

# Case of the Spring-Exclusive Strawberry Tart



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## Prologue

It might be unrefined to begin with the contents of a dream right off the bat, but after some deep reflection, it seems best to start from there. It's better than ending with a dream, in any case.

In the dream, I was accusing a classmate, as a crowd of people watched on. It was that kind of situation.

"In other words, XX-kun, with all this proof, the truth is as clear as day. As I initially expected, it was resolved within a period of the timetable.

"Feel free to present any evidence if you refuse to admit that there is none that can help your case, but as they say, there is nowhere to run. I wouldn't say that using the inline skates in your alibi was original, but it wasn't a bad idea. It's just too bad that you met the wrong opponent.

"Remember The Case of the Missing Bassist from a while ago? Did you know that the one who solved that case was me? Moreover, I was the one who saw through the case of the fallen vase in the music room, and understood that it wasn't just an accident. And to tell you the truth, I was also the one who caused Sagawa's Group to befall the miserable fate of receiving an official reprimand.

"Thus, I hereby declare my verdict. You were the one who framed her. Now, will you admit defeat? Or will you waste everyone's time with your useless excuses?"

XX-kun hung his head, crestfallen. Hang on, who's this guy again? That question flashed in my mind, but since he was just playing the villain in my dream, he wasn't assigned a particular appearance. After looking down at him, I made a triumphant declaration.

"Well, it still isn't too late to redeem yourself. If you still have a shred of sincerity left in you, you should follow it."

And then I turned towards the audience. They were also faceless, but they extolled my solution with thunderous applause.

"Wow, amazing!"

"I never thought of that."

"I can't believe he's the culprit."

"Wonderful as always!"

"As expected of Kobato Jougorou."

"Brilliant, brilliant!"

I raised both my hands with a triumphant air towards them as a response to the inexhaustible praise. Trying to deceive me with such a trick goes beyond shallow thinking, and is closer to a monkey's thinking. I also feel a little unsatisfied. Is there no one intelligent enough to at least cause a groan to escape from my mouth?

Well, I was feeling awfully ashamed as I saw my dream self getting caught in the moment and acting so high-and-mighty. Perhaps that sentiment affected my dream, for one person walked out of the crowd who was still cheering.

I wonder who that was? I have a few ideas about who would say those lines to me. He, or she, grinned and spoke.

“That was really magnificent. It was a brilliant deduction with clean evidence. But, um, well, how do I put it, it’s hard for me to say it, but I’ll say it clearly anyway.

“You’re being kind of annoying.”

Man, that was a horrible dream. When I woke up, my heart was pounding so noisily that I wondered if I was suffering from a heart disease.

Thankfully, since it was just a dream, my impression of it instantly became dimmer, and I became unable to recall the details. I had almost forgotten all about it, when I suddenly felt that I had had another dream. The protagonist was not me, but a really small girl. Besides that, I’d completely forgotten the contents of that dream, and not a single bit remained.

I rose up from my bed. There was a growing light on the other side of the curtain. I looked at the wall clock, but it was still too early for me to wake up. Since my eyes were clear and wide open, I decided to stay awake. Sitting by the edge of my bed, I ruminated upon the dream I was starting to forget.

It’ll be fine. I’m completely different from the me that appeared in my dream. With my ideal image in my heart and my smile as a weapon, I should be able to live the life I want to. If the going gets tough, I have a comrade, a reliable partner who shares the same goal.

When the time came, I would set off for the high school. Well, it wasn’t my high school yet, but the entrance exam results would be released today, and if nothing went wrong, I would start going to that school in April.

There would be a change in environment from middle school to high school. Apparently, when those who have been obedient up till middle school start acting mischievous in high school, it’s called a high school debut.

We were also aiming for a high school debut, albeit with a different meaning. In the dim room where the curtains had been drawn, I didn’t stir an inch.

That’s right. With a change in environment, I’ll definitely be able to make it.

## Chapter 1: Sheep's Clothing

### 1

If someone asked if I have confidence in myself, I would have answered in the negative.

Unless the one asking that question was a god and could guarantee that no one would think badly of me even if I told the truth. If so, I would have likely said that “I didn’t even consider the chance of failing.”

Funado High School was known as a highly selective school in the area. That said, since it was a public school, the number of examinees was regulated by the middle schools, so it had an acceptance rate of more than 80%. The numbers of the successful applicants were posted in front of the gymnasium. I went over to look at the numbers with a light-hearted air, as if I were viewing the cherry blossoms nearby, and soon found my number. I let out a small sigh, showing that I still had some degree of anxiety.

In any case, I was done with myself. However, I couldn’t relax just yet. I was still worried about another person, the comrade I had a promise with. We came here together, so she should be around here somewhere... but the crowd of people in front of the notice board made it impossible to spot her. This is hopeless. After all, this partner of mine is a tiny person, and on top of that she doesn’t stand out. I gave up searching for her with my eyes, then went a distance away from the chaos. I took out my mobile phone and started sending an email. The name registered for the address was “Osanai Yuki Mobile”.

*“I passed. What about you, Osanai-san?”*

The reply read,

*“Where are you now?”*

I spun around, searching for a landmark. It was only my second time here, with the first being the time I took the examination. After having a dilemma about which landmark to use, I replied as such:

*“I’m heading for the school gate.”*

*“I’ll be there soon.”*

With our communication complete, I kept my flip phone in my pocket. The emails we exchange are always short. Osanai-san doesn’t use face marks or *emoji*, and neither do I. Quite a while ago, I asked her about it, and apparently she doesn’t use that sort of thing to match my tastes. Which one of us has genuinely simple tastes, and which one of us is following the other? I think both of us are split fifty-fifty on those two traits.

Many other people were also meeting near the school gate. It seems that Osanai-san isn’t here yet... That was what I thought, when the top half of a small girl dressed in a sailor uniform peeked out from the shadow of the unappealing, concrete school gate. Who is she hiding from? I waved a hand at that girl, and lightly darted towards her. Once I had reached her, she spoke in a faint voice.

*“Me too.”*

*“What are you talking about?”*

“Kobato-kun, you passed, right?”

Ah, I see. With that, I produced a wide smile.

“So you passed as well. That’s good.”

“Yes... I’ll be in your care from now on.”

It was a perfectly normal conversation that wouldn’t be troubling even if overheard by others. Even so, Osanai-san maintained her hushed voice, as if mindful of her surroundings.

Her name was Osanai Yuki. Aside from her small body, there was nothing about her outer appearance that stood out at all. She had narrow eyes, thin lips, and a small nose. The parts that made up her face, as well as her face itself, were all small. If pressed, I’d say that her ears were like *fukumimi*<sup>1</sup>. She had an *amasogi*<sup>2</sup> hairstyle, and as if to match her thin frame, her hands and legs were slender. She was so petite that she could get onto a bus with an elementary school student’s fee. On top of the middle school sailor uniform, she was wearing a milk-colored cardigan. As for the atmosphere she gave off... she was like a small animal, a description that she liked herself.

I got to know Osanai-san from early summer of my third year in middle school.

A weak breeze blew past. It was close to spring, and while the cherry blossoms were already blooming, the air between Osanai-san and I was still quite cold. I shivered. There was no need for us to be here until the opening ceremony.

“It’s cold, so I’ll be heading home.”

“Me too.”

Osanai-san replied, then thought for a while.

“It’s cold, huh.”

“Exactly, which is why I said I’m going home.”

“How about something warm to celebrate our passing of the exam?”

That was a great suggestion. I don’t know much about this area, but Osanai-san should know a shop or two. I was about to agree and say, “Let’s go” without a second thought, when an unexpected voice was directed toward me.

“Hello.”

I looked up to see a tawdry-looking man clad in a rose gray windbreaker and holding a notebook in his hand. He had on a russet armband with the word “Reporter” in white lettering. Osanai-san immediately whirled around and hid behind me. That was a swift reaction. The man took a short glance at her, then faced me and spoke in an almost expressionless voice.

“It seems that you’ve passed. Congratulations. Could you spare a bit of your time?”

He wants to interview me? I see.

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<sup>1</sup> Plump ears said to bring good fortune.

<sup>2</sup> A hairstyle of both nuns and young girls of the Heian Period, consisting of straight, usually cheek-length sidelocks and frontal fringe.

I instantly responded with a smile.

“Sorry, I still have some business to settle.”

Leaving those words, I quickly walked towards the crowd of people without waiting for a reply. Osanai-san also followed behind closely. It’s not like I especially distrusted the mass media, but I would rather not be involved with them. Osanai-san should also share that sentiment, but after we had covered a sufficient distance, she looked up at me with her eyebrows clouded in unease.

“Kobato-kun... do you think that person was angry?”

Also curious about that, I took a glance over my shoulder. The reporter was not pursuing us at all, and instead seemed to be scanning his surroundings for his next target.

“I think he’s fine. Even if he did get angry, I imagine it would be part of his job.”

“...Right.”

Even as she nodded, her expression did not thaw.

Professor Clark<sup>3</sup> left the words, “Be gentlemen” to the students of Hokkaido University. Osanai-san and I also have a similar-sounding motto, but at a lower social class compared to “gentlemen”. It is “Be petit bourgeois<sup>4</sup>.” For the sake of everyday peace and stability, Osanai-san and I are to firmly play our roles as little citizens. But that expression is a little imprecise to describe our habits. Osanai-san would usually hide, while I would play it off.

To be a petit bourgeois, one has to watch television and read the newspapers. Making an appearance in either medium would be out of the question. We have absolutely no intention of answering in a dubious interview which may or may not be used as material. However, being a hindrance to others’ work and earning their ire is also unbefitting of a petit bourgeois. That was why we were relieved upon seeing the attitude of the man in the windbreaker.

Even so... I stopped moving and turned around to face the school gate once again. Osanai-san looked at me quizzically.

“What’s the matter?”

“No, nothing much, just that we escaped in a bad direction.”

It would be a little awkward to walk past that man again after we’d just escaped from the school gate, and I hate awkward situations. There should be other exits, but I didn’t know where they were. As I was thinking about what to do, Osanai-san hid behind me again.

“...Don’t move, Kobato-kun.”

I looked around, and realized what she was hiding from.

Naturally, many of my schoolmates from middle school had taken the entrance exam here. Up till now, I had passed a few familiar faces. Osanai-san must have spotted such a schoolmate, and I understand why she would want to hide behind my back. She would certainly feel like running away if she had passed while her schoolmate hadn’t.

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<sup>3</sup> An American professor of chemistry, botany and zoology who was hired by the Japanese government as a foreign advisor to establish Sapporo Agricultural College (now Hokkaido University).

<sup>4</sup> Translated literally as “little citizen”, petit bourgeois refers to a member of the lower middle class.

Come to think of it, Osanai-san's voice was many times softer than usual when we met at the school gate. That was probably because there were other students who had failed to make the cut. Indeed, while we're comrades walking down the path of the petit bourgeois, I'm falling behind Osanai-san in terms of consideration towards others. Appreciating her concerns, I followed her request, and stood still.

Quite some time had passed since the numbers of the successful applicants had been released. While the excitement of the crowd was gradually cooling down, there were still shouts of "Banzai!" here and there that lacked Osanai-san's consideration. Speaking of which, it would be more accurate to say that whatever lingering enthusiasm had already died down. Just as I was thinking that it was about time to move off and have something warm as promised, a voice called out.

"Hey, you over there!"

That rude line was delivered by an impudent voice. Osanai-san immediately stiffened, and I was also fairly surprised. I don't remember being called in such an abrupt fashion before. For the time being, I meekly turned around.

The person standing in front of me was a boy with a rowdy look that corresponded with his voice. He had wide shoulders, a tough body and was quite a lot taller than me. His presence here meant that he was in the same year as me, as well as Osanai-san. If the two of them were to be photographed together, I'm sure the caption would be "The Effect of Nutrition on Physical Development". Both sides of his head had been trimmed clean of hair, causing his entire head, which already sported a squarish face, to look cubical. I turned towards him and broke into a sincere, hearty smile.

"Well, well!"

"That's what you say to me? What a horrible greeting."

"It's way better than suddenly shouting 'Hey, you over there!' Anyway, long time no see, Kengo!"

Kengo just snorted, not showing any particular form of deep affection. It stood to reason that Kengo and I were old acquaintances, but thinking about it, we weren't exactly friends.

"So you also applied for Funa High?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"So, did you get in?"

"Somehow."

"I see," Kengo replied with a nod. He didn't exactly frown, but put on a sour face as he folded his arms.

"Since you use your head, I knew you would never fail... Seems like we're in the same school again."

Kengo passed as well, huh. Congratulations to him, then.

By the way, Osanai-san was shying away from Kengo. Naturally, she tended to do that more to males, not to mention that the masculine Kengo was probably the type of person she couldn't deal with. Yet again, she was gripping onto the hem of my fleece jacket and shrinking away. I often



wonder if Osanai-san would be able to live an easier, more convenient life if she walked around with something to cover her face, like a cardboard box, for instance.

I turned back to look at Osanai-san, and smiled.

“He might look stern, but he’s not scary at all, Osanai-san.”

A frown finally showed on Kengo’s face.

“Who’s not scary?”

“Ah, sorry. Perhaps you are scary after all.”

“I’m just saying, don’t introduce me by using the standard of whether I’m scary or not.”

“You’re right, yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean any ill intent.”

But the harder I tried to defend myself in all sincerity, the suspicious look on Kengo’s face only grew more pronounced.

“You...”

He started, but then swallowed his words.

Since he didn’t continue, I had no choice but to introduce him.

“Osanai-san, this is Doujima Kengo. We were in the same elementary school.”

After receiving the introduction, Osanai-san reluctantly exposed her whole body to Kengo. She bowed politely.

“Kengo, this is Osanai-san. We were in the same middle school, and we’re friends.”

Kengo, on the other hand, was exceedingly sincere. He unfolded his arms, then puffed out his chest and gave his name again.

“Nice to meet you, Osanai-san. You must be a patient person if you’re friends with Jougorou. I’m Doujima Kengo. It seems that we’ll be schoolmates, so please treat me well.”

What a cruel remark. Also, Osanai-san didn’t say anything about passing the exam.

It might have been affected to some degree by their height difference, but Osanai-san was looking at Kengo with considerably upturned eyes. Since she seemed to be having a hard time conversing with him, I thought about helping her out, but even with her stiff countenance, she still managed a smile, as well as a small nod.

As we’d discussed earlier, we went to one of Osanai-san’s favorite coffee shops and ordered something hot. I had coffee, while Osanai-san had hot lemonade and a strawberry tart on the side. It was a small-sized tart, well within the definition of a petit cake.

Wrapping both palms around the cup filled with lemonade, Osanai-san heaved a sigh. She then removed her scarlet muffler and placed it on her knee. To warm up her freezing fingertips, she repeatedly stroked the cup, then finally took a sip. Using a fork, she cut off a slice from the end of the strawberry tart and brought it to her mouth. For an instant, her usually gloomy countenance was bathed in delight. Seeing that, I laughed.

“Is it tasty?”

Osanai-san nodded deeply. She drank the lemonade for a short while, then tilted her head to the side.

“Yes, it is, but...”

“But?”

She replied with a muffled voice.

“I know an even tastier strawberry tart.”

“Uh huh.”

Since I’m not a fan of sweet things, I couldn’t help but give a perfunctory response. Even so, I followed the flow of conversation and asked a question.

“Where?”

A natural smile formed on Osanai-san’s lips.

“‘Alice’ has spring-exclusive strawberry tarts. They’re filled to the brim with strawberries. I’m definitely buying them this year.”

Filled to the brim with strawberries? That doesn’t sound very appetizing, I thought. Then again, Osanai-san would only smile like this when talking about something sweet.

Not wanting to rain on her parade, I replied saying that it seemed delightful.

Despite Osanai-san’s slow savoring of the small tart, it disappeared within ten minutes. During that time, I had also finished my coffee, leaving only a bit near the bottom. With the tart gone and a gloomy expression returned to Osanai-san’s face, she started asking a question hesitatingly.

“By the way, Kobato-kun.”

“Yes?”

“What kind of person is Doujima-kun?”

That’s a difficult question. I’m far from proficient at summarizing a person’s characteristics in a single phrase. I unintentionally replied with another question.

“Interested in him?”

Osanai-san looked down, then peeked at me with upturned eyes. She was probably holding back because I was a friend of Kengo. I smiled and waited for her to speak.

Her voice was so small that it came out as a whisper.

“That person... He seemed really pushy towards you. It might be bad to say this of someone I met for the first time, but he seemed overbearing.”

I can understand her concern. She must have sensed that air in our relationship. Indeed, Kengo does come off that way sometimes.

“You’re right. If he hasn’t changed in the three years since I last saw him, he’s a relatively meddlesome guy.”

“.....”

The expression on Osanai-san’s face, which was already quite dark, clouded over even more. She was probably feeling that a dark cloud was hanging over her upcoming high school life. I could understand her sentiments, but I felt like defending Kengo for a bit.

“You don’t need to worry. He’s a good guy, that Kengo.”

I instantly realized that it was a stupid thing to say. As expected, Osanai-san shook her head.

“I’m even more worried that you said he’s a good guy... because of that, he won’t let us escape. You’ve said that bad people are easier to handle, haven’t you?”

Ah, I see.

However, Kengo isn’t the type of “good guy” that we’re afraid of. He’s not a person who would corner us under the slogan “for the sake of...” Of course, he’s not a bad guy, either. How should I explain this?

Noticing my silence, Osanai-san hurriedly spoke.

“Are you thinking about what to say? It’s fine, you don’t have to bother. If he’s a person you can think of as a friend, he’ll probably leave us be.”

“...Yes, that’s what I think.”

Realizing that I’d given a half-hearted answer, I slowly drained the rest of my coffee. Osanai-san followed suit by taking a sip of her lemonade. Kengo and I did not exactly get along well, but I acknowledged him as a person. If possible, I wouldn’t want Osanai-san to harbor ill feelings towards Kengo, but that’s for her to decide. I shall not intervene.

Soon after, our cups became empty.

As if having made up her mind, Osanai-san spoke with determination.

“Kobato-kun, if you ever need to escape from something, use me as an excuse. You don’t need to worry about me.”

I put on a light grin.

“Of course. That’s exactly what I’ll do.”

There was no need for her to confirm at this point of time, since it was a promise that we had made. Just as I would use Osanai-san as an excuse, Osanai-san would use me as an excuse. I would use Osanai-san as a shield, and she would in turn use me as a shield. By doing that, we would create a peaceful time for us.

We would soon become high school students. We cannot let this chance go to waste.

Our bounding journey towards becoming the perfect petit bourgeois was beginning.

2

And thus, our high school life started peacefully.

For the start of the school year, most of the new students decided to just wait and see. Some observed, while others investigated and polished their basic strategies to build up human relations. Of course, there were also those who threw a strong punch right off the bat, but I managed to successfully distance myself from them.

Eventually, my classmates started gradually catching glimpses of each other's true personalities. It was a peaceful day after school in the middle of June.

It had been raining in the day, so the ground was still wet with puddles of water. With Osanai-san accompanying me, I was walking down the staircase from the fourth floor, where the first-year classrooms were located.

"In town..."

Osanai-san started.

"...There's a new crepe store. I'm looking forward to trying it."

"Looking forward? In the present continuous?"

"Yes, I haven't gone there yet, since I hate crowded places. Although I think it's still crowded..."

I smiled.

"Shall we go together?"

"You'll come with me?"

I was about to suggest visiting the store as we went home from school, when my phone vibrated. I retrieved it to find that it was not caused by an email, but by a phone call. After signalling for Osanai-san to wait for a moment, I answered the call.

"...Kengo?"

On the other side of the connection, Kengo spoke in an excessively loud voice.

*"Jougrou? Are you still in school?"*

"Yeah, I was about to head home."

*"I need a hand. Help me out."*

Hmm. If he's asking me to lend a hand so suddenly, something must have cropped up. I've just made a prior engagement, but I would feel bad for turning down his request. I looked questioningly at Osanai-san, who tilted her head a little to the side.

"How long will it take?"

She asked.

"How long do you think it will take?"

*"How long... About thirty minutes, I'd say."*

“Thirty minutes, huh...”

I looked at Osanai-san again. This time, she looked down in a slightly downcast manner, and said that she would wait. She could have gone home first, but since she said she would wait, I’ll have her wait for me.

“Understood. I can help if it’ll take only about thirty minutes. It’ll be bad if it goes longer than that, though.”

*“You have something else on? I won’t ask you to help any longer than thirty minutes, then. You’re at the shoe lockers, aren’t you? If so, come on over to the east-side staircase on the second floor.”*

He hung up. Just to be sure, I asked Osanai-san if she would come with me, but as expected, she lightly shook her head.

If you view Funado High School from the top, you would see the character 丱, with one horizontal stroke tilted to the left, and another to the right. Those horizontal strokes are known as the North Block and South Block. Since the first-year shoe lockers are in the North Block, Kengo must be referring to the second floor in the North Block.

Which one is the east-side staircase? There are signs to both the North Block and South Block, so I wouldn’t be confused over them. On top of that, there were signs on the staircase landings that said things like “1F – W” and “3F – E” which I was really thankful for.

I arrived at the agreed place to see Kengo clad in the deep green school regulation tracksuit, standing with his arms folded. Around him were two male students and one female student. One male student was wearing a tracksuit like Kengo, while the other was wearing a *tsume-eri*<sup>5</sup>, like me. The female student was in a sailor uniform. The male student in the school uniform and the female student in the sailor uniform had a badge on their collar and chest respectively, so I could tell that they were first-year students. That meant that the other student in the tracksuit was probably not an upperclassman.

Each of them had a difficult expression on their face.

“This seems serious.”

Kengo was also frowning.

“Well, somewhat.”

“You wanted a hand?”

“Yeah.”

Kengo nodded and unlinked his arms.

“There’s something we want to find: a pochette.”

A pochette, huh.

That can’t be owned by Kengo. I looked at the girl in the sailor uniform behind Kengo. It might not be a praiseworthy thing to say things about someone’s personality based on their outer appearance,

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<sup>5</sup> A Western-style uniform with a stand-up collar, closed with hooks or buttons.

but she seemed to give the impression of being spaced out. She had well-built, mature facial features, and I would describe her as a fragile Japanese beauty. That said, she's definitely no match for Osanai-san in the fragility department.

Noticing my gaze, Kengo nodded.

"It's her pochette. It was stolen."

...Ah, that's certainly serious.

Having a theft occur in school is not exactly unthinkable, but what makes it serious is that it caught Doujima Kengo's attention. With his arms folded, fists clenched and a frown on his cubical face, Kengo spoke.

"So there are people here who do petty things like stealing a girl's bag."

"That's petty?"

I asked, but Kengo stared at me.

"What do you mean by that?"

"No, I didn't particularly mean anything by that."

I started by playing it off, as usual. But Kengo didn't believe those words, and instead jerked his chin, as if saying, "Explain." Having no choice, I continued.

"I was just thinking that if there was money in that pochette, then it wouldn't just be petty, but it would be a crime."

"It's a crime even if there was no money inside... But I suppose you're right. Yoshiguchi, what items of monetary value were inside the bag?"

Yoshiguchi was the name of the female victim. Contrary to my impression from her appearance, she answered the question crisply and clearly.

"No, there were only things like lip cream, ball-point pens, and scissors. Ah, there was also a notebook, I think."

"That's all?"

"Yup, that's all. I didn't put anything else inside."

With their relaxed exchange, Yoshiguchi-san and Kengo were probably from the same middle school. Anyway, there was apparently nothing of monetary value in the pochette. Meaning...

No, I'm not required to think here. If that's the case, I shouldn't think about it. Kengo only asked me to lend a hand. After looking at the two waiting male students in succession, I asked Kengo.

"I understand that a pochette was stolen. What are you planning to do by gathering so many people?"

"...You're being strangely honest."

I shrugged. Kengo frowned for an instant, but returned to normal in the next.

"I did say that it was stolen, but we still don't know if that's what really happened. It might have been hidden, for example. We were about to conduct a search of the entire school."

I see. That's quite a calm response.

That must mean that the other two male students were volunteers for the search squad. They were either nosy like Kengo, or were forcefully dragged over by him. One of them was built firmly and looked like he did *judo* or some kind of martial art, while the other was of medium height and built, and had a subservient-looking smile on his face.

"That's how it is. Help us."

I smiled upon hearing Kengo's words.

"Yeah, sure, if it's for something like this. I don't think it'll even take thirty minutes."

Yoshimoto-san turned towards me.

"Thank you, er..."

"Kobato."

"Kobato-kun."

You're welcome. It's just some simple work, after all.

"So, about the pochette we're finding. Yoshiguchi?"

Kengo asked. Yoshiguchi-san extended her arms about thirty centimeters apart. That's quite large for a pochette.

"It's about this big... Also, it's deep red in color, has a thin shoulder strap and has white lining."

I was planning to stay silent, but I instinctively spoke up.

"When did you lose it?"

"It was there until the sixth period, which was physical education. When we returned from that class, it was gone."

I see. So she didn't just lose it somewhere.

"Hmm, red and white, huh."

Kengo muttered as he stroked his chin and nodded repeatedly.

"...Right, let's begin. I'll take the first floor. Shimomura, you're on the third floor; Jougorou, the second floor. Takada, you do the fourth floor."

Based on their gestures of acknowledgement, Shimomura was the one who was smiling, and Takada was the well-built one. The two of them walked up the stairs, while Kengo called out to me, "I'm counting on you!" before heading down the stairs, leaving me and Yoshiguchi-san. Before starting the search, I turned to Yoshiguchi-san with an ingratiating smile.

"Yoshiguchi-san, was it? It must be rough, huh."

She replied, "Yes," in an almost inaudible voice. Without dropping the smile, I continued.

"About the pochette, did Kengo... I mean, did Doujima forcibly call for a search?"

I noticed Yoshiguchi-san's countenance suddenly relax. With a sigh, she replied.

“No, he didn’t force anything. I’m thankful that he’s willing to help me search, and I’m truly troubled that my pochette is missing. That said, seeing him be so enthusiastic about it is a bit... and having three other guys help me makes it seem like I seduced them or something... it’s quite distressing.”

To be precise, it’s distressing if her classmates think that way about her. This girl seems to be a member of my party. Here’s to glory and peace for our petit bourgeois club!

I shrugged.

“You don’t owe me anything for this, by the way. I’m not doing this for your sake, but on Kengo’s request. Yoshiguchi-san, try searching areas where guys can’t get into.”

Now, I should begin as well. If I can find it quickly, I wouldn’t have to make Osanai-san wait.

The second floor which I was assigned mainly consisted of third-year classrooms. Even if Yoshiguchi-san’s pochette was indeed hidden with ill intent, it would be difficult to imagine that it being in one of the third-year classrooms. If it was not in a classroom, then there would only be a disappointingly small number of places to look for it. In Funa High, the lockers are located at the back of classrooms, so corridors exist solely for people to walk around on, and therefore contain only a few objects. But since I’m helping out on a request, I’ll do it properly. Behind the water cooler is the boys’ toilet. There’s no way it could be there.

