

Frigid air dragged at pedestrians, slowing gaits and smothering laughter, wringing the mirth from even those teenagers who were still out, flagrantly ignoring the specter of morning classes. Hisao walked down the crowded Tokyo street, dodging the crowds that lingered even so late at night. Early spring hadn't been this cold for decades. *Another day done. Kind of.* Nearing midnight, the day was indeed done – just not for Hisao. Late nights and early mornings; this was Hisao's life, now.

Time seemed to be his enemy, lately. Work piled on his desk from morning to night, the heating system in his cramped office space humming in the background as he furiously moved from project to project. He'd quickly glanced at a wall clock, which read 5:00 PM. A scant few minutes had passed before that same clock read 10:30.

Now he was trudging toward the subway station, steadily pacing down the brightly-lit avenue, ignoring the throngs of people passing him by. He was looking forward to the stale, warm underground air of the subway. *Even with the crowds, it beats being cold.* He shivered and tightened his coat around himself. At least at home he would have some control over the temperature.

*As long as my heat doesn't die again.* He mused about lodging another complaint, then chuckled. *In a couple of weeks, when I finally have some free time, maybe.* Until then he would have to huddle with the rest of the masses for warmth. Work wouldn't complete itself.

"Hisao?"

Organizing memorial services was trickier than he'd first thought. Mrs. Yamamoto's service was the next day, and the Inoue service soon after. There was still a lot of work to do: the Yamamoto house was being sold and Hisao had to make sure the real estate people didn't show up in the middle of the funeral, not to mention the wills he had to review before his meeting with the legal team the next day.

"Hi-sa-o!"

Mr. Inoue's flowers weren't finalized, despite his gentle reminders that the service was fast approaching, and wouldn't it be terrible if the florists didn't have enough time to prepare the proper arrangements? And caterers, always thinking they knew best. *I give you the menu, you cook it. I don't care if you think it could be better.* A million million small details conflated into one crisis after another. *I'll have to do more work at home.* Hisao sighed to himself. *I guess it beats working at the office.*

"Hisao Nakai!"

*Oh. She's talking to me.* The 26 year-old man studiously avoided looking around for the voice's owner. He subtly quickened his pace and furrowed his brow, as if deep in thought – practiced maneuvers designed to ignore clients' families while still appearing polite. Everything needed to appear polite.

This one, however, was persistent.

"Hicchan!"

*Oh.* Memories: golden eyes, gravity-defying curls. Misha.

*Shizune.*

Now the man stopped in the fluorescent glow of a convenience store, turned to see a face that had once been pretty, but had since blossomed into beauty. Misha's bright eyes were the only feature that hadn't changed. Shocking pink hair, once long and curled to a ridiculous degree, laid stick-straight against her scalp and swept back to end abruptly at the base of her neck; beneath long bangs, parted asymmetrically and half-covering her right eye, she wore an easy smile and sported a shade of lipstick so subtle that Hisao almost thought she wasn't wearing any; her rouge and eyeliner were applied delicately, very tasteful, blending into her skin all but seamlessly; and her features had sharpened a bit, her face longer, thinner – as if the eight years since high school had hardened the happy-go-lucky teenager.

"Misha?" His voice was gruff, physically and mentally exhausted as he was from too many 12-hour workdays.

Also, he didn't want to see the woman. Not ever again.

A smile, and Hisao thought he saw her pearly white teeth glint in the harsh artificial light. "Shiina, now, but yes. Wow, it's been so long! How are you, Hisao?"

Shiina, Now, was wearing a dark grey skirt and blazer over a bleached white blouse. A bright red ribbon hung down from the collar on her shirt, to disappear within a coat that hugged her waist tightly, emphasizing curves Hisao didn't remember; her low heels, Hisao couldn't help but notice, accentuated her calves nicely without drawing too much attention; and the professional-looking black bag slung over her shoulder reminded Hisao of his mother when she had still been working in the business world.

"Fine, fine," replied the man after finishing his hasty appraisal of Shiina's appearance. *How can she wear that and not be freezing?* "How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks." The cheery lilt Hisao had known in high school was all but gone, replaced by a huskier voice and polite speech. "Haha, I'm surprised to run into you like this! It's been almost eight years, hasn't it?" She eyed him openly for a moment, finally raising her gaze and offering another grin. "You look great!"

"Thanks, you too." It had been a long time since he'd seen the woman standing in front of him. They had been good friends in high school, almost a decade before. Eight long years since Yamaku. Since... *Shizune.*

Immediately, Hisao lost interest in the conversation. A foul taste curdled his tongue; memories stung his eyes. One foot unconsciously turned to leave, and he had to force it back into line. Appearances were everything in his business; Hisao couldn't afford to blow someone off publicly, or he might scare off potential clients. *An unfortunate aspect of the service industry.* Muscles ached with fatigue, cried out for rest; he resisted the urge to look at his wristwatch. *Soon enough.*

Even as Hisao opened his mouth, Misha's – *Shiina's* – affable smirk disappeared, slipped into a sadder smile.

"Shizune."

The single word seemed to echo loudly in the Tokyo night; all but whispered, it still managed to drown out traffic, smother the sounds of a city teeming with life. Hisao allowed his eyes to slip shut briefly as he let that name wash over him, filling his chest with warmth, beating back icy winds. *Yes.* Soft hands; a harsh gaze; silky smooth lips that tasted faintly of cherries. *Shizune indeed.*

Hisao shook his head, banishing bad memories. *Enough. It's late, and I have no time for you anymore, Misha.* A deep breath of dry air.

"I don't mean to be rude, Shiina, but I should really be going. I'm extremely tired and I have to get up early tomorrow morning. Maybe I could get your cell number, so I can call you to catch up later?" He pulled out his phone and flipped it open, deftly navigated to his contacts even before his overcoat swung closed. "Okay, I'm ready." Eyes focused on a small screen, thumbs hovered over the keypad.

"Hisao." Shiina shifted, placed her hands on her hips and affected a wry half-smile. "We both know if we don't catch up now, it'll never happen," the woman chided gently, playful and stern at the same time. "There's a small bar not too far from here I like to visit when I'm in the area. Let's go grab a drink; I promise you'll be out of there by midnight." She spoke quickly, looking at her watch for a split second before adding, "You can spare an hour for an old friend, can't you?"

*A high ceiling, measured words echoing throughout the auditorium – then, silence.*

"I shouldn't," protested Hisao weakly, finally looking at the time. "It's already 11:00, and I really do have to get up—"

"I'll buy." She shifted her bag, hiking it further onto her shoulder; the movement nudged pink hair down, obscuring one eye. She brushed it aside deftly and continued, "Besides, how often do you get asked to drinks by a beautiful girl like me?" Her smile was the same, at least: unabashed, coloring her entire face with mirth.

"Misha, I—"

"Ah, there we go then." Suddenly, her arm was intertwined with his own, and they were walking back the way he'd come. Hisao hadn't even noticed her move. "I told you to call me Shiina, and you didn't, so you owe *me* a drink now." The man glanced askance at his companion, who shrugged and tightened her grip. "It's okay, I'll settle for you just coming out with me."

Off, into the night, with Shiina leading and Hisao reluctantly pacing beside her.

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Shiina led him to a nice piano bar, cheerful despite the dim lighting. It was crowded, the air slightly hazy from a few cigarette smokers scattered about the room, but customers spoke quietly amongst themselves and a somber tune emanated from the small black piano at the back. A tiny hardwood dance floor stood empty at the end of the narrow room, which had a long bar along the left wall and seating on the right. Hisao nodded slightly, eyeing a tray of martinis that passed him by, resting expertly on the outstretched palm of a waiter. *This is a nice place.*

"Here," declared Shiina as she slid into the only unoccupied booth, "this should do." She stowed her purse against the wall and laid an arm on the table, staring up at her companion. The bar hummed with muted conversations.

Hisao slipped into the booth, opposite Shiina, and clumsily stowed his briefcase by his legs. *So much for resisting her charms. How does she do this?*

Before he could answer himself, a waiter appeared out of thin air and Misha – *Shiina*. *I've got to stop doing that.* – ordered a glass of wine, something German-sounding. Just as suddenly, two pairs of eyes focused on Hisao, who swallowed awkwardly.

"Ah, beer for me, I guess," he stammered, still not entirely settled.

"Certainly, Sir," replied the waiter politely, his black vest wrinkling slightly with a minute bow. "What brand would you prefer?"

A quick glance around revealed no menus or indeed any indication of their selection. Hisao thought he caught Shiina trying to hide a smirk.

"Sapporo," he finally answered, speaking clearly but quietly over the soft, somber music wafting through the air. "Draft." The waiter quickly deepened his bow before disappearing toward the bar, leaving the two old friends alone.

Hisao started unbuttoning his coat, but caught himself before he could remove it completely. *I won't be here for that long, hopefully.* Instead, he let it rest open, revealing his charcoal grey suit coat underneath.

"So," started the woman sitting across from Hisao after he'd settled himself, "what are you doing these days?" Shiina smiled at him and again Hisao was struck at what a beautiful woman that perky girl from his youth had become. Round cheeks had thinned, small lips had plumped, and wide-eyed naïveté had all but burned away.

"I work for a company that organizes memorial services." More than once, Hisao had unintentionally ended conversations by bringing up his job; for the first time, he was grateful. He continued, "When people die, sometimes they don't want to go through all the hassle of organizing a proper service for their loved ones; they want to grieve. So that's where we come in." Hisao grimaced slightly at how contemptuous he sounded. *Not 'proper service', just 'service'. Organize a service. Slips like that can cost me clients.*

Shiina's eyes grew wide, but she sounded amused rather than put-off when she said, "Oh, really? I can't say I pictured you in that sort of job." Another quick brush of her hand cleared long bangs out of amber eyes.

"In what sort of job did you picture me, then?" Quicker than Hisao would have thought possible the drinks were in front of them, both his glass and Shiina's already starting to drip moisture despite the dry evening air. "Oh, uh, thank you." But the waiter was already gone, delivering drinks to another booth further along the wall. Hisao's eyes followed the waiter for a moment, watching him nimbly weave through traffic to deliver beverages, before bringing his eyes back to his companion. Shiina swallowed a sip of white wine and shrugged slightly.

"I don't know," admitted the woman, setting down her stemware and licking her lips, capturing a few more drops of liquid, "a businessman of some sort, maybe a journalist or a writer. But not a... what do you call your job, anyway?" She leaned forward to place her elbows on the table, chin in one hand, the other absently playing with her wine glass.

"Well, Service Organizer is what my business card says, but I do more than that." Suddenly in the unfamiliar position of describing his job, Hisao picked up his own glass and took a long drink, considering his daily duties. "I deal with estates and inheritances, book venues, liaise with caterers and florists, arrange cremations — that sort of thing." He took another drink, relished the delicate burn of carbonation in his throat. *I deal with death all day.*

To Hisao's surprise, Shiina was halfway done with her wine. She seemed to notice his blank stare and smiled.

"I was thirsty." An unabashed smile greeted Hisao, and he watched as his erstwhile friend took another small sip.

*I can tell.* Determined to finish his drink before Shiina could order another, Hisao took a pull of his beer and almost spilled some down the front of his shirt. Shiina smirked again, failed to disguise it by sweeping long bangs behind her ear.

"So what do *you* do?" asked Hisao, brushing off the near-disaster. As he spoke, the background music picked up tempo a bit, seemed to shift into some light jazz that Hisao could almost recognize. Around them, conversations seemed to grow louder and more animated along with the music, as if it were as much a cause of the mood as a reflection of it.

"I'm an administrative assistant." She swallowed another mouthful of her wine and smiled her large, toothy smile. "My business card says 'Secretary', but I do more than that."

Even Hisao couldn't keep the smile off of his face, though he tried. *First blood*. He erased the grin with a raise of his glass, letting bitter hops play over his taste buds.

"So where do you 'secretary'?" Hisao only half paid attention as he asked; Shiina's glass was close to empty, and his wasn't even half-gone. He took one more swallow as Shiina reached into her purse quickly and withdrew a business card, which she slid across the table.

Hisao grimaced into his beer. *Stupid. Maybe if I just ignore it...*

"I work at a law firm on the other side of the city," replied Shiina, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. She slid the empty glass to the edge of the table, toward their approaching waiter. "Two more, please," ordered Hisao's companion cheerily, even before their server reached the small booth. She winked across the booth. "You'd better hurry up, Hisao. You're falling behind." Now she was being pushy. More like Misha instead of Shiina. "And don't I get a business card?"

Sighing internally, Hisao reached into the inside pocket of his suit coat. *Yes, yes, the Ritual of the Business Cards*. He hadn't wanted Shiina to know where he worked, but leave it to Misha to pry it out of him anyway. Trapped by decorum, Hisao extended a piece of white cardstock, which Shiina snatched out of his hand and placed into her purse without even a cursory glance.

"There." Shiina nodded once, patting her handbag. "Now I can find you if you disappear for another eight years."

*Disappear?* Images flashed in Hisao's mind: a sterile white room, filled with the hum of medical equipment, packed with books and devoid of visitors; a devastated boy, sitting alone next to a single suitcase, listening to cars drive away into the dim evening. *I'm not the one who disappears, Misha*. A girl with long, black / short, blue / curly, pink hair. *I stay still while others walk away*.

Fatigue settled into Hisao's bones with finality, an almost audible thud. His mind, made all the more weary by his company, was filled with painful memories and a growing irritation at the woman in front of him. Shiina — a ghost from his past, another thorn in his heart — seemed oblivious of the way her mere presence pained Hisao. She sat

calmly, hands folded on the table, staring and with a crooked smile on her face. Once, they had been friends; now, Hisao raised his hand for the waiter.

"Hisao?" Shiina frowned and glanced at the apron-clad attendant walking back toward their booth.

"I'm actually done." Hisao spoke to the waiter; in the corner of his eye, Shiina sat up straighter. "I'll take the check, please." Hisao's flat, emotionless voice surprised Shiina, who sighed and nodded at the waiter's questioning look. Hisao reached into his coat without looking up. "What's your cell phone number?" Out came his phone again, screen reflecting the bar's pale light. "I'll call you when I have more time."

Finally, he looked over to Shiina. As their eyes met, with Hisao's defenses back up, Shiina reemerged.

"Hisao." Her formal posture, stern eyes, almost made Hisao flinch. *Almost.*

"I'm really sorry, I truly am, but I've been working twelve-hour days all week, and I'm just about ready to collapse." Practiced, metered speech. Polite. Non-committal.

Shiina just lowered her gaze to the table and played with her empty wine glass. Hisao could see the mark her lipstick had left, the trail of moisture left behind as the glass spun beneath pale fingertips. Silence fell, heavy and hard.

The bill came, Hisao paid it, and the waiter departed all without another word.

"Sorry, Shiina, but I really do have to get going." Hisao's words cut through the still air, and bits and pieces of other conversations started to catch his ears once more. The pianist was quite skilled; a few couples had wandered out onto the dance floor, mostly foreigners. "I've got a busy day tomorrow."

"So do I." A bit petulant, but mostly hurt. Her eyes never left the glass, still spinning beneath dim bar lights. "Is it wrong to want to see an old friend?"

"Of course not." That was a lie. "Maybe we can catch up some other time. Can I get your cell phone number?" Hisao's phone remained out, fingers at the ready.

"We've been here for five minutes." Gold eyes whipped up, flashed with anger. "You're blowing me off. If you're going to be rude to an old friend then I don't want to 'catch up'."

Hisao smiled inwardly, forced a frown onto his face. "Fine. Be that way." He stowed his cell phone and turned to climb out of the booth, intentionally leaving Shiina's business card on the table. "I'll see you around, I guess." *Finally.*

"Why are you doing this?" The woman's voice was heavy with sadness, almost trembling

from the weight of her emotions. Shiina was gone again, but this wasn't Misha, either. The woman at the table seemed smaller, somehow; less sure. Hisao found himself transfixed at the sudden change. "We were friends in high school. We went everywhere together. Why won't you even spend an hour with me?"

That question snapped him back to reality.

"Misha, every memory I have of you is more painful than I care to imagine." Anger crept into the man's voice. Wrapped around the handle on his briefcase, Hisao's knuckles turned white. "Just being with you is torture. In fact, the only thing you can do is hurt me." *Wow, I must be really tired.* Uncensored truth continued to spill out of Hisao, who was staring intently into Shiina's golden eyes. "You remind me of Shizune. You know what happened, what I lost. You know better than anyone else, as a matter of fact." Hisao's clenched fist began to tremble; other people had sensed the tension in the air, were casting sidelong glances at the two old friends.

"And where were you when all that was happening, by the way? Where were you when I was at the lowest point of my life? Where was my 'friend'?" Memories, quickly suppressed. "I'm sorry that I'm rude, but it's necessary. I can't think about Shizune any more. Or you. I've spent too much time doing that already." Hisao stood and bowed to Shiina.

"I'm sorry." He turned and walked away, toward the exit, toward his escape from this torture.

"They're closing Yamaku."

Hisao stopped dead in his tracks.

Several seconds passed before the words came to him, cold and bitter. "...I'm surprised it's taken so long." He refused to turn; his words barely carried over the hum of the bar.

"They want as many alumni at graduation as possible. The last graduation." Another jazzy tune started up in the background, and a waitress brushed by Hisao with a tray of drinks held high above her head. "I'm in charge of contacting our class," continued Shiina, somberly, "so it was lucky for me to run into you, I guess. A lot of people have already confirmed." Hesitant, very unlike the Misha of old, or Shiina. "I'd like it if you could come."

Before the question was out of Shiina's mouth, Hisao was shaking his head. "No."

"Please."

Again, Hisao shook his head emphatically. "No." Unconsciously closing his coat around himself, the man took another step toward the exit. "Goodbye."

"Shizune would have wanted you to go." Soft words, so soft Hisao almost didn't hear. But hear he did. Wide-eyed and furious, Hisao whipped around to glare at Shiina — staring at the table, obviously ashamed of using such tactics. "She would have." Quiet, but certain. "You know it."

"How dare you—" The man slammed his mouth shut, cut off the venomous hiss abruptly. He refused to make a spectacle of himself for the Misha, or Shiina, or whoever she wanted to be. Other customers turned; the bartender took a warning step toward the furious man, a glass held forgotten in one hand, a frown creasing his brow.

