hand extended towards the roof the whole time. He was as foolish as they come.

"Are you an idiot?" This was the most appropriate reply I could come up with. I don't think there exists a better word to describe him. Didn't he say the same thing last year and how did it turn out then? In my recollection, there was a long string of zeroes.

Forget it. Taniguchi, I'm very happy to be your classmate again. Even though my frame of mind was that of a front-line commander being besieged by mechanical foot soldiers and only having a shovel to dig entrenchments with, having a foolish conversation with Taniguchi took a lot of the stress out even if it wasn't something mere words could completely get rid of.

Having a friend at the same level as you was definitely very important. Even if we both regarded the other to be the dumbest person on Earth, it didn't matter because we were the only ones who knew the truly stupid things we ourselves had done in the past.

If someone didn't know, it wouldn't have made them an unprecedented genius. Rather they'd be a vain, thick-faced person who was more like a turtle in a human form than a human.

What Haruhi wanted to talk to Koizumi about during lunch break wasn't actually self-explanatory. After finishing my lunch and wanting to go to the washroom, the SOS Brigade vice leader, who had been leaning against the wall waiting to ambush me for who knows how long, immediately ambushed me after seeing me.

"I have two things I want to tell you about." With his arms crossed, he stuck two thumbs up. His expression was cool and refreshing like a meteorologist who was firmly convinced there was a zero percent chance of rain. "One piece of news is good. The other isn't good or bad."

Then please start from the news that isn't good or bad.

"Suzumiya-san ordered me to remain in the brigade clubroom."

I don't know why Haruhi would keep you locked up like that. You didn't chop someone down in some unknown castle, right?

Koizumi said while smoothly eluding me, "Simply speaking, I think she's only being responsible. She wanted me to continue staying in the clubroom for a while after school, almost as if it was something that couldn't be neglected."

Why? The original resident Nagato, brigade leader Haruhi, nor maid Asahina-san were going to be present. The utility value of the clubroom was even less than the shell shed by a cicada.

"Ah, did you forget? The advertisement for recruitment of new members is still snug in its original spot; it hasn't been taken down yet."

“...I had already forgotten.”

“The freshmen who have sharp observational skills towards mysterious occurrences may not necessarily want to join the SOS Brigade. This might be what Suzumiya-san is thinking. If you don't have the courage to show up, then don't show up at all. It would save us the hassle. That type of thing. However, it seems that she hasn't put much effort into recruiting new students with her attention being diverted elsewhere.”

Nagato was already like this. Haruhi was even so earnest as to call on her early in the morning to make breakfast. Looks like she really didn't have freshmen on her mind.

“Exactly. However, she doesn't consider the probability of recruiting a freshmen to be zero. Doesn't this type of thinking resemble the demeanor a brigade leader should have? Compared to you, she's definitely much cooler-headed.”

You should use nastier words if you want your talk to affect me.

“I'm only stating my own personal feelings, but what you say makes sense as well. You have your own sense of righteousness, so would it count as your righteousness having gone a bit too far if you took irrational and impulsive actions? I must regretfully point out the answer is in the affirmative. As long as someone disagrees with your beliefs, they would get labeled as an evil lackey or a spy. This happens because you're just that righteous.”

It must be because this sentence came out of the mouth of a silly kid who always had a gentle and soft smile that I felt I really wasn't being praised.

Koizumi ignored my gaze that resembled that of a hungry spectacled caiman crocodile and said in the gentle, kind voice of a cello:

“Next comes the good news. The Closed Spaces and <Celestials> made at night by Suzumiya-san have stopped appearing lately. The results of the statistical analysis of the occurrences tell us that the <Celestials> will almost certainly be calm for a considerable amount of time. Much of the burden on my body has finally been removed. Although this is only my personal opinion, examining the current state of affairs should make you greatly relieved. Furthermore, no amount of overtime pay could have made up for my lack of sleep.”

The renewed appearance of Closed Spaces should have begun after the meeting with Sasaki, right? Presumably their sharp decrease could be attributed to something on her mind that overweighed her concern of comparing herself with Sasaki.

“Of course.” In Haruhi's tone of speech Koizumi said: “The something on her mind must be Nagato not being able to come to school. Such an unusual situation focused all of Suzumiya-san's attention in one place.”

So it doesn't matter anymore if <Celestials> cause a lot of damage? No matter what, Haruhi wouldn't place Sasaki higher than Nagato in importance.

Koizumi agreed with rejoice, "From Suzumiya-san's perspective, her concern for Nagato-san has increased, but she hasn't become restless with anxiety. As long as there aren't any more unnecessary meetings between you and Sasaki-san, all she would think of the matter is that you two used to be friends. In comparison, Nagato-san, regardless of the past, present and future, will always be a key SOS Brigade member. One couldn't even begin to compare their relative importance in Haruhi's mind."

I already knew these things millennia ago. The revelation that Haruhi has a special spot for Nagato in her heart was already revealed on the winter vacation trip to the ski resort.

Summoning a memory from ages ago, I recalled the bizarre western-style house in the middle of a snowstorm. At that time, no one was more concerned for Nagato than Haruhi. Don't kid me saying that was only the brigade leader's sense of responsibility. Haruhi is the type of person who would never see someone dying and not do something to help, much less when that person was a companion who she had experienced so much with...

As I woke from my reverie, I once again heard Koizumi speak with the voice of someone who had never had his feelings hurt before, "Even though I didn't plan on telling you this, let me report to you a third thing. To put it bluntly, you've been regarding Nagato-san with too much affection. It's been especially noticeable since the matter during the winter vacation."

Do you have anything against it? Huh?

"I don't. For Nagato-san, who is clearly someone truly worthy of your trust, to have fallen into illness, you must be finding it hard to accept, right? However, if you attach too much importance to Nagato-san, you might not be able to see the whole situation clearly and instead might get an upside-down picture."

You're not hinting at Nagato only being an inconsequential sidekick, are you?

"I am most certainly not. Please think about it. Nagato-san has entered the present situation and is just in the process of unknown interaction with an alien life form. The time-traveler and the esper don't have anything to do with it. They're just nearby and don't even have the opportunity to collude even if they so desired. However, such an antagonistic situation is exceedingly sensitive to influence from a third-party."

This isn't the type of thing you chat about outside a washroom, but Koizumi went on as if nothing was wrong.

"Rationally speaking, people from the future should have complete knowledge of events that have happened in the past. But Asahina-san isn't an ordinary time-traveler. This is also one of her unique points. Even though I don't know what a response of 'I don't know' means, it's not hard to deduce. In the

eyes of people in the future from a later time than the current Asahina-san, she's the ideal smokescreen to the past version of us."

I don't think it's the first time you've mentioned something like this.

"You must realize that if it's true that Nagato-san has been uncontrollably shut down, then there actually exist people who knew of this beforehand. They are the ones who have the power to take action at any moment. She's the one in the SOS Brigade with the strongest combat ability and has succeeded in winning your trust. She also trusts you. What's more, now that you regard Asahina-san's enemy as your own enemy, Nagato-san does so as well. What a person from the future least likes to see is the Data Integration Though Entity's TFEI messing up their plans. Furthermore, that TFEI isn't anyone else other than our dearly loved companion Yuki Nagato-san."

So you're saying that Nagato not being able to get up from her bed is the perfect opportunity for that future bastard Fujiwara?

Then what's he ultimately after?

"This we have no way of knowing."

Koizumi gave a soft, doubtful smile. "I was hoping you would replace me in finding out the ultimate truth in this case."

Okay then. Looks like whether your hopes fall through all depends on my performance today. Koizumi, just stay obediently in the clubroom gazing with eager expectation. Haruhi and Asahina-san will exert all their efforts in taking care of Nagato.

As for me, I have something I need to do.

"There's another thing. This isn't something I'm reporting to you about; it's only a personal conjecture, with a low chance of it being true..."

Seeing signs of seriousness in Koizumi's expression as he was uncertain whether or not he should tell me, I rubbed my chin indicating to him to just hurry up and say it.

"I took some notice over the recent appearance and disappearance of the <Celestials>. Though it can be explained as Suzumiya-san temporarily being too busy to divert her attention, this explanation could also be a colossal mistake."

So what do you want to say? The disappearance of the glowing blue giants was actually because they went somewhere to charge up their power?

"It would be something analogous to that. I suspect the purpose of the Celestials is to conceal the occurrence of something by diverting our efforts. This has been a hunch that's been bothering me all along. Maybe it's only unwarranted anxiety on my part, but it's also not impossible."

So you're saying they're gathering their power right now? How can this be? I for one don't think those glowing blue giants have that sort of intelligence; it's not like they're in the training chapter of a shonen manga.

"Right, maybe I'm worrying too much. Either way, once Celestials start appearing, we'll be gathered together again and find out the truth behind the matter."

Koizumi smiled in a manner overflowing with grace that was so customary of him.

Not wanting to stand and chat for so long outside the men's washroom, I got rid of Koizumi as fast as I could and returned to the classroom in a great mood.

However just as I stepped into the classroom, I remembered my original objective and walked once again towards the washroom. So what? If you want to consider me foolish, then feel free to by all means.

Even if I was beset by so many troubles, at least I had time to go to the washroom during lunch break.

Or at least it was like this until I met Sasaki and the others after school.

The PA system on the school grounds signaled an end to the day's instruction with the ringing of the chimes. Almost at the same time, Haruhi picked up her bag and stormed out of the classroom. I imagine her destination to be the 3rd year rooms, namely Asahina-san's classroom.

Actually, I could walk with Haruhi all the way to where Nagato lives before going separate ways; it was just that there wasn't an occasion for me to appear in the picture right now. Her mind was completely filled with images of a bedridden and sick Nagato.

Her cooking ability left one speechless. Furthermore, I've witnessed how much effort she puts into taking care of sick people. She can also form a comely pair of nurses with Asahina-san. I trust Nagato's daily living habits won't trouble our dependable brigade leader. At the least, Nagato won't go on an empty stomach worsening her condition. Since that matter won't become a problem, the burden falls upon me then to think of a way to solve it.

Who's the worthy fellow I have to take care of? Since the Integrated Data Thought Entity and the Sky Canopy Domain are hidden away in places I couldn't reach even if I tried, I have to rely on Pascal's Law now. As long as I put pressure on one area, it will definitely force that pressure towards another area.

Lather, rinse and repeat.

I haven't gone down this hill by myself in a long time. All along the way, I had to keep my cool and focus my attention. The alien was completely different. The time-traveler would also avoid discussing the subject. That leaves just Kyoko Tachibana. Maybe I can follow up this thread through Sasaki.

Wading through a sea of students anxious to get home, my heart drifted towards the clubroom. Right now would be just when Koizumi has obediently sent someone in his stead to play the role of doorkeeper or was he chatting with a freshmen who didn't hesitate in wanting to join the brigade despite having seen Haruhi's advertisements...?

It's a place where the brigade members, despite having gone separate ways, will eventually end up running into each other. You have to take good care of it, vice brigade leader. If there are any freshmen who want to join, just cordially apologize to them and tell them not to join. Don't let any young people mistakenly go down the wrong path.

Walking down the hill with slow steps, the route didn't feel particularly long. After around the same amount of time had passed once more, I got on my beloved bicycle and set off for Kitaguchi station. Despite being early for the meeting with Sasaki, I was nervous of appearing in public, so I subconsciously picked up my pace. Why wasn't there a place where I could store extra time? If only I could have moved this block of time to this morning, I would have been much more awake during the day.

Back when I didn't pay so much attention to Haruhi, she was just someone who wanted to fill every day with fun memories—someone so eccentric that you would remember her forever. Aware I wasn't so unconventional, I arrived near my destination and biked around passing time aimlessly. Only ten minutes before the scheduled meeting time of 4:30pm did I get off in front of the station. Apologies, let me leave my bike here first for a while. Around this time, the city officials who enforce bicycle parking laws probably won't appear.

Having waited for a while, I saw a rarely seen student uniform through the window. Coming from the bus stop through a sea of people with a faint smile, the ease with which she walked made me feel thoroughly devoid of any worries. At first glance, her entire body was enveloped with the aura of someone easy to get along with and from my deep understanding of her, she really was like that.

Sasaki's moral character was superior to mine by a few million times. I really didn't deserve to be called a really close friend by her.

“Hey, Kyon. Did you wait a long time?”

Not that long. The minute hand still has several minutes to go before it reaches the bottom. Don't tell me there's a fine for arriving early too. One of those girls is enough for the world.

Sasaki smiled softly. Her eyes and mouth both bent into smooth curves. “You actually waited for a long time, right? Though, the time you wasted here was actually equivalent to the length of time I experienced, let's just say call it even.”

What do you mean?

“Nothing. Actually by coincidence, I got out of school early and arrived here thirty minutes early. Although arriving a bit early is good, half an hour is a bit embarrassing. Without a place to pass the time, plain old waiting felt a little too boring. Just then, I saw your face full of suffering pass by on a bicycle as if

you were considering some important matter. So I didn't call out to you and just watched from the side. I really admire you being able to do many laps without getting bored. Do you really love biking?"

How could I get bored by it? This iron horse is a valuable brother to me who has toiled by my side for many years. Also compared to standing like a wooden statue, exercising my body makes my mind work faster. My unfavorable exam results are probably at least partly due to by having to sit in front of a desk for so long.

"You really are an action man, but also suited to be a scholar. Correct, what you said is true. When showering or going on a walk, one will often think about things. The brain relaxes due to mechanical motions by the limbs and thus there is surplus capacity for thought about other things. Cleaning one's body and the like have always been tasks we're accustomed to doing. No particular thought needs to be performed, so the task is accomplished without need for conscious thought. Rather than cudgeling your brain thinking about something, it might actually be more effective and help you focus more attention to think while you're moving. Even though doing routine work isn't fun at all, man is a creature who realizes that it's only by building a subway toward some destination that he will have excess energy to appreciate the scenery outside the window. Even though many consider that only to be a waste of time, I think that the people who consider time to be money will never truly be happy."

I'm not planning on reciting a lecture back to you, but what you said does sound reasonable.

"Based on reasoning similar to that, I'll always leave an escape route for myself. No matter how much pressure there is at the moment, as long as I can make a full retreat just in case, I can afford to take a few risks. That's because everything has an end, like horror films or roller coasters. Regardless of whether a thing has a form or is formless, not many things exist forever."

I didn't particularly want the recent past to last forever so I wasn't paying very close attention. If the talk went over my head, it may have been because the reason I came was the fear of losing Nagato forever.

I glanced around in all four directions and established that the trio to whom I didn't know how to refer would be "Sasaki's Minions", a rather nasty-sounding name.

"Where are they?"

"They're already here. Half an hour ago, I contacted them and told them to wait in the coffee shop." She took up what looked like a fairly light school bag and put it on her shoulder. She made a furtive glance at the expression on my face from diagonally below with head slanted. Her voice had a bright and clear tone like she was in the audience in the bleachers cheering for the home team of a high school baseball game.

"Let's go."

No problem. This is why I came. This is what I gambled on as being some kind of declaration of war. What I'm doing is all for the sake of world peace, to resolve Haruhi's subconscious stress, to get the

Organization that's been disturbing Koizumi's sleep to do less work at night, to reduce the amount of Asahina-san's self-reproach, and to make Nagato healthy once more.

Everything was on the tip of my tongue. To work against the Organization and to meet the Sasaki-promoting brigade that's backing the wrong horse, the Super Inferior Ghost Domain called the King of E.T.'s, with their questionable morals and making Nagato fall ill. The time-traveler who's traveled from afar and has on a clown mask with a slight smile and who considers himself to be a descendant of the North Lineage of the Fujiwara Clan. That time-traveler with the crooked mouth. Your appearances have made me slightly more nervous.

Victory and defeat would be determined at this moment. Long before, I'd already made the mental preparation to fight the Battles of Mt. Tenno, Sekigahara and Red Cliffs. I also had the mistaken perception that I was wading through the current of history. If only I could separate myself into multiple people, I could have gone to ask for guerrilla fighters from the Sanada Clan. It's a shame I only had one copy of myself that I had to make ready for battle.

I couldn't place hope on anyone helping me. Koizumi was in the clubroom as doorkeeper, Haruhi was going straight to Nagato's house, and Asahina-san probably shouldn't make an appearance here. Since I haven't any secret messages from the future from Asahina-san (big) recently, it meant that this was a historical event not even the goddess Asahina could intervene in. Just in case Kimidori-san personally didn't come or Asakura didn't reincarnate once more, I would definitely still sum up my current sentiment with two words: "not necessary". If required, I will repeat it as many times as needed.

This is Earth and Earth belongs to us humans.

Authority over the Earth doesn't belong to any single person. That would be farfetched even for Haruhi or the speaker of the most powerful council in the United Nations.

Haruhi's only title is being the SOS Brigade Leader at North High School. Any other titles, whether above or below in status, were non-existent.

That she hasn't changed any universal constants since the first year of high school is the strongest evidence. I think she would say:

"In these types of situations, whoever fires the first shot has the advantage!"

Let me say that I've found a new appreciation for you, Haruhi. You really are a tough cookie, actually boasting you were going to start a brigade when you had no idea how to organize one and amazingly enough were able to accomplish that. Of course this also helped Koizumi win a few points in trying to spread the belief of Haruhi having godlike powers; it's not surprising that he was able to move me with his words.

Although embracing it was a completely different matter.

As far as whether I believe that or not, for someone like me who's never confessed or been baptized in a church, sometimes I also wanted to cling to some invisible god. Occasionally, I would also donate some money to a shrine close-by. During the Bon Festival, I would chant some scriptures. Not knowing which school or sect the monk came from didn't matter; they all demonstrated some form of belief.

If kowtowing and holding your palms together were all that was necessary to make everything turn out as one wished, then it couldn't get better than that. As it turned out, no matter how much I did those things, I still never noticed my sufferings after I joined the brigade even being slightly alleviated. Nevertheless, I held my belief that going to see Ksitigarbha⁶ in the mountain wasn't a bad choice. Since he didn't have a talent for resolving anything particularly important, he wasn't of much use to me. Seeing the high wall in front of me brought to mind the master from *More Worthy than Revenge*⁷ who relied on his own strength to cut through using a hoe.

Right now was the time to take the first step. After Nagato fell ill, it wasn't just Kuyou; even Asakura and Kimidori-san have come out to stir the pot. Everyone was treating the Earth as the main stage of a martial arts-themed short play for a non-existent audience. As it was, I had haplessly taken a seat in the audience and had been watching the play for so long already that of course I couldn't remain silent without uttering a sound.

Furthermore, the powder keg was Nagato's illness. The situation became serious now. Before Haruhi's outburst, I had to resolve this kind of cosmic question; that was where my duty lay.

Kyoko Tachibana said that the person who truly possessed power was actually Sasaki, not Haruhi.

Fujiwara said that it was fine whoever that person was.

Kuyou Suou said that she wasn't interested in Haruhi or me, but in setting up communication with the Integrated Data Thought Entity.

It really was pile of muddle.

The only thing we needed was time. Maybe that group of SOS Brigade wannabes had plenty of time to spend in Echigo's crêpe shop. It's a shame this meeting didn't take place during the peaceful Edo period, but in the Information Age. How could they let the hollyhock emblem block out the sun?⁸

In the situation right now, even if I don't see any allies around, Asakura has reincarnated with her knife, Kimidori-san's modus operandi is to only report to her boss without interfering even if the world

⁶ A bodhisattva primarily revered in East Asian Buddhism, usually depicted as a Buddhist monk in the Orient. The name may be translated as "Earth Treasury", "Earth Store", "Earth Matrix", or "Earth Womb".

⁷ Kan Kikuchi's novel *Onshu no Kanata ni* (More Worthy than Revenge) describes a murderer who, after repentance and becoming a monk, swears an oath to cut through a mountain making it easier to travel through for the common folk and in passing, tells the story of a man seeking revenge.

⁸ The crêpe shop owner is the protagonist in the play *Mito Komon* in the disguise as Mitsuemom the crêpe merchant, but was actually Tokugawa Mitsukuni. The story described the adventures traveling through different nations punishing evil and promoting the good. The hollyhock was the family crest of the Tokugawa Clan.

was ending, Kuyou is a mechanical moppet who will keep doing research on things she considers valuable without regard for my life or death, and the time-traveler, Fujiwara, is always sneaking around to catch wind of this period's happenings, big and small. I feel that the only person with a sense of urgency is Kyoko Tachibana, but I sense that her influence was the smallest. Just avoiding being played around in the hands of the Organization already seems to put her short on breath.

Looks like the only person I can communicate with is her.

In Koizumi's eyes, a useless person. To Asahina-san (big), a contact in this time period. In Nagato's eyes, almost the lynchpin to the possibility of auto-evolution.

Superimposing the three views, you get a picture of yours truly. I haven't a clue why I still consider myself to be a saint above all others. I can only say that I'm living an unusual life for a high school student. I'm not descended from anyone particularly of note either. If it weren't for that day Haruhi grabbed my collar and banged my head on her desk, I could have passed off as the upstanding high school student drawing little attention anywhere I went.

What change caused me to develop this kind of morality? Where should I go and what should I do? How long should I keep accompanying Haruhi, or should I try to change the current objective of the brigade?

These questions were going to be settled in the coffee shop right in front of Sasaki and I.

Next, I'll pose a few questions to the spectators. When you've opened up a new route and decided at least temporarily that you were going to stride forward, if you happened to see a smoother path parallel to the first, how would you choose?

Would you attend to the original path suffuse with thistles and thorns, or would you choose the small path that's easier to travel on?

This is the decision I was forced to make.

In the coffee shop I was by now familiar with, seated beside the wall were three different expressions waiting for us.

Even if it was an act, only Kyoko Tachibana gave her regards by greeting us. Fujiwara still had that unkind, dirty look. I don't know whether Kuyou was too broad-minded or just didn't have a mind for that sort of thing. Yesterday, she clearly had a big fight with Asakura and Kimidori-san. Today, she sat as still on the chair as a rock in stop-motion animation. Her gaze and eyelashes haven't moved a bit.

"Humph."

After a light snort, I put all my effort into looking around before sitting down. I glanced in all directions to make sure the apron-wearing upperclassman wasn't present in any corner of the shop. At the very least, it looked like she wasn't anywhere I could see. Either she's hiding or her part-time job just

changed shifts. I think Emiri is definitely somewhere. This being another meeting where everyone has gathered for a clash, I imagine she definitely wouldn't miss out on it.

This way is good too. Having Kimidori-san's implausible smile as part of the decor of the room was definitely better than having Asakura make an appearance. Comparing the two was like comparing a flashbang grenade with an anti-tank missile. As long as Asakura doesn't reach the point of fishing out a life-threatening weapon and charging in my direction, since the depth of the upperclassman's calculations may be even deeper than that of my old schoolmate, I don't want to accidentally cause the coffee shop to turn into a battlefield for aliens.

"Over here, over here."

Kyoko Tachibana waved her hand effortlessly, pointing me to the seat across from her.

"How about sitting there? Thank you for meeting with us." Towards Sasaki, she continued, "Sasaki-san, thank you for bringing him here. We're very grateful."

"No thanks necessary."

While Sasaki was taking a seat somewhere behind me, she said, "Rather than going through the civilities, I think I should rather reject your thanks flat-out. Even if I didn't make any phone calls, Kyon would still have met with us. Otherwise, we would be two parallel lines that never intersected, isn't that right?"

The last question was almost certainly directed at Fujiwara. But still that time-traveler would just—

"Humph."