That’s because if the pochette was indeed stolen and hidden, the culprit cannot be a guy, and if the culprit is a girl, it would be difficult for them to hide it in the boys’ toilet. The corner where the water cooler is located is an even simpler matter. It’s not wide enough to hide anything.

Starting from the east end of the second floor of the North Block, I moved west until I reached the other end. While I was fully utilizing my powers of observation, I couldn’t find anything like it at all. I backtracked a little to the connecting walkway to the South Block, which was an open steel frame, and went through it. Come to think of it, the area in this steel frame is most suitable for hiding something. With that realization, I conscientiously returned to the connecting walkway. It had windows, from which one could view the courtyard.

I squatted and looked inside the steel frame. I stood on tiptoe and looked inside the steel frame. The floors of Funa High are made out of linoleum, which made my indoor shoes squeak. This was unexpectedly tiring.

Checking out the connecting walkway took a lot more time than I thought it would. I searched around the South Block, then returned to the North Block. There was now nowhere left to search on the second floor, besides the classrooms that the third-year students were using and empty classrooms that were locked. The possibility of the pochette being in either of those two places was exceptionally low. Would he still tell me to carry on searching?

I was curious as to how long I took, but I’d unfortunately forgotten to put on my wristwatch. I took out my phone, thinking of relying on the time display, when my phone vibrated. It was from Kengo. Come to think of it, I’d unconsciously left my phone in manner mode. *It’ll be fine if he doesn’t need me for some urgent business*, I thought as I answered the phone.

The call connected in less than a second, causing an angry voice to blast from the speakers.

“Takada?”



Thinking that he should know who he's talking to if he just checks the display, I answered calmly.

*"...Sorry, but I'm Kobato."*

I could hear an obvious sigh from the other side.

*"Oh, Jougorou, huh. Where are you now?"*

*"Second floor, at the passageway. I've checked everywhere on the second floor."*

*"Alright, let's regroup. I'll go over to you. Got that? Don't move from that spot, no matter what."*

That was a strange thing to emphasize. If he told me not to move, of course I wouldn't move.

*"Got it."*

*"I'll be there immediately."*

Leaving those words, he hung up. Since he asked me to wait, I'll wait obediently. Is Osanai-san also waiting like this by the shoe lockers?

Kengo's final line was not a lie, for he appeared in less than a minute. He had a considerably grim look on his face.

Instinctively, I asked, *"W-What's the matter?"*

*"Nothing much... just that Takada's scampering about and I can't get a hold of him."*

Takada's the guy in the search squad wearing the tracksuit, right?

*"Can't get a hold of him?"*

That was when I noticed that Kengo's breathing was a little ragged.

*"He told me that he'd finished checking the area by phone, and like with you, I was going to meet up with him."*

*"But that idiot suddenly hung up without properly hearing the meeting place, so he wasn't there when I went over. After that, I called him, but he said he was on the third floor, then the fourth floor, the west, the east, the North Block, the South Block, and so on. I've been totally given the runaround by that guy."*

*"I see."*

An image rose in the back of my mind. It was of a miniature Funa High, with its cross section exposed like a dollhouse, with Kengo and Takada scampering about while looking for each other to no avail. I think I've seen a similar skit a long time ago.

*"...What're you smirking at?"*

*"Ah, well, nothing at all. That must have been really tiring, huh."*

Kengo snorted.

*"So, wasn't there another guy?"*

I asked. Kengo spat out his reply.

*"If you're talking about Shitamura, he's already gone. He left as soon as we split up."*

“Oh...”

I checked the display on my phone again. Oh, looks like almost thirty minutes have passed. I probably won't be needed any more, so I should take my leave. I opened my mouth, about to say as such, but I was silenced with a gesture. Was Kengo telling me to wait? It seemed that he was getting a phone call. As soon as he opened up the vibrating flip phone and answered the call, he barked in a stern voice, reminding me of our previous phone call.

“Takada, listen, don't move. And don't hang up, you idiot!”

At first glance, Kengo might seem simple and straightforward, but he doesn't usually raise his voice like this. Well, he might have changed in the three year period, but that's as much as I know. As for this situation, it looks to me that Takada's disregard for communication caused Kengo to run around the entire school.

“Now? I'm at the passageway, on the second floor. I've met with Jougorou... I mean Kobato. You should also... What? You're outside?”

Kengo exclaimed, then dashed over to the window.

Curious, I also looked outside, and spotted a guy a short distance away from the shoe lockers, facing us with his left hand by his ear and his right hand waving wildly. He was trying his best to appeal, “I am here!” I would definitely not be able to make such a performance in public, I thought absentmindedly.

“I see you. Listen, don't hang up. Come up to the east-side staircase on the second floor in the North Block, or the place where we met with Yoshiguchi and the rest. You got it, right? Let's finally end this game of cat-and-mouse.”

After ending the call, Kengo looked at me with a face filled with sardonicism.

“That damned Takada actually said, ‘That's my line.’”

We rendezvoused at the first meeting area, although Shitamura was not present. Yoshiguchi-san had apparently been waiting there after doing a quick search of the area. Takada, who had run over here, was short of breath, and the hem of his tracksuit was drenched. I was worried about the time, but it seemed that the search squad was about to be dissolved, so I should stay until the end.

We were supposed to report our information, but the only piece of information we had was that no one had any information worth reporting. If they were continuing the search, I would have to ask to fall out, but fortunately, they came to the conclusion that searching any more would be pointless.

Kengo folded his arms and groaned, apparently in a bad mood.

“If it still doesn't show up, we'll have to bring it up to the police.”

“The police! That's overreacting. We should first bring it up to a teacher.”

Takada exclaimed in surprise. Kengo slowly spoke to explain his reasoning.

“I'm not sure how the Student Guidance Department in Funa High is, but in nine cases out of ten it'll be useless if we go to them... Something was stolen. It was an undeniable act of larceny! I don't

celebrate people for following the law, but I just can't stand a person who would steal a woman's bag."

He also can't stand a person who would steal a man's bag, though.

If I had to say, I would be opposed to Kengo's suggestion. As a petit bourgeois, it's no joke to be involved with the police. However, just as the Student Guidance Department would probably not take action for one bag, the police probably wouldn't, either. That was why I did not voice my opposition. If I say that it's someone else's problem, it wouldn't reflect well on me, but well, that's just how it is.

I expected Yoshiguchi-san to say that she couldn't agree to Kengo's suggestion. If she was also a petit bourgeois as I thought, she definitely wouldn't want to bring the matter up to the police. However, my expectations were shattered.

"Yes, I plan to file a police report."

It seems that her resentment for having her pochette stolen was surprisingly deep. Kengo nodded upon hearing Yoshiguchi's agreement.

"Sorry to say this, but there's no way police officers will conduct a search just for one pochette."

Oh? Why, then?

"However, if the school hears that you filed a police report, the teaching staff will make their move, and that will corner the culprit. You should do it as soon as possible, like tomorrow, for instance."

That was interesting. I piped up without thinking.

"You sure know your stuff, Kengo."

Kengo answered calmly without displaying even an ounce of pride.

"Something like this happened in middle school."

Well, well!

However, I was still feeling quite uneasy. The fact that we would be dragging the teaching staff in for the sake of one pochette early in the beginning of my new life just looked like nothing but a bad joke when held up against the creed of life I wished for. It was, of course, not impossible for me to escape alone, but... What should I do?

In any case, it was decided that we would wait and see for today. I checked the time display on my phone. The promised thirty minutes had already passed.

### 3

Osanai-san was standing and waiting by the shoe lockers. She'd been there for more than thirty minutes.

"Sorry to make you wait. I had a weird errand to run."

Osanai-san slowly shook her head.

"It's fine. I like waiting around."

I'd also recently come to like waiting, because it is an action that leaves almost everything to the other party. However, I don't like making someone else wait. Osanai-san asked in a small voice.

"Are you still going there?"

"To the crepe store, right? Let's go. But before that, can we talk? There's something I want to ask."

I was met with a blank look.

"What is it?"

"Well, I'll explain it in order."

I explained what had happened in the last thirty minutes in chronological order.

"Urgh..."

After I had finished talking, Osanai-san groaned, as if she was in agony.

"What's the matter?"

"Doujima-kun is, er..."

"The type of person you're bad at dealing with?"

"Not exactly. He seems troubling when he's close by, but I wouldn't mind seeing him if he's far away."

I smiled wryly.

"That might be the best way to interact with Kengo. By the way..."

I looked around me to confirm that Kengo, Takada and Yoshiguchi were not in our vicinity, then I spoke.

"I would like to do something about this case before Kengo delivers it to the police. I don't like the idea of it blowing up."

"I understand, but... Kobato-kun, you're going to do it?"

"Yup."

Osanai-san's eyes widened.

"You'll become a detective?"

No, of course not. I firmly shook my head.

"No, I'll just look for the pochette, then quietly return it to Yoshiguchi-san's classroom. This way, it won't be out in the open, the police need not be involved, and there should be no problems, I think."

"Really?"

Osanai-san seemed unsatisfied.

"Kobato-kun, do you really think that's good? Anyway, wasn't it still not found even with 5 people searching for it for thirty minutes? Perhaps it's not in the school anymore?"

Well, that's the question. I vocalized the thoughts I had from the time I left Kengo and company to the time I reached this area.

"About that, I think that this case can be settled with testimony from the witnesses."

"Witnesses... Who?"

"Before that, listen to this. Takada-kun intentionally gave Kengo the runaround."

Osanai-san nodded, not looking surprised at all.

"Uh-huh."

She was asking, "So what?"

Kengo and Takada missing each other so much that they would put a comedy skit to shame was unnatural enough, but the fact that it happened in the school grounds that was not wide at all made it seem even more unnatural. In any case, hanging up before listening to the meeting area and repeating that a few times would shock even the little scatterbrain<sup>6</sup>. Kengo might have been too excited to notice it, but Takada obviously had no intention of meeting with him.

Next...

"There are two strange things about this."

"Two? Isn't there only one, which is why he made Doujima-kun run around the school?"

Of course, that's one of them. I grinned and nodded.

"The other one is why Takada-kun purposely went outside and waved at us. Waving your hands wildly in the middle of a crowd of students going home strikes me as a little abnormal."

If I find that unusual, it should also sound unusual to Osanai-san. However, she gave a retort.

"But there are people like that, people who are flashy with their body language."

"I suppose... but there was no need to go outside. If Kengo and Takada were keeping in contact via mobile phone, what was the point of showing himself?"

Osanai-san fell deep into thought. Many students who were in the midst of leaving the school were looking at us curiously, since we were conversing so amicably. It might be too self-conscious of me to say this, but declaring that the two of us to be a set might prove to be useful in the future. That said, I'm a little embarrassed by this. I pulled Osanai-san to the area outside the infirmary.

Finally, Osanai-san muttered in a fragmented manner.

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<sup>6</sup> A reference to a Japanese children's song, *Awatenbou no uta* (Song of the Little Scatterbrain), which was originally a German folk song, *Schwefelhölzle*. The gist of the song is that a scatter-brained boy keeps rushing out to do an errand, but doesn't hear what the errand is about, forgets his wallet, and even forgets the vegetables he buys. If you're interested, you can listen to it [here](#). I believe the cute illustrations in the video are good enough, but if you require an English translation, you can get it [here](#).

"...Maybe he wanted to wave his hand? Or perhaps he wanted to put on his outdoor shoes? Or if you flip it around, he wanted to take off his indoor shoes...?"

"I don't think so."

Osanai-san looked up at me.

"You have an idea about it, Kobato-kun?"

I scratched my cheek.

"Yup."

"I see... So you did make a deduction."

I was lost for words as I heard Osanai-san's cold voice. I hurriedly replied.

"No, that's not it."

With a humph, Osanai-san looked away. While I felt a little guilty, I pressed on to suppress that feeling.

"Erm, anyway, by waving his hand outside, Takada-kun could hide the location he was at."

"...?"

"In other words... Hey, Osanai-san, did I mention that Takada-kun and Kengo were in tracksuits?"

"Yes, you did."

"So, it was really wet outside up till just now because of the rain. What if Takada-kun didn't go to the fourth floor as he was told, and instead went outside from the shoe locker area, unseen by Kengo? What if he ran off somewhere to quickly do something?"

Osanai-san slowly nodded.

"I see, the hem of the tracksuit got wet."

"It would have been disastrous if we had noticed that Takada-kun's tracksuit was wet when we met with him later. However, something wet does not dry easily. That was why Takada waited for the right timing to go outside where we could see him, and show that his tracksuit got wet from that instance. Besides that, there doesn't seem to be a reason for him to step outside at that time."

After a brief pause, I continued.

"Taking into account that fact that Takada-kun was not on the fourth floor when Kengo called him, it is almost undeniable that he was outside for a long time, but it would be good to have some evidence. To judge the right timing to show himself outside and wave his hands, he must have waited near the shoe lockers. My witness is the person who saw him in the act."

Osanai-san nodded in agreement, then pointed to herself in surprise.

"Eh?"

I laughed.

"Yes. Thus, I would like to ask a question to the eyewitness.

"While waiting for me in front of the shoe lockers, was there a boy in a tracksuit who kept using his phone?"

Osanai-san carelessly answered.

"There was. He was wearing a tracksuit and had a tough-looking body."

Bingo.

"It's definitely him, then. Yoshiguchi-san's pochette should be hidden somewhere in the vicinity of the school building, probably somewhere with a roof."

"Kengo said that the pochette was stolen or hidden. If it was stolen, it would be for personal gain. If it was hidden, it would be in bad faith."

I spoke as I walked on the asphalt that was still wet with patches of rainwater.

"...So Takada-kun hid Yoshiguchi-san's pochette in bad faith?"

"That doesn't feel quite right. If he had a malicious intent, hiding the pochette would be meaningless. Simply dropping it in a trash can would have been much more effective."

"He also couldn't have stolen it, right? If that was the case, he wouldn't have participated in the search and would have just left the school."

It was the corners of the passageway and the water cooler earlier, but now I checked every nook and cranny at the planters under the eaves, as well as the shrubbery. While searching alone seems frivolous, searching in a group of two makes it look somewhat meaningful. That was one of the main reasons why I was doing this with Osanai-san.

"What do you think, Kobato-kun?"

"I think there should be an addition to the choices of stealing and hiding. Another possible motive could be rigging the pochette."

"Rigging?"

"Something could be placed inside the pochette, or something could be taken out. Since it takes some time and effort and the pochette can't be put back while the job is incomplete, it was temporarily hidden from Yoshiguchi-san. That's what I mean by rigging."

In other words, they intended to return the pochette eventually. Hence, it wouldn't be left out in the rain, and should be in somewhere with a roof. It might not seem necessary for us to secretly search for the pochette if it would be returned eventually, but if the rigging takes a long time, or if it goes on until evening, then a police report would be filed. It would be best for us to find it.

I didn't specifically know what kind of rigging they were planning to do with the pochette, although I did have an idea. Osanai-san replied, "Perhaps," then wordlessly devoted herself to searching for the pochette.

We went around to the back of the school building.

At first glance, this place had something suspicious in it – a shed. A sign in front said, "No open fires in the gas cylinder storage". The metal door at the entrance to the shed was locked, but there was

enough space between the door and the concrete floor. Exchanging glances with Osanai-san, I approached the door. Paying heed to the wet ground, I crouched down and hit the jackpot. A white strap could be seen peeking out from behind a gas cylinder. I stretched my hand out to pull on it, and out came a small, red pochette. I pulled it out and showed it to Osanai-san.

She clapped her hands a few times with a face that, while a far cry from one that displayed happiness from the bottom of the heart, had a bright expression.

“As expected of Kobato-kun.”

I could feel my face becoming hot, but not because I was happy.

As I held up the pochette in my crouching position, the small Osanai-san bent her knees a little, then scrutinized the pochette.

“Will you be checking its contents?”

“Yes, although I don’t want to. But we don’t have a choice since that will determine what we’ll do.”

*Sorry, Yoshiguchi-san!* I apologized in my heart, then peeped into the pochette.

Yoshiguchi-san had said that there weren’t many items inside, but it looked to be filled with all sorts of things. There was a collection of multicolored ballpoint pens, and even a few fluorescent pens. There were also two notebooks that seemed to have been used occasionally. Of course, I didn’t look inside them. There was supposed to be a pair of scissors inside, so I cautiously felt around with my hand to find a pair with rounded edges, as if it were a toy. Perhaps it’s used to cut photo stickers. I also found some lip cream and a mirror in the pochette.

I removed everything from the pochette in a scramble, and noticed something at the very bottom.

“...Is this it?”

It was an envelope that was light blue, no, it was probably closer to pale blue-green in color. It was addressed to Yoshiguchi-san, and written on the back were the name “Takada Youichi”.

“What is this?”

I never expected something like this to show up. In fact, I’d actually expected a listening device or something like that to have been placed in the pochette. In my imagination, the lining of the pochette would have to be cut out so that the listening device could be sewn in. But no matter how you look at it, it’s just a simple envelope. I tried to see through it to view its contents, but there wasn’t enough light coming from the cloudy sky.

Indifferent to my bewilderment, Osanai-san went, “Huh...”, seemingly having grasped the situation. I was about to ask about what she thought of, when...

“You!”

A sharp voice rang out, causing me to whirl around in surprise.

“Ah, what luck.”

I murmured without thinking. Takada was standing right before us, his face bright red with rage. He looked as though he might throw a punch if I agitated him unnecessarily. I could tell that Osanai-san had slipped behind me to hide. Takada looked at the pochette in my hand, then the envelope in the other, and bellowed hatefully.



"You! Kobato, was it? What are you thinking, looking through someone's bag!"

This is bad. If I handle this poorly, the situation could turn violent. I hate it when the police is involved, but I also hate it when violence is involved. Especially when it happens to me.

However, the troubling thing here is that I couldn't escape. If I ran away, it would only set into place a hostile relationship between the two of us. I certainly don't want to make an enemy with three years left in my high school life. Takada moved closer without hesitation. Looking at his feet, I thought, *The hem of his tracksuit sure is wet.*

And then the pochette and envelope were taken from my hands... from behind me. Osanai-san had extended her hands from behind and suddenly stole those items away.

Takada's eyes widened in surprise, as if he had just noticed Osanai-san, however implausible that might sound.

"Who are you?"

"...I'm Osanai. I'm a friend of Kobato-kun."

Osanai-san gave her name in a feeble voice, causing Takada to snort. He probably saw her as someone easy to deal with. He was about to step forward again, but was sharply stopped by Osanai-san.

"Please don't move!"

That was probably the same expression as an intimidated squirrel. Having lost momentum, a blank expression appeared on Takada's face. Osanai-san hugged the pochette and envelope close to her chest and spoke.

"If you come any closer..."

If he comes any closer?

"I'll run away to a place with lots of people around, and hand this over to Yoshiguchi-san. Are you sure you want that to happen?"

"....."

Takada fell silent. He would probably be faster than Osanai-san, but he probably didn't want to forcibly take the pochette away from her, either. Anyway, if Osanai-san did run away, it would be my job to distract Takada. I have no choice, since that's the promise I made with Osanai-san, so I really hope she doesn't run.

The standoff lasted for a while.

Takada looked to be searching for the best move, but he eventually capitulated and sighed.

"Alright, I was wrong."

Noticing Osanai-san relax, I was relieved. But as I was wondering what she would do next, she approached Takada and presented the two items in her hands, all on her own accord.

"Eh?"

Takada exclaimed in surprise. Unable to believe it, he looked at us and the items in turn. After handing the envelope and the pochette to Takada, she hid half of her body behind me. With me as a shield, she spoke to Takada with a small voice that barely reached him.

“That’s a love letter, isn’t it? You didn’t have the courage to directly give it to Yoshiguchi-san, so you decided to put it in her pochette. But you regretted your decision and wanted to retrieve the letter, but someone walked in on you, so you hid the pochette. Is that correct?”

With a start, Takada stiffened. Even I could tell that Osanai-san had hit the mark.

Takada had placed the love letter in the pochette while Yoshiguchi-san wasn’t looking. He’d planned to pass it to her, but regretted his decision, probably thinking that it wasn’t gentlemanly of him to do that. A person who has something snuck into their bag would usually get angry, after all. That doesn’t count as a confession. Realizing that, he tried to retrieve the letter, but with how much clutter there was in the pochette, it would take quite a lot of time. In a fit of panic, he temporarily hid the pochette. So, to deceive Kengo’s search team, he participated in the search and moved the pochette to another hiding spot outside the school building. That was probably what happened.

Another possibility that can be considered is that the letter in the envelope was something other than a love letter, since that would also bring about the same phenomena. However, the attitude of the culprit made the truth clear as day.

Osanai-san strained her voice to chide Takada.

“Since you’ve done it yourself, I don’t think you have the right to criticize Kobato-kun for looking through the contents of someone else’s bag.”

I thought he might fly into a rage again, but the strength drained from Takada’s body. In response, I also relaxed. Takada laughed in a self-deprecating manner.

“You’re right. I did a stupid thing. I don’t know what came over me...”

“It’s good that you understand. We’ll be going off, then.”

Osanai-san pulled the hem of my uniform and retreated. Takada seemed to be letting us go off peaceably, which brought me no end of relief. As we were about to turn back, Takada’s doleful voice sounded.

“You two understand, right? If you like each other, you know the feelings I had when I did this, right?”

The two of us looked at each other.

Well, that’s how it looks on the surface. We nodded at the same time in affirmation, then turned around and quickly left the area.

The crepe at the newly opened store was too sweet for my taste. With more than half of my chocolate banana crepe remaining, Osanai-san spoke.

“Kobato-kun, that’s something I don’t get. While you all were searching for the pochette, Takada-kun could have announced that he found it. Why was he so fixated on secretly returning it later on?”

I looked up to see that Osanai-san had already polished off her apple jam crepe. I licked a bit of fresh cream of my crepe and replied.

"If you were Takada, would you have done that?"

For a moment, Osanai-san tilted her gaze upward in doubt, then looked down bashfully.

"I don't think I could. It's too shameless... or rather, too audacious for something in the wrong."

"...When Takada was moving the pochette out of the school building, he could have retrieved the envelope then. While there was no rush for him to do that, he forgot about it, meaning that he was completely focused on not being found out as the culprit."

Especially since Kengo was so enthusiastic about it. I chuckled as I imagined what Kengo would be like when filled with rage.

Yoshiguchi-san wouldn't need to file a police report the next day, since Takada would probably return the pochette to her locker today. It didn't concern us anymore, but I would at least like to pray for his success. There's still a long time left in our high school life. Perhaps he'll find another chance during that time.

I heard an electronic sound. An email had arrived in my mobile phone. It was from Kengo.

*"We found the pochette. We don't know the culprit."*

That was good. It was a really good thing that the problem was settled as if it were just a minor issue. I turned my mobile phone off.

Since Osanai-san had finished eating already, she was probably bored. She gazed out the window and muttered.

"Hey, Kobato-kun... Do you understand the feeling of wanting to give a love letter, then stealing a personal belonging of that person because that's a chance to pass her the letter?"

"....."

While I listened to Osanai-san's words, all I could think of was the crepe being too sweet.

"He did say that we should know..."

I gave up. I felt a little guilty towards Osanai-san, but it was impossible for me. Placing my chocolate banana crepe on the tray, I sighed.

"I don't know. That's a situation that I can't relate to."

Well, if we ever feel like understanding that feeling, the day we understand will probably come. But for now, I don't care, either way. If Osanai-san had eaten her crepe at a normal pace, this conversation wouldn't have happened.

Dusk was falling outside on the streets.

"Yeah... That goes for me as well."

The dying red rays of the evening sun shone on Osanai-san's face as she continued staring out of the window.

## Chapter 2: For your eyes only

### 1

There is a kind of instance in which people feel that they're having the best time of their lives. It is not one of the numerous peaks you can see if you look far enough down the scale of time, but it is a moment that is truly one of a kind. We yearn for such an instance, and strongly wish to at least be able to catch sight of it. That is because we are unable to beckon such a moment into our lives. All we can do is wait for someone else to produce one.

Moreover, this kind of instance will not appear so easily. That is why we cannot help but compensate for it as a means of consoling ourselves. You could say that being attracted by phrases like "only now", "only here" and "only this" is a wholly unavoidable phenomenon. And no matter how many times it is used, "for you only" will remain as a powerful killer phrase.

For that reason, when an email with the words "For your eyes only! A sneak peek only for you!" arrives in a mobile phone, especially when that phone in question is owned by a high school first-year high school student in his prime, you can expect the student to be zealously absorbed in reading through the email. That is a remarkably refined reaction borne from an aspiration for an aesthetic afflatus.

I tried to explain as such, but while I was stammering, unable to summarize it well, Osanai-san blushed.

"Kobato-kun, you also read this kind of emails, huh."

She murmured. She then continued, "...Not that I care."

Peeking at someone else's phone from behind might seem bad on Osanai-san's part, but she was always standing behind me, and she was bound to catch a sight of whatever was on my phone's monitor. Basically, it was careless of me to read this kind of spam mail while my back wasn't leaning against a wall. I was about to give a response, but Osanai-san trotted a few steps away and started browsing Italian recipes, her cheeks still red.

It was a month since school started. Osanai-san and I were not participating in any extracurricular activities as of yet, so we could go home as soon as lessons ended. There was a large bookshop on the way back, and for its size, it seemed to only have books that you could find anywhere. It was a bookshop lacking in appeal, but I still stopped by here after school. It was becoming a new habit to accompany Osanai-san to browse for a while returning home from school.

Osanai-san was staring fixedly at the Italian recipes, although I knew that she was clearly trying to ignore me. I sighed, folded my phone, then picked out a magazine at random. "Short Trips – Kyoto in Spring" was written in large lettering on the cover. I was interested in the phrase "Short Trips", so I picked the magazine up and opened it. As I was admiring the vivid photographs of Kyoto vegetables, I muttered, "Wow, these look delicious," and I instantly heard a voice from right behind me that was as soft as a whisper.

"But aren't those expensive?"

I turned around to see Osanai-san bending slightly forward. She'd just been looking at the recipes, too... No, if I'm unsettled by her ability to erase her presence, I can't be with her. I put on a smile.

"Don't worry, I won't click on any weird areas."

"Weird areas...?"

Osanai-san moved away again. This time, she buried her face in a book of cake recipes. Peeking at her from the side, I turned the pages of the magazine to see a photograph of *torii*<sup>7</sup> lined up as if they were reflected by a pair of mirrors. So this is Fushimi Inari. As my breath was taken away for a moment...

"Say, Kobato-kun."

She appeared behind me again. Why behind? It would have been perfectly fine for her to be at the side.

"About that email from just now..."

Didn't she say that she didn't care? Is it that much of a crime to read a spam mail that arouses the low passions? Suddenly filled with an urge to run away, I looked around the shop. Is there no path for me to escape?