"I know, I do. But you should come." Smaller still, seeming to collapse in on herself, Shiina managed to avoid raising her eyes. "You should."

"Look at me." No response to Hisao's command. A menacing step, forceful words barely held below a shout: "Look at me, dammit!"

Finally, Shiina raised her head. Glassy eyes shone in the dim light; regret and sadness were etched into her face. But she held his gaze defiantly. "Shizune loved Yamaku. She would have wanted you to be there. She would have been there."

Hisao could scarcely believe what he was hearing, seeing. *God damn you. God damn you, Misha.* Fatigue and fury weighed heavily on Hisao, grinding his weathered defenses to dust. Memories flooded back to him. Memories of that place. When he and Shizune had laughed together, had learned to open themselves to each other, had clumsily explored each others' bodies in the darkness of the forest — a sure grip in the still air, sunlight streaming through the canopy overhead; a sudden sneeze, a smile, more staccato breaths; nervous fingers intertwined; a reassuring squeeze.

Then the bartender's heavy hand fell on Hisao's shoulder, jerking him from his reverie.

"Sir, you are bothering the other customers. I have to ask you to leave."

Breathing deeply, Hisao's face collapsed in on itself, anger replaced by a momentary grimace of pain. Skin sagged, seemed to age twenty years instantaneously. Where there had been a healthy young man now stood a crushed husk of a human being, beaten, held together only by anger and regret.

Just as suddenly, his features were smooth, unreadable. "I was just leaving anyway." Hisao purposefully strode out of the bar, leaving Shiina behind forever.

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*"And finally," echoes Misha's voice throughout the gymnasium, "to all the underclassmen:" Hisao watches from the floor, sitting with the rest of his classmates, ready to graduate. Misha and Shizune are up on the dais — the mute Student Council President and her interpreter — speaking to the assembled student body. "Do not—"*

*Shizune's eyes go wide, her face turns white.*

The universe spins. Blurs of color; shouts, concerned and surprised. Time passes.

*Outside the nurse's office, Hisao sits, his face in his hands. Neither of his parents is around; they are still behaving oddly, even after all this time.*

*A man with long, shaggy hair emerges, glances at Hisao hatefully, then strides away.*

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"I'd love to come, but I'm meeting a friend for dinner tonight." Hisao quickly tidied up his work area and shuffled papers into his briefcase haphazardly. The men standing in front of him hadn't expected Hisao to accept; it was just a polite offering, to keep up appearances. An equally polite – if untrue – refusal was more than acceptable.

"Really?" replied one man with glasses, feigning disappointment. "That's too bad. Maybe next time?" Hisao nodded his agreement, but his three coworkers had already turned and were walking away, talking amongst themselves. If Hisao hadn't known the boss' son, they never would have approached him in the first place.

*Besides, they barely do their jobs.* People had remarked that Hisao worked too much, that he needed a hobby. Hisao didn't understand. *The work needs to be done. People depend on us to offer solace in times of need, and I'm not going to tell a grieving widow that I'm too busy to plan her husband's funeral.* Hisao leaned back in his chair and took a look around the office, noticing that he was the only person left. *With so many services coming up? Really?*

A long sigh.

Regardless, Hisao had nothing in common with his coworkers. They were all middle-aged or older, and resigned to living meaningless lives. One was going through a divorce, one was supporting a mistress, and the rest seemed to struggle with children, wives, house payments – mid-life crises. Hisao had no common ground with them, and no desire to even tacitly support their poor office etiquette. So he pulled his coat over his shoulders and stepped out into the hallway, alone.

Silent steps toward the elevator, then in. Hisao punched the "G" button, which chimed sharply.

Truthfully, though, even if there hadn't been so much work to do, Hisao still wouldn't have wanted to go out. The last few weeks had grated on him rather more than they should have; nights seemed shorter, workdays longer. Even the elevator seemed darker, though the glaring fluorescent lights still managed to hurt his eyes.

Ding. Out, through a small foyer, and finally into the evening air. Far above him, beyond the distant Tokyo skyline, the sky had begun to turn orange with the day's end. A gust of wind bit through his light wool topcoat; Hisao merely leaned into the wind and plowed forward, toward the train station.

Again and again the man passed businessmen chattering into cell phones, animated, discussing vitally important issues. Female office workers huddled in groups, fighting off the crowds with sheer strength of numbers. Fading sunlight cast long shadows across streets as Hisao paced onward, away from the busy city and toward the solitude of home.

Crowded trains, always the same. Cool air; warming of late, but still uncomfortable.

Walking into his apartment, Hisao flipped on a light, shrugging off the sudden stab of pain as his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. He dropped his shoes to the ground, set his briefcase down more gently. Outside, muted reds had faded to a deep blue. It was late, but he had work to do. *There's always something to do.* To the dining room table.

Hours passed. The silent apartment echoed with stillness. Occasional scribbles sounded loud against the wall of quiet that had become Hisao's life.

*This stuff is terrible for me,* thought Hisao as he slurped the last of his instant ramen and regarded the papers in front of him one last time. There was nothing more he could do. *Heh.* There was nothing pressing enough to keep him awake any longer, at least. As the empty, Styrofoam ramen bowl sailed toward his trashcan, Hisao gathered the various papers and legal forms into a tidy pile and stood, scooting his chair back under the table neatly.

Standing after sitting for so long made Hisao's vision spin. He placed a hand on the table and bowed his head, waiting for oxygen to return his vision. Blood pounded in his ears. *Did I take my medication today?*

As his eyes cleared, he looked around his empty apartment. The light from the dining room extended boldly out into the living room, but was swallowed up soon by the darkness beyond. Bookshelves lined the walls, but held no pictures – just volume upon volume of fiction. Walls were bare and white, sterile; there was a couch and a television, but nothing else in that small space. Hisao had little time for decorating. He spent most of his time at work, anyway.

Quietly stepping out of the dining room, through the kitchen, he turned off the light behind him. Hisao spent time in one of two places. Work was done, so it was time for bed.

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*Pills. An endless array of pills.*

*Hisao looks at the handful of pills and grimaces, baring his teeth at the prospect of taking medication for the rest of his life as much as the oblong objects in his palm. 'Well, you gotta do what you gotta do, I guess. Down the hatch.' One swallow of water to force the objects down his gullet; one to make sure they got to his stomach; two more to wash the dry taste of medication out of his mouth.*

*Outside, the moon is bright in the sky. Looking out his small window, he can see the forest on Yamaku's grounds, shadowy trees stretching into the distance.*

*Perhaps that's a bit dramatic – the school isn't that big – but it's all the same. Trees, separating him from the rest of the world.*

*He flops onto his bed, head hitting the soft pillow with a POOF. 'What time is it?' Looking to his alarm clock, he frowns at the red digits glowing there. 'It feels later than that.' Probably for the best, though. He is supposed to take his pills in the morning; getting woken up by Shizune and Misha earlier had distracted him, and he'd forgotten. Earlier is better for the meds, apparently.*

*Another glance at the clock. He sighs. Probably isn't a big deal, anyway. So long as his body gets the meds, right?*

*The boy hikes his foot up into the air lazily, more playing around with his body than anything. His feet feel sweaty. He rotates his ankles a few times, splays his toes out experimentally, then sighs and launches upright on the bed. Pulling one sock off after the other, Hisao thinks on how the two pretty student council girls have railroaded him into joining their group. He's only just arrived at the school – hasn't even gotten his bearings, let alone made any friends – but here he is, in what could be considered a leadership role.*

*Spreading his toes once again, this time on the relatively cool floor, he ponders: is the student council really in charge of anything? He doesn't know. He's never been on one before, and he didn't pay attention all that much at his old schools. Sure, the class reps and such had always made it seem like they were big shots; but, that could have been their personalities.*

*Again, it doesn't really matter. Shizune has her hooks into him, now, and everyone knows it.*

*'It's not that late.' Hisao glances at the clock again, then scratches his back awkwardly. 'I should take a bath.' Over he moves to his toiletries, gathering them up and looking around for his indoor shoes. Hand on the doorknob, a thought strikes him, makes him laugh half-ironically. 'I wonder how my friends would react if they heard I got woken up by two beautiful girls walking into my bedroom?' He opens the door quickly, to see Misha standing there with her fist raised mid-knock.*

*"Oh! Hisao!" The girl jumps a bit, and Hisao rests a hand on the doorjamb, waiting for*

*his heart to calm back down. "You scared me!"*

*"Yeah?" He catches his breath, then looks up, past pink curls. "What can I do for you?"*

*Misha clasps her hands behind her back and smiles – though a small smirk rather than her grin from that morning. And without the laugh.*

*"Shicchan wanted me to tell you 'thanks for joining the student council!'" She is far too loud for this late at night. And the way she's tapping her heels... "Shicchan and I are really looking forward to the rest of the school year with you. So, welcome! And thanks!"*

*Hisao smiles, despite himself. It is hard to get angry at someone that innocent.*

*"Me, too." He bows slightly. "I hope you'll take care of me from now on."*

*Misha quickly returns the politeness. "Oh, no, I should say the same. It'll be really great with a boy on the council from now on!" And she cackles, probably waking up half the dorm.*

*Finally, Misha glances down to see Hisao's toiletries. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to keep you." She smirks again and starts tapping her heels once more, hands still behind her back. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay, Hicchan?"*

*"Sure..." His word trails off, as the spunky girl is already gone. 'Shizune sent you, huh?' As he closes the door and starts down his hallway, blue hair flashes in his memory.*

*'Two beautiful girls.' Steps, downward.*

*Blue hair and glasses.*

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Hisao shot upright in his bed, sweating bullets and panting heavily. Early morning sunlight pierced his consciousness, drilled painfully into his brain.

Beside his rented bed, the hotel's alarm clock read 6:04 AM.

"Happy birthday," whispered Hisao to the photo carefully tucked in his suitcase.

His heart refused to calm down. *Deep breaths.* In, out. *This may have been a bad idea.* Hisao calmly stepped out of bed, moved to his bags and retrieved some pill bottles. Shaking hands nearly dropped the medications twice as Hisao's heart continued to ram itself against his ribcage roughly. Tossing the pills into his mouth, the sweating man grabbed at his bottle of water and drank deeply.

*Just calm down.* More soothing breaths, the way he'd been taught. Slowly in through the nose, out through the mouth. *Repeat.*

Soon enough, the episode passed. Hisao paced back over to the bed and sat roughly, still sweating, adrenaline surging through his veins. In that small, rented room, replete with outdated furnishings and tacky carpet, he reflected on his journey. From Tokyo, city of bright lights and constant movement, to eight years in the past. To the place he never thought he'd see again.

*No point in trying to get back to sleep.* He stood and moved toward the shower, still shaking.

*Dammit, Misha...*

Getting ready was a slow process, especially today. His best suit – imported from Italy, a strange purchase made hastily and regretted since. *Have to make sure these people know I'm doing all right.* A beautiful tie his mother had bought for him the year before, sent through the mail for Christmas. Shiny silver cufflinks and tie bar. Freshly polished shoes, gleaming in the muted incandescent light emanating from the single lamp on the nightstand. A light pea coat, discarded and left on the bed. The cold had finally receded and spring was making itself apparent.

Hotel lobby to taxi to a point in the past that Hisao would rather have forgotten.

Winding roads soothed Hisao's nerves, twisting around buildings and hills almost randomly. But that couldn't last. All too soon, Yamaku loomed ahead of the taxi. Its heavy wrought-iron gates were swung wide to accommodate parents and alumni alike, welcoming, like an old friend beckoning you to enter. Too few bodies moved through that yawning gap, however. Hisao paid his driver and exited the vehicle.

Hisao walked into Yamaku. In front of him, the courtyard seemed pitifully empty. When he'd first arrived at the school, that place had been green, lush, crowded. Now, it was brown, barren. Hisao heard a smattering of laughter here and there, saw groups of no more than four walking toward the buildings in the distance. Darkened windows surrounded him, unkempt foliage and disused walking paths stretched into the distance. With a quick glance behind him, Hisao saw the school's gates sitting still, beginning to rust.

Shaking off idle thoughts, Hisao gave himself a final once-over. Tie straight, jacket crisp and unwrinkled, shoes bright in the late morning sun. *I really am doing okay.*

No need. No one even glanced twice at him. Now and again the man glimpsed a familiar face – here was a tall blonde girl whose name he could not quite remember, striking features and glassy eyes, leading around a short, pudgy man and three small children – an amusing role reversal anywhere else but more than normal in this place; there was an older man, still unkempt and looking uncomfortable in his own skin, chatting awkwardly

with some parents; and on, and on, and on. A paraplegic from his graduating class wheeled by, but didn't pay Hisao any attention. Perhaps the man had been slighted by Shizune. Or perhaps by Hisao himself.

One of the stranger pairs of women that Hisao remembered – legless Emi and armless Rin – gossiped happily as their husbands and children stood idly by, waiting for the signal to begin moving into the auditorium.

And Hisao was invisible.

Part of him was glad at the lack of attention. Perhaps he would not have to endure the pointless chatter that was so commonplace at such events. He would be exempt from clumsy apologies and insincere well-wishes. No fake sorrow, no feigned interest. *Work gives me enough pointless chit-chat.* Still, he gazed around the assembled families and sighed. A small part.

Hands shifted nervously from soft pockets to clasp behind his back. Warm, spring sun warmed the top of Hisao's head; a cool breeze blew through the courtyard, a faint reminder of the frigid cold that was so recently departed, echoes of steamy breath and numb fingers.

*Small, blue fingers. Smaller than anything Hisao could remember seeing before.*

Traipsing slowly through the courtyard, toward the auditorium doors, Hisao focused his thoughts on Shizune. On the good times, when they had been in love. Before graduation, before he'd lost her. *And more.*

Hisao thought he heard someone call his name, and turned to see — nothing. Across the courtyard, now, those groups of parents and alumni continued to mingle while Hisao turned once more and started away toward the large building that would house Yamaku's final graduation ceremony.

Far, far too few chairs littered the floor in front of him. Perhaps ten rows of twenty or so seats, arrayed as if nothing were out of the ordinary. With all the empty space in the auditorium, those chairs could have been spread out more, given the guests more legroom. *Inefficient. I'd never let so much room go to waste.*

Several people had already staked claims in various parts of the array of chairs, mostly elderly relatives and their younger shepherds. Some of the faculty milled around at the front of the room, near the dais where large bouquets of roses flanked a simple wooden podium. There was the English teacher – *She's still working here? She must be 80.* – and the nurse, looking as young as ever.

Suddenly, the man in the white coat lifted his head and locked eyes with Hisao. Unlike everyone else on campus, though, he held the gaze beyond that first moment. Hisao tensed unconsciously. *Of all the people I don't want to see...*

The man across the room made no move toward Hisao, however. They two stood still for a moment, letting their shared past do the speaking for them. Then the nurse nodded, once, and turned back to his previous conversation.

Muscles unclenched as anxiety flowed out into the cool air. Hisao shivered slightly as wind blew in from the doorway and caressed his neck softly. Sweat had started to make his stiff collar uncomfortable. *Get used to it, Hisao. You chose to come.*

Now, voices came from behind the man, who turned to see groups of people walking through the wide double-doors. *It must be starting soon.* Again facing the stage, Hisao flexed his fingers nervously. *Time to find a seat, I guess.* His knees were shaking.

Hisao made his way to the last row of white wooden seats and staked a claim on the outside chair, closest to the door. The hardwood floor looked unpolished; the roses at the front of the room provided the only color. There wasn't even a banner congratulating the seniors. *Sad.*

All around him, seats started to fill up. Several people he'd noticed earlier glided past him without a glance. *Lilly. That was her name.* Watching people file into the auditorium, Hisao spied a few new yet familiar faces from his vantage point. Kenji, who had lived across the hall from him, sat down a few rows from the front. He looked good, which was surprising. Suit, tie, and a downright gorgeous young woman on his arm. *How did that happen?*

Continuing to people-watch, Hisao sat back in his chair and tried not to think about where he was, what had happened the last time he was in that room. As the flow of people trickled to a stop, he found his legs twitching. *I don't want to be here. This was a mistake.* Doubts and worries were gone, replaced with a grim certainty: even if Shizune had loved this place, to Hisao, it was torture.

But he *was* there. He had told himself he'd try, and try he would, despite the pain in his chest. He owed it to Shizune.

*This was a terrible idea.*

What seemed like ages passed; then, thankfully, a booming voice echoed from the PA system. The ceremony was starting.

Graduation went slowly. Many of the faculty gave speeches for the 14 graduating seniors; there was a lot of time to fill, and not much actual graduating. Hisao's feet tapped the ground impatiently as speech bled into speech and minutes turned into more than an hour.

To Hisao's chagrin, Shiina walked up on stage. He hadn't even seen her in the crowd. Sweat glistened on his brow as the woman made her way to the podium, and he clenched

the muscles in his legs. *No. Stay.* Hisao forced himself to relax.

Shiina was wearing a skirt and blazer again, but dyed a deep red. The lines of her clothes were crisp and pressed – every inch the professional woman, top to bottom. Even her gait implied a self-assurance that few people could hope to attain.

Then, she cleared her throat.

*I can't do this.*

Hisao bolted. Ignoring his own loud, echoing footsteps, the man walked as quickly as decorum would allow toward the doors, toward fresh air and freedom. He didn't hear even the beginning of Shiina's speech. The door closed loudly behind him before a muffled voice began speaking. *I don't need to hear how much you miss Shizune.* More deep breathing, to slow his racing heart. *I miss her, too.*

Remarkably, the fresh air calmed him somewhat. His legs had stopped shaking, though his hands still trembled with nervous energy. Jaw muscles ached dully, sore from clenching his teeth. He stretched, throwing back his shoulders and arching his spine. The sun felt warm on his face. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day.

In his coat pocket, Hisao could feel a photo frame sitting close to his heart. *Always in my heart.*

Sharp, black shoes walked away from the Yamaku auditorium for the last time.

The grounds, where Hisao had spent his senior year of high school. Unkempt plants ran wildly along a low retaining wall, where dull shades of red and orange reminded Hisao of his only Yamaku culture fair. Birds sang overhead; scant few wispy, white clouds floated on the breeze, moving off toward the horizon. A truly beautiful spring day.

Hisao clenched his fists tightly.