As if he was imitating the sneering sound I had just made with my nose, his mouth didn't move at all.

"Maybe. Although you two..." His gaze swept across my face. "It's best if you don't think too much of yourself. This isn't advice; ha, it's a warning. To me, these meetings are ultimately vacuous. The gap in knowledge and power of understanding between me and you is too great."

It was strange that surprise was a step faster than indignation in reaching my mind. Being able to rile up my fury with each sentence; what kind of talent was that? If you want to draw me over to your side, shouldn't you at least switch to a polite manner of speech? This guy Fujiwara was truly blunt and straight-forward to the core. This type of personality that doesn't differ between inner and outward thoughts is actually quite similar to that of Asahina-san. Could it be that everyone from the future was like this?

"Good, quickly let me hear what you're planning to do. Trouble has finally emerged from blindly following the alien's orders, huh? How did you feel after losing such a strong supporter? Hurry up and tell me how you're planning to go about self-preservation. This is the extent of what I want to know. I

actually really want to see how a harbor manages to withstand the power of the typhoon through the night with a damaged seawall.”

This stupid fellow's talk and his infuriating tone destroyed the last few bit of hesitation in me. Bastard, do you really want a beating? If you have a few buddies to help you then better call them out and let me pound your face into mush against the table. Just as I was rubbing my fists itching for a fight and getting ready to plant the non-existent boxing gloves on my hands in Fujiwara's face...

“Just let him go, Kyon. Sitting down now would be better. Though it's much like you to show a sense of justice, I can't just sit here peacefully and watch you beat someone up. Of course that doesn't apply just to you, but to everyone present. I think my temper is pretty good having only gotten angry once in the past two years. Although to tell you the truth, I get scared even thinking about that time. I still remember the last time I got angry was about two years ago and I'm still trying to extend that record. So I beseech everyone present to not let it go down to zero today.”

Sasaki's tone was gentle as usual and got me to listen obediently.

Whether it was Sasaki losing her temper, shedding tears or being sad, I haven't seen it before and don't wish to see it in the future. The person most appropriate to have a smile on their countenance isn't limited to Haruhi or Asahina-san. Although I wish Koizumi would restrain himself a bit, it's just the opposite with Nagato, who I think should have a less serious expression. Even though I wish to see Nagato get better, it wasn't something that could be solved by fighting with Fujiwara here. If I really wanted to fight, my opponent should be the alien.

I was thinking this, so I gave a stare to the alien.

“.....”

But Kuyou stared unblinkingly with a vacant gaze at empty air five meters behind me. I couldn't believe my eyes, but her gaze had no life at all. Kuyou Suou definitely meant harm to the SOS Brigade. I've established the state of affairs!

She was the initiator of the bad things that have happened.

I kept staring at Kuyou who seemed very much like a specter. She has the excessive firepower to level huge areas, but was dressed tonight at the coffee shop in a rather eye-catching girls' school uniform. I should say that this kind of person would probably draw glances wherever they went.

But it would seem as if sitting here was a soulless 3D hologram that felt like late-night static from a TV commercial that made you so absolutely terrified your hair would stand on end. Nagato was confined to bed by illness, yet this one was actually outside, totally free and unfettered. Aside from the four words “I can't accept this”, I couldn't think of anything else. Indeed, it's only the unknown alien who would do something like this without understanding the consequences. Though I didn't understand what the Integrated Data Thought Entity's Humanoid Interface was, at least Nagato, Asakura and Kimidori-san seemed like people.

About Nagato, I don't need to add anything. Aside from fooling around with carrying a knife, Asakura seemed more suited than a normal high school student in all aspects to be class president. Even though I don't know Kimidori-san very well, at the very least I know she's capable of integrating into daily school life. Those two seem to at least have put some effort into acting the role of human beings faithfully.

But Kuyou didn't share the least bit of such a mentality. I also don't think she understands the living being known as *Homo sapiens*. Even an invisible person would understand more of their own existence than her. I felt that she was just a head, arms and legs extending out from a girls' school uniform; that there was nothing underneath but air. The only person who would think like this was me. No one else cared at all.

Simply put, she made me feel completely uneasy. If her actions fell within the scope of human behavior, I wouldn't have reacted like this. However, the opponent was a super-intelligent being who was more of a puppet than human and someone not even Nagato could communicate with. Furthermore, there was hardly a person whose actions were as hard to guess and who would be this hard to deal with. She finally uttered a sentence. She was harder to see through than even Haruhi.

“.....”

Maybe because she sensed the aura of hostility I was putting all my effort into generating, Kuyou's eyes were like those of a dwarf elephant⁹ being unfrozen for the first time and slowly became focused on me. A small gap formed between her fossilized lips.

“—yesterday—thank you—”

Her voice resembled the sound of wriggling made by a beetle pupa.

“—this is.....a word of thanks.....”

At the end, she actually appended another sentence.

I was so shocked she would thank me that I was temporarily at a loss for words. Fujiwara gave an expression indicating the matter didn't concern him. Kyoko Tachibana's face showed a slightly noticeable expression of surprise. Sasaki's expression showed a slightly teasing smile. None of the three uttered a word. Remaining uncommunicative, we congealed into a block in our corner with the only sounds being the classical music played and other customers clearing their throats at other tables...

What should I do now?

“That...”

I didn't have to rack my brain; Kyoko Tachibana also felt that there wouldn't be much progress if the current situation continued and took the lead in opening up the meeting.

⁹ An ancient Japanese elephant species.

"Kuyou-san, what happened to you yesterday? Um...Never mind, let's skip it for now. I'll ask you about it later."

Kyoko Tachibana pressed her body forward. Like an honored daughter from a wealthy family hosting a tea ceremony, she was neither humble nor haughty, and said while facing me, "Thank you for coming today. I really hate to trouble you so many times, but it is indeed necessary. This meeting is very important and can't be ignored."

No need for thanks, I scheduled the meeting myself.

"That's true." Kyoko Tachibana made no secret of the solemn tone in her words: "Regardless of whether it's sooner or later, it's definitely something that will happen. Maybe I should say that from our side, we would rather it not happen very late and that we originally desired for it to happen sooner. It's only that we had no power supporting us or any means to oppose Koizumi-san's organization."

While speaking, the girl looked at Kuyou and Fujiwara and nodded as if she'd discovered precious treasure.

"I've finally acquired the magnificent power to move the entire world. Though you might not regard us as partners, we can still aim for the same objective and fight side-by-side, right? That's true...Right?"

Fujiwara didn't respond. Kuyou was still deep diving in a serene sea. Kyoko Tachibana however, sighed. It just happened that the waitress delivered ice water to Sasaki and I at that moment rendering her silent.

"Two coffee blends, hot."

Sasaki ordered quickly without having asked me. I sized up the waitress who was another student, establishing that she wasn't Kimidori-san. She probably thought she ran into weird people. Her steps on her way back to the counter were noticeably hurried. I suddenly thought of something and stared at the air in front of the three people across from me. Kyoko Tachibana and Kuyou actually ordered sundaes. Two cups of sundae seemed very ordinary and it seemed to give the impression that I was constantly looking for extraordinary things by comparing two pictures like in that game for children. The ice cream, over half of which Kyoko Tachibana had gobbled down, seemed like it was about to melt into milk, while Kuyou's sundae remained intact without having melted. Regarding what kind of a pointless alien trick this was, it was the same as Fujiwara continuously playing with an empty cup that had originally contained something...the similarity being my not wanting to guess in either case.

Kyoko Tachibana began the discussion once more and said:

"About that, first let me straighten it out a bit. The reason for our meeting here today..."

She winked at me.

"It's because Sasaki-san said you wanted to meet with us. You must have something you want to tell us, right? Then please go ahead."

She passed the microphone towards my outstretched hands, but there was nothing in her hands. I also didn't pretend to receive something non-existent.

"It's for Nagato's sake that I came."

Looking at Kuyou, I said:

"I don't know what kind of design you have and you're not obliged to tell me. I only wish that you'll stop whatever evil scheme right away and stop your foolish attack on Nagato. Did you hear me clearly? I don't plan on repeating it too many times. If aliens want to fight, then go do so at the end of the Milky Way."

"——end——"

Kuyou's mouth began moving like an ancient insect trapped in fossilized amber that had finally broken free.

"——of the——Milky Way.....that is——here——this planet's location——very remote....."

The coldness in her voice sounded like the white haze that drifted out when you opened a freezer. Was she playing around with me? If you're disgusted by this season that Shamisen loves so much it makes his winter fur stand on end, then just go drill into the sun's core.

"——also possible——after the matter is finished."

Then, hurry up and finish it right now.

"....."

Kuyou's head slightly tilted and her two eyes blinked.

Like some kind of signal—

"Fufu."

Out of Fujiwara's mouth spilled a most infuriating laugh and he looked at me with no good intentions.

"Then let's do just that. Nothing else, just what you proposed. No, listening to the manner in which you spoke to Kuyou, it sounded more like an order. Since you're courageous enough get in an argument with an alien intelligence interface, even if it was foolhardy I ought to praise you with a few words. Humph, actually I really want to study your brain to see where the illness lies. Only then would I help Yuki Nagato, such an organic expeditionary machine, although I will hold back my personal curiosity for now."

Seeing that Sasaki and I hadn't uttered a sound, Fujiwara continued:

"In any case, it seems like you won't allow that doll of a girl to malfunction; this way, the matter becomes much simpler. Listen clearly, I have the capability to stop the Sky Canopy Domain from continuing to disable the Integrated Data Thought Entity."

If a one-way mirror was placed in front of me, I would see someone wanted for fraud in front of my eyes.

"You don't believe me? It's a shame that it's the truth and something I knew I had the capability to do even before. The Sky Canopy Domain is easier to control than the Integrated Data Thought Entity and accepted our proposal in a straightforward manner. While we're at it, I might tell you another thing. This was a plan that Kyoko Tachibana agreed to as well. That is to say, all three of us knew of this plan. To make a long story short, I'll express in words what I'm ordering you to do."

Fujiwara looked at Kuyou for half a second. From his half-crooked mouth, he spat out the following:

"Transfer all of Haruhi Suzumiya's powers to Sasaki. Just obediently accept. You don't have any alternative aside from choosing 'yes'."

Only Kyoko Tachibana agreed and nodded. Stone-gazed Kuyou stared fixedly at the wafer stuck in the matcha tea sundae. Sasaki and I sat side-by-side staring at Fujiwara's hateful face.

"Uh huh..."

Sasaki used her index finger to poke her face.

"Fujiwara-kun, that was the idea Kyoko Tachibana-san proposed a few days ago, right? Didn't you say at the time that you didn't care who possessed the powers? What made you change your mind in this regard?"

"I still don't care who possesses the powers."

Fujiwara squinted his eyes and turned away.

"The situation before is the same as the situation now. Only the appraisal of worth for each person has changed with a new interpretation of the situation, which has led to the path to the final outcome being changed. Only the path has changed, so even if the final outcome was the same it would develop differently. 1×1 and $1 \div 1$ both evaluate to 1, but the calculation methods are completely opposite."



"But this is only sophistry," Sasaki spoke with firm determination. "From what I've heard that's completely wrong, or if you're aware of that, then you're play-acting. Suzumiya-san's powers are actually an obstacle for you, right? Uh huh, that's right...Saying you don't care is actually a lie."

Her slender fingers drifted to her chin and she said while thinking:

"So that way, it's fine even if I don't possess the powers. You don't care either way, but only so long that Suzumiya doesn't possess the powers. Fujiwara-san, you really want Suzumiya-san to lose her mystical powers, right? The reason you can't afford to let her continue like this definitely has a reason somewhere. Even though it was by coincidence that I ended up here..."

With eyes shining and lucid, Sasaki said:

"Although some things can't be the result of mere coincidence. For example, the time in the past when I was good friends with Kyon. Time-Traveler-san from the Future, can you say how much of this matter is actually set in stone?"

The speed at which her brain worked left one speechless. She's facing a time-traveler and she can still speak in an aggressive tone. Flipping through my address book of friends, only Sasaki could pull that off. Furthermore, she didn't belong to any organization like Koizumi.

Fujiwara's expression at this instant looked like a stiff mask, but soon reverted to a cold smile.

"Do you think you can move me with just those words? No matter how glib your tongue, it will still be futile. I wasn't lying, but only wanted to make smooth progress on this matter. Isn't that right, Kyouko Tachibana?"

"Err...right."

The girl who was named said as if thrown into confusion:

"That's right, it would be my request. It's because I deemed it good to first agree to a relationship of cooperation that I implored them to do this."

Sitting in between and working alongside the taciturn alien and the sinister time-traveler was the esper. Despite everything she said being respectable, none of her actions were helpful to our cause. So I once again turned towards Fujiwara.

"Just a minute. Is Kuyou the reason why Nagato fell ill? You're saying that she would do that kind of thing because you led her to do it?"

Fujiwara revealed the glance of a villain in a traditional play.

"That's something completely irrelevant in this case. Whether it was the result of my machinations or an opportunity that presented itself, in either case the final outcome ends up being the same. Even if it was an opportunity that simply appeared and had nothing to do with me, it still remains the reality of the situation. If it was like that, I could have had nothing to do with it. If it wasn't, I could have personally stirred it up. There's nothing constant about the past from the future's perspective aside from making appraisals of worth."

What the hell was this guy saying? Who in the end was the villain working behind the scenes? Was it Asahina-san's antagonist, this time-traveler, the Sky Canopy Domain, or was Kyouko Tachibana the puppeteer pulling all the strings?

I was beginning to realize that no one could be believed. Even though I needed some time to consider, Fujiwara wouldn't let me have my wish.

"Your brain is really quite dull. You said Yuki Nagato had hope of recovering to normal and I said I could accomplish that. I can order Kuyou to stop disabling your treasured doll."

Once the discussion returned to the main question, it really cut very deep. Then I will officially represent the SOS Brigade to form bridges with you. First was something that Koizumi also wanted to find out:

"Why should you have the upper hand in this matter? Aren't they unknown life forms with whom there's no way of communication?"

Fujiwara used "Let's not use that to derail the matter at hand" to skip over my question.

"What are you joking on about?"

"You can treat it as a joke if you want, but it was out of goodwill that I mentioned it."

Listen to your own bullshit.

At this moment, Kuyou's crystal-like lips quivered.

"—I will carry it out."

She was exemplary at speaking all of a sudden.

"—result harmful, search for other means.....also a possible choice."

With eyes of a dark crystal-like substance, she stared me between the eyebrows.

"—unable to communicate directly. Set indirect sound at terminal contacts as noise. Mutual concept transmission overload. Waste of energy. No instant result leading to perpetual waiting."

Hey, hey, hey. Can I get a Good Samaritan to come translate that for me?

"That is to say—"

Sasaki's fingertip ended beside the corner of my eye.

"Nagato-san's illness is caused by Kuyou-san, but Kuyou-san doesn't consider this type of action as very productive. With one word from Fujiwara, she will immediately stop. The condition is transferring Suzumiya-san's powers to me. Furthermore, Tachibana-san's opinion is in agreement with Fujiwara's, right?"

"Right." Kyouko Tachibana let her shoulders fall: "Even though the views of Fujiwara-san and I are not quite the same, we have noted the same change in appraisal value..."

"Shut your mouth."

Fujiwara cold words froze Kyouko Tachibana's half-opened mouth.

"It's as she said." Fujiwara stole the opportunity to say: "We wish to see changes in the present situation benefiting all parties present. Only Kyouko Tachibana wants Sasaki...wants you elevated to a godlike status."

"That's not true. It's not actually like that. We're only..."

Fujiwara completely ignored Kyouko Tachibana's refutation.

"Kuyou's real self wants to analyze Haruhi Suzumiya. But as long as the Integrated Data Thought Entity is present, she has no way of doing that. Despite there being two...three layers of defensive

mechanisms, we still have a way getting in. Now that what's at stake are the mysterious powers, as long as you transfer those powers to a third-party, the matter will be settled."

Who can do that?

"Kuyou can do it." Fujiwara answered offhand and continued lamentably, "Hey, c'mon, you didn't forget everything, did you? We can do anything we want to such a person as Haruhi Suzumiya. Weren't her powers used before by a third-party? Don't tell me you can't remember Haruhi Suzumiya's powers being taken away causing the whole world to be changed? Clearly, you should be the last person to forget these events when you were sent there by someone so fascinated with you."

Nagato...

I remembered Haruhi's disappearance from class 1-5, Koizumi and class 9 evaporating from the school building, getting my wrist twisted by Tsuruya-san, and the pain of getting punched in the face by Asahina-san. In the end, it was in the completely changed clubroom guarded solely by Yuki Nagato wearing glasses and a pallid face, where I ran into the girl who tugged at my sleeve with her fingertips.

During last year's sonorous festive season, I ran into a big hitherto unknown problem. In the process, I found out many things that I didn't want to miss out on and gained a deeper appreciation for some things that I didn't want to blunder away even once.

This group of bastards.

I glared at Fujiwara and Kuyou in turn.

No mistake that it was caused by Nagato. A mere mortal like me of course had no way to say with certainty what those Data Life Forms who were virtually the same were capable of. Whether Integrated Data Thought Entity or Canopy Domain, both were undoubtedly far more intelligent and capable of more tricks than the human race. My intuition told me that despite not being too similar to Nagato, Kuyou didn't know how to lie either.

"Are you intending to use Nagato as a hostage?" My voice burst forth at 120% of my normal voice with a furious tone as real as they come. "You're saying if we want to save Nagato, we will have to give up Haruhi's powers?"

How could we let you have your way? You're actually trying to bully me with crappy logic like that and by being stubborn to the end? Don't think that just by using Nagato as a pretext that we'll obediently wag our tails and tongues and do as you say. Humph, of course I'd want Nagato to be healthy and perfectly well, but these are two distinct matters.

Furthermore, Sasaki is a true friend...

"It's true." She couldn't help but nod her head twice. "I also don't want that kind of power. I hope you guys will listen to a bit of my opinion as a key person in this matter."

This was covering fire that I welcomed with two outstretched hands. But I couldn't help but let my fury-filled head develop some sense of distrust. Actually no, I couldn't say it was so much as distrust, but only as far as labeling it with a small question mark.

I turned to the slightly flustered Sasaki, getting a side view of her face, and said: "But that's a world-changing superpower. Aren't you even slightly moved by that?"

Sasaki's bright eyes fully faced me and she said with a faint smile, "Kyon, changing the world doesn't hold much interest to me. If the power isn't very user-friendly, it's very likely that I'll even accidentally end up changing myself without being aware. Did you know that I am a part of the world and one of its key elements? If I wanted to change the whole world, I wouldn't have a choice but to end up changing as well. For example at this time, even if I relied on my will to change the world, the me in the new world wouldn't be aware that I was the one who changed the world. All recollection would have disappeared, because I myself changed along with the rest of the world. This is a real dilemma. Despite possessing amazing powers, one wouldn't know one had used the powers...that is the real dilemma."

Seems a little hard to understand.

"When people run into uncertainty, they have two possible reactions: denial or making an attempt to understand—neither is right or wrong. No one is obligated to twist their value system they've set up to try to understand something. But it's impossible that their value system will remain unchanged their whole life. People just need to ask themselves why something cannot be understood. Coming up with an answer they accept is good enough. If you could have a world just the way you want it, then there wouldn't be any weird reasons or explanations."

Sasaki turned towards the three people in front of her. "I have no way of understanding what you guys are thinking and there's no way for you to explain it to me. Since I've had an answer in mind for a long time, there's no need to say too much. With too much talk, there'll definitely be a misunderstanding. When the time comes, it will only make things embarrassing for oneself."

"I actually don't care what you think." Fujiwara said with chagrin. "All is well as long as you silently do what we tell you to do."

"In the end." But Sasaki didn't stop talking there. "People still can't do what's beyond their powers. Even if you try to act the part, it's nothing but an illusion."

She carried the momentum of a three-stage rocket after the second engine had been set alight, letting me move the decimal point one digit to the left for the weight of my burden.

"Now that even Sasaki has said so much, I of course won't obediently accept such an unfair condition either." I was about to say "You should have come two days earlier" when I realized that Fujiwara had indeed shown up two days ago, so I swallowed my sentence. Trying to talk your way around someone from the future was really difficult.

Sasaki patted me softly on the shoulder.

"If you try to use this kind of leverage, it will only work on small things like someone having forgotten to bring spare change for the vending machine. I don't have any objections to the world worth remonstrating about, or I should say that I've long ceased taking them to heart. This world full of contradictions was made by the accumulation of illustrious eras since the appearance of humankind. I don't think that the paltry amount of individual thinking can do anything to change that. Even if I had that kind of power, I wouldn't be able to guarantee anything or even have two-folds worth of confidence that I'd be able to create a better world. This isn't me being humble; I don't believe there exists a person who could do that. The consciousness of the human race has not evolved to so advanced a state yet. The Earth is like a ship carrying us all in a great voyage through the cosmos. If this ship somehow came to be aware of itself, it would probably eject the unknown, ingenious race of primates into space entirely. That might even simply matters. Since mankind is what it is, no matter how you beat about it, we won't become gods. Furthermore, a god is a concept we've created. According to history, a god hasn't appeared on some corner of this planet even in the beginning. I don't have any interest in becoming an image of a formless concept. God has never died and it has never been born. This is the reason that no one has ever found where god has been buried. Maybe an intrinsic quality of god is that it can't be explained by any concept."

At the same time Sasaki finished her super-long speech...

"—ha—ha ha—ha ha ha—aha....."

Without missing a beat, Kuyou burst out laughing without any warning. Her tone was both high and low making it sound both joyous and sad. Hearing it made me suspect I had hearing problems with my ear.

"—too funny.....ha ha—"

What do you mean? It's fine if you have a go at me, but laughing at Sasaki will only fill my spleen with anger.

"I will take pity on you by explaining it then." Following Kuyou's laughter-filled words, Fujiwara continued sneeringly, "Why do you think the right to choose belongs to you? We will listen to you express your view like this, but we aren't here to receive your teachings. Please don't misunderstand us, inhabitant of the past."

The leisure and comfort that had just been sprouting in my mind was broken this instant.

"Let's not talk about Kuyou; you make me want to laugh too. Aren't you thinking too much of yourself? Do you think you have the right to decide everything? That you have the right to decide the direction of the world? Ha! Who cares what you think, you being the mastermind behind some pointless game? Ha ha, you're a joke. Making people laugh so loud exemplifies how pathetic you are. Listen clearly. You can't decide anything and you're just a puppet. I admit that when you carry things out, you're different from other people. You can get things done quickly and easily, but that's all—you're still a puppet. Your actions and your perception of yourself are completely different."

When I understood his meaning, I felt something cold on the back of my neck.

Kuyou was still laughing non-stop.

I again realized when Haruhi disappeared how human Nagato seemed.

These people—

Don't you dare look down on us like humans.

Not only Kuyou, but Asakura and Kimidori-san as well.

As such, they all wanted to hear me speak. No matter what opinion I held, they would be able to smash through it with ease, without paying me any mind. This is how highly they rated themselves. Kuyou's unsuppressed laughter was that of a child who'd just gotten a new toy. We were able to see what we saw only because it carried the dazzling sincerity of a child crushing an ant to death that crawled beside their foot...

My dependable friend Sasaki; the shadow over her features gradually grew.

"Since the talk has already reached this point, do you still expect me to cooperate? Saying these things has the complete opposite effect. My relationship with Kyon is far greater than the one with you."

"I think I've said it more than once already. I don't care at all what you think."

Fujiwara let out another derisive laugh.

"Ah..."