"Oh!"

I habitually have no confidence in myself, but I was lucky today. I spotted a familiar face lined up with a short bookshelf close to the wall on the other side of the shop. The person who was staring at the manga on the shelf was...

"Oh, if it isn't Kengo! I think I'll go say hi."

Uttering those unnatural words in a monotone, I shook free from Osanai-san, who obviously still had something to say, and walked towards Kengo.

He eventually noticed and beckoned me to come quickly. It's strange that Kengo would put on a pleasant face when he had no business with me. Speaking of strange, I find it weird that Kengo was at a manga bookshelf. The Kengo I knew didn't read manga.

Kengo's arms were folded and his eyebrows were slightly furrowed. Wondering if he needed me for anything, I called out with a light tone.

"Hey, it's rare for us to meet at a bookshop. Are you looking for something?"

Kengo glanced at me, then spoke in a throaty voice.

"Yeah, though I'm not sure what exactly I'm looking for... You're proud of your head, right?"

"What's with this question from out of the blue?"

I was a little embarrassed, but Kengo didn't care.

"Introduce me to some good manga."

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<sup>7</sup> A traditional Japanese arched gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a Shinto shrine, usually red in color.

Wow. I'd thought that he was a straight-laced person with no interest in fiction, but he'd apparently become interested in reading manga. Even so, that morose look on his face was exaggerated. While I was a little disappointed by the easy task, I accepted it with a smile.

"Yeah, sure."

I'm not particularly familiar with manga, but I can definitely find one to recommend. It probably wouldn't be the best to start him off with an overly surreal fantasy, or something in the realm of paraphilia right off the bat. It should be sports then, I thought as I took a book off the shelf. It didn't exactly break new ground, but was easy to read, and since it didn't have as many volumes, should be easy to buy as well.

"Jougorou, is this good?"

"You're looking for a manga with good art?"

"...Is that how it is?"

"Does that mean you can't decide?"

"As I said, I don't know what I'm looking for."

In that case, I also don't know what to recommend. Even so, I plucked two volumes from the *seinen* manga<sup>8</sup> shelf. While I was at it, I also grabbed a *shoujo* manga<sup>9</sup>.

"What about these?"

"Hmm..."

Kengo groaned as he received the manga with an unexpectedly solemn air. I was about to say that if he plans to read them, he might find some boring stories mixed in, but Kengo nodded deeply.

"I see. The art is more detailed than the one earlier."

"Though there are some manga with detailed artwork only on the cover."

"You're knowledgeable about art, then?"

Huh?

"By art, you mean the artistic kind, and not manga art, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are..."

Are you an idiot? I was about to ask, but swallowed my words.

"...I think knowing some manga authors with good art is unrelated to having good aesthetic sense."

"Is that so?"

"I'm more of an impressionist."

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<sup>8</sup> A subset of manga that is generally targeted at a 18–30 year old male audience.

<sup>9</sup> Manga aimed at a young teen female target-demographic readership.

I meant those words as a little joke, and was trying to convey that I only possessed the appreciation of a petit bourgeois, but Kengo replied with interest.

"If that's so, you're probably better off than me."

I suppose that's certainly true, comparatively speaking. Kengo thought for a while and spoke.

There's something I don't understand about art. Lend me your knowledge."

"Knowledge, huh."

I took a glance at the recipe corner. Osanai-san was peeking at us with a cake recipe book in one hand, and our eyes met.

"I've got no knowledge that will help. I can lend a hand anytime you need it, though."

"It's hard to find a use for your thin arms. Anyway, I'd like you to look at some actual art. I'll give you the details next time."

"Thin arms" was quite a cruel way of putting it. If I did a physical fitness test, I would get an average score for almost all items. Although my arms are certainly smaller compared to Kengo's.

In any case, I was definitely interested in what Kengo, who would usually be quite far removed from the term "appreciation", had started. It wouldn't be late for me to decide whether or not to lend my knowledge after listening to him.

"Yeah, sure."

Kengo nodded. Since the artwork was in school, it was decided that he would contact me by email once lessons ended the next day. Apparently having no more need for manga, he walked toward the exit with large strides. It was now my job to put away the manga volumes that were left behind.

I turned to the recipe corner to look for Osanai-san again, but she was nowhere to be found. Well, she's small, so it's no wonder that I instantly lose sight of her. I whirled around, and instantly produced a weird sound.

"Ah!"

With the manga volumes in my hand, I'd accidentally given an impressive smack to Osanai-san's forehead as she stood behind me. Bending backwards, Osanai-san staggered for two or three steps, then put a hand to her forehead and stared at me wordlessly.

"Ah, erm, Osanai-san..."

"....."

"It's dangerous, so I think you should stop standing directly behind me."

"That's all?"

"Sorry."

Osanai-san nodded.

"So, did you need me for something?"

I asked. Osanai-san stroked her forehead, which had turned red, apparently having forgotten about what she wanted to say the moment she was hit. With a start, she looked up.

"About just now..."

"Just now...?"

"That email with 'For your eyes only'."

So she's still going on about that!

I winced at her words, but she firmly shook her head.

"No, not about its contents, but that phrase made me think of something."

"What is...?"

I fearfully asked. At that moment, a cheerful smile appeared on Osanai-san's face.

"It reminded me of the spring-exclusive strawberry tarts at Alice. They're available up till today."

"Oh."

"Kobato-kun, will you come with me?"

It's an honor to be invited, but I understood the reason all too well. I knew that it would sound really sad if I asked, but I asked anyway.

"Basically, the tarts are limited to one per person, correct?"

Osanai-san nodded in an unexpectedly bright manner.

There was quite a distance from the bookshop we were browsing at to Alice. It was fine for Osanai-san since she rode a bicycle, but it was a little far for me to go there by foot. After a discussion, it was decided that Osanai-san would lift the saddle of her bicycle, and we would travel together. The saddle on the metallic silver bicycle had been raised to the maximum range. I wondered if I would fit on the bicycle Osanai-san usually rides, given how short her legs are, but it seemed fine.

I'd never asked, but Osanai-san's weight was likely to be under forty kilograms. As a result, my pedalling was light even though there were two people on the bicycle. Instead of straddling the cargo rack behind, Osanai-san was sitting on it, and for safety she had a hand wrapped around my neck instead of my torso, causing me a small bit of pain.

A voice from a loudspeaker reached us from far away. It spoke of urban development that citizens desired. It spoke of a bright future. Thank you, thank you. Obviously, it was the car of a candidate for the city assembly election. Nothing to do with us, the legally incompetent. There was a traffic jam behind the candidate's car, which was moving forward at a snail's pace. I wonder if the people in those cars stuck behind will throw in their candidacy.

I'd been to Alice a few times. It was a small cake shop that took up the first floor of an apartment building. It's not my style to visit a cake shop alone, so my previous visits were all with Osanai-san, and I'd memorized the route to get there. A widely spread back net used for baseball came into view, opposite a row of private houses. That would be the sports ground of Minakami High School. It was a good landmark, for Alice was located just a short distance away.

We continued moving on the sidewalk. I kept seeing the cars from a driving school, which was normal, since the mansion containing Alice was built diagonally opposite from Kiranishi Driving



School. Along the way, I noticed a training car heading in the same direction, driven by a young woman with a freakishly solemn gaze. When our bicycle entered the parking area of Alice, so did the training car enter the driving school.

After hopping off the cargo rack, Osanai-san straightened her skirt, while I locked the bicycle. Looking through the glass door of the shop, I noticed that there were few people given that it was the last day for the spring-exclusive strawberry tarts that Osanai-san was so looking forward to.

“Let’s go.”

I said, and Osanai-san entered Alice with a noticeable spring in her step. Seriously, she only seems to enjoy herself whenever something sweet is involved. Smiling wryly, I also stepped into the shop. As soon as I pulled open the glass door, I was surrounded by the sweet fragrance that seemed like it could come from a sponge cake being baked, sugar being melted, or fruits being heated. I don’t particularly like cakes, but this fragrance actually made me feel bubbly.

However, Osanai-san didn’t even glance at the other adorably-sized cakes arranged in the show window.

“One spring-exclusive strawberry tart, please!”

She piped up with an unusually energetic voice, causing me to turn around.

“Yeah, erm... one for me too, please.”

As if influenced by the fragrance in the air, a sweet smile drifted onto the face of the female shop clerk.

“Lucky you! These are the last two.”

Wow, we almost didn’t make it. I instinctively whispered into Osanai-san’s ear as she waited restlessly.

“That was close.”

“Yep.”

Osanai-san beckoned me to get to her level, so I bent my knees. She then whispered into my ear.

“Thanks to that email.”

I suppose it’s true that you never know where good luck will spring from.

The spring-exclusive strawberry tarts were packed in boxes. I have no idea how they’re different from regular strawberry tarts, so I posed that question to Osanai-san, who was grinning from ear to ear with the two boxes in her hands.

“It’s different every year, so I don’t know. It’s a taste just for this year... I can’t wait!”

She replied. Recently, or perhaps ever since I was born, have I ever made a face that showed my anticipation to such an extent? As I was momentarily lost in thought, Osanai-san placed the two boxes in the bicycle’s basket, as if she were storing treasure. The tarts would be at an oblique angle, but there’s no helping that. I suppose I’ll cycle softly on the way back, to the best of my ability.

Besides Alice, a convenience store also occupied the first floor. Upon catching sight of it, Osanai-san said that she wanted to buy some milk. I followed her into the store, but unlike a certain someone,

it's not my habit to stick tightly behind someone else, so I headed for the magazine corner. In contrast to the cake shop, the convenience store was mainly filled with students from Minakami High School. There were also many people behind the register. It seemed that buying even one bottle of milk would take quite a bit of time.

There was nothing that attracted my attention at the magazine corner. Having no other choice, I picked up a manga magazine. That reminded me of my talk with Kengo, and I became a little curious about what he wanted me to look at. Well, I'll naturally find out about it tomorrow.

A popular song was being played in the wired broadcast. I quickly flipped through the pages of the manga. It's not that I was reading quickly, but I wasn't reading at all. I was just having fun flipping through the magazine.

Soon, I noticed a noisy clamor going on outside. Right on the other side of the glass was an assembly of about five people. All of them were wearing the Minakami High School blazer. Hmm... they seemed to be of the uncouth sort. Perhaps I should keep an eye on them, I thought as I focused my attention on the group. I could hear their conversation from here.

There was just one person in that group who gave off the atmosphere of a gentle-mannered man. He wasn't at the level of a pretty guy, but he had a kind-looking visage, a slender body, and was wearing a small pair of spectacles. He gave an order.

"Alright, let's get going."

What, they're leaving already? I didn't have to worry at all, then. That was what I thought, when two people broke out of the group, and moved towards my side. They didn't seem to notice that I was right by their eyes and noses, within the safety of the convenience store, not to mention that I was eavesdropping on them while pretending to read manga. One of the two was wearing his uniform in a manner that exemplified the "uncouth" impression I had of them, and had a restless gaze, causing me to imagine that he held a low position in the group. The other student was rather overweight and hadn't shaven his beard properly. The former began talking to the latter in a pleading tone.

"Sorry, senpai, but I can't make it."

"Hah?"

The fat guy frowned.

"What do you mean, you can't make it? I told you to keep your schedule open, yeah?"

"No, it's not because of my schedule, but I don't have the means to get there."

"The means? What about your bike? Didn't you go back to get it?"

The one with the lower status continuously lowered his head in an attempt to apologize.

"It got jacked."

"Are you stupid?"

That's awkward... But if he doesn't have a bicycle, then I wonder if they can have two people ride one bicycle, just like Osanai-san and I did.

The fat student turned back to the remaining three of the group and spoke in a loud voice that made me wish I hadn't perked my ears to listen on them.

“Senpai! Sakagami’s bicycle got jacked!”

The genteel student in the group stared coldly at the one named Sakagami, who wordlessly looked off in the distance to evade everyone else’s gaze.

“Sakagami.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Do something about it with your own talents. You know the location, get there in ten minutes.”

As I said, he could have just let two people ride together. But I suppose he couldn’t stand having to look after his underling.

In the end, the group left on bicycles, scooters, or motorcycles, leaving behind Sakagami, who was hanging his head in shame. Still looking down, he kicked the asphalt and disappeared from my field of vision.

I noticed a presence behind me. Turning around, I addressed that person.

“Did you buy your milk, Osanai-san?”

My eyes did widen a little upon seeing Osanai-san there, but I won’t be surprised so many times in just one hour. Osanai-san didn’t answer, but held up a polyester bag with a pack of milk in it.

“Let’s go, then.”

Osanai-san nodded slightly, then walked out of the convenience store, singing to herself a strange song with the lyrics “Tart tart tart”.

It was at that moment.

A metallic silver bicycle crossed us with an overwhelming intensity.

With two flat white boxes in its front cage.

...I don’t know which of us was the first to catch on. Osanai-san’s eyes widened, her mouth hanging wide open as she froze in place. I was the first to start moving. I dashed out and shouted, “Thief!”

But Sakagami put his strength into pedalling, neglecting to look back at us. The bicycle gradually sped up, quickly turned the corner and soon disappeared from view. There was no way we could chase after him. I noticed the lock, which had been stomped on and broken, lying on the ground in the parking area. Don’t tell me he actually did that in broad daylight...

I timidly turned around to look at the area near the door of the convenience store. My loud voice had attracted a bunch of onlookers. Meanwhile, Osanai-san was still carrying the polyester bag of milk, her mouth agape and her eyes hollow.

## 2

I don’t know what gave Osanai-san a bigger shock – that her bicycle had been stolen, or that her she’d missed the chance to eat the spring-exclusive strawberry tarts. Another bicycle could be bought, but the strawberry tarts were products exclusive to this spring. On the other hand, the two strawberry tarts only cost three thousand yen in total, but a bicycle would cost at least three times

more. In her stunned state, Osanai-san was unable to move her hands, and had dropped the polyester bag of milk on the way home. She showed no reaction even when I tried to call out to her or console her.

The next day, I tried sending her an email between lessons, but there was no reply. While I was in a dilemma regarding whether I should leave her alone, lessons ended for the day, and an email was soon delivered to my phone.

*"I'll come find you, as agreed."*

Seeing that the sender was Kengo, I was reminded of the appointment with him, which I had all but forgotten about.

Well, let's forget about Osanai-san for a while. She'll never despair of the world for the sake of a bicycle and strawberry tarts. Moving on from that, I waited for Kengo. A mere two or three minutes after I received the email, Kengo appeared. In his hand was a university notebook. I thought that it contained the picture he'd mentioned, but I was wrong.

"Where are we going? Since we're looking at a picture, it'll be the Art Room, right?"

"Exactly."

I was wondering if I should bring along my favorite loose-leaf notebook if I had to take notes, but since Kengo already had a notebook, I'll leave it to him.

The first-year classrooms were concentrated on the fourth floor in the North Block, while the Art Room was on the fourth floor in the South Block. Since the passageway between blocks was on the second floor, we had to go to the third floor and walk across the roof of the passageway.

"I find it strange, Kengo."

I started as we calmly walked down the stairs.

"That you would be involved in art even when you don't know what 'impressionist' means."

"Who says I don't know? I understand the word, and I know what kind of art it describes... though they just look crude to me."

"So, what about them?"

"I'm supposed to introduce some cultural clubs together. I went to the Art Club to ask about it, and that topic came up. It turned out to be an interesting story, so I decided to give them a big introduction."

I tilted my head.

"Introduce? Where?"

Kengo gave me an exasperated look, but it soon changed to one of understanding.

"Oh, I didn't tell you, did I? I joined the Newspaper Club. One of the articles we're running is an introduction of clubs in the school."

The Newspaper Club, huh.

That term brings to mind journalists, and I imagine that journalists have intellectual curiosity for a wide range of topics. However, that doesn't seem to be a good description for Kengo.

“What’s with that smirk?”

“Well...”

Well, the members of the Newspaper Club are not exactly journalists, and the link between journalists and intellectual curiosity is just my guess. I shouldn’t say this aloud.

“I was thinking that you don’t have to be in charge of the Art Club. There are clubs for stuff like Kendo and Judo here, right?”

Kengo said, “Yeah,” and nodded.

“That is so, but I was requested to do this by the upperclassmen. Since it’s a social obligation, I couldn’t refuse.”

That so?

Well, if there’s an obligation, Kengo definitely wouldn’t be able to refuse it.

We reached the front of the Art Room. There was a green felt notice board installed on the wall in the hallway, which was decorated with a few pictures that was really fitting for the area near an Art Room. Canvases can’t be put up on a notice board, so the pictures were all framed. I was wondering if Kengo would knock on the door, but he simply opened it.

“Good afternoon.”

With a light greeting, he entered the room. Since it was an Art Room, I’d expected club member to be in the midst of carving out their youth on canvas, by sitting in a circle and making a sketch of a torso or something. My expectations weren’t far off the mark, except that there were too few club members for them to form a circle, and they were spread out in the room, all drawing different things.

“Hello, Katsube-senpai. I have arrived.”

The one called Katsube was a female student who wasn’t facing a canvas, but was reading a book. She had gentle features on her round face, and was quite far removed from the sternness one would associate with art. I could tell that she was a third-year student from the badge on her chest. When she caught sight of Kengo, the expression on her face relaxed.

“Good, I was waiting. Is the kid behind you from the Newspaper Club as well?”

“No, he’s a friend. I’m not really cut out for art, so I asked for help.”

Now, with the number of people unrelated to art increased from one to two, will be able to achieve something? All I can do now is look forward to the full story. Though if I’m wanted for my wisdom rather than my eye for appraisal, I might be of some use.

Katsube-senpai looked around the room for an instant. Almost all members had stopped drawing, and were looking at us while staying seated. Not a single person was moving their brush with undivided attention. Katsube-senpai waved us over to a table by a window overlooking the courtyard, apparently having judged that we would not be a nuisance to the other members if we talked here. She told us to sit wherever we wanted and wait for a moment, then disappeared into the preparation room.

Katsube-senpai immediately returned with two sheets of paper, which seemed to be smaller than posters. I asked Kengo if they were the pictures in question, and he nodded silently.

“Take a look at this.”

Katsube-senpai placed one piece of paper face down on a nearby table, and laid the other in front of us.

“...Haah.”

I sighed.

If that was a sigh of admiration, it would have been good in terms of life experience, but it was actually a sigh of disappointment.

Well, it was certainly a picture. Since it had no words or numbers, it could only be called a picture.

It was fully covered with pastel colors, depicting a rural scenery. There was a mountain range on the other side of a plain lit up by the brilliant rays of the sun, and a pair of horses, probably parent and child, were galloping in the middle of the picture. On the mountainside was a farmhouse, as well as a small field and an open forest. The subject of the picture wasn’t particularly extraordinary, but the painting style was. The paint was so thick that it was as if multiple layers of pastel colors had been applied, leaving behind no trace of the brushstrokes.

On top of that, there was no contrast in shading and lighting, and the mountains were the same shade of green. The plain was uniformly emerald green, and the sky was light blue everywhere. You could see it as cutting corners, but applying such a thoroughly monotone coat of paint is probably a form of hard work in itself.

Upon further inspection, I noticed that the picture still had some peculiarities. There was a clear distinction between the horses and the plain, between the plain and the mountains, between the farmhouse and the field. More specifically, their outlines were drawn.

If asked to summarize my honest impression of the picture in one phrase, I would have probably gone with “What the heck is this?” Rather than a watercolor painting, oil painting, pastel painting or ink wash painting, the genre it was closer to was...

“What do you think, Jougorou?”

I instinctively let out my honest thoughts.

“It’s like a cel painting<sup>10</sup>.”

I could hear Katsube-senpai release a small giggle. If not a cel painting, then it would be a drawing in a coloring book.

I felt the back of the picture. It seemed that it wasn’t drawn on art paper, but on Kent paper<sup>11</sup>. It was in a size I was used to seeing, B5. If B5-sized Kent paper was not being sold somewhere, they must have cut it themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> A cel is a transparent sheet on which objects are drawn or painted for traditional hand-drawn animation (Like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs).

<sup>11</sup> Kent paper is very smooth, has a moderate amount of elasticity and thickness, and is well-suited for many drawing materials and writing instruments, including pencils, pens, and water-soluble paints. Also, use of an eraser produces little scuffing.

“Did someone in the Art Club draw this?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a good picture?”

“As you can see.”

I asked because I don’t have the eye to make such a judgment. I changed the question.

“So, does this picture contain some artistic message that we don’t get?”

Kengo put a hand on my shoulder.

“That’s it, Jougorou.”

“.....”

That means...

“You want me to decipher the artistic message behind this picture?”

“Yeah, that’s basically it. I don’t understand it at all. If only I could see it as a good picture, it would be a lot easier to understand.”

“Sorry Kengo, but I have an appointment with Osanai-san later...”

“Wait, you said you would at least listen to the story.”

I was about to stand up, but some force was put into the hand on my shoulder. Katsube-senpai gave me a pitiful look as I was forcefully made to sit back down.

“The person who painted this graduated last year. It has been here for the last two years.”

“I see.”

I gave a half-hearted reply which showed my lack of motivation.

“In the first place, that person... Katsube-senpai, what was his name again?”

Katsube-senpai nodded once.

“I’ve talked to Doujima-kun about this already, but the artist of this painting was someone called Ōhama-san, and he mainly did oil paintings.”

“Oil paintings? Were his oil paintings like this, too?”

“Not at all. Ōhama-san was a fan of Takahashi Yuichi<sup>12</sup>, so many of his paintings captured the same atmosphere as the famous painter’s. He said he would eventually aim for Nitten<sup>13</sup>. ”

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<sup>12</sup> A Japanese painter noted for his pioneering work in developing the Western-style art movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan. His best-known painting is a salmon hung up to dry.

<sup>13</sup> Nitten claims to be the largest combined art exhibition of its kind in the world, attracting a great number of fans and art critics. The exhibition consists five art categories: Japanese and Western Style Painting, Sculpture, Crafts and Calligraphy. During each exhibition, works of the great masters are shown alongside works of the new but talented artists.

Takahashi Yuichi. Now, he's known for his picture of salmon, or was it trout? Seriously, you shouldn't be trying to get an art analysis from someone like me.

Anyway, if that person called Ōhama did oil paintings, and was in the orthodox party with his declaration to aim for Nitten, this sketch in front of us must be a joke of his, no matter how you think about it. It isn't something worth keeping for two whole years. My face must have revealed those thoughts, for Katsube-senpai correctly deduced what I was thinking.

"You must be thinking, why keep this for two years?"

I reluctantly nodded.

"Yes, I was."

"There were some circumstances surrounding it. I haven't talked about the details with Doujima-kun yet, but..."

As Katsube-senpai shot him a look, Kengo responded in a low voice.

"Circumstances, you say?"

He opened the university notebook that he'd brought along, and took a ballpoint pen from his pocket.

"I want to relay this to the senpai in my club later, so I will be taking notes. Sorry, but I'm a slow writer, so please speak slowly."

"You'll be taking notes?"

Katsube-senpai raised her voice in surprise. Since someone in the Newspaper Club taking notes of what is being said amounts to an interview, it was understandable for Katsube-senpai to react that way especially if she didn't plan on participating in an interview. Although no recording was being done, the upperclassman cleared her throat and kept silent for a moment, probably thinking about where to begin.

"...I see. I think I'll start from the very beginning. I'm sorry if it goes on for too long."

With that preface, she started.

"Ōhama-san drew this in the summer of his third year here, although he should have left the club already. I think no one else knew about the painting. Me knowing about it was a coincidence, after all.

"I was surprised when I saw the painting, because I couldn't think of it as Ōhama-san's work. Then again, no matter how much he likes art, he doesn't have to stay true to his beliefs in every single work that he creates. I thought that painting was done on a whim by Ōhama-san."

"Was that wrong?"

"Ōhama-san can get extremely serious, so I was a little afraid of getting close to him, but he was usually a warm person who often smiled. When I accidentally asked him if it was a doodle, he answered while smiling, that it was the most refined painting in the world."

Refined...?



I instinctively took another look at the painting that was like a picture in a coloring book, but it did not suddenly emit light, or anything of the sort.

“He said it was too refined for me to understand it. He was putting emphasis on the word ‘refined’, and it seemed like he was trying to hold in his laughter as he said it, so I thought it was just a joke. Wouldn’t you think so too?”

“So, I asked if he was joking.”

Katsube-senpai waited for Kengo’s hand to catch up, then continued.

“He swore to the gods that he was serious.

“After taking a few days to complete the painting, he entrusted me with it. ‘I will come and pick it up when the time is right, so hold on to it for me,’ he said. Later on, he graduated before I got the opportunity to talk to him again.”

I interrupted the recount.

“So, it’s been two years?”

Katsube-senpai gave a small nod.

“I’ll also be graduating next year... so I want to do something about this. I was thinking of calling him, but he apparently moved, and I don’t have his new contact information.”

“How about passing it down through Funa High’s Art Club from generation to generation?”

I asked in a joking manner, but Katsube-senpai shook her head firmly.

“To be honest, it’s a nuisance.”

“Oh.”

Saying that it’s a nuisance is quite a drastic evaluation.

Katsube-senpai started to speed up with her words.

“Since there are no other drawings on paper, we have to go out of our way to preserve it. Furthermore, because it’s something that was left in our care, we can’t treat it carelessly. We could certainly leave it here if it has some meaning, but if it’s really a doodle, I’d like to throw it away.”

She made some logical statements with her kindly, round face.

If it’s been two years since the painting was handed over and one year without any contact, that Ōhama person shouldn’t have any complaints if it were disposed of. That said, I can understand why Katsube-senpai is hesitant about throwing it out. It would be unbearable to receive some weird criticisms later on, and if some artistic test was being conducted... that would be quite scary.

I recalled that Katsube-senpai had brought along two pieces of paper.

“Is that picture similar to this one?”

One picture was right before our eyes, while the other was face down. But when I asked that question, Katsube-senpai gave me a quizzical look. I was wondering if I’d failed to hear her talking about it, when Kengo spoke up from the side.

“You haven’t told him about the situation yet.”

“Ah, I see. Right, you currently don’t understand why we think of this as mysterious.”

It’s certainly a weird painting, but I never thought of it as mysterious. If the first painting’s like this, no matter how awful the second one is, I probably wouldn’t think of it as mysterious, either. That was what I thought, but...

“This is...”

The second painting was flipped over, and with one glance, I could agree that it was indeed mysterious. A rural landscape, the sun, a mountain range on the other side of a plain. Horses, a farmhouse, a field, an open forest.

The second painting was just like the first.

### 3

I took my leave from the Art Room. Immediately after I closed the door, Kengo spoke.

“What do you think? It’s a strange story, right?”

“You’re right. It would be fine if it were a copy or if it were computer-generated, but having two hand-drawn pictures that are similar is just...”