The dorms were in worse shape; in eight short years the paint had started fading, the stairs were dirty and cracked, and the rooms themselves smelled musty and old. Hisao could tell that not even a quarter of the rooms had been used this semester, or this year for that matter. Thick layers of dust covered everything from the second floor up.

Feet followed a half-remembered route as if drawn there by magic. His old room was the same. His bed, where he and Shizune had—

Just as quickly, those same feet moved downstairs and outside. Behind them, the dorm's door swung wide, capturing the echoes of footsteps that grew faint before finally disappearing.

The library hadn't changed, thankfully. Large wooden bookshelves lined the walls, still

holding tomes of knowledge and mystery, suspense and fantasy. Even the air hadn't changed. Yuuko wasn't there; he hadn't expected her to be. A small smile creased Hisao's face as he inhaled deeply, looked over the room one final time, and closed the door. *That was always a place I could lose myself.* The smile faded; he turned and walked away. *I suppose I've a weak spot for libraries.*

Soon enough, he spied another familiar door: the student council room. His final visit on this trip to the graveyard. Steeling himself, mindful of the parcel in his coat, he reached out and placed a hand on the door.

Suddenly, it opened – causing Hisao to jump in surprise – and out stepped Shiina, eyes moist, a tissue in her right hand.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, surprised. "You startled me!"

"Me, too," gasped Hisao, doubled-over, as his heart calmed back down. He rubbed the scar on his chest firmly, soothing rattled nerves. "What..." *...are you doing here?* But Hisao already knew the answer to that.

"Just visiting Shizune." She gestured over her shoulder, to a small, framed picture of the blue-haired young beauty sitting in the far corner, atop a small black wooden table. A vase sat next to the photo, holding a small bouquet of flowers; incense, still fresh, filled the air. *A shrine?* Hisao looked to Shiina, who was still dabbing tears from her face. "The faculty put it up after she—" Shiina's voice caught, then, and Hisao had to nod. *I know how you feel.*

"Well I guess I'll be seeing you, then." A hand raised in a half wave, Hisao attempted to slide past her, into the room; Shiina's surprisingly strong hand caught his arm.

"Wait," she pleaded softly. Stern eyes turned to the appendage, then to Shiina, who seemed to realize for the first time that she'd moved. "Sorry," she murmured apologetically, releasing him and taking a step to the side. A sniff, then, "I just wanted to say that I'm glad you came. I didn't expect you to, but I'm glad." She sniffed again, wiped another tear from the corner of her eye. "Take your time. I'll wait."

*You really don't have to.* But this wasn't about Shiina. She could do what she wanted. This was about Shizune.

Hisao stepped into the room slowly. Step by step, moving through the room, he kept his eyes affixed on the portrait in the corner. It was a strange photo, for her. A small smile, not cocky or sly; head straight, looking directly at the cameraman. He couldn't be sure, but she wasn't standing like her arms were crossed – others might have thought she looked haughty when she did that, but Hisao knew it was born of a quiet confidence instead. Eyes, peeking out from behind her glasses, held no hint of mirth or glimmer of annoyance. A calm portrait of a volatile, fascinating woman.

"Hey," murmured Hisao as he made the final steps toward the table, acrid smoke filling his nostrils. Hisao hated that smell, the smell of funerals, of despair. Of death. "It's me."

All the things he had planned to say ran through Hisao's mind. He considered making a heartfelt speech about how much he missed her. Briefly, a book he'd read popped into his mind. It had reminded him of Shizune. An apology hovered on his tongue briefly, quickly rejected.

Unlikely as it was, Hisao found himself smiling. He reached into his coat and produced a small, black picture frame; a tiny, blue face appeared there, eyes closed as if sleeping. "I thought you'd want to see him at least once." Fingers tightened on the frame. "Even though you never got to meet him, I'm sure you would have been a great mother." He continued gazing into Shizune's blue eyes, frozen there in high school forever, even as his vision blurred. "I will always, always love you. Both of you." Eyes burned. "Never forget that." Placing the photo down, mother next to son, Hisao turned and strode away, scrubbing at his eyes and refusing to look back. *Goodbye.*

Out in the hallway, Shiina stood some way down the hall, staring out the window. Her arms crossed, head cocked to one side, she reminded Hisao of Shizune a bit. *Goodbye to you, too, Misha.* Hisao shook his head and turned to walk in the other direction.

"You're leaving already?" Hisao turned to see Shiina approaching at a brisk pace, red skirt swaying with each step. She'd discarded her tissues, but her eyes were still slightly bloodshot. She seemed angry, though Hisao couldn't be sure. *She was just crying...* "Aren't you going to come to dinner tonight, with the rest of us?"

A snort echoed down the empty hallways. "No." Again he moved to leave, but Shiina caught the man by the sleeve once more. *This is a nice suit, Misha.* He gently removed her hand and brushed the spot she'd grabbed.

"Hisao, we're all dying to talk to you, see how you've been doing." She ignored Hisao's slight and stared directly up into the man's eyes, standing so close Hisao could smell her perfume.

*Caught in a lie, Misha. Not like you at all.* He had made eye contact with enough old classmates to know how people felt about him. *Even if people do remember me, it's not because we were friends. I'm just the guy from the student council.*

"Name one."

"What?" Shiina blinked, confused.

Hisao crossed his arms with finality. "If you can honestly name one person who wants to talk to me – who has said those words *to your face* – then I will come." He sat back on his heels and waited.

Outside, Hisao could hear cars pulling away.

"Thought so." A nonchalant wave. "Have a good life." Another small turn, a step in the opposite direction.

"I care." The words were quiet enough to make Hisao think he'd misheard them. Awkwardly, he stopped mid-stride to look over his shoulder.

"Sorry?" His back was still to Shiina, but he turned his shoulders, straining to hear.

"I care." Trembling hands wiped tears from golden eyes. A tissue, retrieved from some hidden store, contrasted starkly with her skin. "After Shizune died, I... I couldn't bring myself to see you, talk to you, anything. Even though I knew I should, I didn't." She took a step forward, and Hisao swiveled to face her yet again. Golden eyes met brown. "I'm sorry for that. I can't imagine what you must have been going through; but I was young and stupid, and I'd just lost my best friend, and I could only think of myself." A sudden, deep bow. "I'm sorry."

Hisao declined to acknowledge the bow. He stared at the top of her head, mind racing. *What?* He hadn't expected an apology.

"But I did – I do care." She straightened, ignoring Hisao's confused expression; the deep red skirt suit she wore seemed to absorb the hues of the setting sun, filtering in through the windows of the school building. "I want to know how you feel, how you've been doing, what's happened in your life. I miss you, Hisao, almost as much as I miss Shizune." More tears ran down cheeks already pink from crying. "I want you to come to dinner with me." She sniffed once, then smiled a shadow of her old smile. "We can even call it a date."

That almost did it for Hisao; he nearly turned on his heels and walked away. *You never did know when you were overstepping your bounds.* Had she no idea where they were, what he had gone into the student council room to do?

But something in her tone, in the sincerity of her words, kept his feet rooted to the ground, his attention on the conversation. Slight shoulders shook with emotion. Liquid eyes seemed to tremble; knees clenched together in a bizarrely formal way, uncomfortable and awkward.

"One condition." He was almost surprised by his own words, but the earlier disdain he had felt toward her was softening. All the rage and regret he had funneled into Shiina was beginning to leak out, now that he had said his goodbyes to Shizune, and he could finally see – finally remember – who Misha had been in high school, how close they had been.

A very, very small part of him missed the bond they'd shared. But it was there, nagging at him to accept. *It's not her fault that Shizune died.* She had abandoned him in a way...

*But she apologized.* An unexpected – but heartfelt – apology. And the way she opened herself, dropping Shiina and attempting – even for a brief moment – to become the Misha she'd been those years before. Perhaps she regretted who she had become. Perhaps she truly wanted to right past wrongs.

"We have to go by ourselves." Hisao's tired, resigned stipulation brought life back into Shiina's eyes. "I have nothing in common with any of the other people here."

A smile, the brightest smile Shiina had shown since her friend had died. Immediately she was laughing her old laugh. "Of course, of course!"

"Geez," muttered Hisao, rubbing at his ear. Apprehension returned. *Another mistake, Hisao. You're too soft.* "You still laugh like that, Shiina?"

A slap on his back, heartfelt and appreciative. She beamed up at him. "Call me Misha, Hicchan."

That brought another rare smirk to Hisao's face. "...All right. Misha." He glanced at his watch quickly, then back up to the woman who was smiling as her tears dried. "Where should we go?"

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Shiina finally found the door she was looking for and stepped through, trying not to draw too much attention to herself. Closing the door behind her and looking around tentatively, she beheld a small, tidy office with a handful of people working at cheap-looking desks.

She fanned herself with one hand, swiveling her head from side to side, looking for a familiar face. Summer had warmed quickly, and Shiina was perspiring slightly. If spring had been cold, summer had made up for it, even so early in June. Her work-appropriate long-sleeved shirt and vest were better than a blazer, but not by much. Part of her longed for the chilly air of springtime.

"Can I help you, miss?"

Shiina stopped scanning the small room as a tall, thin, bespectacled man approached her, hair thinning and a polite smile on his face. "Yes," she smiled back, clasping her hands in front of her. "I'm looking for Hisao Nakai." She could feel the small office stop working to discreetly pay attention to their conversation.

"Mister Nakai?" The older man didn't even bother hiding his surprise, but obediently glanced over his shoulder to an empty desk. "He's meeting with another client right now, I believe." A glance toward a closed door in the corner of the room before swiveling his pinched face back toward Shiina. "Is there anything I can help you with in the meantime?"

"Do you know when he'll be done?" Still polite, Shiina ignored the uncomfortable sensation of sweat dripping down her neck. "It's a personal matter." The other four men in the room hadn't stopped shuffling their papers, typing on their computers diligently, yet were all but staring, now.

"I see." He glanced to his right, and Shiina followed his gaze to a small waiting area with padded chairs. "Well, it could be a while. Mister Nakai only just started the meeting, you see." Standing up straighter, "Are you sure I can't help you with anything? Or would you prefer to wait?"

She affected a small frown, as if considering this new information. She held it for just long enough to appear thoughtful; right as the man opened his mouth to speak again, Shiina bowed slightly and cut him off. "I'm sorry," she said with an embarrassed smile, "but would it be all right if I wait for him? As I said, it's a personal matter."

One of Hisao's coworkers – a portly man appearing just slightly older than Shiina herself – stood from his desk and approached them. His eyes seemed to linger on her tall, black heels; her dark hose; the long skirt of the same hue, reaching beneath her knees but hugging her hips tightly.

"Mister Nakahara, there is a phone call for you." Portly bowed a bit and smiled a polite smile. "If you'd like, I can show our guest to the waiting area."

Nakahara sighed, though Shiina couldn't be sure if it was out of irritation or something else. "Of course, of course." To Shiina, "Miss, Mister Suzuki here would be happy to show you to our waiting area. There is tea if you would like, as well." And off he went with another bow, to pick up his desk phone with a small scowl on his face. She caught a bit of his conversation; apparently, Nakahara had expected the call over an hour earlier.

"Miss, if you would follow me...?" Suzuki bowed, extending a hand toward the chairs to her right.

Thankfully for Shiina, the door in the corner opened, discharging Hisao and a tiny old man. The stooped man forced a kindly smile and said a few words Shiina couldn't quite make out. The sadness in his eyes was devastating. He and Hisao moved toward the front of the office, silent except for plodding footsteps and the creak of a thin, wooden cane.

"Ah," muttered Suzuki as he noticed Shiina's gaze, but said nothing else.

Walking toward the entrance, Hisao noticed Shiina and a smile softened his face, beaming above his black suit and tie; how much he'd changed in those few short months since Yamaku closed.

Their first few meetings had been short, and Hisao had barely spoken at all, let alone

smiled. Angry, tense conversations filled their time, and Shiina left feeling tired rather than refreshed. But she'd persevered, kept calling, writing emails. And now, though Hisao was still severe most of the time, occasionally he would crack his dry lips and smile, and Shiina felt glad she'd been persistent. A small seed of hope blossomed, hope that they could be friends once more.

Hisao quickly cleared his face as he turned to the old man. "Mister Imahara, if you have any questions, please give me a call. I'm here to help, after all." The pair brushed by Shiina and Suzuki, and Hisao opened the door politely.

"Thank you, Mister Nakai." Mr. Imahara attempted to force appreciation onto his face, through layers of regret and loss. And, though he did not entirely succeed, Hisao nodded in understanding, acknowledging the mixture of feelings no doubt swirling in the old man's heart.

Mr. Imahara's few words seemed to exhaust his reserves of strength, however, and he closed his eyes for a second before exiting into the hallway, cane tapping rhythmically with every step.

Hisao closed the door softly, taking a moment of respect for the old man's hardship before turning to Shiina and her erstwhile guardian. "Shiina, hello," he stepped to greet her. "What can I do for you?" No more smiles, but not as cold as he'd once been.

"Not much," she answered truthfully, unclasping her hands unconsciously and standing a bit straighter. Suzuki withdrew and returned to work; the rest of the office did the same. "Do you have a few minutes?" She brushed bangs out of her face, adjusted her large, burgundy purse.

A quick second of hesitation before Hisao checked his watch, looked to the rest of the office, and shrugged slightly. "Sure. Do you wanna grab a coffee or something?" He patted a pocket, apparently empty, and glanced toward the back of the room.

"Sounds great." Shiina smiled, eyes glowing.

"Let me grab something," muttered Hisao distractedly before moving to his desk. He returned a few seconds later, holding a phone that he flipped open for a moment before depositing it in his pocket. "Suzuki," he called over his shoulder, "I'm stepping out for a bit. If something comes up, give my cell a call." The short man nodded a reply, but Hisao had already opened the door and was ushering Shiina out.

The elevator seemed smaller than before, with Hisao there, but Shiina still relaxed visibly once the doors closed, slipped into a more comfortable stance. Air conditioning, pumped into the small metal box, washed over Shiina's face. She sighed gratefully.

"Tense?" asked her escort with a glance, noting her transition from Shiina to Misha.

She shook her head slightly, adjusting her bag again and reluctantly stepping out of the cool flow of air. "Just a bit warm. Though I did get the feeling that I was on display in your office." She returned Hisao's sideways glance, but he was staring up at the elevator's display, watching numbers tick slowly toward 1.

"Ah." Hisao smirked a bit, but it disappeared quickly. "Well we generally deal with older women, so a young secretary coming in is quite a big deal for them." Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. "But they're mostly harmless, so don't worry."

"You're probably right. I can be kind of sensitive about that sort of thing," she said by way of apology. Misha flipped her hair playfully, stuck her hips out and pouted seductively. "When you look like this, you have to be careful."

"Well," mused Hisao, ignoring her comments, "Nakahara might not be." The elevator chimed once and double doors started to open. "From what I hear, he's been cheating on his wife." This early in the afternoon, the lobby area was all but deserted. Hisao glanced at Misha. "With a secretary."

"*Him?*" Misha didn't bother to hide her surprise, leaving behind the relatively cool elevator and stepping into the lobby proper. "No way, really?"

"Would I lie to you?"

"Haha!" Still inside, Misha managed to soften her laughter. "Yeah, you're right, Hicchan. You're right." The pair stopped before exiting the building, unsure of their destination. Outside, the July sun beat down on black pavement relentlessly. There was no need to brave Tokyo's summer heat any longer than strictly necessary. Misha began fanning herself again.

"Where should we go?" Misha let the playful lilt creep back into her voice, no longer trying to impress anyone. In the distance, the green sign for a chain coffee shop caught her eye, and she pointed. "There?"

Hisao shook his head. "I know a better place a few blocks away." He pushed open the door and politely waved Misha through, out into daylight. Humanity pressed in around them immediately, amplifying Japan's ever-present humidity tenfold. Even at 1:40 PM on a workday, people were everywhere. Fearlessly, Hisao set off down the street.

"Are you sure?" asked Misha as she followed. "What about work?" Even in such conservative heels, and surrounded by what seemed to be a never-ending deluge of noise, she seemed to pierce the afternoon air with staccato clicks.

"One of the nice things about working for a small company like mine is that I get to schedule my time the way I want." Though he did glance at his watch. "I have some things to finish before the end of the day, but it's not a big deal." Another sidelong glance at his companion and her deep red purse. "What about you? Shouldn't you be at work

right now?"

"No, I got the day off." Misha's pink hair slipped into her face as they walked down the crowded city street, but she brushed it back almost automatically. "That's actually why I wanted to talk to you," she added as they paced toward the as-yet-nameless café. Sweat started to bead on Hisao's neck, and Misha smirked as the man dabbed a handkerchief under his collar. A traffic signal turned red, and the pair stopped.

"Bragging that you have a day off?" His snide remark earned Hisao – and the other people waiting to cross the street – a painfully, ear-shatteringly loud laugh. The Shiina persona had faded completely, leaving only Misha, loud and shameless as ever.

"No, Hicchan," chided Misha. "I have the day off because my boss is out of town on a business trip. I'm going to meet him tomorrow." The light turned green and their world lurched forward, propelled by a dozen dozen bodies. "I have to cancel our plans for Friday."

"All right." Hisao shrugged, then politely maneuvered around a pair of female office workers apparently on a late lunch. When he returned to Misha's side, a playful shove nearly propelled him into a rather large man's back. "Hey, watch it!"

"Hicchan, that's mean." Misha had affected a playful pout, but her eyes shone with mirth. "Couldn't you at least pretend to be upset?"

"Why bother? You wouldn't have told me unless you already made other plans." Another shrug. "And anyway," the man continued with a glance over to Misha, "couldn't you have just called me? You have my number."

"Wahahaha~!" Two men in dark blue suits turned to look at Misha, then quickly returned to their conversation. Misha continued, unaffected. "But Hicchan, then I wouldn't have gotten to see where you work!" Not letting him get a word in edgewise, she continued, "I switched it to next Friday. You'll still come, right?" She almost bounced as she walked.

"Yes, Ma'am." Obedient, but without resentment; Misha smiled. "I don't see why I have to do this group date, though. I'm too busy for a girlfriend."

Frowning sternly, Misha scolded, "No, no, no! You're already 27! You have to settle down and get married!"

"W- ...Married?" Incredulous, Hisao turned to his companion, who frowned up at him sternly.

