

とららドラ

虎、肥ゆる秋

スピピンオオラ

2!

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス





とらドラ

虎、肥ゆる秋

スピコンオオラ

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Toradora Spin-Off! - Volume 02 Chapter 01-03 Part 1 (Incomplete)

Table of Contents

1. [Novel Illustrations](#)
2. [Chapter 1](#)
3. [Chapter 2](#)
4. [Chapter 3](#)
5. [Chapter 1](#)
6. [Chapter 2](#)
7. [Chapter 3](#)
8. [Chapter 4](#)
9. [Chapter 1](#)
10. [Author's Notes](#)
11. [Translator's Notes and References](#)

Novel Illustrations

These are the novel illustrations that were included in Spin-Off 2



Front cover



Back cover



**Taiga-san,
because you eat
too much! ---
"Fall-Fattened
Tiger"**

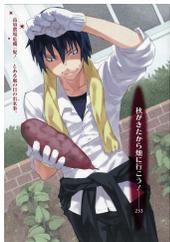


Haruta gets

close to an
older girl...
who!? --- "Once
Spring Arrives,
Let's go to
Gunma!"



● **BBQ Team**
Bishamontegoku!
It was a
tragedy. ---
"THE END OF
Summer
Vacation"



● **Takasu Farm**
Crisis! One
stormy day. ---
"Since Fall has
arrived, let's go
to the farm!"



● **Ha! Today was**
a shock! I made

Kakuni!

**Yoga time,
this is, like, the
best!**

**Oh! I ate
chocolate! YOU!
Don't be kind to
me that way!**



**This recruiter
is familiar!? So I
started a new
edition! ---
"Teacher's Pet"**



Page 11



Page 35



●

Page 55



●

Page 75



●

Page 107



●

Page 151



●

Page 181



●

Page 199



●

Page 229



●

Page 233



●

Page 249



●

Page 281



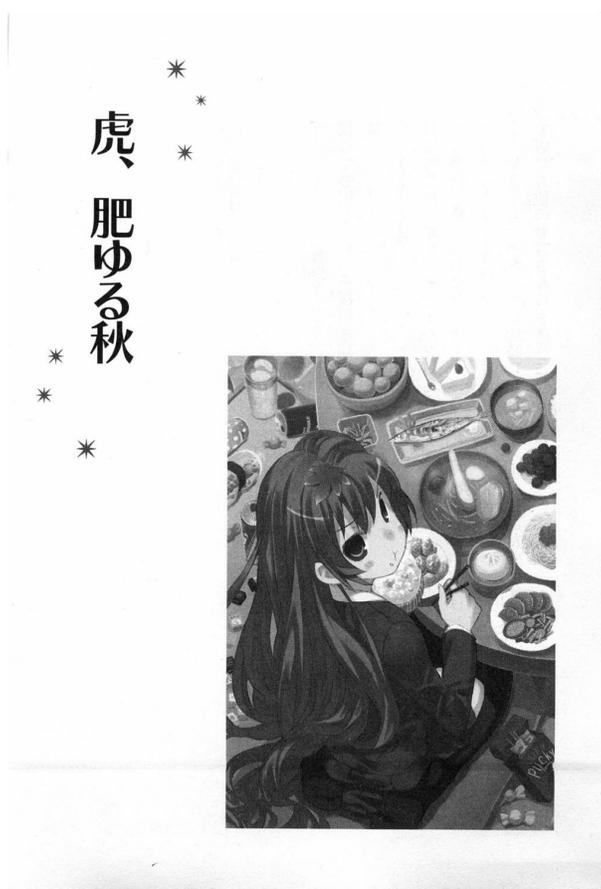
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Page 297

Chapter 1

Fall-Fattened Tiger

Chapter 1[[edit](#)]



Takasu Ryuuji remembered.

Come to think of it, it might be that in the beginning, her appetite for food was what brought them together.

"Hmm...."

It wasn't friendship, nor love, yet could he remember correctly just how this strange, family-like relationship, solid yet complex, came to be? It was ...

"Hmmm....."

... to be precise, perhaps, fried rice. Indeed, it was fried rice. It started with that unforgettable but awful night, and then feeding her fried rice at three in the morning.

"Hmmm....."

"Hey, that's enough. It's fresh food, if you keep it in your hand like that it's going to go bad, and the other customers will be annoyed at you."

"Shut up!"

Overwhelmed, he sadly kept quiet. Though he had a strong reply on his lips, he thought that perhaps it would be better to hold his tongue. "Shhhh!" Huffing through her bared fangs, Aisaka Taiga again... "Hmm....." ...swallowing her anguish.

In that small right hand there was a chunk of pork shoulder roast. In the left hand a pork-loin block. *Shoulder roast if we make homemade [chashu](#) (and, make simple curry with the broth), pork-loin if we cook trotter for Japanese style [kakuni](#), so WHICH ONE!?!?* Forced by Ryuuji to decide, Taiga was looking over the pork on the meat counter, slowly freaking out.

Light and fluffy waves of hair reaching her waist, transparent milky-white skin, she had a refined beauty like a French doll. Short for a second-year high school student, the whorl in her hair didn't quite reach Ryuuji's chest. Combined with a petite build, Taiga was rather cute today. With those big chunks of meat in both hands, thinking about what to do with that simple mind, "I would just as soon eat both...", Taiga is a beautiful girl, of course.

An exceptionally beautiful girl, and...

"Ummm.....Ahhh.....! I give up, I can't decide! Ryuuji, it's your choice! Because you're making it, and are a better judge with that pig-nose sniffer working, you choose delicious things! Now do it!"

...rather bossy.

"Who has a pig-nose!? No way. Well then, cheaper it will be. Today roast, we'll make *chashu*. It's decided."

".....!?"

"What? What's up? You want *kakuni* now? In that case I don't care,"

"....!"

"What's up, seriously? Don't you really agree with roast? Sounds good to me! Good, it's decided. Let's go."

Comparing the cuts of meat in both hands, not wanting to let them go, Taiga finally shouted "Hya!" and closing her eyes, she returned the pork loin block to the meat counter. At that, Ryuuji dropped the chunk of roast into the basket.

" ... 'Hya!' ... ?"

"Let's leave already, let's go quickly, we're done. If you stay here you'll get lost again! I'm starving, so I hope you don't take forever cooking! Go for *chashu*! After that, what will we have for sides?! Potato salad or macaroni salad would be good!"

Yanking the edge of Ryuuji's basket, Taiga left the meat section with her eyes looking rather desperate. ... Leaving still rather regretfully, at the last moment looking back to where the pork loin was. Ryuuji was by now a little exasperated.

"You're really something, saying you're hungry lately, pretending it isn't just greed, eh?"

"Dirty!? That's really cheeky! What can be said about this lowly, vulgar, taxing, bumpkin, this pig-dog block of rotten meat!"

--- *Wasn't that a bit abusive?*

Before he could reply, she gave Ryuuji a deep poke in both eyes.

"My eyes, my eyes!"

"You're a bad person; you should repent. Ha! What's with the drama, you completely disagreeable rascal? Hold on, aren't you embarrassed? People are watching."

She poked him in the eye up to the second joint!... Scary... Those public high-school uniforms over there!... and so on, women look away... everybody averted their gaze, even with his eyes closed it must certainly have hurt. Ryuuji was in the middle of the store aisle, in pain, a figure in school uniform with his eyes pushed in, crouching, unable to get up. It hurt, it didn't hurt, it hurt to death.

Arms crossed in *zama* style, Taiga sneered down at him in contempt. A most evil, violent, tyrannical, brutal and strong wild beast --- indeed, she was also known as the "Palmtop Tiger". That she is known by that name probably bothers the tigers.

"You really complain. Well, OK. Because of my super good pure and gentle heart, I'll gather and bring up the purchases for you. I got so hungry during your little show that I got rather anti-social. ... Whatever else, you're sure a lucky guy, what with me helping you out with the shopping. Shouldn't you be grateful? Don't you see? But that's okay, because I feel I should, from now on I am going to help you as much as I possibly can."

Hmph. So she says.

... Come down now, fire and brimstone!

Ryuuji's scary eyes glittered like crazy, glaring at Taiga as if they were about to spout blood. Incidentally, his eyes were simply bad genes, and his eyes were red only because they had just been poked badly. Unfortunately, since he didn't actually have demons in the family, he couldn't curse anybody. At that very instant,

"Gyaa!"

Taiga fell on her rear. Everything in the aisle within one meter in front of her went flying. Of course, it wasn't divine punishment. It was simply Taiga's clumsiness. Ryuuji's resentment was forgotten in a hurry, drawing near and reaching out to Taiga,

"Oh, are you OK?"

"... wha... eh! From that shock now I know! Today we will make *kakuni* of course!"

"... is, is that so?"

Taiga's greed was showing again.

In the basket she replaced the shoulder roast with the pork loin, added the ingredients for macaroni salad, milk, eggs for making tomorrow's lunch, ham, spinach and some cheap pasta. And now her eyes rested upon some kinds of seasonal mushrooms. Thicker mushrooms are cheaper, but these ones,

"Oh, these [shimeji](#)...! These [maitake](#)! Such huge [shiitake](#)! The [trumpet mushrooms](#) are big too! Look at this fine *bunapii* root... of course it tastes like fall! Let's make mushroom sauce!"

By the mushroom counter, Ryuuji, pain in his eyes forgotten, almost leaping for joy, began fishing. Taiga's eyes also glittered while she brought out her hands,

"Truly delicious! As usual, seasonal stuff is the best! Ryuuji, this one too, this one too!"

"Oh, that too, that too! Eh? What's that!?"

In her hand was a wooden box of [matsutake](#). Quickly taking it from Taiga's hand, he quietly and unobtrusively put it back on the counter.

Indeed, the season was fall. Here and there in the supermarket plastic maple-tree ornaments were installed; over by the fish-counter housewives gathered for fresh [saury](#). Incidentally, with regards to the Takasu family, *saury* was last night's feast. Sizzling crispy broiled skin, body covered with thick fat, drizzled in soy sauce, with plenty of grated radish and [sudachi](#) too...

"... Chestnut rice... and mushroom curry perhaps ... !"

"...Waa...!"

Ryuuji filled a bag with nice round chestnuts, then was attracted, as if in a dream, to the long line for *saury*. Taiga was hypnotized by it too, and followed. And, lined up in a row next to the chestnuts on display, big bunches of white grapes, their sweet smell a torment.

"Uwaa... looks good! I rather like that, grapes... man, why does fall have so many yummy things!?"

"I really love grapes too! Well, shall we buy some!? ... It can be dessert!"

"Eh, eh, eh... no... way! Seven hundred eighty yen, that's still expensive!"

Grabbing only chestnuts, Ryuuji escaped, pulling his eyes away from the grapes. Such is fall, when speaking of fall cravings. Taiga's appetite is a strange thing, seeming a base greed, a awful spirit, but it is not. For myself too, and everybody else is pretty much the same.

Speaking of the fall harvest, seasonal things are naturally delicious (amongst other things), and your body, done in by the summer heat, finally gets back into condition and begins to want wholesome energy.

That is what they call fall. [Horses](#) also get fat, you might say.

"OK, let's pay the bill. Since it's crowded, just wait by the exit!"

"OK!"

Once Taiga had left, Ryuuji got in the line for the cash register, mixed in with the housewives. On top of the basket was a tote bag, so he indicated that he didn't need a bag from the register. To this point, there was completely no hesitation in his manner.

With his fatherless upbringing, Ryuuji's housekeeping experience is no less than five years, even though he's only in his second-year in high school. Since this last spring, acting as a real mother for another person, had only increased his abilities. And from the first, that person with the evil bloodshot eyes tolerated the eating and eye-poking.

"Welcome! Do you have a point-card?"

"Yes, I have one."

"Well... kyaa!"

"..."

The cashier yelped --- just once: women are getting better these days. Choosing the seasonal ingredients is fun and all, but besides cooking, general housework is what Ryuuji loves. He doesn't think a little bit of shopping is a problem. Thinking about menus, thinking about nutrition, thinking about which season it is while comparing this and that, making decisions. More than some clumsy game, the abuse Ryuuji received was an impressive spectacle.

Carrying his basket filled with things for cooking, with a good-humored look on his face, he looked around for Taiga.

"...Ou!"

Ryuuji jumped instinctively.

Certainly fall is here – fall's appetite is here. Here--, waving to Taiga's form, could not help but be truly surprised. In spite of the fact that dinner was coming, and in spite of the *kakuni* he was going to make, Taiga was waiting for Ryuuji those few extra minutes at the corner of the bakery in front of the supermarket,

standing there eating a muffin.

"Ah, there were sweet potato muffins. In season." See ya!

"What are you eating!? From here we're going to eat!"

"It's OK, come on, come on! We'll just use a little less rice."

She stretched her mouth around the muffin to bite it, but suddenly Taiga said "Ha!" and her face got serious.

"What's up? What's happening?"

"What shall I do? My throat is dry."

"Yeah, that muffin-something you were greedily standing and eating there, would surely make you thirsty. Have patience until we get to the house, then we can put on some tea."

"...What shall we do? I would like try a latte. Look, over there, in the park there's a coffee shop."

"What!? The way it is, I've decided no way! From here we're going to eat! Take a look at my shape! Don't you have pork!?"

"Right away, it's next. Just chill, alright? I tell you, if you have some, you'll be satisfied. You don't even need sugar. My treat! You were the one who said he liked the coffee over there! Let's have some, OK?"

On and on she went, while packing muffin in her mouth, Taiga took Ryuuji along with her, they indeed went to the café. The plan was to get a latte without sugar. Somehow, when they saw the menu, "Wow, they've got Cinnamon Maple Cream Latte!", they said, naming the most incredible thing they saw, moreover Ryuuji took the opportunity to wash his hands, "Come now! Fall's latest product, pumpkin roll cake! By request, de-li-ci-ous!"

...Indeed, fall seems to be here.

It looks like fall's appetite has arrived too.

Fried rice was the catalyst. The very beginning was Taiga's appetite. Everything came together eventually when she snuck into the house late at night, Taiga fainted from hunger, when he made fried rice his luck ran out. Ryuuji's mastery

of cooking caught Taiga's eye, and since then, the Takasu home had another sort-of member that came every day to eat. Speaking of that appetite, it was truly becoming a problem. Where in her petite body that chowhound was putting it all was pretty much a wonder.

Back to the present. Greeting fall's appetite, Aisaka's appetite was also rather bottomless. That night's *kakuni* supper also, "Seconds!" "Seconds!" "Seco..." "...time to stop" "...nds!", the cooker's chestnut rice continued there until it turned color.

Well, isn't it healthier than no appetite? I was thinking, if there are leftovers, I wouldn't be able to avoid saying something, but --- Ryuuji was bad manneredly eating the boiled rice from the ladle with his front teeth. Taiga gulped down Ryuuji's extra portion. Come to think of it, this week Ryuuji's not had a single refill. If you think about it well, it's a good thing, Ryuuji one bowl, Yasuko one bowl, the two of them together seemed like one person. Since he was always cooking for three, Taiga came to eat as if she were two people.

"Ahh... that was good, that was good... and tea?"

Taiga stretched out under the low dining table, lazily seated, the bottom of her UNIQLO sweatshirt showing a little. Come to think of it, in the past few days many people had begun to notice this style. Up to this point, Taiga had normally chosen foolish frilly layered one-piece dresses.

While getting up once again to clean the bowls, Ryuuji tried to casually ask, "I've just been noticing, but lately you have been taking it easy, don't you think?"

Taiga twitched. There was a moment's silence, but then right away, similarly casual, "...Hmm? Ah, more or less. I tried to wear it once, since it was easy. For some reason or other. Well, it doesn't matter, since I always wear either a one-piece or casual clothing, right? Look, I only come here to eat. I just want to take it easy. ... What should I do... It's OK, right...?"

"That's alright, it doesn't matter. Yeah, take it easy. Your clothes are all so blasted expensive, aren't they usually a bit excessive anyway?"

"Y, yes..."

"Look, pass me that plate. Help clear, and I'll wipe the table."

"...OK..."

In the Takasu house, the fall evening continues on...

*

"Are you eating something again?"

"Keep quiet. What does it have to do with you?"

The next day, the familiar room of the second-year class C was noisy with break-time buzz. The distracting voices resounding all around, Taiga was sitting by herself at her desk, putting some almond chocolate into her pack. Ryuuji didn't want to unintentionally say anything along the way finding fault. Certainly nothing about relationships,

"Hey you, didn't you eat anything during break-time? Are you alright, really?"

"I'm fine, what's up?"

"My stomach's upset. My stomach's restless because I ate too much before, the hospital emergency room was awful, wasn't it?"

"Don't worry. We're only human, and that's how one learns."

"Fufun", while trying to look up at Ryuuji in contempt, Taiga took out a small bottle of stomach medicine, which had 'Take after drinking like a fish and eating like a horse!' boldly written on it.

"Anyway, look, wipe your mouth. It's indecent..."

"Shut up! Get away from me!"

"You should carry some tissues with you anyway."

Ryuuji felt quite like a parent. In spite of her complaints, he handed her a tissue from his pocket, "wipe, wipe, this area", he motioned against his own face, pointing at his own mouth, showing her the place with chocolate on it. "Eh?"

Here?", said Taiga, wiping the opposite side. "Nope, here", said Ryuuji, pointing at her mouth with a different finger, and, and there, done.

"...Ah?"

That's when it was. And for the first time, looking straight at Taiga's face, at point blank range, he noticed.

"...W, what...?"

"What? Where, here? This area? ...Did it come off? Or is it still there?"

Taiga noisily licked the chocolate off the edges of her lips once again, looking upwards curiously at Ryuuji's face stiffly staring at her. Ryuuji froze, his brows knitting, looking hard at Taiga's face. He froze. It seemed like all the chocolate was gone, and though Taiga was scrubbing and wiping around her mouth with the tissue, that wasn't it. That wasn't it. That was no longer the topic already.

"Stop. ...You. ...You, well..."

"Eh?"

"... You... what's going on?"

Ryuuji took hold of Taiga's wrist, gently holding her back. "A little too familiar, aren't we!", said Taiga (naturally), baring her fangs.

"...just as I thought..."

Ryuuji, took his hand away, staring and overcome with surprise. When he grabbed Taiga's wrist, what an odd plumpness, ...what he felt before, in the moment when he grabbed her wrist, "helpless" or "petite" or "I knew you would break it accidentally if you tried hard", that feeling completely left. How terrible, fa...fat, ness...

"Taiga..."

"...disgusting. Look at this!"

He stared at Taiga's white face. Taiga, with a strange touch of awkwardness, looked the other way. She's pretty, he thought. She had big eyes, a refined nose, lips like flower petals too, and today she was also dressed nicely. Taiga is always a beautiful person. But, strangely, isn't that area rather rounded? Her jaw line

was sharp and hard, like cut glass, but now there's a surprising curve around the neck. Proper for supporting such a small face, her neck was slender, graceful like a crane or swan, perhaps not quite so much, more like what... a duck? ...Sort of.

"...you..."

Gulp, Ryuuji stared straight at Taiga's eyes, looking at her sharply. And, "Is there a little bit more of you?"

Say it.

"...you must have gained some weight..."

Said.

He went and said it.

He looked down at Taiga's shaking shoulders. Ryuuji slowly bent his body, methodically and gently looking for alterations to her uniform jacket stitching.

"...Oh...!"

"Well, you're wrong! It's no big deal!"

There is no mistake. And not only that: Her skirt hook was undone. The fastener was not closed. Her neat waist was undone.

"Summer clothes made to the same size because, look, I'm not wearing winter clothes underneath! It's simply too tight."

"...Whatcha wearin'? What, are, you wearing...?"

"...Ca, cami..."

Fat.

Taiga, fat.

Which at this point was not surprising. It's only natural, to the extent she was eating, eating and eating, that she would naturally gain weight, even ignoring her idle lifestyle. Rather, that until now he hadn't been aware of Taiga getting fat was a wonder. Isn't this kind of thing alright for a grown woman? It's no excuse. Ryuuji was about to open his mouth and talk about Taiga getting her just desserts, --- but he stopped. He swallowed what he was about to say. His thoughts were spinning.

Who prepares Taiga's meals?

I do.

Who manages Taiga's daily life?

I do.

...That which was from the start a vain hope, was no longer, as it was now a fact. Grim reality. Taiga simply covers part of the monthly expenses. You cannot escape responsibility. In other words, Taiga's getting fat... was his fault?

Great. The ground under Ryuuji's feet was shifting. Health management is housewife's work, and the first principle of cooking is health. Nonetheless, nonetheless, she gained weight. Entrusted from out of the blue with a young lady, and from his cooking, under his care, she seems to have gotten fat! His pride crumbling down around him, his "you make a rather good housewife" conceit collapsing, Ryuuji's ego itself made a rattling noise as it fell apart. Spoiled brats getting gifts of soda, meats and candy, chubby elementary school students with their splendid metabolisms completely finished --- In time, he would wind up looking like a typical bad parent like you see on television. He stared at his hands, angrily shaking.

"B...B...Because I've eaten freely...! Because of that, you've gotten fat...!"

What!? Taiga's eyes got real big.

"Hold on, why don't you stop that!? I am not getting fat! I'm not joking, I don't have the genes for getting fat! Recently the food's been really good! That's the truth! There's been plenty too! That's the truth too! What with potatoes, pumpkins, chestnuts, fall truly is my favorite time! But with my muscles, how much I eat doesn't affect my body very much."

"In fact you would have to, with all your heart! Ah! I understand now ... it was because you were wearing UNIQLO!? Those clothes looked baggy!"

" ... ---♪"

Taiga held her tongue, turning the other way and whistling.

"Youuuuu, you, you,... you, what are you doing? Ten thousand already, twenty thousand already, making frilly dresses you can't wear, you, you, you... ah!

WHAT A WAAAASTE!!!"

Going crazy, Ryuuji was fainting in agony. Tiptoe, he spun around like a top. "What's going on with Taka-chan?" "Must be puberty..." In the background, the carefree voices of their friends could be heard. It's awful! Nobody understands his pain, this time enough to tear the top off his head.

"What's wrong Takasu-kun? If you get too excited you'll give yourself a stroke!"

"...!"

A voice calling from behind, right behind. Turning around, Ryuuji was about to die.

"Oh, you're eating chocolate. Yooo! Have tea with me, yo!"

Pretty! And pointing her finger and winking at Taiga is seen a strange girl, Kushieda Minori – strange but funny, shining on Ryuuji like the sun. A spinning, sparkling golden goddess. Cute and bright, he had an unrequited love and admiration for her; it was Taiga's buddy Minori.

"Minorin..."

"What's up, how're ya doin' Taiga. Look here! Girl chocolate! Can I have some?"

"Y, yes..."

"Hehe, then one piece stolen. I've recently gained some weight, so my diet warrior self is coming back to life. Ah, but, too well! Could I have another?"

"Here you go, here you go..."

Minori's whole face a smile, she tossed Taiga's chocolate into her mouth, one piece after another.

"Ku, Kushieda..."

"What's up, Takasu-kun?"

"... Why don't you take the rest of Taiga's chocolate...recently that one's been eating a lot."

"Eh? That's OK, I've got enough already. What matters most is that I am a diet

warrior, as I said a moment ago."

With a smiling face, Ryuuji's gaze returned from Taiga's box of chocolates to the form of Minori and stayed there. Hair curled up around the shoulders, dark suntan finally missing from her face, both eyes glittering brightly, well-formed body wrapped in a school uniform, very very, aah, how cute... well, becoming. That's not it, that's not the case now.

"... Kushieda diets when she needs to. Where's the extra weight?"

"But I do! You can't see my belly nor my thighs, which is where things usually go south. Really, with me forever worrying about diets, I'm seriously not in danger. I tell you that I love to eat, from the start I've been the eating type. I feel relaxed at the moment, but wait wait wait wait..."

"... Taiga, too, because she loves to eat, is really the eating type..."

"But Taiga eats yet stays thin naturally, right? Like, she has such slender tapering bones, like, completely, eternally beautiful girl's fragrance floating about, petite, like. I'm really jealous."

"...Slender? Petite? ... Really, truly, is that so? You don't really notice the things that are always around you."

"Takasu-kun buddy, that's nonsense, look! Taiga's here today as always, slender, petite..."

Looking back, Minori laughed while staring at Taiga.

Taiga averted her eyes.

"...Oh...? Taiga's appearance..."

Minori gripped Taiga's chin, turning it up. Licking her lips while staring, she then turned it down also. Taiga was at her mercy, but couldn't utter even a word of complaint. Eventually Minori let go, one word, "Aiyaaa..." was all she said. Then she turned to face Ryuuji.

"Takasu-kun. Tonight will be the judgment!"

"...for sure?"

"What then? It can be awful when Minorin becomes Ryuuji's guru! Judging

what!?"

Finally Taiga got up and kicked her seat. Pock, round cheeks inflated, clinging to Minori's chest, like she were trying to throw a tantrum to put your teeth on edge.

"You have no idea, ... do you?"

"I have no idea!"

Minori had no choice but to bite back, shake her head and cry out, "---Don't leave! Black Amin!"

It had to be an accident, but such incredible timing for once! The classroom door opened with a creak, and conversation in a beautiful voice gave a flowery atmosphere to 2-C. Kawashima Ami appeared. Accompanied by her good friends Kihara Maya and Kashii Nanako, while rubbing on hand cream,

"*Yawn...* the next class is math? I'm tired, perhaps I'll sleep~"

"Now there, Ami-chan, tomorrow's Saturday, we'll have the day off so hang in there."

"Is that so ♥? Anyway, I'm looking forward to tomorrow ♥."