He’d probably been through a great deal of hardship to create the second painting, too. You might think that he only had to exert the same amount of effort twice, but drawing something a second time usually fills you with a sense of futility, so that might not be enough.

“While they’re similar, they’re not exactly the same, though.”

“Really? I didn’t notice.”

“You can tell if you look at it closely. I’m thinking that perhaps the painting is jammed with a considerable number of ideas, so he made a copy in case one gets dirty or gets torn.”

“Considerable number of ideas?”

“That’s what I’m expecting from you to figure out.”

I’m honestly grateful to be on the receiving end of such expectations, but it’s way out of my field of expertise. If I can come up with the answer just by thinking about it, then most of the reasoning, or the solution, would have come to me already. As for ideas, it could be that the picture changes when tilted, or that the picture becomes three-dimensional when viewed at a parallel angle... If that were the case, it would be interesting, but even so, those aren’t exactly innovative.

“...So, what’s that?”

“Yeah, I’ll show it to you.”

Kengo brought out a copy from his uniform pocket. Katsube-senpai had passed it to him after the interview.

“It’s a copy of the student newspaper from two years ago. There’s an interview of Ōhama-senpai on it, and apparently, it’s a commemoration of him winning an award at a prefectural exhibition. She thought I could use it in my article.”

“Wow, so Katsube-senpai was holding on to something like that.”

“There’s an article of a ball game tournament in June on the back, with a huge photograph of the senpai playing an active part in it.”

“I see. So, why does someone currently in the Newspaper Club need to get an old snippet of news from an outsider?”

As if saying, “What a stupid question”, Kengo gently lifted his hands.

“I can get this copy from Katsube-senpai in one day, but it’ll take me three days to find a back number from two years ago in the Newspaper Club Room.”

You should clean it up, then.

We crossed the passageway from the South Block to the North Block.

“So, what do you think? Got any ideas?”

“Sorry that I can’t live up to your expectations.”

I shook my head, causing Kengo to peek at my face, surprised.

“You admit that you don’t know?”

“Isn’t that what I’m saying?”

“...You’re being awfully honest.”

Isn’t that a good thing? Though Kengo seems strangely disappointed by that.

Anyway, it wasn’t my intention to be honest there, but I was lacking in devotion to finding an answer. Not taking a look at material right in front of my eyes just doesn’t sit right with me. I held a hand out to Kengo.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Could you let me take a look at that copy?”

“This? Sure.”

Kengo retrieved the copy once again, gave it a cursory glance and handed it to me.

“Thanks. I’ll read it now.”

It wasn’t a particularly long article. I could read it while walking.

Interviewer: Congratulations at winning an award at the Prefectural Art Exhibition.

Ōhama: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Actually, I have not seen the painting that won the award. What kind of painting is it?

Ōhama: It’s a size 20 oil painting. Up till now, I’ve usually based my paintings on the color red, but this time, I mainly used a shade of blue that is close to sky-blue. I think the picture turned out considerably bright because of that.

Interviewer: By size 20, you mean...

Ōhama: Basically, it's in a normal size.

Interviewer: What did you paint?

Ōhama: Fruit. It's a weird subject, don't you think?

Interviewer: Even at this stage, you paint fruit?

Ōhama: Basically, I'm at the stage where I'm polishing my skills. I feel like I've been painting the same things since I entered this school. Right, I've also painted many pictures of fish.

Interviewer: Fish? In the Art Room?

Ōhama: No, at home. If I painted them in the Art Room, I would be chased out for the fishy smell (laughs).

Interviewer: You're right (laughs). By the way, I have a really refined image of oil paintings in my mind. What made you start making oil paintings?

Ōhama: I have never thought of them as refined, so I could start carefreely. I started out with a prank, just for fun, and I believe my principles have not changed since.

Interviewer: Do you often make prank paintings?

Ōhama: That's right. As for whether I'm a refined person, I can't say for sure, but if you make a case based on the fact that my paintings are often vulgar, I can only think that you're basing your argument on mere quantities.

Interviewer: Oh.

Ōhama: Sorry for the weird response.

Interviewer: Anyway, it will soon be the time to decide on your future path. Do you have any goals in mind?

Ōhama: I think that no matter where I go, I'll end up painting anyway. I'm not sure if I can do that as a job, though.

Interviewer: Don't your family have high expectations for your paintings?

Ōhama: I'm not too sure about that (laughs). I have an elder brother who is a lot older than I am and he frequently comes over to hang out, but only he and his children are delighted to see my paintings.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for today.

Ōhama: Thank you too.

Hmm...

I kept silent.

"So? You figured out something?"

I stretched my neck to the side and returned the copy to Kengo. As we were parting, Kengo spoke.

“There’s no helping it if you can’t figure it out. Well, that’s not the only story we have.”

For just a small moment, I was hit with a pang of guilt. That was actually an effective piece. With this, we can decipher his methods. Those words were at the back of my throat.

But I swallowed them back down.

Using your wisdom in a shrewd way is not necessarily seen as a good thing. I know as much. I thought I wouldn’t mind if I could decide whether to lend my wisdom only after listening to the situation, but that was a little naïve. If I had wanted to sit still, I shouldn’t have listened to the story in the first place.

I returned to my classroom to find someone sitting in my seat. It was Osanai-san. Is it just my imagination, or does she look worn out? She called out to me in a weak voice.

“Welcome back.”

My response to that greeting was the result of a spinal reflex.

“I’m back.”

Since my chair was filled, I sat down at a nearby table.

“...So, why are you here?”

“Because I saw you go to the Art Room. I thought you would come back immediately.”

“You saw me?”

“I can see from my classroom.”

I see. Looking at the two buildings of Funa High from a bird’s eye view, they form the character 丩, with one horizontal stroke being longer on the left and the other horizontal stroke being longer on the right. As a map of that aerial view appeared in my mind, I realized that Osanai-san’s classroom was indeed directly opposite the Art Room. If she looked across the courtyard, she could have probably seen us in there. As I understood that point, she continued.

“Those were some weird paintings.”

“You could even see them!”

While I raised my voice without thinking, Osanai-san took a palm-sized pair of binoculars from her pocket and showed it to me. With those, she was able to see the painting. I’m not sure why she walks around with a pair of binoculars, though.

“They’re like carbon copies of each other.”

That’s right, I was about to say, but there was something about those words that confused me. I wet my tongue and replied, bearing in mind my pronunciation.

“You mean they’re like exact copies<sup>14</sup> of each other?”

“That’s what I said... that they’re like carbon copies of each other.”

So what if they’re like carbon copies of each other? Osanai-san may or may not have deciphered the meaning behind my wry smile, but she returned a gracious smile and continued.

“So, I was waiting for you, Kobato-kun... I thought I should apologize. You gave me so much encouragement yesterday, and I didn’t even reply.”

“Oh, about that?”

I waved my hand exaggeratedly.

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Osanai-san nodded. Apparently having pulled herself together, she asked in a slightly louder voice.

“So, what did you talk with Doujima-kun?”

I made a difficult face. Due to my silence, unease immediately clouded Osanai-san’s face.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. Was it insensitive of me?”

I shook my head.

“No, it’s not that I don’t want to talk about it. It’s nothing much, really.”

I wasn’t just trying to reassure Osanai-san, but I felt like telling her about the two paintings. I compiled Katsube-senpai’s old story with Ōhama’s words, and roughly relayed it to her. Since she was looking at the two paintings, albeit from a distance away, she was quick to understand.

“...And with how things are now, Kengo’s looking for a new story.”

I concluded.

However, just as I could somehow read Osanai-san’s preferences and movements from being next to her for such a long time, Osanai-san could apparently also read my feelings to a certain extent. As if thinking that I would flare up, she looked at me with slightly upturned eyes and spoke.

“Kobato-kun, you’re not helping them?”

“I don’t understand the picture.”

“But you’re close to understanding it, aren’t you?”

It seems that I really can’t underestimate her. However, the fact remains that I haven’t understood it yet.

“Sorry if it’s just my imagination, but you seem frustrated, Kobato-kun.”

I smiled wryly.

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<sup>14</sup> Osanai said “iki-utsushi”, which means carbon copy or a spitting image, while Kobato said “hiki-utsushi”, which just means copy or replication.

"Well, I suppose. It may have been just a glimpse, but I caught sight of the solution. But you should know, Osanai-san. Playing a detective is really not something for people who aspire to be part of the petit bourgeoisie. I think it's better for me to act like I didn't hear anything."

"If you're fine with that..."

Osanai-san muttered, fell into thought for a while, then suddenly asked again to make sure.

"But are you really?"

"....."

If you put it that way...

I'm not exactly trying to get in anyone's good graces here.

And I haven't completely solved it yet, but still...

After seeing this much and being requested to solve the mystery behind the paintings, letting it go would put me off.

"...I just think it seems a little cold-hearted."

"I think so too."

The two of us are not much of the emotional type, but that doesn't mean that we're cold-blooded. Having an indifference to civil matters is fine, but being cold or cool is not a virtue in the eyes of a little citizen.

But there remains the problem of how to find the solution.

"Assuming that I do solve the mystery, I would hate to tell everyone about it. I did this, and thus I found that. You know how that kind of explanation goes."

"Yup, I know."

I wonder if there's any good hand for me to play. One that would allow me to tell everyone about the solution, while not requiring me to appear in public. There's no way such a convenient method exists. If only there was someone whom I can freely explain my deduction to and whom I can entrust with conveying that explanation...

...Before my eyes stood Osanai-san.

"Eh? Me?"

She figured it out just from my gaze. Seriously, it's difficult to make light of her.

But in reality, it wouldn't work. It would be just cruel to have the shy Osanai-san do that for the sake of my responsibilities. Also, I don't want to do this purely based off my responsibilities, but my preferences are mixed up in this as well, making it even worse. Moreover, being so closely involved in a deduction is a violation of the promise I had with her.

As I was troubled by these thoughts, Osanai-san quietly spoke out.

"If you can't give up on this... you can use me as an excuse."

"...Oh yeah, you're right."

I immediately understood what she was talking about. Normally, we would use each other as a pretext to escape, but Osanai-san was saying that this time, I could use her as the detective for this particular system. I felt grateful to her, but at the same time, I was quite surprised. She was actually saying that it's fine for her to be used, and for me to break that agreement. Just in case, I questioned her.

"You'll become the person who solved the mystery. Are you sure that's fine?"

A smile, feeble as it was, appeared on Osanai-san's face.

"Yup. It's our promise to use each other as an excuse, anyway. Also, I probably won't get acquainted with Katsube-senpai, and I caused you so much trouble yesterday..."

You don't need to worry about that. Furthermore, even if Osanai-san will have no more interactions with Katsube-senpai afterwards, I can't say the same thing about Kengo.

...However, after some consideration, I decided to go on board with Osanai-san's suggestion. Not solving a problem when it can almost be solved actually gives me quite a lot of stress. This personality trait of wanting to solve problems is probably the greatest hurdle to my aspiration of becoming a petit bourgeois. I know this, and yet here I am violating the prohibition. Seriously, I'm still lacking in devotion. I replied in embarrassment.

"Alright, I'll accept your kind offer, just this once."

"You can see the solution, right?"

"Yeah. Well, I'll be going home now. Shall we go together?"

Osanai-san looked up at the sky and nodded. She looked like she was thinking about something for a moment, then made a suggestion in a small voice.

"You know, I have a digital camera. If you take photographs of those two paintings, I could do some thinking with you."

That's a welcome suggestion. It would certainly help for me to get Osanai-san's assistance, and to be able to store the paintings as digital data.

"It's fine, you don't have to help me that much."

I declined, but a flush rose on Osanai-san's face as she shook her head wildly.

"No... It's for my own good. I'll feel much better having something else to think about right now."

I couldn't say anything to that.

The next day.

I didn't have it in me to visit the Art Club alone, especially since I wasn't a member of the Newspaper Club. Thus, I cajoled Kengo into bringing me there again. There were no difficulties regarding that, and I managed to naturally store each painting as digital data in the camera.

As I was about to hurriedly leave the room, Katsube-senpai spoke, as if having just remembered something.

"Oh, right. Those paintings are titled."



“Is there one title for each painting?”

“I’m not sure about that. It might be a title for just one of the paintings. Hang on, I’m trying to remember what it is... ‘To the Three of you, Six Mysteries’.”

That’s quite... Kengo and I responded at the same time.

“That sounds meaningful.”

“That’s not the title, is it?”

Katsube-senpai directed a light glare at me.

“I wasn’t the one who named it.”

And I wasn’t blaming you for it... I mumbled as I drained my tea, then quickly left the room.

While returning to our classrooms, Kengo asked a question.

“Your attitude today’s quite different compared to yesterday. Can you figure out anything with those pictures?”

I smiled to play it off.

“I might understand something, or I might not. But when I told the story to a friend, they said that they might be able to figure it out with the photographs.”

“A friend? Who is it?”

“...I’ll tell you if they manage to successfully solve the mystery.”

“You’re actually entrusting something you don’t know to someone else...?”

Kengo snorted, but thankfully didn’t pursue this line of questioning any further.

“Also, my friend asks if you could lend them the old news article as well as the notes you took.”

“Those?”

Kengo was taken aback for a moment, but readily accepted the request.

“Well, I have no plans to use them anyway. Come to my classroom and I’ll pass them to you.”

With those two items, I returned to my classroom and rendezvoused with Osanai-san.

“Did you take the photographs?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s have a look, then.”

It was fine for small items like the digital camera and binoculars, but she couldn’t bring her personal computer to school, so we had to go home. That leads us to the next question. Should Osanai-san come to my house, or should I go over to Osanai-san’s house? In the first place, my house doesn’t have a personal computer with the function to download the data from a digital camera, so me visiting Osanai-san’s house was inevitable.

Osanai-san lived in an apartment. It wasn't loaned, but was owned by her family. I had only been there once, so I couldn't remember how to get there. We walked there while I followed Osanai-san's directions.

On the way, I told her that we now knew the title of the paintings.

"'To the Three of you'?"

"'Six Mysteries'."

Recalling the earlier conversation, I made a bitter face.

"When I said that it can't be the title, Katsube-senpai glared at me. 'I wasn't the one who named it', she said."

Osanai-san swallowed a breath.

"I would have said the same thing in her situation... Anyway, Kobato-kun, do you think that the title holds some meaning?"

I nodded.

"Probably. The word 'Three' is a counter for something. If 'you' refers to something non-human, it's a counter for a number of objects. If 'you' refers to a human, then it would be a counter for age."

"...I never thought that it could be referring to age."

"As for the six mysteries, I'm not sure. What do you think, Osanai-san?"

Osanai-san slowed down and thought for a while. With her small stature, her walking speed was originally slow, so I also had to slow down considerably.

After going across a small junction with a push button at the traffic light, an apartment building with cream-colored walls came into view. That would be Osanai-san's house.

After such a long wait, she finally responded.

"We'll have to see..."

That was all she said.

Let's take a look, then. Osanai-san's house was on the third floor. She retrieved a key from one of her pockets and went in first. She was probably cleaning up, for I was made to wait for a few minutes before being let in. It was neat and tidy all over, which made it hard to believe that it was the result of a few minutes of cleaning. It was so pristine that it looked hardly lived-in. I'd heard about it. Osanai-san was an only child, and her parents apparently always reached home late and went off to work early.

A desktop computer was installed in one corner of the wooden-floored living room. With unexpected familiarity, Osanai-san adeptly downloaded the data onto the computer. She then spent a little more time adjusting the size and other properties.

During that time, I brought the loose-leaf notebook out from my bag. As I thought, it was filled with information about the case. I distilled the main points from Kengo's notebook and the old news article.

Kengo's Notebook (Katsube Asuka-senpai's Testimony):

- 1) Ōhama usually did oil paintings.
- 2) Ōhama created the second painting in the summer of his third year of high school.
- 3) Only Katsube knew about Ōhama's second painting (whether he hid it, or whether it is a coincidence is unclear).
- 4) When Katsube asked Ōhama if it was a doodle, Ōhama denied it (saying that it was 'the most refined painting in the world').
- 4') However, when he said that, he looked like he was trying to contain his laughter.
- 5) Ōhama entrusted Katsube with the painting.
- 5') Katsube was supposed to hold onto it until "the right time".

Student Newspaper:

- 1) This was from June, two years ago.
- 2) It was an interview for winning an award in the Prefectural Art Exhibition. (Proof that Ōhama's aim to get into Nitten was not just talk?)
- 3) Ōhama usually used a lot of red.
- 3') "The picture turned out considerably bright" (Meaning that it usually isn't like that?)
- 4) Ōhama thought of himself as in the stage of polishing his skills
- 5) Ōhama did not think of his paintings as refined.
- 5') "As for whether I'm refined, I can't say for sure."
- 6) The only people close to him who showed interest in his paintings were his elder brother and his kids (Ōhama was a third-year high school student, but his brother had kids?)

The keywords were clear after extracting them.

And the title, 'To the Three of You, Six Mysteries'. Also, there were two of the same painting. Or to be precise, they looked the same.

The answer seemed obvious. All that was left was to confirm it in the paintings.

Two icons with the names "mittsunokimi.jpg" and "muttsunonazo.jpg" appeared on the monitor of the computer Osanai-san was operating. Those were some long file names. We opened up the two files and placed them next to each other.

A mountain range in the horizon overlooking a plain. A farmhouse and a field. A horse and its child. An open forest.

Osanai-san expressed her thoughts after seeing it up close for the first time.

"It sucks..."

She remarked. I liked her frankness.

Once again, I looked at the pastel color paint that had been thickly applied on the Kent paper cut in B5 size.

I made a request to Osanai-san.

“About that farmhouse. Could you enlarge it? Yeah, both of them.”

The farmhouse had large windows, and a wall clock could be seen within. After enlarging the two images, Osanai-san turned to look at me, her hand still on the mouse.

“...Kobato-kun, this is...”

I nodded.

#### 4

It is always better to nip a problem in the bud. On the day after I visited Osanai-san’s house, I had had every intention to put an end to the mystery.

Unfortunately, Kengo had apparently gone to the Art Room alone once classes had ended. That was what Osanai-san, who had been gazing out of the window in the direction of the Art Room, told me. That completely derails the plan. I’d intended to explain to Kengo, then have him convey that explanation to Katsube-senpai. Even if Osanai-san says that I can use her as a shield, I feel heavy-hearted imagining her play the role of detective in front of Katsube-senpai and the other members of the Art Club. I have no confidence that she can pull it off.

But it wouldn’t do to delay it any further. Having no other choice, I headed to the Art Room on my own. I knocked and opened the sliding door to see Kengo inside, as per Osanai-san’s information. He was talking to Katsube-senpai in the same spot as we were two days ago. He turned around as he spotted me.

“I never thought you’d come here, Jougorou.”

I responded with a vague smile and sat next to Kengo, who immediately asked, “What about your friend or whoever?”

After taking a deep breath, I looked at Katsube-senpai and recited the words that I’d memorized.

“When I showed my friend the photographs of those paintings I took yesterday, they managed to see the paintings’ aim.”

“Huh?”

Katsube-senpai’s eyes widened. Kengo was also momentarily taken aback.

“Really, Jougorou? Who is that?”

“It’s Osanai-san. I believe I’ve introduced you to her before, Kengo.”

Kengo nodded slightly as the name registered in his memory. It’s actually quite amazing that he remembered her after seeing her only once, especially when she can hide her presence so well.

“...Ah, her. I didn’t know she was knowledgeable about paintings.”

“She didn’t need knowledge about paintings for that deduction.”

I asked Katsube-senpai to bring the paintings, and she did so, even with an incredulous look on her face. She arranged the paintings side by side on a table, allowing me to study them and confirm my points.

“What is it, Jougorou?”

“You were saying two days ago that while they’re the same picture, there are differences here and there. Osanai-san noticed that when she first saw the paintings.”

Katsube-senpai objected calmly.

“What’s about it? If you have some time after finishing a painting, wouldn’t you want to touch it up a little?”

I nodded.

“Yes, that is true, but let us count the differences in the two paintings. Kengo, where is it different?”

A slight grimace appeared on Kengo’s face, but he answered as he was asked.

“There’s a white spot on the small horse’s hind leg.”

“Besides that?”

“The leftmost mountain is at a different angle.”

“And?”

“That’s all I noticed.”

“How about you, Katsube-senpai?”

However, Katsube-senpai did not answer obediently as Kengo had.

“As I said, what about it?”

It seemed that the upperclassman was starting to feel ticked off at me for asking questions I already knew the answer to. I definitely understand that it’s not a pleasant feeling to have someone act like a detective in front of you. I was feeling apologetic for causing Katsube-senpai’s discomfort, and at the same time uncomfortable for using Osanai-san as a shield.

Not wanting my mental state to be worsened, I decided to answer my own question.

“The time shown on the wall clock in the farmhouse is different. The number of ridges in the field is different. The second tree on the right of the open forest has a different height in each painting. Also, the size of the sun is slightly different.”

“.....”

Katsube-senpai kept silent. I continued at a faster pace.

“My friend spent thirty minutes comparing the minute details of the paintings, and found all these differences.”

In reality, Osanai-san and I only spent fifteen minutes on that task. It was easy for the first five differences, but we were slow to notice that the angle of the mountain was different.

I looked up to notice Kengo comparing at the two paintings and counting with his fingers. One spot, two spots...

"I see. The paintings are different in six spots."

"Yes. Those are the 'Six Mysteries'."

At that moment, both Kengo and Katsube-senpai looked at me, surprised... Perhaps I was being overly flamboyant there. I should have uttered those lines with a little more disinterest, but I couldn't shake off my bad habits. I might as well state the conclusion, then. I took a deep breath.

"Basically, these two paintings make up a game of Spot the Difference.

"To ensure that there wouldn't be differences other than those that he'd planned, the artist drew distinct outlines and filled it in with a thick layer of paint so there wouldn't be differences in shading. He didn't make an oil painting, probably because it's more convenient to copy the sketch on paper."

"That's..."

Katsube-senpai's voice was stuck for a moment, but was released in the next moment with an exclamation.

"That's ridiculous! Which high school student would be happy to find the differences..."

"The person supposed to receive this is three years old."

In face of the pressure emanating from Katsube-senpai, I managed to continue.

"It's in the title - 'For the Three-year-old you', right?"

"Tha..."

Katsube-senpai seemed like she was about to say, "That's ridiculous" again, but broke off. Using that opportunity, I continued with the words I had decided to say.

"The paintings were drawn on Kent paper because it was the most fitting for them. But they were also in B5 size, which makes me think that they were meant to be mailed. Even though B5 and A4 are not standard letter sizes, there are envelopes for those sizes.

"Ōhama-san asked you to hold on to it until the time is right, which probably means the time of the recipient's third birthday. Ōhama-san has a brother, and his brother's child apparently loved seeing Ōhama-san's paintings. Going by age, the paintings' recipient should be that child."

"Indeed, that would explain the strange title. But Jougorou..."

Perhaps acting as a representative for Katsube-senpai, who was seemingly lost for words, Kengo asked a question.

"According to Katsube-senpai, Ōhama-san described these paintings as 'refined', but you can't say that a game of spot the difference is refined. Even if there is such a thing in this world, can you say that this is it?"

"As for whether I'm a refined person, I can't say for sure."

“Urgh,” Kengo groaned.

“That was written in the copy that I received from you. And then it went on like this. Hang on a moment.”

I reached into my pocket for the copy.

“‘If you make a case based on the fact that my paintings often contain many vulgar parts, I can only think that you’re basing your argument on mere quantities.’ That’s quite an interesting quote. It shows that the word ‘refined’ is a significant keyword in Ōhama-san’s mind. The interviewer was not emphasizing that word, but Ōhama-san was considerably hung up on it. That means that our definition of the word ‘refined’ does not fit with Ōhama-san’s definition, Osanai-san said.

“Now, how did Ōhama-san perceive the word ‘refined’? If his ‘paintings often contain many vulgar elements’, it follows that they often contain few refined elements. If we turn that around, it means that he makes his paintings with many vulgar elements and few refined elements. That would mean that it’s a concept of quantities, and not a concept of qualities, right?

“I think that deep down, Ōhama-san did not believe in that. When he told Katsube-senpai that the two paintings are refined, he was smiling, and that was a meaningful action. He was looking at the term ‘refined’ with cynical eyes, because the difference between that as a concept of quantities and a concept of qualities has grown fuzzy.”

Since Katsube-senpai didn’t seem to like being questioned by me, I turned towards Kengo.

“I neither support nor oppose Ōhama-san’s view.

“Osanai-san continued on from this line of thought. If Ōhama-san’s concepts of ‘refined’ and ‘vulgar’ were ‘based on mere quantities’, what kind of thing would be ‘the most refined in the world’?”

With his arms folded, Kengo looked at the ceiling.

“I suppose... something that no one can understand would be the most refined.”

“That’s not it. A thing that no one can understand cannot be judged to be refined or vulgar.”

I could see from Kengo’s eyes that he understood.

“If not zero, then one, right?”

I nodded.

“Exactly. They are paintings that are only meant to be judged as good by their recipient, a three-year-old child, who probably likes horses and lives in an area with wide open plains. The child, who might not even be able to read yet, must have liked picture books and playing spot the difference.

“Ōhama-san created these paintings aiming to please only one person. Following his views, or rather, his cynical views, he could have certainly considered this to be one of the most refined works in the world.”

After finishing my statement, I hastily added.

“...That was what Osanai-san said, anyway.”

“Hmm.”

Kengo groaned as he scratched his head.

Katsube-senpai, who had had an awfully perplexed look on her face, had finally composed herself. Even so, she looked at the two paintings coldly.

“Why did he entrust me with these things, then?”

“The child often came to Ōhama-san’s house. He must have wanted to present it as a surprise gift, and wanted to keep it secret until the child’s birthday. He could be certain of the paintings’ secrecy if he left them at school.”

“So why didn’t he come back for them?”

“Who knows? Perhaps his relationship with the child’s family broke down, causing him to be unable to give the child the paintings as a present... Or perhaps the child’s tastes changed, causing the paintings to be meaningless...”

“You’re wrong. If that’s the case, he could have told me.”

Ah, so she noticed. While she noticed it, I think I shouldn’t say it.

“Basically, he forgot. To him, it might have been a trifle he could easily forget about.”

I blurted out. With great reluctance, I nodded.

“That’s what I think... which was what Osanai-san said.”

“Do you still think these paintings are refined?”

Her voice was markedly dark. Sensing instability, I evaded the question.

“To me, not quite.”

Being an honest person, Kengo gave an honest response.

“In two years, an infant’s tastes can drastically change. There is now no one who can understand these paintings.”

That made me suddenly think of the events at the bookstore some time back. We yearn for an instance in which people feel that they’re having the best time of their lives, because we are unable to beckon such a moment into our lives. However, that instance in these paintings has been lost forever, without anyone having experienced it.

...Of course, that is assuming that the pair of paintings truly contained such an instance in the first place. I don’t believe Ōhama-san’s words. I don’t even consider them. Facing a word like “refined” with a serious attitude is something that a small citizen should avoid doing.