"Of course!" Certain. "You're getting too old, Hicchan. If you wait much longer, you'll *never* get married!" Pedestrian traffic shifted suddenly, shoving Shiina's shoulder into Hisao. "Oop, sorry, Hicchan." She adjusted her black vest and smiled another apology.

"No problem." Hisao sighed heavily, audible even over the din around them, and ran a hand down his face. "So I don't get married. Not a big deal."

Misha sensed his mood and bit back a cheerful reply. She let the man scowl into the pavement for half a block as she weighed her next words. The burgundy purse still slung over Misha's shoulder shifted as she readjusted her grip.

"All right, how long has it been since you've had a girlfriend?" A bold tactic.

Silence was his only reply.

"Hisao, answer me. How long?" Sharp clicks, heel against concrete. "Hicchan."

"...I thought we agreed not to talk about this." Cold words on a hot day.

Strain appeared around Hisao's eyes. He scowled, but at the ground – almost like he'd forgotten that Misha was there. Measured steps continued leading Hisao toward a café, but his body seemed on autopilot. Momentarily, the man closed his eyes.

Shiina interjected, interrupting his reverie.

"Well you agreed to come to the group date, and I need to know what to tell my coworker. She's looking forward to meeting you, you know." Another glance from a suit-clad businessman, quickly back to his cell phone. They continued to shuffle down the street, Hisao saying nothing.

Finally, Hisao answered. "I dunno, 2 years, maybe?" He led Misha around a corner, where she had to step out of the way as a young man raced by, briefcase flying behind him as he ran. Again she adjusted her purse and shot a scowl over one shoulder

"That's too long." The certainty in her voice was back, as if Misha couldn't imagine a viewpoint other than her own. "You need to get out and live life, Hicchan. If you keep yourself cooped up in the office you'll *never* get over—"

"Stop." Hisao punctuated his command by planting his feet in front of a glass door. Misha continued on for a step before wheeling around to face her friend, who scowled openly. Misha's hair had again fallen into her eyes, but this time she did not raise her hand.

"I agreed to come to the group date. As a favor to you." Hisao emphasized the second part, anger flashing in his eyes. "But you agreed not to talk about Shizune, as a favor to me." Hisao's forehead twitched slightly. "Are you going back on your word?"

Sighing, the woman bent her head slightly in contrition. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry." She bowed a stiff bow, which Hisao did not return.

"All right, then. We're here." He stepped aside and pulled at the glass door behind him, obediently holding the door open for Misha. His stony face seemed a stark contrast to his smile at seeing her earlier.

Misha just sighed again.

---

*Silently, Hisao paces back and forth in front of Shizune's room. It is well past curfew, and he knows that his time is running out. Any second the dorm manager could walk by, or another girl could come out into the hallway. But his heart is pounding in his chest, and his palms are sweating. Why is he so nervous?*

*In his back pocket, a small, folded piece of paper burns against his body. He has written and re-written that note two dozen times, and yet is still unsure. He tried to learn the sign language. Something like this has to be spoken, not written. But, despite Misha's patient education, he just can't seem to get the motions down. The note will have to do.*

*Someone sneezes. Hisao jumps, heart in his throat. ...But it was nothing. Silence falls back over the small hallway, and he can hear his breath echoing off of the low ceiling. He has to move. He has to make his move.*

*Feet planted firmly in front of the door, he raises his hand to knock... then pauses.*

*She can't hear.*

*It takes all his self-control to hold back laughter. Despite all the planning, the sleepless nights figuring out the right words to use – words that would convey his feelings, that would make Shizune realize how serious he was about this – he had never planned out how to actually get into her room.*

*Still smiling, Hisao rests his head against the door softly. Nothing to be done now. He will have to wait another night. Briefly, he considers slipping the note under her door, but quickly rejects the idea. Writing a note is already too impersonal; dropping it off and running away would be downright cowardly.*

*The door moves. Hisao catches himself quickly and takes a surprised step back as Shizune opens her door and peers out. She is wearing green cotton pajamas, a simple long-sleeved top draping loosely over her small frame. Seeing her in such casual clothes – for some reason, he can't help but think that she's already bathed for the night, and is probably not wearing a bra – excites and terrifies him. "Shizune!" He can't catch the surprised word before it passes his lips.*

*For her part, Shizune also looks surprised. She glances down quickly, then crosses her arms over her chest – authoritative, as usual, but also a bit defensive – and frowns. 'Hisao.' The boy can make out his own name, at least. He awkwardly notices that she is*

*keeping her arms close to her chest, much closer than usual.*

*Shizune continues to sign for a moment. Hisao can understand more than he can sign, but the majority of what she says is lost. He catches Misha's name, as well as 'night' and 'sleep'.*

*This is a terrible, terrible idea. Hisao's face is flushed red, and he can barely get his hand in his pocket, it's shaking so much. This would have been much better with Misha around. It wouldn't have been private, but at least he would have been able to say what he wanted to say.*

*Alas, the time is upon him, and he promised himself he won't chicken out again. The paper moves toward Shizune, still slightly trembling, and Hisao tries to keep from vomiting. "Here," he says ineffectually. "For you."*

*For her part, Shizune can only blink for a few moments before scowling and looking at the piece of paper, then back to Hisao. She squeezes her torso more tightly. An irritated stare.*

*They stand for a moment, just looking at one another.*

*What now? Hisao hadn't anticipated this. Apparently, Hisao hadn't anticipated a lot of things.*

*Letting his hand fall to his side, Hisao takes a deep breath, then shoves the note into his pocket again. Arms raise and he starts trying to sign. 'Shizune.' He's pretty sure he has that down by now. 'I'm sorry that my signing is so terrible,' he hopes he says, 'but I've been studying, and I hope you can at least understand me.'*

*'For a long time—' Shizune reaches out and grasps his hands, stops the confession mid-word. She is smiling softly. The look in her eyes is affectionate, and a bit mirthful. She quickly removes her arms and signs, simply, 'Thank you.'*

*No. That can't mean what... 'Shizune, I—' Again, Shizune grabs his arms and smiles. Silently raising a finger to her lips, she smirks and exhales slightly. "Sssshh."*

*Suddenly her hands are on Hisao's cheeks, and Shizune raises her face to his.*

*It is the sweetest kiss Hisao will ever have.*

---

Hisao and four other men sat on one side of a long, rectangular table. Across from them were Akiko, Mafuyu, Natsuko, Haruko, and Shiina – Shiina, of course, being the only person Hisao had ever met before. In contrast, the girls all knew each other from work; the men seemed to be acquaintances, as well. Each man wore an identical grey suit; each

woman wore what Hisao assumed was the work outfit for the secretary pool at their law firm: black vest over white blouse, black knee-length skirt, black hose. Shiina was the only exception, wearing a navy blue skirt with white blouse, but eschewing the vest in consideration of summer's heat.

Hisao sat in the corner, alone with his black suit – an afterthought.

Compounding the problem, he wasn't even sitting by his one friend in the room. Shiina had placed herself at the opposite corner of the table, as far away from Hisao as possible. He couldn't tell if it was intentional or not, though Shiina seemed not to mind. *This is stupid. I shouldn't have come.* He wasn't having a good time, other people seemed to be avoiding him, and there was work to be done at home. *One big mistake.*

Natsuko was seated across the table from Hisao, as she was apparently the one who had been so keen on meeting him. She had the longest hair he'd ever seen – at least, he thought so; it was tied up into a tight braid that reached the middle of her back – and was short, even for a Japanese woman. Misha seemed to have lied, however; she seemed more interested in the man sitting to Hisao's right, Shiro.

Left with nothing else to do, Hisao sipped at his beer and scanned the rest of the party. Natsuko seemed to be cheerful but a bit naïve, certainly younger than Hisao and probably the youngest at the table. She struck him as the type of person who would help anyone out, because she believed the best of people. *She'd make a terrible politician.*

Shiro was charming and confident, but in the way most young, rich men are. He couldn't imagine failure; he was invincible. To be fair, he'd graduated from a good college and been lucky enough to have a job just fall into his lap. But he'd never had to *work* for anything before, if Hisao hadn't missed his mark. And, of course, ambition oozed from his every pore. Every other sentence began with, "When *I'm* in charge..." Natsuko was lapping it up. Hisao prayed – for both of their sakes – that life continued to bless Shiro.

Akiko and Saburo were hitting it off, as well – he a salaryman, she a secretary, both music fans, both originally from Fukuoka. Haruko was speaking animatedly to a shy man named Jiro. She, like another person Hisao could name, laughed loud and lived hard. Short-cropped hair danced in the hazy summer air as she described the last time she had gone mountain biking, and her encounter with a bear. When she lifted her shirt to expose the scar on her side, Jiro recoiled with a fierce blush and looked away quickly. *I wonder if he knows that she's already marked him as her own.* No matter. Hisao wished them well.

On the other side of their six-legged, wooden island, Shiina and Mafuyu seemed to be fighting over Taro. *Really, though, it's not much of a fight.* Taro and Shiina were talking about something Hisao couldn't quite make out, back and forth, with Mafuyu only occasionally interjecting. She looked as shy a girl as Hisao had ever seen. She wore a barrette in her too-short hair and could barely speak without stuttering. But she obviously fancied Taro, and it was no surprise: he was by far the best-looking man in the

room, and had worked closely with a member of the Diet at his law firm.

Shiina, though, was proving too much for Mafuyu. As Hisao watched, the shy girl would stutter an awkward question, blush, then bury her face in her iced tea. A few minutes would pass before she could work up enough courage to try again, with the same predictable results. Shiina kept the conversation going, but the lapses between Mafuyu's contributions got longer and longer.

Suddenly, the pink-haired secretary leaned over and nudged Mafuyu playfully, again saying something Hisao couldn't quite make out and causing the shy woman to blush a deep crimson.

To his side, Shiro rose suddenly, distracting Hisao just as things were getting good. "If you'll excuse me for a minute," he muttered politely before sauntering off toward the bathrooms the way one does when one's date is going well. Hisao nodded his head obligingly, though the man clearly wasn't talking to him.

After watching Shiro walk away – for perhaps too long – Natsuko turned and smiled at Hisao, preventing any further people-watching. *Here it comes, I guess.*

"Mister Nakai, you haven't said much this evening. Are you feeling all right?"

*Ugh.*

"Ah, yes," he replied instead, scratching the back of his head in what he hoped was an endearingly awkward gesture, "I just don't know much about the law. I fear I'm out of my element, here, seeing as you all work in that business."

"Yes," Natsuko replied, turning her torso slightly to face Hisao, "Shiina has told me that you work at a graveyard?"

"Close." Hisao smiled his professional smile, a bit perturbed that people kept making that assumption, "but my company isn't affiliated with any particular graveyard. We arrange funerals for grieving families who would prefer to leave the logistics of their loved ones' services to others." He glanced at his watch – they hadn't been there for more than an hour.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Natsuko dipped her head slightly, seemingly embarrassed. "Shiina told me you arranged funerals, and I just assumed—"

"No, no, it's fine," interrupted Hisao. "You're not the first to make that mistake." *Whatever.* Rare indeed was the person who wanted to talk about death at a group date; Hisao changed the subject. "So, how long have you worked with Shiina?"

Small talk, for much too long. Natsuko wasn't interested in Hisao; neither was he interested in her. So they spent a few minutes discussing her college, how she'd managed

to land her current job in the secretary pool at a large law firm in Tokyo, how she was still surprised how demanding the work was at times. Then Shiro came back, Natsuko's pupils turned into hearts, and Hisao was left to his own devices once more.

Back to his beer. His watch had moved five minutes. *I wonder if I'll be able to get any of my invoices done tonight...*

Shiina was laughing at one of Taro's jokes. Her Shiina laugh: genuine, heartfelt, but reserved. She reined in her usual cackle, forced it into a more socially acceptable titter. *It's a bit sad, Shiina. You should be able to laugh around your new boyfriend.*

As Hisao sat there, nursing his beer, surrounded by budding romance, he watched.

Mafuyu gained confidence as the evening wore on. Shiina was even able to press her friend into ordering some fancy mixed drink at one point. The conversation ebbed and flowed, Taro making a few jokes, offering up topics; Shiina responding, working actively to get Mafuyu involved. The alcohol and persistence helped a bit too much, and when the evening was over and couples started splitting off to make future plans, Misha was left with Hisao.

*Ah, well. All's fair in love and war. Two and a half hours had passed. At least it didn't last as long as I thought it would.*

Shiina and Hisao sauntered toward the subway station, in no hurry. Hisao's backside ached from the hard, wooden chair; walking felt good after so long. To his side, Shiina matched his stride, humming quietly to herself. *She doesn't seem too broken up about it. Still...*

"Sorry about Taro." He felt he should offer some sort of consolation, and an awkward apology would have to do.

In response, Shiina cocked her head with a puzzled look. "Huh? I'm not interested in Taro."

"Really?" It was Hisao's turn to look confused. "Because you seemed to be getting along with him pretty well."

A smile, but no laugh. "Oh, that. Mafuyu is really shy, so she asked me to help her out a bit." As always, her tall heels clicked loudly against the pavement. "That's all."

"Wait a second." Hisao stopped, started counting off points on his left hand. "First, you force me to come to a group date, telling me that 'a girlfriend would help me stop being so boring'; then, you rearrange my schedule for me *again*, saying I need to get married or I'll be alone forever; and now I hear that you're playing matchmaker instead of following your own advice?" Crossing his arms in mock-anger, "I'm disappointed in you, Shiina."

"Wahaha~!" Her real laugh reappeared. "You caught me, Hicchan, you caught me!" Bright lights in the distance announced that they were nearing the subway. Misha and Hisao started moving again, toward that island of light. "Ah, it's okay though. You saw how everyone was getting along. They paired off almost as soon as we got there." Hisao couldn't argue with that. "And none of them were my type, so I'm not bothered by it."

"Oh?" Hisao cocked an eyebrow. "So what's your 'type', then?"

"Someone more cheerful than you, that's for sure," she shot back quickly, frowning up at him. "I saw you off in the corner, scowling and acting like you'd rather be somewhere else. Did you even *try* to have a good time?" Hisao opened his mouth to reply, but Misha wasn't done. "And it's rude to check your watch so often, Hisao. Honestly! I wonder what your mother would say."

A mischievous glint appeared in Hisao's eye. "You saw how everyone was getting along. They paired off almost as soon as we got there." Hisao danced ahead a step, expecting and avoiding Misha's playful shove. "And none of them were my type, so I'm not bothered by it."

"Hicchan, don't be mean!" she scolded, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. "I'm being serious!"

"Oh, it's okay for you to say that, but not me?" A full smile split Hisao's face, and he laughed. Laughter, even more scarce than his infrequent grins.

"Aw, Hicchan~!" Misha's grin mirrored Hisao's.

Down into the subway, laughing like the kids they used to be.

---

*Hisao's mother knocks one final time, then gives up and leaves. Hisao is still in bed. Today marks two weeks.*

*In his hands, he holds a small piece of paper. His high school diploma. His mother had dropped it in front of his room the day before; he has only just opened the small cardboard tube and extracted its contents.*

*A wrenching pain rips through his guts. Shizune. Memories bubble up, unbidden.*

*Quickly, he squashes them. That place conjures up too many harsh memories, the sweet scents of Shizune fouled by bitter loss and regret. Yamaku is gone, and so is the life he hoped to have. No time to dwell on such pain. No need to sink deeper into a spiral of hate and tears.*

*The paper in his hands is supposed to represent a turning point, his entry into the real*

*world, removed from the shelter of high school and its dearth of responsibilities.*

*What, then, is the point when that world Hisao left behind was one of pleasant chains binding him to a life of happiness, when the shelter it provided was burst abruptly by unfortunate happenstance? When the real world has already made itself cruelly apparent?*

*Tears begin to run down his cheeks, fall onto the thick parchment that was supposed to bring him freedom. At what cost, freedom?*

*A cost far too heavy to bear.*

*Echoing off of the confines of his self-imposed prison, sounds of paper tearing. Again and again he rips the diploma, halves becoming quarters, discarded confetti soon carpeting his floor. 'Fuck Yamaku. Fuck the real world. Fuck you, Shizune. Why did you have to leave me? I thought you loved me. I thought we would be together forever.'*

*The tears do not stop, even long after those shreds of paper become too small to tear with thick, unwieldy fingers, shaking from malnutrition and shame, slick with sadness.*

*He covers his face with dampened palms and weeps. Fuck Yamaku. That part of his life is truly over. Perhaps, someday, he will be able to forget it – and Shizune, though the sobs intensify at that thought – and move on with his life.*

*For now, he continues to mourn in a humid, grief-filled cell, filled with memories he no longer wants.*

---

At first, the envelope seemed innocuous, even mundane. It wasn't unusual for Hisao to have mail or documents left on his desk, so that cool Monday morning he just brushed it aside and set down his briefcase, shaking off his coat and the wintery cold outside. *November already.* Black leather briefcase and gloves dropped onto his desk, and Hisao ran a hand through hair still chilled from northern winds. *Winter just isn't my season.*

Heavily dropping into his upholstered office chair, Hisao sighed with relief. *At least it's warm in here.* Tired eyes regarded his desk, the manila envelope sliding through his field of vision almost unnoticed. Papers cluttered the desk, frequently organized into neat piles and destroyed as quickly as they were made. There were always so many things to do.

Nakahara stopped by his desk, dropped off a couple invoices that had been delivered to him by mistake. "Thanks, Nakahara." Hisao nodded appreciatively, and his coworker returned to his own workspace. More documents, fed into the organized chaos of Hisao's workspace. The envelope remained unopened.

Nakahara's invoices captured Hisao's attention first: the florist and decorators from the previous night. A large yawn split Hisao's face. *These late-night services are killing me.* He quickly drafted some checks and marked them in his ledger. *Did last month's books get balanced?* A hastily scribbled note, affixed to his computer screen: 'Check with Ueno re: bank books'.

As he reached for the envelope, Hisao's phone rang; it was his usual florist, asking about the Abe funeral. Yes, it was on Sunday. No, they'd moved it to their home. Yes, they still needed all the flowers. Another sigh as he replaced the phone receiver. *I should get to bed early tonight.*

Finally, he returned to the parcel. As one hand closed around the thin envelope, he noticed its weight: light, not nearly as heavy as he'd expected. Envelopes rarely contained fewer than fifty pages, usually more. He turned it over in his hands; there was something hard inside.