The attention of all the guys was greedily grabbed by that sweet voice. That person, with the wonderfully well shaped hourglass figure. Her long, straight, glossy hair glistened. Glowing the color of lilac flowers, with skin fair beyond pearls. Her eyes were like jewels, watery like a Chihuahua's. Ami looked like an active-duty high school girl model, smiling while she made her entrance, even classroom's hazy air, smelling of gym shoes, could be seen changing at once for the better.

And that angel's glance, it was casually directed at Taiga. Anything interesting? She tossed her head once and averted her gaze, however,

"...Eh!?"

She did a double take. She looked everything over really quick, not even needing her unnaturally twisted insight. Then the angel strode over. "Nya~", she said, giving a peek at her true nature. "Taiga?", she said, grinning maliciously.

"W, what is it, Baka-chii! Don't you dare come closer! I'll go berserk!"

She was getting ferocious.

"Hey, Taiga-chan... I'm getting a feeling, but... are you, perhaps, lately... gaining weight?"

"!?"

Hahahahahahaha -- ☆ That so figures, she gained weight! -- ☆ Fall appetite is so funny! -- ☆ Ami's body shook and twisted, she was laughing so hard.

"Shh! Stop that, Ami-chan, it's not that bad if it's said clearly! Everybody's in shock from how you said it!"

Nanako now came up to make extra sure.

"It's OK, Taiga-chan. As a slightly plumper person, you may be able to get one of the boys your own age, really. ...Personally, I prefer upperclassmen."

Grinning, with a strangely seductive smile, she ignored Taiga's attempts to shoo her away.

"S, stop it! Your mole is going to touch me!"

Taiga shook off Nanako's hand, scowling at Ami. She summoned the awful wicked witch to Minori.

"Blasted Baka-chi--, I am not fat! That can't be right!"

"Hey you, don't you even realize? If that's the case, Ami-chan is going to show you. You've lately been gaining weight? Seriously. This is only about eating, right?"

Ami had casually confiscated the box of almond chocolate a little bit ago. Taiga was trying with all her might to take it back,

"It, it wasn't just chocolate that made me gain weight!"

Let's show her! At that signal, "Ah...", "Really...", "Oh...!", Ami, Maya and Nanoko, 2-C's official pretty-girl trio, tried to show off their slender waists, standing in a line, arm-to-arm as a team.



"Taiga--, you know what? My dinner last night. Bamboo shoots it was, bamboo shoots."

"For me, shiitake mushrooms. Black tea afterwards."

"And I had [lotus roots!](#)"

"Oh...", Ryuuji shuddered instinctively. Minori also shuddered. Especially Taiga, staring at the three girls as if she were seeing a ghost. "Fuu", Ami took a breath and continued.

"As a result, we girls always have a body fat percentage of 10%. Our clothing is size 7. That's a Small. Our bluejeans have 24-inch waists. ... Because we want to be that way, we are always denying ourselves to the max. Carbohydrates morning and noon only. If by chance after school we go for tea, that evening we have some 27 kcal seaweed soup from the vendor at the train station. Without tea, the evening is what matters, up to 400 kcal. If there's time, we may go walking, work with a balance-ball, do pelvic exercises, enlist [Billy](#), or go to the gym. In short, we super, super, super deny ourselves. We go to great lengths. I can't stand it that someone like you, who's eating all the time, can wind up with the same figure as we have! Without effort, without self-denial, you do the impossible. With baggage like that, you should be super fat. That's really good ♥"

This could frankly and truly be called a delicate matter. Ryuuji gasped, then laughed aloud at the sight of Ami. Miss Witch was summoned to the fore, but Minori, looking startled, gave a signal for everybody to stop. And she reached over to Taiga, who had suffered ten minutes of all kinds of shocks,

"Oy, it's about time for the lesson. Are you prepared? Ami, get back to your seat, too. Takasu, how long are you going to wander about? ...Hey, Aisaka. I just noticed, but recently the atmosphere has been pretty healthy. Why does it seem you're a bit rounder?"

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeee!", she squeaked. It was the final blow. The class president Yuusaku Kitamura was the origin of this sudden sexual harassment that was completely free of ill will, but equally free of any delicacy. Nowadays this overly serious person with an unusual pudding-bowl haircut, his clean-cut handsome face hidden by silver-rimmed glasses, to tell you the truth, is Taiga's crush. He's Ryuuji's friend, too.

Hurriedly propping up Taiga, who was dizzy and starting to faint, Ryuuji reflexively became indignant.

"Ta, Taiga, don't do anything rash... Hey, Kitamura! Idiot! Where's your tact?!"

"Eh? What?"

"What else? You! You! Idiot!"

"Eh? Idiot? ... Oh, this...!"

And then, exhaustion. Kitamura's pant's zipper was wide open, revealing his shirt-tail.

"...Taiga... Oy, are you OK? By any chance did you see anything of Kitamura's zone?"

"I didn't see anything... I didn't see, but, Ryuuji, Minori... I... I... I have gained weight... I'm overweight... I already knew! No, in truth I did it! I can't run from it!"

Sinking into to her chair, Taiga buried her head in her hands.

"Taiga... what's done is done. I understand... You must go on a diet. I'll do it with you. We'll do it together. I'll make sure it happens."

"Try!" Teary eyed, but with her head raised, Taiga cried, defeated.

"Gyaaa! No way! Bamboo shoots, shiitake, lotus roots, no way!"

It seems the pretty-girl trio had planted a bit too much trauma in Taiga. Minori was revealed as a true friend, gently patting that head.

"It's OK, Taiga! Leave it to the veteran diet warrior Minorin. We can come up with a fun plan that doesn't require us to be so extreme about what foods we eat!"

Chapter 2

Fall-Fattened Tiger

Chapter 2[[edit](#)]

☆Minori's Diet Memo☆

Item 1! <Healthy eating!>

Eating well balanced meals. Of course, we cannot eat too much, but if stress builds up due to insufficient food, it is meaningless. After eating well, go running flat out for an hour.

Item 2! <Healthy Exercise!>

After leaving club activities, run flat out for two hours. Returning from school also, avoid accidents by running flat out. Get a part time job, then run flat out all the way home from your job.

Item 3! <Always Keep Moving!>

Don't sit still at home. Don't rest. Always have a plastic water bottle in your hand. If you go to the bathroom, then afterwards go for a walk, thirty minutes at a flat out run. If you watch the television, then afterwards go for a walk, fifteen minutes long at a flat out run. If you chat on the telephone, then afterwards go for a walk, after the call is over run flat out.

Item 4! <Pamper yourself every now and then!>

If the effort wears on you, then once in a while it's all right to have a snack. If you have a snack, then go out for a walk, three hours of flat out running.

"...Huff...huff...huff..."

"...Huff...huff...huff..."

"...Huff...huff...huh..urp! Ack! ...Yech..."

"Taiga, wh... cough! ...Huff...huff...cough cough cough!"

"Yech... ye... yech..."

"... up ...!"

Off to a bad start.

It seems both of them wound up puking.

Eight o'clock in the evening, a bench in a small children's park. The two of them were in really bad shape. Ordinary exercise can be nothing more than a routine, but doing all-out sprints after eating is not a good thing. It didn't even bother Minori... Ryuuji clung to the bench, prostrate. Feeling nauseous, he frantically swallowed his bile. Poor Taiga, down on all fours, her nice ponytail all messed up, couldn't even resist when a toy poodle, out for a walk, came over and sniffed her.

"Ta, iga... to the bench..."

"...Huff...huff..."

Her jersey sleeve shaking, Taiga grabbed the bench at once and pulled herself up. Taiga said nothing, she was so exhausted she was unable to sit properly on the bench. Then for some reason she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and hit speed dial.

"Yo, Taiga! What's up?"

"...Huff... huff... Mi, Mino... rin..."

"What's all the excitement? Ah, wait a sec. ...hmm. ...yes, it's OK. What's up, what's going on?"

"... Minorin... that... that, from school, that diet memo you gave me, well it's a bit..."

"Ah, yes, yes. Are you putting it into practice?"

"...Impossible... coming from you, Minorin... walking and running flat out, is wrong, I think... people, usually, running like that, I think... as far as I've heard..."

"Are you kidding? Is that so? Taking the time to call while you're walking, at a flat out run? Wow! Beast! A flat out sprint on a fall evening sure feels good!"

"...Huff...huff... ..Excuse me, I'm feeling a little bad... panting..."

"Eh, have you got a cold? Take care to sleep warmly!"

The phone call over, Taiga put the phone away in her pocket. She simply said, "I think this is the first time Minorin and I disagree."

On the verge of fainting, dizziness making it hard to think, Ryuuji tried to add it all up. Dinner had, in itself, been quite a production. The main course was fish instead of meat. The side dishes were vegetables, full of natural carbohydrates. They expected to moderate their calories without having to suffer much. They were thinking to have their meals this way for a while. Nevertheless, it was a "moderate" degree. Taiga had a bit of trouble getting into her new fall outfit, a flesh-color leotard. This, even though it was new clothing. So of course, refusing to exercise was not an option.

However, for anybody but Minori, recklessly running and running flat out is impossible. They had learned by their own experience that Minori was rather strange. For a normal human being it should be good enough to walk instead of running flat-out. Nobody but Minori could have proposed that "whenever you say walk, it means running flat out". Once a day should be sufficient, provide that one deliberately and without fail takes the opportunity to walk.

"Chestnut! Let's go! Stop bothering the young lady's butt!"

At that moment, the toy poodle was very much absorbed in sniffing Taiga's rear, its feet splayed out stubbornly, looking up at Taiga with moist eyes and barking eagerly with a charming voice. Taiga looked it over.

"...What's with this little dog? Friendly little guy, he seems to be looking at me with love..."

"Kiyuun...", responding to that nose, "Ura!", she took off both her sneakers and went over in her stocking feet. "Ararara!", said the dog's owner, an astonished lady, as she pulled on the leash. The dog was very excited. "Haga!", without warning everything went crazy. Next thing you know, "A-hahaha-ha-haii-yahha-!", laughter sounded as the dog pushed its face to Taiga's feet, licked her socks, bug-eyed, belly showing while tears began to flow. In this world, there are truly all sorts of pets.

"... You, some kind of secretion must be coming from your feet..."

"It isn't a secretion. It's a pheromone. Shall we put some on your face?"

"No thanks, really. Just try doing that, and I'll die."

Quite embarrassed, the dog's owner mumbled, "Sorry about that", escaping as quick as she could with the crazy dog. Watching that figure, Ryuuji thought, *Dog, is it? ...Now I see. Things like that can be reasons to go walking.*

"...Dog, it's just as well. Going out for a walk every day is not fun. But, if walking becomes a natural daily routine, it really ought to be as good as dieting."

"Hey you! That's woman's figure, did you notice?"

Having spoken to Taiga, Ryuuji now bit his lip. Having only really noticed the curly-haired toy poodle, if he could get another look at the pet owner he would have to apologize. People like Taiga cannot be compared to people with normal metabolisms.

"What are those awful eyes of yours looking at? Oh, something else has gone wrong. We can't run anymore. That is, that guy is not likely to give up wandering around town. We absolutely have to go to the convenience store and do some shopping. Then we can have [oden](#). And ice cream. ...If you try to do like those three fools, every day eating only bamboo shoots, shiitake, lotus roots, all you can do is get frustrated... Arrgh, it's too unpleasant..."

"Absolutely, that."

Even in the best of times, Taiga is sullen by default. Ryuuji was exposed to the worst of her violence day after day, and what Taiga would be like, with yet more stress accumulating, getting yet more nervous, is terrifying to imagine. For the moment, easing the tension level by joking, the violent girl and the generous guy taking the abuse, the plan came into existence at the last moment. Turning it all into a joke is better than getting sent to the hospital. Hardly a matter for the police.

"... As far as extreme diets are concerned, I am opposed to them. Yet for us, there is still a way left."

"Eh, what, what? Ah, I have it! Liposuction!"

"Great. That should fly. Go ask an American celebrity."

Ryuuji got out his cell phone, looking for a particular address. Whether that sort of woman would be close to her phone on a Friday evening was a nice question... the call sounded twice, three times,

"... Eh, hello? So suddenly, it's a big surprise. What's up?"

Got through. It was their representative Japanese celebrity – Kawashima Ami.

"Oh, suddenly's no good. That's... a bit awkward, favors for both of you."

*

"---What's with you? My clothing hobby is not strange!"

"Bakachii is wonderfully fashion-conscious by habit. Unusual, her hobby."

They met Saturday, their day off, at ten in the morning. At the same station as the three went to before, in front of the ticket gate. The weather was nice.

The three looked at each other without being too obvious: the area around the station was a little more prosperous than where Ryuuji and Taiga lived.

Ryuuji was wearing a T-shirt and denim pants, a parka styled like a traditional [haori](#), and VANS sneakers. In his hand he had an eco-bag bought on a Kyoto field trip, a largish canvas tote bag from a famous store. Scary though his expression may be, his style was very much that of an ordinary high school boy. On the other hand, Ami was no less than you'd expect from a performer. On her small fist-like face there were Chanel-brand sunglasses. Her long hair was brought together in a bun, and over her long legs she wore cargo pants tied at the waist. On top, a thin, but probably absurdly high-priced tank top, with a knit cardigan over that, she was an aura model on display in a habitually simple style. Her sneakers were PUMA, but the tote she put to her shoulder was branded with the Chanel logo.

The problem was Taiga. Looking upon the scene, Ami had a scowl on her face.

"Rather unique, you might say... really making a statement, with both barrels! Aren't you separating yourself just a bit!?"

"Even looking trashy can be good. In any case, meeting up with Ryuuji and Bakachi was just an excuse. It would be rather strange if going to the gym has become unfashionable", Taiga answered, unruffled.

From the start, she really loved ruffles and lace. Overskirt with the front buttons undone, unfashionably wearing petticoats and underskirts inside, that was Taiga's standard fashion. Fluffed up and disheveled stuff, cardigans and sweaters too. Anyway, it's like she had made a vow to dress in layers, using knits with flowers and suchlike attached randomly here and there, really girly, really flowery, frilly, lacy and with live cotton. The whole thing's total price in a certain famous frilly brand turned out ridiculously high, and the first one should have been her favorite.

Taiga's chosen fashion for today, first of all, was a T-shirt. Looking like just a white T-shirt, in fact it was young lady's phys-ed class clothing, 'graduated' from the school. And then those tired old pajama pants. Gray and white striped, UNIQLO, they cost 980 yen. Barely wearing shoes, she had put on some rather cutesy girl-brand dress-up sneakers, and over the T-shirt she wore a windbreaker a few sizes too big. In fact, it looked like she was wearing one of Ryuuji's jackets.

"Heh", laughed Taiga, looking defiant.

"Well, Bakachii, it looks like we can't help but have you along with us. To be honest, my clothes aren't just frilly stuff. It's truly awful, having to dress this body for a little more volume. It's all about volume. Seriously, I do too much along that line. Size is not a reason for not going somewhere, but rather a reason why you cannot wear something. ... You can laugh, at least for today. Anyway, I owe you a trip to the gym. Going to the gym for first time in your life can be a problem, all the more because you don't have an experienced person by your side, and the going is rough. In fact, getting a good laugh might put you at ease. Go ahead and laugh, Bakachii. Laugh."

Through her light brown sunglasses, Ami looked carefully over Taiga's (more accurately, Ryuuji's) windbreaker. She double-checked the worn old T-shirt

inside. She stepped back, said "Uwaaa...", and shook her head.

"... Sorry, but I can't laugh. You're just too pathetic..."

Taiga quietly looked up at Ryuuji.

"... Sometimes apologizing is easier than laughing at someone, eh, Ryuuji..."

"It can't be helped. Well, it is right now. If you could slim down everything would be as before."

While Ryuuji and Taiga nodded at each other, agreeing in a easygoing manner, Ami, with a serious look on her face, finally took off her sunglasses.

"How can you two be so carefree about it all...! Honestly, you two talking about 'taking me with you to the gym', though I find it annoying to the core, something, Ami-chan, has now awoken. Rather volunteer minded, this feeling. Taiga dear, you are seriously dangerous. Your clothes don't really matter. Let's hurry up. If we don't get on our way to the gym soon, things could get pretty bad. Let's run, since it's not far!"

No sooner did she say that, then Ami as if inspired by Minori suddenly began to cross the street at a trot. Ryuuji and Taiga, rather confused, gave chase.

---Well, it seems we receive according to how we dress ourselves.

"...This place's atmosphere is surprisingly normal."

Ryuuji paid the 1500-yen visitor fee and changed into a rental outfit, a T-shirt and jersey shorts, then waited for the two girls to change, looking around at the machines lined up in a row. There was hardly anybody there, here and there a machine being used, really just neighborhood housewives, and by herself a rather plain office-worker.

In fact, Ami had been asked a few times for a personal tour of this gym by that fellow. It so happened that her parent's home was near to [Azabu](#), [Shirokane](#) and [Omotesandou](#). Having been brought to such a super-famous gym, they were slightly nervous with anticipation. Because she often stayed with relatives nearby, Ami was a current member and could bring them as guests. As far as Ryuuji was concerned, the place was more than good enough.

Whether or not it really suited him I cannot say, but for now he sat down on a

bench near the locker room. According to the map of the inside of the building, on this floor was space for machines, and, separated by glass, there seemed to be a few special workrooms set aside. The list of workrooms showed a wide variety of things available to do; eventually they planned to try out some of them. And in the basement there was a pool and sauna. If it weren't for Taiga's glare, he by all means would have gone to try it out.

Painfully he paid 1500 yen more than he had planned to, though in truth Ryuuji had more than enough. Of course they wanted to get over the gloom from their fall fatness, but still, right now, it was 1500 yen. Now that they had grudgingly paid, they got to experience the gym. *Glare*, his sanpaku eyes gloomily glowed.

"Takasu-kun, sorry to keep you waiting---"

"Sorry about that."

The girls came out of the locker room, Ami and Taiga making their appearance. Taiga, like Ryuuji, wore differently colored rental outfits, but Ami ---

"... What? ... What's that...?"

"What does it look like? I can dress down now and then too."

Ryuuji and Taiga simply left their complaint about Ami's appearance hanging in the air. "Wh, what?", said the knowing Ami, tilting her head as if in puzzlement, that body, her beautiful form showing through the light T-shirt and yoga pants. You might expect her to be a model with impeccable style, like some two-dimensional cartoon character, but you would be wrong. She wasn't what you might expect.

"'Kawashima's like this?', you were thinking for sure. Right, Taiga?"

"That's right. 'Bakachii dressing as expected', let's call it a base hit."

The two of them 'like this' proudly showed their forms, their high leg leotards awfully tight. And at their hips, scarves fluttered for some unknown reason.

"Huh!? What'd you say!? Do you have a problem with what I wear!? Just what were you expecting of me?"

"Nooo, Bakachii's wearing the bikini she used at the school pool. The gym

leotard pinched so she changed into something with a little more space."

"Ou!"

Right then, a lady with a cats-eye style leotard, a [punch-perm](#) hairstyle and too much makeup was about to cross in front of them. "Phew", there was a trail of too-strong perfume following her. Taiga escaped to the wall, scared, and Ryuuji reflexively held his nose.

"Wh, what now, something like a bad dream was going back and forth...!?"

"Ahh, it was, it was. All over town they say this place is a haunt of older ladies..."

Ami pinched her nose too, but soon got used to it. That time, a young female trainer noticed and rushed over.

"Kawashima-san, good afternoon! Do you have friends with you today?"

"Ah, good afternoon--! Thank you so much--! These two haven't been getting enough exercise recently, could they try a visit? (♥)"

"Is that so? Aw---!"

She wore a professional smile, but for a moment it stiffened in fear. Of course, Ryuuji's face begged for such thing to happen. They had kind of gotten used to it... Ryuuji firmly concealed his chagrin, to the last a gentleman, yet still rather a high school student,

"...Takasu is my name. I am just starting gym, so please show me what I must do."

He bowed his head gravely. When you know you look like a gangster, it looks good... and it's the very easiest thing to do. The trainer nodded once rather like she recognized. "L, let's start this afternoon! There are many things we can try, ok?", she said, her professional smile returning. Then she looked towards Taiga.

"This way, you're Kawashima-sama's friend, aren't you! Hey, aren't you the pretty one! Ah, perhaps, might you be one of her model friends?"

Before Taiga could say anything,

"No way! How can somebody like me hang out with such as them--! They're a

bunch of classmates--! Commoners they are, just commoners--! It's just that we've gotten too fat from the fall!"

Taiga's back showed insult in its very lines. Ryuuji gasped, his breath taken away. Seeing how things were going, Ami winked so she might not wind up a corpse. But her worry was unfounded.

"...Fattened by fall, Aisaka am I."

She gave a tortured shout, and then nodded. Taiga looked like she really planned to return and change back to her flesh-colored leotard. The trainer smiled and laughed,

"If that's so, then first of all, shall we go over there and check your body fat and weight, and then put together a plan?"

"Well, rather than that, could we try some of the various kinds of personal training here?"

--- *Could you give us 1,500 yen worth?* The Scrooge in Ryuuji wanted him to say that. The line of machines on this floor wasn't all that interesting, after all, since they didn't want to exercise alone. The young lady trainer smiled and nodded,

"In that case, just past studio B the beginner's basic yoga course is about to start. Would that be good for a warm-up?"

Three sets of eyes gleamed. The first stage would be yoga.

"Here's a yoga mat. Spread it out."

Ami was handed a rolled up mat. Ryuuji and Taiga were a bit taken aback. The instructor wasn't there yet, but in the studio at least ten young women were each in their places, drinking water and doing their stretches. They were all getting used to the scene: though it was a beginner's course, the truth was that Ryuuji and Taiga seemed to be the only couple starting personal training.

"... So that you won't be embarrassed, I will show you how to do it."

"Oh, me too. Kawashima will be used to this, right? Since you're free, go to that place in the middle of the front row."

"Eh? Even though I was over there... ah, I'll do it over here."

Together in a corner near the wall, the three of them laid out their mats. The rest of the people seemed to have come alone. Ryuuji's group talked while drinking,

"Wh, what... This is the real thing, isn't it? The one guy here will show you that learning by doing is best."

Ryuuji's voice, even lowered, was strangely conspicuous against the healing music in the background. Ami looked back while seated in front in a cross-legged pose, Indian style.

"Just relax yourself. At your own pace, if you can just pose you'll be fine."

She slipped off her thin T-shirt in a smooth motion. High-leg leotard nearly overdoing it, her yoga pants and navel-showing sports bra showed her form rather nicely. "Oh", "Seems to have a habit of showing herself off", Ryuuji and Taiga's voices were a bit upset, but Ami said "This is best for yoga time."

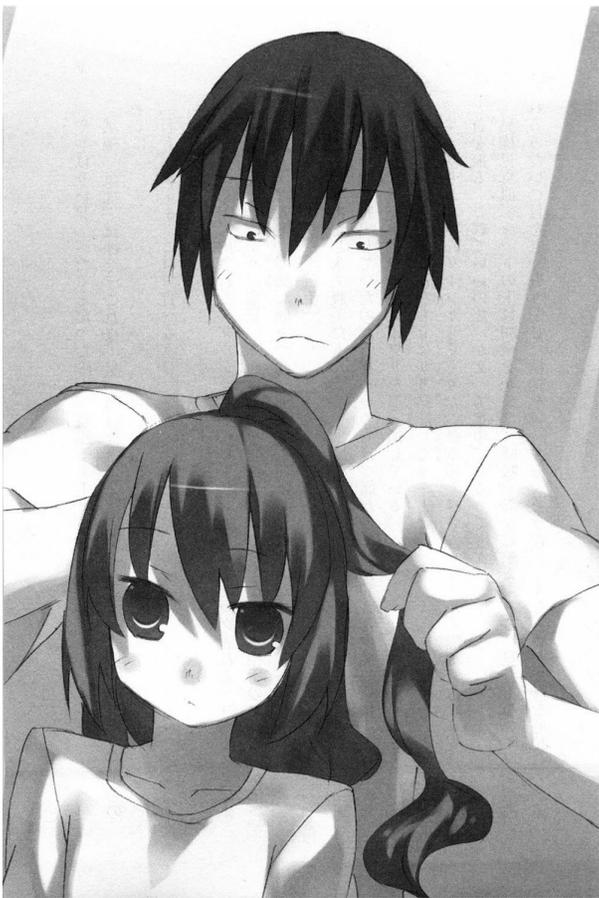
Now that you mention it, there was an awful lot of exposure all around. Low-riser yoga pants fitting so tightly the panty lines were visible, showing their navels, several showing their bellies, several more in tank-tops, T-shirts clearly showing their body lines through the super-thin fabric everyone was wearing. Now that he realized this, Ryuuji didn't know where to direct his eyes. Even Ami in front him, flat bellied with spine clearly exposed, arms outstretched, so dazzling... but it couldn't be helped. Hardly so pretty as to be holy, she seemed rather too disagreeable to save.

"Ryuuji"

Shock! It was Taiga's voice over his shoulder. The strange thoughts drifting about this wholesome yoga studio seemed to have been discovered.

"Keep thinking like that and you're going to get kicked where the sun doesn't shine."

"...Ah, sure..."



Taiga was holding out several hairpins she'd brought stuck in the hem of her T-shirt. Ryuuji skillfully made a ponytail from her long soft curly hair. "Spoiler", said Ami, but, as for Ryuuji, his glance found a refuge: Taiga's very uncool rental wear. Ami, it goes without saying, but all the other young women's outfits, with their strangely realistic skin-like textures --- they were surrounded, every direction polished like a mirror. In every direction everything was completely visible, as if it were heaven, as if it were an ordeal---

"Wow, that's good! Even my head's doing well!"

"...Oh!"

--- *It's a test!*, thought Ryuuji, on the verge of shouting. *Phew!*, a whiff of strong perfume and before their bugged-out eyes there was the old lady, in yoga pants and yoga bra, suntanned yet creaking as she did her sit-ups. She was working hard, looking like Pharaoh with brown eye-liner dripping down her cheek (super scary!), her strangely long, silky, pitch-black hair also scary. From that direction came "Hey, I did it!" This looked to be a test without equal.