A cold smile crept onto Katsube-senpai’s lips. It was a sneer, absolutely unbefitting of her round face.

“In other words, this is...”

Katsube-senpai stacked the two paintings on top of each other, and ripped the stack in two.

“Trash.”



## Chapter 3: How to Make Delicious Cocoa

### 1

It was a Sunday when I spotted Osanai-san in town.

Osanai-san and I did have a reciprocal relationship, but it did not extend to codependence, and we were definitely not inseparable lovebirds. We would hang out after class to eat a dessert, or browse through some books, but we had never made plans to go out on a weekend. Both of us wouldn't be averse to it if one of us brought it up, but none of us would think of sticking together meaninglessly.

I was drifting around aimlessly in town on a bright Sunday in May, when a girl I thought I'd seen before appeared from a mobile phone dealership. After studying her face a while more, I realized that it was Osanai-san. You might be wondering why I couldn't differentiate between "someone I thought I'd seen before" and "someone I often see" when I'm usually next to Osanai-san in school, and the main reason was Osanai-san's clothes.

When Osanai-san is wearing her sailor uniform, it helps to hide her presence, and brings to mind words like "gloomy", "plain" and "dull". But today, she was wearing a pink tank top, a white lacy shirt on top and cream-colored denim pants that stopped at the knees. Her *amasogi* hairstyle was hidden by a plump leather hat, making it inconspicuous. It was a style that seemed to say, "I'm usually an energetic high school girl, but I'm in a state of ennui today." Even if she was seen by a classmate, they wouldn't be able to tell that it was Osanai Yuki in a quick glance.

The difference in image was so great it was as if Osanai-san was wearing a disguise. In fact, she might even consider it as a disguise herself. Us petit bourgeois are too self-conscious.

Having perfectly seen through her disguise, I approached her from behind. However, I didn't get far with my sneaking, and my quarry unexpectedly turned around when I was a few meters away from her. I wasn't thinking of surprising her, but I certainly wasn't expecting to be surprised myself. With the leather hat worn low over her eyes, Osanai-san put on a thin smile.

"What a coincidence, Kobato-kun."

"Yes, you're right."

I was still shocked that she knew I was approaching her from behind. Reading my expression, Osanai-san showed me something in her right hand. It was a mobile phone. It was a flip phone, and was opened up, but was not turned on.

"I could see behind me by looking at the monitor."

"Eh? You can see just with that?"

The phone monitor was black, as is usually the case, and didn't reflect much light. Even if you tried to use it like a mirror, the reflections should be too blurry. Osanai-san shook her head.

"I thought someone was approaching, so I looked there."

Her finger pointed at a cleanly-polished show window, on which Osanai-san and I were reflected. Yeah, as usual, she has great eyesight. That doesn't sound like a compliment, so I won't say that out aloud.

After feeling a bout of admiration, I realized that the phone Osanai-san was holding was different from the usual one. I pointed at it.

“Ah, you changed your phone.”

Osanai-san nodded, folded the open phone and showed it to me again. It had a cold, ivory color and was considerably thin. It also had a camera lens affixed on it.

“Oh, it comes with a camera.”

For some reason, Osanai-san looked a little embarrassed.

“My old phone was way too old, so...”

“Mine’s a lot older than your old one, though.”

“Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

No, I’m not hurt from that at all. I smiled and shook my head.

“So you came here today to buy a phone?”

I asked, but Osanai-san’s face clouded over.

“...Well, there’s that, but...”

“Hm? Is there something else?”

“No.”

She shook her head lightly.

“I thought I would feel better if I did some shopping.”

She murmured. I tried thinking for a while, but I couldn’t figure out why she would be feeling down. Quite some time had passed since that case of the spring-exclusive strawberry tart, after all.

“What’s the matter?”

“I was called to the Student Counselling Office two days ago.”

“Yeah, now I remember.”

Come to think of it, Osanai-san had been called over via the schoolwide broadcasting system. At that time, I’d wondered why the peaceful Osanai-san would be called to the Student Counselling Office, but I soon forgot all about it.

“Did you do something to make them mad at you?”

She shook her head.

“No, but they asked me all sorts of questions... about the bicycle.”

“Bicycle? The one that was stolen?”

“Yup. It was found at a weird place, they said.”

“Isn’t it good if it was found?”

“Rather than found, it was seen.”

Osanai-san replied with a painfully troubled expression on her face. I was about to stop her and say that it was alright if she didn't want to talk about it, but before I had the chance, she soldiered on.

"There was a case of burglary last Sunday. My bicycle was seen there."

"...The eyewitnesses saw it there?"

With a nod, Osanai-san started speaking quickly.

"In Hondo-chō, the apartment of a student called Io Kibe was hit. There was an election on that Sunday, right?"

Right, the election's over. Come to think of it, it's been quiet, with no more election cars driving around.

"That apartment was apparently burgled in the thirty-minute window that the student was out making their vote. Their *inkan* was stolen, but their bankbook was fine, so they suffered almost zero damages. It was during that time when my bicycle was seen. Some meddlesome... sorry, some observant neighbor thought it strange that some youngsters seemed to be acting as lookouts by the roadside, so that person memorized the number on the bicycle license seal."

You need a bicycle license seal to be allowed to ride a bike to Funa High. Not that I would know, since I always walked to school.

"There was an inquiry by the police, who found my name using the bicycle license seal number, and called me to the Counselling Office."

"Did they treat you like a burglar?"

"No. I immediately told them that my bicycle was stolen."

I might have been overthinking it, but I felt that Osanai-san's face was colored with a little irony as she spoke. As if spitting out the words, she continued.

"I was scolded for having my bicycle stolen. I felt down after that, so I felt like going out and doing some shopping."

Well, that does happen.

It was a sunny day, and it was a little hot. I checked my watch to see that it was just past one o'clock. If we continue getting exposed to the sun's rays in May, the effect of the ultraviolet rays could be frightening. Using my hand to block the sun, I spoke with a smile on my face.

"I see. It's good that you get to shop to your heart's content... but before that, how about taking a break somewhere cool?"

Osanai-san didn't immediately respond to my suggestion, but also used a hand to block the sun, then peered into my eyes, until her gaze finally dropped to my feet.

"My feelings are hurt..."

Ah, seriously.

Then again, it was rare for the modest Osanai-san to coax me into doing something, and while her feelings weren't exactly hurt, I could tell that she was certainly pissed off. This is a good chance to show my magnanimity. Be that as it may, I should have come here with more money in my wallet.

“...Fine, I’ll treat you.”

“There’s a place with delicious homemade yogurt nearby. The fruit sauce there is wonderful.”

Osanai-san responded without a moment’s delay, though she didn’t have a particularly ecstatic countenance, then adjusted her hat, pushing it further into her head. It seemed that she had planned to go there already. Osanai-san herself probably understood that compared to shopping, eating something sweet had a greater effect on brightening her mood in general.

However, to tell a long story short, our plan regarding Osanai-san’s favorite yogurt sauce was temporarily put on hold. Soon after we started walking off, my way-too-old phone received an email with the contents:

*“You’re free, right?”*

It was from Kengo. While walking, I sent him a reply that did not conceal any truths.

*“I’m walking.”*

*“So you’re basically free. I’ll invite you to my house. Come over.”*

I raised my eyebrows. It was rare for Kengo to make an invite on a day off. I had no particular reason to decline, but it should be fine to treat Osanai-san to some yogurt first.

*“I’m walking with Osanai-san. Later.”*

A few moments passed.

*“That’s even better. I have to thank her for that case about the paintings a while back. How about coming over together?”*

Oh, right. Osanai-san was believed to be the one who dealt with the case of the two paintings. Hmm, what should I do? I’m fine either way. This isn’t the only chance for me to eat a sweet dessert with Osanai-san, after all. The question is whether Osanai-san is willing to come along.

During that exchange, while I had slowed down my walking pace to type those replies, Osanai-san had gone a few steps ahead. I called out at her back.

“Hang on a moment.”

Osanai-san turned her head around.

“Kengo asks if we want to go to his house.”

“...Is that so? See you next time, then.”

“He specifically asked if you would like to come as well.”

Osanai-san’s eyes became unexpectedly wide.

“Me too?”

“Yes... If you don’t want to, I won’t force you to.”

I thought she would be troubled over this, but without a moment’s delay, Osanai-san recovered from her state of surprise and immediately nodded.

“Yup, I’ll go.”

"Oh, really? He asked us to go over right now, so are you fine missing the yogurt?"

"Yup. Is that no good?"

There was no reason for it to be a bad thing, but it was a little unexpected. Osanai-san is a relatively shy person, and I can't believe she would throw away the opportunity to be treated with yogurt.

"So, where is Doujima-kun's house?"

I told her the approximate location. Osanai-san thought for a while, then asked if we could stop by her house. Now that I think about it, Osanai-san's house is indeed on the way to Kengo's.

We left the shopping street, and as Osanai-san had wanted, we stopped at her house, where she spent about ten minutes getting a change of clothes. The tank top was replaced with a turtleneck, the denim pants had turned into a long skirt, and the leather hat had disappeared. She was now wearing a plain appearance. In other words, Osanai-san's disguise was off.

## 2

Kengo lived in a house on an old residential street. I'd been invited there two or three times while we were in elementary school. I was wondering if I would

get lost on the way there, since it had been so long since I last visited, but our journey there was unexpectedly smooth. It was a house that was less than a meter away from its neighbours, with a concrete-block wall surrounding the two-story building that dominated the landscape. When I pressed the bell, Kengo immediately appeared. He was in a shirt and jeans, a comfortable attire.

"Hey, so you came."

Kengo said as he tried looking over my shoulder, where Osanai-san was hiding.

"Nice to see you, Osanai-san."

"...Hello."

She gave a little nod in greeting.

"Well, come in."

Following his suggestion, we went through the entranceway into a wood-panelled corridor. I'd never thought it to be a big house, but now that my body had grown, I felt it was remarkably small. While the living room that we were led to was only about six tatami mats in size, it had few items and large windows, causing it to give off a sense of openness. Also, the air conditioner had been turned on, which I was quite grateful for. The three of us surrounded a table that was a little large, whereupon Osanai-san and I sat down on floor cushions with a checkered pattern.

"Wait here for a while. There's some delicious cocoa."

With those words, Kengo left the room.

"...Cocoa?"

Osanai-san muttered in puzzlement, probably because the images of the stern Kengo and sweet cocoa didn't fit with each other. I was thinking for a moment that there could be some roundabout

humor hidden here, but I immediately realized it was impossible. Kengo was too straight-laced for that.

After we waited for a brief moment, Kengo returned. He had a tray in his hands, which held cups with cocoa in them, filled to the brim. Taking care not to spill anything, Kengo placed the tray on the table. Each person held out a hand and grabbed the nearest cup.

"You said that this cocoa is delicious, right?"

"Yeah, it's Van Houten<sup>15</sup>."

Isn't that normal cocoa, then? You can probably find these lined up on the shelves in a supermarket next to Morinaga<sup>16</sup> products. I've never done a taste comparison, but it's nothing special. However, I kept silent, not wanting to crush Kengo's confident proclamation. I glanced to the side to see Osanai-san with a blank look on her face.

And thus, we drank hot cocoa in an air-conditioned room on a sweltering day. The cocoa didn't seem that hot when I brought it to my lips, but when it actually entered my mouth, it was really hot, above the suitable temperature. Thinking about it, or even without thinking about it, I would have definitely preferred something cold. Well, I can't say something so choosy since I'm here on his invitation. Furthermore, the cocoa was in fact quite delicious. I'm surprised that Kengo can make such delicious cocoa.

"You melted the cocoa powder in hot milk, right?"

"Of course."

"It's melted well. This is pretty good."

I don't have a sweet tooth like Osanai-san, and I'm not a cocoa connoisseur as a matter of course, but I could tell that this cocoa was way better than what I can make. What I usually don't like about cocoa is the powdery feeling it leaves behind, but I felt no such thing after drinking Kengo's cocoa.

Kengo smirked.

"Do you know how I made it? I can tell you the trick, if you want."

"Nah, it's fine."

"Well, listen anyway. The taste changes quite a bit with one procedure. With one cup of cocoa, I realized that cooks are indeed craftsmen."

You shouldn't have asked if you were going to tell us to listen anyway.

"Procedure? Like putting in salt after sugar?"

"Oh? There's a way of making cocoa that involves salt?"

Not that I know. I looked to the side to see Osanai-san quietly blowing on her cocoa, since she had a cat's tongue. Osanai-san would probably know the method that Kengo was talking about, but she

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<sup>15</sup> A Dutch brand of cocoa, known for pioneering a process to remove the bitter taste and make cocoa solids more water-soluble.

<sup>16</sup> A Tokyo confectionary company which makes candies and other confectionaries like Marie biscuits.

had curled up shyly and was seemingly intent on blowing on her cocoa. I decided to obediently play the role of the listener.

“So, could you tell us?”

“Listen well. Put the cocoa powder in a cup and pour hot milk inside. The trick here is to be moderate when pouring the milk.”

“Oh?”

“If you add a tiny amount of hot milk and scrape the cocoa powder, it will turn into a paste.”

He made an action that resembled grinding something at a pestle.

When the cocoa powder has completely turned into paste, pour in hot milk again, but only the amount that you want. Put in an appropriate amount of sugar, give it a good stir, and...”

This time, he moved his hands as if he was stirring with a muddler.

“It turns out like this.”

Kengo said as he pointed at the coffee cup. I studied the contents of my cup again. “Oh,” I said as I nodded.

“I see. As you said, there is such a big difference with just one procedure. That was interesting, thanks.”

While I frankly conveyed my gratitude, Kengo had an expression on his face that was hard to describe and seemed to swing between displeasure and confusion. “Hey Jougorou,” he started, but swallowed his words. He cleared his throat, then continued in a conspicuously loud voice.

“Anyway!”

That was an awkward way of changing the subject. Kengo turned so that half his body faced Osanai-san.

“It was a great help when you lent your knowledge for that case back then.”

He bowed. As the lower half of Osanai-san’s face was hidden by the coffee cup, she stiffened.

“That also helped to reflect credit on my seniors. Thank you for that.”

Looking closely, he was actually retreating slowly while in the *seiza* position. That’s some deft footwork. Is the main point based on how he uses his big toes?

“I really wanted to give my thanks earlier, because Jougorou and I both don’t know the slightest about paintings. Thankfully, the two of you were acquainted with each other.”

With part of her face still hidden by the coffee cup, Osanai-san sent me a signal with her eyes, probably wanting me to put a stop to this.

“Ah, Kengo, about that time...”

But there was no effect.

“Jougorou was explaining about it so triumphantly, but you were the one who cracked the case without even seeing the actual paintings. I was wondering if you could tell us how you managed to find the key to solving the case...”

"I, I..."

Osanai-san finally placed the cup down.

"I need to use the washroom."

She stood up while speaking. With a disheartened look, Kengo replied.

"You'll find it if you turn left by the entranceway. Did you get that?"

"I can find it, I think."

Osanai-san left the room in haste. I apologized to her retreating figure in my heart for not being able to support her.

The footsteps on the wood-panelled corridor grew distant. Kengo, who seemed like he had been listening to those footsteps to confirm that Osanai-san was going the right way, suddenly looked at me. Surmising that he had something he wanted to say to me, I broached the subject.

"So? Do you have anything you want to talk about for inviting me here on a Sunday?"

"Not really. Nothing worth talking about, anyway."

"You mean to say that you called me here in middle of my walk just to lecture me about delicious cocoa? I can't exactly say I'm thankful for that. Well, I'm happy that I'll be able to enjoy delicious cocoa from now on, though."

I said that in a joking manner rather than in an argumentative one. However, Kengo seemed satisfied with that.

"Hm, it seems that you haven't lost your edge."

"What are you talking about?"

Kengo released his grip on the handle of his coffee cup.

"I'm not good with beating around the bush."

"I know."

"I'll ask you clearly, then. Did something happen to you in middle school? The atmosphere you give off now is too different. Where did the old Kobato Jougorou who wouldn't die even if he got killed go?"

"Really? For example?"

I feigned ignorance.

Kengo's tone was unexpectedly calm.

"For example, you ask? Everything. Even now. You were only taught the method of melting cocoa powder, and you say, 'That was interesting, thank you'?"

I sipped my cocoa. As I thought, I would be happier with something cold on a hot day.

"I don't know. What would my past self have done?"



Kengo glared at me, though he wasn't worked up. Man, that brings me back. Kengo and I used to often stare at each other back in the day.

"What I know is that you wouldn't be satisfied if you didn't get to say everything you wanted to say. If someone knew something that you didn't, you would use malicious language and be unwilling to admit defeat.

"But now you're even more vicious than ever, though you're much gentler when you talk. You've become the type of bastard with a horrible mouth and personality, but hides an ulterior motive behind a smiling face."

...That's a bummer. Do I really look like that? Even when I've spared no effort to become a petit bourgeois who can force a smile on his face and heart. I'm the worst at handling headlong charges when I'm not prepared for them. Osanai-san, who should cut in to help me out, isn't here, a resounding consequence of me being unable to assist her earlier. I wracked my brains for a plan to somehow avoid Kengo's interrogation, but no solution came to mind. In the midst of my thinking, I suddenly grew annoyed with it, and spoke softly with a smile still affixed to my face.

"To summarize your question, you're asking if anything happened to me in middle school, right?"

"I suppose you could put it that way."

I took one more sip of cocoa, then placed the cup down and lightly raised both my hands.

"It's simple, then. Nothing happened. I might have been like what you said I was when I entered middle school, but I naturally became like this when I graduated. Like a petit bourgeois."

Kengo stared at me with a sharp gaze.

"...I don't believe it."

"That's up for you to decide."

"As they say, the soul of a child of three stays the same. That Jougorou wouldn't have become like this unless something significant happened."

"They also say that a man changes after not seeing him for three days. Even more so when you haven't seen me for three years. It's just that you've changed too little, Kengo."

I averted my eyes away from Kengo. I'm no longer suited for staring contests. Kengo sighed.

"I get pissed off whenever I hear you say, 'That's right' or 'Exactly', since you don't think that way. You're a guy who hasn't ever deemed the word 'Yes' to be acceptable, after all."

That's not true. I do aim to obediently listen to what others have to say, though I may not be able to do that well yet. Even so, I'm still in practice for that, so please let me off the hook for this.

I could sense that my tone of speech was becoming gradually colder.

"If it pisses you off, you'll have to get used to it."

"I phrased that badly, but you should understand what I'm talking about."

I shrugged and answered quickly.

"Yeah, I understand. But Kengo, you were expecting me to have had some sort of trauma that made my change easy to understand, right? Don't be stupid, there's no such thing. Not at all. I have my

own reasons for aiming to be a little citizen, don't I? I might as well ask about your reasons for being a good-natured person. Is that all you called me here to talk about? If so, I'll..."

That was when it hit me. Even with that sharp retort, I couldn't go home yet, because Osanai-san hadn't returned from the toilet. Come to think of it, she's taking quite a long time, isn't she?

Once again, I softened my expression. Kengo looked disappointed.

"Ah, I'll use the toilet."

"...Do as you like."

### 3

I didn't actually feel the need to go, but I went to the toilet, anyway. Judging by the "open" sign on the knob, the door wasn't locked. If so, where had Osanai-san gone? She couldn't have possibly gotten lost in this narrow house which probably wouldn't take much time to clean, right? I stood in front of the toilet to consider Osanai-san's whereabouts when I heard a voice from somewhere.

"But if you do that, the volume will..."

"You're right, but..."

It was coming from the kitchen. One of the voices came from Osanai-san, while the other probably came from Kengo's elder sister, Chisato. Thinking of taking a peek, I inched towards the kitchen, when the sharp-eyed Osanai-san suddenly spotted me.

"Ah, Kobato-kun."

Having no choice now that I had been found out, I appeared in front of the two of them. Chisato-san shot me a glance, said, "Welcome" and folded her arms. I've known Kengo since elementary school, so I've also been acquainted with Chisato-san from that time. I've heard that she also goes to Funa High, so perhaps I should call her Chisato-senpai instead of Chisato-san? While Kengo had a squarish face, that did not apply to Chisato-senpai. The only similarity their faces had was that they had distinct facial features. However, in Kengo's case, that characteristic built up an impression of toughness and strength, but for Chisato-senpai, it made her seem like a flashy person who would probably look good in high heels. Currently, her mouth was in the shape of the character へ.

"...What's the matter?"

I directed my question at Osanai-san, but it was Chisato-senpai who answered.

"We've been challenged by that idiot Kengo!"

Huh?

I must have looked foolish, for Osanai-san giggled. Chisato-senpai unfolded her arms and pointed sharply at the sink.

"The sink is dry!"

"Uh huh."

“And the only thing there is a spoon.”

I looked in the sink. As stated, there was only a small spoon there, with a chocolate-colored stain on its tip. Naturally, that would be the spoon used in the mixing of the cocoa powder.

“What about it?”

Chisato-senpai brushed her hair upward.

“You’re slow. Kengo brewed some cocoa for you two, right?”

I wouldn’t say that cocoa is brewed. The word “brew” has the connotation of “immersion”, and is of course suitable for tea, but while it is sometimes used in the case of cocoa, it just doesn’t seem fitting. However, I didn’t say anything. It would be rough to be accused of “having an ulterior motive” again.

“You’re right. How did you know?”

“I told her while we were talking...”

Osanai-san replied in a hushed voice. She didn’t need to be so secretive about it when all she did was tell Chisato-senpai that cocoa was served to us, though.

“If milk was used in the cocoa...”

Chisato-senpai said as she spread her hands wide to indicate the entire kitchen.

“There must be a saucepan here, naturally.”

Ah, I see. You can’t make hot milk cocoa without warming the milk. For that, there must be some kind of pot. It doesn’t need to be a saucepan, specifically. A wok or stockpot would do the job just fine.

“He washed it, didn’t he?”

I bluntly replied, causing Chisato-senpai to point at me without a moment’s delay.

“You sure are slow. As I said, the sink is dry!”

What an excitable person...

Thanks to that frankly depressing conversation with Kengo, my feelings were a little hurt. And here was Chisato-senpai with her high amounts of energy, which somehow made me feel better, something that I didn’t expect myself. A wry smile rose up on my face as my melancholy largely dissipated. They say that smiling is good for one’s health, and it seems that the type of smile doesn’t matter.

“To make hot milk cocoa without wetting the sink... do you think that’s possible?”

“Who knows? Perhaps Kengo came up with an ingenious plan?”

“So if I were to ask you to do the same...”

“I cannot.”

“Me too. Neither can that girl over there.”

Being pointed at, the “girl over there” responded with a small nod. Chisato-senpai brought her hand that she had used to point at Osanai-san into a fist and shook it.

“...Unforgivable!”

Unforgivable? Really?

“Kobato-kun, right? You’ve known Kengo for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Doesn’t it frustrate you that Kengo can do something that you can’t?”

“You’re right, it is frustrating.”

I replied on reflex, but immediately regretted it. I’d accidentally revealed my true colors. Osanai-san let out a low, sharp voice.

“K-Kobato-kun!”

On the other hand, Chisato-senpai seemed satisfied to no end.

“Exactly, exactly. If so, how about tracing Kengo’s actions with me?”

That was certainly a strange turn of events. That said, I couldn’t swallow what I had already spat out. Anyway, Kengo couldn’t have possibly come up with a plan that I can’t figure out by racking my brains for a bit. I should try solving this puzzle with her.

In any case, it wasn’t even a difficult puzzle. All I had to do was find a way to heat up the milk without using a saucepan. While the kitchen wasn’t spacious, it was complete with electrical appliances. And of course, it should have *that*.

I looked around for it, and found it, as expected. I was, of course, referring to the microwave. It was larger than I thought it would be.

“That’s a big microwave.”

I remarked. Chisato-senpai puffed her chest out in pride.

“You can make sweets in this. It works as an oven, too.”

I noticed Osanai-san looking at the microwave enviously, while seeming to hold herself back.

“...It looks like you can even fit a size 8 sponge cake<sup>17</sup> in this microwave.”

“So you’re thinking that he heated up the milk with the microwave, aren’t you?”

While I was a little irked by her mocking tone, I nodded.

“If he used a microwave, he wouldn’t need a pot.”

“In place of that, he’d need a non-metallic container, though there’s all sorts of things here made of plastic or ceramic, like that bowl over there. But as I said, you’re slow. This is the third time I’m saying this, but the sink is dry.”

I see, so there’s no big difference, huh.

---

<sup>17</sup> A cake 24cm in diameter for 12 to 14 people.

Then again, he didn't have to heat the milk up in the same container. I raised three fingers.

"How about this, then? He prepared three coffee cups, filled them with milk, then put them in the microwave. He would have three cups of hot milk."

However, Osanai-san quietly put in a word of advice.

"But Kobato-kun, what we received was not hot milk..."

"Yes, it was cocoa. So he added cocoa powder from the top with a spoon."

"But Kobato-kun, what we got was not just normal cocoa..."

So what, I was about to ask, when it hit me. She was right. We were not served just normal cocoa, but delicious cocoa, and we'd just listened to the method of making such delicious cocoa. It required adding only a small amount of milk.

In other words, he must have needed some equipment for pouring out the milk into the coffee cups which contained the final product, cocoa.

And yet the sink was dry. Without thinking, I let out a sound.

"...Wow."

Chisato-senpai folded her arms.

"It seems that you've finally recognized the problem. Just what did that idiot Kengo do? Even if he didn't use something like a bowl, or in other words if he placed coffee cups in the microwave, there should be six cups."

I noticed a small mistake, so I corrected her.

"No, he could have done it with just four cups. He warmed up three cups of milk, then prepared another cup for making delicious cocoa. He dissolved the cocoa powder in that cup, resulting in one cup of cocoa, and one empty cup. By repeating that three times, he would produce three cups of delicious cocoa."

But I was corrected once again.

"That's impossible, Kobato-kun. The spoon would get wet when he makes the first cup of cocoa. He has to scoop cocoa powder out of the bag three times, so there should be two spoons in the sink, but..."

It seems that Osanai-san is going along with Chisato-senpai's puzzle and my obstinacy, even though she probably isn't very eager about it. In my heart, I pressed my hands together in gratitude.

"Also, we're talking about Kengo here. He definitely wouldn't do something as sloppy as inserting a wet spoon into a bag of cocoa powder. If that's not it, he could have prepared one cup for heating up the milk and three cups with cocoa powder, so he just has to heat up the milk and pour it into the another cup three times."

However, this means that he used the microwave three times, which is quite a waste. That can't be it.

Chisato-senpai shook her head in an exasperated manner.

"You guys sure are unproductive. No matter which of your theories is right, he would have to use four cups, right? But only three cups were used."

Oh, right. I tilted my head.

However, that conversation was definitely not unproductive, because it helped me see the direction to the correct solution. I mumbled to the two of them.