Kyouko Tachibana's form shrunk even smaller. "Heavens, everything is ruined." Kyouko Tachibana sighed, but her expression didn't yet show signs of discouragement. Perhaps this deserves admiration. In the end, she put on the facial expression of a missionary and preached to me.

"How about this? Please think about it some more. I know you value Suzumiya-san and the SOS Brigade very much, but maybe you can look at it from another perspective? As long as Suzumiya-san has her powers, Nagato-san's condition won't change and you'll eventually be sucked into the strange matter."

What are you trying to say?

"Even if Haruhi Suzumiya lost her powers and became a normal person, the SOS Brigade wouldn't disband, right? The existing circumstances won't change for this reason. Koizumi-san will still be the representative for the Organization, Nagato-san will still be an alien, Asahina-san will still be from the future, and that's all there is. They won't have any misgivings about Suzumiya-san's actions. Everyone will behave like before accompanying the brigade leader to play happily together."

Now that would really be a group that not even fan clubs could aspire to be.

“True, that's just what I want to say. Don't you think that would be pretty good? If you still wanted to experience supernatural events you have hitherto, we're still available. Kuyou-san is an alien and Fujiwara-san is from the future. Even though I don't want to tell you I'm an esper, I guess I am one after all. As long as you treated it as being extracurricular activities with Sasaki-san, it definitely wouldn't be boring.”

Too stunned for words describes my situation right now. She was inviting me to organize the second SOS Brigade, to cause the Haruhi-led SOS Brigade to lose its essence, and nominating Sasaki as the new SOS Brigade Leader...What should I do?

“Furthermore,” Kyuoko Tachibana overtook my train of thought, “I also want Koizumi-san to get rid of some of the burden on his shoulders.”

“Huh?”

Why are you so worried about Koizumi's frozen shoulder?

“He will definitely thank me very much, because...” Kyouko Tachibana went on pronouncing things that went without saying, much like a young girl full of daydreams about pies in the sky and cloud-castles. “Don't you know? The Organization was founded single-handedly by Koizumi-san and he has always been the director during its operation. He is also the most capable person there. Even though he doesn't understand my way of thinking, I have some respect for him nonetheless.”

“.....”

This part of the conversation planted itself heavily into my brain marrow, but I still resembled a piece of rock unchanged in my countenance. I don't know how it was, but at that instant I didn't want to say anything at all. How much of what this person said can be taken as truth? Or was she only saying what she took to be true? By this time, after hearing Koizumi explain to me so much that I didn't know to be true or false, I found it similar to listening to Kyouko Tachibana. Asking me to choose sides to stand on was rather laughable, but Kyouko Tachibana shouldn't need to make up this sort of lie...No, maybe she does. If she wants to throw my thoughts into confusion, this trick is definitely very effective. Only her face really was filled with most heartfelt admiration.

.....

Oh well, now I have to pull the emergency brakes on my train of thought. Now wasn't the time to think about how Koizumi's Organization is organized...

That bastard Fujiwara began his weird “kukku” laugh again.

“Let me first reveal an important piece of information. Treat it like I'm giving you preferential treatment. In this time period, it's actually something you'll be able to hear only at this present location. You must be really eager to find out what I'm about to tell you, so here it is. Simply put, I'm going to give a little explanation of something that you haven't seen until now and that's the TPDD.”

Without anyone asking, he began behaving according to really strange guidelines of behavior. I definitely wouldn't recommend his personality to anyone. I can guarantee that Fujiwara was the textbook case of a weirdo.

"The way Mikuru Asahina and I travel through time actually has some problems. Due to the principle behind it, when the time machine is used for travel, it is required to penetrate the time plane, so it needs to form a hole in order to travel to the past. Don't worry, a small hole doesn't influence much and fixing it is easy too. Basically the further you travel to the past, the more damaged the time plane becomes. Furthermore, the more times a time period is traveled to or from, the number of holes formed will also naturally increase. Do you follow me up to this point?"

I really wanted to pour wax into my ears. If you wanted to tell me, it was fine. But letting Sasaki hear this outlandish classified information wasn't necessary. Doomed to be torn apart by five horses by troubling matters, just one person (myself) was sufficient.

"The main point is that the use of TPDD is accompanied by the risk of destroying the already existing time period. The chiseled open holes have to be filled, much like if a dripping roof is left alone, the house will be ruined too, or they will set off effects that cascade into the future. The main thing time-travelers to the past must do is repair errors caused by the TPDD. But Mikuru Asahina is an exception. She's actually responsible for a special mission, but she herself isn't aware what it is. Humph, the entire matter is of the highest level of secrecy, so she doesn't know anything about it; it must really be toilsome for her."

Fujiwara seemed like he was done reciting what he'd planned to say, finally retracting something he was going to say.

"For example..."

He withdrew the previous statement and began his story again.

"What I just told you was actually something you weren't supposed to know, but so what? The answer is that you yourself have changed as a result of what I've told you. Humph, do you want to make it more interesting?"

No. If it gets any more interesting, I'm afraid I'm going to die laughing.

"Since you heard what I just told you, it's inevitable that you've been influenced by me. This demonstrates the advantage I hold over you group of past inhabitants." Fujiwara's tone finally became honest. "You just mull over that slowly. Whether your antiquated brain actually discovers any answers, I will use your actions to decide. If you manage to derail matters already established, I'll have a good show to watch."

Just when I thought he really finished talking this time, he followed up immediately with this attack. "I will silently await your response and hope that you will commit the words I said today into your memory. At the same time, there's no harm in forgetting. Regardless of what you decide to do, I'll still

have a way to complete my mission. Whether you choose the route of accompanying Haruhi Suzumiya toward certain destruction or let her become an extinct volcano, you're free to do as you please."

I really wanted to ask him whether or not he knew the exact time when I'd give him my answer. For someone from the future, this was probably something certain. Fujiwara and Asahina-san were different. He should be someone who follows the script no matter what. Could it be that there really wasn't an opportunity to test him? The image of the beautiful Asahina-san flashed through my mind. Her in maid costume compared to her in teacher costume was like the pedestrian street light signaling on as opposed to off.

"Why are you giving me time to consider?" This seemed like a very direct question out of the questions I asked.

"Because the matter is already predetermined. If I had instead put it that way, would you have accepted it? If you couldn't, it also doesn't matter. Okay, my happy hour is over."

Fujiwara nimbly released himself from his long crossed legs and stood up. "Though it's incredibly stupid to be bound by time, given that the direction in which things are flowing is already set, nothing can be done but to quietly accept it. Nevertheless, like the ancient deep sea fish who didn't manage to catch a ride on the evolution bus, there's still the possibility of going against the stream."

After these two complementary sentences, Fujiwara turned and left the meeting.

I watched his tall shadow walk out the door without having left a cent. My nose was still filled by the miasma he'd left behind. At this moment, Kyouko Tachibana picked up the bill as if it went without saying.

"Pardon me, but I should get going too. You probably need some time to consider. It's only that what you must consider is really too much..."

I don't know whether it was due to Fujiwara's toxic influence, but Kyouko Tachibana's thin shadow showed some signs of exhaustion. It was no wonder that you became utterly fatigued in mind and body interacting with that kind of person. I couldn't help but sympathize with her a bit.

"I'll just discuss a bit with Sasaki-san if that's okay. Sasaki-san, let's stay in touch even without having anything to do with this matter...a relationship purely based on friendship."

"It would be best if that were possible." Sasaki looked up at Kyouko Tachibana and raised a corner of her mouth. "I hope that the only thing that will ever exist between us is friendship."

Kyouko Tachibana didn't answer, only taking an uneasy glance at Kuyou who was sitting like a piece of furniture before sighing. She went to the cash register to pay the bill, then waved goodbye before leaving the coffee shop. As such, the crystallized Kuyou showed sign of dissolving.

With my spirits sagging into a bundle, it was only after I chugged down the glass of ice water that I realized Sasaki's two cups of hot coffee never made it to our table even by the very end.

Even after having said this much, matters haven't made much headway.

After I got the waitress (thankfully it wasn't Kimidori-san) to finally send over the hot coffee and to add copious amounts of sugar and milk powder, I still thought the bitter taste was a bit too much, I finished drinking the last drop before noticing that the strange Kuyou was sitting at the position of the highest seniority, staying more still than an old-fashioned ichimatsu doll¹⁰ found in the attic of a countryside house. My brain began to work.

Why wasn't this person moving, as if she hasn't even thought about leaving? Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana had already gone, and she was still staring blankly at us. Was it actually some kind of alien form of communication? Was she indicating to us that there was something more she wanted to tell us about?

I don't have the capability to decode strange non-verbal alien appeals, so don't depend on me for that.

When I was looking at Kuyou, Sasaki put down her empty cup and a faint smile formed on her lips. "Kyon, let's get going too. I don't want to repeat what Fujiwara-kun said, but we do have to think about the future. Even though it was a boring and disorderly meeting, I do think there is some sense to be made out of it. From Fujiwara-kun's tone of speech, he seems to have some hesitation."

It's good if it's like that, although what we should think about is also a question.

"That's true. We don't seem to have a right to choose, but also completely no idea how to make them have no more illusions about the matter. However, we should be able to do something at least."

Getting yourself bogged down in a situation like this really doesn't let you loosen up at all. They want to transfer Haruhi's god status to Sasaki? Is this a choice between a domineering, completely self-unaware god and a reasonable god aware of her temperance? If I was forced to answer, I'd have to admit Sasaki was rather more suited to be god.

Nevertheless...

I honestly didn't want to see it happen.

I'll use the following to elucidate my meaning. I don't want Sasaki to have any transcendent and abnormal powers. It was best for my normal friend to continue being normal. Now since Haruhi was like that to begin with, she can just keep being herself. In ancient mythology, all the gods were all cosmic troublemakers even more unreasonable than humans. From this point alone, I think it was always pretty good that we could even communicate with our god. Shrines also wouldn't just up and switch to a different god to worship. Huh? Wait a minute, what am I thinking? Just having Koizumi speak in defense of Haruhi was already enough. Looks like I'm much more muddle-headed than I'd imagined.

¹⁰ Japanese doll whose hair will grow longer, often seen in horror stories.

This could hardly be blamed on me. Reincarnated Asakura, the looker-on Kimidori-san, the time-traveler who found some god-forbidden way to get in touch with Kuyou and was now flaunting his might—I've been continuously perturbed since last night. Unless I was Buddha incarnate, it was impossible for my mood to be as tranquil as water. Looks like there was still a long road ahead to achieve enlightenment.

“Right, Kyon. Aside from myself, there should be someone else you can have heart-to-heart talks with, right? Honestly, I really don't know what to do. If there's someone who can produce an answer immediately, I'd welcome it anytime.”

The first person who came to mind was Koizumi and his knowledgeable-looking face. Aside from him, the bed-stricken Nagato also deserved consideration. Even though the most dependable was Asahina-san (big), there was no way to contact her unless she made an appearance. It couldn't be that this matter didn't fall under her jurisdiction, could it? If so, it was very likely that what would happen next would proceed exactly like the Tanabata event as a re-enactment of something previously established. If that was the case, the only thing we could do would be to raise our arms in surrender.

“Kuyou-san, do you want to leave with us or do you want to finish your sundae before leaving? Tachibana-san has already paid the bill, so you can take your time eating.”

The shadow of the rival alien lackey didn't move in the slightest. Her half-open eyes remained on empty air. There was no reply.

“Are you still awake, Kuyou-san?”

Sasaki waved her hands in front of her.

“—I didn't fall asleep.”

She replied with a volume bound to smite down the sandman. The surprising volume made hair stand up on end and I asked:

“Were you listening all the way to the end?”

“—understanding complete, execution has finished.”

What did this mean? If she got rid of the burden on Nagato, then this really helped me out a great deal.”

I hastened my departure from the table before Sasaki. I was a bit worried about leaving behind only this member of the ominous group of vagrants...well, more like I was worried that I would lose her. All of a sudden, Kuyou stood up and followed us for some unknown reason. I thought she would quickly disappear without a trace, but I didn't actually imagine she'd be like a sentry following us not too closely and not too far.

When Sasaki and I left the coffee shop, she was still following us, so I felt some uneasiness at this. Furthermore, it was gradually becoming dark.

"Is there something else you want to say?"

Sasaki turned and said in my stead what I'd kept locked up in my mind. The alien who hadn't taken any etiquette courses still maintained her silence. Her soulless eyes stared towards some unknown location. I can see that she has not managed to hit it off with the human race since she was born. It was good that her personality was mysterious, but I was afraid whether her personality even existed was up in the air. Yesterday, when Kuyou was attacked by Asakura, she still had a faint smile. But her from back then hardly resembled her right now. It couldn't be that she had multiple personalities, could it?

I only noted that turning around would be unwise.

"Hey, Kyon!"

When the familiar voice hit squarely on my eardrum, I was almost tripped by the flat asphalt road.

Together with Sasaki, I stopped walking. Kuyou did the same.

"It's really rare to run into you here."

It was only my high school classmate Kunikida who'd be dressed in his school uniform and bag outside of school time.

But who Kunikida was looking at wasn't myself, but the old classmate beside me.

"Long time no see, Sasaki-san."

"Is that so?"

Sasaki had a soft smile while stretching. She looked at Kunikida and said, "I saw you at the national practice exams. It shouldn't have been someone who merely resembled you, right?"

Kunikida smiled back softly. I think this was the first time I've seen him smiling like this. "I know that you eventually realized. You would know from my looking back at you, right?"

"That's right. I was looking at the other person very observantly." Sasaki said in a bureaucratic tone. "I don't normally get much attention. If I received a look like that, the pain sensors on my face would get stimulated."

"You're still your old self." Kunikida nodded his head with relief. At this moment, a hand extended from the side planting itself on his shoulder. A wily face that made people want to loudly exclaim "Why did I run into you of all people?" emerged.

"Hey Kyon. I really can't underestimate you, or I should rather say that I'm seeing you in a whole new light. Whoa...is this Kyon's old girlfriend?"

...Taniguchi, even though I completely don't want to know why you would be loitering around with Kunikida in front of the station, there's something I'd like to request from you: please go home now. If possible, please use three rocket boosters strapped to your back to speedily return home. Lift on! If you can, you might as well use this method to send yourself into orbit. I might be able to ask an observatory to calculate your orbit.

"Why be like this, Kyon? We don't often run into each other, so let's chat a little more." Taniguchi displayed a smile revealing of a lack of self-restraint. His boorish glance lashed out at Sasaki and I alternately. "How could you be like this? You already have so many girls around you and it still isn't enough, eh?"

It was abundantly clear what he wanted to say, so I expressed my contempt. Just when I was considering assuming a crouching position like a sprinter's starting position to get away as fast as possible, Taniguchi finally became a bit more serious.

"Introduce me, Kyon. I'm your fellow classmate, so if you have something to say just go ahead and say it."

"Her surname is Sasaki and we attend the same high school."

Even though what I said seemed satisfactory, Kunikida nevertheless took the baton from my hand. "Sasaki-san, this is Taniguchi. We all have classmates since our first year of high school."

It was truly a fine example of a concise introduction.

"It's nice to meet you." Sasaki bowed gently: "The affection you show each other is very nice. Kyon shouldn't have caused you much worry, right?"

Taniguchi's blunt initial reaction returned as he showed his mouthful of white teeth and plan to follow up. "But your good taste really has no limits and your appreciation is really good. It's really something I wouldn't have thought of even if I'd racked my brain to pieces. What grievances could someone like you have towards life? How do you get me so ticked off, Kyon...Kyon...Kyon!?"

How are you behaving now? Why are you now imitating the strange call of a wild tropical bird from Southeast Asia or is it in fashion to stifle people like this nowadays?

I was rather impatient and wanted to stare Taniguchi to death with my glare, except...Huh? It was strange that who Taniguchi was looking at wasn't actually me or Sasaki.

"...Wha!?"

Taniguchi leapt back a step and raised his arms in surrender before stopping himself halfway through such an unnatural movement. He became flabbergasted as if he'd become petrified upon seeing a ghost. I didn't have time yet to guess what holy fool was even more foolish than Taniguchi, who already held pole position in the category, when I realized that my dear classmate's glance passed right through Sasaki and I landing on Kuyou Suou's black cat face.

If I even sometimes forgot about her existence, why would Taniguchi have noticed her?



“——”

What shocked me even more was that Kuyou actually produced some response upon seeing Taniguchi. The girl clad in a girls' school uniform slowly lifted her left hand, unfolding her palm. From her sleeve, she revealed a pure white wrist with a fashionable wristwatch on it that had gone previously unnoticed by me. Not in a million years did I imagine she would be wearing such a cute trinket, much less a mechanical watch to boot.

“——thank you. I'm not planning to.....return it to you.”

Huh?

“No problem, it's not like it's anything valuable. If you don't like it, you can even throw it out if that makes you happy. No, I hope you will do as you please. It'd please me too.”

Taniguchi and Kuyou were having a conversation. The season had clearly not arrived yet, but Taniguchi still didn't miss an opportunity for his face to sweat profusely and wave his limbs around aimlessly. Even if his suspicious actions would immediately have prompted the police making their

rounds to thoroughly examine him had they been present, this scene was truly a miracle that defied normal explanations.

"I heard that was a Christmas present from Taniguchi." Kunikida's explanation didn't dispel my astonishment, but instead redoubled it. A watch? Kuyou expressing thanks? Christmas? Who was connected to what now? Was I dreaming?

After Kunikida had tossed me along with my jaw that had dropped to the ground into a sea of questions, without the least hesitation he changed the topic back towards Sasaki.

"Can I ask you how you ran into Kyon again today?"

What "again today"? That has too many undertones attached...No, no, no. What's surprising at the present moment should be Taniguchi and Kuyou, not Sasaki and I, right?

However, Sasaki still regarded her conversation with Kunikida to be of slightly more relevance. "A lot of things happened. I don't have the intention to make a long story short. If possible, you can find a time and ask Kyon about it, okay?"

"That won't be necessary. I'm not really that interested to find out. Speaking of which, to be able to run into Sasaki-san and Suou-san here, the world must be really small."

"Do you know her too? I really didn't imagine, Kunikida-san. I trust my surprise is much greater than yours. Where did you come to know Kuyou-san?"

I wanted to know too.

"Kuyou...Do you mean Suou-san? I met her during winter vacation because of this guy...Huh? Where did he go?"

Taniguchi? He seemed to have long ago performed something akin to the Woodpecker strategy in the Battle of Kawanakajima that executed a surprise attack, but ended up failing and the Takeda forces routed¹¹. The pace he fled at was an impressive sight.

"This Taniguchi, who was just introduced to me, said that you were once his girlfriend. This is true, right, Suou-san?"

"—yes." Kuyou answered as if it were just like breathing. "—my memory identifies itself with your statement ensuring its validity."

"And it's been about a month since you've broken up?"

"—Guaranteed."

¹¹ During the 4th Battle of Kawanakajima, Takeda Shingen's army defeated by Uesugi Kenshin's army arrayed on Mt. Saijo despite Shingen having executed the Woodpecker strategy, which involved leaving 8000 men in the main army and sending the rest out in a night raid against the Uesugi army.

Hey, what was this?

Was the girlfriend Taniguchi mentioned last Christmas Kuyou? Then she was the girl he broke up with before Valentine's Day too? Wait a second.

I was greatly astonished, but had to ask, "According to this, you did something before Naga...No, before that guy stirred up that thing, she was already...already here!?"

"—right. I didn't find any problems executing this operation."

Was what I was feeling at the moment a feeling of dissatisfaction or uncertainty?

"...How did you end up spending time with Taniguchi?"

The response was extremely clear-cut. "—because I made a mistake."

"What?"

"Taniguchi also said that to me. He said that was her reason for breaking up." Kunikida also asked in a concise manner, "When did you meet Suou-san, Kyon? Did you know her before high school?"

No, it happened recently.

Sasaki took a sidelong glance at my mouth which often produced clumsy sentences, then said with a jesting smile, "I met Kuyou-san recently. By a little bit of fate and coincidence, Kyon got a chance to meet her too."

"And she's also Taniguchi's ex-girlfriend. It's truly too coincidental. If you converted it to a percentage, what would it be...?"

Sasaki said to Kunikida who was wring his neck pondering, "Are you talking about probability? If something strange might happen at any moment, you can use just one word, probability, to describe any coincidence that's hard to believe like the one right now..."

Sasaki smiled merrily, slightly turning her hand. "It must be planned by an all-knowing, all-powerful god, right?"

"That doesn't really sound like something Sasaki-san would say."

I agree. Didn't God go somewhere on vacation?

Kunikida abruptly shrugged his shoulders. "Kyon, Sasaki-san is only saying something in a roundabout way. She's saying that our meeting was just a coincidence, so there's nothing more to think about."

How can you tell me not to think? One or two can be explained as coincidence. Three or four will make the urge to begin questioning whether you were being led along by someone irresistible for you.

Even though I was well aware that being serious in something like this was a plain waste of energy, this must be something that only vexed me after being hit repeatedly by violent storms and waves.

I don't know how Kunikida saw me as I was spinning silently in a whirlpool. In the end, he continued, "After school, I came to the book store in front of the station to pick up a book I'd ordered. By chance, Taniguchi was free so he accompanied me here. Then we spoke about whether we should sit down and have a cup of tea..."

Kunikida turned and searched for the deserter Taniguchi's trail and shook his head.

"Since that guy's gone, I guess all I can do is improvise."

Should this play be called "The Cowardly Taniguchi's Amazing Escape Before the Battle"?

"I'll be embarrassed if I keep interrupting your plans, so I'll go home now."

Kunikida turned, so Sasaki continued by saying, "Kunikida-san, no matter where you are, as long as you see me feel free to say hi. Chatting a bit about shared recollections and always looking warmly towards sunny things is a great joyous activity in life."

"This sentence fits more with Sasaki-san's style."

When smart people talk, each planning three moves further ahead, an ordinary person like myself am no longer able to keep up.

"Okay, so long." Kunikida seemed satisfied with the series of words with Sasaki. He didn't ask any further questions about Kuyou as if he didn't think too much about it and left like this.

I watched Kunikida's gradually shrinking shadow and didn't plan on worrying any more about Taniguchi's two-man group. Kuyou seemed to have done some formless trauma to Taniguchi's heart. Kunikida's also a clever person, so he probably wouldn't report it to Haruhi, I think.

"Kuyou."

I met glances with the person who was half a nestling whose nest was here and half a rigid head of a mop.

"You already arrived on Earth last December, right? Then you got close to Taniguchi." What I wanted to ask had accumulated into a mountain, but I thought it was good to sort things through by starting here. "Did you take a fancy to Taniguchi in order to come in contact with Haruhi or me?"

"It was a misunderstanding——" She replied with a voice like a talking deck brush.

"What did you misunderstand?"

"——mistook him for you."

"You..."

Did Kuyou begin a relationship with Taniguchi because she mistook him for me? Hey hey hey hey hey, why did it have to be him? It just made it harder and harder for me to decide what to do.

“Almost as if some information source had become muddled, exposing the situation to the possibility of his interference...” Kuyou said word-by-word, “The probability isn’t low.....”

At least Nagato didn't have to expend energy to take care of you then.

“Were you affected when Nagato remade the world?”

“I wasn't changed.”

Kuyou lifted her chin, her bloodless lips continued bit-by-bit saying things that would have made other people tongue-tied had they attempted to say them.

“Your concept of the universe is that of a passing mirage, but we've also begun to sense a surprise never before seen. A world of the past overlapping with the present world. Exclusive actions. Some areas altered. Interesting.”