"Hey, stop teasing the guy! You wouldn't like it in his place!"

"But it's perfectly fine once in a while! Besides, we don't see too many young guys here--!"

"Oh! Here they come! Hayano-san hurry up! Here, here!"

"They're coming! Can you make some room, my friends are coming! Hey, I've heard the ugly lady instructor has quit!"

"Doesn't that just figure!? She gave up, of course!"

A test. A test. This was definitely a test. Before Ryuuji realized it, the [Aunt Squad](#) had gathered around.

"Hey, youngster! Want to eat some of this?"

"...!"

A bag of [shrimp chips](#) was held out to him. Through the yoga studio, healing music streamed down. For just that moment, Ryuuji's frightening face lost some of its force. At any rate, it wasn't scary for this bunch. Ami and Taiga, while vaguely rejecting the shrimp chips, let their eyes wander.

"Oh, Bakachii, arm-pit hair, arm-pit hair."

"Liar. It's been permanently removed."

Those guys must have been making their own escape. Not liking sitting in the center of the front row, the two had quietly moved, leaving Ryuuji as a sacrifice, the stranger passing through.

"Th, those guys... this time it's a conspiracy...!"

A towering impregnable wall of old ladies separated him from the area of younger women. "Ay", muttered Ryuuji, and shook his head. This was rather nice. Cutting through to get back would be a problem.

He tried to get ready, emulating the others by sitting on the mat and breathing quietly. Trying to achieve peace of mind, he closed his eyes tightly to escape from the distractions around him. Yes, a strange warm feeling was suddenly coming over him, though the aura coming from the withered old lady was preferable somehow.

"Hahaha! She's gotten fat too!" "Gyahaha! She's a housewife!" "It's because that one's house is poor!" "Hahaha! Want some shrimp chips!?" "Here, here, they've arrived! Yoshida-san, here!"

He didn't want to hear --- no, he couldn't hear anything. His heart was clear and serene, like still water. He hadn't been gone too long from the world of old ladies when the female instructor showed up. In gray yoga pants and gray bra. But by then Ryuuji's breathing had settled down, having been set in order.

"We're running late, so let's get started with the lesson. ...Breathe slowly... breathe in... breathe out... in... out... concentrate below your navel... in... out... relaax... relaax..."

"This one's the new teacher?" "Resembles a chicken." ... Relaax...

"Slowly... arms towards the ceiling... that's right... breathe... stick out your chest... relaax..."

Sitting [seiza](#)-style with arms uplifted, they bent their bodies. Filling their lungs, oxygen got down to their navel. "It's hot in here!" "Isn't the A/C working!?" ... In... Out...

"Knees as they are... put your hands out front. Lower your head to the floor... slowly, and stretch as if you were drawing a big circle with the top of your head. Keep it there."

They grunted as they bent backwards to the [Nagoya Castle killer whale](#) pose. It wasn't painful, the female teacher's peaceful way of speaking keeping even Ryuuji calm. "You couldn't do it! Hahaha!" "Eh, your way!? No way! I have bad hips!" "I'm gonna take a little break!" ...Keep going.

"Slowly get up... right hand to the right ankle, left hand in the air... feet spread wide, slowly... hold..."

Hold it steady... "What are we going to do for lunch!?" "That French place was awful!" "Rather expensive for what they give you!" ...Switch to the other side and hold. Through all the twisting and stretching, Ryuuji had his eyes half closed. Concentrate on your navel... ah, has Taiga fooled them...? I don't know...

"Don't force your body. Stand straight up... both hands raised up. Breathe deeply. Quietly... deeply. Close your eyes... open up your mind. Breathe together, move your bodies... keep your right hand straight in front. Lift your left leg behind you... bending your knees is OK, grab your ankle with your left hand as gently as you can... right leg steady... hold it there."

...I did it.

Ryuuji finished, cleanly snapping to one leg, purity coming from the area of his navel as if it were a lotus flower blossoming. He felt his senses open up. Grandma's voice? Didn't I hear... Has Taiga fooled them again? I don't know...

Keep it there...

"Those old ladies made such a racket, I was completely unable to concentrate!"

"In your case, you did whatever poses you felt like doing. I couldn't concentrate either because of it. Hey, Takasu-kun. ... Takasu-kun?"

"...Ryuuji are you listening? ... Ah, this guy's [*chakra*](#) is open. Oy!"

Lightly poked, "Huh!", he returned to his senses. Ryuuji opened his eyes. Standing stock-still in front of the workout room, he realized that the yoga class was completely over. He felt pleasantly tired, and had a light sweat... his whole body felt lighter, but even more than that his head was clear. He instinctively approved.

"It seems that somehow ... I might like yoga...!"

Kinda looks like it, Ami nodded,

"For even one person to concentrate that way in the midst of all the racket from the Aunt Squad, that's quite something. Especially with all those mirrors, you had to be a strangely forceful kind of person."

"Of course, in normal life, many things may be forcing you..."

"Uh..."

"...What are you two trying to say about me? I'm better than that!"

Glare! Taiga frowned.

"Such quiet exercise won't help to lose weight, Bakachii! You have to exercise hard enough to get breathing hard!"

"Yeah yeah, of course that's so. In the end, it was a warm-up exercise, after all, I didn't want to squash you... race you to the machines? We can watch DVDs."

"Eh!? Would that be machines like treadmills? No way for me, after that workout room, I'm restless to work up a sweat dancing!"

"Selfish fellow... ah, there's something. Yes, yes, something that fits you to a tee..."

With Ami leading, Taiga and Ryuuji filed out of the glass-enclosed studio. Adult men and women performed ballet together in a studio, in another there were older people using the balance ball. There weren't a lot of obvious amateurs amusing themselves with intense hip-hop dance in another studio. "So many things to do...", said Ryuuji interestedly, looking around through the glass.

Before long, for some reason or other, a high pitched sound became audible,

"...Dancing to work up a sweat, wasn't that what you described? If that's the case, here's your wish."

Ami came to a stop, pointing with her finger at the studio before her. Ryuuji and Taiga both realized where they were, and were frozen in astonishment.

"Aerobics – HARD", was written on the note naming the class in that studio, a butterfly --- no, a [moth](#) fluttered wildly about. Unfortunately, the cats-eye lady was already there. There was somebody in very bright, shocking pink tights, too. There was an middle-aged guy with a deep tan wearing a V-neck leotard (!) that exposed one of his nipples, another guy with purple, gold-spangled leg-warmers, a few other guys in ordinary jerseys, another guy so hugely overweight he could have been a sumo wrestler, and another person of unknown gender and unknown age, but so light and flexible he/she could do a triple spin easily.

There was a spray of sweat. The glass fogged up. A euro beat began. The teacher was really something else. "Hey, turn! One, two, three, four, hey turn. One, two, three, four, next time do it really good. Ready...set! Yeah, hey!" "Yeah, hey!" "Phew. Ah, I can't! Can't! Ow!" "Whoa!"

Bambambambam! Their bodies shook, and they all popped and jumped up at the same time like a bunch of shellfish. From a crouching pose, "...Hah!", they looked up. Clap! Clap! Clapping their hands, they started doing the Two-Step! Two-Step!

"...This is scary..."

Taiga sighed, and muttered. What might it be? Ami looked at Taiga, "We girls don't want to do this. We'll just do some of the quiet exercise machines." Ryuuji didn't raise any objections. The three of them tried to leave quietly without anybody else seeing them,

"Noooo! Wait! Hey, come on!"

Startled, without thinking, the three of them turned around. Turning towards the heat-fogged glass, the chief moth, who was wearing a full-length gleaming golden tight and exuded a powerful feeling of sweat, that female (?) teacher spun around while he/she locked on to the three people trying to learn by doing. Their feet frozen in horror, they missed their chance to escape.

"Hey! Come on! Hey! Come on!"

"In-cha, in-cha", clapping time, while tapping a little cool-down step, he/she repeated through the glass at the students, "Come on! Come on!". Keeping the same expression, making the same look, keeping up the same step. 'No way, impossible, seriously,' the three thought as they slowly stepped back.

"What an experience! Aoww!"

Finally the spell on the door broke, and the golden moth appeared in the corridor. "Ewww!" "Yech!" "No way!" In nothing flat, the three of them were entangled, running about screaming and trying to escape, the smells of perfume, sweat and sneakers mixing together and crowded into that stuffy, hellish space. Their ears hurting to death from the high tension Euro beat, the teacher let out a shout through the mike, "No way, this can't happen!" "Forgive me!" "No way, no way, no way, no way, no way" Dumped into the middle of the dancing crowd, the three's voices were heard by no-one. And so a new round started.

"Heeeyyyy! Come!"

Bah, everybody jumped up together, legs spread wide. The three were dumbfounded by the thunderous noise. But they really couldn't help it, at any rate in this crowd, so reckless, magnificent and furious was their abandon. "Oh!"

"So, sorr...ouch!" "Hol, no! Sto...ah!" Arms bumped, stomach struck. Knocked down on their butt, trampled to death. Can't stop, nobody can stop. Not wanting to die, you have to move like everyone else.

"Step! Step! Right! Left! Step! Step! Slow turn! Hmm... wow! Ha!"

Sweat flew around, glittering. Their heads were soaking wet.

At that moment, Ami's hair came undone softly and fluttered about in the air. "Mm, sexy!", came a voice, Ami said "Wow!", and turned a bit more. "Hey!" At the sound, Ryuuji lifted his face, "Smile!" called the voice. Ryuuji answered "No!", showing his teeth. My face may be scary, but I'm OK with that. Taiga just kept dancing. Shake you booty! "Yahoo!" Bend backwards, pose to the max! Snap your fingers and jump with your legs spread! "Unnh...", curling the body, moving forward on tiptoes, "Experience!" --- And while you shout all together, you're done! And everybody collapsed, the lesson done!

Waah... from the midst of the heat came applause, applause, and great shouts of joy...

--- "Huff, huff," ...painful gasps. Ryuuji, feeling he had lost something of himself, forgetting about the two girls, wept alone in the studio.

Chapter 3

Fall-Fattened Tiger

Chapter 3[[edit](#)]

It was no big deal.

That one was just bitten by a dog.

Putting an end to the situation, they went to try out the quiet exercise machines, and next thing you know it was one o'clock. With lunchtime approaching, they exercised with all their might, pushing the hardware to its limit for ten minutes, finishing up in this area. Ryuuji, Taiga and Ami separated and headed for the locker rooms.

Ryuuji took a quick shower, dried his hair and got dressed, but the two girls were not ready yet. While the girls took their time getting changed, Ryuuji sat on a bench, quietly waiting. He was discovered again by the cats-eye lady, who was drifting by. "Hey!", she waved, "Hi!", he replied somewhat uneasily.

Aerobics had made him forget the yoga class. Yoga suited him. He quietly breathed the way he had learned while constantly checking his e-mail with his cell phone. Even so it was slow, and his bored face looked fearsome whenever he looked over his shoulder towards the girl's locker room.

Yiiippesss...

An echoing shriek, "What's this? What's this?", made everybody turn and look. The cat's eye lady turned, too. Staff rushed over to the locker room, then,

"Oh...!?"

Ryuuji held his breath.

Accompanied by staff, Ami "H, heavy...!", appeared burdened. It was Taiga. Her face was pale, already at death's door. Ryuuji, in haste and confusion, rushed over and asked,

"What's happened!? Are you anemic!?"

Taiga couldn't say anything, so Ami answered.

"...It was the crazy body-fat meter in the locker room. After all the exercise, what do you think it would show? Once it settled down... Taiga was 'chubby'..."

"Ch...chubby...!"

"After that 'You have lost weight but are still overweight. This is normal.', it seems it was a bit much for her, to be impartially declared a little fat. Looks like she collapsed from the shock."

Taiga, lifted up on her old enemy Ami's back, couldn't even lift her head. For the moment Ami carried Taiga piggyback --- why? Her short body felt super, super heavy. Indeed, wasn't she a little chubby?

"Ta, Taiga, you're doing OK... right? Coming here again would be OK... wouldn't it? Yes, you might as well buy a membership. I can't take care of the financial arrangements, though."

"That's true. I would be able to come here every week. Seriously, let's do the machines."

"...Sounds good... good enough..."

"I'll do my best to do as you say, OK? We'll refrain from snacking, and we'll watch our meals."

"...If you say so... I've tried hard at this, I'm not all that good... not at all..."

"Sounds like this isn't your first try at this."

"...No it isn't... rather... Please forget about my problems... Thank you for what you've done so far..."

Startled, Ami's and Taiga's eyes met. Taiga was a bit depressed, from what could be seen.

Ami chewed on the earpiece of her sunglasses, looking a bit worried. "Yes. So it is.", she said, raising her eyebrows.

"You are rather down, aren't you? ... Well, we've been given an unusual sight: Ami-chan pitching in and helping out."

"It's OK, don't bother... I'm not a [flasher](#)..."

"So nice a mouth, you'll pay for that. 'Thank you very much Ami! I got so thin thanks to you, Ami!', you should always try to say."

--- *What on earth was she thinking?* In the end, Ami had a good laugh.

*

Monday, the start of a new week.

"Yo! Aren't you feeling well, Taiga? A cold, I suppose? Ah, maybe the extreme diet?"

"...Shh. That word isn't allowed anymore."

"Oooh. ...So what now?"

At the usual meeting place, the corner with the [Keyaki](#) tree. Minori frowned while looking worriedly at Taiga's depressed-looking face. Taiga, silent, hanging her head in shame, absent-mindedly walked by herself.

Taiga's spirits had not yet recovered from that first time at the gym. It would have been rather nice if only that appetite would have just disappeared, but Taiga went back to overeating because of stress, and her little bit of extra weight just wasn't going away. Because of that excess stress piling up... a nasty roulette wheel had long ago started spinning.

"Taiga... Are you OK...? Hey, heey..."

"..."

Minori's call wasn't answered. The wind blew. Underfoot, dry leaves whirled around from the chilly breeze. Right at that moment, Ryuuji sighed for some reason.

Looking back the way they came, for some reason they saw about a dozen guys in school uniforms that looked like they were running towards them, paper bags covering their heads. Was this a bad dream? It had to be. Ryuuji blinked over and over again, dumbfounded and at a loss for words. "The ground isn't... the

ground is shaking!", cried Minori ... transforming into a withered old hag and trembling.

Taiga also noticed the strange situation, and surprised, lifted up her head. *What is this paper-bag gang up to?*, she was thinking.

"Eh!? What!?"

Without saying anything, they grabbed both of Taiga's arms. It took two guys, arms in arm, firmly locked. As might be expected in such unexpected circumstances, even of the Palmtop Tiger, she was unable to shake off her bonds and simply raised an astonished shout. Then,

"Whooooooooooooa-----!"

"Run, Taiga-----!"

"Drop her weight she will, Taiga will lose her fat!"

The paper-bag gang shouted together. Still pinned by both shoulders perfectly, by brute force, those guys got Taiga running as fast as she could. Nonetheless, very politely, and before she knew it, there was a rope tied around her body, with a tire at the end of it. "Whaaaa! Wha, what are you guys?" --- Even while Taiga was shouting, they didn't stop running. If she had lifted her feet, as it was she would simply drift, unavoidably carried along.

In a daze after having seen it all happen, Ryuuji suddenly realized something. One of the voices coming from the paper bags sounded like one of Noto's close friends. It sounded familiar, like one he had heard amongst his classmates.

"Waahhh... They must be demons!"

"May I say... Taiga, that we've taken you for ride!?"

She exchanged a confused look with Minori and then, "He-llo ♥" --- From behind her, close to her ears, whispered a sweet voice. It was Ami.

"Oh! Hello Amin! Did you see just now!? Taiga was kidnapped by demons!"

"Yep yep I saw it, I saw it. It was scary! ... Really something."

"He he", said Ami towards Minori and Ryuuji, her cute, rather small face smiling.

"Look, they're the boys from our class. You see, yesterday we had a little discussion to come up with ideas. 'To tell the truth, Taiga was a bit worried about her weight, Takasu-kun was concerned about losing weight too, and I requested the help of two of the strongest guys. Getting Taiga thin again inside of one week, that was our goal. We made a game where if she lost, she would have to stop dating Takasu-kun. What do we do?' If word of this game were to spread around the rumor mill... Takasu-kun? Did you hear me?"

"... Ha! At the worst time, he goes off into a trance! Hey, you, how dare you treat all this like some huge joke...!"

"Takasu-kun is a really solid guy!"

With that support from Minori, Ryuuji somehow pulled himself out of wherever he was, and was able to finish listening to what had been said.

"Then OK, 'For the sake of Ami-chan we guys are going to get Taiga thin in one week!' Everybody looks all fired up. The guys are really nice about it, so we might say that as far as Taiga's concerned, we have no worries, right?"

"Aamin, you're fantastic!"

The sound of Minori's hands clapping echoed. With an angelic smile, Ami spoke. "Minori-chan, that means that today you go with me to school! Would Takasu-kun like to come along with us too?"

And Ami really was fantastic. ... Well, more precisely, fantastic to the young men of 2-C. Ryuuji was going to attend no matter what, but from every direction came cries of "Why does Ami-chan give him attention!?", the other guys looking daggers at him. As usual, accompanied only by Kitamura, Nota and Haruta, he paid them no heed.

During recess, the guys shuffled off to put paper bags on their heads, so Taiga would not remember who it was that gagged her "St---op---it---!", and carried her away running.

Through the corridors. The grounds. The stairways. They gave up their free time for snacks, at mid-day break they would come and give a thorough inspection inside her lunchbox, and then again the paper bags, run-run-run-run! And so it was.

When they started, Taiga was often dragged along, otherwise her feet would be running foolishly in mid-air, being brought back down by the weight of the tire. Anyway, it was a sorry sight to see. But look! The second day, third day and fourth day she continued to improve, little by little, Taiga together with the paper-bag squad ran through the corridors faster and faster. Even with one of the paper-bag guys sitting on the tire, she ran easily, pulling it along. Like a workhorse... no, a hero magnificently advancing across the battlefield, like a warhorse she was.

"Well, she's learning discipline, looks like."

"Hey, look at that expression. She's like an animal born to run."

Carefree, Minori was like the wind pursuing Taiga. "Go for it!", called Ryuuji. "Shut up!", answered somebody further away.

Gradually it could be seen, more and more clearly, that Taiga's body was slimming down. First, she lost all the looseness in her waist, toning up completely and looking better. Sharp lined, tinged with wildness, chin pointed, even her cheeks sharp-edged. Her features somehow tinged with ferociousness, that look all the more fiery and bright. Her uniform-clad body was drawn in simple lines, nothing wasted, now better than ever. Quickly, easily, there weren't any slow parts to her. If you were to keep it up day after day, going to school, returning from school, during break-time and lunchtime, those tire-dashes could teach anybody discipline, don't you think? It may be only to get thinner, but it's super-healthy. Ryuuji tried to make low-calorie, high-protein meals, and made nothing between meals. In the classroom, in the street, in the supermarket, the members of the paper-bag gang stuck with their job. In the house she had freedom, but Taiga's body was so exhausted that at mealtime she just wanted to sleep, and after a healthy meal, she would fall dead asleep.

Taiga's muscles were being blessed more, now, naturally waking up to the running.

*

And so one week passed.

Taiga slimmed down splendidly. The perfect figure and even more so, her looks, her truly pretty looks, returned to what they were before Fall started.

And now. Start of the school day, a little before seven-thirty in the morning. Taiga sat quietly, cross-legged in the middle of classroom 2-C, wooden sword in hand, meditating. Her head was completely cool. She was sharpening her thoughts. First of all, she struck (swish!) the first guy who came in. And then she struck the next guy. Skipping the girls, she struck the next three. In short, she struck every guy but Kitamura. While she was at it, she even struck Ryuuji. And lastly, she struck Ami. A word of thanks, and a strike of the sword, to Ami-sama and Company. With that, the long painful diet week was over. ... It was finished, by this hand!

Heh heh, I'm nice, am I? Ah, maybe I fell in love? This isn't a joke, can't we just stop? For your information, it's just a whim. W-h-i-m.

"---Why did we work together so much for Taiga's sake?", they asked amongst themselves, "Is this what we get in return?" Ryuuji thought that comment rather Ami-like, and a bit laughable. Cutesy, mean-spirited, affected, but in the end... just let it pass. To that Ami he said, "It's a good start", though the words weren't really appropriate. A whim it may be, in exactly that sense. What isn't good about that?

"...Yes! It's done."

A little work was yet to be done, and already Taiga's share was headed to school, and his own share. And today one more. He was skipping lunch, since because of a certain somebody he could only eat salads and sort-of-sandwiches. Cooked brown rice and [hijiki](#), bean salad, fried marlin with mushrooms. Afterwards fruit, since the [kyoho grapes](#) had finally arrived. A bit sparing on the calories, but a fall lunch it was. Whether or not that she would accept it was another question. She was either a cutesy girl in a smiling iron mask, or at rare moments, a somewhat sad smile. Either way was fine: Ami was both. If they were together, she would wind up laughing in her peculiarly malicious way. In some ways Ami Kawashima was an idiot.

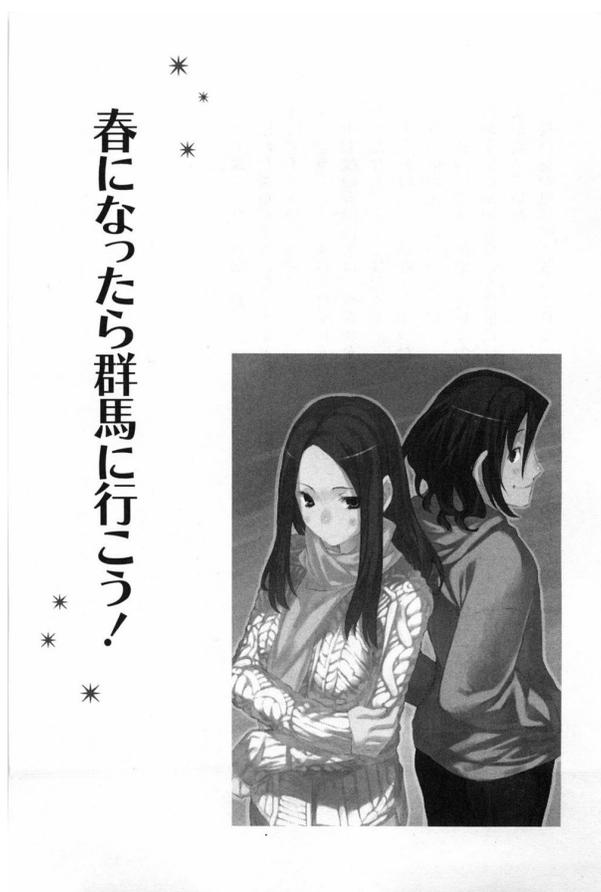
Ryuuji, after all this, unconcerned by the expectation of a hellish attack on

himself, wrapped three bentou nicely in differently colored mini-[furoshiki](#).

Chapter 1

Once Spring arrives, let's go to Gunma!

Chapter 1[[edit](#)]



Seventeen years old, it was evening.

The withered weeds coldly hid the riverside embankment, the usual way home. His nylon school-bag thrown into the basket of a granny-bike, loose pebbles from the bad road clanged against the metal of the bike. The late autumn wind blew coldly past his ears. He found himself forced to wear his trusty fleece hoodie under his school uniform jacket.

Seventeen year-old Haruta Kouji, was distractedly thinking while pedaling. The parka was a really good thing. ...But rather,

"...That woman, she went and jumped..."

The scene remained before his eyes.

After four in the afternoon. Nearly December, it was already starting to get

dark. The streetlights were coming on bit by bit, as he turned towards the bridge he could see them all lined up down the side. There, under the dim and gloomy light, a woman stood.

Her long hair could be seen, blown about by the wind. The face of the child-like person could not be seen, small in the middle of the bridge, standing alone.

---But, that was all. From just that scene, the thought "perhaps she may jump", came to his mind, because of a dumb conversation with his friends after the last class at school, a little while before.

With that dreadful look of his, "Taka-chan" Takasu Ryuuji had related, "Close to the register in the supermarket, they sell fresh flowers. But there aren't too many buyers, there are other things close to the register, and sometimes packages run into the display. A flower breaks off at the stem and falls to the floor. I see the poor flower and call the store clerk -- shortly she comes. 'Here you go', at once stretching out my hand and facing her, 'Let me pick up the flower for you.' Our hands strike, our eyes meet. 'Here you go.' 'No, for you rather.' At length I turn it over to her. 'Do you like flowers?' 'I'm not all that familiar with flowers.' 'Well, if it's OK with you, might we have some tea?' '...That, that would be fine.' " ---With his cold [sanpaku eyes](#) seething with desire, it seemed to be what he considered to be an ideal meeting with a girl. Although it seemed like a pleasant story with a sweet atmosphere, on second thought the idea of picking up and giving a girl some decapitated flower stinks of poverty.

"Noto-chi" Noto Hisamitsu said, while wiping some black spots from his glasses, "It's rather similar to Takasu's story, but in a CD store. Other than myself there only seems to be one other person listening. I'm thinking while reaching for this strange minor band's CD, and the girl was picking up the same CD and our fingertips touched. 'Er, uh, do you happen to like progressive rock?' 'Ah, I listen to it a lot.' 'Yes, me too.' 'Ah, it's better if I have tea, too.' 'Yes, isn't it though.' And so... this is how I would do it." --- I wasn't gaping, but, on the other hand Taka-chan dangerous face glittered. Haruta didn't agree. If she was listening to some strange minor progressive rock, it didn't really feel cute to him.