"Hmm, the way I see it, we can solve the problem if we look at it from another perspective."

"Look at it from another perspective? What do you mean?"

"Well, I originally thought about it this way: The end result is three cups of cocoa, so there has to be some equipment for pouring milk in, so why can't we find it? But currently, we can look at the question like this: Given three cups of hot milk, it is necessary for some mortar-like equipment for mixing the cocoa powder to exist, but why is there no such equipment? Now, we're looking at the question from another perspective."

"...I see."

A meaningful smile appeared on Chisato-senpai's face. That was curious, but I was a lot more strongly attracted to the problem that I'd been given.

Hang on. By the previous line of reasoning, four containers are required for three cups of cocoa, but in reality there were only three containers.

"Perhaps this is what happened."

The two of them focused their attention on me.

"Basically... there were only two cups of 'delicious cocoa'. The other cup was made by dropping cocoa powder into hot milk, and was conventional, powdery cocoa. How about that?"

That way, whichever one of the two methods Kengo used, he would end up with two cups of delicious cocoa and one cup of normal cocoa.

"I see," Chisato-senpai replied. However, Osanai-san looked around in the air, then sent a weak gaze in my direction. She wanted to deny my suggestion, but was too shy to do so, I suppose. *Why would Osanai-san do that?* I thought, and instantly hit upon the answer.

"No, sorry, that can't be it."

"Why not? It's entirely possible that Kengo made his own cup of cocoa sloppily, isn't it?"

"You were not there, Chisato-senpai, but the each of us randomly picked a cup from the tray, and Kengo was not the first to take his cup."

If there was some kind of magician's secret behind it, Osanai-san and I could have been steered towards the correct cups. However, that would be like using a chef's knife to kill a chicken, and there is absolutely no need to utilize such techniques to distribute cups of cocoa. Anyway, I can't imagine Kengo having the finesse to pull off such a move.

That means that three cups of cocoa must have been made with only three containers.

Hmm, Kengo, what exactly did you do? You haven't shown me your clever side before.

The silence continued. The phrases “three cups of cocoa” and “delicious cocoa” kept repeating in my mind. Before my brains turned into cacao, Osanai-san murmured.

“It’s possible to make three cups of cocoa with two cups of hot milk...”

“Eh?”

Chisato-senpai and I turned to look at her in surprise, causing Osanai-san to momentarily panic and look around at her surroundings, probably searching for cover. However, we were in an open kitchen, so there was nowhere for her to hide. In exchange, she shrunk back and looked down, then continued in a small voice.

“He put two coffee cups of milk in the microwave and got two cups of hot milk. He took one more empty cup, and dissolved the cocoa powder in that cup to make two cups of delicious cocoa. Up till here, it’s the same as what Kobato-kun suggested in the beginning. After that, he poured one third of the cocoa in each cup into the empty cup. That way, he gets three cups of delicious cocoa.”

I see. However...

But Osanai-san voiced my rebuttal on her own.

“However, if that was the case, the cups would have been filled up only to the sixty-six percent mark, while the three cups we got were all filled to the brim...”

“If you knew that it was impossible, then why did you even say all that?”

Osanai-san face turned red upon hearing Chisato-senpai’s reasonable criticism.

“I was just trying to fill the silence...”

That’s heroic. Too heroic.

As my heart was moved into tears, Chisato-senpai suddenly made an exclamation.

“Ah! I got it! That’s it, it’s exactly like what the midget said!”

“Midget...”

Osanai-san muttered, apparently dissatisfied with the nickname. Not caring about that, Chisato-senpai spoke excitedly.

“With that method, he would get three cups of cocoa using three cups. All that is left is the volume, meaning that he made three cups of thick cocoa in advance, then added milk to them.”

I immediately objected.

“That would cool down the cocoa. The cocoa that we received was so hot that we couldn’t immediately drink it.”

“He could have put them in the microwave, then. They’d become hot.”

...Well, it’s certainly not impossible to make three cups of delicious cocoa in three containers using this method. However...

“So he heated up two cups of milk, made cocoa, split it into three cups, then heated the cocoa up again. That takes too many steps.”

“He was challenging us.”

"I don't think so. I can understand if he had asked us to guess how he made the cocoa, but I can't imagine him going through all that trouble for something that he wasn't even trying to show off."

Chisato-senpai groaned, then fell silent. Once again, she folded her arms.

"With this, I can also make three cocoas with three cups, but it really pisses me off that it'd be less efficient than how that idiot Kengo did it. Ah, seriously, why does cocoa have to come in powder form!"

Those words came out as just an outburst of frustration, but they got me thinking.

"I see! What the heck, I might have misunderstood."

"Hm? Misunderstood?"

"Yes. I assumed that Kengo made cocoa from cocoa powder, but what if there was some kind of cocoa solution that I didn't know of?"

Chisato-senpai's shoulders drooped. She languidly walked over the fridge and opened it. On the other side of the door, below the eggs and beside some packs of milk, was a cocoa-colored bag.

"That's the cocoa powder. It's the normal kind."

Osanai-san added, "It's Van Houten."

She was right. That was certainly normal cocoa powder.

"So why is it in the fridge?"

"It's to keep it dry, right? That's what I think, anyway. That was what Kengo did, so there shouldn't be any deep thought behind it."

Ah, I see. I've heard that rice crackers don't go soft if you store them in the fridge. Although I feel like I've also heard that that doesn't apply for refrigerators today.

Anyway, now we know that the ingredients of the cocoa did not possess some kind of secret that cannot possibly be known to others. Hmm, I think that means we're stuck.

Hesitatingly, Osanai-san made a suggestion.

"If you don't know and want to know... isn't it better to ask Doujima-kun?"

Chisato-senpai's response was immediate.

"Definitely not."

I couldn't declare it so clearly, but I held similar feelings. While it was partly for fun, we'd come all this way, only to get stuck here. Is there really no breakthrough we can make? It's not like Kengo used magic, either. We need to find a way to compress four containers into three. Is there any magic that can make a bullet hit two people? The question I posed earlier, "Given three cups of hot milk, it is necessary for some mortar-like equipment for mixing the cocoa powder to exist, but why is there no such equipment?" is framed weirdly; it seems to hold some kind of unnecessary preconceptions.

Osanai-san looked at me while I was deep in thought.

At the same time, Chisato-senpai paced around the kitchen.



“Why is the sink dry? The cups and spoons are dry, too. Did he wipe off all drops of water from them? But he left a spoon...”

The sink is dry. For someone in the same household to be so fixated on that point, there should be no dishwasher that we cannot see.

I stared at my feet and submerged into my thoughts. Not because I was accompanying Chisato-senpai, and of course, not because of any rivalry towards Kengo, but because thinking was fun.

The sink had to be wet, because it had to be used to wash and dry the fourth container, for the purpose of making us believe that it had not been used for making cocoa. However, it was impossible that Kengo would wipe off the entire sink just to camouflage it from us. If he hadn't used the sink, then the fourth container would still be wet, but if it were still wet, there was no way that it wouldn't be noticed.

...Or not?

“If it's wet, there's no way it wouldn't be noticed.”

I tried vocalizing my thoughts, because I felt that I could organize my thoughts that way.

“...Kobato-kun.”

“Basically, the problem can be rephrased as such: ‘Making three cups of delicious cocoa produces four wet items. What is the fourth item?’ There are three coffee cups wet with cocoa. If the other item was washed, it would be wet with water. If it wasn't washed...”

There's no mistaking it. Exactly, this is it. Now, the problem has been properly rephrased. The answer is now clear.

I raised my head spiritedly.

“Chisato-senpai!”

“W-What?”

“Please open the refrigerator.”

While bewildered by my sudden burst of vigor, Chisato-senpai complied. Will this be fine? Given the time taken, I believe that evidence should still remain.

“I've opened it. What should I do now?”

I pointed to one part of the refrigerator.

“Please hold that pack of milk.”

As I requested, Chisato-senpai touched the pack of milk, and suddenly drew back her finger. “Ah!” a sound leaked out her mouth as she felt an unexpected sensation.

“This is...”

“It's hot, isn't it?”

I was hit with a wave of liberation, then a sense of achievement. I felt a smile forming on my face, but repressed it.

Kengo put the entire pack of milk into the microwave and heated it up. Since the microwave can bake a cake, it should be large enough. Something surrounded in metal will not be heated up in a microwave, but if you think about it logically, paper will not block microwaves. What is the fourth wet item? The answer is the pack of milk itself.

I looked up at the ceiling, and let out a deep sigh.

Chisato-senpai raised her fist and shouted.

“That sloppy idiot!”

#### 4

Kengo was still moody when we stood next to each other in front of the long toilet. He asked me what I was doing, to which I responded truthfully that I was talking with Chisato-senpai. He followed up by asking what we were talking about, and I told him that it was about solving a puzzle.

After that, we had some safe, friendly conversation. Kengo wouldn't bring out a dangerous topic with Osanai-san around. Not wanting to outstay our welcome, we took our leave.

It was still too early to be considered evening when we started the return journey. I recalled Chisato-senpai's words.

---*You're good!* I always thought you were smart when you were a little kid in elementary school, though.

---*Kengo's worried about you, although he's strangely reserved and doesn't say what he wants to.*

---*But it seems like it's just needless worry. You're totally fine.*

---*You're good at playing along, huh. You were really immersed in the problem back there.*

---*Well, I hope you two get along. He's just my idiotic little brother, though.*

Good at playing along, and being immersed. Both of these are traits unbecoming of a petit bourgeois.

Osanai-san hadn't spoke at all, and didn't even try to make eye contact with me. Did I say something horrible, or did I do something that put her in a bad mood? The hesitance of a little citizen finally returned to me.

However, I actually knew why Osanai-san wasn't saying anything.

We were now right in front of her apartment, and we would soon split up with just a solitary word of farewell. If I went off without saying anything, it would become all the more awkward on Monday. I called out at her small, retreating figure.

“Hey, Osanai-san.”

“...”

“It’ll be fine. We won’t do something like this ever again. It’s a Sunday, so we can think of this as letting loose for a bit.”

With a flutter of her long skirt, Osanai-san turned around. And then she smiled. It was a smile that contained no energy, although her smiles were usually weak, anyway.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Osanai-san...”

“We have a promise, but that doesn’t place any restriction on what kind of person you will become. The Kobato-kun today was just like the one when we first met. If it’s more fun over there, you can just become that Kobato-kun. I don’t mind.”

Naturally, that was true. The promise of a mutually beneficial relationship we had was not so high in priority that we had to drop everything for it. Becoming a little citizen was our shared aim, but if one of us wanted to drop out, there would be no reason to stop them.

However, I didn’t want to drop out of our agreement just yet. I replied.

“It’s a Sunday. I just played around too much. That is all. I’ll stop showing off my wisdom.”

For a brief moment, Osanai-san looked at me. Just when I was starting to think that she was observing me, she nodded.

And then Osanai-san disappeared into her apartment.

As for me, I decided to walk around on the streets for a while more. I could certainly use a good stroll by the river.

## Chapter 4: A Swelling in the Mind<sup>18</sup>

### 1

What is the area where the Calvin-Benson cycle, also known as a dark reaction, which uses the substrates of a chloroplast, occur?<sup>19</sup> That was the question I had to solve. I was pretty sure I'd memorized it, but I just couldn't recall. In other words, I hadn't memorized it well.

All the other blanks were mostly filled. I was a little unsure as to whether the four ATGC proteins in DNA were nucleotides, nucleotides, or something else entirely, and there were some multiple choice questions that I'd decided to leave to luck and instinct, but I'd answered all the other questions. The only one left was the question about the location of the Calvin-Benson cycle. I would probably be able to recall the entire word if I just knew the first letter. A, i, u, ... no, there's not enough time. I should start from the N row. Na, ni, nu, ... this is meaningless. Ah, I was so sure I had that memorized, too. Work, hippocampus! Link up, neurons! While we're at it, it'd be nice if time stopped, too.

However, time, as well as my hippocampus and neurons, did not work as I wanted them to. The bell rang, signifying the end of the designated time.

"Time's up. Put down your pencils, and pass your papers to the front."

The invigilator called out. During the examination, the seating order was based on alphabetical order, and following that, my seat was at the back of the classroom. Having no choice, I stopped and handed in my answer paper which still had one blank. I wasn't exactly aiming for a high score, but I was certainly frustrated that my memory had failed me.

Anyway, with Science 1 complete, all mid-term examinations were over. As if having waited impatiently for their chance, someone in the class pushed a window wide open. A refreshing, comforting breeze blew in. Well, nothing I can do now that it's over. It was 12 in the afternoon. I hadn't pulled an all-nighter to study, but I'd stayed up quite late last night. I suppose I'll hurry home and take an afternoon nap.

I returned home and took a light lunch. After changing into comfortable clothes, I lay down on my bed. Half-asleep, I wondered if I would be able to drift off to sleep, when I was roused by the ringing of the telephone. Almost thirty minutes had passed. My mind was clear, as if I'd just awakened from a deep sleep. In this state, I could easily recall terms like stroma and stromatolite<sup>20</sup>. Anyway, stroma is the answer for the question about the Calvin-Benson cycle. Too late to do anything about it, though. But more importantly, I should answer the telephone.

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<sup>18</sup> This is part of an old saying: "Keeping silent is like having a swelling in the mind", meaning that if you don't say whatever you want to say, you will be left feeling uneasy and unsatisfied.

<sup>19</sup> The answer, according to Wikipedia, is the stroma, which is the fluid-filled area of a chloroplast outside the thylakoid membranes, although I can't say I understand what all that means.

<sup>20</sup> Stromatolites are layered sedimentary formations that are created by photosynthetic cyanobacteria. These microorganisms produce adhesive compounds that cement sand and other rocky materials to form mineral "microbial mats". In turn, these mats build up layer by layer, growing gradually over time.

With light footsteps, I moved to the living room and answered the ringing telephone. The caller was Osanai-san.

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Yes, um...”

Her voice was devoid of energy. Osanai-san’s voice probably sounds weak to people not used to it, but there was quite a subtle difference with her usual voice.

“Do you have anything on later?”

“Nope, nothing.”

“I see.”

I could hear her exhale, seemingly relieved.

“Um, could you come with me for a while?”

That’s rare. Osanai-san actually called me out when both of us had returned home already. Well, the exams were over, and I’d already shrugged off my drowsiness. Prepared to comply with almost anything, I answered brightly.

“Sure, where?”

“Umm...”

A weird silence followed. Osanai-san then spoke in a voice that seemed like it could disappear at any moment.

“Humpty Dumpty.”

What? I instinctively put more energy in the hand holding the receiver.

“If I remember correctly, Humpty Dumpty’s the place where...”

“Don’t say it... Please don’t say anything.”

I see, so there’s some circumstances regarding this. There’s no helping it, then. Osanai-san was the one who’d sealed Humpty Dumpty away. If she’s decided to go there, it’s not my place to stop her.

“Alright, I won’t ask. So, where and when do we meet?”

“How about three o’clock in front of the shop?”

I glanced at the clock. Looks like there’s still time. I consented, and hung up.

After changing and tidying myself, I left my house while dragging my bicycle. The weather was quite troublesome, being too hot for spring clothes and too cold for summer wear. On the way, I felt a little uneasy about the contents of my wallet, so I stopped at a bank. Even with that detour, as well as my relaxed pace of traveling, I reached the small shop made out of red bricks before the appointed time. With the bricks surrounded by a thick growth of camellia, it looked like a house of candy. The chimney sticking out of the triangular roof also made it look all the more lovely. Well, it’s a place that a little citizen guy like myself cannot enter on his own.

By the way, it’s a cake shop. I studied the shop’s signboard. “Humpty Dumpty” was written in yellow letters that seemed to pop out of the sign, causing me to let out a chuckle. “Cake Shop Humpty

Dumpty”. In traditional Japanese, it would be “Western Confectionary – Spilt Water Will Not Return to the Tray”<sup>21</sup>. It was a name with enough impact to make you hesitate and think, “Just one bite?” The shop with the spring-exclusive strawberry tarts was called Alice, but I can assure you that the owners of all dessert shops in this town are not all Dodgson<sup>22</sup> fans. Those are the only two shops with an Alice-related name, to my knowledge. Strictly speaking, Humpty Dumpty originated from *Mother Goose*, not *Through the Looking-Glass*, but it would be interesting if there were a shop called “Sweets Shop Jabberwock”.

I could clearly tell that the shop was focused on a strong, sweet taste, paired with other flavors like butter and brandy. Instead of producing a flat taste, it strikes an esoteric balance, and thus it is Osanai-san’s favorite shop, by a long shot. However, she liked it too much that she ate too much, and firmly resolved never to enter the shop again. Incidentally, I was also with her on the day she made that resolution. The volume of cake she polished off was certainly larger than the capacity of her stomach.

Recalling that moment, I laughed.

“You’re laughing alone...”

A voice came from behind. I couldn’t even hear the sound of her bicycle stopping or her footsteps. I turned around with a smile on my face.

“Ah, how long were you here for?”

“I just arrived.”

Osanai-san’s expression was stiff. There’s definitely something going on here, I thought.

“Let’s go.”

With just those two words, Osanai-san quickly walked off towards the shop. Good grief. I was about to follow behind her, when I noticed a small flyer pasted on the door. A cake buffet today from two to five o’clock, for 1,500 yen per person.

I see, so it’s a buffet...

There was no background music playing in the store.

“I’ll have a standard chiffon and a coffee.”

So she’s warming up by starting with a chiffon? That was what I thought, but...

“...and a mille-feuille, and a panna cotta, and a strawberry shortcake.”

She’s going all out right off the bat, huh.

For the time being, I ordered a coffee. Since I was accompanying Osanai-san, I was obliged to eat cake too, so I also ordered a Mont Blanc. I probably wouldn’t be able to eat two of those, so I

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<sup>21</sup> “Cake Shop Humpty Dumpty” is in katakana, which is used for borrowed words, but “Western Confectionary – Spilt Water Will Not Return to the Tray” is written only in kanji and hiragana. By the way, the phrase “Spilt Water Will Not Return to the Tray” means “you can’t unscramble a scrambled egg”. Sorry, just had to squeeze in an egg-related saying.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Lutwidge Dodgson is Lewis Carroll’s less well-known real name.

ordered it à la carte, rather than as part of the buffet. Only when we reached the table for two did I realize that it was not the season for chestnuts, so I should have ordered something more seasonal. Perhaps Osanai-san had considered that when she added the mille-feuille and strawberry shortcake. What a deep thought process.

That said, the Mont Blanc that was brought over was not inedible. However, as expected, one of those was enough to make me feel stuffed. I drank my coffee in small sips. Osanai-san had already finished off the panna cotta, and was busy cutting up the pie pastry of the mille-feuille. She first collapsed it on its side, then stuck the knife in vertically. After that, she pierced through the piece of pie pastry with a fork. She chewed lightly and wordlessly, with more power concentrated in her knife and fork than seemingly necessary.

I asked as a smile formed on my face.

“Did something happen?”

“Nope.”

Osanai-san gave an immediate response as she poked at the fragments of mille-feuille. Of course, there was something she wanted to talk about. That was why she called me. Osanai-san is not a person cute enough to enter the shop alone, but it didn’t seem like she was going to talk about it easily. Apparently, I hadn’t given it enough consideration. I took another sip of my coffee.

“...How was the test?”

I meant that as a lead to whatever was on Osanai-san’s mind. I thought that her tongue would become more slippery if she participated in some idle chatter, so I brought up a seasonal topic. However, as soon as I finished my question, Osanai-san’s fork stopped moving. Her gaze, which had been focused on the mille-feuille on the plate, moved slightly upwards for an instant.

“I think it went pretty well.”

“I see. That’s good.”

“But then...”

After moving the last fragment of mille-feuille to her mouth, Osanai-san pulled the chiffon towards herself without a pause.

“Science 1 was a little...”

“Oh, really?” I interjected, “What a coincidence. There was something I was unable to recall in Science 1.”

“Me too, but I managed to remember it in the end.”

With one stroke, she pushed the knife into the chiffon, which was a little larger than the other cakes.

“It was the question about the enzyme that converts peptone and proteins to polypeptide. The word ‘peptidase’<sup>23</sup> appeared in my head, and I couldn’t think of anything else.”

“I really thought of the correct answer, right before the test ended. But at that moment...”

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<sup>23</sup> The correct answer is pepsin, which is a kind of peptidase.

As if frustrated by that, Osanai-san cut the chiffon, which was still too big to be eaten, into two clean pieces. The two slices of chiffon tilted unsteadily and fell onto the plate.

“Some glass broke.”

“Huh?”

With her fork, she stabbed one of the pieces of chiffon that had fallen on its side and delivered it to her mouth.

“An energy drink bottle fell from one of the lockers at the back of the classroom and shattered, making a really loud sound... and that made me forget all about the question. We had a tough time cleaning up after the test, too, although the bottle was empty.”

“Yeah, that must be tough.”

Osanai-san looked at me again with upturned eyes. This time, she seemed to be studying my reaction, fixedly. Judging that I wasn’t about to continue, she let out a small sigh.

“That’s why I felt sad... so I searched for you, Kobato-kun.”

There seemed to be a leap in her logic.

However, after some thinking, I realized that not giving enough in the way of explanations is not the same as having a leap in logic. Anyway, Osanai-san didn’t look for me because she was sad. I’m willing to bet anything that she did that because she was annoyed. I definitely can’t say that out loud, though.

Instead, I played dumb.

“I see. Were you searching for me since the test ended?”

“Yup.”

Wow, seriously? That could mean that Osanai-san had gone without lunch. They say that there is a separate intestine for alcohol, a separate brain for Go, and a separate stomach for desserts, but what of an absolutely famished Osanai-san taking on the challenge of a cake buffet? That would be a really interesting situation. But more importantly...

“If you were looking for me, you should have sent an email to my mobile phone.”

Osanai-san replied reproachfully.

“I did, but you didn’t reply.”

“Eh?”

I hurriedly checked my pockets. It wasn’t there. Come to think of it, I don’t remember removing it from my uniform pocket. So was it there the whole time...? Oh, now I remember.

“Ah, my phone’s at school.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, the battery went flat before the test, so I put it in the table, but I forgot to take it back.”

“I see.”



Osanai-san placed the knife and fork down, and looked up.

“...Are you going to retrieve it?”

Hmm...

Well, I suppose. I nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll be off for a while.”

“I’ll be eating cake here, then.”

With those words, she returned to the slicing of her chiffon. It is indeed interesting to see her indulge in sweet desserts, but I should finish up what I have to do.

It should be simple. All I need to do is investigate the scene.

## 2

Humpty Dumpty was located a short distance to the northeast of Funa High School, although Funa High was already at the north side of town. I could get there within five minutes if I were on a bicycle.

With the midterm examinations ended, club activities had resumed. The baseball team and track team were back to training on the sports grounds, and the shoe locker area was still open.

Anyway, I headed for the fourth floor to search for my mobile phone in my classroom. It was there, in the location I’d suspected. I replaced the battery, and checked my email.

*“Let’s eat cake.”*

*“Where are you?”*

*“Is your phone out of battery?”*

*“Kobato-kun?”*

...I’ve done a horrible thing.

After placing my phone in a pocket, I got started on my other reason for coming here. Osanai-san was in class 1-C. Feeling the awkwardness of being in school wearing plain clothes, I prayed that I wouldn’t run into anyone as I walked down the corridor.

Perhaps the prayer worked, for the corridor was completely devoid of people, as was the classroom. “Sorrrry for intruding,” I jokingly called out while entering.

Naturally, the classroom had the exact same layout as mine. It had a blackboard, teacher’s lectern, teacher’s table, a collection of desks and chairs, as well as a locker for cleaning equipment. That, however, didn’t stop me from feeling a weird sensation.

Entering another classroom without an invitation seemed somewhat shady, and because of that, I felt like I was doing something wrong. I wondered if I felt that way because I was a petit bourgeois, but that didn’t seem to be right. I could remember feeling awkward when entering a classroom I

didn't belong to, even before I became a petit bourgeois. It must be some psychological reaction, then.

I quickly scanned my surroundings. I did not want anyone to see me like this, and especially not Kengo. He would probably laugh and say, "That's the old Kobato I know." I spoke to myself for assurance.

"...It's fine, I'm not causing trouble to anyone here."

As proven by my thoughts when my actions were not being witnessed by others, I really did not have enough devotion to the petit bourgeois lifestyle.

There might be some evidence left over that could shed some light on the breaking of the bottle during the exam. If my hypothesis was correct, there had been enough time to clean up the evidence, but that didn't mean that it had been properly dealt with. If the culprit was conceited or negligent, some evidence may have been left behind.

Yes, there was a culprit.

Osanai-san had also noticed that fact.

The classrooms in Funa High were floored with linoleum. The lockers were also not that high up. Even if a drink bottle fell from the highest point of the locker, I can't imagine that it would break. A bottle that would break after falling for only about one meter onto linoleum flooring would probably be considered too dangerous and wouldn't be allowed to circulate. It would be a different story if the bottle had been struck, or if the floor were made out of concrete.

So why did it break... it is a fact that the bottle broke, after all.

Firstly, the cap must be off. Based on the experience I'd gained from pranks I played when I was young, there is a clear difference in intensity when the bottle has a cap and when it doesn't. Also, it is necessary for the bottle to be damaged. Having some cracks would be good, but it's quite difficult to get cracks at the exact required spots. It would probably be a lot easier to glue together a bottle that has been broken.

In other words, the bottle did not fall naturally, and also did not break naturally. If the broken state of the bottle was artificial, so must be the falling of the bottle.

Someone had set it up so that the bottle would fall and break during the exam. Osanai-san realized that was the case, and was pissed off that someone had caused a hindrance during her exam, which was why she broke her restriction on Humpty Dumpty.

"So that she can go on a binge."

I whispered to myself, and laughed at my own statement.

However, Osanai-san didn't know who would do such a thing. That was why she invited me to Humpty Dumpty as well. But no matter how annoyed she was, she couldn't call me over and tell me about it due to the promise we made as little citizens. Even so, she wanted to call me, bring up the topic, and find the right time to explain the situation... what would we do about it afterwards?

Well, I'm here in class C investigating, so I'm certainly getting on Osanai-san's plans to some extent.

I walked one round in the classroom, but couldn't find anything. The classroom, which had the doors and windows closed, was getting a little warm. Spring was ending soon.

I wouldn't be particularly troubled even if I didn't find any evidence, but I walked another round in the classroom anyway.

I looked around, giving special attention to the desks. The desks of Funa High were perfectly normal desks built for school use. They were made of a thin metal board on top of an assembly of pipes, forming a container, with another board fixed on top.

I found what I was looking for on my second round. It seemed that the culprit had indeed been conceited or negligent.

It was at the front part of a desk, hidden by the top board<sup>24</sup>. A few pieces of cellophane tape had been stuck where it couldn't be seen by a person standing up. Some words had been written on the tape with an oil-based pen.