Hisao pried up the brass chad, opened the envelope and dumped the contents into his palm.

There were several seconds before Hisao realized what he was holding. Then, several more before he believed it. Finally, a long period where he turned it over in his hands, examining it, making sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. A DVD case, with a familiar face on the cover.

Suzuki glanced over from his desk and caught Hisao's eye.

Hisao was out of his chair before he realized he was moving. Purposeful, angry strides carried him over to the Suzuki's desk, who shrunk back. The scowl on Hisao's face was as severe as anyone in the office had seen.

"You think this is funny?" asked Hisao angrily, dropping the item on Suzuki's desk with a loud clatter. "You having a good laugh? Because I don't respond well to these kinds of jokes, Suzuki." Hisao's adversary turned in his chair slightly, bringing the two men face to face. "And work certainly isn't the place to be tossing this sort of thing around," continued Hisao roughly, not giving Suzuki time to speak. Disgusted at his coworker, irritated that he thought them close enough for such a tasteless joke, Hisao opened his mouth to continue, but was cut off.

"It's not a joke, it's real!" Suzuki's confused scowl mocked Hisao's anger. He sat up straighter, glanced at the DVD before continuing. "When she came in earlier this year, I thought I recognized her. It just took me a while to figure out from where!"

"What, so she turned you down for a date?" Raising a hand to forestall any reply, Hisao pressed on, "No, you know what, I don't care. Just keep that out of my sight. And don't bring anything like it to work again." Spinning on his heel, Hisao turned and started back towards his desk.

"I'm not lying!" Suzuki stood up defiantly, almost pleading at Hisao's back. "It's real! Watch it, if you don't believe me!"

The commotion had attracted an audience. Bodies in the office turned to watch Hisao and Suzuki, eyes strained from parsing legal forms focused on the argument between two supposedly amicable men.

"Yeah, I'm not a pervert like you," spat Hisao over his shoulder, not even bothering to give Suzuki his full attention. Another step toward his desk, uninterested in bandying words with his diminutive coworker. "Just keep it to yourself."

"Dammit, why would I lie to you about this?" Anger had started to turn Suzuki's pudgy face red. Poorly-parted hair danced above rosy cheeks: "I've got nothing to gain! Just watch the damn movie and see for yourself!"

Hisao turned and started to reply; Suzuki had not finished.

"I'm doing you a favor!" Suzuki's words carried throughout the office. All work had stopped, now.

"That," Hisao pointed to the DVD on Suzuki's desk, "is *not* a favor. And I don't know why you'd try to make me believe something like that, but it's not going to work. I've known her since high school; she's not that kind of woman." *Ridiculous. I never realized Suzuki was such a petty man.* From atop a desk calendar, Shiina's face – among other things – peered up at the ceiling.

"You think I can't recognize that pink hair? Those golden eyes?" Suzuki's voice started to rise again. "That I'm some sort of idiot who can't remember a face? It may be hard to believe, but *that* is your girlfriend! Don't take it out on *me* that you're going out with a whore!"

Hisao choked on his reply. *Is THAT what they think?*

"First," answered Hisao, raising a finger high into the air, "she's not my girlfriend. Second—"

Suzuki, red-faced and furious, swept up the DVD and whipped it into Hisao's chest, who barely caught the hard plastic case before it dropped to the floor. "Whatever she is, it makes no difference to me. Just keep that in case she 'gets pregnant' and tries to trap you into marrying her." Suzuki dropped back into his chair and retreated to the papers on his desk. "Please excuse me," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I have work to do."

The only thing that kept Hisao from clocking the shorter man was the fact that Mister Miyashita, the owner of their business, walked through the front door. He glanced around the office, followed one of a dozen gazes to Hisao, who was clenching his own

jaw so tightly it hurt.

"Something going on, here?"

"No, Sir," replied Hisao, tucking the DVD behind his back and smiling casually. "Just thanking Suzuki for calling the florist like I asked him to." He stopped breathing. *Stupid, stupid, why are you getting so worked up over this...?*

Mr. Miyashita nodded curtly and continued toward his office on the opposite side of the space. "Good."

Hisao turned; Suzuki flipped open a folder, started scribbling notes; the office resumed operation. Nothing out of the ordinary. A passing storm, no damage done.

The DVD felt warm in Hisao's fingers.

He opened his briefcase and tossed the item inside, quickly closed and stowed the luggage under his desk. There was work to do, always more work. *Just get back to work, Hisao.* Hisao turned on his computer monitor and grabbed the mouse. *Don't worry about it. It's nothing.* Swift clicks opened his email's inbox. *Just get back to work.*

A quick glance to his briefcase. *No, no, don't think about it.* Back to his inbox. *Just check your email like usual.*

His eyes settled on black leather.

Hisao's day continued like that. All day long, the DVD seemed to radiate heat from within his briefcase, so that whenever he turned he could feel it sitting there. Text flowed across his computer screen, half-read. *Didn't I just finish this checklist?* Back, to correct errors made in haste. *I never make this many mistakes.* The silence in his office, usually comforting, amplified Hisao's unease.

He barely made it through the day.

Coat, gloves, shoes discarded haphazardly by the door, Hisao raced into his living room. He threw on the light, snatched Suzuki's DVD out of his briefcase and... paused. Turning the plastic case over in his hands, examining each photo on the case, Hisao froze. A DVD tray lay extended, empty, beckoning, blue display gently reminding its user that no disc had been inserted.

It certainly *looked* like Misha. *But why would she be in a porno?* It just didn't make sense.

Gears whirled, retracting. Hisao watched silently as the movie loaded, started to play.

It wasn't long before Hisao shut off the television and stared at the floor. Myriad feelings

raged in his mind, battling for dominance: confusion, anger, disappointment. Fingers tightened around a plastic remote. Moans still echoed in the small living room, moans punctuated by a sharp, nervous "Wahaha~". Gasps lingered in his ears, the sound of a vibrator. A stiffness straining against Hisao's pants injected shame into his already-confused brain; anger swiftly surged. With a wordless shout, Hisao flung the remote across the room to clatter loudly against the floor.

Lights hummed overhead, a high-pitched whine that Hisao could only hear when he really concentrated. His thoughts continued to spin wildly, a maelstrom of conflicting urges.

*I owe Suzuki an apology.*

---

"Sorry for always changing our plans, Hicchan." Misha's bangs bobbed as she bowed her head slightly, still smiling – always smiling. "I hope it doesn't bother you too much." Her thick, black blazer sat in the chair next to her, with her coat. The woman's white blouse stood out in the dim lighting of the room, even with her sleeves rolled up and her collar unbuttoned: blazing brightly against a sepia-toned background.

*So, you take your clothes off for money?*

"Wednesday is as good as Saturday, really." Words laced with frustration, unintentional. Hisao shook his head, tried to avoid thinking about anything as he glanced up to another pair of customers walking into the restaurant, escaping the late November winds.

*I know what your breasts look like.*

*No.* He had decided to ignore it. What she did was her business.

"No problem, is what I mean." he smiled politely. "Being a personal secretary must be hard work." He and Misha were sitting at a small sushi restaurant, tucked away behind a maze of back alleys and side streets so that only four or five other patrons littered the establishment. "This is, what, the third business trip in as many weeks?"

"Yeah." She poured some soy sauce onto her dipping plate with a sheepish grin. "Sometimes it gets pretty hectic. But the money's good, and I enjoy working there." Chopsticks nabbed a morsel of food and started applying condiments. "Speaking of which, how is your job going?"

"Fine, fine." *I've seen you cum.* "This summer was busy for us, which is, you know, both good and bad." Misha smirked around a mouthful of food. "But November has been laid back so far. I've even been able to cut down to 40 hours a week." Rewarding his attempt at levity, Misha laughed her loud laugh. Hisao's small smile faded, imagining that face dripping with sweat, flushed dark pink.

*Why am I obsessing over this?* Hisao shoved some food into his mouth ungracefully. *She can do whatever she wants to. I'm not her father.* But the images wouldn't leave his head. It was just so out of character for Misha to do something like that, both in the past and present.

*So why did you do it?*

Hisao silently thanked God that he hadn't watched the whole thing. He shook off a momentary flash of anger at himself for watching any at all.

"You work too hard, Hicchan. You should take a vacation, go someplace and relax." She plucked another piece of sushi from her plate and started applying soy sauce. "Summer's over, so it's too late for the beach, but maybe the mountains? Go take a soak in a hot spring?"

Dismissing the idea immediately, Hisao nevertheless pretended to consider it for a moment before shaking his head.

"No, I don't think so. I've no one to go with, and I'd just worry about work, besides." Shoving more food in his mouth, he stopped himself from asking, "How many men have you slept with?"

"Aww, Hicchan, that's no excuse. What about that girl from the restaurant last month?" She seemed mischievous, grinning like a cat in the dim light of the restaurant. "She was cute, wasn't she?" Those white teeth flashed in a smile, beneath rosy red lips.

Hisao snorted in reply.

"Well," she continued, "you've got to do *something*." As the chef placed their next course in front of them, Misha thanked the man and smiled her Shiina smile. Then, turning back to her companion, "I could set up a trip, if you'd like. With those girls from the group date and their boyfriends?"

Another snort, this one derisive. "I'll pass on that. If I learned anything from the group date, it's that I don't have anything in common with people who work at law firms." Shiina's tongue seemed to languish a bit too long on the sushi as she took another bite.

*I've got to stop dwelling on this. Come on, Hisao.*

"You have something in common with me," Misha pointed out. "But," she averted her gaze, stole a glance at her companion demurely, "I can't go with you alone, Hicchan! Who knows what people would say?"

Hisao swallowed hard, barely avoided coughing.

Noticing the look on Hisao's face, Misha tossed her head back and laughed. Even the sushi chef cringed at the sheer volume emanating from Misha's mouth.

"Just kidding, Hicchan, just kidding." Another piece of sushi quickly flew into Misha's open mouth. She swallowed quickly, then continued, "But you really should go on a vacation or something."

"What would they say?" Hisao was barely paying attention to his own words, let alone Misha's. His body was on auto-pilot. *Stop it, stop it, stop it.* Even if she were still doing porn, it was her own damn business. Hisao didn't notice the way Misha hesitated before leaning over to nudge her companion in the ribs.

"Why Hisao, are you hitting on me?" More laughter – loud, loud laughter. Then a lengthy silence. Far too long.

Hisao felt horrible, stuffed more sushi into his face to avoid having to speak. It was rude of him to keep dwelling on such a small matter. It wasn't affecting his life, and he had no problem with her past actions. They were friends; Hisao would be a terrible friend indeed if he let something small like that affect their relationship.

Shaking his head to clear it, Hisao turned to Misha just as she turned to him.

"Misha—"

"If—"

The pair smiled, Misha abashed, Hisao nervous.

"Go ahead," they said simultaneously, speaking over one another again. Hisao just bowed his head and held out a hand, inviting her to speak.

"No, Hicchan, you go." As if to force the issue, she took another bite of sushi, seemed to smile as she chewed.

*This is stupid. Time to end it.* Determination. Hisao cleared his throat lightly, straightened his back.

"I just want to say I'm sorry if I've been a bit weird today." Misha blinked twice, and Hisao scratched his head awkwardly. "I've just had my mind on something, and it's, well, it's not fair to you to let it affect my behavior. So, sorry."

"What's wrong, Hicchan?" Hisao felt a terrible weight settle into his stomach as Misha frowned, genuinely concerned. "Is it something I can help with?"

*Dammit, Hisao...*

"No, no, it's nothing, really. Just some, you know, personal stuff."

"I'm an expert on personal stuff, Hicchan." Misha slid her stool nearer to Hisao's, leaned forward on her elbows eagerly. "What is it?"

"Really, it's nothing. Don't worry about it." *Just leave it alone, Misha...* Hisao popped a bit of food into his mouth, mimicking Misha's earlier actions and hopefully ending the conversation.

She, however, wouldn't be deterred. "Hisao, come on, you can tell me. I'm one of your oldest friends, aren't I?" Golden eyes glittered in the incandescent light.

Hisao started to get annoyed. There he was, trying to ignore something private from Misha's life – *well, it's public in that it's for sale* – and she wouldn't drop the damn issue.

"Misha—"

"I'll get it out of you one way or the other, you know?" The grin she plastered on her face only served to bother Hisao more. Knowing; well-meaning, but certain. "Just tell me. You'll feel better."

Irritation, and panic. *She will, too.* Hisao wracked his brain for a response.

*A lie.* A small lie, to satisfy her. Something with enough truth in it to make sense, to not arouse suspicion.

"Fine." Hisao put as much annoyance into his voice as he could, hoping to dissuade her from any further inquiries. "A coworker brought some, uh, risqué DVDs to work, to give to me. He thought I'd like them, or something. It was pretty creepy." Hisao tried to gauge Misha's reaction, but couldn't detect any change in her expression. "Anyway, I don't really want any more 'presents', but I have to work with him every day, too. I'm trying to figure out a way to politely tell him to leave me alone, basically."

Another slight pause from Misha before, "Oh come on, Hicchan, you don't have to act all pure with me." Another elbow in the ribs. "I'm sure you have some 'risqué' movies of your own, at home." She seemed to be searching for something; her face seemed slightly desperate. *Or am I reading too much into things?*

Ignoring her insinuation, he replied, "I don't need a coworker bringing porn DVDs to work on my behalf. Would *you* want a coworker bringing that sort of thing to *your* office?" Hisao punctuated his question by tossing more food into his mouth.

"Hahaha! I suppose you have a point, Hisao." Misha was all smiles once more, turning back to her sushi. "That would be pretty unsettling." Taking a sip of her drink, she asked, "But why would he do something like that? Are you friends?"

*Drop it already.*

"No, that's the strange part. I've only ever seen him at work." Hisao pushed forward, not giving Misha time to interrupt. "Well I suppose there are all sorts of weird people in the world, right?" A forced chuckle. "How's the food?"

"Oh, it's great. You were right, this is a nice restaurant." She cocked her head to one side with a thoughtful frown. "I just find it hard to believe that someone would bring you a porno out of the blue like that." Sly grin firmly back in place: "Are you *sure* you didn't ask him to bring you any movies? Maybe he had something you wanted to watch?"

Hisao chuckled despite himself. "*Schoolgirl Sex Volume 7* isn't on the top of my 'to-watch' list."

A heartbeat.

*What?*

Wide eyes turned to regard Misha, who just laughed and turned back to her food.

"Yeah, I guess not." Chopsticks reached for a small slice of sashimi, fumbled and dropped it back to its plate. *Is she... shaking?*

"Misha..." Hisao saw his friend cringe.

"Oh!" Suddenly, Misha thrust a hand into her purse and extracted her sleek black cell phone. "Oh, no," she muttered, looking at the screen and sucking air through her teeth. "Sorry, Hicchan, but my boss needs me back at the office." She looked pale as she smiled her apology, but it could have been the lighting. Gathering up her purse, "I've got to go ASAP; can you get the bill this time? Thanks," she continued, not waiting for an answer, and she started for the door, bag gripped in one hand and coat slung over an arm.

"Wait, Misha—" But she was out the door. Hisao hurriedly looked for the chef, hoping to get their bill, but he was busy helping another customer. *And of course*, he thought as he looked into his wallet, *all I have is a 10,000 yen note*. Hisao threw the bill down with a grimace and raced out the door.

Out to the street in pursuit, Hisao looked around frantically. The small pedestrian avenue held precious few people: here a couple of lovers walking arm-in-arm, there a group of three businessmen, drunk and staggering to keep up with each other. At the end of the alleyway, Hisao saw a cab pass by, off duty for the night. But no matter how he concentrated he couldn't find a woman with pink hair and tall, crimson heels.

---

*"I'm sorry, Hisao, but there was nothing we could do." The nurse's voice sounds as*

*hollow as Hisao feels. "Shizune was dead before she hit the ground, and your son..." Tiny blue hands; a lifeless face, innocent in its stillness. "There was nothing we could have done, even if Shizune had survived."*

*"Nothing at all. For either of them." Hisao can barely speak. His voice is a hoarse whisper.*

*"No."*

*More silence, punctuated only by shuddering breaths.*

*"What happened?"*

*The nurse puts a hand on Hisao's shoulder, tries to comfort him as he explains: "Shizune had an aneurysm at the base of her brain. The baby – your son – was coming early. As Shizune went into premature labor she panicked and her blood pressure spiked, rupturing the aneurysm and killing her almost instantly." Hisao doesn't react. He is out of tears. "Your son, unfortunately, had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. Even if we'd gotten to him in time, without proper emergency care..." As if it made any difference: "I'm sorry."*

*Hisao brings his hands up, to cover his mouth and nose. A single tear drops onto the table.*

*Bright lights flash – cars.*

*So many cars rush by. Parents and students alike glance awkwardly at Hisao as he sits, alone, on his single suitcase, waiting for a taxi. Word got out rather quickly that Shizune had died and enrollment was already down, according to the snippets of conversation that can pierce the boy's melancholy. After all, how could these people trust their children to a school that lets its Student Council President die?*

*Misha is nowhere to be found. Shizune's father walks over, slowly; her mother is conspicuously absent.*

*"You know she didn't love you." A great deal of emotion packed into those words, underscored by anger and hurt.*

*Hisao shakes his head half-heartedly. "Yes she did. She and I were having a baby." Emotionless, flat.*

*"No. She was giving the child up for adoption, and was going to leave you." An angry, contemptuous half-frown. "She didn't love you."*

*Too tired even for anger, Hisao replies, "She loved me more than I deserve, and I loved her." He breathes deeply. "I don't know why you're trying to hurt me, but I have just lost*

*my wife and son, and I doubt you could do any more than that." Somewhere in the back of his mind, Hisao smirks at the startled grunt from Jigoro. "She made a copy of your family stamp." With the last of his waning strength, Hisao raises his head to look his adversary in the eyes. "Father."*

*Away walks the incensed, distraught, confused man, never to lay eyes on his son-in-law again. Hisao lowers his head once more, rests his back against a brick wall, and stares at the glasses in his hands.*

---

"Hey, Misha, it's Hisao again. It's been a few days since you said you'd be back, and I haven't been able to get a hold of you. Gimme a call when you get this. Please," he added lamely, then grimaced and punched the 'end' button. *Please?* How stupid.