“What the heck? And why did your tone change again? It really looks like your personality changed, which reminds me of yesterday's faint smile.”

“—there is no tomorrow's today—there is no today's yesterday—there is no yesterday's tomorrow—here.”

I heard, but didn't understand.

Sasaki raised an eyebrow after listening and murmured, “Compared to a lunatic, she seems more like a fanatic. I really hope we didn't have to stand here—that we could talk slowly in the coffee shop and I could even jot some notes down.”

Sasaki took aim at Kuyou's wrist and said teasingly, “Although, since you're still wearing a watch that was a gift from him, it means you're still a bit reluctant to part with that interesting guy who was just here, right?”

Kuyou's glance fell on her watch (it should be a fairly inexpensive model) like droplets of ink.

“—it's something.....I said I wanted to have.”

...Today, I've heard it all.

“—time isn't actually a one-way flow one can't run counter to. To engage in personal activity on this planet, it is necessary to keep track of the fixed, objective time.”

Are you talking about the watch? It's just a some handicraft composed of springs and gears. What determines time isn't actually the watch. What the watch does is provide a convenient way of keeping track in a continuous stretch of human activity.

“—time is mostly randomly generated; it's hardly continuous.”

I almost cried. What was this alien trying to say?

Only it happened to stimulate Sasaki's natural curiosity. “Kuyou-san, but then how would you explain the past and the future? Presumably not by claiming Akashic records¹² really exist, right?”

“—time is limited.”

“What do you mean now? Based on the method of infinite descent¹³, how much time exists between 1 second and 2 seconds?”

“No time. However, there's no danger even if you say some time does exist.”

It would seem as if Sasaki has fallen for the bait.

“Okay, Let me put it this way. Suppose parallel worlds existed. Then according to Everett¹⁴, they can't be infinite in number?”

“—objects that cannot be observed do not exist.”

“Really?”

Sasaki's expression was like that of a young scientist who'd just discovered a new phenomenon.

“—already in the records—doubt.....completely non-existent.”

“So it's like that.” Sasaki's face full of understanding was supported at the chin by her fingers. Kuyou's words really needed someone to show up their ridiculousness.

“What's like that? Hurry up chewing and digesting what you just heard so you can tell me what you've worked out. It has to be so well digested that even an idiot can understand.”

“This...Uhh, Kyon, I can't do that. I understand, but it's just that Kuyou's designer and all life forms made by her designer are fundamentally different from our human race so that their thought processes are completely unlike ours. It's also to say that I've understood that there's completely no way for me to understand them.”

So there's no way no matter what we try?

“Not exactly. I've discovered that our language isn't actually suitable for communicating with them. This is a huge step forward. Speaking of the current situation, her words are almost like

¹² Akashic records are a compendium of information encoded formlessly existing in a non-physical plane of existence.

¹³ A mathematical proof used to show that no solutions exist.

¹⁴ Hugh Everett III proposed the many-worlds interpretation in 1957 that the universe will upon observation split into many universes each with different outcomes.

meaningless noise. But what if it's possible to develop a high performance translator device? Based on the present knowledge of the human race, maybe it will be possible one day. Truthfully, the human race has already broken through countless barriers deemed impossible by pessimists, bringing about inventions one by one."

It will be possible one day, in the distant future that is. If we were in Fujiwara's time, in a future where ships can use forces other than buoyancy to float on...

"Hey, Kuyou—" My voice wasn't actually transmitted into the listener's ear, but disappeared pitifully mid-air.

Kuyou Suou's strange shadow disappeared like thin air, as if it had entered some form of invisibility.

Nagato, Asakura and Kimidori-san can all accomplish something like this, so I didn't think much of it. However, Sasaki didn't seem surprised either that Kuyou's disappeared with a soft, calm smile.

With a glance used to look at aircraft contrails, she added "Truly an act worthy of an alien..."

Hey, is this all you want to say?

"Then I guess I'll add another sentence." Sasaki changed her glance. "I'm really interested in what actions she'll take in the future."

My old classmate's beautiful face was filled with calm. Never having seen this expression on her before, I couldn't help but feel more at ease.

"Kyon, you actually don't need to overestimate Kuyou. Just like we don't understand her, she doesn't necessarily have an accurate understanding of us either. Even though we're pitiable, backwards life forms and comparatively bound in chains with regards to what we're capable of, we nevertheless carry enough value that she traveled all the way to Earth. Furthermore, whether the spirit of the human race and the evolution of the physical body has reached its pinnacle, it's hard to say. My words...Right, the amount of hope I've placed on the blind watchmaker¹⁵ isn't small."

Despite not fully comprehending, I thought she meant it as some form of encouragement.

"See you next time." Amidst a boisterous plaza in front of the station, Sasaki's radiant eyes shined upon by the streetlight faced me and she said, "I'll think about it too. Maybe a solution appeared in front of us long ago only to have been missed. Even though I don't want you to put too much hope on me, we won't be able to avoid the criticism by others regardless of whether we take action or not. Fear itself feels scarier than meeting danger head on. See you later, Kyon."

I saw her wave her hands softly and elegantly as a new feeling welled up in my heart.

¹⁵ Richard Dawkins's investigation into whether evolution was the result of a series of chance occurrences or the work of a designer working with his hands behind his back.

Compared to being lost in a logjam of thought, being forcibly dragged to the land of pure bliss by the caprice of Haruhi, the Queen of Melancholy, felt relatively relaxing, like a light ray having completed a round-trip back to the centre of the Milky Way.

Without a doubt, Haruhi would definitely return. Her homing instinct counts as one of her positive qualities.

Of course, it isn't an ability exclusive only to Haruhi. In the SOS Brigade from vice-brigade leader down to the rank and file members, everyone has confirmed their affiliation was as permanent as the continental plates on Earth would be if the Moon somehow flew away. And that affiliation was to the 1st SOS Brigade headquarters that Nagato quietly stayed in, Haruhi forcibly occupied, and Asahina-san and Koizumi were forcibly dragged into.

My cerebral cortex was sending out bursts of nerve impulses that deepened my desire to gather everyone into the same room to play intellectually unfruitful games to pass the time.

Just like this, Sasaki. It looks like this was where I still belonged; there was no way for me to monkey around with you guys. A new SOS Brigade? Stop dreaming. Is it something you can pirate by just thinking about it? It's not just that the SOS Brigade has us as the members, but that it is the SOS Brigade because it has us as the members. This group of permanent personnel will conquer all the corners of the world! What used to only be Haruhi's desire didn't take much time to become a cherished desire that Asahina-san, Nagato, Koizumi, and I all shared. We were like the accretion disc¹⁶ in orbit around the black hole that was the brigade leader, not getting sucked in or drifting away—only existing—until the mysterious force responsible for the pull on us disappears, right?

Afterwards, I returned home absent-mindedly; I really had to hand it to myself for not forgetting to ride my bike home. The present me, lethargic from having absorbed too much information in my brain heard every rattle and every clank as clear as day. I had to mobilize all of my concentration to maintain consciousness. When was the last time something like this happened?

Therefore after dinner when I was barely able to move my chopsticks, I lost my last bar of stamina, which I would have used to play with my sister and Shamisen. Like a dead person, I climbed into bed and went to sleep without even turning off the light. At that moment, my mental state was like a torn rag that was also full of holes.

I still remember before falling asleep, a thought flashed through my mind that things would be bad if I went to sleep like this. I didn't dream that night. But then again, unless it was a great dream, any other dream would have been cleanly forgotten the moment I opened my eyes.

¹⁶ A type of phenomenon caused by dispersion material in orbit around a star, black hole or another celestial body.

Chapter 6

α-9

The next day was indeed Wednesday.

I don't know whether it was temporary or not, but today's warm sunshine was already leaps and bounds beyond the one provided by the spring sun. Speaking of which, the weather was very similar around this time last year. Looks like the climate on Earth was truly warming up. If this was a man-made mess, then we should clean up our act quickly or else the mailboxes of electricity generating plants around the world will get stuffed to the point of bursting with letters of protest countersigned by polar bears and emperor penguins. I really wanted to fly over there to get them to write one right now.

This is why sweat got my shirt wet on the hike to school making my clothes stick to my body. A neighboring lawn growing lushly with a verdant color caught my eye. Its dazzling green was like the envy I felt for schools with perfect air-conditioning. If I got the chance, I would definitely give the Student Council President a few words of advice. It wouldn't matter whether it was practical for the budget or not, because Kimidori-san could just use her alien powers to get things done. With a flick of her hand, the installation of twenty or thirty air conditioner units shouldn't be a problem.

Koizumi should have informed the Student Council President by now of Kimidori-san's real identity, right? But this President in particular probably wouldn't mind whether his secretary was a member of the human race or not.

I lifted my light book bag onto my shoulder, half conscious of my gaze at the North High students climbing the hill. My pace was unusually fast...huh?

I was puzzled, so I came to a halt. For me, walking this fast was considered a pointless and superfluous action. I didn't know why I would do something so unusual like that.

During this time of year between spring and fall, the weather was at its most pleasant; in fact, it was so pleasant that you could only get it by special order. With the god of spring still demonstrating his power of generating sunlight together with the front of the rainy season still stuck far off to the south, it combined into perfectly mild weather. Even though I knew the weather wasn't due to Haruhi, and my cheerful mood wasn't anything to be surprised about, I still felt something was off.

As I groped in the darkness of my consciousness, I felt like I had found the solution when I finished climbing the hill.

"It's too peaceful..." Why did these words come out of my mouth? Haruhi has been in her best mood dueling it out with new brigade members, Asahina-san was still delving into the "Classic of Tea" set after school, Nagato had tossed her Literature Club President duties straight into the garbage bin and thrown herself into a sea of books, and Koizumi seemed happy all the time every day.

Of the recent meeting with Sasaki, Kuyou, Kyoko Tachibana, etc., I actually thought it was an overture to an offensive of supernatural happenings. Yet it had passed without a hint of trouble. That nameless time-traveler also hasn't made any moves, although this must only be foreshadowing for the removal of his mask which would come sooner or later. I don't know whether it'd be better to die early and get reincarnated early, or better to prepare for battle. If it would be possible to delay the matter forever and preserve the present situation, I would thank my lucky stars. But who was the person I looked to for taking pity on me; was it Nagato or my dear close friend Sasaki?

I recalled the conversation with my middle school classmate. The topic we had spoken was precisely about graduation and small talk that enriched your life, but wasn't completely one you could label constructive. But on the other hand, she should be able to talk the heads off of the time-traveler or that alien. It's about time I willingly called someone up to understand the situation better. The time-traveler really made me uneasy.

Absentmindedly, I walked into the building for freshmen. It was something that only happened a few days after a new semester started. I mechanically switched into my indoor shoes, drifted into the Year 2 Class 5 classroom and sat down. It would be fall before the routine class politics and matters that left me looking like a wooden plank ended.

After lying on the desk for a while, I heard Haruhi charge into the room before the bell sounded like a horse at a race who was trying to get to a dominant position with the finish line in sight. She defeated Okabe-sensei who doubled as the PE teacher by a full two horse lengths.

"Why so late? Is it because you were preparing the brigade entrance exams?"

I made the most of the brief time between the end of class meeting and the start of first period by posing my query.

"Yeah..." Such an inconclusive response emerged from Haruhi's lips. "It was really because I actually made lunch. I woke up early today and, since I had some free time, I thought it would be good to make one once in a while."

Oh, I see. What kind of wind was blowing today that caused Haruhi to actually do something considered normal for a high school girl?

"Looks like it took you a considerable amount of time. Is it one of those fancy 3 or 5 layer varieties?"

"It took a while because I wanted to make it nutritionally balanced. I'm sure it'll be delicious. I'm really looking forward to lunch period."

Haruhi pouted like a duck or an owl while saying, "Yeah..it's weird though. Why did I suddenly get the feeling that I just had to cook something? Maybe I had a dream like that. I can't remember but it was like I was making food for someone...but despite that, let me warn you that I didn't make any extra portions; I'm going to eat it all myself."

You don't have to place particular emphasis on this point. Even if you wanted to give me some lunch you personally made, I wouldn't be able to find a corner in the school to eat it, much less this classroom.

"You don't bring lunch very often do you? Is there any special reason for that? It isn't because your mother lacks cooking skills, is it?"

After remaining silent for a moment, Haruhi said, "How did you know? This...it's hard to say...I don't really want to say it...but you're right. My mom, my mother's taste is different from that of the average person."

In other words, she has no taste.

"When I was young, I actually thought everyone's family was like this. A normal family would more or less go eat in a restaurant once in a while, right? When that happened, I was moved almost to tears. It was solely due to my thinking it was only in restaurants that you could find this kind of deliciousness that I didn't think much of it. It wasn't until I began eating cafeteria lunches in primary school that I began to suspect something. The food tasted so good as to make me keep shoveling it into my mouth constantly, one spoonful after the other. But sometimes my classmates weren't satisfied and would give me their leftovers."

She stared out the window with a look of nostalgia in her eyes. "Later, I tried my hand at cooking, just out of impulse. Even though I just copied everyone else's beef and potato stew, it was still worthy of being a memorable first in my life. Guess how it tasted. Exactly the same as the cafeteria food. This was the moment the first piece of scale fell out from my eye.¹⁷ It dropped with a 'plop' and I flicked it away with a 'clink'!"

This scale must have been really big.

"About the same size as a scale from a Red Arowana or Arapaima. From that point on, I decided to try my best not to let my family do the cooking."

"Oh."

Haruhi's talk dug up some matter from my head and a strange feeling accompanied.

Speaking of lunch...it couldn't be. Does the cafeteria menu have beef and potato stew? Or was it the scale of the freshwater fish from the Amazon rainforest?

While I was deep in contemplation, just as I was about to kick the answer to the last word of the crossword puzzle out of my larynx and towards the goal,

¹⁷ Fish scales falling from your eye is a Japanese idiom that means that something obscuring your view has been removed.

"That's right, Kyon." Haruhi changed the topic of conversation by 180 degrees, completely ruining my plan. "It's regarding the first new brigade member test."

Huh? Oh, right. That certainly is the top case right now.

Haruhi left the topic of her family's dinner table...more like she wanted to drop it as soon as possible.

"Having trials for so long really is a bit troublesome, so I want to boldly and decisively speed up the process a bit. Do you have any good ideas?"

That the venerable brigade leader would actually consult the opinion of a lowly, grass-roots member who was undeserving of mention truly overwhelmed me with flattery and honor. Originally, I thought the highest person in charge would carry all the powers of appraisal. Looks like that had been a purely arbitrary assessment by me.

"Well...regarding the trials..." I blurted out an idea that had flashed into my head. "How does a race to catch one hundred and one hamsters sound?"

At this moment, Haruhi revealed a petrifying stare resembling that of Medusa and looked at me like I was a convict who'd snitched on her. "...How'd you know I wanted to do that? You even got the number right..."

Since I was able to get everything on the list right, does it mean my brainwashing was nearing completion? I shuddered endlessly at this thought and had no alternative but to ask.

"Where are you going to get so many hamsters?"

"Then let's change it to a Shamisen's flea-catching contest."

He's been a housecat for a while already. He even gets dragged by my sister to bathe together. Needless to say, flea-catching isn't necessary anymore. Why does the exam get changed this easily?

"How about a culinary competition using just the weeds on the school grounds as ingredients?"

Don't look at me to be the judge.

"How about waving a bag of flour back and forth in front of the police station and competing to see who gets taken in for questioning first. How does that sound?"

Don't make any more trouble for the police. We may not be able to apologize for such a prank.

Whenever Haruhi had an annoyed look, she had crocodile eyes and a duck mouth. "Then what'll the competition be?"

Why ask me? Why do you like competing in categories people can't make heads or tails of? This is just a trial, right? There's no need to make it as opulent as a festival celebration. If it was an octopus baking competition, I'd support it. We could get baking trays cheap from a cooking store.

Haruhi let my words pass as if they were running water in a small brook. "Kyon, the entrance test won't only be held this year. It will of course continue to be held next year as well. Seeing as it's an annual tradition, it's not too much to consider it a festival celebration, is it?"

It wasn't like ancient rites passed down to the present time or some interesting traditional celebration. It's leaning a bit towards the Olympics or the World Cup. It would be tedious if it were held every year.

"Haruhi, think about it carefully." I decided to try talking some sense into her: "Did Nagato and Asahina-san pass the test? Wasn't Koizumi recruited because he was a transfer student? We didn't even hold an exam last year."

Speaking of which, my recruitment into the SOS Brigade was the biggest mystery of all. That should leave her at a loss for words.

Haruhi handily stuck out her tongue and said, "Geez. Do you even want new brigade members or not?"

To tell you the truth, not really. Even if the new member had something that made them distinctive from the rest of the world, I'm afraid they'd be considered an intruder by Haruhi. Now, there haven't been any warning signs that someone like this exists amongst the freshmen. The tragedy that's about a normal person who can't get any more normal is already exemplified by me. The best conclusion would be for such a tragic play not to receive an encore performance; it's not like it's been a recent fad. Human civilization is already more than 2000 years old. We really should have learned some lessons. Someone located at an extreme end of the human race can't help but express such a feeling.

Even though Haruhi was still trying to fill in the blanks of the ____ competition, I could only pray to the God of Mice that before the end of school the situation wouldn't reach the extent of trying to collect one hundred and one hamsters.

Praying to Daikokuten should suffice, right?¹⁸

I felt a sense of liberation once again because school had ended and I continued to act in accordance with a daily fixture that had developed the past few days, receiving Great Teacher Haruhi's teachings in preparation for upcoming exams. That I am voluntarily taking part in this activity is something I don't feel the need to mention. As for why I needed to bring up something that didn't need to be brought up, I don't have an answer.

¹⁸ One of Seven Lucky Gods in Japanese folklore. Tradition has it that white mice are his emissaries and are a lucky omen.

"Exams are such a waste. No matter how great my answers are, the upper limit is still only 100. The thing I hate most is being bounded by restrictions like that. I hate it. Think about it, Kyon. If the level of thought of the test-taker exceeded that of the test-maker and came up with a truly profound answer that required a leap in thought greater than the question begged for, but due to small careless mistakes on other questions wasn't able to get a full mark, wouldn't this be really strange? I'm dissatisfied by this aspect of exams. If I was the one marking such an extraordinary response, I wouldn't hesitate giving them 200 marks or even 1000.

Haruhi flipped through the textbook while speaking.

"Also, all this exam thing requires you to do is perform rote memorization of the stuff in here. It's totally pointless. There's nothing better than mechanical work to make you lose your humanity quickly. This is moral depravity— moral depravity, I say!"

Unless Haruhi can reform the Japanese education system, these pointless ideas won't be reflected in my English grade.

"An ability to comprehend is more important than memorizing a whole textbook!"

Here I was thinking that she wanted just now to overthrow the most traditional and time-tested method of using exams to test students.

"You definitely have to treat it as a story to memorize it. As long as you can remember why someone did something the way they did, other related facts will appear in their entirety like digging up yams when you pull out a whole chain of them. Do you get it, Kyon? As long as you have the basic concept, all you have left to do is to realize what the test-maker was thinking. Even though no one knows exactly what ancient people thought, people living the same era aren't as hard to guess. I'm not asking you to guess what the exam paper will have on it, rather, what the test-maker was thinking when they were making the exam. There's definitely an opportunity to outwit the opponent here."

For the test-maker, it's easier to ask a student to fill out the right answer rather than for them to outwit you, right? Why do you have to be so attached to exceeding all someone's of expectations?

"Only this way can you have a moral advantage. The only reason we have the status of student is because of our age. The privilege of instructing us actually falls upon the unaccomplished, rigid teachers completely devoid of fresh ideas. We definitely must use our age as a weapon. Even though this falls within our rights as it should, it's limited to this brief period called high school. To use this life-threatening weapon to its maximum utility on the greatest battlefield of all, we only have two years left."

Not knowing whether I understood or was simply indifferent to her idea, I was currently experiencing high school life and at the same time crying an anguished howl. I didn't see the implications of such an idea. Unless an obstacle on the genetic level was surmounted, a sparrow wouldn't be able to understand the philosophy of a falcon. Squawking atop power lines with the likes of Taniguchi was more befitting for me. As for a life of hunting and contending with the enemy for supremacy, I'll leave it to

Haruhi, the protagonist of "The Red and the Black"¹⁹ or people of the like who have exuberant ambitions. It so happened that recently, I haven't had any desire to do anything aside from sleeping with a poor knowledge what I should do.

"That really is an asinine self-declaration." With a surprised look on her face, Haruhi shook her head. For a moment, she glanced at me as if I was a cowardly samurai who had outpouring earnestness yet would always keep the plug on it.

She spoke with a startlingly steady intonation, "Forget it. I don't want to criticize your personal philosophy. However..." She began to get serious near the end of her sentence. "No matter how you regard school, classes and exams, it's not so easy in the SOS Brigade. In the Brigade, my word is absolute. No matter how you put it, I have extraterritoriality. Whether it's Japanese law, common sense, traditions, social customs, presidential orders or the decision of the highest court of law, it doesn't count in the brigade, got it? Any problem with that?"

Okay, okay, okay. No problem. Something like that which I had been thoroughly aware of long ago doesn't need to receive special emphasis. No one knows better than me that you've gotten the attention of the mysterious alien life forms from beyond the Milky Way. Therefore it's all on you, Haruhi. Anything in the SOS Brigade regardless of it being big or small, it's fine if you're the one making the decisions.

Actually, Nagato, Koizumi, Asahina-san (big), and others have all privately agreed with me on this, so I hope you won't blame them.

I don't know what Haruhi thought of my sighs. I only saw that she contentedly closed the book and set about putting her notebook into her bag. It signified that today's tutoring session and time wasting to intentionally arrive late have simultaneously concluded.

Despite only being a short ten or so minutes, this time was precious to me like the breather at half-time of a sporting event. I didn't know the psychological origin of this sense of relief. Even if this brief period only served to delay the meeting at the clubroom or leave insufficient time to sample Asahina-san's first pot of tasty tea, it seemed as if I was almost trying to avoid the clubroom nowadays.

Why was it like this? Maybe I was embarrassed to see those brigade applicants, the new shining freshmen, or maybe I was caught up in irrational anxiety; an unsubstantiated premonition about something. But no matter how you put it, ever since Haruhi's disappearance Nagato has been doing particularly well. Together with 'happy to solve any problem' Koizumi and coquettish and heart-moving Asahina-san, they have generated a pure and magnificent aura waiting for me in the clubroom.

Even though the presence of every SOS member was all that was necessary for me to feel unrivaled confidence in high school, I was in a strange mood like that of rarefied air sneaking into my lungs causing me to experience a feeling I couldn't quite pin down with words.

¹⁹ A novel that French novelist Stendhal wrote as a commentary on the society of the Napoleonic era.

What the heck was it?

The chance encounter the other day with Sasaki, Kyouko Tachibana and Kuyou truly worried me, but still didn't make me feel as if they were going to do anything shocking. Seeing Sasaki standing on my side, they were afraid that she would launch into a verbal bombardment much like Haruhi. Even with the negligible amount of reasoning effort I put in, I could imagine them not knowing how to get on her good side. She was the same as Haruhi; both were hard to influence one way or the other...although they had different directions in mind. Haruhi wouldn't listen to anyone even if her life depended on it. Sasaki would first listen to them and respond with a huge speech. Her character was founded firmly on solid bedrock. Even if Zeus or Cronus descended from the heavens and issued an edict, she wouldn't betray her character. If Prometheus and Cassandra on the other hand visited to try to convince her, she might actually do them the honor of listening.