It read:

*Amylase – Starch → Maltose*

*Maltase – Maltose → Glucose*

*Sucrase – Sucrose → Glucose and fructose*

And so on. It even included "*Trypsin – Peptone and proteins → Polypeptides*", that Osanai-san couldn't remember.

Satisfied, I tore off the cellophane tape, rolled it into a ball and stored it in my pocket. I'll dispose of it at a random spot later.

With light pedalling, I headed for Humpty Dumpty again.

Basically, it went like this. It is a fact that an easy-to-break bottle was set up to fall during the exam. What did the person who did the setup, or the culprit, have to gain from this?

During the exam, the bottle fell and broke. What would happen afterwards?

If the bottle had been filled with gasoline or some kind of acid, it would be treated as an act of terror, but the bottle was empty. Thus, there is only one thing that would happen: a loud noise.

What would happen if a loud noise sounded during an exam?

It would surprise Osanai-san, causing her to momentarily forget the name of the enzyme that decomposes proteins, which she has almost recalled. That causes the average score of science 1 for freshmen to fall, in turn raising the adjusted standard deviation score of the culprit... but if they were aiming for that, the culprit is prescient. If so, they would have predicted the exam questions, rather than sabotage Osanai-san.

Besides that?

Osanai-san would not be the only one to be surprised by the loud noise. If a noise suddenly breaks out in a classroom where silenced has been maintained, lots of students would be surprised as well. What would happen if they're surprised by a loud noise? They would forget the name of the enzyme

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<sup>24</sup> It wasn't exactly clear in the description, but I imagine the top board extends over the container part of the table, so there is some sort of overhang.

that decomposes proteins... no, enough with that line of thought. I think they would subconsciously turn to look at the source of the noise, or in other words, the back of the classroom. And that would be allowed. To put it more formally, the invigilator would allow students to openly look around during the exam.

And if they can look around?

If students can openly look around, they can't be faulted even if they look at the beauties of nature. And there is nothing a student would want to look at other than a cheat sheet.

After being surprised by the sound, or pretending to be surprised by the sound, the culprit could turn to look towards the back of the classroom for at least two or three seconds. They wouldn't be able to look for more than five seconds. However, for the sciences, and for our level of biological studies in particular, memorization is key, so five seconds of looking at a cheat sheet is more than satisfactory. By the way, I'd considered the possibility of the culprit getting the answer through gestures by someone else instead of from a cheat sheet, but it is too difficult to signal an answer in five minutes, and it would attract too much attention, so it is impossible.

Using a cheat sheet would be the safest method. The culprit would not be blamed for looking behind, and the cheat sheet had been set in a position on someone else's table that is also a blind spot for everyone else, so it would not be noticed. It isn't difficult to understand the culprit's feelings. Not wanting to get a bad score in the first exam after entering the school is a natural sentiment, even for someone who may not necessarily be a petit bourgeois. It is a cheap trick, though.

All that is left is to figure out the trick behind making the bottle fall at the right time. Well, that's not difficult, either. All of us have phones. The culprit could have hidden a phone in his pocket and secretly pushed a button to send an email at the right time, with the receiving phone in the locker. The vibrations caused by receiving the email caused the bottle to lose balance and fall. Of course, that is only a possibility. Ice or dry ice would have worked as well.

The light at the pedestrian crossing in front of me turned red. I looked at my watch. A lot more time had passed than I'd expected. Even Osanai-san could have left the shop already. I sent her an email.

*"Are you still at the cake shop?"*

The reply came before the light turned green.

*"I'm having pumpkin pudding."*

That means that she was still unsatisfied after polishing off the chiffon and shortcake. Perfect.

### 3

Osanai-san was sitting at the same table, but with different cakes in front of her, none of which seemed to be a pumpkin pudding. It seemed that she'd demolished the pumpkin pudding in the time it took me to get from that junction to Humpty Dumpty. The remaining cakes were a baked cheesecake, a tart, and a tiramisu. I couldn't tell what kind of tart it was just by looking at it.

Approaching the table, I instinctively asked.

“Can you still eat?”

Osanai-san’s face clouded over as she shook her head weakly.

“I wanted to eat the marjolaine<sup>25</sup>, but I thought that would be impossible.”

That means that she probably had confidence in finishing everything on the plates in front of her. Seriously, that’s the attitude that people who want to take on a buffet should have. Osanai-san quietly pushed a fork into the baked cheesecake, which had a glossy layer of jam on its surface.

“...So?”

Osanai-san murmured. Her voice was so soft that I couldn’t immediately tell that it was a question directed at me. Finally realizing that she was getting right to the point and asking me about the results, I showed a vague smile.

“What are you asking about?”

It was just for a moment, but Osanai-san glared at me, as if to say, “Don’t play dumb with me, you bastard!” However, in the next moment, her gaze immediately dropped to the soft cake.

“What I’m asking about, you say?”

A brief silence followed. The clink of the fork touching the plate sounded extraordinarily loud. She moved the piece she just cut out to her mouth, then remained still. Seeing that I wouldn’t fold, Osanai-san sighed.

“...It’s nothing.”

Of course she would say that. If she mentioned that she wanted to know the culprit who caused the drink bottle to fall, she would be breaking our agreement. She might have been planning to get me to make a deduction if all went well, but it wasn’t that easy. As long as we had the promise, all I could do was to listen to her complaints.

Osanai-san and I had a promise, to let each other escape. I’d decided to escape so that I could stop showing off my wisdom. Similarly, Osanai-san also had a reason for wanting to escape. Kengo had been annoyed at me for having changed, but Osanai-san was not like this in the past. Just like me, Osanai-san had sworn to become a little citizen. And a little citizen wouldn’t hold a grudge, even if someone had caused a disruption in their exam for selfish reasons. Osanai-san had indeed changed.

Her capacity for cake hadn’t changed, though. It might have even increased, actually.

After that, Osanai-san’s lips remained sealed. Of course, that was just a figure of speech; in reality, she opened and closed her mouth multiple times to put in and swallow all sorts of things. Looking on from the side, I observed that her pace had increased. Osanai-san showed no emotion, and was mechanically moving her knife, fork and spoon. Humpty Dumpty. Spilt water will not return to the tray. Well, for Osanai-san, somewhere with a little more meat might have been better.

I ordered another cup of coffee from the waitress, then took pleasure in looking at Osanai-san modestly enjoying herself. Eventually, she finished the last bit of tiramisu, wiped her mouth with her own sepia-colored handkerchief, and muttered a line.

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<sup>25</sup> Another name for dacquoise, which is a dessert cake made with layers of almond and hazelnut meringue and whipped cream or buttercream on a buttery biscuit base.

“Keeping silent is like...”

Yeah, that is certainly an apt phrase to describe this situation. I grinned and completed the phrase.

“A swelling in the mind, right?”

We left Humpty Dumpty. We’d both ridden our bicycles here, but Osanai-san felt like walking, so I followed her as we dragged our bicycles along. As for why she wanted to walk... well, I don’t need to spell it out. Osanai-san would probably have to skip dinner later.

Neither I nor Osanai-san could head straight home from Humpty Dumpty, which was located a little away from the north side of town. There was a small river in the way, so we would have to cross a bridge no matter what. We decided to reach the city area by walking along the national highway and taking a southbound road that passes through the area near Funa High.

Osanai-san was being quite taciturn, so I felt like I should say something. Since I’m not exactly someone who can easily think of uplifting words to say, all I could manage was, “You sure are holding it in.”

Hearing that, she looked up at me and nodded. Then, she smiled and gave her reply.

“If it’s just like this, I’m fine...”

How admirable.

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was a little before half past four. We’d entered the shop at around three o’clock, meaning that Osanai-san had spent one and a half hours in Humpty Dumpty. She probably hadn’t spent the entire time eating at that speed, though.

The highway, on which we were heading west, finally folded to the south. We approached the traffic light of that L-shaped curve, or to be more precise, the T-junction, since there was also a narrow road that extended to the north. Since we didn’t have to cross the road, we ignored the traffic junction and turned to the left.

As we were doing so, Osanai-san suddenly raised her head, a fiery look in her eyes. I instinctively asked, “W-What’s wrong?”

She responded in a sharp voice.

“Sakagami!”

“Eh?”

I followed her gaze to the other side of the highway. A metallic silver bicycle zipped by at a dangerously high speed. I couldn’t see it clearly, but was that...?

Osanai-san grinded her back teeth vigorously. She turned the bicycle she’d been dragging along by a 180 degree angle, quickly straddled it and put her feet on the pedals. I immediately shouted out.

“Osanai-san, don’t!”

The light at the pedestrian crossing was red. With a high amount of traffic on the highway in the evening, it couldn’t be crossed without a pedestrian crossing. In the first place, what could Osanai-

san do even if she caught up to him? Immediately realizing that, she stopped her bicycle after moving for just a few meters.

“That’s my bicycle...”

All we could do was watch Sakagami’s rapidly retreating figure. Sakagami headed straight towards the T-junction and went into the narrow road leading north. The road immediately reached a hill and became a steep slope. We could just make out Sakagami get off the bicycle and push the bicycle up the slope.

Osanai-san seemed to be staring intently at Sakagami. I was facing her back, so I couldn’t see the expression on her face. Being able to recognize Sakagami in one glance was remarkable, but not forgetting Sakagami’s face showed that Osanai-san didn’t have enough devotion, either.

Sakagami pushed the bicycle up the hill until he eventually disappeared from sight. We couldn’t just stand in the middle of the pavement forever, so I timidly called out to my companion.

“Osanai-san... I understand how you feel, but let’s go. We can’t catch up to him anyway.”

She slowly turned around to face me.

Her face, unexpectedly, had a smile on it. In that state, she replied.

“You understand how I feel...? Kobato-kun, you know what I’m thinking of right now?”

Ah, Osanai-san, that’s impossible. Also, your smile is becoming tight.

As I said nothing, Osanai-san continued talking to herself.

“Yeah, I suppose today was a good day. The tests ended, I had cake, and now I know what happened to my bicycle. What a good day it was...”

Well, if she says that, I know what to say.

“You’re right. I hope tomorrow’s like this, too.”

But Osanai-san was lost for words after hearing my simple reply. She looked like she was about to say something, but forced it back into her mouth and just smiled.

While looking at her painful smile, I had a thought. I wondered if not speaking your mind could interfere with the next day, which was supposed to be a nice day.

In more ways than one.

## Chapter 5: The Heart of A Wolf

### 1

It was the next day.

With my modest bento laid out on my desk, some noise suddenly drifted from the school speakers. The broadcasting switch was turned on. Since I was well-behaved and didn't belong to a club, I couldn't imagine that I was in any way related to the announcement that would follow, so I paid it no heed as I separated my disposable chopsticks. However, while the announcement was indeed directly unrelated to me, it was still related to me by proxy.

"Osanai Yuki-kun from Class 1-C, please come to the Student Guidance Office. I repeat. Osanai Yuki-kun from Class 1-C, please come to the Student Guidance Office."

I don't know what she was like in the past, but the Osanai-san now is a humble person. She doesn't earn the ire of others, and doesn't transgress or go against what is right<sup>26</sup>. Even so, she is not overly punctilious, and even seems to have a goal of living every day plainly, without drawing attention. I also call myself a little citizen, but I'm no match to Osanai-san's devotion in that respect. If my immersion in a group is "moderate", Osanai-san's would be "invisible".

Even with Osanai-san being like that, this would actually be the second time she is called to the Student Guidance Office. We haven't been in this school for long, so Osanai-san would be nothing but disappointed for being called for Student Guidance twice already. That said, I do have an idea of what she's being called for.

She might need my assistance for escaping. I quickly finished up my bento and waited for Osanai-san near the Student Guidance Office.

It seemed that she'd already entered the room and was undergoing Student Guidance. After less than ten minutes, the door slid open and out came Osanai-san. She bowed to the people in the office, and noticed me as she turned around.

"Hey."

"Ah... Kobato-kun."

We walked side by side, but to be precise, Osanai-san seemed to be half a step behind. As usual, she was looking down, but it was not because of her wariness, and because she had just received a shock, for her eyes were spacing out.

"Was it about the bicycle?"

I asked, causing Osanai-san to instantly look up, as if I'd hit the mark. However, her eyes instantly dropped to the ground again, and she nodded.

"What happened?"

"Um... They said that it was found."

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<sup>26</sup> This is from the Analects of Confucius, with the whole sentence being, "At seventy, I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing what was right."



“Wow! That’s great!”

I said that brightly with a smile, but Osanai-san didn’t give so much as a grin. Since she had been so concerned about it earlier, I could understand that it wasn’t just “found”. I was thinking of pressing her for more information, but she continued on her own accord.

“There’s a slope if you go straight where the highway branches right at Kitahamae. My bicycle was discarded on the other side of the slope.”

Where the highway branches right at Kitahamae. To be precise, that’s the area where the highway from the south branches east. Going straight from that would mean the narrow path at the T junction. Thinking about it, I immediately recalled what had happened the day before.

“Isn’t that the place where we saw Sakagami yesterday?”

“Yes... If I’d chased after him, I could have gotten my bicycle back yesterday.”

Osanai-san said that with a hollow voice, showing that she herself didn’t believe that she could have done that.

“Someone made a phone call, saying that it’s a nuisance that a bicycle with the seal of Funa High was discarded there. So, they were mad at me and said that I didn’t manage my bicycle well.”

I smiled wryly.

“You’ve heard that before, right?”

“Yeah.”

With the previous case, the Student Guidance Department should have known that the bicycle with Osanai-san’s bicycle license seal had been stolen. It was totally unfair for them to chide her for not managing her bicycle well. However, Osanai-san did not care at all about the unfairness, and that was only natural. Taking injustice without complaints can be said to be the first rule of being a petit bourgeois.

Adding the assumption that Osanai-san’s lack of cheeriness was related to the bicycle, only one thing came to mind.

“So, the bicycle was mostly broken?”

She glanced up at me for a while, then nodded.

“The person who called the school said that it had been run over by a car. I’m not sure how damaged it is, though...”

I don’t know the details, but if an unmanned bicycle was run over, that would make it a property damage accident, and I believe Osanai-san could even request for compensation. In the first place, I’m a hundred percent sure that the person who made the phone call did so to escape from the responsibility.

It was noisy at school in the afternoon. In a voice that was almost lost in the surrounding clamor, Osanai-san spoke.

“I’ll collect it after school. Could you lend me a hand?”

Our promise did not extend beyond securing a path of escape. Even so, I quickly accepted the request.

## 2

After lessons ended, we left the school.

“You know...”

“...Yeah?”

“It would be great if your bicycle can be fixed.”

“...Yeah.”

The conversation that passed between us was devoid of life or color. Even our eyes, which would usually be looking about restlessly at our surroundings, were fixated at our feet. I didn't have anything to say, and even if I did so, it would be like pushing aside the curtains at the front of a store, or like driving a stake into sawdust. In other words, it would be completely useless.

I walked beside Osanai-san as she pushed the bicycle that she'd bought after her bicycle had been stolen. We walked on the path that we'd passed the day before. As we neared the outskirts of town, we started seeing fields sandwiched between houses. The pavement also became more narrow, causing the two of us to block the entire path when we were walking side by side. Noticing an elderly woman on a bicycle approaching us from the back, I went behind Osanai-san to let her pass, and continued staying behind afterwards. Walking side by side without saying anything made me feel ill at ease.

We headed straight at the junction where the National Highway split east, towards the small northward path and approached the hill we'd seen the day before. Sakagami had ridden the bicycle until some point in the hill, where he dismounted and started pulling it along. Osanai-san, on the other hand, started pulling her bicycle along from the very beginning. Actually, after getting a feel of the hill, I noticed that it wasn't very steep. Even someone like me could get over to the other side while riding a bicycle.

We stood at the peak of the hill. It was about fifty meters past the end of the downward slope before us. A metallic silver bicycle lay on the road shoulder of a one-lane road. It was, of course, Osanai-san's bicycle. Osanai-san stared at her bicycle and opened her mouth for a moment, but no words came out. Instead, a sigh escaped her lips, which, for some reason, I thought as disquieting. However, that was just a minor premonition that I could dismiss as a product of my imagination.

The two of us went down the hill.

When we were only a short distance away from the bicycle, I was the first one to open my mouth, and shouted in an especially bright voice.

“Look! It's not even broken that badly!”

The handles and saddle were properly fitted on, and its frame didn't seem to have suffered much damage. The chain had been displaced from the two-speed gear, but that could be easily fixed. Machine oil was splattered everywhere, but if Osanai-san wanted, I could clean it up right here.

Sakagami seemed to have exposed the bicycle to the rain, so the entire bicycle was covered by a light stain, but we should be thankful that it came back without any problems, right?

However, Osanai-san had a better eye for observation. That said, even if I'd found the bicycle to be in a worse state, I could do nothing else but shout, "Look!"

Osanai-san's gaze was concentrated on the back tire. I could see what was wrong in an instant... it had been crushed, and the entire wheel was twisted. I frowned. Osanai-san would need to switch it out to get it working again.

Before I could say anything, Osanai-san muttered.

"They said that it was collapsed on its side, with the back tire sticking out on the road. It was crushed by a car in the evening, and the person driving the car called the school this morning."

A colorful seal was on the back tire's mudguard, with Funa High's emblem and the bicycle license number printed on it.

"But wouldn't it be fine if you just change one tire?"

I asked with an unnatural brightness, almost like a professional jester, but Osanai-san just pointed at the front wheel without even looking at me. *There's nothing wrong with it*, I thought, but took a better look before saying that out loud.

"...I see."

The front tire was also damaged. The wheel itself was fine, but a number of spokes were twisted. That would probably make the bicycle quite uncomfortable to ride, but it still wasn't such a big problem.

"But you could fix this with a hammer."

Osanai-san shook her head.

"I'm alright with the spokes being twisted. But look, there are signs that they were stepped on."

Indeed, it seemed like the spokes had taken the impact as a whole. There was also some mud stuck on them. As Osanai-san had mentioned, it did look like the bicycle had been stepped on while lying on its side. Sherlock Holmes would be able to figure out where Sakagami had walked at just from the mud on the spokes, but unfortunately, I'm not that skilled.

Osanai-san's eyes were quicker than usual today. She continued by pointing at the area near my feet, urging me to take a look.

"He stepped on it here."

It was difficult for me to see if there was anything there with my eyesight. I would have to crouch down, but I was hesitant to kneel before Osanai-san's feet. I gestured for her to stoop down a little, then folded my knees to the ground.

"...Hmm."

There were distinct tire marks on the asphalt pavement, but they were small and still quite difficult to spot.

Osanai-san dragged the bicycle, placed it on its side so that the back tire stuck out on the road and the front tire fit the markings on the pavement. With that, I was convinced that the tire marks were indeed left by the spokes of the bicycle when they were being stomped on.

I looked up to see Osanai-san biting down strongly on her thin lip. She must be desperately trying to endure the frustration. Considering her emotions, I decided to stop the cheery jester act.

Instead of leaving the scene, Osanai-san moved her eyes finely, searching if Sakagami had left any more traces behind. I accompanied her through her silence, noticing that her fists were clenched.

Eventually, she asked me a question in a voice uncharacteristically lacking in emotion.

“Kobato-kun, what do you think happened yesterday? Why did my bicycle...”

I hesitated, unsure about how to answer that question. There was no need for me to do that, and I’d already decided not to show off my intellect. Even Osanai-san should understand, or rather, Osanai-san should understand it the most. If she was still asking me about that, it meant that she probably wouldn’t be able to calm down unless I made a deduction that could convincingly explain the circumstances. I studied the broken bicycle, turned around to look at the hill, then thought back to Sakagami’s figure from yesterday.

What happened the day before appeared in my mind as a relatively clear sequence of events. Discarding the deliberate brightness I’d used earlier, I replied in my normal tone.

“Alright, this is what happened.

“As we noticed yesterday, Sakagami was in quite a hurry. He hurried up the hill and probably tried to forcibly switch gears midway, causing the chain to come off. This hill isn’t so steep that you can’t get a bicycle over it without pushing it up, after all.

“Since the chain came off while he was rushing for time, Sakagami was annoyed. However, he didn’t abandon the bicycle there. It wasn’t as simple as that. A bicycle without its chain cannot be used to traverse a hill or flat ground, but it can still be ridden down a slope. He must have straddled the bicycle at the peak of the hill and used the gravitational force to travel down.

“It’s about fifteen meters from here to the foot of the hill. When the bicycle’s momentum weakened enough such that it became faster to walk than to ride the bicycle, Sakagami abandoned the bicycle. He did that right here.

“After that, he hit the bicycle because he was pissed off that it malfunctioned while he was in a hurry. To be precise, he stomped down on the spokes of the bicycle with a great deal of strength. Then, he ran off, on his own two feet, down this road.”

I turned my head around and peered at the other end of the road I’d mentioned.

But the problem was immediately apparent. The only things that could be seen from here, a location one hill away from a road that deviates from the National Highway, were farms, farms, more farms, as well as the occasional fields, vinyl greenhouses and sheds used to store farming equipment. The road soon ended in a T junction, with the right path eventually leading to a road that crosses the mountains, and the left forming an arc that surrounds the farmland region and eventually returns to town. As I was momentarily lost for words in my confusion, Osanai-san spoke in my place.

“Where to? You’re not seriously saying that he’s toiling away at a farm, are you?”

I was taken aback by Osanai-san's rude, sarcastic comment. She was resting her arms on the moss green bicycle she'd ridden here, which was leaning diagonally against an oak tree. She also had on a faint smile, causing the premonition that I'd dismissed earlier to return. Osanai-san cannot be complimented as being an honest person in the first place, but she was giving off a rather dangerous atmosphere right now. I called out at her profile.

"Osanai-san, calm down."

"I'm calm enough. More importantly, where do you think he was rushing off to? The left path goes back to town, and the right one goes to the mountains. It's far either way, even with a bicycle."

...That was certainly true. If he wanted to turn left and get to town, he wouldn't have needed to go over the hill. If he wanted to turn right, he wouldn't be able to get to his destination without sufficient leg strength and stamina. Abandoning the bicycle further cut his ability to get anywhere. It wouldn't be a problem if Sakagami were a long walker, but I can't imagine that he would have that kind of disposition, though I admit that it isn't right to judge a book by its cover. Then again, if he is the kind of person who doesn't mind walking on his own two feet, he wouldn't have stolen Osanai-san's bicycle in the first place.

I looked up from my feet to stare into the distance, where the country road caused the line between pavement and main road to fade and crack. There was nothing there. I didn't mean that it was a vacuum, but... well, I might be on to something here.

"...I see. It could be that his destination was this very road."

Osanai-san's eyes turned to look at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps he had an agreement that a car would pick him up here?"

"Did he have to hurry to such an extent that the bicycle chain fell off, or would that car not wait for him? Also, he should have a cell phone, so wouldn't he be able to contact them?"

"It would make sense if it was a bus. A bus wouldn't wait for him."

"A bus..."

"Basically, it was like this. Sakagami had planned to go somewhere far by taking a bus. However, he was late, and the bus he'd wanted to take just left the station closest to him. Thus, he hopped onto the bicycle and rushed over the hill to overtake the bus."

Osanai-san gave a small nod, but made a rebuttal.

"But there's no bus stop that can be seen from here."

"A bus would probably stop if you waved at it on a peaceful road in the outskirts like this one."

Osanai-san leant on her bicycle at a deeper angle. She let out a sigh, then slowly replied.

"It might be as you say, Kobato-kun. A bus might stop if you wave at it here. However, I wonder if any buses go through this area, and at what frequency? One bus every hour... or perhaps every two hours?"

"Who knows? You can check up that information, but there's nothing we can do here."

I don't know if Osanai-san had been listening to what I said, but she rolled up the sleeve of her sailor uniform which was too long for her, and her gaze fell to the watch on her now exposed wrist.

"....."

"I understand your frustration, but you've gotten back your bicycle. Come on, let's get out of here."

However, she gave a strange reply.

"I'm not frustrated at all... I'll be here for another three and a half minutes."

*Fine, if it's just that,* I was about to reply on reflex, when I noticed the peculiarity in her answer.

"Three and a half minutes? Is something happening then?"

Osanai-san kept a watchful eye on the left and right side of the road. However, her gaze was completely different from the one she usually made in school, where she would be wary of her surroundings to allow her to escape from any situation. It had an alert sharpness about it that was cold but at the same time, somewhat gentle. She didn't even look in my direction at all.

"Another three and a half minutes, and it would be the time when the two of us spotted Sakagami yesterday."

"Ah."

"If it's a bus, it should come soon."

I see, that is certainly true.

Imitating Osanai-san, I raised up the metallic silver bicycle lying on the road and rested my arms on the saddle. We waited for time to pass in similar poses. Osanai-san didn't seem to be fretting about it, and was naturally waiting for something to happen.

However, I couldn't help but feel that something was out of place once again. Due to Osanai-san's skillful inducement, I'd given some thought to yesterday's events, even though I hadn't intended to... Osanai-san was clearly acting strangely. Thinking about it calmly and considering her current position, it only made sense for her to have the following attitude: "What a horrible thing to do, stealing someone else's bicycle, and on top of that abandoning and destroying it! But it's fine now that it has been returned to me. It's just a shame that I'll have to pay for repairs." Could she really be that upset about Sakagami's actions?

I silently observed that her right hand was slowly moving. Her slender fingers were inserted in a pocket of her flared skirt, while her eyes were fixated on the road. For some reason, the small Osanai-san didn't look so small now. After raising my head and straightening myself, I realized that her countenance didn't look so weak, either. Perhaps she'd noticed me looking at her face from the side, for she pulled her hand out of her pocket, bringing something out.

"You want one, Kobato-kun?"

"Ah, yes. Thanks."

It was a cola-flavored lollipop, which I rolled around my mouth. Osanai-san's lollipop was, judging from the wrapping that I'd peeked at, melon-flavored. Since a large lollipop was stuffed into her small mouth, her cheeks were bulging, like a squirrel storing food in its mouth. However, that was currently the only bit of her appearance that gave off the impression of a small animal.

We were silent as we licked our lollipops. We spent about three minutes twirling the lollipops in our mouths, but nothing happened except for a light truck slowly trundling by. However, it was a little impatient to throw in the towel after waiting for only three minutes, and more importantly, we hadn't finished our lollipops.

I hadn't looked at my watch, but I estimated that another two or three minutes had passed. Osanai-san pulled the lollipop stick from her lips, wrapped it in some pocket tissues and returned it to her pocket. "What about mine?", I was about to ask, but Osanai-san's eyes had unexpectedly widened.

"Kobato-kun, look there."

We could see a bus approach us from the left side of the T-junction. Since I had been so confident about the hypothesis that Sakagami wanted to overtake the bus and wait for it, I was deeply satisfied when I saw the approaching bus.