Of course, Hisao knew about stupid. That was the sixth message he'd left her without a reply. She obviously didn't want to talk to him, but he kept calling anyway. *Like a stalker*, he grudgingly admitted to himself. *Maybe I am a stalker.*

He paced around his small bedroom, rubbing dry hands together. *Why won't she answer?* He knew the answer. *Is this the way it ends, then?* Chilled by the wind seeping in through his partially-open window, Hisao slid it shut and closed the latches firmly.

He'd been over the situation... *Who knows how many times?* Time and again he'd replayed the last eight months in his mind, trying to figure out when he'd started to care at all about Misha. And there was still no answer.

*Like it or not, this does mean something to me.* Misha meant something to him. A friend.

*Working pays the bills, but I can't go out to eat with paperwork.* Silly. Hisao hadn't always been so silly.

Outside of the small one-bedroom apartment, a cool evening breeze brushed by, softly breaking against the windowpane. Its gentle, hollow howl threatened to lull heavy eyes to sleep. Yet the uncomfortable knot in Hisao's stomach refused to let him slumber.

*Why hasn't she ANSWERED?*

Worry shifted to anger, as it had done so often since the sushi bar.

*I just want to talk to her! Is that so unreasonable?* Heavy footsteps, back and forth across hardwood floors. *She has sex on camera and I'M the bad guy?* That was hardly fair.

Silently, Hisao cursed Suzuki for his meddling.

With a sigh, the man flopped onto the bed heavily, fatigue creeping through his body, attempting to massage a weary mind into unconsciousness. It wasn't Suzuki's fault. *It probably isn't all Misha's fault, either.* Hisao had obsessed over it, after all. *But there is no reason to keep avoiding me like this!* Fists clenched in the cold air. *God DAMMIT Misha!*

From anger back to melancholy. He knew he was being stupid. There was nothing wrong with Misha doing something like that. Her body, her life, her business. The woman had her reasons, and Hisao could respect that. *No matter what she did, or why she did it, she's still my friend. That won't change.*

*So pick up the fucking phone and let me tell you.*

A hand reached out, grasped Hisao's small cell phone and started punching buttons. *One more place to try.* Muscles ached, irrationally – he'd done nothing physical for years.

Hisao's cell phone struggled for a second before the call was connected. *Last call, then bed.* The familiar pulsating tone of a phone ringing. *Not that there's anyone there this late at night.*

Four rings before their answering service kicked in: "Nishimura & Asahi law offices, office of Kozo Kawai; how may I help you?"

*It's not a machine.* A familiar voice.

"Misha?" Silence. "Misha, it's Hisao. I—"

"I'm sorry, Mister Nakai, but Mister Kawai is out for the evening. I would ask that you please call back during normal business hours if you have any business with him." Shiina, answering a work line; personal calls were for personal lines. "Thank you for calling. Have a nice evening." Click, and the line went dead.

Plastic strained in Hisao's grip. *Fine, fuck you, then!* With a growl of frustration, Hisao found himself dialing Misha's cell once more.

Two rings before Misha's pre-recorded message started playing.

"What the fuck, Misha?!" he shouted into the empty room, nearly throwing his phone through the window. "What the FUCK?!" A muffled thud as he whipped the object into a thick down pillow instead.

Hisao stood for several moments, heaving with rage. He could feel his heart thumping against his ribcage, an insistent reminder to calm down. *Fine.* Reflex kicked in: his breathing evened, pain Hisao hadn't noticed before began to ebb. *Fine.* Heartbeats slowed.

*I'm done. I've put up with this long enough. Surprisingly painful words: I don't need her.*

Hisao slid into bed and turned off the light with an impotent grunt. Other matters demanded his attention. Three services were planned for the next week, two of which had somehow gotten the wrong flowers delivered. Hisao made a mental note to talk with the shop's owner. *Their prices are good, but now I see why.*

Musicians for the third hadn't been chosen yet. The family wanted a string quartet to play music at their reception – a pricey proposal, and Hisao had to make sure to get everything just right. He had been warned not to anger wealthy clients, a grating lesson that he nevertheless took to heart.

Flashes of his desk: paperwork, from the recent budget meeting. *How on Earth did Ueno screw up the tax books so badly?* Again, Mr. Miyashita had asked Hisao to pick up the slack. He wasn't a whiz with numbers – far from it – but Hisao was diligent and thorough, which Ueno was obviously not. *I'd rather do it correctly than leave it to him again.*

Ten minutes passed while Hisao lay in bed, thinking about work. Twenty minutes. Ninety.

Finally, wide awake despite the late hour, he allowed his thoughts to drift back to golden eyes and a piercing laugh. Winds had died down outside; still air surrounded Hisao, amplified his shallow breathing. *I just don't understand why Misha is avoiding me.*

The DVD.

*Okay, fine, but all I want to do is talk. I don't care about some stupid porno from however many years ago.*

Floorboards settled somewhere above him. *You can do whatever you want, Misha. If you want to make porn, go ahead.*

An itch at the back of his head.

*If she needs money, she can just ask.* Nothing else could have forced the Misha he knew into doing something like that. *I've got savings; just ask. You don't have to debase yourself like that just for cash.*

Hisao shook his head vigorously, dry-washed his face. He was avoiding the issue. *She's being evasive, and I can't keep this up.* Hisao had enough on his mind; if Misha wanted to talk, she could call him.

*Otherwise... goodbye, I guess.*

The room seemed abruptly colder; Hisao reached for a blanket, draped it over himself.

*Still cold.* Pillows were repositioned awkwardly, tested, moved again.

As Hisao finally drifted off to sleep, his fatigued mind leveraged an ultimatum: one more try. If she still didn't want to talk to him, he'd leave her alone.

Forever, if need be.

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Morning came too quickly, and Hisao spent the workday fighting off drowsiness. Numbers upon numbers, from morning until evening, without even a break for lunch. Scribble, type, yawn. Repeat.

"I have a doctor's appointment, so I have to leave early." No one looked twice.

A clear sky, glowing red with December's early sunset, viewed through the window of one of Tokyo's ever-present trains. Hisao stood against the door, hand clasped to a metal railing, and thought. Stations passed as he considered his words, should he catch up to Misha. Conversations played out in his head, one for each of a thousand different openings, ten retorts for each of imaginary Misha's responses.

Passengers got on, off; anger became regret became sadness. Sadness? *Maybe.* Maybe sadness. He reflected on how nice it was having someone to pal around with again. A rueful admission: he'd spent more time alone than with others, since college.

Anger returned, justified. Hisao couldn't imagine how her avoiding him would help anything. It didn't make any sense. Sudden fear: perhaps she resented him in the first place. Misha had been the one who had forced their reconnecting at first, after all. Had his self-interest had finally gotten on her nerves? He did spend quite a bit of time involved in his own affairs, focusing more on work than on other people.

*But I can't be bothered with people who will only ditch me in the end.* Like Misha had, once. *People don't change.*

Transferring trains barely interrupted his thoughts. *People always leave me.* That day, with snow falling all around him, standing under a bare tree with Iwanako, he'd still had hope. Hisao Nakai hadn't been so jaded, then. A girlfriend; someday, college, a house and a family.

His illness had taken that from him.

*No.* Hisao's illness hadn't done anything. His so-called friends had abandoned him all on their own. He hadn't been whisked away to some private hospital in Sweden; he was still at home, in the town he'd known all his life to that point. They just refused to visit.

And Shizune. And his... *My son.* They'd been taken from him through no fault of their

own. Misha, though. She'd just disappeared. And his family, supportive as they tried to be, drifted away over time. Hisao sometimes lamented the loss of his family. Eventually, they had stopped trying. Everyone eventually stopped trying.

The anger had returned by the time he got off at Roppongi-itcho. *I'm not letting you get away with this again, Misha.* If she wanted to go back to her half of the city, he had no right to stop her. *But I'll have the last word.*

Crowded, always so crowded. Tokyo continued to amaze Hisao, even after living there for so long. The sheer number of people threatened to overwhelm him at every turn. Wave after wave of bodies crashed against the breakwater of the subway's exit, Hisao swept along with the flow. Overhead, the sun's final rays were fading into night. Tokyo streetlights hummed to life even as he watched.

Making his way through the crowd, navigating busy intersections and packed corners, Hisao found Misha's building. His righteous anger had faded again, into an emotion Hisao had neither the time nor energy to decode.

Inside, up the elevator to the 28<sup>th</sup> floor. *I'll surprise you at work, this time.*

Before Hisao, elevator doors opened with a ding and brought the man face-to-face with Mafuyu. *Mafuyu?* Double-checking his memory, Hisao dredged up her last name as the few other people shuffled out of the elevator. He approached Misha's coworker, locked eyes with the small woman and smiled his most professional smile.

"Ah, Miss Kumagai. Hello."

Mafuyu jumped a little at seeing Hisao, stepped to one side of the elevator with him while another load of people boarded and were whisked off to the ground floor. She appeared nervous; Hisao recalled that she'd been nervous at the group date, too.

"Mister Nakai, hello." They exchanged bows quickly. "What brings you here?" Even Hisao couldn't miss the way she strangled the straps on her handbag, a deep green that matched her long coat.

"I'm actually glad I ran into you. I've been trying to get a hold of Mi- Shiina, and can't for some reason." Hisao glanced toward double doors emblazoned with the name of their law firm. "Is she around?"

With an innocently conspicuous glance to her watch, Mafuyu tightened her grip on her purse and bowed again.

"I'm sorry, Mister Nakai, but she left at 5:00." Anxious: "I can tell her you stopped by, though, if you'd like." The barrette in her hair made her look far too young to work in an office.

*Of course.*

"Ah, actually, there's something I needed to give her." Hisao's heart began to race, as if his body were rejecting the lie. "Did she go home, or is there still a chance I can catch her somewhere?" Sweating, Hisao shifted his feet. *Why is it so hot in here?*

Mafuyu glanced at her watch again as she continued to wring the straps on her purse.

"...I could give it to her, perhaps—"

"Ahaha, yes, well, it's something rather personal, you see. She, ah, left something at my house, and I think she'd rather I give it to her personally." *Just tell me where she is.*

Mafuyu blushed and dropped her eyes. Hisao felt the urge to tap his toes impatiently, resisted. Instead, he shoved a bashful expression onto his face and bowed a shallow apology.

"Sorry to be so persistent, but are you sure you don't know where she might be?" Hisao tugged ineffectually at his collar, trying to cool himself off. "It's only 5:15; she couldn't have gotten far." He laughed a bit at the half-joke and resisted loosening his tie. Behind Hisao, elevator doors opened again, yawning wide to engulf another throng of passengers. Winter coats passed by, all but unnoticed.

Mafuyu's meek response was several seconds in coming. "W-Well, we're supposed to meet for karaoke tonight, since—"

"Karaoke?" blurted Hisao, causing his companion to jump a bit. *Misha singing? I can't imagine what that would sound like.* He could almost hear her piercing laughter.

"Y-Yes," continued the young woman, "we're meeting for karaoke at 7:00. I could tell you where to meet us, if you'd like." She blushed again and wrung her purse more fervently. "You know, so you can return her..."

"Right, right, the, ah... Yes." Sheepish this time, Hisao's smile was nonetheless as sincere as he could make it appear to be. "I wouldn't be any trouble, I assure you. I just need to return the... item..." he looked at his briefcase, "...and then I'll leave you to your karaoke."

Hesitantly, reluctantly, she gave him the information; he thanked her and turned to the elevator as it began to open again. *Finally.*

"Um, Mister Nakai?" Hisao turned back to see an unexpectedly worried look on Mafuyu's face. "Miss Shiina, she's been acting... odd, lately. I don't know if it has to do with you, but..." Dark eyes dropped to the floor momentarily, flew back up to spear Hisao with intensity. "You've known her longer than any of us, and we can't get her to tell us what's wrong. If you could, would you help her?" Awkward and uncomfortable,

Mafuyu nevertheless appeared to be genuinely worried. "She always looks so happy after your dates."

*Dates.* Unexpectedly irked at the comment, Hisao had to take a mental step back. *You were the one who put the idea in her head.*

"I'll do what I can." Another short bow and he hopped into the elevator just before it closed.

As the metal box carried Hisao downstairs, Mafuyu's words echoed in his head. *Happy, huh?* She'd always seemed the same old Misha, to him: boisterous, shameless, and cheerful. *Maybe there's still a chance...* Hisao shook the thoughts out of his head. She had made it abundantly clear that he wasn't wanted around anymore. *It doesn't matter how I feel – she's done with me.* A chime sounded as the elevator reached the third floor, stopped to admit more passengers.

*It doesn't matter how I feel.* Another ding at the second floor, more guests. Hisao felt the floor dip as bodies piled in.

*How do I feel?* Doors opened, and Hisao walked out into the foyer.

---

Passing time at a café somewhere near the karaoke bar started to grate on Hisao almost immediately. A steaming hot coffee sat in front of him, untouched, along with some sort of pastry the waitress had recommended. He happened to be the only customer in the place at the moment, and had more than an hour to waste. His fingers itched to be working on something, anything.

Hisao took a small bite of the foodstuff in front of him and barely avoided spitting it out. Trying to wash the taste out of his mouth with hot coffee only helped to burn his lips. His waitress chatted with another server somewhere barely within earshot.

*Scalding coffee and a Styrofoam doughnut.* He let a sigh escape his lips. *And all the time in the world to think.*

Hisao hated thinking. He hated introspection, reminiscing; he'd arranged his whole life to avoid it. The only things worth remembering were memories of Shizune, which were also the most painful. So he'd thrown himself into school, into work. He was only happy when something was holding his whole attention; otherwise, memories consumed him.

Despite his careful life planning, the previous few weeks had offered a large amount of down time. Even after taking on as much paperwork as he could find, he still lay awake at night, unable to sleep. He'd devoured three books in a week. The television he owned had gotten more use in the last two days than in the years since he'd bought it. All in an effort to avoid time to himself.

*Sleepless nights, interminable train rides and empty cafés. Everything I could want and more.*

Misha. She'd been Shizune's interpreter. She'd been – she was *still* – Shizune's voice. Sometimes he'd recall Shizune's words but hear Misha. And Misha was the reason Hisao was sitting in a deserted café, waiting around for a karaoke party with people he didn't know.

Anger quickly melted back into melancholy. *I don't even know what I'm doing anymore.* Half the time he wanted to scream; other times he wanted to pretend he'd never seen the video. She was his only friend, and also a constant reminder of his past. The way she prodded him about everything, from his attitude to girlfriends... *Like some random girl could give me back what I lost.* She managed to drag Hisao out of himself, forced him into the real world.

Hisao dragged unusually cold, clammy hands down his face. Enough of that. He called the waitress over, paid and inquired if there were any bookstores nearby. *Something to take my mind off of this... situation.* Directions in hand, Hisao walked outside into cool December air.

Fatigue slowed Hisao's steps. He walked down some nameless street toward an unknown bookshop, doing everything in his power to forget Shizune, to forget Misha, to forget the world around him. *Trying to forget my life.* Through a wooden door and into a hall of literature.

Firmly lodged between the pages of some random novel, Hisao waited for 7:00 to roll around. That was the time he would get his answers, ask his questions. But until then, he could only wait. And Hisao was tired of thinking.

He came to himself suddenly, hurried to check his watch. It read 7:24. "Great," he mumbled under his breath as he returned the volume to a shelf at his elbow. *I'll have to remember that book.* He raced past the register and through the front door. As soon as his shoes hit pavement, he began to run.

By the time Hisao found the karaoke place it was almost 7:45. Breathing a little heavily, he approached the lobby attendant, feeling out of place in his black suit and tie, carrying his briefcase, trench coat lapping at his knees.

"Hello," he replied politely to the shopkeeper's greeting. "I'm meeting a party. Can you tell me what room they're in?"

Up the winding staircase and around a corner. Red paint assaulted Hisao's eyes. *I never liked karaoke places.*

As he turned down a long, eye-wrenchingly colorful hallway, he spied short pink hair,

black slacks, and a white shirt draped over a familiar frame. As if she were expecting him, Misha stopped halfway down the hallway and turned. She seemed... different, though Hisao couldn't immediately discern why. They locked eyes. Hisao saw a flash of recognition, a twitch across Misha's forehead.

As Hisao opened his mouth to speak, his friend spun on her heel and hurried away.

"Misha!" he called, probably too loudly for the setting – but she ignored him, rushed into a room on her right. *She's shorter.* The thought came unbidden to his mind; his eyes flitted to her feet quickly, just as sensible black flats disappeared behind a gaudy red doorjamb. He hurried down the hall after her.

Hisao's heavy, black briefcase knocked against his leg as he rushed toward the karaoke room he had seen Shiina enter. As he approached, the door opened to reveal Mafuyu, fidgeting with the barrette in her hair. Before they could collide, the small woman squeaked, brought her hands to her chest and looked up at Hisao, startled.

"Hisao!" Behind her, the door closed roughly, propelling both she and Hisao into the hallway. Mafuyu jumped out of Hisao's arms, blushing furiously and stammering apologies, which the man waved off.

"Miss Kumagai—"

"Yes!" She peeked over her shoulder, then returned her attention to Hisao. "Yes! She- I mean Shiina isn't ready yet." Black vest, black skirt and hose, white blouse – still blushing red. "She asked me to ask you to wait."

"Wait?" The guard nodded. "So she's going to talk to me, finally?" A look of puzzlement crossed Mafuyu's face. *Oh, right. She thinks Misha and I are...* "Sure, okay." Hisao slumped against the wall, letting his briefcase hit the floor. "I'll wait."

Standing in the hallway with a shy secretary, Hisao waited obediently. He tried to pick out songs from amidst the cacophony of notes in the air, but failed. *I don't listen to much music, I guess.* Still, he tried.

Mafuyu opened her mouth several times, but never managed to say anything. She would gape for a moment, reconsider, and return to awkward silence.

Minutes passed. *What is going ON here?*

Hisao stood from his slouch. "Miss Kumagai."

Misha's door opened, forestalling any reply. Akiko and Haruko emerged, wearing the same black skirt and vest as Mafuyu.

"She's ready." Akiko invited Hisao inside with a wink, then shared a laugh with Haruko

that disconcerted the man. He stared, dumbfounded, at the three women standing in front of him, all knowing looks and innuendo that Hisao couldn't quite discern.