Well, even if those guys appeared before me as temporary specialist tutors, I don't think they'd be as easy to understand or willing to lecture as Haruhi. Based on objective analysis from hindsight, knowledge of the past is the best source. It may be hard to imagine, but if my name was remembered by future generations, I wouldn't have any inclination to voice a complaint to the historians of the day regarding the accuracy of their analysis. I would be long dead by then and dead people can't speak. Only the people of the future have the right to allude to people who have long been dead and rotting.

Even if someone close to me passed away, the eulogy I would write containing their aspirations wouldn't be bigger than a nit. So no one better die as they pleased. Disappearing isn't allowed either. As long as Haruhi and I are still here, anyone related to the SOS Brigade isn't allowed to leave voluntarily. The current situation should be maintained forever onwards. Adding new members was okay. Reducing the number was 100% not allowed. Despite this clause being one of the SOS Brigade's highest regulations at present, it hasn't been committed to paper. It, nevertheless, was common knowledge.

As I was pondering this over and over, Haruhi's tutoring session had ended. She was subjected to concealed smiles as she left the classroom much like a Hitler Youth member of the Nazi Party taking large strides in the outdated school corridor.

Despite Haruhi's special tutoring session having ended (only to continue tomorrow), I got but a few seconds of peace. Even as we approached the somber hallway of the clubroom which was our final destination, side by side, I still had some questions I definitely couldn't put out of my mind. Although they confused and disoriented me, Haruhi didn't seem to care one bit.

Even though I didn't know what was more important in Haruhi's mind, brigade entrance trials or my passing the school exams, her steps towards the clubroom remained as brisk and spry as the steps of a tap dancer. Looks like she really did find joy in this. I'm afraid the only ones to qualify for the brigade were going to be the one hundred and one hamsters.

I really hoped the brigade applicants possessed the agility of a rodent and the unhurried nature of a cat. Rather than become a test animal for Haruhi's pointless psychology experiment, it was better to do some self-reflection. Sometimes I would wander about leisurely and sometimes curl up in a defensive

posture. I might even become more optimistic about long-term prospects. After all, Koizumi provided enough loyalty and tail-wagging to satisfy Haruhi. Though all the new applicants had to do was empty out their heads to resemble land iguanas in order to integrate quickly into the clubroom, such a possibility seemed quite remote in my opinion.

It would be terrible if their brain structure was similar to that of Haruhi. Regarding the SOS Brigade and new brigade members, one tie-break scenario was better than an ongoing series of tests.

Should I mention that it turned out exactly as predicted? The number of hamsters in the clubroom doubling as brigade applicants was indeed reduced by bit. The remaining three boys and two girls formed a full house. Though it was already one fewer compared to yesterday, in my mind it still seemed like a lot of people. I really wanted to speak with each of them one-by-one and ask them the real reason why they were so attached to the SOS Brigade, but unfortunately that fell to Haruhi. This person who held power over the entire brigade with the highest authority to make every decision had just walked into the clubroom when she loudly proclaimed:

"The final SOS Brigade entrance trial has begun!"

Asahina-san, who was already awaiting her fate in the clubroom, stopped in the midst of pouring tea and blinked. The sole person ruminating over the full details, Koizumi, laid out his hands on the chessboard. Nagato was in the corner carrying out her philosophy of silence while flipping page-by-page through an old book.

After almost ten seconds of silence, I finally began to speak, "It's already reached the final portion?"

"Yes," Haruhi said high and mightily. "Dragging it out for too long would just inconvenience everyone. What's more, I've already gathered enough information. The only thing left to see is your willpower; friendship, effort, and success aren't necessary. You haven't stayed with us long enough to develop friendly feelings and effort is only the excuse of someone who's too ashamed to hand over their report card. As for success, what I'm looking for is not for you to triumph over something; a triumph over someone is what's most important. Like right now, if you can't defeat me, then it's all for naught."

Haruhi's disdainful glance took a tour over the five freshmen. Then she nodded and said:

"Not bad. You all followed my instructions and brought your PE uniforms. Then hurry up and change."

The group of freshmen in question sitting solemnly and rigidly in the steel pipe chairs looked at each other in dismay and didn't move. It was hard to fault them having been given an order to change, but no information as to where. Speaking of which, when was it that Haruhi had informed them to bring the materials needed for the exam? They actually all brought their bags containing PE uniforms; this was something worth commending. Everything involved in this matter was truly strange and unfamiliar. Even though I wasn't aware of any link between PE uniforms and a brigade that had nothing to do with athletic activities, the freshmen had still complied with the orders of the tyrannical brigade leader.

"Oh, okay."

"Got it."

With these low voices, they all stood up holding their PE uniforms.

However, all they did was stand up and nothing more. Looks like their feelings of shame still remained with them in robust amounts so that they didn't seek equality with the opposite sex in regards to change rooms.

I don't know how, but neither Koizumi, Nagato, nor Asahina-san seemed to take issue with this situation. They all seemed to have "Don't be shy; go ahead and change" written on their faces. Koizumi maintained a faint smile (this guy couldn't be a closet pervert, could he?), Asahina-san continued her plan of providing everyone with a cup of tea, and Nagato was still in the corner reading her old book, not even bothering to raise her head to have a look.

Looks like the task of extending a hand of salvation to this group of freshmen with suspicious looks on their faces somehow fell to me. As I braced myself for the worst and took a deep breath...

"Come, the current members will all be outside. Yuki too! You can read outside." At this moment, Haruhi exhibited her rarely seen leadership quality. "Girls change first. Boys come to the hallway and change after the girls. Even though in my view, boys and girls should be treated equally, you can't argue with physical differences. Come. Come out quickly."

I couldn't tell that she was someone who used to change so magnanimously even in front of boys in the Year 1 Class 5 room. I won't mention it. Maybe it was a prior misconception or Haruhi's smile that was making me muddle-headed.

Be that as it may, I still had to make it clear. "What do you want them to do in the end?" Looks like it was going to be a test in physical stamina.

"Didn't I tell everyone already? It's going to be a marathon." Haruhi cupped her face with her hands and assumed a matter-of-fact expression. "Those exasperatingly slow exams really don't suit me too well. Instead, by using this straightforward method, opportunities to showcase your strengths definitely won't be few in number. Furthermore, the club recruitment period is coming to an end soon, so some of you might want to start considering your second-choice clubs. Therefore, I thought of this idea of using a test of physical power to determine who gets in and who doesn't. Vitality is the most important quality, so the most suitable trial is a marathon."

I tried to recall whether the SOS Brigade has had any endurance test until now.

"Hey, hey, hey, just wait a second." It's better not to say anything, but the people in this gathering who protest Haruhi's cruel plan appeared to be just me. "And what about your earlier trials? You're not planning to use just the marathon to determine who gets in, are you? If so, then why didn't you just hold a marathon in the very beginning?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk-tsk-tsk."

Like an examiner who had long anticipated such a question, she clucked her tongue and waved her finger around. With the intonation of an elderly monk after hearing the superficial words of a novice, she said, "Your mind is just a bit too simple, isn't it, Kyon? Earlier interviews and tests of course served their purpose. I really wanted to see everyone's way of looking at things. As for my level of vision and concentration, it's much like that of an eagle hunting for mice hiding in the shadow of a cliff."

It was just that it wouldn't be much longer before the wretched mouse would get brought back by you to your nest and served on the table.

"The reason I was mentioning exams with no end is because...because it's like the MacGuffin in a suspense film!"²⁰

"In this case, it should be a red herring, right?" Koizumi calmly stepped in to correct, but I was completely unable to see how a breakfast sandwich had anything to do with fish so I promptly shut up. But it seemed as if even Haruhi herself wasn't too clear on this either.

"There's no difference. The important thing is how suitable this trial is as an test. Uh huh, simply put I've actually been constantly observing and sounding out you guys; the exam content is completely irrelevant. All that the answers to the questionnaire you filled out did was filter out the ones who couldn't make it to this point, and so..."

Haruhi extended her index finger and drew an arc across the nose tips of the five freshmen. "Congratulations to you for surmounting layer after layer of difficulties and for earning the privilege to embark through the ultimate trial by fire. Hurry and use this opportunity to celebrate! What follows will actually be the real test. First, I'm giving you a warning. The final stage will be harder than any of the prior challenges by several hundred times. It will require physical strength, willpower, vigor, courage, and the most important ability humans have; that is, the determination to never give up. Only then can you obtain the ultimate victory waiting for you behind the final challenge!"

It made me feel like these were just some generic words used to create a spectacle, but it did seem to fit the current situation fairly well. It probably wasn't said only because it sounded good. Haruhi Suzumiya was just the type of person who would do anything that popped into their head. If that's not the case this time, then who else in the world would be able to say it?

I couldn't help but show a bitter smile precisely because someone like Haruhi would sometimes make me...

I desperately stamped out any ideas that sprouted from my mind. Very dangerous, very dangerous. Despite only being words formed in my mind and something only I could hear, a consequence of having heard it was that I couldn't pay it no heed.

²⁰ A movie term referring to a plot element that can take the form of an object, person, or goal that everyone is chasing after.

Language is a form of cognition. Once some cognition is acquired, it's very likely that I will have to do some deep analysis into a life-or-death situation facing me in my hope to live as long as possible. Maybe it was only a pointless struggle, but currently I still didn't want to be restricted to any ideological point of view or doctrine of precedent.

In the end, I put the brakes on my urgent train of thought and began thinking of other happier things in the distant future. For example, another Tsuruya-san cherry blossom viewing party or the release of a new game...

"....."

Perhaps seeing my thoughts in the process of concealing something, Nagato smoothly lifted her glance and stared at me for a while before returning to her book.

"Uh..."

Not to worry. It's fine if someone finds out; as long as it's not Haruhi the world will remain in peace. However, I don't think it matters if she finds out a little bit...Apologies, I seem to have been possessed by the devil just now. No, no, it really was like this.

Alas...The person who needs to look for pretexts in order to trick themselves like this is someone with memories that despite dating back several years, will be reminded by one particularly tragic event that tends to cause them to run their head into the wall to death. The human brain is incredibly poorly designed, because it will suddenly think of something you wanted to forget about long ago. Someone please hurry and realize the human-cat hybrid project. A cat brain probably doesn't have even a bit of that far-reaching ambition or any worry about the future at all.

Going to the change room must have once been an option to Haruhi, only to have been deemed a waste of time and for her to double back.

With Haruhi in charge of enforcing and implementing the clubroom as a change room with boys and girls alternately, Koizumi, Asahina-san and I naturally withdrew to the hallway. I stood empty-handed, staring blankly. It was only when the freshmen boys became resigned to their fates of having to change into PE uniforms that Haruhi, standing inside, showed an expression of suspicion, having been prompted by Nagato who, despite being asked to leave, continued to read with her head down not having moved a inch. Before you blame me, I'd like to say that I did think about asking Haruhi and Nagato to consider how these three high school boys felt about stripping down in front of upperclassman girls, but I really didn't think they had anything to hide. Furthermore, it could have been a hoop Haruhi wanted to make them jump through in order to join the brigade. Just as I started to think about the girls changing and how it might not have mattered if I stayed inside too, the freshmen finished changing and headed to the sports field outside.

Let me be blunt; I really didn't think there was anything to regret about it. It wasn't something I could do on principle or something that was in my nature. Furthermore, Asahina-san would have been watching from the sidelines!

After much hassle, at last Haruhi solemnly introduced the SOS Brigade final exam. It was fine if they could get started, but what was slightly confusing was why Haruhi had also changed into her PE uniform. As for this girl who lives in her own world of vastly throbbing spiritual energy which she never had any scruples about, I was becoming more uneasy about her bounding gait like that of a capable composer improvising the lyrics of a street hip-hop tune. But the most important problem now is what faced us at the sports field.

I don't think I need to mention that the sports field would be a site of contention for the different athletic clubs after school. This would be a daily sight in every public high school that didn't have sports programs with special training. Currently, the track and field team, soccer team, baseball team, and other big teams as well as students doing small-scale athletic activities were constantly vying for position over this land. It was as if they were despots of small nations each asserting it as their territory and conducting a silent show of strength near their borders.

Though the battle situation with the track team essentially having a monopoly over the 400m track couldn't exactly be said to be desperate, Haruhi nevertheless walked towards them with a high-spirited and vigorous air leading the five freshmen without any sign of politeness. She was comparable to the banner flag fish from a school of fish performing a surprise attack.

Although it was already impossible to stop once this matter had gotten started, since I didn't participate in any athletic activities outside of PE class, I joined Koizumi and Asahina-san at the top of the steps leading from the sports field, awaiting our fate that lay in Haruhi's hands. They've followed Haruhi for so long, so they naturally had a good understanding of what she was going to do next. Nagato, who had been unenthusiastic from the beginning, was probably still lingering in the sea of books in the clubroom. Truly a wise decision Nagato.

In other words, we three SOS Brigade members had simply chosen to become curious onlookers. If I told you we were anything other than forced to show up, I'd be lying.

On closer inspection, Haruhi was like an emperor deliberately trying to make things difficult for one track team member. Completely disregarding all of their grievances and way of looking at things, she led the five potential brigade members to assemble near the starting line.

"There should be no problem with letting us run! Even though the track team has no strong suits besides running, we actually have a higher purpose in mind. Also, we're only running today and it's not like we'll cause any disturbances. Besides, the sports field is open to all North High students. Do you have any objections to us running on it?"

After quickly finishing this long stream of words, Haruhi gave the opponent 0.1seconds to respond. "So no objections? Then it's settled."

The track team didn't have to time say anything before Haruhi gave a signal to the group of bandits. It was a short phrase...

"Get set....Go!"

When she finished, Haruhi bolted from the starting line, but the freshmen still remained in their original position at a loss for what they should do. They probably hadn't been informed what to do beforehand. "Hey, what are you doing? Hurry up and follow me!"

They were knocked out of their petrified state by Haruhi's loud voice and strode to overtake Haruhi's shadow in her PE uniform running around the track. Judging from leader Haruhi's pace, this probably wasn't a short-distance— Oh, right. It's a marathon.

How many kilometers was she going to make them run? She didn't even bring a stopwatch. Speaking of which, the final entrance exam was serious going to be limited to a marathon? It really was the misfortune of all misfortunes.

"Thankfully we didn't have to find one hundred and one hamsters." I murmured as I sat down at the top of the steps and gazed into the distance at the sports field below me. Haruhi loudly encouraged the freshmen who lagged behind ceaselessly. She ran at the front leading her brigade forward as if she had wings; truly a spitting image of a shepherd dog.



Koizumi squinted and gazed far off into the distance. He had some reaction to me. "Although it's not impossible to do, it's probably because, in Suzumiya-san's mind, hamsters don't signify anything particularly noteworthy."

"If Haruhi really wanted it to happen, how would you do it?"

Koizumi lifted his palms facing upwards, much like he was weighing two objects. "Of course I would ask help from my friend who's running a chain pet store. I would use my full capability to help her gather them one-by-one. Speaking from the view of genuine appreciation, hamsters are very cute animals."

As long as they're not all packed into a box, it's fine; it's not like you're trying to make poison from their souls.

"By the way, Koizumi..."

"What is it?"

"The freshmen who are attending this mad marathon, are they all from reputable backgrounds?"

"Of course. As far as we know from our investigations, there aren't any misgivings worth mentioning. Whether it's an alien, time-traveler, or a human who's just different, none of them fit the bill."

Koizumi's hand moved towards stroking his chin. "It's just that..."

"Just that?"

"If I had to pick the freshmen who gave me the most scruples, I'd have to admit one does exist. Despite the person certainly being an ordinary human, I feel the way I do because of my intuition or some kind of premonition for that person. Though speaking of Suzumiya-san...if everyone was eliminated, it wouldn't be fun at all. So recruiting just one wouldn't be such a strange thought. So who will be the one she keeps? The person picked appears before me involuntarily. Although it's just a very small premonition, I don't have any better way of explaining it..."

I get a feeling that the person he was speaking of was the same person as the one I had been thinking of—and it was a girl.

"There aren't any problems with her background, right?"

"Right, it's all been investigated. However, that person's a bit unusual..."

Unusual how? If you want to tell me, then out with it.

Koizumi answered joyfully with a chuckle, "I'll keep it a secret for the time being. It's only a little secret amounting to nothing. I can also assert that the person definitely won't cause us the least bit of harm and might even help us."

Even though this kind of obscure wording rather whetted my appetite, since even Koizumi says so, all I could do was believe him. As long as the matter involved Haruhi, this guy became even more nervous than me.

"However..."

There's more?

"Yes. However, at the moment my mind has a sense of a very superficial, yet quite difficult to explain, disharmony. Please don't misunderstand. What I mean isn't that group of freshmen, but something completely about myself."

If it's life advice about anything other than romance, I can lend an ear for the time being.

"I don't think talking it over will help." Koizumi looked at the tatarian aster in full bloom beside the flight of steps and said, "Actually I feel like I've 'become weak', how should I put it..."

From the outside, your face is still an iron mask featuring a half-open smile.

"What I mean isn't how it looks from the outside. What I mean is I'm not sure whether what I'm currently seeing is the conscious reality or whether I'm currently in a dream world that I've imagined which is just a virtual reality...that sort of thing. Either way, it's just a little suspicious, that's all."

You haven't messed around too much with Haruhi's mental state, have you? If you walk around too much at night, you're bound to run into a ghost. Why don't you go see a psychiatrist? If it's just the serotonin syndrome²¹ they can probably write a prescription for you.

"I will seriously consider it. If it's just a personal problem of mine, then that would be great. No, it definitely must be that. Since Suzumiya-san is having so much fun, there won't be any reason for the Organization to come into play anytime soon."

Hearing Koizumi finish, my glance returned to the sports field once again.

"Once everyone finishes running, they'll definitely be thirsty. I'll leave now to prepare the tea." Considerate as always, maid Asahina-san's words rang in my ears as she passed by.

What I didn't imagine was that Haruhi's pace was exceptionally fast for a long-distance run like the marathon. Also, it seemed like they were just going to run around the same track for the entire time. Not having a stopwatch meant there was no time limit. I'm afraid that having a clear-cut objective like timing a few laps around the track didn't even cross her mind.

Having though this far, I finally hit upon Haruhi's real purpose and felt profound sympathy for the five freshmen. That lunatic Haruhi really intended for them to run until they could no longer even crawl. The ones who couldn't keep up would get eliminated one-by-one. When it's over, does she intend to just say a few casual words of condolence to the ones who kept at it to the end? That was probably it.

Looks like she couldn't think of any test more interesting than the hamster competition, so she wanted to use the marathon to cut the Gordian knot. Though I wanted to ask her how she planned to use the written exam in her decision, the current Haruhi was probably the way she was because she felt

²¹ An overabundance of serotonin, which can cause headaches, dizziness, vomiting, lethargy and even death.

weary once more. Otherwise, she would have actually cared about these freshmen who had played with her for so many days.

Nevertheless, the most likely possibility was that she never intended to recruit new members in the first place.

The final trial by fire, a marathon without a time-limit. To wait for Haruhi to stop running...There definitely won't be half of the freshmen still left standing behind her when she stops. Haruhi was someone who wouldn't let anyone follow her; a girl comparable to a comet's super fast speed.

After just a few laps, freshmen began to lag behind, validating my thinking. This scene wasn't hard to imagine at all. Even if you looked through the track team, you probably couldn't find many who were able to keep up with Haruhi. However, there were still a few focusing all their attention on keeping up with the lead pack, solely composed of Haruhi, forming what could be called the chase pack.

Normally, a marathon-type competition will have a fixed distance or time-limit, but Haruhi hadn't even thought of it. She just wanted to run—run to her heart's content. The finish line didn't exist in time or space. For the freshmen behind her, this only meant physical and mental torture.

On a side note, the source of Haruhi's physical strength remained a complete mystery. It seemed that if she were let alone, she would run happily all the way until daybreak tomorrow. Did her mitochondria originate from the Earth? Even if her mysterious cells could generate unknown amounts of ATP, this demonstration of her full capability really shocked people beyond belief. All the feelings of begrudging within me transformed into gasps of exclamation.

I watched like an imbecile as the fresh recruits were forced into heavy toil. How much of my time had been wasted already?

Asahina-san's care for the brigade applicants remained regardless of whether they passed or failed. She returned to the clubroom to prepare her newly discovered buckwheat tea leaving Koizumi and I to watch over the carnage.

Or no, not just us. The athletic clubs who had originally been on the sports field had begun watching this peculiar marathon. Haruhi's running form looked great and her strides were light. Even though I'm not familiar with it, her motion resembled an antelope galloping headlong on the grassland.

It's good this way too. If Haruhi really wanted it this way, then it would be like this every day. But—

Not too much time had passed and the scene on the sports field could only be described as the aftermath of a battle.

Freshmen successively broken by the marathon without a time limit lay paralyzed on the track. This led to my firm belief that after having seen this kind of mental exercise in this day and age, the athletics clubs would no longer feel inclined to hold athletic competitions at North High in the future. If

Haruhi had decided to use this as the brigade entrance exam a year ago, I can guarantee Asahina-san and I would have failed. Though I'm not considering whether taking part in such an exam would be considered a good fortune or a huge calamity for me, without hesitation I would thank Haruhi for having gone easy on us.

Of course someone as optimistic as me didn't think there was going to be any freshmen to pass the test of this marathon whose sole intention was to cause trouble. However, the time for this knock-out competition enforced by Haruhi to end would eventually come. That was when the monster Haruhi would stop for a breather and be able to disperse any sandstorm in the world.

So far, the sight before my eyes has managed to dispel the self-confidence I've so far accrued in the seventeen years of my life.

The brigade applicants lay on the track, some reclining on their backs, others on their stomachs. Since they were obstacles, the track team members moved them to the side of the track without saying a word. I'm sure all these half-zombie boys and girls wanted was fresh oxygen and freshly brewed tea.

However...

There was only one person who was able to keep up and cross the finish line behind Haruhi by just a few seconds after she announced the end of the test.

Though she couldn't help but be sweat-soaked and gasping for breath, she still completed the test. No mistake, by "her" I'm referring to the that specific underclassman who joined the school this year.

Her ill-fitting, loose PE uniform was supported by a slim frame. Her sweat-soaked hair hastily rearranged by the clumsy efforts of her hands slowly took the form of a bird's nest. A blush gradually bubbled onto her upright-looking face, which carried a smile full of heartfelt joy.

"You..." Haruhi's voice betrayed some surprise. "You were pretty awesome actually keeping up with me. Have you done track before?" Haruhi's breath was also uncontrollable.

"Nope." The girl replied immediately. "I've only participated in activities, but haven't joined any clubs. Until now, the only one I've wanted to join—hoo-ah!—is the SOS Brigade, so please let me stay! It was only because I wanted to join the SOS Brigade- no matter what!- that I was able to pass this test!"

I don't know how many kilometers she ran, but she was still able to answer so full of energy and even had the strength to squeeze out a smile on her sweat-dripping face.

Haruhi seemed to be deeply satisfied by this conversation. A part of her effort was used trying to control her breath while another part said, "The only one who passed the test was you. However, this was only the first compatibility test. Later on there might be more tests. Are you ready?"

"No matter what you ask, I'm not afraid! Even if you want me to scoop up the moon's reflection on the water, I'll still try my best!"

The conversation between the two left Koizumi and I looking dumbfounded with our mouths open like bass.