Well then, as for your dream, what is it? When he was asked, Haruta answered sincerely. "Passing by the river, I unexpectedly found a girl who had fell in and was drowning. Magnificently rescuing her, I gave her mouth-to-mouth

resuscitation. She came to, fell in love with me, receiving thankfully the help I gave her, trustingly asking if we could go home. Because we had gotten wet, we had to change clothes of course, and we talked, smooth-like, ... next, he he!" ...It was all quite serious. Compared to his two friends' answers, it was rather dramatic, fateful, and had a sense of speed. Overall it was better and more probable.

Despite this the two of them, unfortunately but all too likely, truly densely yet assuredly from a feeling of pity, shamefacedly said 'Well, I have to go to the supermarket.', and 'I've gotta go buy a CD.', each of them wishing to leave and go find their ideal dates. Feeling defeated, and peddling my bike, that's how I found myself at the riverbank! ...And that was what *really* happened. I was simply returning home.

Arriving at that place, because he spotted the woman standing on the bridge, unintentionally that ridiculous story---

"Oh?"

She seemed to be climbing over the guardrail without hesitation.

Ready, set, like that, it looked like she was going to take the plunge.

It was about five meters to the surface of the water.

Putting herself in a diving pose, off she went, falling directly down.

And then, *splash!* And, a sheet of spray. Amidst the white foam, her body was swallowed up and disappeared.

"...This is really bad, it can't be real, this can't be happening... whaaaa!"

And then, panic. Shouting aloud, his long, chin-length hair stood on end. He was the only person around, in short the only eye-witness. He frantically pedaled over, dumped the bike at the foot of the bridge and slid down the embankment. Since he was a little kid he'd been used to playing by the river. Yelling a battle-cry, he dived in as he would have then. The cold nearly froze his heart. His feet sank to the mud of the riverbed, surprisingly deep and slow, different from when he was a kid.

"Hullo! Are you all right?"

He shouted while moving through the murky water. At once, his sneakers and socks were pulled off by the mud, and he found himself barefoot. The breathtakingly cold water soaked him to his thighs, sheets of spray came up from mid-river and leapt out from the water surface like white hands. There were so many things to consider. He realized something about this situation. The kids from around here, everybody's done it once or twice. Himself included. It didn't look far from the bridge to this river, so, instead of cracking her head on the riverbed, it looked like she had gotten stuck in the mud. He raised his hands out from the water surface, then lifted his face a few centimeters. It looked like he could breathe overhead clearly, provided it didn't get any deeper. If this happens again,

"Go for it! ...Keep going!"

This way, he could just pull out anybody he grabbed from this mud from hell.

"...Phew!"

He struggled to the water surface, carrying her body out in his arms. She was unconscious. What he was going to hold on to he hardly knew yet, but he held on desperately anyhow, his feet kicking at the mud, moving forward sluggishly. Leaning into it, he struggled toward the broad embankment. They collapsed in a tangle. He pulled her up and gently laid her wet body on the dry withered grass, but she showed no sign of coming to. She was unconscious, it seemed. "She's not dead...", he wanted to think.

"She doesn't look too good... what am I going to do? Anybody, help! Ah, that's it, that's it, ambulance, ambulance!"

Yeah, her cell-phone, where is it!? In the bag!? In her shirt pocket!? Will it have gotten wet!? And stepped on by some idiot in a hurry, when suddenly,

"...Cough...!"

With a cough, the mud-covered girl started breathing again. Her body shook while she painfully coughed, bent double, and then coughed violently several more times, expelling water, her breathing a noisy rasp. Her hand reached out, trying to find something. Panicking when Haruta bent over her, she tried to turn away from the scoundrel. All the while, with one hand he felt for her shirt pocket, desperately searching for the cell-phone,

"...Wow!?"

It happened suddenly, and with great force.

She wrapped both hands around his neck, clinging with awful strength. He was pushed down almost as hard as he could stand. Her arms held Haruta so tight he could hardly breathe, and her feverish breath blew hotly on the back of his neck.

"Of, course... cough! Help... me...!"

Even if he wanted to try and free himself right away, her arms held him so tightly he couldn't even try to leave. Luckless until she almost drowned, he thought as with awful strength that girl came and hugged him.

"Ryousuke's not here... I cannot live on...!"

While whispering, "warmth, warmth." While coughing painfully. While repeating "Ryousuke, Ryousuke".

"But my name is Kouji for sure, not that I should be saying that here... well, never mind! I've gone and said it!"

He had been talking to myself, clearly surprised, but it looked like it got through to her that time. She had been clinging but suddenly she separated from him.

First, she looked at him.

He was smeared with mud, with long wet hair, the color of his skin peeking through the thin knit where it clung to his elbows. Even those shoulders and arms were rather thin, his dirty face awfully pale. On his round forehead, a shallow scrape, the feet which stuck out of his slim denims were barefoot. The pupils that stared at Haruta were large like a cat's, sparkling and shining brightly, but her long eyelashes trembled as if she were frightened.

"...Who...? You aren't Ryousuke... what's going on...?"

"I happened to be passing by."

"Where's Ryousuke...? The man, who was here... where is he?"

"I don't know."

"No way... no way, that... Ryo,"

"Ah!? That reminds me,"

He shouted aloud, and his eyes went wide, taken aback. With a hot look, Haruta shouted so he wouldn't forget.

"Tomorrow I have to work the day shift---!"

"..."

Now, it just died--- just like that, like a shutter her eyelids closed. Then the very next moment,

"Ah, wait wait!"

Exhausted from the repeated exertions, her body collapsed. Once more the river's flow tried to take her away. With the last of his energy nearly exhausted, it looked like she would be washed away, but somehow he was able to grab her arm and pull her back up on the riverbank.

*

Her hair shone like silver.

"...Use this, too."

He forgot to take the offered towel, lost in thought after having seen her form. A little older than he, but not yet a member of the workforce. Probably a college student. Still quietly looking at him, she sat by the towel fallen by Haruta's knees. Then,

"I'll have to lend you some clothes. ...Here's something to wear. I even have some sandals you can put on to get back."

Along with the towel, at Haruta's knees there was a gray men's bathrobe, samurai style.

"Close the shower curtain, OK? ...Did you hear me?"

"Duh..." (TN: Got any better ideas? Japanese (ほえ～))

---That stupid mop's mouth, hanging open, might have looked like part of

practiced whole-body relaxation, but in reality, he was still rather tense inside.

The second floor apartment where she lived was just across the road from the riverbank. She brought him there, accompanying him as he walked the bike, going up into the small one room apartment, and at the moment, Haruta had to borrow her shower. Last used by her. Even so, even Haruta, despite how awful things had been, couldn't help but turn to the dripping wet girl and, bowing his head, ask her permission to enter.

Somehow, some way, I'm alone with a member of the opposite sex. And this one in particular fresh from the bath, with warm wet hair, lightly dressed, with perfect slim lines, smelling nice, standing before my eyes... For all these reasons and others, a monk would have a hard time relaxing in a situation like this!, he thought, wondering how things could turn out this way.

"...Quickly, before it gets cold. Then you would really catch a cold. ...The river water was rather dirty, too."

"OK", he said, anyway it was her place. (TN: Same mystery as above, spelling slightly differently this time: 冴え)

And now, borrowed towel and change of clothing under his arm, the time had come. Hiding his nervousness he simply stood up. He had nothing on from the waist down--- though he had wrapped a borrowed bath-towel around his hips in a sexy style. He had adopted that style while he had been waiting for his turn in the shower: his pants had been dripping like crazy, coldly clinging to his legs so that he could not sit down. The upper half of his body was not much of a problem, so he kept his T-shirt on. His nipples were standing from the cold.

So, the bathroom's over there. And, while drying her hair with a towel, she pointed to a small door that could be seen near the front door. "Eh? Where is it?", he said, twisting his body so he could look over there. At that moment, the towel wrapped around Haruta's lower body softly fell down.

He didn't realize what had happened for a couple of seconds. But then he suddenly felt rather chilly, and his body felt a bit exposed.

"Wha...!"

He shouted out loud. Why in the world was the lower half of his body exposed

like that? His friends knew he wasn't in the habit of exposing himself. He was so embarrassed, he covered his face, which had flared red in an instant. Oh, what a scandal... Just his face hidden (though with a daunting pose), he peeked through his fingers to check her expression. There's no way his sacred bottomless style could be allowed to be seen---

"..."

Without a word, she sat quietly, wearing a slight frown. Not raising her voice, not moving, not scolding him, nor even raising her hands against him. All of which meant,

"---Safe! Oh--- surprise! I think she might be able to see! Safe safe! Made it...!"

Both his arms snapped down to cover himself. Zip! He carefully focused his energy and rammed his little finger into the wall with all his strength. Squirming in pain for a little while, he didn't say a thing, but from all his embarrassment his face naturally heated, and finally unable to stand it any longer, still bare-bottomed, he shouted "Hyoo!" and escaped to the bathroom.

The small simple arrangement of bathtub, toilet and washbasin surprised him as he shut the door, but finding himself alone could finally breathe properly. His face turning the color of overripe apples from the pressure, he could finally hang his head. "Wow, what a klutz I am! She must think I'm a complete idiot!", he thought. ...It may have seemed he was doing a report on himself, but frankly he couldn't even think right then and there.

As she had just showered in the dim bath unit, it was still warm and stuffy. Though it was so small he had trouble getting in, eventually he managed to stand in the bathtub. Then he smoothly took off the last layer stuck to his body: his T-shirt.

"...What...? Oh boy. What's this... Oh!"

It was at that time.

In short, after all the confusion, it suddenly dawned on Haruta. Below, he was already bottomless, up top, his T-shirt still hung around his neck, he hit the palm of his hand with his fist, making a thumping sound and knocking his elbow into the washbasin. Here we go again! Yet another bang.

"*This, is not* my dream date!"

In some details it was--- he rescued a girl from drowning. And then she invited me to her place. She took a shower, and now it was his turn. It was fair to say that the situation was "pretty close". "Hey look at this!", he repeated foolishly as his two friend's faces came to mind.

The borrowed towel and clothes he put in the toilet seat, and got completely nude. Dancing for joy while turning the shower valve, he yelped in dismay as water sprayed mercilessly all over the towel, floor and change of clothes. He had forgotten to close the shower curtain.

At first the tepid shower pouring down chilled his body. But the water temperate rose immediately, the hot shower beating his skin pleasantly warming him up. In the midst of water noise, Haruta by himself,

"...Heh he he!"

In a good mood he scrubbed his face. Without shampoo he scrubbed his long damaged hair, bending his body this way and that. Hey look, hey look, isn't this something? This date is real! "Haruta, you are a really the boss! As an apology to you, I will ask Taiga to go out on a date with you!" ---Taka-chan said in his imagination. "Haruta, how clever you are-- you're a genius--! By way of apology, here's 100,000 yen!" ---He imagined Noto saying also. Stop it you two, with friends like that... well, but, if you insist, I'll take it... Going out with a scary classmate (oh boy), or moving him to tears, 100,000 yen in the wallet. Accepting those apologies may have been imaginary, but the reality is turning out much like his story.

This date is going exactly according to plan. And, if she's just wearing a towel, isn't that good?, he thought, *She's nearly defenseless*. His hair still wet, he put on only sweat pants and a T-shirt over his slim body. That white skin... seductively thinly dressed.

"Whew--! What excitement!"

Body soap was enough to wash away the mud from his legs and feet, but his monologue revealed thoughts too liberal, his own yet somehow he thought he really ought to be prepared to flee. Just because they took turns showering separately, didn't mean he couldn't expect anything afterwards. Just that he

couldn't expect anything strange. But nothing happening, nothing at all... absolutely not! Speaking of which, this could all be a joke! Sorry about that! While bowing his head to no-one in particular, he looked down to his nether regions, double-checking. ...No problem. Not that he truly expected to find something, but he was a bit worried about getting some strange infection in a delicate area from the dirty river water--- Very sorry about that... the world can be an awful place!

Hurriedly finishing up what remained of his shower, drying his body with the borrowed towel, and without hesitation he put on the borrowed sweatpants without underwear. His briefs and uniform pants he put together in a plastic bag she had given him. Then he resolutely opened the door to the apartment hallway. There was a loud bump.

"Oww..."

"Oh! I'm sorry...!"

The loud noise had come from the door hitting square on the back of her head. The open bathroom door was right next to a really tiny kitchen, and it looked like she had been in there heating water. She was there right before his eyes, holding the back of her head and groaning from the pain. A greasy light blue kettle let the world know it was boiling, bubbling stupidly.

"Bla...black tea, or coffee... which would you like?"

"Coffee for me! Your head, it is OK?"

"Eh... sort of, in a manner of speaking..."

"Huh? Sort of? Seriously, is your head OK?"

"...OK. My place is a bit small, you see. This kind of thing happens often..."

Recovering, she got out two coffee cups. She tossed in some instant coffee. Some of the powder spilled into a really beat-up sink. And then from the kettle poured boiling water. Two cups of coffee about twice as strong as they should have been, but that was OK.

In spite of just throwing together instant coffee like that, the delicious aroma of coffee wafted up and filled the air. Haruta like an idiot remained standing the

whole time, watching.

“Here you go. ...Drink up.”

Those slim hands passed him a cup of coffee, and then she just started drinking her portion. The narrow hallway and kitchen hardly seemed a yard across. Chilly air came in from the hall. He remained standing casually.

Well, that’s all he could do--- strangely understanding, Haruta followed her, sipping over-hot coffee in that place. Before long, in that narrow apartment, the combined bed and television stand’s rather large shelf completely full, neither tea nor anything drinkable was to be found on the table. There were clothes, makeup, piles of papers and heavy books scattered all about, beyond that, what else? That must be a sketchbook, and over there many books piled up, here and there fallen towers. Buckets of what might have been really big writing brushes, fluffy round brushes, dirty plywood, oily fluids in bottles and so on: strange things were scattered all around. The floor visible, a while ago Haruta had sit near the edge of a cushion. Next to that cushion, there was a stepped on and very possibly shattered CD case to worry about. No way... me? Is this risky?

"...My room, it’s dirty, isn’t it?"

Suddenly spoken to, he was startled. He looked down at her petite figure.

Still damp, her brown hair, falling straight down to her chest, still gleamed like silver. Looking at her round forehead while nodding, continuing on to the cheeks and white nose, he blinked.

Thin, pale white, and all over--- transparent seeming. While thinking about that,

"It’s really a mess, isn’t it! Something smells too! An art studio? Looks like?"

He wasn’t smart enough to be careful. CD Destroying Criminal = He’d already forgotten that he himself might be the culprit. In spite of his being too honest for his own good, her quiet expression didn’t change.

"'Art Studio', you guessed right. ...This, is the smell of oil paintings I’ve made, not collected. Individually they’re OK I suppose... but my security deposit is as good as gone..."

"Paintings--- Now I see! Are you an artist? I like that brush, is it for painting?"

"No. I'm just an art student."

"Art School!? Paintings, of course you're making them! Wow incredible, that's fantastic! An artist in the making! An artist, it can't be! Show me something, show me a painting!"

"No way. ...Hey, by the uniform you were wearing, you're a high school student, right? A public school?"

Nodding, "Haruta Kouji, seventeen years old", he confirmed. "Hmmp", she said, sipping her coffee with the expression on her face still not changing.

Sneaking a glance sidelong at her supple figure, turned neatly at the narrow point of her pale waist, looking just like a cat, he thought, and then suddenly he remembered. Cat or not, her walk to and from school was certainly keeping down the stray fat. She was the spitting image of the Siamese cat in his old neighborhood. There were silvery lines in her ice-blue eyes, and being slender and pretty she seemed a foreign cat.

Despite her owner's care, she had smoothly escaped somewhere through an open window, never again to return--- at that moment, this vision of the charming, long-tailed girl's body wrapped around his spirit and jerked him awake. Reflexively, he rubbed his eyes. In his imagination it was all settled. But...What in the world is her name...?

"...Ah, er. What, what's your name?"

"...Dontwantosay."

"Dontwant Tosay? Dont Wantosay? Ah, 'scuse me, where's that name from? That's a foreign name f'sure, which country ya from?"

From eight inches below, two round eyes looked up at Haruta momentarily bright. Those deep blue eyes looked like they were shimmering. "Uwaa...", his voice rose in wonder. And then,

"...Where'd you come from, already-- ahh--! You're pretty! You're beautiful! You were just about dead, so of course I helped you--!"

---Smirking

From his now-loosened mouth, the words he had meant to say but couldn't started flying out. "Oh!", he realized, too late to keep his confused mouth shut. And then *wham!*, he blushed... since coming up to this apartment, he had blushed so many times already he didn't know how much more he could take.

"...[Hamada](#)"

It's a 'hama'?

What's that?

To his shame, he couldn't remember. He was awfully puzzled, having lost track of the conversation after he had looked down at her.

"Oh! Now I get it!"

Finally understanding dawned. It was comprehensible. Bam! He slapped his hands together and bowed his head deeply.

"DONT is an alias, but your real name is HAMA, right! Ahahahaha what a combination--! Then I will call you Sue."

"That's not my name. ...Hamada, Sena..."

"Ahahaha! Sena-san? So you're [Ayrton](#)! Well, you can call me Kouji, if you want."

"I'd rather not..."

"OK then... Haruta will do."

He would have preferred being called by his first name, but it was no big deal. More importantly, he strained to memorize her name: Hamada Sena---chan. His head barely able to handle it, unable to think about deep things, he managed it once it had dripped down into his memory. Still, in this odd moment,

"Hey...?"

He started to forget, when once more a light bulb lit up over his head. Sadly, the bulb was rather sad, dim, with low wattage, the illuminated memory taken right after being only sort-of memorized, being close to falling away, knocked off like dust by the wind.

"Ryo, ryou... ryuosa... hmm... ryousa, -sorta? ...No, what was that memory..."

ah... ah? So long ago...?"

"...Perhaps, 'Ryousuke', you might be trying to say?"

"Ah, so it is, that's it. That may be it."

Sena chewed on her lip, hiding a frown. Not the greatest thing, but, that mouth opened once more. Perhaps in its own way, it was her sense of duty regarding her rescuer Haruta.

"Ryousuke, this clothing, the owner of it, is a man."

"Whaa? Is that true? The owner? ...Seriously, a man? ...Because you told me a while ago, 'here you go', I had put this on without underwear... Ah, no, just because I thought you were single that doesn't mean that... ah... that's what it was... a man"

"...It's okay. I don't think I'll be wearing it anymore."

"Oh, really? Wow! Good, good, for the time being I will stay 'upwind', for many reasons!"

"...That's not good."

"Not good!? 'Downwind', what am I going to catch!?"

Not paying attention to the restless Haruta clattering around, her damp hair combed down by her slim fingers, Sena looked down at her toes. If she were a real Siamese cat, her tail would probably be waving back and forth restlessly in the air.

"That's not so. That is something to wear, in other words something already here that you can wear when you come. Ryousuke is my boyfriend... perhaps becoming my ex. That was the guy's name. Unfortunately, well... my jumping in river and all, he was the reason."

"...Ouch... so that's how it was."

About enough to drown oneself. There are some complicated circumstances around, he thought. Indeed, it was a love affair. But even Haruta knew better than to say "that's a common thing..." Coffee cup still in hand, Sena's bowed silhouette blended into the shadows, seeming to vanish from this world.

"...Though he left me, I really wished he hadn't. I tried to get him to talk, but of course it was no use. Though I pursued after him to the bridge, not catching up, begging him to please come back, I only saw his back... and in the end he never looked back. I didn't really think I was going to die. In such a shallow river, I didn't think there was any chance a person could die. ...Well, that possibility might have come true if you hadn't helped me. But, even looking back at drowning, ...even if nobody noticed, I didn't think..."

He remembered the figure of Sena, standing on the bridge in a daze. Sena had been motionlessly staring somewhere down the road. Her boyfriend had been somewhere along that gaze.

Downhearted, and unable to do much, Haruta simply acted sympathetic, not asking questions. Nodding as if he knew all about this kind of thing, he tried to cheer her up, poking her on the shoulder with his fingertip and going "Bang☆". "Ow...", Sena's hot coffee spilled on her hand, but she didn't notice him.

"Even if I was going to be abandoned, I would have appreciated being noticed! Besides, if I wanted to be noticed, I'd rather not have to scream something like 'I'm going to die!'"

"I cried. ...I really cried. Since about a month ago. Over and over again."

"...Ah, is that so..."

Suddenly, she backed off a bit. Even so, there was something about her voice that calmed him at once.

"For the first three times or so, it was getting to be like I was apologizing. It felt like that. At first, saying to myself, 'we can talk next time', I was able to put it off. ...But the fourth time, he told me 'I can't go out with you anymore', and since then little by little perhaps I've limited my putting off of things."

"And with that change in attitude you tried to drown yourself. And that misfired."

Sena didn't nod. But, she should have. "Ah", suddenly her breath caught.

"...What I really mean to say is this. Though I could say that I could still put things off, it no longer made sense. My boyfriend didn't love me anymore, right? For me, forcing a guy to stay is not love. Isn't it more fun to simply stick

together? That other guy wasn't fun, rather, wasn't he 'patiently' ignoring me? For him, it must have been such a pain, unbearable and stressful, wouldn't it? I loved the guy, but wasn't that pathetic?"

She relaxed a bit, having put her true feelings in order. Seen in profile, Sena's head was hung in shame, perhaps too much so, her long wet hair still hanging straight down.

Sena left her mug in the water-spotted sink and groaned painfully.

"Of that... I understood. I wasn't going to worry about Ryouzuke anymore. Whatever else happened, whether I died or not, that fighting had to end... never again would I follow that path, I understood."

To support herself and keep from collapsing, she reached up to the sink with her hand. Her wrist was slender to the point where her bones were visible. Her nails were short, cut down nearly to the quick. Through the back of her hands her bluish veins could be seen vaguely, floating there. It wasn't just that she had the face of a beauty. She also had many other good points, he thought absentmindedly.

Yep. This person is pretty, of course. And she's free. Whether she realizes it or not, she's been declared a Free Agent. Haruta blinked, realizing, if she really wants a change, then why would she not not opt for what's already at hand?

"But, I still love him. ...What should I do about that? I used to think that no matter what awful things we said or cried, angry, resentful or regrettable, if we took a walk together everything would be like it was before. 'We would eat together, just as we did before.' I loved walking together, the two of us. We would talk while strolling around, drink tea, check out the bookstore, returning tired to eat our meal, messing around until we fell asleep... you could say I really loved that time. I was happy. I was whole. I don't want to lose him. ...What should I do?"

Yes! The moment has arrived! Flipping his long hair up, he looked up at once to try and assert his claim.

"You ought to look for a new guy!"

Like for example, me me! Let it be me! Let it be Kouji! You're as noisy as all get-

out! But leaving that aspect aside, you've got plenty else that's fascinating! Besides, separating from Sena is something I really don't want to think about! If we were to separate, it would be because she threw me out! So, Sena, you don't annoy me at all! Your guy from before has forgotten you! So, right!? Right--!? I bow before thee!

...As you might expect to this point. Cool, keep your cool. Really, I mean it. Set your face sternly. Give off the air of a really good looking guy, dripping confidence. But,

"...No way. It is meaningless to do it, if it's other than with Ryouzuke."

"Well, is that so! Hahahaha!"

In two seconds his ship sank. He could only laugh.

"B, but right! Excuse me! Let's see now!"

After we're done talking, then it's good-bye. We will see how it turns out. Sena, letting out a sigh, quickly peeked at the wall clock. That movement seemed to indicate some impatience. A chance encounter long awaited, he didn't want it to end like this. In the middle of this awful cold, he jumped into the river and saved her life. Would she even thank him properly!? ...But of course nothing's been said so far (she didn't even ask for help...), though it looks like perhaps there's a little something in her eyes. Even though I could have given her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. From the bottom of his heart, he thought, I would like to see her eyes a bit more. If only he could see.

"Let me see, right. ...I think I was taking the wrong approach, for sure. I"

"...Eh? What are you talking about?"

Very dangerous, talking while thinking about strategy!

"Because, well... that, about your boyfriend, he doesn't need you anymore. That's just the way it is. Holding on to your old relationship would be awfully hard, and now you have a chance for a fresh start! A new relationship, under construction! Looks like it."

"...How do you mean?"

"Fo, for example, that, Sena's new appearance... Ah, yeah. Now I get it!"

Ahahahaha--!"

At that moment, a bolt of lightning went off in Haruta's brain, clearing his eternally hazy mind from that time onwards. And then it faded. The brightness of the flash was no surprise. It came. Things like that happen now and then.

"What!?' That's incredible, you could only get yourself a high-schooler for a boyfriend!?' Ah, but that was the plan, of course!?' Her young boyfriend has brought such happiness, Sena has completely forgotten her old boyfriend. Flaunting it, she's giving off a fog of happy hormones. Ha!?' Is that person Sena!?' Do I see any regret in this!?' To me, this looks like a pretty picture!"

"...That 'high-schooler', is possibly...?"

"Yes! That's me!"

"...Incredible...?"

"Yes! That's me!"

Sena gave Haruta a good look, blinking many times, chewing her lip while she thought. Then,

"Well... in short, you're saying make him jealous?"

"Yep, just a bit! A warm and happy Sena-san, once more restored, newly fallen in love!"

Of course, by Haruta's real plan, it was getting about time to convert make-believe to reality. However much they might regret it, once Sena was his girlfriend he wasn't planning on letting her go for any reason.

So, what can I say for myself, looking like a fool but in truth a rather sneaky person. Like right now: I'm suggesting that we cooperate in a charade, grabbing this golden opportunity...

"...But, why would you do such a thing?"

"Well of course, that way I can become a good friend of yours, and I hope it might even become the real thing! Sena's so pretty, and cute...! Art students are really incredible! Finally I've met somebody I don't want to good-bye to! ...Yah! There, I've said it!"

What have I said! In an instant, he was crouching down, hiding a furious blush behind his hands. His long awaited flash of inspiration had come to nothing. It was over.