Dazed, he stepped past the women and through the doorway. *I don't even know what I'm doing anymore.* Misha had succeeded in putting Hisao on the defensive yet again. *At least I finally found her.* He shut the door with a soft click.

Sitting on a couch, karaoke paraphernalia arranged neatly beside her, Misha tightened her lips nervously.

"Hey, Hi-" She stopped, closed her eyes as if berating herself. Starting over with a deep breath, "Hello, Hisao." She gestured stiffly to a couch across the small room from her. "Won't you have a seat?" Her Shiina voice, lower and more metered; but shaky, hesitant. The way she sat on the cheap couch, back too straight, knees drawn together unnaturally, hands lying on her lap, palms down, awkward and obviously uncomfortable – Hisao swallowed.

As he moved to the couch, again he noticed that something was different with her, though it eluded him. He studied the woman as he sat, setting his briefcase down on the floor awkwardly. She was wearing slacks, which was odd – Hisao hadn't seen her *not* wear a skirt. Her face seemed overly smooth, like she was forcing herself not to show any emotion. She couldn't have been comfortable in that ridiculously formal position – it belonged at a job interview, not a talk between friends. And she seemed paler than usual. Even in the relatively dim light of the karaoke box, Hisao could tell that Shiina looked like a ghost compared to her usual self.

Something tugged at the back of his brain. Hisao's eyes narrowed, focused on Shiina's lips. *Lipstick.* She hadn't been wearing lipstick in the hallway just now, had she? Her swooping bangs clung tightly to the side of her head; *Her hair looks wet.* A strange feeling welled up from the pit of his stomach, a confusing and troubling feeling.

Blush on her cheeks where there had been none. Empty liquor glasses conspicuously absent. He would have bet money that the strong smell of perfume in the room was fresh, less than a minute old. A crazy thought entered his head. *No...*

A glance down, beneath the table, confirmed: she was also wearing heels.

Hisao had to fight to avoid burying his face in his hands.

"M—" was as far as he got before Misha bowed deeply at the waist, doubling over completely.

"I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry, Hisao." She remained folded up, speaking to the floor. "I shouldn't have run away like I did. I shouldn't have avoided you. I should have returned your calls. I shouldn't have been so rude to you on the phone the other day." Her pink head dipped a bit. "I shouldn't have done a lot of things. A-Are we still

friends?"

"Wh..." Hisao rubbed his forehead a bit, confused. "Please, stop bowing," he pleaded gently. Misha hesitated, but straightened, back to her too-stiff posture and expressionless face. She kept her eyes on the floor in front of her.

"I'm more confused than anything, I think," muttered Hisao. *Angry, too, but that can come later, I guess.* Her apology had at least *seemed* sincere. "Misha, what's going on?" He spread his hands, at a loss for words momentarily. "I know you're probably embarrassed about—"

"Stop." Shiina was back for a fleeting moment, firm and unyielding. She was looking not at Hisao, however, but at the door. Hisao turned his body slightly to see what had caught her attention, but all he could see was a large wooden door.

"...What is it?" Still training his gaze on nothing.

"..." Shiina shifted her gaze back to Hisao, then quickly dropped her eyes. Suddenly, her hands were moving.

'Do you still sign?'

*Oh.* He looked back toward the room's entrance; sure enough, shadows danced under the door. *I see.* Well if they wanted to listen, they could do as they pleased. Hisao stretched his arms – and stopped short.

*The lessons are going poorly. Hisao sighs, trying to force his fingers into unnatural shapes, move his arms without flailing. Shizune and Misha sit across the table, starting intently, faces blank, eyes sharp. Sunlight streams through the windows behind them, a warm early evening sun that can lull you to sleep if you aren't careful.*

*'Again,' signs Shizune impatiently, and Misha translates unnecessarily. Some of the simple words Hisao can understand; but the girls don't know what he gets and what he doesn't, so Misha's vocalizations continue, and will continue to do so until he shows more improvement. He folds his aching fingers in to make a fist, extends his thumb to the side. 'A'. Fist again, pinky up. 'I'. Index and ring fingers straight up. 'U'. 'E'. 'O.' 'Ka'.*

Hisao blinked and the room came back into focus. *Pay attention, Hisao.* Deftly, hands started to make the complicated gestures necessary for sign language.

'I try to keep in practice.' He smiled slightly to himself, unconsciously; it had been a long time since he'd signed with another person instead of videos or books. Far too long, in fact.

Shiina visibly relaxed, back into Misha, a tired smile playing across her face momentarily. She snapped back into a nervous frown quickly, though, and sat up

straighter – a feat Hisao had not thought possible. Her arms slipped into familiar patterns, white sleeves tracing patterns in the air.

'I'm glad. I... don't really want them to know.' A quick look to the door; Hisao nodded silently. He started to sign again, but once more Misha cut him off. 'Please. There are some things I need to say.' The sign Misha used gave Hisao another pause.

At Yamaku, that had been one of Shizune's idiosyncrasies.

Alone, in their shared bed late at night, she and Hisao would exchange stories from middle school, childhood. In the dark of that small dorm room Hisao came to know her better than all the time they spent together working in the student council room, or going on dates, or wandering the school grounds.

'My father always told me that I could do whatever anyone else could do,' she signed to him one steamy night, sweat glistening from her forehead, dripping between her breasts to a slightly swollen belly. Distant eyes had regarded Hisao that night; a sad, far-away look crept onto her face. 'Once, when I was being bullied in elementary school, I had a bit of a breakdown. I stopped signing altogether. Not at school, not at home. I barely ate, and as soon as I got home from school I went to bed.' Hisao had waited as Shizune took a breath, just staring at her hands for a long moment with a wistful smile.

'Eventually, my father managed to convince me to sit with him for a bit. He didn't do anything for a full ten minutes, and I started to get impatient. But still, he just sat there, watching me, as if he hadn't had to bargain for a full week just to get me to acknowledge him like that. His eyes...' Shizune's breasts rose and fell with a deep breath. 'I still remember his eyes as he quietly regarded me, looking like he wanted to hold me, stroke my hair, as he had when I was small. At the time, I couldn't appreciate it.' She smirked slightly. 'Now, that memory is one of my favorites.

'Finally,' now Shizune's smile was full, and her eyes sparkled in the moonlight, 'after more than a half an hour, I exploded. Jumping to my feet, I signed furiously at him. 'Why did you call me out here' this and 'You don't know how I feel' that and 'You and Mom don't know what it's like'. And you know what he did?' Hisao had shaken his head, entranced by the woman sitting in front of him. 'He just smiled and, with tears in his eyes, signed 'I've missed your voice.'"

Even Hisao had to blink back tears at that. But Shizune wasn't even ashamed; she let the single drop run down her cheek, never breaking eye contact with her lover. 'These,' she held up her hands, 'are my voice. He was the one who helped me realize that. I may not be able to sing, but I can do just as much with my voice as anyone else. I can tell people what I have to say; I can read bedtime stories to my children; I can even tell the man I love that, well, I love him.' Even with all they'd said and done before, Shizune managed to blush as she grinned a toothy grin and touched Hisao's hair affectionately. 'I love you, Hisao. I just wanted you to hear that.'

Shizune never used the sign language for 'sign language'. It was always – always – 'talk', or 'say', or 'yell'.

"Hisao?" Misha's voice snapped him back into reality.

Shaking off the reverie, he had to bow an apology. *It must be from lack of sleep.* Silently, he motioned for her to continue.

Despite Misha's insistence that Hisao let her speak, she sat, staring at the hands in her lap, for a full minute before abruptly clenching her jaw and spearing Hisao with a steely, determined gaze.

'First, I want to apologize again for Shizune.' Hisao felt his heart begin to pound, anger surfacing momentarily before he reined himself in. 'I can tell that you don't want me to talk about this, but I need to say it. When I tried before, it didn't seem sincere – and this is very, very important to me.' Gold eyes hardened. 'I'm sorry. I was a terrible friend back then. When she died, I could barely believe it myself. The shock of losing my best friend like that was too big for me to handle, Hisao, and I shut down. I couldn't even take care of myself, let alone check to see how you were doing. My family herded me away from Yamaku, and I let them.

'But that wasn't right. That was a terrible thing for me to do, and I'm apologizing. You had just lost as much as I had – more, in fact. But I was too caught up in myself.' Shaking her head, 'And I thought of myself as your friend.' Shiina's self-deprecating snort communicated more effectively than her words ever could have.

'That being said, I don't expect or even deserve your forgiveness. But it... has to do with the rest of... everything.' Now Misha was growing more nervous. If she had been anyone else, she'd have been chewing on her lip, or shaking her leg; the only way Hisao could tell was a single, furtive glance at Hisao's face, then quickly back to her own hands. 'The videos, I mean.' *Plural.*

'I'm sure you remember how I was in high school, Hisao. I was a bit ditzy, a bit naïve. I'd never really *lost* anything. My family was lucky enough to have the money to provide me with a home, food, clothes, spending money – almost anything I could ask for. My relatives were all still alive; my cat, at 15 years old, was remarkably still around; even my friends from public school kept in touch with me after I transferred. I wasn't prepared to lose Shizune, not like that.

'Nothing helped, and I went off to college a broken girl. I didn't even try to interact with anyone. I could barely make it to classes at times. There were whole days where I'd just cry, dawn to dusk, in my dorm room. No one wanted to be my friend; even if they'd tried, I was in no mood to put up with them, most of the time.

'Until I met a boy.' Misha's eyes tightened into a scowl. A fire burned in those golden orbs – anger, and hurt. 'His name's not important, and I'd rather not remember it anyway.

But somehow he wormed his way into my life. I guess he saw that I was weak, damaged, and figured I'd be an easy target. Well, I certainly was, at that.

'He started off nice. They all do, I'm told; but I was just out of high school, and had only a little experience with men. He listened to me talk, let me cry on his shoulder, was tender when we..." She paused, took a breath. "...made love. I didn't even notice that he was going out with two other girls at the same time, or the way he laughed at me behind my back.'

Hisao sat still, engrossed. Anger, confusion had melted away; he was completely immersed in her tale. Misha's long eyelashes closed, putting out the fires and holding in tears.

'Eventually,' she continued without opening her eyes, 'he started to groom me, I guess is the way to put it, for the... you know... well hell, I was in them – the pornos. He'd...' Blushing – shame, and anger.

'He'd picked well, with me: I couldn't bear the thought of losing someone again. I was still so fragile. He continued to insist, and I eventually agreed. He said it would only be once, and nothing scary – just sex with him, never anyone else. I could choose not to do certain things if I wanted.' Hisao saw her squeeze her eyes shut more tightly. 'I never did refuse to do anything, but he was at least honest about being with other men, amazingly enough.' Fists, and she dropped her head, shook it from side to side before looking up at Hisao.

'I think I would have, you know.' She looked both disgusted and frightened. 'Been with strangers. It's sad to admit, but I think, if he'd been more aggressive, I could have been lost to that life forever.' At last, a tear found its way down her cheek.

'It was three movies altogether. I never had to have sex with anyone but Yu— ...my boyfriend, and I never caught any diseases. He even shot the movies himself. Only once was anyone else in the room, and that was what snapped me back to my senses. The way that man panted, with his eyes fixed on my body...' She squeezed her legs together tightly and a small shiver rippled through her frame.

'I went home for a short school holiday and confessed everything to my mother. She... To her credit, she didn't tell my father, or I'd have been kicked out of the family, I think.' Hisao nodded, remembering how his own father had taken the news about Shizune's pregnancy. 'I transferred schools immediately, moved cities. A completely new life.' That same, self-deprecating sniff from earlier. 'Maybe I didn't deserve another chance. But I got one, and I took it.

'The videos haven't come back to haunt me since. I cleaned up my act, tried to become the person I'd originally wanted to be. ...Maybe I tried to become Shizune in some ways, too,' she smiled ruefully, 'but who can blame me? She was...' A sad smile played across her lips and she stared down, towards the floor, at nothing.

*Yeah.* Hisao nodded to himself. *Yeah, she was.*

'But you, Hisao...!' She rose her eyes to meet his. 'Of all the people I never wanted to find out...!' Hisao could see her clench her jaw, breathe deeply, blink away moisture. 'Anyone else, I could have handled. The girls,' she glanced to the door, 'my father, even my boss. But not you, Hisao.' A disappointed grunt. 'I panicked and ran. Again.'

'Since then, I've been trying to gather my courage to talk to you, to tell you all of this. I didn't want to do the same thing again, to abandon you. After last time, I... I wanted to at least explain. I wanted to do better.' Misha smirked, pale cheeks tight. 'You deserve the truth from me. You deserve at least that much.' She took a deep breath and held it for a moment. 'I'm sorry that I've been so terrible to you. Thank you for putting up with me. I... hope you can forgive me.' She bowed, folding herself to face the floor once more, her hopeful half-question lingering in the air.

It took Hisao a couple of seconds to realize she was done, wrapped up as he was in her story. "Wait," he blurted, forgetting to sign; but he was interrupted by the room's phone. Shrill, especially loud after the long silence. Misha hurried to pick it up.

"Hello?" Hisao glanced at his watch, confirming that their hour had expired "...Yes. Ah, no, thank you. Yes, thank you very much." She hung up and turned to Hisao, shrugging, resigned. Heavy-lidded amber eyes regarded her friend.

"Time's up, Hisao." With a forced smile, Misha tried to brush back her bangs, forgetting they were held up by hairspray. The smile turned to a grimace, and she turned to the door. "It was nice talking to you, at least." The door opened to reveal Misha's three companions. "Sorry for taking so long," she said to her friends, mock-levity disguising the shame she felt. "I'll pick up the tab if you want to get your things." Her purse was already over her shoulder, her feet already out the door.

"Wait!" cried Hisao. But she was gone. HE tried to stand, to give chase, but Haruko blocked his way as she shuffled into the room. He tried to jump around her, but Akiko and Mafuyu streamed in behind her and began trying to gather their things. Haruko dodged left as he dodged left, mirrored his movements to the right. "Sorry," he breathed quietly, and they repeated their dance.

*Come on...*

"Excuse me," he placed a hand on her shoulder and tried to gently nudge her out of the way. Frayed nerves betrayed him; far too forceful, Haruko fell off balance, tripped over Hisao's briefcase. Flinging an arm out to latch onto her bicep, the man managed to keep her from falling, if barely. "Whoa! Are you all right?"

Haruko glared her reply.

"Sorry, sorry. It was an accident." He helped her regain her footing. "You're okay?"

"Fine. She's just paying downstairs, you know," Haruko cast a sidelong glance at him as she bent to get her purse. "It's not like she's going to disappear." Beside them, Mafuyu and Akiko hurried out of the room, possessions in hand. *Probably to talk to Shiina. Damn.*

"She did last time." Though the woman had a point. Hisao shook his head, sighed, then crouched to pick up his black briefcase. Familiar shoes rested on Haruko's feet. *Sensible black flats.*

Perfume, hair spray, shoes.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" He ran a hand through now-greasy hair. *I have time for one question, I guess.*

Mildly surprised, raising one eyebrow, Haruko nodded after a moment. "Sure."

"Why are you wearing Misha's shoes?" Hisao pointed at her feet tiredly. *Do I even want to know?*

"Misha?" Hisao watched as the woman made a mental note about Shiina's new nickname. *I don't even care anymore. Just answer the question.* "Shiina likes to dress up when she sees you." Haruko's explanation hit Hisao like a fist. "She didn't have heels with her; I did." Shoulders shrugged slightly in the dim room, though she looked amused.

A headache Hisao hadn't noticed before throbbed suddenly. *I shouldn't be surprised.* He worked his fingers at the bridge of his nose, attempting to rub away the sudden pain.

"And the make-up?"

"Shiina likes to dress up when she sees you."

"Yes. You said that."

Silence.

"So she wants to impress her old friend?"

Haruko stared. Next door, a new song started, sending thumping bass through the wall.

"I'm not stupid." He was telling himself almost as much as he was telling the woman in front of him. Looking back on the past few months, the signs were legion. "I'm just very, very surprised." *Damn, my head hurts.*

"Wh— So you're NOT going out?" Haruko's eyebrows shot up. Hisao didn't even bother to answer; he just continued to rub at his forehead. "Wow. Well in that case," she swept Hisao out of the room roughly, "if you don't get after her, Shiina really *will* disappear." Hisao stumbled into the hallway with a strangely excited Haruko following behind. "Go!"

*What am I even doing?* Haruko continued to make motions with her hands, shooing him away. Shoving pain aside, Hisao found his feet and raced downstairs. He caught up to the other three women out front, standing with their heads together and whispering furiously.

"Shiina." All three of them looked up; Akiko and Mafuyu stepped aside, letting Misha bow a shallow bow.

"Thanks for letting me say what I needed to say, Hisao." Hisao's headache gnawed at him. "I'm going out of town for two weeks starting tomorrow, but I'd love to get together for dinner when I get back."

Exhausted, head pounding, suddenly thirsty, Hisao looked to the others in Shiina's group. Impatient; they wanted to leave. Haruko sidled up lithely, joined the others, attempted to encourage him with a thumbs-up. The time for speaking was gone, unfortunately. Shiina was done, and he wouldn't get his chance. So he swallowed his words. Hard.

"Sure."

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The long train ride across Tokyo was a blur. The pain behind Hisao's eyes continued to batter him; he longed for sleep, for the sweet embrace of unconsciousness. Watching lights pass by just aggravated the pain. Resting his head in his hands offered no solace; for the rest of the interminable trip, Hisao fought the urge to throw up.

Finally, relief. Opening the front door to his apartment, Hisao dropped his briefcase unceremoniously, glad to be rid of its weight, and shuffled to the kitchen to grab a glass of water and something for the pain. As pills worked their way down his throat, Hisao blinked back another painful explosion between his ears. The world went white momentarily, and he had to steady himself against his kitchen sink.

The room came back into focus. Eyes settled on something almost out of the halo of light spreading from his kitchen – a book, resting innocuously alongside other similar volumes, atop a black, wooden bookshelf. Hisao glided noiselessly into the living room and switched on the overhead lights. Mercifully, the sudden bloom of incandescent light broke harmlessly against his eyes and the rest of his apartment became visible.

High above the rest of the items in the apartment, several sign language books leaned on one another. In college, he'd chosen to take courses when he realized they were

available. He'd continued his studies on his own, for reasons that were becoming more and more clear to him.