Her body didn't lose out to Haruhi in terms of leg strength and lung capacity, and she was a freshmen. The track team definitely wouldn't let such an opportunity slip by. Look! The track team members who had been gloomy over the occupied track are already showing ominous looks. That must definitely be them racking their brains to try and scoop up a freshmen with good prospects into their team!

Though this could only be a pipedream when you ran into Haruhi, the track team's expression was similar to that of Portuguese missionaries who had their eyes on the belligerent shogun of the Warring States era that wanted to remain distanced from Buddhism. They held onto a slimmer of hope on changing the aspirations of the freshmen student. With my own eyes I saw that after she demonstrated an aptitude for long-distance running, it was perfectly natural for her to feel an inclination for this type of activity in the future. I completely approve of this.

Satisfied with removing the sweat on her forehead with her hands, she suddenly lifted her head and met my gaze. What was implicit in her squinting smile brought me a boundless feeling of *déjà vu*.

Is she somehow in the know? She might be the fourth person with mysterious powers possessing a dissembling ability that made even Nagato and Koizumi turn a blind eye to her...In the end, it was only theory crafting. She didn't have the aura that Sasaki, Kuyou, Kyouko Tachibana and the mysterious time-traveler all carried.

Could she possibly be the fifth power—

Hey, c'mon now, please don't. How many kinds of people do you want me to have dealings with before you're satisfied? No matter how much trouble I was assaulted with, my instincts didn't sense any danger from her at all. She was in all probability just a freshmen who stood out from everyone else. At the very least, Haruhi wanted a new member in the brigade. It was just this simple. Haruhi's famous declaration of wanting to assemble a time-traveler, esper and alien is already one year old. During the space of this one year, a myriad of unbelievable things have happened and all of these were Haruhi's wishes being satisfied without her knowing it.

Haruhi's latest wish was to recruit a capable new brigade member; it didn't even matter whether they were human or alien in origin. Therefore, what she really wanted was most likely a second bottom-dwelling member who she could easily order around; in other words, a second copy of me. With that said, this girl who passed Haruhi's entrance exam would probably become an NPC-type member mainly used to boost membership numbers, run errands, or take the place of Asahina-san as second-generation SOS Brigade mascot when she graduates.

If she wasn't human, then presumably she would actively try to get in touch with me soon. It wouldn't be too late to make necessary considerations when the time comes. I've long since gotten used to dealing with eccentric people.

What was certain was that this person who was taking a rest leaning on her knees didn't possess any esper characteristics, the mysterious past life of a time-traveler, or the absurd behavior of an alien.

She must be human. I didn't need any hints or advice; this was the conclusion I came to through my analysis. It must be like how modern man became an undeniable reality after an incomprehensibly countless number of steps in evolution from primitive organisms without a fixed shape. This too must certainly be the truth.

Occasionally, I too will arrive at the correct conclusion.

So it was that the end of the sudden SOS Brigade entrance test's final trial, due to the equally sudden whim of the dictatorial brigade leader for getting the entrance exam over with quickly, finally brought the chapter to a close.

As may be presumed, this didn't bring about the end to our questions. These questions consisted not only about the sense of déjà vu towards the qualified underclassman, but the indescribable pull on my gaze when we met for the first time as well. Although Koizumi affirmed that she definitely wasn't someone suspicious, she was able to pass Haruhi's entrance exam and conceal her worth. Everything indicated that she wasn't an ordinary person.

But what on earth made her so special? In Tsuruya-san's case, at least she was a resident of the Earth which adds a checkmark to the column indicating my relief. If aliens, time-travelers or espers were involved, it was an application problem from a completely different problem set.

"Uhh—" As I kept groaning, lost in thought, Koizumi patted me on the back.

"Not to worry, she's very ordinary. If I really tried to find a high school girl with as much stamina as Suzumiya-san, I could probably find a few hundred or a few thousand. Getting such a cute underclassman, isn't it a pretty good deal for us? She seems to have a natural aptitude for running errands."

Looks like he sincerely felt this way. His whole face was filled with an easygoing and gentle smile.

But no matter how I tried to pass the unexplainable sense of déjà vu off as a misconception on my part, I couldn't shake it off.

Though this misconception had me puzzled since I had no prior recollection about her, to pay special attention to her at what was through and through a chance encounter, looking at it another way, I clearly knew I hadn't interacted with her before. So why would I feel as if I'd seen her before? This question appeared as slender as a cirrocumulus cloud of chimney smoke in the late evening lingering on my mind.

"Wait."

Put this way, the problem didn't actually lie with the underclassman, but with myself? I for one didn't put much weight on such a suspicion. At first glance, her outward appearance was that of a skinny, underclassman girl who tried to make herself likable, didn't worry about anything, and was loved by all. Why on earth was I so agitated?

By now, the conversation between Haruhi and the sole freshmen who managed to get recruited into the brigade, should probably have finished. They were now a step ahead of us in returning to the clubroom. When the door opened from the inside, the girl left the clubroom rushing past me in such a hurry that she almost ran straight into me. Her silhouette was like a cabbage butterfly in the spring wind.

"I should get going now. I look forward to hearing your advice tomorrow!"

Her smile was like a blooming flower in summer. There was her loose-fitting uniform which hadn't been made to measure, unique hair clip, and the two shining stars on her healthy-looking face, which dazzled with such vitality. She also sported a soft and tender smile.

Though Koizumi stood beside me looking like a male supermodel, the underclassman didn't even look at him, only giving me a quick glance for a brief moment before letting out a gentle laugh "he he".

"See you tomorrow!" Like a red robin who happened to recall just then what direction it wanted to fly, she disappeared amongst the stairs like a wisp of smoke.

After remaining silent for a long while, "Looks like she's quite fond of you." The "he he he" laugh probably most suited Koizumi right now, but I only heard him continue muttering, "Ah, this new student is really cute. If only she could become an underclassman in the same club as us, it would be even better. Looks like she's not too bad. How do you feel about her?"

I don't really feel anything. I had assumed Haruhi wasn't intending to recruit new members at all, so I'm just a bit surprised that someone made it through. I was busy just now coming up with words of praise for that underclass girl's perseverance to make it through the trial of a crazy marathon designed to eliminate everyone. But if she didn't do that, I would just be preoccupied with doubting my own athletic intuition.

"Actually, long-distance running doesn't have much to do with having great athletic intuition. According to a study, inheritance plays a much bigger influence. However, this isn't important; just ignore what I said for now."

You're really not nervous about this at all, Koizumi? It's not because you have some inside information, is it?

A loud shout erupted from the clubroom interrupting Koizumi's lightly bitter smile and shrug of shoulders that he used to wriggle past my question. My interrogation came to a close.

"Done changing! You can come in now!"

Sounds like Haruhi was truly happy beyond words.

She was seated as usual in the brigade leader's place sipping buckwheat tea from her exclusive tea cup. Asahina-san was busy picking up and folding PE uniforms that had fallen to the ground. From head-to-toe, she gave off the air of an exclusive Suzumiya family servant girl. The headstrong eldest daughter of the family having decided the question of whether or not to bring the servant girl to school was an apt description of the current situation, was it not?

"Would that be good, Haruhi?"

"Would what be good?"

"Recruiting a new member."

"Well, to tell you the truth," Haruhi finished her cup of tea in one sip and set it on the brigade leader desk with a bang. "Actually I wasn't planning to keep anyone, so that's why I used the marathon as the last test. But I didn't imagine there would be someone who would be able to keep up with me to the very end! Exclamation marks and question marks both leaped out in pairs, just like '!!??'."

As I had assumed, she didn't have the intention of recruiting anyone straight from the start. The earlier entrance tests had only been small entertainment for Haruhi.

"But since the new student's stamina is comparable to mine, she really gave me a good scare and deserves special consideration. For someone so exceptionally talented, joining the track and field team and becoming a first-rate medium- to long-distance runner attending high school competitions wouldn't just be a pipedream, right?"

Since that's the case, maybe we should consider discussing things over with the track team to share the good fortune?

"That's too wasteful. Of course the track team would be willing; they haven't won a single prize lately after all. For someone like her, other clubs would be willing to risk their heads trying to recruit and I, of course, am not going to hand her over just because they asked me to. Furthermore, she was the one who came knocking on the door of our SOS Brigade. If we didn't respect her personal wishes, all our education would be for naught. I would never do something like going against the principles of democracy."

She obviously didn't care the least about education or people of any ideology, but she still feigned passion for it.

The feeling of being in the envious gaze of other clubs must invigorate her beyond all measure. Now this wasn't China's Three Kingdoms period with warlords vying for supremacy, so it wasn't necessary to be like Cao Cao who recruited talented people like mad.

"I guess going that far is a bit much." Haruhi felt around in a drawer in the brigade leader desk, then took out a photocopy she'd kept in there for who knows how long. "Take a look at this first."

I received it from her, only to realize that it was the written component of the entrance exam that Haruhi had gotten the applicants to complete a few days ago. Ah, it should be one of the answer pages.

"I'm planning to incinerate everyone else's, keeping only hers. The new member's determination is written on it. I think you deserve the right to see it too."

I truly did want to see the valuable information left by a freshmen who passed an entrance exam Haruhi concocted on impulse with flying colors. I quickly skimmed over everything once. Her pencil handwriting performed a shy dance over the blanks left for answering questions I already knew.

The content of her exam is described below:

Q1: What was the aspiration behind the formation of the SOS Brigade?

A: If you have an idea, then you have to make it a reality. I'm already in love with the SOS Brigade.

Q2: What can you contribute to the SOS Brigade?

A: I can do anything I have permission to do.

Q3: Out of aliens, time-travelers, sliders and espers, which do you like best?

A: I want to converse most with aliens and become good friends the most with a time-traveler. Espers seem to be the best at making money. Regarding sliders, possibilities are many.

Q4: Why do you like them the best?

A: I wrote my answer together with the previous question, sorry.

Q5: Write down a personal encounter with something mysterious.

A: Haven't had any encounters before, sorry.

Q6: Write down your favorite idiom.

A: So marvelous or horrible that it may be...

Q7: If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?

A: Build a city on Mars and afterwards, name it after myself like Washington D.C., hehe.

Q8: Last question. Please express your resolve in wanting to join the SOS Brigade.

A: I'm willing to do whatever I'm told, even if I lose my eyesight and have to wear glasses.

Remark: If you brought an item you like very much, then here's an opportunity to earn bonus points. Please bring the item to me.

A: *Roger. I'll bring it to you immediately.*

...Washington D.C. wasn't a city the first American president designed on a whim, was it? And what does D.C. stand for?

"Don't know. Doesn't it stand for 'direct control'? It sounds about right."

"....."

I don't know whether it was due to having heard Haruhi's careless statement, but Nagato's bangs slightly trembled. I didn't check to verify my hypothesis.

Probably thinking that showing us the answers wouldn't do us any good, her silence seemed to tell us to ascertain their validity ourselves.

I let out a pointless "hmmm."

Speaking of which, I haven't heard the name of the new member whose recruitment was already certain. Naturally I turned over the exam paper to look for her name, but for some reason the blank for her class wasn't filled in.

Yasumi Watahashi (渡橋 泰水)

Her full name was written in upright handwriting as if it was written with a fountain pen, only...

"...How do you pronounce it? Tamizu Watabashi...No, it's Yasumizu...right?"

"She said it's Yasumi Watahashi."

Haruhi replied casually to my question, as if she considered it to just be a name, thus not worth a mention.

"....."

However, my train of thought actually got interrupted by this name like a small fish who'd gotten sucked into a torrent, then caught in a fishing net. Furthermore, the only one to get caught was me, the enfeebling fish. The one on the hook, was it this girl with the surname Watahashi or was it me?

"Uhh...?"

And what was up with the déjà vu? My foggy memory was telling me I knew this name. No mistake, I've heard it before. Watahashi, Watahashi. Don't remember this name. Don't remember these characters. I only recall the pronunciation...Watahashi...

"!"

The rust-stained gears in my brain suddenly snapped towards each other with a "ka-cha" sound. Lacking lubricant almost to the point of getting stuck, they began to move once more. While I was assaulted by my misconceptions, a lucid recollection of many days ago appeared before my eyes; it had a feeling like picking up a piece of glass from the bottom of a glass of clear water.

"It's me. Wata—shi."²²

Despite it having been a phone call taken in the bathroom resulting in many echoes, what I heard was indeed a female voice with the intonation of a young girl and one my sister didn't recognize.

It's me, Wata—shi...

This is what I heard from the other end of the telephone. She didn't deliberately lengthen it just to puzzle me. That is...

"It's me, Watahashi."

I wasn't long immersed in the sense of relief upon chasing away the clouds and being able to see the sun when turbulent suspicions once again sent me into a deep abyss within the innermost of my being.

Yasumi Watahashi...

...Who the heck was she? Even if it had been just a prank call, why would she still want to join the SOS Brigade and become a member even after having gone through Haruhi's hideous mess of an entrance exam? This freshmen definitely had question marks written all over.

Furthermore, her proactive personality scares people; actually getting the head-start by actively calling me for no foreseeable reason. And now, this girl of unclear background and unknown intentions has managed to sneak her whole self into our SOS Brigade.

What were this girl's true colors? Was she from another organization of espers, an agent from the Sky Canopy Domain, or a part of Asahina-san's group of time-travelers?

Be that as it may, the SOS Brigade felt a sense of unease when Watahashi was present, regardless of what superpowers she possessed, but hasn't actually shown the least bit of vigilance. If she was an esper, similar to Kuyou, or was in league with the time-traveler, she should have elicited some reaction from Koizumi, Nagato, and Asahina-san. However, they only gawked at her for a while. Our upperclassman was even a bit joyful. Even though precedence suggests that the upperclassman would have probably been kept in the dark again, but Asahina (big) should at least have left a secret order from the future in my shoe locker.

²² "Watashi" (わたし) is "I" in Japanese. Kyon's leaving out the "ha" sound in Yasumi's name.

What significance did the current situation carry? Was it pure coincidence? Chance had it that a freshmen with Haruhi-level stamina was perfectly suited to join the strange club at North High known as the SOS Brigade...were things really this simple?

It's purely coincidental, right? My mind hadn't reached the clarity required to renounce further pondering on the subject.

Then again, what was the meaning of that phone call?

What was the point of the phone call, brief in duration, clear-cut in hanging up, that my sister forwarded to me in the bathroom?

"Good grief."

I actually thought I could spend a few more leisurely days, but for the sake of world peace, I better pay some attention to this freshmen called Yasumi Watahashi.

Only, Yasumi Watahashi...

With a light movement, Haruhi flipped over the test paper and read out the words in the "Remark" section. "Look, she also wrote...'Please be sure to call me Yasumi. It'd be great if you could call me by the katakana pronunciation.'"²³

The kanji pronunciation is the same as the katakana one.

"Kyon, I don't agree with this sentence. Kanji, hiragana and katakana of course have their respective intonations and meanings; they're all different. If you don't believe me, just try saying my name in hiragana."

As if kanji sounds that much gentler compared to katakana. I'll ignore that for now.

As for Yasumi...

Done thinking. After being lost in thought for thirty seconds, it was a name that didn't correspond to my memories. Even with the knowledge that she was one year my junior, my memory was still covered by a layer of fresh snow and I couldn't find even a tiny imprint left by her name. I'm definitely not mistaken.

I don't know her. However, I was also certain that the brain matter under my skull was saturated by the monstrous contradiction that I had seen her before somewhere.

"What should we get the new member to do first? We already looked for mysterious happenings last year. Giving her the main role of the new movie...also seems a bit too soon. Ah, I should ask her what instrument she can play first."

²³ Yasumi would like to be called ヤスミ instead of the kanji characters 泰水, which don't correspond to "Yasumi".

Looks like Haruhi was completely unaware of anything unusual. Having just recruited a new member, her energetic spirit was exactly like it was the past few days: engrossed in some intense activity.

Was I the only one who heard this sound of indescribable disharmony that felt like a small-scale bomb had blown a hole in what had already been an unusual daily life?

Some secret was definitely hidden in Yasumi Watahashi.

What was it? Should she be included in a list of people to be investigated?

I moved my glance in Koizumi's direction.

But our SOS Brigade Vice President was currently gracefully enjoying the hot buckwheat tea that Vice-Vice President Asahina-san prepared. He didn't even blink in response to the signal I was trying to send with my eyes.

Ugh...

...Forget it. Since you're not taking it seriously, I don't need to worry either. Isn't that right, Koizumi?

β-9

The next day was indeed Wednesday.

All is quiet. A day of ceaseless pondering had arrived.

After rolling around in the same blanket as Shamisen, the first thought I had upon being roughly dragged out of bed by my sister was "Ah...again I have to look for things that are only going to vex me." The number of worries I had were really too many; I couldn't even figure out where to begin sorting things out.

Of course, waking up this way definitely wasn't the most cheerful of ways; sinking me into melancholy as soon as I became aware of my surroundings. Some things always reminded you how happy the time spent in an unconscious state was. Sleep was the optimal way of escape, except it could also be said to be procrastinating your problems away or wasting your time.

Seeing my sister innocently pick up Shamisen behind me and shake him about first thing in the morning, I actually let out a slight smile of envy. Maybe I, playing the role of the big brother, have some huge character defect. To have been this childish years ago would have been normal, but I couldn't recall anything similar happening with me. I instead dug up a pile of memories I'd almost forgotten. The DNA between people was so similar. Where on earth did it begin to diverge? Could it have been due to the difference in gender, age, or perhaps the blood type? I didn't at all believe the ABO blood type

personality analysis or horoscopes, and I felt superstitions were beneath contempt. However, people close to me, friends in particular, should have had a considerable effect on my personality development.

I grew up to be an awkward guy. My sister still preserved the frankness of doing anything she had her heart set on doing. Even a few years from now, I don't think there'd be much change unless she got corrupted by her environment in middle school and became a rebellious young girl. As her older brother, I couldn't help but utter a secret prayer that that day would never arrive...that she would instead forever remain someone similar in temperament to Tsuruya-san. Might as well send her to the Tsuruya family as an adopted daughter for the time being. Tsuruya-san would educate my sister with great enjoyment, laughing all the way, and then she'll accomplish her task of completely blending all their joys together. Although I'm slightly apprehensive at an appearance of Tsuruya No. 2.

To mention in passing, Tsuruya-san is the most reliable out of all the normal people I know. So much so that I couldn't help but suspect something's going on. Could she be the recent benefactor who has taken my place in dealing forthrightly with all the troublesome matters, big and small, in the SOS Brigade revolving around Haruhi and Asahina-san? Even though I couldn't see the slightest inkling suggesting this was the case, and disregarding my personal opinions, you don't seem too unconnected in these matters, my upperclassman.

From Mount Tsuruya, we dug up a mysterious, unknown device that was under her care, which was an object made with technology considered to be from the future even by contemporary standards and commented on by ancestors of the Tsuruya clan. It definitely wasn't merely indicative of cultural heritage; it was another killer weapon in my hands sooner or later bound to become the crux of some matter. Though I didn't know if it was a sharp weapon for dealing with time-travelers or a divine weapon specially designed for nullifying aliens, the day for battle wasn't far off. Of course if it turned out to really be an antique piece of scrap metal from the Genroku period, I have my plans for that possibility too.

Going back to what I was saying, you can never have too many welcome surprises just like Ura Dora tiles, Red Fives, and Open Riichi.²⁴

The unavoidable routine exercise of climbing the hill was part of the daily morning scenery. In order to get through the merciless school gate that had an extremely high chance of closing right in front of me, I went back to the pace I was used to. As it always turned out, I could find no way to join the slow walkers of the world. Another reason was that, despite being promoted to Year 2, I haven't changed my wake-up time, making the time I left every day essentially fixed. As long as I was able to make it on time once, even by fluke, I would depart at the exact same time in the future. Honestly, this could even be said to be the culmination of experience that the human race had accumulated. The ones who wanted to get to school early even for no reason at all were just a flock of sick people with an unhealthy fetish for the shabby-looking school building.

Today in particular, while walking this gloomy route to school that always left me gasping for breath, an unexpected person called out to me from behind.

²⁴ Welcome surprises that occur in Japanese mahjong.

"Kyon!" It was Kunikida. He must have suddenly broken into a run to catch up, because he was trying to catch his breath. On his face, he also carried a strange expression I didn't know how to describe.

"You're exactly the same as the person I knew before. Completely the same."

I didn't think the first words would be in a slightly different direction from the usual morning greetings. Why is he saying these words now? Was it necessary for him to tell me his feelings here of all places?

Kunikida reached my side and I slowed my pace a bit. After his breath got slightly more even, Kunikida ignored my puzzled expression and said, "Sasaki-san is also the same as she was in middle school. My impression of her still remains the same."

So what? Why do you bring her up so early in the morning?

"It's also to say that you, Sasaki-san and I are all high school students now. However, my first impression of Kuyou-san was that she was a little strange. Even though I feel a bit sorry for Taniguchi, I think keeping some distance from her would be preferable. My intuition from that time remains unchanged even now."

Very perceptive...that's probably not what you'd call Taniguchi. He didn't feel the sense of revolt or of suspicion that a normal person would upon meeting Kuyou. Your reaction, on the other, is much more commonplace and normal.

"Just a bit. Speaking from common sense, I don't think she's a normal person. Though I don't know if she's friend or foe, I definitely wouldn't become good friends with her. Taniguchi is someone who would. Oh right, actually..." Kunikida lowered his voice and pressed his face close.

"I don't know if I should tell you this, but I have the same feeling about Asahina-san and Nagato-san. Originally I thought it was just me thinking too much about it, but it also seemed like something was amiss. Tsuruya-san is the only person who visits you guys frequently, so there's probably nothing to worry about. Ah, sorry Kyon. It's fine if you just listen and let it pass. I only wanted someone I could talk to about it, that's all. If your SOS Brigade activities need my help again, I hope you won't forget to give me a call. If possible, it'd great if you could get Tsuruya-san to come too."

For the rest of the journey to the classroom, Kunikida and I engaged in small talk. After being able to express my heartfelt thoughts, I almost stopped paying attention to the old questions as he beautifully transitioned the conversation to worries about the mid-term exam, grumbling about PE class's 2,000 meter run, and other daily trifles.

He wanted to provide me with some simple advice based upon his way of going about life, I think. Though he seemed to be holding something back when speaking about Tsuruya-san, his insight was truly quite sharp.

Generally speaking, Kunikida didn't know that much about us but was still concerned about us from the sidelines. He was the only person out of my current classmates who knew both Sasaki and me, but even if he discovered the strange and unusual relationship between us, it still wouldn't be too big a deal. I felt truly fortunate to have a friend in my life so smart and so close to me since he already helped me a considerable amount by predicting which questions were going to be on the exam. Plus he'd been a friend since my middle school days. There was no reason for Haruhi's knowledge of him to be limited to "someone from the same class." The subject of Taniguchi on the other hand, doesn't need to be brought up. He's still quite suited to forever remaining a one-man stand-up act.

Kunikida must definitely be thinking this too. Therefore, during this time with only the two of us, I more or less disclosed what I was just thinking about.

My intuition seemed like it was gradually becoming even more acute than that of the normal person walking beside me. Who was it that effected this change in me?

The morning and afternoon classes all went by smoothly without a hitch. I had been off in another world as the school bell signaling the end of classes began reverberating on the grounds.