...It figures. I really look like an idiot. Everybody, all around, says that I seem to be a pitiful, foolish, idiot dimwit. Whatever my real plan was, I've broken it all to pieces with my careless talk. Even I cannot believe how, like a complete idiot, I went about destroying myself, and set up traps for myself, but,

"...Ahaha!"

Sena had just laughed. Almost ridiculously, it seemed like a joke. Covering her mouth with both hands, bent almost double, but still not quite laughing out loud,

"Well, it's funny... but, it might be a good idea. Let's do it. I want to do it. Yep, incredibly, even though the plan came from a high schooler, it's rather amazing. You've been surprisingly persuasive."

"Re, really!? Really--!?"

Both of them seated next to each other in that narrow kitchen and corridor, Sena turned and nodded repeatedly. Furthermore,

"Really. This will a part-time job, OK? Do as you said. Each job... each date we show off the 'new Sena' to Ryouzuke, I will give you 3000 yen."

"Are you kidding!? Seriously, after all!? Hurray!"

To be able to date Sena, even temporarily, and getting some spending money on top of it! Haruta struck his fist into the air from joy, shouting happily with no underwear on.

---Haruta Kouji, seventeen years old.

And that was how he came to be a male escort.

Chapter 2

Once Spring arrives, let's go to Gunma!

Chapter 2[[edit](#)]

"Harutaa! Look look, my dad got a shareholder's coupon for [Yoshigyuu](#) beef on rice--! *Gyuudon*! It's free [gyuudon](#)! Wanna go!?"

"...Please don't talk so casually before me, Noto-kun. *You* picked up a free coupon from the roadside, then came over to *my* place to eat a bowl of Australian beef on rice, and that's fine?"

"We get shareholder treatment. What? You're not going? Seriously, when it's free? Until yesterday, if you had been reborn as a cow, wouldn't you have wanted to be made into *gyuudon*?"

Puzzled, Noto turned his not-so-cute face towards him, tilting his head slightly so he could see his friend through his black eyeglasses, giving him a condescending smile. Even if that free coupon had sprung up from a turnip field, there was his date.

Though it was after school, the classroom was still busy. Long haired, sassy, even brash standing there, Haruta quickly got back to packing up to leave. He stood there wearing a hoodie, a uniform jacket over that, and an imitation Burberry checked muffler wound around his neck. Today was not a good day to go along with Noto's puzzles.

"I've got something to do, OK? Catch 'ya next time! Later, Noto!"

"Eh!? What, what's going on!? What else--, you're so anti-social!"

"Sorry, sorry about that. Why don't you ask Taka-chan or Kitamura the Great Teacher?"

"The Great Teacher has already left for student council work! Besides that, Takasu's got problems of his own!"

He saw Noto pointing in the direction of that unlovely face, as sullen as ever.

Over there, with a face just like a [Noh](#) mask, his friend sat in his chair, his nose dripping slowly. It was a rather incredible scene. *Gulp*, with a reflexive intake of breath, he hurried over to the body, but not even once could he get a response.

"Ta, Taka-chan!? What's wrong!?"

"...She's a klutz...! I...!"

Yipes! With those awful eyes glaring ahead, "There was an accident.", and a proud, arrogant, very short person stood there. With fluffy long hair, like a French doll, carefully made up, their classmate. The Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga.

"Taigaa! What are you doing to Taka-chan! He looks pretty bad!"

"Because there was an accident. Hmph, having to explain to an idiot seems idiotic, just like to this one,"

The Palmtop Tiger showed Haruta a milkshake can. Pull top.

"It was really hard to open, so I gave it my all! It opened all right, but that ugly dog-boy's face was right there... unfortunately, right behind my elbow."

I'm an 'ugly dog-boy'!? You are! I've got a nosebleed!? Isn't it a tragedy. Aren't you worried!? Oh, I do, I do. Aren't you to blame!? Such a scary accident. How can you drink that juice with a straight face!? Milkshake. ...While his nose slowly dripped, to all appearances it was their usual rather overdone comic routine unfolding.

"...You, you're making like a sprinkler, Taka-chan...!"

"More like splatter, Haruta."

Yes yes, you could say that. That Noto wanted him to go with him was nice, but now he had to hurry up and get moving. Haruta grabbed his bag with one hand. With the other hand he waved at the bespectacled turnip field, the nosebleed boy and the pint-size tiger. The time set to meet up was drawing near, and all this was starting to eat into his free time. But "wait a second" so his nosebleed could stop.

"There was something I wanted to say, and I almost forgot. Your pants are oddly shiny. When you get back, spray them with vinegar-water and iron them. Ah, and don't forget to unplug the iron when you're done."

"Ohhh, the Taka-chan we know and love, finally revealed. I'd left my a pair of pants at the cleaners, and forgot to go back and get them. In truth, I've been wearing the pants from my middle-school uniform since yesterday. They turned out to be the same color, so wouldn't it be a surprise if got noticed?"

"But I didn't know. ...Does anybody send their uniform to the cleaners during the week without having a replacement? Why did you do that?"

"Heehee! It's a secret!"

Leaving his mommy-like friend's query unanswered, he left the classroom. What they were doing was secret, secret of course, and he'd made a promise. So he kept it. He got running at once, when at that moment an idea flashed through his mind. He'd almost forgotten. He quickly ran back, stuck his head through the classroom door,

"Yo, Taiga! I had something I wanted to say, too--!"

"Who said you could talk to me that way! Idiot, just hurry up and get out of here!"

Without thinking he grinned, winked at Taiga, and shouted in a deep voice. There was something he wanted to do to that predator-girl by all means, to give her something to worry about. He had almost forgotten what it was.

"You're looking a bit laid-back today, rather sexy... eh? In fact, to put it crudely, you're always hanging around looking after Taka-chan, letting your lazy private life exert it's super-sexy influence on him ☆ Boobs... you don't have. Your chest ought to swell out a bit ☆ But Taiga's boobs... the fact they aren't there is a mystery. When you're wearing a swimsuit you look OK, but wearing a uniform you look rather hollowed out."

In Taiga's tiny hand, in an instant. He saw a tin can crackling, crushed in her grip.



Run for it, Haruta----- ...The voices of friends shouting “You sure told her off, but are you crazy?”, over their shoulders as they ran past him. What next? Oh yeah, next was the bonus, what he wanted to say was just the first part.

Last night, after he got done trading e-mails with Sena. He was basking in the afterglow from their secret meeting. The room may have been dirty, she may have been a bit out of sorts, lightly dressed in front of a guy the first time they met, but somehow, after all, the fundamentally sloppy Sena was still awfully attractive. She had the power to fire up a guy’s imagination. "Ahh..., she’s something else...", he had thought dreamily many times. And then he realized.

A messy girl is a good thing!

...So, from the moment he thought of it, until nearly three in the morning, he schemed alone about the "Intramural Sloppy Girl Trophy". He wanted to present that award to Taiga, for a victory well earned. He escaped from the school, straining his bicycle, pedaling at full speed. Leaving the school gate, he went straight for a little while, easily making a green light. He didn’t think Taiga would be able to catch up with him.

He rode past the riverbank of fate, passed over the bridge of destiny. Heading towards home, he took a different way, to the station. His feet slackened on the pedals when he saw the crowd gathering at the ticket gate.

"Where will she be?", parking his bike and locking it up while looking up.

He gasped.

Already. He'd found her right away. Sena was standing by a building post, tapping on her cellphone with one hand. Apparently she had been hidden for a while on the other side of that column, perhaps by a little glass... or not. His heart began to beat wildly. Frankly, this was the first time in his life he'd met up with a girl somewhere, just the two of them. He'd been on so many group dates with lots of people (and they were an ongoing string of failures) that just two of them--- but still, he was quite nervous.

Should he call out to her? What should he do as an entrance? She was on the other side of the column, showing off a little, her long hair stretched to her jawline, carefully combed this time,

"Ah. You were already here?"

"Eeeek! Idiot brother, how about knocking next time!"

She'd become his little sister.

As if he'd been punched in the stomach, his face went red, his cheeks inflated and he involuntarily glared at Sena's white face. Though it was a surprise, though she suddenly came into sight around the post, it didn't matter. Silly brother. Just when I finally tried to look good... transformed into a really cool guy. Of all things, why "little sister"? My foolish, stupid stupid brain.

Haruta was floundering, about to give up. Sena, on the other hand,

"...I'm excited, Haruta-kun."

For some reason, with her hair done up nicely, with that casual wave, it seemed like a planned greeting.

Her straight brown hair parted in the middle, today it shone like silver. Not seeming at all a person who lived in a dirty room, Sena was a graceful figure standing there.

Wearing a gray outfit with a white knit coat, light blue muffler wrapped around her neck, beige cargo pants and a large brown leather bag hanging from her shoulder, of course today she appeared even more the Siamese cat. With slim

dark brown pumps, she really looked like a cat on tiptoes.

Below her wide forehead, Sena's glowing ice-blue eyes gazed intently at Haruta, quietly shaking. Haruta couldn't help but look back, grinning at the Siamese cat on tiptoes.

*

"There," said Sena, pointing ahead, a stylish store-front café could be seen.

From a wooden deck there were steps leading to a plate glass entrance. Bright decorative plants were arranged along the brick wall. But then he read the place's name. ...By himself, he didn't think he could ever go in there. He wouldn't be able to with Noto. He couldn't with Taka-chan or with a teacher. To begin with, this place would never allow high school students in the door.

"...Ryousuke has a part-time job here. Today being Wednesday, his shift's about over now."

"Wh, what, in that fancy place, is it OK to go in with this uniform on? You must have some pull, getting me in there... wow!"

"About here, shall we? ...Ready?"

Grab.

She grabbed his hand. Her slender fingers, pleasantly cool, softly holding hands--- his heart was beating faster, and the blood vessels in his brain were beginning to throb. Even in the best of times, his brains weren't of the best manufacture, and if he suddenly got a lot of blood flowing to them, he became a complete fool.

"No, I'm not, but.. if I even touch that place I'll contaminate it..."

"...Hands, contaminated...?"

Sena quickly withdrew her hand, confused and shaking her head. Shyly, he gently took her hand again.

"I was kidding, they're not dirty!"

Hiding themselves under the building eaves, Sena made sure of it. Taking Haruta's hand, she placed herself at his side once more. She attached herself to Haruta's whole arm, pressing her cheek near his shoulder. Fingers intertwined, their hands were glued together as if by a vacuum. Through his arm, he could feel every irregularity of Sena's slender body quite distinctly. Everything, from the soft thin layer of flesh to the slender bones underneath.

Is this what it's like? This thing, going out, pretending, so to speak.

"...Something's wrong. Your palms are damp. You're sweating."

"Eh? ...No way, that's embarrassing! I'll wipe them!"

"Keep cool, it's OK, no big deal. ...Ah, perhaps, Haruta-kun, you've never held hands nor dated a girl before?"

"I have too!? But, we broke up!"

"...Really?"

It wasn't true...

The honest answer was in his mind, but he feared it likely that he'd already been found out. If his palms didn't stop sweating, he didn't know what he was going to do. Just by holding hands, linking arms and looking like an ordinary couple, they were already making a huge scandal. His face heated, and by bad luck a stray hair tickled his nose in a way he couldn't stand. However, Sena didn't even notice the atmosphere, looking at her watch,

"It's time, shall we go? Act like a perfect boyfriend, OK? If anybody asks anything, it's all right if you don't answer."

"Yeah!"

"Look cool, OK?"

"Sure!"

The tiptoeing cat quietly stepped out. Slightly behind her, Haruta walked out too.

Sena waved her phantom tail in the air and wrapped it around Haruta's body –

it seemed like. They fell into step. At the same slow speed, with a similar gait, advancing in a similar fashion. Their hips were about to strike when the invisible tail whipped around him as if to say "Match up!". Haruta adjusted his pace. They were glued to each other, hip to hip.

Petite Sena, it seemed like she fit perfectly under his arm. The tail still guiding him, he shyly let go of her hand and placed it on her shoulder instead. I fit perfectly next to Sena's form, he thought. Even through their clothing, it was warm everywhere they touched.

"...Hmm, a little too familiar, don't you think?"

"Yep. No big deal."

As for Haruta, his problem with sweaty palms subsided and he could breathe again.

Sena quietly turned to look straight at the café entrance, a determined look on her face.

So they went up the deck steps, looking to all the world as if they were flirting, sticking to each other still. Haruta opened the glass door, letting Sena into the café.

"Welcome to our establishment."

He thought, "Of course, the handsome shop employee shows up suddenly." He ought to be saying "Party of two?"

"Ah..."

The handsome clerk became aware of Haruta beside Sena. He was much taller than his own 5 foot 9 inches. The arms below his rolled up shirt sleeves, in spite of being slender, bunched and swelled with muscles. Casually asymmetrical, his hair was done in a stylish manner. He was clean-shaven, except for a thin moustache in an old style. The jet black shirt and style of his pants went together really well. When that guy saw Sena, he did a double-take upon recognizing her.

"...What? No way. Ryouzuke's shift has started. We can't, I forgot... excuse me, I was careless."

It was Sena speaking.

Wow, he thought.

Suddenly that guy, suddenly something about you so-and-so--- Ryouusakushi, that's who he was. Surprised, without thinking,

"G'afternoon! Ho! Studd!"

"Bang☆", he shot so-and-so-kun with his finger. ...Perhaps a little idiotic, he thought a bit too late. The guy didn't utter a word, clutching his chest by mistake and then looking back at Haruta.

"...No way... already..."

Sena kept her cool, assuming a similar pose. She lowered her head to conceal the pride that was showing. However, she shook it off shortly, and, looking up,

"...After all that fuss, let me introduce you. This kid, in fact, has just become my adoring boyfriend. It must be a surprise, he being a high-school boy and all. ...Haruta-kun, this guy, is just, merely, a college classmate."

So he was. So easily declared "merely". Wow--- without even thinking about it, many frightened words fell away from Haruta.

"...Because the manager's here, don't speak loudly about high schoolers. Welcome. Please come this way."

Falling quiet, things were going Sena's way. Sena's words had disturbed so-and-so-kun a bit, even if he concealed the fact. He played the part of the handsome waiter perfectly, not even cracking a smile, guiding the two of them over to the seats he had prepared. Water, hand-wipes and menus were already placed on the table.

They took their seats. Then, both Sena and Haruta still quiet, they looked through the menu. While some other customers got up to pay their bills, so-and-so-kun smiled and stood by the register.

"Sena-san... really, just what is that guy's job though..."

"...As for me, I'll have coffee. How about you, Haruta-kun?"

"Ah? Let's see, then orange juice. ...How should I put it..."

"Excuse me. Could we order?"

Sena hushed Haruta, since that guy was close by directing the help. Ordering coffee and orange juice, they sipped water. He combed his long hair over and over with his finger. Suddenly she put her big bag on her knees, rummaged around inside it, and lined her notebook, cell phone and wallet up on the table. They were sipping water still.

Her notebook had all sorts of folded corners and pieces of paper stuck into it. With regards to her cell phone, the first thing he saw was that it had a number of souvenir straps from various places attached to it. But then he saw it's entire current state (though the Shisa Kitty wasn't too bad, what about the chess piece with 'Sunlight' written on it, or the gourd with a map of Shikoku stuck in it?). Her wallet was swollen like a chubby piglet, but certainly not from money.

As you might expect of this messy girl... thought Haruta in the middle of watching all that stuff, the notepad, the cellphone and the wallet, Sena had closed her bag once more. You could say that she had absolutely everything thrown in there. Finally, she pulled out her wallet again, and from amongst the cash pulled out a crumpled receipt. She unfolded it, refolded it, and stuffed it back into the change purse.

While she was doing this, for some reason she stared intently at the middle of so-and-so-kun's counter. I'm not going to give it away, she was probably thinking.

If so-and-so-kun went to the right, she looked right. If he went left, then left. If he went in the back, she waited for him to come out. If he came out, she would try to hide, dropping her gaze and inspecting the wood grain of the table.

"Sena-san. Hold on. Hey. ...You should stop that."

"...Eh? ...Hoo!"

"Ah, sorry..."

He wanted to tell her to stop glaring at so-and-so-kun. Making a face at him as if to force him back, quit making the guy look over here, will you?

No way. She had poked her fingertips into her eyes, something he'd never have thought of... Sena held her fingers to her eyes, collapsed over the stylish café's table, not even saying anything.

"Ex, excuse me, seriously... but I'd thought you'd stopped going out with him..."

"...What's that?"

Sena asked, slowly raising her face. It felt like he'd been slapped on the cheek by her long tail, whipping back and forth agitatedly through the air. Her big misty eyes glared back at him briefly, virtually stabbing him.

"'What's that?', you're not self-conscious, are you? Sena-san, staring at him so much is a problem. Your happiness hormones aren't showing. Your plan isn't going to work."

"...But I'm not looking..."

"You were looking. You were playing with that gourd while you were looking."

"Gourd? I don't have any such thing."

"It was attached to your cell phone. Don't you even remember your strap?"

Sena got the cell phone out of her bag to reexamine it, making sure the gourd was there, mixed in with everything else on the souvenir strap. Her brow creased faintly, "What's this...", was all she muttered.

"See, the gourd was really there. You didn't need to give me that look. Your hormones aren't going to come out that way. If you keep on looking full of regret, ready to fall apart, you'll get discovered and you won't progress even one bit. Hey, am I saying too much?"

Still turning the gourd over and over on the table, Sena's thoughts seemed to have gone floating down the river...

"Y...es. I'm all right. ...So it is. It sure is. I think I agree. ...So it is, so it is. Fine, there are things that need doing."

Sena came firmly back to herself. She put away the gourd, stopped chasing after so-and-so-kun's form with her eyes, said "Have this", and from her bag pulled out some kind of pamphlet and quickly put in front of Haruta. [Kusatsu](#), [Kinugawa](#) and other names jumped off the paper. It looked like a travel agency pamphlet for a hot-springs tour.

"Ah, there's naked people! Eh, that, with me!? Wa~ thank you~! I'd be happy

to!"

On the front cover in the open air the wet face of a model saying 'Hey there... sister, the water's really nice...' It was tempting Haruta. As it was, he just wanted to dive into that two-dimensional advertisement. But,

"...I wasn't giving it to you, Haruta-kun. I was given it out front of the station. Let's go look. Look, I'm thinking about us going together to the hot springs, to see what it's like."

"...Ah... Is that so... I guess that's so... Nobody's ever done anything like that for me... This is already good..."

"...If it turns out you like it, we can surely go again..."

"Good~!? Let's do it!"

Enthused, they crowded next to each other as they started looking over their one pamphlet. "Kusatsu's pretty good, what do you think?" "Sounds pretty good~! What's the best place!?" "Gunma" "Gunma maybe~! Where's that!?" "Kanto" "Kanto maybe~! Kusatsu sounds good~!" "But this one is [Ikaho](#)." "Sounds pretty good~! What's the best place!?" "Gunma" "Gunma maybe~! ...Eh!? Gunma!?" "Gunma" "Gunma, that's awfully surprising, isn't it!?" "But that's not all. [Minakami](#), Sarugakyo and Shima hot springs are all in Gunma." "Wow! Me, I'm getting to like this Gunma already!" "Me too." "Gunma sounds good! Pure happiness!" "Me too." --He touched her lightly, taking advantage of the moment.

"What's with this? Rather couple-like," she laughed at Haruta's side, then suddenly serious, she murmured in a quiet voice.

"...I am making conversation with you, you dunce, don't you ever use your head..."

"Eh!? Wasn't that awfully rude!? Would you want even your gourd to be saying such things to strangers!?"

It was a completely inexcusable thing to say. They separated a bit. "Sorry, sorry...", she said, trying to smooth things over, but Haruta's humor was beyond repair. In spite of Sena's efforts to build up the mood between them, in spite of having taken the trouble to build up a desire to go to Gunma, she had said those

things.

"This head of mine, I'm lending it to you! That, I will do!"

"...Wha..."

In revenge, he pulled a page of math homework out of his bag. Getting out a mechanical pencil, he repeated "I will do it!".

"No way... what's this? Wow, X or Y... I forget, I don't know. I can't do it. I can't even look."

"What!? You're a college student!? Ha, suspicious...! Very suspicious! No way, Sena-san, did you cheat to get there!?"

"...Not good for your reputation. If you really think about it, you'll understand. ...OK, from this point let's be serious..."

The waitress brought them coffee and orange juice. She cast a mildly disapproving look at the math handouts scattered about on the stylish table, feeling them poorly done. But, right now that wasn't the case.

Glaring at the problems, Sena frowned seriously, wrinkling her brow, forgetting even to breathe for a bit, lost in thought. Without realizing it, even Haruta stopped breathing. Then after a short time, there was a rustling.

"Wow!? ...Very good!"

"...And I didn't even have [Pinoko](#) by my side..."

Inspired by the genius [Tezuka](#) and, he guessed, with a touch remarkably like his, a certain unlicensed doctor and his young girl assistant were drawn in the answer section. By just putting fine outlines here and there, the atmosphere was suddenly transformed. Scribbles became an illustration. From the darkness, the shapes of two people began to come out, as if they were moving towards the light and coming to life,

"...As you would expect of a art college student...! That's great! It always looks like a trick that with a mechanical pencil one could draw like that... as if it were a proper tool for drawing... seriously, that's really good...!"

"No, this has nothing to do with studying painting. Simply that I've loved it since I was a kid, it's just copying."

"Even so, it's great!"

Without thinking, he applauded. If a standing ovation had been permitted he would have done it. Apparently unused to such praise, Sena's mouth curled in a faint smile.

It was at that moment.

"---So as not to bother the other customers, studying and similar things are not permitted here."

The two of them looked up. So-and-so-kun, slipping away from the waitress (yes, she really was a waitress), stood up. On top of that, he whispered:

"...If you're just going to play, why don't you just leave and go to McDonald's? High school students are not allowed to come in here."

Excuse me, I'm sorry if I have some free time.

From Sena's point of view, that extra something was really dead.

When he understood, Haruta took Sena by the hand. Suddenly forced to get up, they picked up all their stuff, not forgetting the handouts nor their bags, filling their arms. Like that, they jerkily dragged themselves to the door. In total, the bill for the two of them came to exactly 1000 yen, so Sena threw a 1000 yen bill and the ticket at the unmanned register and silently stalked out of the shop.

She went down the deck steps, continued walking down the street, then went down a dirty alleyway behind the station, full of garbage.

"Hold on! Sena-san! Er, wait a bit..."

"...Today was enough. I'm quitting."

"Quitting?... No way, we haven't done anything yet! I mean, you're just getting yourself upset."

"...It's all right. Stop already. This day is over."

Sena still wasn't looking at Haruta's face, still not speaking a single word while she rummaged through her bag. Hidden by her hair, Sena's face could not even be seen. Grabbing her overstuffed purse, she pulled out three 1000 yen bills. Then,

"Here you go."

It was pushed towards Haruta's chest. Fluttering down towards the filthy ground, without thinking Haruta caught it. Then, at that very moment,

"Sena-san!"

Sena ran out of the alleyway. He quickly ran after her. Running after her back, he noticed the 3000 yen in his hand. It dawned on him. He'd received 3000 yen. It was an uncomfortable feeling--- brought over from Sena, what that money meant.

Wham! With a shock that shook his mind, "[no further](#)", you could say, was a four letter word. In other words, the 3000 yen she'd handed him, was like a line between Haruta and Sena.

He could not get past it. How to get past it, he did not know. If he were to throw away the 3000 yen, that would be a bad thing. In this hand was 3000 yen, money discarded when Sena paid for something you could say didn't work out. Sena's feelings, that reality, had not changed.

With regards to Sena, he had been pulling that string, the so-called part-time job. He finally understood. And once again he realized just how dim-witted he was. Despite his plan of becoming her boyfriend little by little, he didn't know if the string would break anyway as soon as he pulled on it. Three thousand yen wasn't that big a problem, even so, he foolishly couldn't quite get past it. Even in that, the all-knowing Sena had taken the initiative, striking precisely.

It was terrible situation. In spite of it all, his feet weren't working. In spite of the awfulness of their separation, he wasn't able to chase her. The 3000 yen that were in his hand, that was surely Sena's intention, he thought. In the meantime, Sena's form disappeared into the crowd.

Would it turn out to be the last time? --- With just Gunma and the unlicensed doctor, would that be the end?

Alone, in the back alley left standing still, that moment a cold winter wind pushed against him. Unable to do anything else, the rascal hurried home. His feet could hardly bear him, he still couldn't hardly walk, his foolish body trembled miserably.

Chapter 3

Once Spring arrives, let's go to Gunma!

Chapter 3[[edit](#)]

"...Wh, what now?"

"Shouldn't you be elsewhere?"

"...I should, but, I, I don't really feel like eating..."

"Why? It'd be better if you ate. Hey, teach, it looks like you ordered out for lunch. What's that? Something delicious---"

"[Umani soba](#). ...It's really good."

"Me, I've got a yakisoba sandwich, a jelly donut and crusty bread. It's expensive. It's terrible."

While chewing on the dried out bread, Haruta Kouji watched as Koigakubo Yuri, single woman (age 30), split her wooden chopsticks apart. Taking the wrapper off the bowl, the single woman (age 30), weakly extended her chopsticks towards the umani soba---

"Yech. ...Yuri-chan, you're the kind of person who starts eating with the quail?"

"...It's not that good, not particularly..."

To Haruta, that seemed really strange. Normally that would be last, wouldn't it? What kind of homeroom teacher starts by suddenly attacking the quail eggs? It's got to be because she's single, and she's thinking about something awful like a lover's suicide. Last night, Sena having left him behind, he had trudged home under the weight of all his feelings. And after that, no received contact at all, leaving his young heart to run wild. His homeroom teacher sometimes wound up bearing the brunt of his adolescent frustration.