Below them, different DVDs: *Conversational Sign Language*, *JSL for Businesses*, *How To Sign With Confidence*; the list went on.

Other shelves, full to bursting with novels, textbooks, non-fiction – all medical in nature. Tomes on medical terminology and diagnoses; international bestsellers about the Hanta virus, heart disease, cancer; anatomy manuals, with pages on the brain dog-eared.

Deeper into the room, pictures appeared. Here was Shizune, standing next to his younger self at the registry office, both children smiling as they defied both their families and common sense to get married; there was the young, blue-haired beauty, blushing slightly as she covered her breasts and rested a hand on her bare belly, swollen with the miracle of life; the official student council photo, an uncomfortable-looking Hisao flanked by two strong smiles, one quietly confident, one whimsical and care-free.

And on, and on, and on it went. Everywhere, vestiges of his time at Yamaku that had crept back onto his shelves over the years. Pictures that had spent years tucked away at the back of his closet, now out on display. Books, once a refuge, had become an excuse to revel in his loss. Over time, spare moments had turned from distraction into a ritual of collecting and arranging reminders of Shizune.

How? How had it gotten so bad? A fantasy novel, one that had been given to him one warm Summer's day in his first year of college, peered out from between other once-beloved books that had languished, unused, unloved, for years. He removed it, felt the heavy, hard cover in his hands, flipped through a few pages. He remembered some of the characters fondly.

The only people he remembered fondly, these days.

From the corner of his eye, Hisao caught a small glint of light.

Atop a high shelf, next to a plain, gold wedding band, lay Shizune's glasses – the ones she had been wearing when she was ripped from his life. He reached up, took them down. A minute crack ran down the left lens; Hisao ran his finger over the small imperfection once, twice.

So many mistakes in his life. He turned the interlocked pieces of metal and glass over in his hands. So many terrible memories, so many wasted opportunities since.

*They say that it's never too late to re-invent yourself, to fix the mistakes you have made.* Hisao's headache re-asserted itself forcefully, and the man dropped to a knee, vision swimming once more. Hisao felt tears work their way down his face – whether from physical or emotional pain, he couldn't tell.

*Some things simply cannot be fixed.* A small crack, almost invisible but completely irreparable. Hisao stood unsteadily and staggered toward his bed, glasses still gripped firmly in his hand.

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Back aching, exhausted, Shiina hauled her luggage out of the taxi and toward her building. It had been a good idea to pack so much – the extra days abroad could have caught her unprepared – but after such a long trip, and with little sleep to be found on the plane, Shiina wished she hadn't been so sensible.

Swirling winds cut through her wool coat, chilling her even as she perspired with the effort of dragging her luggage toward home. Wild, messy hair flew into and out of her face, causing sudden and intense anger. Irrational anger. She needed to get to bed.

A swift kick sent her building's glass door sailing open wide. Misha winced slightly as the door hit its internal rubber stopper with the dull echo that can only be produced by thick glass vibrating. Wheeled bags dragged against the ground, plastic discs spinning uselessly in the air. She was almost home.

She noticed a man huddled in the corner, between the secured inner door and the stone wall, wrapped in a large black trench coat. He started awake, and Misha blinked a few times as her eyes focused in the bright entryway while the man stood up quickly, showing no sign that he had been sleeping just moments before. His black suit was impeccably pressed, as always.

"Misha. Welcome back."

Letting her bags drop to the ground, the woman goggled. "Hisao?" Suddenly he was on her, stealing luggage away and draping it across his shoulders, showing no signs of fatigue.

"I'm glad you finally made it home. That corner gets pretty uncomfortable after a while." The last of the weight was finally lifted off of Misha's shoulders and she sighed, stretching languorously.

"Thank you." She blinked again. "Wait, why are you here?" Hands, now devoid of baggage, moved to straighten tangled hair, only succeeded in making the problem worse. Her sleep-deprived brain was having trouble keeping up. "How did you know when I would be home?" She silently berated herself for wearing such an ugly pantsuit for the flight, navy blue and years out of fashion.

"I didn't." He shrugged slightly, a large yawn splitting his face in two. "I've been waiting here for two days. You were supposed to get home last week, you know." Misha could only stare. "This is, uh, pretty heavy." Hisao tried to adjust his grip, failed.

"Oh!" Quickly entering the door code, Misha led Hisao into the building proper, holding the door as he shuffled along behind her. "Sorry. I'm just a bit surprised to see you." A sharp left turn and the pair was walking down a narrow, well-lit hallway, dark red carpet marking their path. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk to you." Heavy words, harsh. Misha's eyes immediately welled up with tears. "You live on the first floor?" Apartment keys already in her hands, Misha started before nodding. "Great," grunted Hisao. "I don't know that I could do stairs with these." He could barely shrug, with all the clothes weighing him down. "How did you manage with all this stuff?"

A yawn preempted Misha's reply, thankfully disguising the single tear that escaped from her eye. "Sorry, sorry," she mumbled dully. "I haven't gotten much sleep lately." She stopped at an apartment door and slid the key into the lock. "I'm stronger than I look, you know."

"Heh. Don't need to tell *me*."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Golden eyes focused intently on the door before them. Or had it been an insult? Misha's stomach started to tremble.

"Of course. What else could it be?"

Misha blinked before turning the handle and letting her porter inside, but the fear in her gut refused to settle. She slipped her shoes off and flipped on a light.

"Come on in. I'll go get some tea ready." The end of her sentence faded into another large yawn.

"No need," groaned Hisao, letting Misha's luggage drop just inside the apartment. "You're exhausted. I can stop by some other time."

"Oh, so you're just going to leave me wondering what could make you sit outside my apartment for two days?" What could shock Hisao out of his ridiculous work schedule to come all the way across the city? What could drape his every word in that awful certainty? "Just leave the luggage there. I'll be right back."

"Misha." Hisao shrugged the last bag to the floor, rubbed at his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Another person would have smiled. Hisao simply turned to leave.

"Hisao, just get in here." Misha was perhaps shorter than she intended to be, and immediately apologized. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I'm exhausted. Just... come on in. The living room is off to the right." Leaden steps carried her deeper into her apartment.

Hisao watched Misha turn a corner and allowed himself a stretch of his own. Those bags were *heavy*.

He silently slipped off his own shoes and made his way into what he assumed was the living room. Misha's apartment. His own stomach started to churn. Curious despite himself, flipped a light switch to his right.

*Huh.*

The general rule, as far as Hisao figured, was that all women had a soft spot for frilly, pink things. *In fact*, he mused silently, taking in the room, *the stronger the woman, the girlier their living quarters*. Misha had surprised him again.

Tasteful, simple, and devoid of kitschy knick-knacks – Misha's living room was doubtlessly neater than his own. No stuffed animals, no hand-knit blankets, no stuffed animals tucked away in the corners of the sofa. It was a bachelor pad.

A bachelor pad devoid of painful reminders. Hisao squeezed his eyes shut. *Too late for that.*

Turning into the room, Hisao allowed the sight to wash over him. Modern, black, wooden cubes climbed up the wall on his right, holding scant few pictures. To the left, a simple, off-white microfiber couch sat in the center of the room, complete with matching overstuffed chair and ottoman. The floor was bare, leaving hardwood slats to reflect recessed overhead lighting. A flat-screen television rested against the far wall, flanked by more improbably-floating black wooden cubes. Sliding Japanese-style doors made up the third and final wall; they were dark.

Hisao took a few steps and started peering at the pictures he could find. Misha graduating from college – she looked as surprised as her mother, who was positively beaming next to her. An obligatory souvenir photo atop the Great Wall of China. Two women he didn't know flanked Misha in one photo, standing outside what appeared to be a restaurant in some unnamed city.

Another step, another pair of pictures. These, he recognized. He was even in one of them.

Shizune, Misha and Hisao in front of a Christmas Tree. Shizune, in her black woolen sweater and ubiquitous glasses, looked as pleased as she ever did. On her left, Hisao, uncomfortable in his suit coat and tie, smiled as best he could. His girlfriend had wanted the picture. Misha's ridiculous pink curls, always seeming to defy gravity, somehow *bounced* in the photograph, captured as she was in the middle of a large laugh.

*That was the only Christmas I had with Shizune.*

Hisao forced himself to look at the other picture. It was Shizune and Misha again, this

time at the start-of-year assembly, presumably before their senior year of high school. Best friends, beaming at the photographer, heedless of the hardships of the world.

Again, Hisao forced himself to move on. It was time to move on. The box in the breast pocket of his sport coat weighed heavily on his heart.

A few more photos – Misha and unknown persons, happy to be in New York, the Tokyo Tower, some restaurant or another – and there were no more. Less than ten photographs. *Like I should be one to talk.*

The rest of the shelves were taken up with books – mostly fiction. A lot of books Hisao had heard of, if not read; some, he was unfamiliar with. Several in English.

"Have you read that book?" Hisao turned to see Misha standing across the room, coat gone and wearing khakis and a green blouse. *She changed clothes that quickly?* Her hair was even combed, fresh hairspray keeping her vision clear. She even seemed to have put on...

"Makeup, Misha?"

"I'll have you know that I don't need makeup, Hisao. I look this beautiful, even when exhausted." Another surprise greeted Hisao: Misha blushed slightly, but crossed her arms and scowled anyway.

"Misha..." Hisao sighed, gestured to the couch. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

Ah. Making herself look foolish again. Tears, blinked back, covered with another fortuitous yawn. Misha was always making herself look the fool. Especially around Hisao.

"Sure, make yourself at home. I'll go get the tea."

Before she could turn, Hisao called out, "No, Misha. Please. We need to talk."

The pink-haired woman paused for a moment, then navigated to the other side of the couch and sat, bracing herself, steeling her emotions. Hisao placed himself next to her and took a deep breath.

Misha pounced before he could speak: "So why were you waiting outside of my apartment for two days?"

Hisao swallowed his words. *Leave it to Misha to take control of the situation.*

"I needed to talk to you, and I didn't know when you'd be back."

"What about work?" she cut in quickly. Her hands, clasped together tightly, rested on her

knees.

"I have vacation saved up, and I've done some paperwork while waiting. Mi—"

"So you haven't showered for two days?" Misha smiled a trembling, toothy grin. "And I thought *I* smelled bad."

*Enough.*

"I went home to shower every day. Misha, please listen." His stern request finally bought him enough time to turn his body, look into eyes of liquid gold. "I have something I want to say to you. Some things, actually."

Suddenly, tears welled up in those metallic yellow orbs. Her usual attempts at blinking them back proved fruitless, and she had to reach for a box of tissues sitting next to the couch. Misha wasn't ready for Hisao to say goodbye.

"Sorry," she said softly, rubbing her eyes, blotting mascara that hadn't even had a chance to dry. "I guess I knew this was coming, but I didn't think I'd be so out of it when it did." The tears refused to stop.

Hisao blinked, himself. Misha's... unguarded response shook him momentarily.

"...What?" he recovered lamely. "Wh- No, listen." He had spent two and a half weeks thinking about this conversation. It was time.

"I'm not dumb, Misha. I know about... well I know about your feelings for me." She dropped her gaze, closed her eyes. Blushing – ashamed, maybe, or just embarrassed, or red-faced from crying – Hisao couldn't tell. He forged on. "I may be a bit thick, but I figured it out eventually. And since you've been gone, I've done some thinking.

"You and I have some history. There is a lot of crazy stuff in our past that we can't forget, that we *shouldn't* forget." *Shizune*. "There are some things that you've done that you don't want to remember. And, well, I'd be lying if I said that I'm any different. But..."

"Look, I'm not a great guy. I don't know why Shizune fell in love with me, and I don't know why you did, either. It's pretty confusing, honestly. And," he added, running a hand through his hair, "I've never been really honest with myself about my own feelings. Shizune was a... whirlwind, and I just kind of got swept up in her.

"But with you..." Hisao watched as Misha tried to staunch her tears. She was trembling. "I've known you for a long time, and I've gotten to know you even better this past nine months or so." Hisao screwed his own eyes shut, sickened at how stupid he sounded. *Well, it will get worse.* "Really, the only things I've looked forward to since moving to Tokyo have been nights with you.

"Shiina – Misha" Hisao shifted uncomfortably on the couch, "I don't know if we can overcome the stuff in our pasts. I don't know if I'll be able to forget Shizune the way... well the way I probably need to. But." Hisao reached out to take one of Misha's hands. She scowled up at him, puzzled. "I know Shizune wants us to be happy. I'd like to think that I was her first priority..." Hisao glanced over to the photo of Shizune and Misha, before their senior year of high school. "...and maybe I was, in some ways. But you were her best friend." A nod. "She would have wanted you to be happy more than anyone. More than me, probably."

Dipping his right hand into his coat, Hisao removed a long, thin black box. "Here. This is for you."

"...What?" Misha paused, letting another tear streak black make-up down her cheek. She had been prepared for a harsh goodbye, not for this.

For his part, instead of handing her the box, Hisao opened it to reveal a pair of sparkling, glassy earrings and matching necklace. Three small frosted snowflakes lay against black velvet.

Misha just stared. Confused, she almost laughed. Her stomach twisted on itself again, and she fought off queasiness.

"Wh..." She reached out a shaking hand to touch the box, then looked up at Hisao quizzically. "What?"

"Shizune would have wanted you to have those."

Misha, still confused, looked back up, scowling, mascara tracks running down her face. Hisao answered the unspoken question:

"They were made from her glasses."

"Her glasses?" Misha swiped at another rogue tear, letting Hisao's words sink in. She looked back down to the simple snowflakes, then trained wide eyes on Hisao.

"Shizune?" Back to the box.

"I kept her glasses, after the... accident. I've kept them all this time. Maybe... maybe my memories were holding me back. I don't know. I'm not very smart.

"But I want to start living again." He gestured to the snowflakes. "I found a jeweler, and I had them made. For you." Hisao hoped that Misha would raise her head, but she kept looking at the jewelry, tremors running through her hands. "I don't like who I've become, Misha. I *do* like who I am when I'm with you. I..." Misha still refused to look at him; Hisao forged on. "I need to start over. And I want to be with you when I do. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to realize it." Hisao shook his head. "That sounds stupid. You'd

think I could come up with something better after two and a half weeks."

Misha looked up, and Hisao watched her expression melt from bewilderment to understanding. Softly, gently, she put a hand on his chest and pushed him down into a reclining position. Hisao could feel her strength falter as she breathed deeply, fighting off sobs. Without speaking, Misha maneuvered quickly but gently atop him, to place her head on his chest, to bury her face into his shoulder. She continued to shudder with deep breaths for a moment, lying next to him on the small, white couch.

Several moments passed before she could speak.

"This is probably a dream. I'm probably hallucinating from lack of sleep." Hisao heard the lid on his – no, *her*, now – jewelry box click shut. Misha wrapped her free arm around his chest and squeezed. "I don't doubt that I'll wake up in a bit and you will have left me again, like I deserve."

Hisao awkwardly placed an arm around the woman on his chest; she responded by burying herself deeper into his body.

"But stay, for now. Until I wake up." Hisao felt her chest expand with a deep, steady breath. "Just until I wake up." Another deep breath, too late – the sobs finally started. Misha started to convulse softly as years of shame and regret worked their way out. "J-Just stay a bit longer."

Hisao wrapped his arms around the surprisingly slight woman on his chest. He could feel her weight pressing against him, holding him to the couch. He, awkwardly at first, then with increasing confidence, began to stroke her back as she wept, digging her sharp nails into his flesh. One hand wandered up to stroke her neck; the sensation of her soft skin sent goosebumps up Hisao's spine.

Impulse took control: Hisao bent his neck, buried his face in Misha's hair. He sighed, involuntarily, a bodily release. Underneath the hairspray, beneath perfume and makeup and whatever else, Hisao smelled something wonderful. It smelled like...

"Like home."

Misha didn't hear his soft whisper. She – whether out of sadness or relief, she would never be able to discern – wailed into Hisao's black suit coat. Still clutched in her left hand, delicate white snowflakes rested against velvet of the deepest black.

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*Shizune and Misha exchange a mirthful glance. In Shizune's room, well after curfew, the two friends sit, cross-legged, facing each other on the mute girl's bed.*

*'He's cute, right?' Shizune signs excitedly, all pretenses dropped in front of her only real*

companion. *'He's a bit quiet, but he's super-cute!'*

*'I know!' Misha smiles at her friend and signs back excitedly, 'Who'd have thought the new transfer student would be so good-looking!' A small blush suddenly spreads across Misha's face, and the two girls descend into a fit of giggles, uncharacteristic for either of their real-world personae.*

*'Why didn't you let him win the game?' signs Misha finally, after catching her breath. 'What if he doesn't want to join the student council, now?'*

*Shizune's trademark smirk blooms beneath metal-rimmed spectacles. 'Oh, he'll be back. I can guarantee that.'*

*Hands over her mouth, Misha has a tough time stifling her loud cackle. 'Pretty confident, huh, Shizune?'*

*The other girl smiles largely, adjusts her glasses. 'He'll be back.'*

*Misha laughs into her hands once more, barely muffling the noise. 'How can you be so sure?' she manages after a moment.*

*'What, with two pretty young women like us? He'll be begging to join up.' She crosses her arms beneath her breasts with finality.*

*A moment passes between the two. Misha looks pointedly at her friend's chest, then looks up and signs, 'I think that's considered cheating.' Shizune blushes fiercely, then throws a pillow at her pink-haired companion, who clutches it and laughs loudly, ignoring the late hour.*

*Mirth finally dying down, Shizune and Misha gather themselves and look at each other once more. 'So,' asks Misha nonchalantly, 'do you think you might finally get a boyfriend, then?'*

*Shizune blushes again, but frowns thoughtfully for a moment before, 'Well I just met him. He's cute, but what if he turns out to be an asshole?'*

*'Oh.' Misha fidgets slightly, adjusts her seat, tugs at her pajama pants. 'So you don't mind if I hang out with him, then, right?'*

*This time it's Shizune's turn to laugh while Misha blushes.*

*'I'll tell you what,' she smirks finally. 'If he turns out to be a good guy, we can both take a shot. I'll support you if you support me.'*

*'And if he turns out to be a jerk, we can kick his butt together,' finishes Misha. The girls share a smile, then shake hands.*

*'Deal.'*