After school, Haruhi and Asahina-san left for Nagato's apartment to visit the patient as was previously agreed upon, leaving Koizumi and I, the two male club members, in the literature clubroom. Fully aware that the three female club members wouldn't be showing up, this clubroom's worth went down an immense amount in my eyes. Furthermore, none of the total amount of freshmen who wanted to experience the SOS Brigade showed up. Forget it. It's better that you not come. I should actually thank all of them for treating us as if we didn't exist. If someone did come charging in, it would be as difficult a situation to deal with as someone showing up for a part-time job interview when the shop owner was off on vacation.

"Huh?"

I woke up abruptly with a start. Once the SOS Brigade lost Haruhi, it was nothing. Not only was it incapable of normal operation, but not even a meeting could be held. It was like a passenger train that had lost the locomotive section providing the propulsion; it could only remain seriously disturbed and wait on the rail track for its death.

"What shall we do? Since no one wants to play board games with me, why not get some exercise?" After being kept down by a depressing silence for a while, Koizumi asked this in a candid tone, showing clear signs of craft.

"That works, too." It was perfect, because I wanted to relax for a bit too.

Koizumi took down a cardboard box that had been piled up to the roof on the cupboard and opened it in front of me. Inside was a heavily dented aluminum bat and ragged baseball glove. Both were equipment that we used in the baseball tournament held by the city. Haruhi hadn't dealt with this antiquated baseball equipment that was gotten using underhanded methods from the baseball team, and had simply left it here; she really was a hamster who dragged everything it found into its nest. She

doesn't want to join this year's baseball tournament too, does she? If we used the homing bat and my magic baseball pitches two years in a row, we would definitely receive disdain. I didn't want to stand on the pitcher's mound again, but I might be persuaded to play some soccer.

I closely scrutinized the contents of the cardboard box, but wasn't actually able to find any hard or soft balls. Only a tennis ball rolled out; one that I didn't know who Haruhi had to rough up to obtain. If we're playing in the courtyard, this is much safer than a normal baseball.

Thus Koizumi and I picked up the baseball glove full of seams and the shaggy tennis ball, leaving behind the clubroom currently experiencing a dearth of interest.

The courtyard was completely empty. The ones who went home had long since accomplished their mission and couldn't be found dilly-dallying in the courtyard. The art-related clubs were in their respective clubrooms running their activities. The only audible sound was that of a broken trumpet from the band, slightly overpowered by faint sounds of shouting coming from athletic clubs on the sports field.

Since the students who gather around and open their lunches during the lunch break weren't going to appear, the only things obstructing us from tossing the ball around were the cherry trees in the courtyard. By now, the blossoms had withered until none remained. At the moment, greenery was expanding its influence; this was definitely the bagworms' favorite season.

"I'm going to start."

I caught the sinker thrown by the carefree prince, Koizumi. The glove barely felt any shock or made any noise. He was obviously holding back his skills. I followed by tightly squeezing the tennis ball and turned sideways to throw it back.

"Nice throw."

Koizumi caught the ball. After saying some shallow words as was customary of him, he tossed it back as relaxed as an infielder picking up a gently rolling ball and throwing it to the first baseman.

After tossing the ball around with Koizumi, which only served the purpose of passing time, I unconsciously recalled something Kyouko Tachibana said. It seemed like something I'd almost forgotten and something I very much wanted to forget.

I have some respect for him nonetheless.

The people who viewed the SOS Brigade Vice President so high as to reach the point of worship certainly was not many. For now, let's not mention his popularity among girls of the same year due to his looks and social skills...

"Koizumi."

"What is it?"

"Eh..." I began to stall, having begun feeling contempt for myself thinking this way. So Koizumi is the leader of the Organization of espers? Mori-san, Arakawa-san and the Tamaru brothers are all working under him? I wasn't so simple-minded as to accept it as truth so quickly.

"Nothing."

Koizumi didn't betray a speck of suspicion at my abrupt silence, but on the contrary said with a tone of having everything figured out in his mind, "Then can I ask you a question?"

He followed up his question with another question. "Have you heard of the term 'Gnosticism'?"

"Not at all. I'm not very familiar with political terminology. I can't even differentiate between communism and socialism."

Koizumi laughed bitterly and began explaining the so-called Gnosticism. "It can be said to be an ideology or a religion. In a country like ours where we excessively adopt the religious holidays of various countries and populate our country with many gods, it might be a relatively foreign idea. Simply put, it's a position considered to be heresy in countries that believe in the existence of only one god. To track the origin of this idea, you have to go considerably far back. Even though it's considered completely heresy now, this idea has been spread many years even before Christianity was established."

What a shame that I slept through nearly all of my citizenship classes, so I absolutely can't see what you're getting at.

"Then how about I briefly summarize Gnosticism? Please allow me to make a long story short."

If you can simplify it so that even a primary school student can understand, then I won't have any objections.

"People from ancient times thought the world was filled with mistakes. For example, if the world was made correctly by an all-knowing and all-powerful god, then He probably wouldn't have bestowed such a ridiculous amount of suffering among the people. After all, creating such a complete utopia would not have been beyond His powers. However, with societal conflicts causing a spread of injustice, the world would sometimes be in the hands of the forces of evil that bullied and humiliated the weak in order to maximize their suffering. Why would such a god make such a cruel world, then abandon it and take no further notice?"

Probably because he saw his game heading towards a bad ending, so he didn't want anything to do with it anymore.

"Maybe it was like that." Koizumi tossed the ball in his hand up in the air, then caught it. "But think about it from a different angle. The answer might be really simple. Maybe the world really wasn't created by a benevolent god, but instead by a god-like being with malicious intent."

Both sides are more or less the same, aren't they? Did the carpenter have evil intentions in mind when he built a house based on faulty designs? I think we can let the justice department settle that one.

"If it really did stem from malicious intent, it would make sense for god to turn a blind eye to evil conduct, because his nature is to do evil. However, man has an intuitive understanding of the world. Not everyone is evil and some will recognize evil deeds for the crimes they are. This proves that the human race possesses the capability of doing good and taking a stand against evil. If the world was really so plugged up with evil that not even water could trickle through, the concept of good would not exist."

Koizumi let the tennis ball spin on his fingertips and said, "Therefore, the ancient people firmly believed that the world was created by a false god and that this knowledge was the strand of light bestowed upon humanity by the God that truly existed. In other words, God doesn't exist in the world, but stands outside protecting the human race."

It would be circular reasoning if they didn't think this way, right?

"Right. It's precisely because this religion regards the maker of the world as a demon that it drew the ire of the many believers of more ordinary religions. Have you learned about the Albigensian Crusade in World History class yet?"²⁵

I haven't learned it yet, but I can ask Haruhi about it.

"Moreover, Gnostic doctrine is in considerable agreement with present society. However, modern man isn't much different in terms of levels of thought from their counterparts in ancient times. What we can think of in current day, earlier people could have thought of as well. No matter how much technology and how great the level of measurement precision improves, there's no way to make substantial advancement into biologically improving our ability to think. At present, we're already reaching a dead end in evolution; what's more troubling is that this isn't a recent development. This has become a difficult problem in human history that will remain forever."

Though I felt Koizumi's reasoning was moving a bit fast, all my academically-inept self could do was smartly keep my silence. Making dumb comments causing the discussion to fall into disorder was diametrically opposed to my principles.

"Okay, I've already said a lot. Let's organize the current situation that we've been drawn into a bit."

So the whole mish-mash you've just said was actually just the lead-in? Koizumi is really dead-set on beating around the bush.

"Tachibana-san's faction doesn't regard Suzumiya-san as the true god. Maybe Suzumiya-san really is this world's creator, but she honestly does lack a bit of self-awareness and it's this unawareness that has convinced them she wasn't the true god. If that's so, then somewhere there should exist a god that can be sufficiently proven to be the real one according to their belief. And they've found her, but it's also possible that they only think they've found her."

²⁵ In the year 1209, Pope Innocent III suppressed the army raised by a strand of Christianity known as Albigensians, violently repressing them for over 20 years

So that's why they found Sasaki? That's my weird middle school classmate who referred to me as a really close friend.

"Closed Spaces is also an area of consideration." Koizumi said as if sharing idle gossip. "Suzumiya-san's Closed Spaces are permeated with an impulse to destroy, which lacks the constructive nature of a creator. It's not like she's intending to hire public employees to go in and carry out large-scale construction."

He unexpectedly added in a corny joke that was completely senseless. "On the other hand, Sasaki-san's Closed Spaces are reportedly quite stable much like the Steady State theory in cosmology.²⁶ Inside, there's almost a sense of everlasting tranquility. Maybe there are more people who want an alternate world full of tranquility and without Celestials."

I remembered being immersed in radiance on the uninhabited street. After signs of human habitation disappeared, it was replaced by an indescribable feeling of softness, bordering on some sense of quiet and comfort. A student desiring a room of peace and quiet for preparing for a big exam might very well be willing to pay for an admission ticket.

"Taking it one step further, if Sasaki-san often made Closed Spaces like that, would it become a problem? However if Suzumiya-san's mind was steady and knows to keep her feelings in check, she won't immediately explode just because something doesn't go her way. This type of situation is like a fuse that's caught on fire. If it can be extinguished halfway, then everything will be peaceful. If it continuously expands, then it will burn all the way to the gunpowder store."

Do you regard her as the Balkan Peninsula of the early 20th century?

"Well." Koizumi opened up his two hands and said, "So that's how Closed Spaces are created. Celestials accelerate the process."

Koizumi rubbed his chin. He was a spitting image of a famous detective preparing for a decisive announcement of his meticulous reasoning. "On the other hand, Sasaki-san often makes a fixed quantity of Closed Spaces, but doesn't go so far as to let them run out of control. This is part of the reason she was chosen, I think."

Then which choice is preferable? Forcing things out at irregular intervals or letting them flow out in drops at a steady rate?

"This..." Koizumi briskly gave up on trying to answer, using his thumb to flick up the tennis ball. "Since I'm standing on Suzumiya-san's side, my decision might be somewhat biased. Even if someone could make an impartial decision; that someone certainly wouldn't be me. It's enough if I can carry out my objective. I have confidence I won't overstep my authority in this situation. Despite my confidence,

²⁶ The universe is constantly expanding while the density of matter in a random section of space remained constant. The fundamental composition of the universe would remain unchanged.

once Suzumiya-san is implicated in the matter, my eyes get covered by a layer of mist. I can only entrust this matter to someone well-acquainted with both Suzumiya-san and Sasaki-san."

I see, I see. When all is said and done, that person turns out to be me.

"Can you hear me out on one more thing?" Koizumi's words were as dexterous as a skylark in the early spring. "At this very moment, our SOS Brigade is still intact and even closer than before. Whether it's an alien life form, a time-traveler from the future Earth, or an esper with limited powers pledging allegiance to Suzumiya-san, the amount of division between us is nonexistent. We hold the same intention in our hearts, moving forward towards a common goal. The person at the heart of this matter is Suzumiya-san..."

Koizumi dragged out his words, ending like a director giving directions in acting. With an exaggeratedly low voice, he said, "And there's you."

There was no point playing dumb now, so I might as well catch what he threw at me. Therefore, while I was at it, I patted my glove waiting for Koizumi to begin.

"This question doesn't just concern the entire SOS Brigade, but everyone. Nagato-san and Kuyou-san; Asahina-san and the self-named time-traveler Fujiwara; our Organization and Kuyou Tachibana's faction; you and Sasaki-san...everyone is connected and coiled together by a single thread moving towards the sole central point. For the time being, no matter what happens in that center, no matter what emerges, the actions will reach some sort of conclusion. I'm afraid that soon it won't just be a question for you alone."

"Then what should I do? Should I try to make jokes or watch from the side? Or should I record the events as best I can to make work for future historians a little bit easier?"

"Anything is fine." Koizumi looked like a pitcher trying to decide between a two- or four-seam fastball, fitting his fingers snugly along the seams of a baseball. "I think you'll know when the time comes exactly what it is that you should do or rather what you have no choice but to do. As long as you follow your heart, it will do...even to the extent of not needing to do much reflection at all. If the reasoning ability of the human race hasn't eroded, we should be able to pick out the correct move at the most critical juncture. Your decisions so far have all been correct. I'm half-convinced and half-looking forward to seeing you continue this streak."

Having reached this point in our talk, Koizumi, who was above criticism, once again made a move. This time it was a fastball with considerable force behind it. His strong grip on the ball told me that I'd heard everything I needed to hear.

Indeed...

Not Koizumi, Asahina-san or Nagato. And of course not Haruhi.

A compulsory assignment has been given to me. No, it had been assigned to me straight from the beginning. Ordinarily, I could probably weasel my way out of it with my usual "good grief," but it being the case that my seal was on the envelope, this probably wasn't the right time to use that technique.

This was my intention from the beginning. I became aware of this long ago. Of course I didn't know what I should do, but I know I must put everything I have into it. An image of Haruhi and Asahina-san's expressions of concern for Nagato rippled through my mind. How did I have the heart to play catch with Koizumi?

By no means was this what I was supposed to be doing. Regardless of past or future, no SOS Brigade activity would ever be this senseless.

"Humph!" I raised both my arms and used the proper pitching posture to throw it as hard as I could towards Koizumi's glove.

"Nice curveball." Though he complimented me, what I was trying to throw had been a fastball.

"Ah, forget it." It was a result that I reached with some reluctant consent. Now I can throw a nice change-up, right?

Right now, was I supposed to stand on the pitcher's mound and face an unknown batter? Then have a taste of my all-out breaking ball!

The ball I threw made a slight ringing sound as it hit Koizumi's glove.

"If I could transform into a comic book hero like Superman..." Even if that was impossible, I still said these words out loud. "If I received the power to easily sort out all the troubles in the world, I definitely wouldn't join the side of justice. I would just beat up all the people I didn't like."

Koizumi stopped his pitch mid-action and looked at me with the gaze of a biologist who had just discovered a rare organism deep in the jungle, then let out a distinctive light laugh. "That's not impossible at all as long as Suzumiya-san desires it. If she was firmly convinced that you had secret powers and was engaged in a life-and-death duel with certain people, you'd be able to become the superhero you envision. No matter what you become, I won't be late in coming to your assistance. The question is whether you truly want to become a fighter who can knock someone into outer space with one punch and break up any future schemes with one roar. I'll repeat it once more: Nothing is impossible since everything hinges on what Suzumiya-san is thinking."

You don't even have to think about it. That's not my job at all. Having your superpowers awakened and defeating all enemies in my sight? Even more, defeating them through fighting? Which era's children's TV show is that from? This hackneyed theme has been explored to death even 30 years ago, hasn't it? Someone trying to pull that off would be conclusive proof that human culture has fallen into a retro style and become stuck, unable to make further advancement. I'm more inclined to learn about new age culture.

At any rate, I'm quite the rebel. Expressing an understanding of royal mannerisms has about as much worth to me as a trail of toilet paper left behind from the side of a bathroom.

I caught Koizumi's super-slow, Eephus-style curveball and had begun considering what kind of spin I should use to transform it into an incredible pitch that would scare the wits out of him before realizing it would only have happened in a daydream.

After having had our fill of tossing the ball around, Koizumi and I finally returned to the clubroom, which of course was completely empty. As for people wanting to join the brigade, let's not even talk about a person...there wasn't even a ghost's shadow here. I was really a bit surprised. Out of so many freshmen, there must have been one who was wired differently from an ordinary person, right? Speaking of which, my brain must have been quite infested by the Haruhi bug for me to have turned out like this.

Haruhi and Asahina-san didn't make one phone call to us. They were probably having so much fun at Nagato's place that they forgot why they went there. No news is good news after all. Haruhi would definitely think Nagato had been a bit careless and had come under the weather. She wanted to use her perseverance and self-invented folk remedies to make her better. Though it was likely that Asahina-san, who has already helped out quite a bit, was a bit afraid of Nagato, seeing a companion in poor health must have made her throw any feeling of estrangement into the back of her mind. Asahina (big) was a different story, but the current Asahina-san was a real nice person. Nurse Asahina-san...you haven't really donned a nurse uniform, have you?

After returning to the clubroom, the number of things we could do was the same as the number of pitches a rookie pitcher gets to make before getting taken out halfway through the inning. In brief, Koizumi and I put back the baseball equipment wherever we pleased, and after checking whether anyone had accessed the computer, locked the door and left the school. Guess this is a good opportunity to hurry home and meditate over reaffirming my resolve.

I stopped my beloved bike in front of the house and opened the unlocked door. With a glance I noticed my sister's small colorful shoes scattered randomly and a pair of never-before-seen black leather shoes. From the size, they should be categorized as women's shoes. Thinking Miyokichi had come to play again, I didn't think too much about it and stepped into my room only to be scared to the point of almost backwards somersaulting out of the room.

Simply doing that because my sister was smiling and sitting upright in a room she didn't have permission to enter would of course have been making much ado about nothing. But it was her companion who gave me a fright like being struck head-on by a large dragonfly on a countryside road.

That girl gently stroked Shamisen's chin as he rested on her leg. She lifted her head towards me, softly smiling with her eyes in the shape of the moon.

"Hey, what a good cat you have. I've forgotten where I've read the article, but it said that cats are either hit-or-miss, regardless of breed or ancestry. It depends on the owner's luck. As I see it, the person who gets to raise Shamisen really hit the jackpot. I'm not saying you're fortunate for being able to raise a

male calico. How should I put it...it's that his impressive intelligence and tameness might make him even closer to a human than a human child."

"This guy's more arrogant than a human at times. I don't think he even regards himself as a cat."

"Kyon, it happens to be just the opposite. Cats regard humans as being of the same species, only as slightly bigger cats, so they're not courteous to humans. In their eyes, the only difference is that humans aren't as agile and can't catch mice. They see us as a lumbering and clumsy creature who's always sitting down. Dogs, on the other hand, are a different matter. From time immemorial, dogs and humans have had the same desire for society. Both are used to living their lives as part of a group, so it's easier for them to get used to each other. I think dogs probably regard themselves as being different from the humans, because it's necessary in order for them to be obedient to the owner or leader."



"Sasaki." I said with a dry voice, even forgetting to put my bag down.

Only then did I turn towards my sister, "Where's mom?"

"She went to buy groceries for dinner tonight."

"Oh. Well that's fine. At any rate, you need to get out."

"Eh—" My sister puffed up her face. "I just wanted to play with Sasaki-oneesan. Kyon-kun is such a bully."

No matter how much effort my sister put into showing her displeasure, she couldn't out-stubborn me.

"That's not it. Sasaki and I have important matters to discuss. Right, were you the one who opened the door for her? Haven't I told you many times that you can't open the door for a stranger when you're home by yourself?"

"She's not a stranger! She's Sasaki-oneesan who Kyon always used to bring home to play before. I only saw as far as the gate, but I knew you guys left on a bike together. Right?"

Seeing my sister pretend to be serious in seeking agreement, Sasaki forced a smile and said while nodding, "It hadn't occurred to me that you would still remember me. I feel truly honored. Ah, kids really do grow up fast. I have to regard you in a new light now. First, I shouldn't call you a little kid anymore. You've already become an elegant young girl."

Really? Her appearance hasn't at all changed since then.

"Of course in the eyes of her brother she hasn't. Since you grew up together, you probably saw her as part of your daily life. You saw her growing up in real-time, so it's only natural for you to make a subjective comparison. It's only because I've seen her so infrequently that I could objectively say she's grown a lot."

That sounds pretty reasonable, but you didn't come for a special visit just to express your thoughts about my sister growing up, did you?

"No, my state of mind hasn't been so poor as to be influenced so easily by sudden happenings."

I simply picked up Shamisen, who had been snoring away on Sasaki's leg, and pressed him to my sister. Then I pushed her out of the room.

"Meow!"

I ignored Shamisen's protests:

"We aren't going to play right now. We're only going to talk about some things you won't be interested in, so why don't you go downstairs to play by yourself for a while? Go take some catnip from the litter box and rub it into the scratching post. In passing, you could also change the cat litter and brush his fur for him. Shamisen would certainly be overjoyed."

"Eh?! I wanted to chat with Sasaki-oneesan too. I want to hear what Kyon has to say!" Although my sister made a full-body protest while holding Shamisen, she still suffered a forced eviction. For a while I could hear the elementary school kid and cat grumbling complaints from the other side of the door with

a lot of "wah, wah" and "meow, meow" sounds. Finally I heard them go down the stairs, letting my calm composure return from above the clouds.

Sasaki's cheerful secret "kukuku" laugh probably also helped me find my bearings.

"She's really, really cute. Based solely on a couple sentences, I can tell she really is Kyon's sister. The environment she's growing up in is quite good. I also have a faint sense that she really likes her older brother. You being the closest person to her, she considers you to be a magician who can bring pleasant surprises to her. For example, just when she wanted a cat to raise, you actually brought one home. She probably reveres you a lot."

But I've never detected a bit of that reverence. Two, three years ago, she was a total crybaby that you couldn't even be in the same room with. There were many times when I wanted to find a piece of cloth to keep her quiet. I know from experience that within my family there are those who don't have a younger sister and thus create any unrealistic image they want, but that could just be speaking from an outside perspective.

I had thought this far when Sasaki again continued her offensive.

"I'll tell you about an unimportant matter. Compared to fresh water, cats prefer to drink water humans have bathed in."

Where did this come from?

Sasaki let out her secret "kukuku" laugh. "That's why I said beforehand that it was unimportant."

"Now what?" I tossed the book bag on my shoulder onto the bed and sat down in front of Sasaki with my legs crossed. I looked at my old classmate's light smile and her unmoved expression. "What is it that you really want to say? I hope it involves some important matter."

"Very much, very much."

The return of Sasaki's glance was as captivatingly soft as a cherry blossom tree in full bloom. "You're close to your limit in restraining your curiosity, right? In many senses of the word, the last meeting truly had too much interference. All along, I've been looking for an opportunity to speak freely and frankly with you. It was also because I thought you would certainly have a plan ready that I was up the whole night waiting for you to call. Unfortunately it turned out that there had been no message from you, which surprised me quite a bit."

You don't have to overstate it so. I myself had reached my wit's end too. For instance, how to deal with the alien, also known as the telephone directory wearing the uniform of the Milky Way police serving telephones everywhere.

"Why so cold? Oh well, it doesn't matter. I'm used to all possible reaction from you by now, so I can immediately forgive you. Now I'll jump straight to the topic at hand."

Still confused as to what that topic was, I obediently nodded my head. It being the case that she would make a special trip to call on me, I should probably be all ears and listen quietly to all she has to say. Presumably, it was going to be valuable information worthy of a listen.

"Then let me first report my opinion of Kuyou Suou after a great deal of questioning."

That's certainly among the things I really wanted to find out. It's worth was as high as to make me want to stretch my ears until they were as long as those of a wiener dog.

Sasaki twirled a hair from Shamisen that was left on her leg and stared at it attentively. "Ever since I was little, I'd always imagined what aliens would look like if they really existed. In manga, a common premise is that we're able to observe them using optical telescopes and are able to establish some level of communication. For example, using the concept of prime numbers and simple devices like translators are a common sight."

With the topic of discussion revolving around details of interstellar communication too numerous to list originating from sci-fi novels, it just happened that I'd also been making my way through somewhat abstruse Western sci-fi books due to Nagato's influence. Since it was all made up, naturally the number of terms you had to remember was quite high.

"Okay, now put what I just said away to the side." Sasaki twirled the cat hair between her fingers. "Both Nagato-san's Integrated Data Thought Entity and Kuyou-san's Sky Canopy Domain appear to be completely different from the aliens in the easy-to-understand stories written by humans."

I really wanted to let the classic sci-fi authors who wrote about humanoid aliens on Mars or Mercury hear that sentence. It should motivate them to write more vivid and interesting stories.