It was lunchtime in the teacher's staff room. They were in a corner nook, surrounded by the second year homeroom teachers' desks. Haruta was seated

close to the desk belonging to the single woman (age 30), looking at his homeroom teacher's face, while she drank a gulp of Oolong tea. The single woman (age 30) looked uncomfortably back at Haruta's face. Hesitantly, she asked him.

"...Ha, Haruta-kun..., not that it matters all that much, but why are you eating here?"

"For some reason, I just didn't want to stay in the classroom. ...I really didn't feel like talking nor laughing, and my being quiet was upsetting everybody else, wanting to checking my temperature, wanting to carry me off to the infirmary like a dead thing, girls offering me tissues so I could wipe my nose, girls saying 'those gloomy eyes are ruining my cellphone reception', cursing me ...and because nobody would leave me alone."

"...Really? That really shows that people care, doesn't it? It seems, with that around here... especially... that that..."

"Yep, it was just like that."

You see, Koigakubo-sensei was really popular, so easygoing she could actually eat lunch together with a student. And, at that moment, another young female Japanese teacher was calling for her. "Please, help me!" Looking rather desperate, with her chopsticks brandishing some pork from her umanisoba, the single woman (age 30) answered in an encouraging tone.

"...Well then, since we're talking... Haruta-kun, the other day in English class, you did pretty bad on your test, so you will need to take a make-up exam, OK? Cause if you don't, you might wind up being held back."

"But you know, Yuri-chan, it's cause it's a really strange language..."

"...Haven't heard that one, never."

Hardly in the mood to eat, still holding his bread in one hand, Haruta gazed at the profile of his teacher. That face slurping umani soba was really different from Sena's, he thought. Among other things, her features weren't the same, even more than ten years difference in age could account for. Whatever you might call beautiful, it wasn't that. Whatever it wasn't, as a living being, she appeared to be of entirely different species.

In Haruta's eyes, Sena was completely different from other human beings.

"Wouldn't it be incredible to be loved by a cat?"

"Yes yes. ...Ah! What shall we read? They didn't put in any [Jew's Ears](#)... how lucky."

"Despite having been cared for by all my family, if the window were opened just a bit, I would surely have escaped."

"Uh huh"

Slurp slurp---

"I'm talking seriously, and you're just slurping noodles!? Aren't you my homeroom teacher!?"

"Ah, excuse me. But I was just stretching..."

"Well then... I forgive you. There's something I want to talk through, um... Yuri-chan... why do you think that cat ran away?"

"Eh? ...Are you talking about some sort of dream? Things of the deep psyche can be somewhat scary..."

"No, it doesn't have to do with me. You could say it was a dream. What do you think? Since you're already thirty years old and resigned to living a long life, you should understand many things of life, right?"

"Why would you say such a thing... ..well, but, whatever. You'd be surprised, even with thirty years, how little more we adults actually know. Even teachers don't know things."

"Eh? You don't know!? Even though you're a teacher!?"

"I don't know. I don't know but... yes, a proper teacher-like example answer, 'When dealing with rebellion, one must keep in mind that specific steps must be taken.' --- As a young man, might you be trying to assert your independence out of adolescent anxiety? Is it something like that? Am I close to the mark? Ah, that was something, educational psychology, that was quite something else... Ah, I've forgotten so much, I must be getting old."

Slurp slurp---

"I must be getting old... or perhaps I should say that my answer was completely ridiculous..."

"Ah, please don't mind me, ok?"

Slurp slurp---

"Well then, one more question. ...A man being together with a woman he doesn't love, or a woman being together with a man she doesn't love. Which is more pitiful?"

"That situation I understand! Obviously, the guy's more pitiful! Women, even if they don't love their companion, will stick with that companion, dealing with problems calmly. Men, they will limit themselves to clearly and distinctly denying that they 'hate' their women, though that is not all that awful... but still, it's not all that nice either... That's the way it is! It really is! Haruta-kun will become like that too! Aaah! No way no way, Men! No way! Slurp! Yuck!"

"Now now, let's stay on subject. OK then, just why would women put up with such ugliness, just because they can? Why should they, if there's no love there?"

"You're right, it doesn't matter. Because I'm not seeing any likeable men. ...What, Haruta-kun, are you possibly playing games with some strange girl? No way already... just a second... stop, aren't I asking rather strange questions? Under normal circumstances in our class, if you do anything strange, you come under a lot of pressure from others."

It's nothing strange, really.

---Hmph. He found himself getting angry, mixed with annoyance, at this carefree single woman. Isn't this just pitiful, he also thought.

"...Let's make a trade!"

"Ah! Aaaa! My umami soba~..."

Taking the opportunity to grab the bowl of ramen, he got work with the chopsticks used by the single woman (age 30), wolfing down the umami soba as fast as he could. It was unexpectedly delicious. It suddenly came to him that if he kept this up, he'd wind up stealing all her umami soba. Pushing aside his old half-eaten bread, he vacuumed up everything in a flash, the cabbage, the carrot, the

pork and even the the Jew's Ear hidden at the bottom.

Oh wow, we're trading lunches. We're on *really* good terms. I'm envious. Then, after the Japanese teacher who'd received her help earlier returned, having bought her something to drink, the single woman (age 30) said "I want something in return!" He replied by waving his crusty bread in the air.

It may have seemed an eternity, with everything going through his imagination, but after he was done gobbling his teacher's umami soba, as he was returning to his classroom, a text message from Sena arrived.

*

Buzzzzzz!

Buzzzzzz!

Ha. Ha. Haruta's Great Escape~!

I couldn't hear, my ears were closed~!

Something I've gotta talk about!

Working out the times tables is too much!

Just working out times tables, is, too, much – *Buzzzzzz!*

Buzzzzzz!

(# from network)

"...Did you hear me?"

"I didn't hear you!"

He flipped her a peace sign, and then said clearly, "I did the times tables!" Sena said, "How?" Her ice-blue eyes turned towards him, as chilly as today's wind.

"Wh, what~... why're you talking so depressed like. I don't wanna hear it, you'll just make me gloomy too..."

"Haruta-kun shouldn't be getting depressed. It's my problems we're talking about, after all."

It could even be said--- the subject of Sena's gloomy words, a few difficult spots scattered through her times tables, had crept back into her head. Truth be

told, Haruta Kouji had been depressed for a while. Then, a sigh escaped him too. More of them wanted to. ...It was not even something they could joke about, walking down the road side by side with the fallen leaves blowing around, hearing such talk was getting to be really depressing.

Sena had asked him to go with her to her college, about ten minutes by [private railway](#) from the dirty apartment's neighborhood. He felt like he was trespassing on the college grounds, clad in a high-school uniform, looking like he might be there for an entrance examination, and checking out the students wandering about, but campus security didn't try to kick him out, nor even bother him.

While he walked together down the sidewalk with Sena, past a big lawn, the grass turning yellow, he unconsciously hunched his shoulders against the cold wind blowing past them. What you might expect of a college, but still spacious. Far away in the corner of the grounds could be seen a snowbound bunch of trees. Over in that direction some sort of school building had been built. On the steps leading to the main door, on benches scattered here and there, and even on piles of building stone, the forms of students could be seen scattered all over the place. It was already turning towards evening.

"If you didn't hear me right, then I'll say it again. You know,"

"Heeey! It's all right if you repeat yourself, but I've already got the idea!"

"...What? I heard you clearly."

"Listening with half an ear..."

---According to Sena.

Once upon a time, there was a certain high school, with a certain four people, young men and women when it all happened.

First, the two girls. They had come from similar backgrounds, and shortly after starting school they became fast friends. The two of them went to the College of Arts, lost themselves in art museums, joined clubs, and then met a pair of guys, close friends from another class. Adding them to their group, in the blink of an eye the four became friends. At the dorms, or exhibitions, or cultural festivals... The four of them attended every event, became best friends and began to call each other, and during the summer of that year, one of the girls and one of the

boys fell in love, and officially became a couple.

Becoming second year students, the remaining girl and boy wound up in the same class. Thinking on that, the girl was secretly pleased. Since two of the four were now a couple, the remaining two would naturally be attracted to each other. With just the two meeting up in class, their attraction was steadily gaining strength. In the space of that year, the set of four became a pair of couples.

Then, they were third year students. The storm of cramming for the exams started. Commuting back and forth every day to cram school, preparing for the exams to move up to a specialty within the College of Arts, only once skipping class, returning to work on a plaster design. Winter came, spring came, the only desire of the late-starting couple being to attend the same art school. Of the first couple, the girl went by herself to the school of arts. In the end, the guy didn't pass the entrance exams and ended up going to a private college of literature.

Nonetheless, the four of them spent every weekend and break together. Since they had become college students, they would stay in the taverns almost to the morning. Even when they threw up on themselves, sick because they were unable to get used to drinking sake, how many hours they passed away talking? They started out sharing the latest news about their various friends from high school days, then talked about their different schools, their new friends, they gossiped about the oddball professors, and the up and coming artists. What the art museums might be doing. Whatever they might have seen or experienced. Who at what age was doing what. What kinds of things they wanted to make. What kinds of urges they found inside themselves. How they were becoming artists. What they were eating. How life and work came together--- the Literature guy, who had already been quiet for a while, now became really quiet and depressed.

He still wanted to go to the College of Arts. He wanted to do as the others, holding to the same dream. But it had fallen through. He couldn't go a year doing nothing, and it would have been a miracle if they had allowed him to retake the entrance exams. All four had been worried if they would meet the qualifications, but in the end those who judged, the experts of the Fine Arts program, had not chosen him. He hadn't painted since the test. He wasn't becoming an artist anymore. He had become a dropout, an outcast. He had

withdrawn from the race. It was just him, alone.

They became second year college students, then third year, spring, summer and then fall. The guy bid the girl farewell. Having quit the race, deeply disappointed, at length he began to build a new life with new interests. The girl's feelings were hurt, then---

"I was robbed. Whatever, there's so much more out there, I think."

Sena's hair, tucked into the muffler, fluttered in the cold wind. Haruta was by her side, both of his cold hands stuffed into the pockets of his uniform jacket. After all, he had no choice but to put up with her depressing talk.

"I can't believe it... it's only been two weeks since we split up. Ryousuke and I worried about that kid, not leaving him alone every day, going together to drink, though he cried every day when we went out. ...But then one day, Ryousuke, it seems that he took a girl back to his room. I had gone home with some sort of cold. ...On the railway platform, facing the opposite direction from another couple waiting for the train, I saw myself alone. The couple stood side by side, I could not hear what they were saying... That moment was terrible, I had an awful feeling. There was no way, I thought... but I got burned."

Ha. Ha. Haruta's...!

...Not good.

Sena's voice had faded to almost nothing. It wasn't that he was just going deaf. She was so pitiful--- and if she thought about such things, Sena was going to become even more pitiful.

At that moment, in the hard cold wind, Sena's white face transformed, suddenly sobbing. Having seen that expression, however...

"...Ryousuke, what is he saying about me, I wonder? Really, from our first year in school I loved only him. But once we started hanging out with our friends, what else could I do?"

"...Yes..."

"Woman as a woman, in truth from the beginning Ryousuke was affectionate in his own way. But I imagined that Ryousuke loved me, ...in return."

"...Really~..."

"...All my life I believed that whether it were boyfriends or close friends, ...even in those days I was like an idiot, which can't be forgiven. Now I hate all of it.

"...Ow~..."

Rather harsh talk, he thought. It was hard for Sena, it was awfully harsh for others to hear too. Those fun high school days, to collectively "hate" them, it was too much for a busy high school student to take. It was too depressing. As you might expect, he couldn't even consider it. To not be able to imagine the faces of his friends. To even have various reasons to "hate" them before much time had passed...

No way. There's just no way. He didn't even want to imagine such a thing. Pulling up his hair, closing his eyes, he concentrated. Shout. There's got to be a way out of this.

"I'm freezing---! Gunma---!"

---In his mind, he had imagined a wonderful vision of the Gunma Prefecture. It was adorably heart-shaped. He had no idea what the real shape was. No matter, Gunma was wonderful. Kusatsu, Ikaho, Minakami, Gunma. Sarugakyou and Shima, all of them Gunma. Gunma was warm and fun, full of unclothed people. And best of all, lots of hot water in gardens. He loved Gunma. He loved going around without clothes. He really, really, really loved Gunma♥

"Ahahahaha! If I even think about it, I get warm! Man o man~, Gunma is it! Gunma it is~! Fuuuunnn! Right Sena-san, Gunma's really good, right? It's fun, isn't it!"

"It really is fun. Ah, yesterday, the pamphlet I gave you... sorry, but I forgot about it."

"That's OK, that's OK, for now that's fine♥ Always my heart lives in the warm heart of Gunma-chan♥ Gunma is my dream♥ I totally love Gunma♥ I am by Gunma and Gunma is by me too♥ Gunma is my buddy in everything I do♥ Tonight's side dish is Gunma's Kusatsu♥ Nyaa~n♥"

"Gunma is a nice place, for sure. ...By the way, I threw away that gourd from yesterday."

"Ah, so what of it! We can do without that weird thing! We don't need it!"

"...The gourd was reminding me of that thieving woman... I crushed it with my foot as hard as I could, and then threw it from the veranda..."

"Gu, gun...gu...gu..."

...Eeh! Cool! That fits even better with my plans for Gunma!

Noticing the gloom soaking into her bones, Haruta suddenly stood still. He had noticed something really strange was going on, and the imaginary train to Minakami was heading off without him. He was losing the chance to escape to Gunma.

On the sprawling lawn, a dozen or more people dressed in flesh-colored bodysuits were moving back and forth sinuously to the beat of a set of drums. Sena's slowly turned towards it, gloomily. Even after running around Gunma barefoot, that was a strange scene.

"Kya---! What's that!?"

Haruta's shriek was like silk tearing, and Sena stared at the group too.

"Ah... there was an announcement about dance class practice, so they must be practicing, I think."

"But isn't it awfully strange!?"

"I think they want to do something strange."

"What a strange dance~! They even do that! Can you do that too!? Wow, that looks great! Absolutely completely right! Heehee!"

"No, because I don't dance. ...If I had more time, but that field is always too noisy. Dancing, singing, storytelling, acting on stage, doing comedy, the guys are there... Because I am just a painter, and this is my school. The people here like hanging out to see the eccentric, amongst other things."

"Kya..."

Thadump ♥ his heart leaped for Gunma.

While they were talking, Sena's hand casually extended out to Haruta's hand. Her slender fingers gently entwined with his. Gunma beat faster. Yet at the same

time, conflicting with his heart, his blood was running cold, rising up from the bottom of his stomach. Sena's fingers were rather chilly too.

Without thinking, he withdrew his hand.

"...Why?"

She looked up at Haruta's face, eyes glowing ice-blue. Her phantom tail softly twined itself around his wrist, trying to bring his hand back. But he escaped. A little apart from her, he stopped.

"Don't do that, even though... Holding, your hand... again the same thing, isn't it? Something meaningless? Yesterday it didn't mean a thing. It didn't mean a thing to you. Wouldn't doing the same thing again look suspicious and backfire? And... ah... uh..."

---Really, he thought as they separated yesterday that he wanted to talk about softer feelings. But he couldn't find the words, and he gave up. But because so many things happened, essential things could not be said. This was what his pathetic brain really feared.

She stood absolutely still before Haruta's eyes, her expression unchanging.

"I've been behaving myself better today. That wasn't called for. Don't worry, I'll make up for my foolishness. ...Yesterday I really messed up. It was a surprise, I lost my cool ...rushing out like that, embarrassed at being found out like that. I regret that. I've been, behaving myself better today. With regards to Ryosuke, very soon there will be an announcement of his work, and the workshop ought to be finishing up."

Splat, at that moment, a drop. A raindrop fell on the tip of his nose. Mouth open like a fool, he looked up without thinking.

Sena's finger reached out, catching Haruta's finger once more. Gripping strongly, that was good, she looked up at him as if she were speaking to him. Ice-blue eyes, trembling and speaking. It must have been the work of the three thousand yen. *There are so many things I cannot do. I can't even think about them. I cannot let myself cross that line. Not even in Gunma could I think about it. Because I cannot even think about you.*

"Over there, the big building with the workshops. ...The rain's coming. Hey.

Let's go quickly."

---He could not escape.

He never even got on the imaginary train to Minakami. He never got on the imaginary train to Kusatsu, either.

Unable to say anything more, unable to do anything more, by Sena's slender fingers, guided by her soft hand he had to start running. "Wow, what rain!" "What a mess! We really need an umbrella!" "You've got to be kidding! Until yesterday getting wet didn't even bother you~!" ---Looking up at the darkening rainclouds, many of them protesting, the other students started running too. People out for a walk, old men and even the dogs started running.

*

It looked like they'd managed to escape from the cold raindrops falling down, while Sena ran together with Haruta, the raindrops was making polkadots on the sidewalk, but before long they threw themselves in the shadow of the eaves of an old building.

"Haa, it's cold... here. This is the workshop building."

"It's really coming down!"

As soon as they had gotten all the way inside, even Haruta saw and understood how completely the place was crumbling from age. Dark mold was crowding the corners of the ceiling. The window glass was completely fogged over, and the iron window frames and latticework was rusted. A line of dull, drab doorknobs went down the hallway. Looking like they'd been there for decades, from what he could see, these things are antiques... if what he'd heard was correct, anyway, the building was a junkyard.

From the moment he stepped into the place, he could smell the unique odor of oil paint. And even more irritating--- thinner or something stronger smelling was wreaking havoc with his nose. "This stinks!", exclaimed Haruta without thinking, then frowned: Sena must have been used to this. Putting on a good face, Haruta went without hesitation down the dark corridor, barely lit by the flickering,

nearly burnt out fluorescent lights.

They went up the bare, cracked concrete staircase, arriving on the third floor. Sena's feet stopped. They could see rooms lined up down the whole corridor, each identified by a letter of the alphabet. A guy looking like a student dashed out of one of the classrooms with a huge backpack and a canvas tote, and went running down the staircase as if he still had more to do.

"...That guy, he had a painting, didn't he? Do you paint here too?"

"Yes"

"Could you show---"

"No"

For some reason they had lowered their voices, since everything echoed in that dim and narrow corridor. Sena looked around a bit, then shortly started walking down the corridor. Going steadily but surely, today her boot-heels echoed.

What kind of person came to this floor? Walking side by side with Sena, hand in hand, he noticed that her delicate earlobes were pierced, but there was nothing stuck there. Really, wasn't Sena just perfect today? If he could be her new boyfriend, would he be able to pretend to be completely happy?

Sena perfectly hid her true feelings of love, and instead pretended to love---

"...?"

Something hurt.

'What was that?', he thought, clutching his chest.

"What's wrong?"

"...I don't know. I'm all right..."

It hurt, didn't it? Wasn't it painful? What about Gunma? He had no idea. In any case, he didn't know why his throat tightened whenever he breathed. If he were a little smarter, maybe he could express in words just what this hurt he was suffering was, and then maybe he could understand. Not born all that smart, he still hadn't gotten to understand himself yet. Sorrowful, Haruta scratched his long hair roughly. For the time being setting it aside as something to think about

later, inside of three seconds he had forgotten.

3D, 3E, and next, 3F said the number-plate on the white sliding door they stood in front of. Sena made a slight grimace, he noticed from the side. 'Perhaps in this room', Haruta thought, at almost the same instant.

The door suddenly opened from the inside.

"..."

The voice that cried wasn't Sena's. Door opened, what was inside was revealed. What's-his-face was there.

Hair all raised in a headband, he was wearing black-rimmed glasses with very thick lenses. With holes in his worn jeans and a cheap-looking flannel shirt, and, in spite of it being winter, he was almost barefoot, wearing sandals. He wore an wrinkled apron so paint-stained that it's original color couldn't be guessed. It contrasted sharply with yesterday's handsome, super-cool, jet-black, stylish store employee, which had made Haruta's looks suffer in comparison. Now he just looked like a nerd. But maybe what's-his-face was in his element here, he thought. Because even in Haruta's opinion, what he wore today was surprisingly appropriate for what he was up to.

...At any rate, so it was. They both wore the same black-rimmed glasses, but Noto could hardly be more different from this guy. Noto. The poor thing, Noto.

"Hullo, even today you're cool, of course ☆ Really good! Whatever you wear, it matches! If I dressed like this it'd be seriously dangerous, yo maan, [Seihou!](#) Hoo! Seihohho! Hohho! Hohhohhoo! Hohhohoo! A slob inside! Whoa!"

Without thinking, Haruta had staggered nearly halfway over to him, but caught himself just in time, recovering his sanity. Nope, you don't just walk up to and hug a guy like that.

Then at Haruta's side there was a Siamese cat with beautiful silver-grey hair, her long tail gracefully swinging back and forth--- long and slender, waving in the air. She snuggled against her new boyfriend, melting to his form.

"...How fortunate. You were here hard at work. We meet up like this a lot, just like yesterday. ...Why would I want to go out alone, I ask myself, or would I rather meet up with someone?"

What's-his-face didn't say anything. He glanced at Haruta's face, then looked hard at Sena's face. Sena gave him a composed smile in return. Only Haruta could feel the awful pain that flowed through her fingers, knowing the commotion in her heart.

"A break? Go buy coffee? Convenience store? Somewhere out of the rain?"

"...What a coincidence, for sure. I'd really like to know what you're up to here."

"What? No way, I had no idea Ryouzuke had come here! I didn't think he was here. I wondered if Misako's bunch had come here. Even those girls are doing things here, and since they said they'd make tea I was looking for them."

"Bringing a high-schooler?"

"Oh, us ♥"

Her tongue stuck out cutely, as if in greeting, while the matter of Haruta continued to be left out of their conversation completely, as if it were just a pin-prick.

"Even for this young 'boyfriend', I want to do a proper introduction. Ryouzuke and the others have already kicked me out, finishing things completely, so to speak. We thought we'd give everybody something to worry about. Isn't that right, Haruta-kun? We're going to the hot springs, aren't we?"

"What? Hot springs? What's with this?"

Fully five seconds later, it dawned on Haruta. Oh yeah, the Gunma pamphlet, the bare people, the hot springs. They were pretending. Holding Sena's hand tightly,

"Ah, Gunma Gunma! Yes, we're going to Gun~ma! Because we love Gunma~! Right, Sena-san!"

"Ahahahaha!",

---Carefree laughter echoed, but nobody else joined in. Sena, of course, was not laughing, having brought up the subject of hot springs.

The phantom tail swam from side to side in the air.

Deep in what's-his-face's eyes, a sharp look burned.

"...Hot springs though, it doesn't matter. Maybe this way, you'll finally stop coming over here to the studio to bother me? When I'm too wound up, I'll finally be able to come here and take a break. You aren't going to help me with my work after this? Will I be able to work with the same energy, I wonder? What about the deadline? Mine is the same as yours. Don't you understand just how awful the situation is now?"

"Whatever... I wasn't planning on bothering you,"

"You aren't bothering me. Lately though, you've been crying a lot, and clinging, but I had to turn in my assignments on time... if they dropped me, what was I going to do? Every time I found the time to meet up with you, you'd cry. We'd go out, you'd even keep me for hours, and because of that I'd be ridiculously late to the exhibition. Aren't you doing the same thing today? In the middle of my third year I'm the best, in spite of this awful situation."

"...That's a lie. Excuse me. About that stuff, I don't want to know..."

"Maybe I don't want to know either. Your prospects are good, you're getting just the right guidance on all your subjects, your classes are finishing up... about my feelings, I don't want to know!"

The sudden shout echoing in his ears, Haruta reflexively hunched his shoulders. He was almost frozen at Sena's side. So-and-so-kun threw something with all his strength at their booted feet. There had been a 500-yen coin clutched in his hand. Now it made one big bounce off the floor, then rolled strangely around, then making a plinking sound when it struck the wall.

"...Forget it! Understand this! I'm not going out with you anymore! We're making an end of it, can we do that!? So that way you can stop bothering me!? Of course, I, we are such a problem! We're betraying you, you're jealous, and we're making a problem for you! I'll get even! ...I want to do a good job of it! But for now, I am going to think of other things!"

That so-and-so scratched his head furiously, and his face was twisted in almost uncontrollable irritation. His hairband fell to the floor, trampled under his sandals unnoticed.

Sena stayed frozen where she stood. Suddenly, Haruta had a flashback to that day: submerged in the muddy river, a white hand struggling painfully for the

surface of the water. Without thinking, he gripped Sena's hand tightly. At the same time he tugged at Sena's hand as if to say, "Shall we get out of here?" But they could not. Sena's feet were nearly buried in mud, and she couldn't move.

She had failed. All was in shambles. So-and-so-kun has blown up. Sena had stepped on a something like a land-mine --- so he thought, at that moment.

Then it came. The idea came.

"...Ahem? Just a bit? Wait? Please?"

In order to protect Sena he took one step forward, standing before so-and-so's eyes. Then, he spoke.

"Ryo...Ryousaku-kun, is it? I have something to say, if you don't mind? I'd rather talk about other things, but, would changing girlfriends do? Besides which, though you've been blaming everything on Sena, might the problem be that you don't want to go out with her? If you had explained properly, what could she have said? Why didn't you explain it to her? Or perhaps I should say, were you just going to keep her tied up in chains? You decided to do nothing about the matter, but what about Sena? Whether it's this matter, or your assignments, you don't seem to have done too well. I wonder if it's really Sena's fault. So what's with you acting all angry?"

So-and-so's eyes finally looked straight at Haruta's. The look in his eyes was almost murderous. But he wasn't scared at all. As for his face, well, Taka-chan's smile was a hundred times scarier, and as for the sentiment, the Palmtop Tiger's wrath was a thousand times scarier. For he was a real beast, a dreadful living weapon, ready for military use. With an slack-jawed idiotic face, facing so-and-so's eyes directly, or at least, continuing to do so.