"That's true and it's not limited to sci-fi. If John Dickson Carr had lived during the current era, he could have used modern technology to come up with even more cryptic locked room mystery novels and get me addicted to reading. I should beg your Asahina-san to use time-travel and bring him to the present time. That's not a joke in the slightest."

It's a pity the trip to the present itself would have a high possibility of freaking him out. I haven't had a chance to visit the future yet. Maybe it has to do with a prohibition against bringing people to the future.

"I'm just mentioning these things casually, that's all."

The fine, tri-colored hair drifted away from Sasaki's soft and slender fingers. Her peaceful gaze was fixed on my face, signaling the end of the idle talk.

"Maybe it's because of that that they have no way of understanding the system of values and actions of us humans. It's with difficulty that they gave up their own ways to become an advanced living organism that such a human being represents. Maybe even though they know what we talk about, they don't know why we talk about it; perhaps even so far as knowing that we're talking about questions that

contain no answers. Do you think you can converse with an alien while knowing nothing out of the 5 W's and 1 H except the who and the where?"

Absolutely not. I can barely understand what Nagato says. Looks like a problem arises even when deciding whether Kuyou is the villain or not.

But Sasaki continued, "That sort of poor communication is actually quite understandable. For instance, you probably can't understand the system of values of a water flea or a paramecium. Can you imagine conversing with the bacteria that causes whooping cough or mycoplasma pneumonia?"

Based on my level of intelligence, it would indeed be a little difficult.

"If a single-celled organism or bacteria possessed the intelligence of a human, they would probably question the actions of bipedal mammals too. What's the humans' purpose in life? What are humans planning to do to the planet and the world? Their surprise upon hearing the answer to these two questions might make them go beyond simply questioning."

No matter how much I thought about, I couldn't figure out my purpose in life, but I believed speaking of the entire human race, my type of person was overwhelmingly in the majority.

"Kyon, what's the most important thing to you in the world?"

I couldn't respond in a short amount of time.

"Me too. In the present world people are faced with so much complex information that their system of values doesn't get quantified." Sasaki's expression and tone of speech still remained the same. "For example, to one person it might be money, to another it might be knowledge, and to a third it might be relationships. Each person's value system is different to the point that it's impossible to use your personal value system to measure everything in the world; this point we're certain about. That's why you couldn't quickly come up with an answer to my question."

Probably.

"But I think that in the past, people wouldn't have put so much thought into this question."

Probably.

Right now is a time where you have any information you could possibly want right at your fingertips, but a century ago...or not even that, even a decade ago the information you could easily access was much more limited than nowadays. If we went back to the Sengoku period or Heian period, would they be more hesitant over their choice of life decisions than people of modern times? Back then, their choices were surely very limited.

If it is said that the freedom of choice follows a diversification in society, then looking at it another way, worrying more about how you should arrive at a decision could be said to be the detriment of having greater diversity of choice. When people had a shortage of information and no way to make a

snap decision, they would often go with the majority and pick the most popular choice, but this is confusing cause and effect. Not only would there be a scarcity of choice, but it would approach the other extreme: the system of values becoming homogenized.

"Looks like when comparing the proliferation of choices, aliens have gone down an evolutionary path where homogeneity is the norm."

Sasaki's voice was still as gentle as ever.

"However, aliens have apparently also realized the flip-side of the coin. I'm guessing that the cause was the meeting between you and Haruhi Suzumiya."

It's fine if you include Haruhi. Having Martians institute a presidential system of government wouldn't be beyond her. The scope of my actions, on the other hand, isn't nearly as grandiose.

"Don't say that. To be able to get something out of a quarrel with an alien you can barely understand is truly an amazing achievement. It's not something just anyone can think of and learn to do. Your conduct must be the result of experience, right? I really envy you, Kyon. The person you mentioned, Nagato-san, sounds fascinating. It really makes me want to open my heart to her and have a long, intimate talk. Kuyou-san hardly ever talks to me."

Though it was spoken with a joking manner, I still sensed that she was half-serious.

"So what should I do?"

"Let's think about it soundly. Fortunately for us, Fujiwara-kun and Kyouko-san are people we can understand. Let's even count Kuyou-san in that category. This is our biggest weapon, Kyon. If we just use our minds, then we can use the final argument we crank out to convince them to give up their hopes. Though it's easier said than done, I believe you have what it takes. That would apply to myself, as well. After all, thinking and explaining your train of thought to another person are abilities inherent in humans."

What benefit can you derive from praising my academic achievement and knowledge I've attained through the second year of high school? Isn't what you said something that only a Nobel prize winning physicist could accomplish if they put all their effort into it? I haven't even learned half of what there is to learn about Ganymede and Triton. The one person that I could claim is worse than me at academics was Taniguchi.

"As I see it, this type of problem isn't worthy of being called a problem because it's a matter revolving around Haruhi Suzumiya. All frames of reference depend on how much she is aware. No matter what abilities you have, the governing principle behind what someone is capable of is still her actions and knowledge. This is a sufficiently big opening for us to work with."

Sasaki revealed a mature smile that made her appear 10 years older. "Adults would only become obstacles, I think. Analyzing, breaking down the problem and figuring out the solution would only waste

time...it would work to no avail. Listen clearly, Kyon. This is our own story, so thinking of a way to solve it ourselves would be a correct way for the storyline to go."

I really feel sorry to have dragged you into this as well.

"No need to apologize. I dare say I haven't ever had so much fun as I'm having now. Since I can't properly thank you enough, please speak up if you have any requests."

I didn't know if Sasaki was speaking in jest or being serious when she said that.

"That's why our chances of success aren't bad at all. This is a remote planet in the galaxy. As long as this tiny planet on the frontier of a boundless universe remains center stage, alien life forms with magical powers can't help but be forced to play earthly rules. Presumably the Integrated Data Thought Entity and the Sky Canopy Domain have similar restrictions and unwritten rules, because otherwise, it wouldn't have been necessary for them to do battle on the sly. It's the same for that time-traveler. He seems to be restricted by certain regulations with reasons unclear to us. This has led me to surmise that this is where we can make the breakthrough to return the situation back to normal."

The only thing was, even if Sasaki's thinking is correct and she has her eye on the right place, how could this be proven?

Sasaki calmly let out her unique "kukuku" chuckle like a young girl who firmly believed that on Christmas Eve, Santa Claus would leave an awesome present beside the pillow.

"We'll definitely think of a way soon. You probably don't want the current situation to go on. I can assume that neither does Suzumiya-san probably and it's the same with me. Being the case that the important people involved are thinking alike, I honestly don't believe the situation will develop in another unforeseen direction."

Dressed in her school uniform, Sasaki looked brimming with anticipation for the future. This brought some feeling of déjà vu. It turns out that I was reminded of Haruhi's smiling expression the day that the SOS Brigade was formed. If it was said that Haruhi at the time was a sunflower in midsummer, then Sasaki now was like a morning glory flower; there were a few slight differences in the impression left by the two.

"Then..."

Then what was the main point you wanted to make?

"I just wanted to have a face-to-face chat, that's all. Without anyone else, just the two of us. Of course telephone conversations and text messages wouldn't work because of the so-called 'walls having ears'."

At that moment, I imagined my sister leaning her ear against the door and then I realized something. Sasaki was being cautious of interception. Wiretapping the telephone was by no means a difficult task for even small organizations. Koizumi having such power would easily be a given. He had

Mori-san and Arakawa-san...it was the same with Kyouko Tachibana and Fujiwara's factions. It was as if you wanted to take some extra effort to remind me of this point, which explains tonight's surprise visit.

"There's another matter. I sense Fujiwara-kun wants to settle everything quickly. Tachibana-san isn't very enthusiastic and Kuyou-san's intentions aren't well known. Only our time-traveler has clearly expressed that his purpose stems from self-interest. From his style, he probably doesn't care too much how it turns out as long as the matter is brought to an end. This is why I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to take action as early as tomorrow."

If I could go on a trip to the Yamataikoku Period²⁷, I would definitely look everywhere and see how much of Chen Shou's work was based on fact. Fujiwara can also take a good long look of the past. Why be so impatient? Don't tell me this period doesn't have any archaeological worth.

"Although wouldn't it be better for you this way?"

I really wanted to break down the ambiguous nature of the present situation and help reduce Nagato's fever.

"This is complete conjecture on my part, but.." Sasaki continued, "The problem facing us might be able to be solved just by demonstrating our reason of existence. No matter who it is, it's possible that the reason they work so hard is to make their *raison d'être* a certain reality. This has nothing to do with aliens, time-travelers, or espers. Maybe everyone operates with a sole, simple motive in mind: to make another person aware that the former truly existed. Kyon, have you already acknowledged the fact that Kuyou-san, Fujiwara-kun, and Tachibana-san exist at the present? You would know that even if they disappeared forever at this instant, you personally would never be able to forget them? At this very moment, I can say without a doubt that they exist in this world. Perhaps their desire is to send a brief, but emotional message of the 'don't forget me' sort."

I still don't understand. Why must they travel to this period to do many unspeakable things to me? It's true that I won't forget their appearance and actions even if I died, but so what? I'm not the court official responsible for keeping records nor the chief editor for a history book. If you want to cause trouble, then go to the time of Tacitus or Herodotus. Or if not, there are many people who have interests similar to yours. Why does it have to be me?

As I ruminated over Sasaki's line of reasoning and was puzzled why the girl who simultaneously held the posts of classmate from middle school as well as old friend from cram school narrowed her eyes, two fists came to a rest on her cheeks massaging them about. What's this? Calisthenics?

"Nope."

Sasaki dropped her hands. "It's just that when I'm talking to you, I don't know why I always have a smile on my face. It's not good for facial muscles to stay rigid for so long, and besides, the

²⁷ The time period where the nation transformed from a small country into a powerful one.

conversation's dealing with a serious topic. I just wanted to see if I could change my expression. Any difference?"

Even though I used an amount of concentration that could have distinguished between 7- and 28-spotted ladybugs, I couldn't notice any difference. A wily smile and eyes narrowed in the shape of the moon...It's true that thinking back to the end of middle school, I don't think I've seen any other expression other than a light smile on Sasaki's face.

Seeing her face, I suddenly thought of something.

"So what's your reason of existence?"

She opened her mouth shortly to answer as if she had long prepared herself for such a rude question. "Being a human, of course it's striving to pass on my genes. Passing on the essential blocks of your existence by having offspring for later generations is in the nature of living beings; at least on this planet, it's like this."

I don't want to hear that type of answer based on evolutionary theory. So what if you knew that your genes were going to be passed on? There was a feeling that the answer was beside the point.

"Really! Why are we born, why do we live...these kinds of questions are but a simple type asked in Buddhist meditation. At first, you might think there exist some important ideas following such a line of reasoning, but in reality there's none. Although if I used it as a starting block to answer again, my reason of existence would first be 'thinking' with the only continuation from that being 'more thinking'. I will stop thinking only when I die. Conversely, 'not thinking' seems almost no different from death. When the time comes, my personality will disappear and I will carry on living as some kind of animal."

Sasaki let out a quiet "kukuku" laugh.

"I want to carry on thinking about the infinitude of connected things in every manifestation of the nature of this world forever, only resting after I'm laid to rest."

What's at the finish line of thought? Ah, please answer with something other than childbearing.

"That's a really good question, Kyon. One that can have a truly personalized answer. If I wanted to leave behind some evidence of having lived in this period other than my genes, of course that wouldn't be limited to double helices specifying the composition of amino acids. Ever since the beginning of history, people have left behind all sorts of stuff on this planet such as extravagantly-sized vestiges as well as epoch-defining inventions. The most advanced technology of the time, the nation's cultural artwork, a completely new technology or a theory that will last forever into the future..."

From Sasaki's expression, I could see that her train of thought was taking her on a trip across different eras all within her head.

"Out of the great historical figures we've learned about in World History class, it's only by having done things worthy of being called 'great' that they've managed to enter the annals of history. Even

though my body and mind are small and weak, if I use my ability to think as a starting point, maybe one day I can come up with a new concept that will last far into the distant future. To be frank, I really do want to give birth to someone and nurture them, leaving a descendant in future generations. Of course it doesn't have anything to do with passing on my genes."

Your ambition is really quite big.

"No matter whether it's leaving behind words or an idea, either is fine. If it's ambition you're talking about, this is the sole ambition I have. It's just that I want to complete it myself without any assistance from any fake aliens, time-travelers, or espers. My thoughts belong to myself and myself alone; I don't want anyone to interfere. Arriving at a conclusion by myself, that's the reason of existence I've defined. I want to make the original words or idea that appears before my eyes reality, without any interference or influence. That's why Kuyou-san and Fujiwara-kun are actually obstacles in some sense. As for Tachibana-san...we should be able to become good friends who won't keep anything from each other. She's the sole person I can rely on out of those three."

I don't think I've ever spoken to Sasaki for so long about a topic nor have I heard her express these heartfelt aspirations before. Okay, I will confess something to her too.

"Sasaki, if you were able to freely use Haruhi's sort of powers, maybe you would be able to realize your dreams."

"Is that so, Kyon? I'm still a normal person torn by conflicting emotions and desires and there are still times when I think that so-and-so deserves something even worse than death. If a small idea on my part could take away someone's life, then I'd definitely be greatly affected and be unable to forgive myself. It's impossible to fence ideas off in my head, ideas that I'm not allowed to think of, so I can't play Suzumiya-san's role. If her power to grant desires was as omnipotent as that of a god, then it's truly a miracle that she's able to live a normal life in this world. One could argue that it would be reasonable to draw an equals sign between Suzumiya-san and 'miracle'."

Sasaki lifted a corner of her mouth in her usual sarcastic manner and gazed straight at me. "Originally, I rejected the existence of God. Even if one existed, it wouldn't be in this world or much less in a situation where they weren't aware of their powers. Think about it. Would you jump into your goldfish tank just because you liked it? Would you willingly break through the glass at an aquarium or the fence at a zoo, and join the tropical fish or the trained wild animals?"

I felt like I was being dodged. With this, I didn't want to have a one-on-one talk with such an intelligent person. At the very least, I wanted to look forward to some assistance from Koizumi here.

"In other words, a higher being wouldn't actually jump into a lesser being's world, humans and gods alike. That's what I think."

Sasaki gave her hands an exaggerated wave and half-jokingly said, "Looks like Suzumiya-san is someone who can be equated with a god and moreover, some people think I can be too. You, who are receiving care and concern from both me and her, two godlike figures, will definitely have a bigger role to

play than watching the play unfold from the sidelines. No mistake about it, you're definitely the kingmaker in this situation. To make the old story come to a close and for a new story to be written, this task falls on your shoulders. Open up your eyes to clearly see yourself for who you are, Kyon! You're a pivotal figure holding in your hands the master key to open any door you want."

Though I was the pivotal figure when Haruhi disappeared, this time I'm not so sure.

"This matter will be resolved in your hands. That is a small, small prophecy I can make right now." Sasaki let out a laugh like that of an early morning dove. "You're the person I trust the most in the world, because you're a dear friend I couldn't ever hope to replace."

No matter how much physical activity she undertook, her expression never deviated from a light smile.

"You can definitely do it. I even think that you're the only person who can accomplish it, so you should have a freer hand in this matter. If godlike Suzumiya-san, alien Nagato-san, and esper Koizumi-san can't get it done, then the only person I can bet on is you: a representative of ordinary people. That's your nature, but it's also your advantage. Kyon, it wasn't a coincidence that you met them and then you met us; you definitely have your role to play. Even if you asked me to bet my beloved stuffed animal kitten from my childhood, I would do it."

As if this symbolized a period at the end of a paragraph, Sasaki looked around in my room before getting up and saying "I should get going" with a light smile. She continued with, "No need to walk me out. You've already cheered me up. Send my greetings to your straightforward sister and admirable cat. I was planning to play with them a bit the next time I came to visit."

Then there was a subtle silence.

Sasaki stood without moving, only examining my face. Not knowing how to respond, I also stood there like a wooden stick, not making any reaction at all, only to hear Sasaki speak in an unprecedented tone of hesitation, "Kyon, I actually had another reason in coming today. It's not very important, and it has nothing to do with Fujiwara-kun, Tachibana-san, and Kuyou-san. I just wanted to talk to you a bit about my normal life..."

I didn't regard myself as a good student who could provide any suggestions to Sasaki on her normal life, nor could I come up with the answers to questions that perplexed even Sasaki. Although, it seems she agreed with me on this.

"Maybe it's better not to ask. Being able to talk this much with you has already made me much more at ease. I understand perfectly well that the proper way would be to resolve your own problems by yourself. Alas, if only I'd realized it sooner, I wouldn't have brought it up. It's completely my fault. Speaking to you about something that couldn't be helped even if we talked about it, I'm really being too selfish. I apologize."

This type of action of bringing something up, then yelling "stop," was the same in my eyes as handing out a blank check and then immediately taking it back. Since I was powerless to treat the symptom Sasaki has come looking for a cure for, wasn't my ego in need of rescuing too?

"Although—" As Sasaki drew out her words, she lifted one corner of her mouth in that distinctive smile. "Being able to chat with you is truly wonderful! It's made me more resolute than before."

As I was seeing Sasaki to the door, my sister came carrying Shamisen. Her hold that resembled the throat lock from wrestling didn't seem very comfortable for the cat who had pain written all over his face.

"Please come play again!" My sister yelled with a face full of joy.

Sasaki waved smilingly to two people and a cat as she left without turning her head.

I waited on the porch until she disappeared around the corner, but she still didn't turn her head once. What was the other thing she wanted to talk to me about...

That sort of perfect retreat devoid of any blemishes really did fit with Sasaki's style.

When I began to think about the real reason for her visit, the moon had already risen past the eastern mountain and it had reached the time most people took their baths.

I saw my sister bring a Takkong action figure into the bathroom, which bobbed in the water as I remained deep in thought. Since the problem had been in my head for so long, I must have known it inside out, but the solution still stubbornly refused to leap out of the cosmos. In the end, the only thing I knew was that the Topic B which she didn't talk about wasn't really important, but letting it pass like this was still a bit depressing.

Furthermore, I always felt that when talking to her, there was a particular word that had slipped my mind until now. What was it? This sector of my memory was like a wiped hard drive from a wrong command having performed an accidental reformatting. Looks like my brain was already showing signs of memory overload, so the addition of a high-performance heat sink was in order. Be that as it may, taking a bath caused the chi and blood to flow unobstructed through me, and they couldn't be cooled down at all. Not forgetting to bathe or brush my teeth was one of my habits; I didn't feel there was anything wrong with this. Despite not being mysophobic, skipping it for a day would make me feel unwell. Hey, it's fine since I'm not the only one like this.

On another topic, I must confess that Sasaki's visit today let me breathe a big sigh of relief. After talking to her, I once again realized she was indeed trustworthy. Though her way of thinking and mediation was slightly different from that of a normal person, she was still a normal high school girl and the same as she was in middle school. If Sasaki didn't enter a famous high school, but entered North High instead, what would be different? Who knows...maybe Koizumi and Kyouko Tachibana would have transferred in at the same time, making my first year of high school feel even more chaotic. Thinking about all these things beyond my power to confirm was pointless. I still had other matters to think about.

"But..." I sighed as much as I talked to myself: "Even though that was said..."

A voice echoed from the bathroom walls. Honestly speaking, I felt really useless, because my mind was completely blank.

"With everything going on all I can do is go to bed earlier and ask the immortals to grant me a dream."

I muttered this with wishful thinking to try and put my hopes to an end. I stepped out of the bathtub and pulled open the folding door. Just as I stepped onto the bathroom mat, an impatient Shamisen who had been looking forward to it for a long time, charged into the bathroom and began furiously lapping up the water in the washbasin. His tongue made slurping sounds for a while before suddenly lifting his head and going "Meow!"

It probably sounded something like that. It was like a retort in cat language correcting my improper way of thinking, but I didn't have enough time to analyze it. He had already sped away beyond the top of the stairs making scratching sounds from his claws against the floorboards. I could say with 80% certainty that his destination was my bed.

Next time, I might as well bring Shamisen to see Kuyou. Maybe the such-and-such life forms in his brain could be of some use.

Although—

"Better not."

I had already given up the thought that someone would make my troubles disappear. Right now, I could only see the matter through to the end in a bull-headed manner. I should put the question of what I'm capable of doing on the side and take a freer hand to things. Even Sasaki advised me to do so.

To place my hopes on data life forms, who reached the Earth due to a freak accident and latched onto dogs, would be foolish. Just let me prove the rightful position of the Solar System inhabitants. Compared to the Andromeda Strain we're even fiercer and more ferocious.

Good. It's time to teach Kuyou and Fujiwara a lesson about looking down on humans from this time period. Originally, I wanted to entrust this matter to a great person whose position, reputation, and IQ exceeded mine infinite-fold, but with how things have gone, how could I casually pass onto a passerby the burden of all things supernatural happening around her, Haruhi Suzumiya's power? Our opponents must definitely be thinking of me with contempt and I'm not overjoyed at having to pick up the slack either. This was a pop quiz concerning the SOS Brigade. Naturally the people taking the quiz had to be us three.

Furthermore, quite unwittingly, I had become a central figure whose presence was required to bustle about mediating conflicts all over the place. The people who had heard bed-ridden Nagato's

heartfelt wishes included just myself. Though I didn't know if it was an unconscious act on her part, she seemed to have been looking for me.

If I couldn't even save the members of such a minuscule organization like the SOS Brigade, then was I capable of anything at all? My capabilities would be limited to helping my sister with her homework or stopping her from shaving Shamisen's fur. Rather than always blindly going with the flow like an idiot, it was better to occasionally be like a sweetfish and swim against the current, coming out all the more impressive because of it.

What's more, my ultimate goal was very simple: to have Nagato get better and make a full recovery.

What's this? Suddenly I got a feeling of vigor throughout my body.

My willpower became as boundless as a hurricane. If I could direct this passion into studying, my mother would certainly be moved to tears. But this and that were two completely different matters. Sorry Mom! In brief, whether it was within or beyond the Earth, there were no intelligent life forms who could make me give up my determination. Could it be that the self-cultivation only attained by heroes had sprouted in my heart? If it weren't for being completely naked due to having just taken a shower, I would definitely have raised my right hand high towards the sky. That's just how emotionally pumped up I was!

What if I were to also accomplish things like a heroic protagonist? The habitually silent me from a few hours ago was someone who even a snail from the rainy season would sneer at. It seems that what Sasaki wanted to do was give me a timely bonk on the head to get me to see the errors of my ways. Even though she speaks in an detached manner, she guides her listeners' thoughts and makes them reach a very good sense of mind. What kind of advanced psychological trick is it? This person was truly frightening.

"Might as well cause a huge ruckus. I definitely have to do something to knock the time-traveler, alien, and esper completely out of my sight."

It went without saying that Asahina (small), Nagato, and Koizumi were no longer a part of my plan. What should I do about Mori-san and Kimidori-san...

I felt intoxicated as if I was in a dream-like fantasy, full of optimistic words being spoken. However, it seemed as if there was another me lurking in some corner of my heart, so detached as to make me full of disgust and want to mock myself. Speaking of which, even though that me may have resembled the old me more, we were still similar in the fact that I still didn't have any way of rebuking the superego that always dampened my spirits at pivotal moments.

So sayth that me.

But apart from me, there should be someone else who can take up the mantle of a superhero, right?

There's no one else. Just that one person...her, huh?

No, it should be her—

It should be.

To be continued in:

The Surprise of Haruhi Suzumiya (Final Part)