So-and-so's irritatingly self-important comments had finally begun to bother him. To some extent, even he had noticed the malice behind them.

"It was Ryousaku-kun that started the whole problem. But Sena-san carried on as if she were dying, and he had had quite enough of that, so Ryousaku-kun honestly felt he didn't need to do anything at all. First of all, Ryousaku-kun replaced her with another of their friends, starting this whole mess. Whether he was too busy to deal with the issue or not, that he started by cheating was of course the very worst thing he could do. Or did he think it easier than dealing

with the issue? Was he afraid it wouldn't turn out quite the way he wanted? Because of that, he threatened her like crazy so she wouldn't talk about the problem. In spite of being so busy, he was unfaithful. He robbed her. What's am I going to do? I won't speak of that. ...What we have is a really talented person, but why can't he, with a little self control, just treat people better? And to cap it all off, bothered by the whole mess, Ryouzaku-kun is about to flunk his class..."

Bam!

--- A sound went off near his ear.

"...Wow. A guy slapping a guy? That's..."

It didn't hurt at all. Every day he was greeted by a slap in the face from the comparatively voracious Taiga, something which definitely left your skull ringing. How much of a problem is a slap weaker than a 4-foot 8-inch high school girl could do?

"Hey!", said Haruta laughing and looking.

Sena gasped.

Still holding Haruta by one hand, Sena let out her breath like a doll, and sank slowly to the floor right there. She looked like she'd been slapped on the face.

Haruta, confused, crouched down and repeated foolishly, "Are you OK? What happened? Did I slap you? Are you hit somewhere?", trying to look at her face covered by both hands.

Turning towards Haruta, so-and-so-kun almost said something, but didn't.

"---Why'd you have to drag, this, high-schooler into this!? What were you doing!? Aren't you an idiot!?"

"...I, am, going, out, with, him."

Like a robot running out of oil, Sena's upturned face went white. She stared at so-and-so-kun's face as if she were clinging to hope. So-and-so-kun's face, on the contrary, had gone red, seeming to be on the verge of growling curses.

"As you wish. But for your information, you'll get yourself arrested. Your getting arrested will be convenient, though, I would never get involved with brats!"

Sena's right hand, hanging on to Haruta's finger, fell to the floor. "...Ah", she spoke in a thin voice, what took a few seconds to recognize as a crying voice. Standing up, Sena walked out. Confused, Haruta stood up too. He wanted to say something to that wretched so-and-so-kun, but looking back found the workshop door had already been closed.

It wasn't worth saying, so he shook himself and took off after Sena. He caught up with her at once. She was crying as she walked. He couldn't touch her, but he immediately placed himself at her side and walked along with her.

The rain soaking their bodies felt like ice.

The weather report hadn't said it was going to rain.

Everybody else went around with umbrellas. Jogging, Sena and Haruta passed them by.

*

By the time they got back to the apartment, the rain was fading and Sena had stopped crying.

After they'd gone in, which was good, yet a little uncomfortable, Haruta combed his wet hair. On a cushion in one of the few empty spaces in the disorderly room, he gave a exaggerated shiver.

The winter rain had frozen him to the core. He rubbed his numb hands together.

"Let me go wash my face," said Sena, and went off to the bathroom. After more than ten minutes she still hadn't come out. He couldn't hear the sound of the shower.

She looked far from happy with so-and-so-kun, after all, that last farewell had definitely been hit out of the ballpark. That may have been her own fault, since she had subjected him endure endless complaints. He couldn't leave, since he felt that even cold comfort was better than nothing. He was worried sick. With her crying so much--- she'd tried to drown herself once, so of course he was

worried.

"...Uh. Are, are you OK...?"

He turned around at the sound of the doorknob.

Sena was standing there.

In the dark corridor with the light still turned off, hair wet from the rain, she stood with a bathtowel wrapped once around her.



"...Aren't you cold?"

Slowly, her hair still stuck to her cheeks, Sena tried to nod at Haruta.

"...Well...you'll catch a cold..."

"It's all right. It's fine, whatever happens."

He watched her white ankles as she slowly, noiselessly, walked over. In the small one-room apartment, Sena came over before Haruta's eyes, crossing in only a few steps.

The light wasn't on. He wanted to turn it on, but he couldn't find the switch. Outside it was already dark, but light from a billboard right next door came faintly in the window, the weak light showing the inside of the messy room.

Sena's cheeks were already tinged blue.

"...You really ought to take a shower. Really. I want to also, I'm freezing to death."

"The cold's all right. ...With Haruta-kun, even with the cold, it's OK. We won't die. ...We can't die."

He really couldn't see the floor of Sena's room. Bending down, Sena was able to kneel right in front of where Haruta sat on a cushion. Her blue eyes sparkling, her white face looked up at him. The shadow of her eyelashes fell on her cheeks. Colder even than ice, Sena's hands caught Haruta's wrists. At that moment, the bathtowel wrapped around her body slipped down to her waist.

The back of his neck stiffened as if he were shivering.

Rattling, his jaw hardened. He couldn't breathe either.

Your breasts are showing...

The idiot idiotically whispered with all his might. But even that voice shyly cracked and shook. At this distance, frankly, everything about her, her fragrance, her body heat, everything had the power to make him tremble. Her silver hair shone blue, clinging to her bare skin.

Both her arms stretched out, wrapped around him and in an instant he was pulled down. He was startled, afraid of his own weight crushing Sena's slender form, and reflexively pushed against the floor with his hand to get up. But in this messy room, pushing with just one hand in the dark, he knocked over a tower of sketchpads.

Then---

"...So it's indecent. ...As long as nobody finds out, it's all right..."

---Then, so it is.

Sena's thin voice went darkly husky. Suddenly reversed, Haruta's body was leaning against Sena's naked body. The bathtowel had gone away somewhere.

Reflected in the light coming in from outside, he looked into those big, trembling, ice blue eyes.

Her skin where he touched, those eyes, all over, how cold she was, he thought.

This whole affair seemed like a dream. A beautiful girl, older than him, naked, trying to seduce him. He didn't know how many times he'd wanted something like this to happen in reality. As it was, if he were to lay himself down, this person would do it all.

As an idiot, it might not be a good to think about too many things, but rather let them go. Yes rather, that might be wiser. It might be better for him. It might be right.

Sena's breath crawled up the base of his neck.

Her fingertip traced his cheek.

The feeling brought by that gentle finger moving was like a dream, and the power from her body overwhelming, ...but, of course, he was an idiot.

And because he was an idiot, he didn't have a lot of control over things. Things were going well, he couldn't take advantage of it. It was only for the moment.

So, what was before him wasn't the naked Sena, such a thing would be 'crossing the line', you could say, but rather hard cold reality.

"...Love, so to speak, is a really strange, thing, wouldn't you say?"

"...Eh...?"

"...That so-and-so, he was never a very good guy... but Sena-san, you ought to know that even doing it this way, you will still be drawn back to him. You're jumping into the river, or the same thing, that's what you're trying to do. ...Up next to play the role of new boyfriend, so you can drown yourself in the river mud. Me."

Sena's wandering finger suddenly stopped.

Looking up at the ceiling still, Haruta continued talking with a shaking voice.

"...Hey. I'm thinking! Give me a bit. It's my problem. ...A terrible thing, I don't... River mud and the like I can deal with, but me, getting hurt..."

He didn't look into Sena's eyes. He just looked at the ceiling. He already wanted to go back.

I want to go back home quickly. I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home already. It was just that. He was a sad, lonely, lost child. Scared and insecure, he was just looking for the way back home.

"...Ahhh. I'm not going to do as you've proposed. Nor do I wish to be called your helper. I would only be a problem. I don't want to be together with you."

Sigh...

I want to go home.

He pushed her body aside. Without even refastening the buttons of his uniform jacket, which had come undone without him knowing, he pulled on his shoes and flew out the door. He took off running.

"Wait! Wait, I'm sorry... I'm sorry!"

Sena's voice could be heard. He turned around suddenly, and saw through the partially open entry door, nude, about to give chase but unable to do so, he saw Sena's confused white face. Suddenly, inside of his head there was an explosion of white light, and he lost consciousness. When he came to, he was crying.

"Sena-san is an idiot! It's not the time to apologize... I'm thinking! About your matters, and my matters too! Just right now, please let me *thinnk*! I'm such a dunce, there are so many things I've got to think about, and I've got to get *through* it all! As because of that, I wind up getting hurt! And it hurt a lot, look! Until not long ago, I was just bait to get Ryouzaku-kun to come back to you! That's all right, though, if you had just thought about it, then of course you would have understood! And yet, and yet, even helping you from the river mud... was that... nothing!? Did you try to understand!? Perhaps you didn't think about it at all!? ...Hey! Because I'm asking! A little bit better... *think about it!* Aren't you an adult!?"

"Sorry, sorry sorry sorry... sorry... sorry excuse me sorry sorrriyyy"

Sena, still naked, shedding tears, in the end began to emerge from her entryway.

"Come back, you foool!"

Her voice was hoarse, having shouted so much. Turning, he ran down the steps

at once.

Leaving the apartment, he ran as hard as he could.

Running, running in the light rain, he ran stubbornly for home. Even forgetting the bicycle he had left at the station, he kept on running.

Though there was hardly any wind, the rain was cold. He stopped along the way.

He crouched down under the eaves of a convenience store. It was cold. His throat hurt. He was dizzy. Cold. He didn't understand anything more. He wanted to go home. Still, he didn't go home--- still he didn't return.

Pulling out his cellphone, he tried to dial the best person for this moment. After five rings, that person answered.

"...Yuri-chan..."

"...Eh! Who's this!? Haruta-kun, is that you!? ...No way, why are you calling from your cell phone!? Were you caught shoplifting!?"

"...Yuri-chan, know what, know what..."

"What!? What!? What happened!? Are you crying!? Did somebody rob you!?"

"Well, you see, though I remembered, the Siamese Cat, see, it didn't come back, and it must have died on the floor of that house. ...Why did it go out to die? Anyhow, as any human being, I thought, why couldn't I save it? Why couldn't I save it? Why is it bothering me so much?"

"I don't understand! Anyway since your teacher is coming, please wait right there! Where are you!? Don't go anywhere, cause I'm coming right away! I'm leaving now!"

"...You don't have to come... but it's OK, Yuri-chan, I'll show you the way... The Siamese Cat, well, even though it was nearly dead, why did it run away from the human? That much, please show me. Myself, though I want to think about myself, my head doesn't work very well. For that reason please, could you think for me? Teacher, please, help me to understand."

"Eh!? Ohhhh what am I going to do? Umm... umm... yes... well..., umm yes... maybe that's it. ...The Siamese Cat, it didn't look so 'bad' it was about to die..."

did it?"

"...Bad...?"

"Look, if it looks about to die, for a human to be sad for it is perfectly understandable."

"...That... in the end, is the line? The poor cat, saddened, about ready to die, decided that was the way?"

"Do you think it will be grateful for your concern? Look, aren't you carrying an awful lot of responsibility for just an animal? Though I remember how it was in the old days, with the dog in my parent's house."

"Your talk helped."

"Is that so?"

"...But you know, I rather want to be there when it dies. Of course, being there when it happens is sad, but if I'm not there I'll always be looking, right? Forever worrying, thinking about it always... wouldn't that be sad still? Forgetting about it just because you cannot see it is absurd (like how a cat thinks). Human love isn't like that. Why don't you understand this? ...Anyway, if it dies, then I need to see it all, even the dying, the very moment we part... Only seeing her til the moment we started liking each other won't do. Running away without seeing her... it's like, like, don't take humans so lightly! I want to say, 'Try and think about it better!' ...Though I said it, whether she understood those words or not, I have no idea..."

"Oh, I see. She isn't an animal. Which reminds me, next door to my parent's home there was a cattle farm."

"Your talk already helped."

"...So it seems..."

---She still don't understand.

As he turned seventeen, speaking with his teacher, under the eaves of the convenience store, Haruta Kouji continued crying.

Then, he caught himself a bad cold.

Chapter 4

Once Spring arrives, let's go to Gunma!

Chapter 4[[edit](#)]

By the time his fever broke, three whole days had passed.

When the Haruta appeared at the start of the new week wearing a face mask, the more fearful classmates said, "The cold bug's even got to Haruta...!", and avoided him as if were the germ itself. Going no closer than his desk, everybody desperately avoided him. Thanks to this, nobody even asked him to give an explanation of what had happened. Even the single woman (age 30) had said of their mysterious conversation the other day, "Haruta-kun had to be delirious from fever, from going outside", so the rest wouldn't be too nose-y.

Of all his friends, Taka-chan was the extraordinarily cheery one. "Tie the bag where his tissues are stuck! The germs will get in the air!" "My iodine helps, gargling's good for you!" "You'll need to change your mask soon, use mine." "Eat oranges." "Here's some hard candy to lick." "Drink some lemon juice." Treating his mask with gloves as if it were hazardous waste, he dashed here and there helping out.

And then, the day ended, where to steer his bike... where to go? Coughing, his mind was numb while he looked towards the school gate. It was then.

"---Ah. You came."

"Huh!?"

By the gatepost, dressed in slender jeans, sneakers and a turtle-neck sweater, with a knit jacket and cap, and a mask, a person stood there. From the white knit cap, long straight silver hair spilled down to beneath her bosom.

Sena, hands in her pockets, in that moment, looked about to say "meow", or to cry.

"...The mask. What's with that? Got a cold?"

"How'd she wind up wearing a cold mask!?", he wanted to shout from his hoarse throat, something really dumb. But Haruta didn't know what to say, since he couldn't remember anything about that night.

"I mean... hold on, still, what can I say since I don't remember..."

In one big step, he closed the distance to Sena. Sena saw that Haruta's mouth was hidden by a mask, and suddenly,

"...I'm sorry, truly..."

"Ah!? Choo!?"

Head bent down all the way to her knees, it looked like she was taking a deep bow. Other students on their way home gave the two surprised looks as they passed. That is, it seemed, this guy with the long hair and hoodie, whose idiotic voice rang within the school, was seen being apologized to by an pretty older girl. It was quite something to see.

Nevertheless there she was: a beautiful woman, with her face downcast and her eyes rimmed with red. Below the mask, surely her face was twisted and about to cry.

"...That was a horrible thing I did. Really, whatever else, I wasn't thinking. ...I've been thinking. Since then. I'm sorry. Truly I'm sorry, please forgive me..."

"Hold on... Stop it... Seriously... Stop crying..."

Wiping her eyes with her fingertip, Sena finally raised her face. Gazing at Haruta sorrowfully, her ice-blue eyes trembled once again.

"...Sorry for what I did, too..."

"Why?", her eyes questioned, unsure how to answer, biting her lips beneath her mask.

While laid up in bed, he too had been thinking for quite a while. Thinking and thinking, he had come to see that his own feelings were only one side of the story, something that pained him deeply.

Leaving a naked Sena behind, deserted. Sena, deeply wounded by his running away. The strength and kindness Sena was able to show that day, he himself did not have. Though he was able to pull her out of the river mud, frankly, he

couldn't even shelter her in his arms.

He had broken the cord-like thing she pulled him with, her arms reaching out, only trying to hold him close--- Bitter regret and the cold bug were conspiring together to grow inside his body, coming back over and over again, gnawing away at him.

If separation was to be their fate, then it fell to him to finish driving Sena away from before his eyes. There was no way he could bear the sadness of that. There was only one way to "cross that line". He could draw such a line, and though it was easy to make a fuss, once he crossed over that line, he wouldn't be able to keep it up. Sheer force wouldn't drive a difficult woman like Sena away.

But, he didn't do it--- that night, Haruta couldn't do it.

Sena tilted her head slightly and shrugged her shoulders, her hands still stuck in her pockets.

"...Since Haruta-kun's feelings were hurt, I was hurt too. I was stricken. ...Since then with an awful cold... even a fever, I've been stuck in bed."

Now that her fever broke, she came to find him. His voice was still scratchy.

"...You came to find me."

"Yes. I came. Thinking about it, I decided to come."

"Is that so?"

She thought about him.

Haruta took one step towards Sena.

Sena had thought about it. Thought, and then must have realized that trying to pull him back was a mistake. Simply returning from the open window would have said goodbye perfectly. Haruta couldn't cross over the line, making it as if it were nothing.

Even if that were so, he couldn't just do nothing. Just when the line was broken--- he couldn't really be sure just when that happened. No matter how much it hurt inside. He could not be sad about this, this encounter, this last chance to see each other.

The line that Sena had set had been dropped. For his sake. 'You can get a little closer', she was saying by coming here to meet him.

Wasn't it enough already, what she'd given? In return for the help he'd given, it was more than enough. He'd been very lucky.

"...Hey, would you mind coming with me over to the college for a bit? We won't be barging in on Ryousuke this time. This has nothing to do with him: I want to show you something. Something I want Haruta-kun to see."

Sena pulled both her hands out and showed them, as if to say, 'I won't do anything funny.' On her two hands were knit mittens that matched her cap, because of which, she couldn't grab anything with her fingertips. She couldn't even secretly take the button of his uniform jacket.

"Yes! Let's go!"

Beneath his mask, he was grinning like a complete idiot.

Leaving with Sena that time, he welcomed her openly with a smile.

*

As they entered the old concrete structure of the workshop building, Sena guided Haruta. Going up the stairs, they opened the sliding door to the second floor room A.

"...Wow... how'd it get like this... absolutely the..."

"It's oil after all. Be patient, you'll get used to it."

About the size of a classroom, the room was square. You could say it was just like Sena's room, though it wasn't. Over on a rack there were some portraits and other materials, piled up in stacks, and some abandoned bags of personal items. In that moment, apart from Sena and Haruta, nobody was around.

The glass set in the window was perfectly transparent and beautiful, with no wires nor grillwork to mar any of it. The light shown brightly, not dim like the corridor. But of course the wall and ceiling were falling apart, with cracks

running here and there. The floor was also sticky, and the bare ductwork was dusty.

"If there were an earthquake, this place would fall apart at once! Sena-san, you'd jump right out the window to escape!"

"Yes, I would. ...For sure..."

In the time while Haruta was shuddering in fear of earthquakes and looking around the workshop, Sena was dragging something really large from a rack in the corner of the room.

"I'll help you! Watch out, that's dangerous! ---Whoa!"

"I leaned it against that wall."

Shouting 'Incredible...', Haruta gently let go. He moved back and once more, he said, 'Incredible.' That board-like thing... he'd never seen such a large canvas,

"...It's a painting, sort of. That one's mine, almost good enough for showing."

"This is innn...credible!"

Again he shouted.

He thought, "Where in Sena's slim body did she hide such energy for painting?" Dynamic, the colors laid down in such thin yet intense, passionate, as if enraged, lines, they naturally jumped out. Red, orange, purple, deep blue, such colors leaping about madly, jumping crazily, crashing about as they laughed and played. He suddenly remembered Sena saying, "I don't dance." So it was--- dancing with the body was not something she did. Because in visions of the world she freely, even daringly, danced wildly, with hidden energy.

"Sena-san, seriously, I'm... impressed! Wow! Since that mess about Gunma!"

Sena looked back at him and said "Oh?", tilting her head, puzzled. Perhaps she hadn't heard the praise she'd waited so long for. Her mask still on her face, she stood quietly there, taking the gloves off her hands.

He was suddenly nervous.

Both of Sena's hands, all ten fingers, had become something incredible. All of her fingers had tightly fitted rings with sharp stones, over the top of which was

placed tape, giving her small fists improvised brass knuckles.

"Wait!? What's this!? Sena-san, what are you doing!?"

"...With this, to that,"

She looked at her raised right fist. Twisting at the waist, her right arm right then---

"...like that. Yep. I wanted to do that."

With a daunting pose, shouting "Gyaa!", she was Haruta. With fierce energy, she swung downward with her ring-punch, diagonally across the middle of the huge canvas, ripping it up. That was good, well done, Sena nodded, then gave it another ring punch with her right. Making a sound as if it were crying, the canvas cloth tore. Sena ripped apart her painted world with her fists.

"Waiwaiwait, no no no, what are you doing!? Seriously seriously seriously! But that painting, you spent so much time on it, and it's really pretty! Awawawa, uwaa!"

Greatly excited, Haruta was dancing around like crazy. Frantically, he caught Sena's shoulder, trying to stop the destruction. But,

"...It's all right. I thought about it. I understood. Doing this, this way, is OK. I want to do this."

"Awawawa...!"

Turning to the big hole she had torn, Sena kicked through it with her shoe. The noise echoing, the frame cracked, of course. The already bolt-upright Haruta, seeing it all, went pale but could only watch over Sena's desperate rage. To a certain extent, he felt small.

"Excuse me. But this painting,"

Bang, crack, crash! ...Finally the canvas fell to the floor.

"The theme was 'Unfinished'. You could call it unfinished... something always worked on, eternally being worked on, it seemed like."

Riiipp! ...Grabbing the torn part, Sena tore the painting up into little pieces.

"...This, you know, was something I painted for Ryousuke. I was trying to draw

my love, my feelings, how much I loved Ryouzuke. Because I thought it would last forever. So too was this painting: always unfinished, always getting more layers. Our love staying with us eternally, our thoughts continuing to overflow, always piling up in layers... or so I said!"

"Hey... you, already, stop already..."

Sena lept up.

With both feet, she trampled the painting.

Again she kicked, striking the wall, once more trampling what had become an unending project, dulling the surface where it had been for so long.

"And so, with this, it is over. ...Completely over. This shape, this painting's final form. In this way, the thing I wanted to paint, it became like this. I did it. ...I wonder, is there anything else? Haruta-kun, this folded stuff. This frame."

"You want me to do it too!? No way! Aren't you going to regret this later!?"

"I won't, I won't. ...It's for the art's sake. Yes. Art, art. *Art*. So hurry up, I mustn't stall."

"Hey, this is going overboard! Really!? Seriously!? ...Are you serious!?"

Yes, I'm serious, Sena nodded. She said to destroy them. To kill her offspring with her. Get it over with!, she said.

---Yes ma'am!

"...Ready, set...! Hang in there--! Minakami Express, here we go!"

Bending the canvas, he stomped on it with all his might! *Crunch!* Making an awful sound, the canvas folded into four pieces. "Two tickets to [Shibukawa Station!](#)", he shouted as he kicked, rent, tore and ripped up.

"As might be expected from a guy, you're strong."

Sena sounded happy, more and more eager to commit murder, murder and more murder. ---They were killing. Together with Sena, he was letting Sena die. It was goodbye, it was farewell this way.

"We can even take the [Limited Express Kusatsu!](#) Let's ride it to [Manza-Kazawaguchi!](#)"

He couldn't bear to see her die.

He didn't approve of her sneaking out like this.

If she was going to do it, she would do it. By these hands, by these feet, before these eyes, they were committing murder by battery. If she said farewell, he would see everything. He would see with his own eyes the last of Sena.

"Sena-san! This is the last one! Stop hitting things!"

"Ooh!"

He supported Sena's dead body with both hands. Shouting "Eei!", she ran with all her strength, ramming it with her elbow. Making a fool of herself, she fell to the floor, almost running Haruta into the wall, and then the corpse,

"I... I did it-----!"

It tore and fell to the floor, between the two of them. Sena raised a delighted shout of triumph. Like a new person, eyes shining brightly, shouting many more times, "Hurray! Hurray! It's over!", she jumped. Haruta jumped with her too. We did it, we did it! *Art Art!*

"Where's all the racket coming from... Sena!?"

The door opening, Sena and Haruta turned around at the same time. So-and-so-kun stood there, seeing the state of the workshop and it's two murderers, his expression changing. All of a sudden, he wasn't the macho he'd seemed before! He went deathly pale.

"You, this... aaah!? It has to be a trick, what have you done!? Wai... wait... uwaaaaa! This, you, Sena, this, the exhibition... is this a practical joke!?"

So-and-so-kun at that moment shook and sank down to the floor. He seemed to truly be in shock. Sena, on the other hand, was calm, cheerful and refreshed.

"At long last it was complete. This was how I finished it. I managed to finish it... at long last, it took a convincing shape! I did it! Yay!"

"Yay!"

She and Haruta gave each other a high five.

"Mon...grel! This too... you did this out of spite!?"

"You're wrong, you're wrong," the two shook their heads at so-and-so-kun. Pointing at the scattered remnants of the corpse, her mask slipped down to her chin, Sena simply explained:

"Really, this is a work of art. I wanted to do it like this... done this way, mine, an expression of how I paint. Exploring myself this way, diving into myself, making sure of what I am, and then practically forming it, if I don't prove myself in my own eyes, I am unable to live as a human being should. Ryousuke, too, is like that. I should know. We cannot live without it. ...But this, is it not still a painting? With three dimensions, isn't it more interesting?"

"...You...are, are you really serious...?"

"Yes, I am. I thought about this, and did it. Now, I feel really good. Everything fell in place, and this work was finished. Finished, and then... quickly on to my next work. My next project has already been born. It's inside of me, but I still don't know very well what it will look like. I want to see it. I'm dying to see it. Crazy about it. Have to make it quickly... have to make it. Quickly, quickly... awful... trembling...!"

As if she were trying to keep herself from exploding, Sena was really trembling, hugging herself tightly. Up to this point, more than anything, her facial expression had said, "I'm feeling good." Seeing her sudden transformation, Haruta for some reason started clapping.

And then so-and-so-kun seemed to understand. While saying "Anyway, anyway" over and over again, he started gathering the more important fragments of all the destroyed works. That hunched form, might eventually wind up the same way, I think.

"You didn't think about presentation... but as far as I'm concerned, the review board... can they do 3D, really?" ---And so-and-so-kun wound up clapping too.

Even so-and-so-kun seemed to have been completely transformed. Both of them transformed, though no longer a couple, it seemed the two could still get along as persons. And so, having had met two different kinds of people, there was a happy ending. Or so thought Haruta in his simple way.

*

Before saying goodbye, he was thinking he'd ask one more question.

"Well, Sena-san, your happy memories of high school, do you think it was all a lie?"

"...How so?"

It was a little too crowded for sitting, so standing in the train being jolted about, he looked out the window. The sky was again dark, the city lights quietly shining.

"...Well, after that times with your friends when your boyfriend was stolen away, in the times when he was cheating on you... how much you've changed, though that must have been painful."

"Have I changed...? ...Well, the fun things about high school, the messy situations, the heartbreaks, the joys, things together with Ryouzuke, things together with that guy... all of it, I don't think it was a lie. I don't think I want to forget it all. I'm thinking it was all important."

"You said, 'I hated it.'"

"Yes. I hated it. All of it, though that's unforgiveable, I think. But, I don't think it was a lie. I don't think it would be good for it all to never have happened. I still hate it, I always have."

"...Really? Those memories from before, how painful were they? After all, wasn't high school life supposed to be fun in the end?"

"Yes. Memories, you see, are things that pile up. And when things pile up, what's beneath invariably disappears. Moreover, some kinds of memories, after a bit, become transparent. The memories buried beneath always have an influence. ...So it is with me and my pile of memories. They make me what I am. ...Being a student, fun?"

"It is fun! ...But because it's fun, you get uneasy~. And despite it being fun, in the end there are all sorts of betrayals, unpleasant things waiting, will everything be broken? Such things..."

"Nobody knows just what will happen. But hey, in this new future whatever kind of awful thing comes up, whatever happens, I will not disappear! The present Haruta-kun's 'fun' absolutely must not disappear. I'm not joking. Haruta-kun is going to pile up memories."

"...Seriously~?"

"Seriously~. You're a really interesting person. ...So interesting you will be, right? Doing so, you will make all kinds of memories, of everything. Everybody does that, only I make my own sorts! My [colors](#) change each moment. Even seeing so many, I'll never get tired of it, even in a lifetime. ...Here's the station! Let's get off, then get your bike."

"Oh, yeah."

They got off the train together at the station nearest Sena's apartment, leaving by the ticket gate. Confused for a bit by all the hustle and bustle, almost taking a break,

"...Well, I'll see you next time. Later, on a date. Next time let's eat. Let's treat ourselves with the 3000 yen from the other day."

"Eh!? Later, we're going on a date!? Hurray!"

Sena laughed. It was good that she laughed, and that alone convinced him it was all over. Having interfered when Sena had thrown herself into the river, having exerted more strength than he thought he had, he had to make sure Sena wouldn't die. Even with the fresh start on life after that, still, that they might be able to go out together had been inconceivable.

He was glad. From the bottom of his heart, he was glad. How happy he was! He didn't think he'd ever had such a feeling before.

"I'm incredibly happy! I really am glad! Hurray, hurray! Send me e-mail, absolutely, OK! Let's get together! Let's eat something, OK!"

"That's fine. Eventually, let's go to Gunma, OK?"

"Wha!? Gunma!? Go to Gunma!? Together!? Really!? How!?"

"By train."

"But you can't! Sena-san's a duummee~ ahahahaha ☆"

"...You see. Thinking about many things, feeling depressed... Hey!, I thought, if Haruta-kun and I were to go to Gunma, it would almost certainly be a lot of fun. ...With that, reaching the limits of what I could know myself, I investigated Gunma on the net. Catching a cold... I really was a fool. Haruta-kun, do you like meat?"

"I love it!"

"Well then, let's try some of the area beef. It's famous."

"Wha! Local beef! Rather, how! You fit a PC in your place! In that messy room, there's space to put a PC! Super incredible! You're a magician!"

"There was space enough..."

Thinking, 'Incredible, incredible,' as he skipped onwards, he noticed. Finally he understood.

He'd fallen in love.

He was in love with Sena.

So like this, happy about little things like this, ---her having thought about him, having investigated on the net about Gunma, there's no helping it, dear beloved Sena.

So it was.

"Until our date! Until our date! I'm really glad! Let's go to Gunma too! Let's go for sure!"

"Let's go by train, since I don't have a driver's license."

He wanted to watch Sena's smiling form forever. The silver hair, the ice-blue eyes, the body followed by its supple tail, he wanted to watch forever with his eyes. To be able to date Sena, wanting to date her, was enough to make him want to shout out his happiness.

It wasn't even an eternity.

Someday this love might even come to a bad end. But for now it is certainly a joy to be alive. If it were to disappear rather than build up. In that case, he would make new colors.

What kinds of colors would they be? What colors would be made? We did it, we could do it, we accomplished it. In that moment, he wanted to shout, "Sena, could you look at these colors?"

I want you to see, a small wish.

*

"Eh..."

"Don't give me 'eh'! Couldn't you hear me just fine!? Because I'm serious!"

One day, at lunchtime. In the staffroom the ridiculous, idiotic voice disruptively echoed all around. While wrapping her arms around her delivered [gomoku-yakisoba](#), guarding it, the single woman (age 30) took a hard look at Haruta's face.

"B, but... Haruta-kun, you've not even chosen fine arts nor calligraphy. Why do you suddenly want a recommendation to the College of Arts, how'd this happen...?"

"Well..., I've fallen in love."

"..."

"Hey, Yuri-chan!? Are you listening!?"

"Oh, sorry... I got distracted counting the mushrooms in my gomoku-yakisoba..."

"I'm going to choose fine arts for next year! So that's why, right? Right? As my homeroom teacher, there are many things you can do to make arrangements so I can get a recommendation, right? I know you can do it! Aren't you in charge?"

"...Ehh... even if I'm in charge, there are things I can and cannot do..."

"Don't say that! Please! ...It can't be helped, I knew that! I'll give you this cream-roll!"

"I don't need it."

"Now, now, don't say that!"

"Waah, I'm eating lunch with a student again today~ I'm popular, se-ri-ous-ly, isn't that nice~.", she said to the young Japanese teacher sneering at her as she passed by. "Isn't that nice!", the desperate single woman (age 30), waved back at her with the cream-roll that'd been handed to her.

"...Wh, which arts college? Falling in love... that is, what... going out with her?"

"That hasn't been decided yet! But, well... sooner or later won't it get that way? Heehee! Gunma by the Love Express!"

"Gu, nma...? ...That person, is that really a girl? ...Human being?"

"What are you saying! She's beautiful! She's probably human! She's a third year now~, look, going back and forth together from school~, sort of~! Kya~!"

"Suspicious...? Did you say third year?"

"I did, I did! Twenty years old! A grown up older sister~!"

"...Well, there's no way we can get a recommendation for next year. And by the time the admissions process is done, a year from now, she will probably have graduated."

Haaa... the quiet flowed through the staffroom for several seconds. And then,

"...Oh wow...! Such a fate I've fallen into... kyaa!"

"Ah, besides, Haruta-kun, you might well have moved on by the time three years have passed."

"Man! Somebody ate your food!"

"Aaah! My gomoku-yakisoba!"

Nevertheless, so it was.

From how he took the Chinese takeout from his homeroom teacher, how delicious it had been--- while carefully avoiding the quail eggs, Haruta smiled happily. It was delicious, this weekend he had a date with Sena, somehow every day was really happy. His smile didn't fade, somehow he was pure angelic smile... with Gunma beating strongly in him, today again his heart was full.

"Devil! Devil! Lunch bandit!"

Even the cries of the kind single woman (age 30) laid up another layer in my heart, yet another kind of memory. Even if he thought she was a little noisy, combined with the flavor of the yakisoba, he heard it as an enchanting melody.

The End

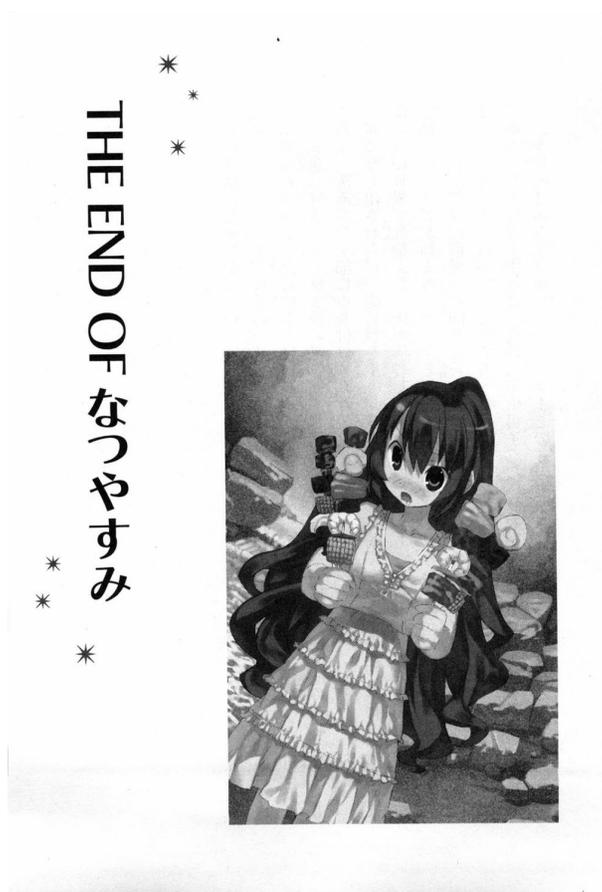
Chapter 1

The End of Summer Vacation[[edit](#)]

Chapter 1[[edit](#)]

Status:
Incomplete

50%
completed
(estimated)



This summer hadn't been too bad.

With one last wipe with the cloth, Takasu Ryuuji permitted himself a smile. He was still hunched over from the work, having applied himself to polishing the sink so thoroughly that it could be eaten from. The drain and faucet gleamed silver without any hint of smudging; there was neither strand of hair on the bottom or sides nor drop of water left behind, just as he wanted it.

His work was perfect.

Gazing at his own reflection in the mirror above the sink, Ryuuji contently mused with how he had done his bangs. In the world the mirror reflected, the real Takasu Ryuuji had already died. He'd been lynched and buried. Behold, all ye people of this world, the nightmare that all mankind has feared is starting---

dwelling upon such things didn't make them real. Maybe it was the sharp, uplifted sanpaku eyes, or perhaps that the green light glowing through the gap between his long bangs let loose a furious lightning attack. In reality, however, he was just born with that face. The person himself was an ordinary second year high school student, an energetic yet thoughtful young man.

Ryuuji's summer vacation this year had been special, different from all that had come before: a villa by the seashore, his first trip without parents, a ghost plot, and even a surprising counterplot. He even caught a glimpse of what 'women' were really like. The summer's memories were etched into his mind, from the ferocious sun to the beautiful things. It seriously wasn't bad at all.

"Fuffuun...♪"

As with these last two days, his special summer vacation was over already. Starting the day after tomorrow was the long-awaited new school term. And, even better, it looked like something exciting was shaping up. Hoping to have fun again this summer, Ryuuji looked at himself in the mirror, humming a tune and fiddling with his bangs. Summer vacation's ending soon, what a shame---

"Fuffuun♪"

He didn't even need to turn around. Standing in the bathroom doorway, she twirled her bangs around her fingertip extended below and to the right of her nose, humming with her face resembling a Hyottoko mask. Crowded into the corner of the mirror was a reflection of her female form, maliciously mocking Ryuuji's silly appearance.

"...What? What's up?"

"Nothing," she curtly responded, glaring at him by way of the mirror.

Aisaka Taiga raised her eyebrow, as if to make fun of the Hyottoko face by getting it backwards. She was barefoot, wearing a cool one-layer cotton one-piece dress with an orange plaid. Her lightly colored hair was tied in the back, gently swaying down to her hips. With her suntanned cheeks and nose, her features were rosy like a French doll--- not at all like the Hyottoko. Rather, she was a second year high school girl, built too short in comparison to the rest, She had a pretty face that was remarkably young but not drawn with graceful lines, as if she were carved from hard glass.

"It doesn't matter, though. Normally, guys would get embarrassed if they were seen staring at the mirror."

What a life. Taiga, as Ryuuji's classmate, lived in the apartment building next door. Each had a crush on the other's best friend. And, as if to completely test the goodness and helpful spirit of Ryuuji, it seemed she was sent as a trial by God. Despite Taiga living by herself next door to the Takasu residence, she spent half her time freeloading here, practically residing with his family, throughout his summer vacation even more so. Taiga slept under only one roof now more than ever.

She angrily twisted the face she had spent time preparing, taking on the form of a fava bean as her chin lifted disagreeably. "Hey, now you've gone and done it, haven't you! 'Fuffuun♪'"

She was simply maddening. Looking back at her, Ryuuji answered sullenly. "If you want to say something, say it."

"Say? But wasn't it like this - 'Fuffuun♪' - Hey, perhaps this sound - 'Nfuffuuuuun!' - How's that? 'Fuffuuuuuuun!'" Taiga's bored expression changed, now spreading her hands and opening her eyes wide as if in amazement. "You've gone and completely confused me!" she rudely declared, lifting her white chin before continuing.

"They say in an old Greek tale there was an idiot who was so enchanted by his reflection on the surface of the water that he fell in the pond and died! His ghost possessed the flowers by the water, and even now couples who visit the pond are brought to an untimely end! But, here, your face would probably make mushrooms... poisonous enough to kill a bear! The spores from your spirit will remain eternally in this bathroom floating around, and new residents will leave, frightened. 'Wa-ah, mushrooms are sprouting up!' they'll say! There – was – a – fool – in – an – old – Greek – tale, in – the – pond – his – gloo – my – face – "Taiga sang with a triumphant expression, poking him each syllable from start to finish.

"You know, for a song about humming, that wasn't too bad!" He answered again simply, moving her fingertip out of his way. But Taiga's upraised eyebrow still didn't move.

"I'm telling you to move it, you narcissistic kid!" Forcing herself in front of

Ryuuji, she started pushing Ryuuji away from the sink with her rump.

"What the – ?!" Ryuuji grabbed the sides of the sink, hanging on with all his strength as he tried to keep Taiga from pushing him back.

"How long are you going to hog the sink? I just want to use the mirror."

"How long?' Until now I was cleaning here! Go use the dressing mirror in Yasuko's room!"

"Ya-chan's in the middle of changing! Besides, you've got to stop spreading mushroom toxins!"

"I am not! Besides, this mirror is part of my house!"

"Fuffuun♪"

"Are you listening!?"

They wrestled each other for the spot before the sink, neither wanting to turn it over. They stepped on each other's bare feet, elbowed each other, and pushed each other aside with their hips. In the end, Taiga had triumphantly stolen the place in front of the mirror.

"Good grief!"

Ryuuji looked over Taiga's head, inevitably using the mirror from behind her. Taiga could only reach up to Ryuuji's chest at best. She couldn't look at him in the face even while standing tiptoed, a rather mortifying problem.

Taiga, her nose nearly touching the mirror, looked over her face. She scanned for areas where she was pink from a little sunburn: cheeks, neck, shoulders, chin, and forehead. And then, approving and nodding to herself, she released her fluffy long hair from the rubber-band that bound it, and, with a moistened hand from the sink, pulled out the kinks so she could comb her hair. Under this treatment, Taiga's soft hair immediately spilled out into its full length.

By example, Ryuuji rinsed his hand too and tried to part his hair in a similar fashion, combing with his fingers and working with it all the way back to his neck. But his straight hair was too stiff, and he couldn't handle it as skillfully as Taiga could. All he could manage on his first attempt was the crooked part in his hair. His hair had grown quite a bit, down to the nape of his neck, the longest it had

ever been.

"... Hey, you. So when are you going to get it cut?"

From the middle of the mirror, her sparkling clear brown eyes looked back at him. "My hair?" he replied,

"It really has grown long. I still haven't got it cut."

"What an answer!" said the disgusted Taiga in the mirror, giving an exaggerated expression of revulsion with tongue stuck out. "Did you intend to start school with that head? Yech, how irritating!"

Seeing the ugly face she gave him, Ryuuji told her to leave him alone. But no matter how or who she said it to, he felt his hair was OK. While looking in the mirror once more, he tugged on his hair a bit more, checking its length. Somebody might be a little irritated, but it was absolutely OK.

This summer Ryuuji hadn't had his hair cut at all. This hair was, in short, 'not bad', a summary of the recent summer vacation. Now, however, he needed to prepare for the day after tomorrow, the new school term, the long running start into the coming fall. He was doing a makeover; he combed his overgrown hair.

Even if he said so himself, he felt that his hairstyle up to this point was too serious. If only it could cover his face, then he'd just have to worry about normal, student-like things. But slowly, the suspicions about him being a delinquent had been fading, and now, with the start of the new school term, he thought he might try a bit of a transformation.

May if he stretched it a little more, combing it out without changing the length, the top a little short, the neckline a bit long, stylishly long, more adult-like, and the texture... That's what he was aiming for. For a moment he thought it troublesome, since it was still in the middle of growing out.

Taiga turned around forcefully, looking up at Ryuuji's face point blank. On tiptoes, she jabbed her finger at his chin with a frown like lightning, fiercely furrowing her brow.

"That's absolutely got to stop! You've absolutely got to get a trim! It was summer vacation after all, you thought, and then you kept quiet, sneaking along and staying out of sight. Your head must -"

The vein in her temple was pulsing. "Ta - Taiga?" Ryuuji wondered just how much she tenses she would get.

"...RRRRRGH! You... are really a pain!" She was shouting with all her might. "I'm warning you for your sake! I'm telling you this out of kindness!"

That...That was out of kindness? Ryuuji scratched near his nostril. Her frankness was a big help, thinking he followed her logic reasonably well.

"That's some face - Aargh!" Something hit his elbow, shoving his hand straight up. Wham! His finger jammed into his nose to the second joint.

"THAT. IS. QUITE. ENOUGH!"

Ryuuji's mind had not changed. With both cheeks stinging and his hair mussed up, he pointed the finger that had been jammed up his nose directly at the tip of Taiga's nose. Taiga cried out in surprise, and exaggeratedly reared back to avoid the now-contaminated fingertip.

"This hair is growing into a vision of what I am becoming! Eventually I will trim it just right, but for now, it is fine!"

"Vision? It seems like some sargassum weed from Hell!"

"That's a bit extreme. Isn't your mane as long as your bed? This summer has been hot and humid."

"I'm fine with it. It grows out naturally brown, smooth and fine. I only have to tie it back."

"Yeah, I might eventually color my hair, or tie it back."

"Kyaa! Sca-ry!!!"

"Why is that?!"

"I mean, even if you don't wash your finger!?"

"My nose is not that dirty!"

From behind the commotion in the narrow washroom, the shape of Yasuko appeared, clad in blue jeans and a T-shirt, and looked in on them.

"So~ How long are you two going to keep making that noise before you finally get moving?"

She wore a cotton billed cap over her face, which was made up with only sunscreen. At her feet, which featured a deep pink pedicure, was a cooler bag with frozen meat stuffed inside. She had three kinds of yakiniku dipping sauces, unopened, in a rather large supermarket bag. Preparations had already been made without them. It would shortly be time to leave the house.

Ryuuji and Taiga closed their mouths, exchanging understanding glances. Their insignificant quarrel stopped at that.

August 30th, 3 pm. The Takasu's and Taiga together headed towards the local riverbank. It was to be, perhaps, the last event of this summer vacation.

*

"Incre-dible..."

"Hey! It's dripping, it's dripping! Whoa!"

Taiga quickly moved her sandaled feet apart as she sat on the bench. The sauce dripped from the grilled corn in her hand – SPLAT – to the ground near Taiga's feet. Ryuuji, as fastidious as he was, didn't even feel like wiping up sauce from the ground. He admonished her to pay more attention, scanning over Taiga's one-piece dress to make sure nothing had stained her clothes.

"But this sight, it's really something else, isn't it? Already the boundaries between the groups are getting rather fuzzy."

"Though here they are pulled rather tightly, those boundaries."

Still sitting lined up on the bench with Taiga, Ryuuji stretched out his sandalled feet, drawing a line on the ground before them. That was where the line separating drunkenness and sobriety lay.

Though it was the end of August, the season was still midsummer.

The sun, after wandering most of the afternoon, was slanting towards them and by the river it was hot and muggy, but even the smell of the water was half-hearted, as if the air were tired of carrying it. Still, the scorching heat wave,

enough to thoroughly burn one's skin, had even driven the cicadas into hiding, even their frenzied voices now somehow feeble.

On the sprawling river bank, enormously tall weeds running rampant on and on into the distance, you could hardly call it pretty. The lazy surface of the river felt quite far away. Here and there on that riverbank, the colorful tops of parasols and tents tossed bright colors around. Clinging to the last of summer, many barbeque groups were coming to this vacant land which had been opened up.

"Maybe that's the Bishamontengoku team over there."

Ugyaaa! Hoaaaaa! Naaaaaa! Boeeeeee! --Towards a group of women raising cries like strange birds not of this world, Taiga pointed with her corn-cob. "I guess", said Ryuuji, looking off into the distance.

<~~50% Completed~~>

Author's Notes

Author's Notes[[edit](#)]

While typing this postscript I'm thinking, "Isn't this PC incredibly dirty?"

I've got a cold, and can't stop coughing and sneezing. My monitor and keyboard, right in front of me, are getting the cold virus every time I blow on them. And look at me! Grabbing and eating bread with my hands contaminated from the keyboard... I'm [amazed](#).

Now, for all the wonderful fans of "Toradora Spinoff 2!" Thank you very much for having taken it (and read it)! I expect we be meeting again shortly, on schedule, with "Toradora 10!" Thank you for your continued interest!

With this schedule to meet, it is not a good time to catch a cold ... I am in a sad state. Until I reached twenty-five years of age, if I felt I was "coming down with a cold", I could get better by the next morning if I got enough sleep that night. But recently, I can't stop it at "coming down with a cold". Whatever medicine I drink, however much I sleep, whatever I eat, whatever vitamin supplements I take, ... I get sick 100% of the time. And in spite of serious relaxation, I don't get better. I go to the hospital, but don't get better. For at least three whole days, I feel unable to manage life in this world.

In the past this would not be ... and until the third year in high school, I, too, had the energy to run around in bloomers. (In that long lost time, bloomers were still OK in public.) Now, I think that if I were to wear bloomers while rolling on the floor-mat, I would catch my death of cold. Mainly for social reasons ... or perhaps because of those bloomers.

Why would I only wear that sort of pants while quietly exercising? When I was an ordinary, medium sized school-girl, the gymnastics festival became a meeting of about 500 bloomer-clad bottoms, something which I now think was a madhouse. Even though all that was only twelve years ago, somehow it feels strangely distant from the present. Twelve years...? The time it takes for a newborn to become a sixth-grader...?

Setting old memories aside, I must have a weakened immune system. Ha! I want to spend my time happy, since I have heard that laughing strengthens your immune system. But when I look up, those cursed words (the AK-47 [pun](#) from before) come into view.

Oh, I'm frozen. Looking back seriously and reflecting on the joke I wrote, I am thrilled.

Now then, everybody! I truly thank you very much for sticking with us to the end! Next, on to editing "Toradora 10!" I am determined to grind this cold virus to dust, while praying for my fans to receive and enjoy this book.

And, at the present time (January 2009), Zekkyou-sensei's manga is being serialized, and the anime is being televised. Both works, from the author's point of view, are top-notch. By all means please check them out!

Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes and References

Translator's Notes[[edit](#)]

Horses[[edit](#)]

[↑](#)Takemiya is referencing a fairly well known proverb in Japanese, "天高く馬肥ゆる秋", which translates to roughly "Autumn with the sky clear and blue, and horses growing stout." The title of this story, "虎、肥ゆる秋" alludes to this quotation as well. The only difference is that the proverb refers to horses, and the title to tigers.

Aunt Squad[[edit](#)]

[↑](#)The author is having a little bit of fun here. Referring to the group of older ladies crowding about and constantly chattering, she uses the words おばさん軍団 (*obasan gundan*). *Obasan* is the usual term for your aunt, or for any older female person you may encounter. This usage is identical to how the word "tía" is used in Spanish. *Gundan* is the word for a small military unit, like a patrol or squad, though it could be used for an army too.

This bit is also found on page 38 of the first volume of "Golden Time". The only difference there is that instead of *obasan*, we find *obachan*, apparently treating the women a little nicer: grown (but not old) women, rather than the (apparently) older ones we see in this story. Whether the author made this distinction consciously is a nice question.

Moth[[edit](#)]

[↑](#)The author is using a word which normally means "[poisonous moth](#)" here, but is clearly referring to the hyperactive teacher of the Aerobics class. Perhaps a better translation might be "gadfly". Nobody I've talked to has seen this usage before, but they agree that it seems to be what Takemiya-san intended.

Flasher[[edit](#)]

↑The author has had Ami say something that can be taken two very different ways. The book has the phrase '一肌、脱いであげる', which can be taken to mean 'pitch in and help out', or 'help to get undressed'. Taiga, of course, plays with the unintended meaning.

Hamada[[edit](#)]

↑Haruta is particularly messed up right now, and can't think straight. "Hamada" can be understood as either the surname Hamada, or as the expression "hama da" (it's a hama).

Kokomade[[edit](#)]

↑The four letter word in question is [ここまで](#), which means "to this point", or "no further".

Umani Soba[[edit](#)]

↑A very rich dish made from boiled soba noodles and all sorts of meats and vegetables. Everything but the kitchen sink. Search Google Images under [うま煮そば](#) to see what I mean. Unfortunately, there is no wiki page about it yet.

Colors[[edit](#)]

↑In this paragraph, the author seems to have Sena playing with words in a clever way. Having declared her topic already (memories), she proceeds to many references to kinds and sorts, but using the word [色](#) (iro: colors, kinds, sorts) and [色々](#) (iroiro: various). The result is interesting, and hard to translate. The fact that part of it referred to changing colors was an interesting coincidence with English usage.

Amazed[[edit](#)]

[↑](#)The author is punning here, combining two phrases: “amazing” & “cold-hearted Kalashnikova (AK-47)”