The only thing was that it was a small bus, or a minibus. It wasn't for public transport. The bus quickly neared us, then flashed past us, right before our eyes. There were Gothic letters on the side of the bus. I see, so that's how it is.

Osanai-san also seemed to be satisfied. She watched the bus as it disappeared from sight, then quietly murmured.

"So he abandoned my bicycle, huh."

These words written on the side of the bus were: "Kiyoshi North Driving School". It was a free shuttle bus.

That kind of bus would certainly stop in areas without a bus stop. Besides, there would also be fixed bus timings.

Finally, the bus disappeared from the end of the road. Kiyoshi North Driving School should be somewhere in the mountains on the right. It was like a solitary fort out of the way from town. Considering transportation convenience, it was a driving school that probably attracted many customers from the neighboring towns that surrounded the mountainous area. I've heard that it's especially convenient because you can easily take the test for a driving license at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Center there.

I shrugged.

"Oh well. That settles it, then. It's over, so let's go home. What are you going to do with your bicycle? You're going to fix it, right? If you like, I can do the chain for you."

Upon hearing those words, Osanai-san, who had been staring at the bus's destination, turned her head to look at me, and smiled brightly. It was a beautiful, unrestrained smile... which freaked me out. Mt. Fuji is beautiful. So is Yellowstone National Park. But you would be freaked out if you saw Mt. Fuji in the middle of Yellowstone National Park. That was exactly how I felt when I saw that smile.

Or rather, I had seen that smile before. That's why I was freaked out.

"It's over? No, Kobato-kun, it's has just begun, hasn't it? We've just got a lead, after all."

"A lead..."

"He ruined my spring-exclusive strawberry tarts. He abandoned my bicycle for his own convenience. I was supposed to be living a peaceful life in high school, but thanks to him, I was called to the Student Guidance Office twice, and I was treated as a thief during the first time. So, Kobato-kun, what do you think about this?"

She spoke in a slow, detailed manner, her smile still not breaking.

"O-Osanai-san?"

Once again, she turned to look at the mountains where the bus had disappeared to.

"I'll have to make him pay for what he did."

She's regressing. Osanai-san's turning back to the version of her that she'd decided never to become again. I hurriedly put myself in the middle of her gaze.

"That's no good, Osanai-san. The stolen item has been returned. You should be satisfied with that. You shouldn't think any more than that. Just let it go. We promised to become petit bourgeois, right? If you don't cry yourself to sleep in silence, you're not being a little citizen."

I spread out my arms to appeal to her. Osanai-san's smile faded.

"...You're right. But still, I..."

"You can endure it. This is where you have to put up with it."

Osanai-san bit her lip. She looked at the bicycle she'd brought along, her stolen, destroyed bicycle, and the bus's destination, in that order.

"But I did nothing. Nothing. Even so!

"...Right, Kobato-kun, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"What do you think is the most important thing for a little citizen?"

I immediately replied.

"Being satisfied with the status quo."

But Osanai-san shook her head slowly.

"Isn't the most important thing for petit bourgeois... the ability to protect their personal property?"

### 3

Osanai-san is in the wrong. The little citizens that we aim to be should not hold such an appetite for vengeance. However, I could not stop her.

Another option I had was to help her, but it was rejected. We did promise to help each other escape, but we never decided to help each other attack. The relationship Osanai-san and I have is reciprocal, not dependent. With the exception of instances when one of us wants to escape from something, we're nothing more than mere acquaintances. Osanai-san enforced this rule strictly.



Basically...

"It has nothing to do with you, Kobato-kun, so leave me be."

That was what I was told.

Those were words that I could agree with. Indeed, no matter how Osanai-san intended to strike her hammer of revenge down on the thief who stole her bicycle, it had nothing to do with me. Even if that fails and Osanai-san is driven into a corner, she'll have reaped what she sowed. I certainly didn't have any right to lend her a hand.

...But, whether or not I'm convinced with this line of reasoning, this is something I need to examine.

I felt like I had to think about what "failure" could mean for Osanai-san in this case. I had had a sense of foreboding about it, after all. A deep sense of foreboding, at that.

Even if she were to put her words of "making him pay" into action, I couldn't imagine Osanai-san cornering Sakagami and saying, "You'll have to pay me compensation for the damages you've done to my bicycle." Sakagami would never obediently hand over the money, and it could even turn out to be a dangerous situation for Osanai-san.

Even so, she seemed to think that she had some chance of success. That was what I was afraid of. Exactly what crazy plan did she have up her sleeve?

Three days had passed since Osanai-san's declaration of war. Yesterday and the day before that were Saturday and Sunday, so we couldn't meet in school. I did send her an email, but there was no reply. I really had a bad feeling about this.

In the meantime, I'd gathered information that I thought would be of some use. However, all I did was gather the information; I hadn't used it yet. I was still unsure about whether to help her. In the first place, I'd decided to stop acting like a detective. On top of that, Osanai-san's "leave me be" gave me a strong reason to think twice about meddling in her affairs.

It was now Monday, in the time after school. I reached the conclusion that I should arrange for a situation such that I can respond no matter what happened.

I sent out an email, to Doujima Kengo. It read:

*"Acknowledging the need to bolster the reserve force of our mobile defense, I request your assistance."*

The reply read:

*"You stupid fool."*

Even with that response, Kengo came to help, which I was grateful for.

That said, the Kengo who appeared in my classroom after school seemed to be in a bad mood, with a foul look on his face and his mouth in the shape of the character へ. He drew himself to his full height, with his arms crossed.

"...Hey."

"What do you want?"

"Well, why don't you take a seat?"

I gestured at the seat in front of me. Kengo pulled the chair back, then plunked himself down on it.

Kengo rarely appeared to be in a good mood, but it was difficult to broach the topic with him glaring at me like that. I decided to begin with a preface.

"Sorry for calling you over so suddenly. Did you have something on?"

"Yeah, I did. They were short of hands in the Newspaper Club."

"Really? I am truly sorry, then."

Kengo snorted.

"Even if you're sorry, there's something you want to talk about in person rather than by mail. I'll listen, so just spit it out already. If it's something worthless, I'll return to my club."

"It's not worthless, but it's not a short story, either. I'm seriously sorry."

"Spit it out, I said."

Kengo seemed to be in a rush, but I wouldn't be able to tell him what I wanted from him if I didn't follow the order of events. I told him about Osanai's bicycle getting stolen, about how Sakagami hopped on it and escaped right before our eyes on the day when we bought those spring-exclusive strawberry tarts. There was also that burglary incident when the bicycle was witnessed. I also recounted the events of four days ago, when we caught sight of Sakagami, who was riding the bicycle up the slope in a hurry, and three days ago, when the bicycle was returned to Osanai-san in a broken state.

Affected by the story, Kengo had a solemn look on his face. Hopping on a girl's bicycle and running away with it was, without a shadow of doubt, an unpardonable offense in Kengo's book. With his arms unfolded, his overbearing upper body seemed to be leaning over me ominously.

I reached a stopping point, and Kengo spat out a breath.

"...A bicycle thief, huh. That's a common occurrence."

"You're right."

"It might be a common occurrence, and the cost might be light, but that might not cure her irritation. One tire, right? That's about six thousand yen, I think."

"I suppose, it should be something like that. But it's good that the bicycle was returned. You hardly hear of stolen bicycles being returned."

At that moment, Kengo glanced at his wristwatch.

"If it all ended well, there would be no meaning in calling me for help."

"A brilliant deduction."

I cleared my throat.

"Osanai-san is planning to take revenge on the bicycle thief."

Kengo made a weird face, as if he'd just been told that fish were flying in the sky. It was probably the same expression one would make when possessed by a fox. But in the next moment, he broke into laughter.

"Hahahahaha, that's good. Teach that scumbag what he can expect from taking someone else's personal property."

I frowned and waited for the laughter to stop.

"It's no laughing matter. You could certainly teach them a lesson, Kengo, because you could use your howling iron fists<sup>27</sup> if it came to that. I could also do the same, if barely. But we're talking about Osanai-san here. Her target just has to fight back, and that would be the end of the story."

Kengo scratched his chin.

"Well, I suppose you may be right."

He then lowered the tone of his voice, seemingly having just realized something.

"You're not telling me to act as her bodyguard, are you?"

"In the general scheme of things, it would be something like that, yes."

"Is this a request from Osanai-san?"

I was momentarily lost for words. I could lie, but it would be found out immediately. Having no choice, I answered.

"No, I'm just acting on my own judgment."

Kengo's mouth started to open, probably about to say something like, "It's none of my business, then." Without closing my mouth, I quickly continued.

"But I have a reason for it."

The mouth that was about to open closed for an instant, then asked a question.

"A reason? A reason for what?"

"A reason for my judgment that Osanai-san could be in danger."

The word "danger" must have had some weight, for Kengo's gaze grew sharper.

"...Continue."

However, I faltered. It was a failure on my part. I hadn't done a good job of leading up to the topic. I wouldn't be able to set out the reason, and my talk with Kengo wouldn't end. Then again, I didn't exactly want to do that in the first place, because I actually wasn't finished with my deduction of the reason. It would have been great if I could just tell him the rough story and employ his support in the case of an emergency.

Wait, can I still recover from this situation?

"What's wrong?"

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<sup>27</sup> This is probably a reference to Denjin Arrow, a 1960s manga about a cyborg superhero. "Howl, iron fists! Fly, Arrow!" is written in the synopsis for volume 2 of that manga, so it might something of a catchphrase.

Kengo asked suspiciously. I'll just say it, then.

"I don't need to say anymore about this. All you need to know is that Osanai-san is going after someone who frankly does not put much thought into their actions."

"How do you know that this bicycle thief is a rash person?"

"Someone who uses a little more of their wisdom would have thought of ripping off the bicycle license seal... Anyway, I don't know how Osanai-san intends to exact her revenge, so I would just like you to lend me your strength when the time comes."

Kengo stared at me fixedly, causing me to instinctively avert my eyes. He roughly stroked his shaven head, then spoke in a low voice.

"You used to be an unpleasant person who disagreed with everything. You would brag about using even a small bit of wit."

...That's all in the past now.

Kengo let out a deep sigh.

"And what of it? What you told me was flimsy beyond words. You might not mean it to be that way, but can't you tell that what you're doing is manipulating others on your own terms? If you have something to say, say it clearly. Asking me to be on standby for an indeterminate time after giving me only a half-assed reason is too good for the bugs<sup>28</sup>."

I buried my head in my hands. That wasn't a figure of speech; I was literally holding my head in my hands. Kengo might be uncouth, but he wasn't stupid. He might be gullible, but he was no idiot. I may have been bragging about my wit again. Kengo was right. Basically, I was making light of him.

"If that's all you have to say, I'll be going."

He got up to leave, causing me to call out to stop him. He stared at me as if testing my resolve, then slowly folded his arms.

"If there are some circumstances that you can't speak of, just say so. Can't you just say that you can't tell me now, and that you'll tell me when it's all over?"

"There are no circumstances behind it. To be honest, I haven't completely figured out the details yet."

"Do it after you've figured it out, then."

"....."

"You don't know, huh."

Kengo slowly shook his head.

"There's something you're thinking about, right? You're also confident that you can figure it out, right? Why don't you do it, then? Isn't that the kind of situation that you like?"

"That's what I used to like."

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<sup>28</sup> The bugs here refer to the three types of bugs that were thought to cause illnesses in people. An action being "too good for the bugs" implies that it is selfish and causes trouble to everyone else.

All I could do was resign myself to the fact that having my past, arrogant self be known to others makes me weak. There were three ways forward from here. I could give up on asking Kengo to be the rear guard. I could sonorously state my deduction. Or...

I chose the third option. With my head down, I spoke in a tone so subdued I surprised even myself.

"I don't like that anymore. That's how it is now. When I think back to the time when I liked making such deductions, I get disgusted at myself."

"....."

"The other time when you made cocoa for us, you said that I was acting weird. At that time, I lashed out at you, saying that you were expecting me to have some sort of trauma that made my change easy to understand. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, I remember it well."

I frowned for an instance. That was no act. I'd just remembered.

"Actually, there is some trauma that makes my change easy to understand. It was three clean strikes in succession. After being countered, I took a straight to my face. After rebounding from the rope, I received a hook, and while I was down, I got an uppercut for my trouble."

Kengo replied with a straight face.

"It's amazing that you survived."

"I survived, but I was knocked down without a fight. I was witty, but deep down, I knew that it was nothing to be proud of. Those blows were strong enough to make me decide never to show off my intelligence again."

"I'm not good with abstract stuff. You don't intend to be concrete about it?"

I shook my head.

"Nope, but it went something like this.

"Because I was putting on airs, I was too late in helping someone, causing people to have a grudge against me.

"I broke a person's fantasies, but that only caused them to cry, and nothing good came out of it.

"Having confidence in myself, I set out my ideas, but I was surpassed by others.

"Those are very common things, don't you think? That may be true. But what I realized gave me an even bigger shock.

"When someone tries their hardest to think about a problem, but can't figure out the answer and is troubled by it, I cut in from the side and solve the problem for them. However, I realized that only a small amount of people would welcome that. Even fewer people would be grateful for that. In fact, most people would avoid me or even hate me for it!"

"...That's not the case. Aren't these all misunderstandings on your part?"

"You don't understand, Kengo. You and your sister are pleasant people. Knowing that I have a good head, you ask me to solve problems. If I do manage to solve the problem, you praise me and say, 'Nice fight!' But haven't you realized? People like you are clearly in the minority.

"Kengo, do you think Katsube-senpai was thankful to me in that case about the paintings? I don't seek gratitude, and I solve mysteries because I like that. However, I'm not sure about being met with dirty looks. Do you know that there have been more than five or ten instances in which I've been told, straight to my face, to not butt in where I'm not needed?"

"I've been told that my way of speaking is bad, or that I hadn't given enough consideration to the parties involved. That might be true. I've seen truths ahead of other people since I was in kindergarten. Sometimes, the truth is twisted. What am I supposed to do then?"

The thirst in my mouth was starting to make me feel uncomfortable.

"Since that would only produce worthless memories, I decided to aim to become a petit bourgeois who has no special accomplishments, is content with the status quo, and believes that the blue bird of happiness is in my own room. You criticized me for that, saying that I was 'hiding an ulterior motive behind a smiling face'. So, what am I supposed to do!"

I caught myself. My outburst had seemingly been too loud, for the voltage had risen in the classroom, which still had many classmates remaining. I should calm down.

...There, my smile is restored.

"Well, that's what it is, so I hope you can let me off the hook regarding that."

What I told him might be lacking here and there, but it was still pretty much the entire truth.

However, telling him the truth here was nothing more than a result of cost-benefit calculation. Basically, I meant it as a sob story meant to earn his sympathy by showing the weakness I have when playing the role of detective in front of other people.

But I miscalculated again. To be exact, I made two miscalculations. The first was that Kengo did not care for such obsequiousness. The other one was that since it was a sob story, I should have spoken in a more pitiful tone, but I still possessed too much self-respect. As a result, the dramatic effect was too shallow, and I revealed too much of my true colors. Of course, it wouldn't go as I'd expected.

Kengo resolutely ignored my ploy and pushed it aside.

"All the more you should think. You're more suited to that."

"...Were you listening to what I said?"

After unfolding his arms, he scratched his head.

"It seems like you've leaked your true thoughts, so I'll say this clearly. I don't know if you're down from taking those hits, but I don't think I want to associate myself with someone who lives such a small, furtive life. I came here on your request due to the relationship we had all those years ago, but if you don't say anything now, there won't be a second time.

"You used to be an unpleasant person, but I didn't dislike you... if you want to be a petit bourgeois or whatever it is, go ahead. But I'll pass on listening to requests from someone like that."

I felt my mouth go agape, as if I was an idiot. But seriously, how can he say those lines without feeling any sort of embarrassment? I continued looking at Kengo, realizing that his unnaturally sullen look was just a front to hide his embarrassment, which caused me to laugh. He did look sullen, but a tight grin eventually formed on his lips, and it appeared that he was putting quite a lot of effort to stop himself from laughing as well.

“Wow, you sure are strict, Kengo. I’ll have to fill you in about my circumstances.”

“Sorry, Jougorou, but I only deal with honesty.”

As my laughter subsided, so too did the modestly uplifting atmosphere. All that was left was a choice. Should I overlook the danger looming over Osanai-san and uphold our promise, or should I listen to Kengo and play my role as a detective?

...This was, in essence, Osanai-san’s problem. Even if I made a choice, I would have to contact her. I reached for the phone in my pocket.

“Since we haven’t started yet, let us make a bet, Kengo. I’ll call Osanai-san right now and persuade her to let go of this case. If I can’t do that, I’ll make use of my modest wit and put into words the reasons for why she could be in danger.”

Kengo nodded, then returned to his most comfortable position, or in other words, folded his arms.

I brought up the mobile phone number and made the call.

With the phone to my ear, I waited patiently. Kengo’s eyes were shut, although I don’t think it was because he was sleepy.

...Come on, pick up the call. I was counting the number of ringing tones. It went over ten, then over fifteen. I placed my finger over the Hold button.

The ringing tone sounded for the twentieth time. It would be fine to assume that she wouldn’t be picking up the phone. I stopped the call, then returned the phone to my pocket. Kengo opened his eyes.

Now that it had come to this, all I could do was steel my resolve. On top of my desk, I rolled my left hand into a fist and grabbed it with my right hand.

“Now, let’s begin. In my view... we can deal with this in a solid chain of reasoning.”

#### 4

The situation was complex.

I’ve read countless stories of people with superhuman powers of observation and deduction, who can reach a conclusion in a single leap of logic, but because of that struggle to explain it to normal people. Thankfully for me, I don’t possess superhuman powers of observation or deduction. Since I can’t do leaps of logic, the path that my logic takes can be easily explained. By following such a chain of logic, I can sometimes find myself stuck exploring dead ends, but all I can do is believe in my intelligence. It is always a comfort to me if it goes well.

“Let me think about how to start,” I pleaded for more time. I placed a fist on my head and thought about it as Kengo waited.

One or two minutes passed. I put down my fist and spoke in a leisurely manner.

“...Alright, I’ll start by going through the information we already have, just to be sure. Three days ago, we found Osanai-san’s bicycle by the road, but there were no locations that looked like it could be a destination nearby. Even so, Sakagami needed to get to that spot before a pre-decided time.

Thus, we can only think that there is something that passes that road on a schedule, and that has to be a bus.

“What do you think about it so far?”

I summarized the contents of the discussion with Osanai-san three days ago. Kengo looked taken aback for a while, then thought for a while, seemingly digesting what I’d just said.

“Did you confirm that a bus goes down that road?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Sounds good, then.”

“That bus is a free shuttle bus to a driving school. Sakagami was trying to get on that bus. What do you think of this?”

A slight frown appeared on Kengo’s face.

“Hold up. Is that the only bus that passes by during that time?”

“We were in the area for about thirty minutes. You could also say that we were there in a fifteen minute window of seeing Sakagami. The bus that he planned to take was definitely that shuttle bus.”

“Alright, continue.”

“In other words, Sakagami wanted to go to that driving school.”

“Next...” I started, but Kengo immediately cut me off with a wave.

“Hang on again. Just because he got on the shuttle bus does not necessarily mean that his destination was the driving school. It could be that the shuttle bus was the most convenient vehicle to get to his destination, and that he didn’t have anything to do at the driving school.”

He sure is meticulous. Indeed, I can’t exactly rule out that possibility... No, I can do that.

“...Kiyoshi North Driving School doesn’t run a shuttle bus service as a voluntary service. They probably wouldn’t let in people who aren’t enrolled.”

“Is that so? Even assuming that is the case, how would they differentiate between people who are enrolled and people who aren’t enrolled?”

How?

To differentiate these two groups of people, those who are enrolled need to produce some sort of identification, and that has to be something that the bus driver is able to recognize even while driving.

I thought back to Sakagami’s appearance four days ago, and there was only one thing I could think of, which was also the only thing that he was carrying. I slowly replied.

“It’s a bag. Or rather, it’s a document holder, and it’s white in color. That’s the only thing that would be easy to spot.”

Kengo nodded.

“I see... Come to think of it, I’ve seen people holding white document holders getting on that bus.”



Well, both Kengo and I have lived in this town for fifteen years, after all, though we don't have any memory of the first few years, naturally. It was only after he mentioned it, but I also have a memory of that scene. That memory endorses the validity of my thinking.

"So, it would be like this. To get on the shuttle bus to Kiyoshi North Driving School, you need to have be at a certain selected location, holding the document folder given by the school as a means of identification. I don't know if this is an original rule by Kiyoshi North Driving School, or if they practise this everywhere across the country.

"Anyway, if you agree that Sakagami took the shuttle bus, you are also basically agreeing that he is enrolled in Kiyoshi North Driving School. It would be too strange for him to fill in the forms for enrolment, pay the fees and only use the school as a midpoint."

"...Yes, I understand. It's probably as you say. I shouldn't have interrupted your chain of logic."

I grinned.

"No, it's a lot easier with checks like this. We're talking about Osanai-san's safety here. It would help me if you're rigorous about this, so that we don't make any mistakes."

Kengo, who had his arms still folded, didn't say anything.

Now for the conclusion we can make from all this. I took a deep breath.

"Basically, Sakagami was trying to get a driving license."

Kengo frowned slightly.

"Yes, that would be a logical conclusion. But what of it? Whether or not he wants to get a license is his choice."

That is certainly true.

However, my conclusion that Sakagami wanted to get a driving license only served to deepen my misgivings. We'd reached that conclusion with detailed reasoning, but it is a conclusion that can be automatically drawn as soon as we confirmed the premise that Sakagami had boarded the shuttle bus belonging to the driving school. As Kengo asked, "What of it?"

What exactly does that mean?

"...What do you think Sakagami is trying to get a driving license for?"

Kengo answered quickly and shortly, as if to stamp out the ridiculousness of that question.

"To drive, or course."

I shrugged.

"Well, you can still drive even without a license. It's just a machine, after all."

"...Just say it straight, Jougorou."

You don't have to get so sore. My head will go dull if we get too serious, anyway.

I cleared my throat.

"Well, if that is the case, or if Sakagami wants to obtain a driving license for the sake of being able to officially drive a vehicle, then there's no problem. In fact, I would wish him good luck on his studies."

Kengo sighed.

“So your conclusion in the end is that you don’t have a problem? I’ll be off if you don’t need me for anything else.”

Ignoring his words, I continued speaking to further my train of thought.

“But is that all? Why is he getting a license? Or you could ask, what is he going to use a driving license for? The use of objects may not always be straightforward. A glass bottle could be used in a ploy for cheating, for example. A driving license could probably be thrown to perform the trick of cutting up a banana.”

“You’re saying that he’s getting a license for that parlor trick?”

“...Indeed, as a physical entity, the plastic card that serves as a driving license can only be used to do something as insignificant as cutting a banana. I would like to turn my eyes to another efficacy of a driving license.”

The efficacy, or authority of a driving license. If you have one, what can you do? As someone who doesn’t own a license, I don’t understand that very well. No, that’s not true. A person actually receiving their license for the first time will not think that there will be some important secret behind it.

A driving license. I’ve seen one a few times. It contains a portrait, date of birth and address, I believe.

...I see. So that’s what I should focus on.

I took a breath, and paused.

“Basically, I’m talking about the side of the driving license that can act as personal identification.”

Probably having sensed that I’d made a leap in my reasoning, a cautious glint formed in Kengo’s eyes. However, no rebuttal came, so I continued, paying him no heed.

“Here we come to a fork in the road. What was Sakagami trying to get a driving license for?”

“The first option: to obtain permission to drive a vehicle.

“The second option: to obtain a form of personal identification.

“Do you have a third or fourth option to add?”

Kengo slowly shook his head.

“Nope, but out of those two options, it’s obviously the former.”

“When one says, ‘it should be obvious’, it generally isn’t.”

After randomly spouting a line that sounded like an aphorism, I continued.

“I think it’s suspicious. For the first option, Kengo would just need to go through the normal procedures, which he would have no qualms doing. However...”

But I was interrupted in the middle of my sentence.

“He might have some qualms about getting a license. It could be against the school rules.”

I immediately responded.

“In Funa High, everyone is free to get a license. What about for Minakami High? I’ve seen some of their students leaving school on scooters.”

I didn’t say that the sighting was in front of a cake shop. That was a little embarrassing for me.

“Eight or nine times out of ten, it wouldn’t be in the school rules. Also, I know that I shouldn’t judge a book by its cover, but I don’t think Sakagami would be the type to back down even if it were written in the students’ handbook that getting a driving license is not allowed.”

Kengo nodded. I suppose we’ll save this discussion for later, and return to the topic at hand.

“So, as I was trying to say just now, I have some doubts about Sakagami trying to get a license for normal purposes... could you give me some time?”

Those doubts were probably borne from the psychological reaction of not wanting to believe Sakagami to be the type of person to seriously get a license. However, I should try to exclude such biased judgments, as much as possible. If I start saying things like “Since it’s probably not like this anyway” or “Since it’s probably like that anyway”, I wouldn’t make a good detective. In other words, by kicking against the pricks<sup>29</sup>, being a true detective is completely different from being a petit bourgeois.

Two to three minutes passed. Kengo must have been bored, but he stayed anyway. I sure am glad to have him around.

The bits and pieces of information whirled around in my head as I organized them and gave them meaning. Osanai-san often commented that I look like I’m enjoying myself like this.

I finally wrapped up my thoughts. There were three questions in my mind. How should I explain them? I planned my strategy out for another one or two minutes.

I deliberately raised a finger.

“The first question is one of distance. Why did Sakagami choose Kiyoshi North Driving School?”

“That driving school is out of town. On the day that Osanai-san’s bicycle was stolen, I remember Sakagami saying something about going back home to get his bicycle. That means that he usually walks to school, and it follows that his house is close to Minakami High. Also, Minakami High is roughly in the southwest part of town, so even with a bus, it takes quite a lot of effort for Sakagami to get to Kiyoshi North Driving School.

“You should also know, Kengo, that there is another driving school in this town, Kiyoshi West Driving School. Do you know where it is?”

Kengo grimaced.

“It’s a little north of Minakami High.”

“Exactly. Basically, it can’t be far from Sakagami’s house. In the first place, Kiyoshi North Driving School is meant for residents of the neighboring towns, rather than the residents of this town. Considering convenience of travel, Sakagami should have obviously chosen Kiyoshi West Driving School.”

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<sup>29</sup> This means to argue against authority.

"When one says, 'it should be obvious', it generally isn't."

"Whose words are those? They sound so cliched and common. That's such a dull warning. Anyway, if you think it's weak, could you grade it for me? Give me a ratio of how much you think it's suspicious, and how much you think it's not suspicious at all."

"A ratio?"

Kengo spent some time thinking.

"I would say it's 65 to 35 that it's not suspicious."

"That's a fair value. Now for the second question: age."

I raised two fingers this time.

"On the day Osanai-san's bicycle was stolen, Sakagami was talking to the members of a group, and he called one of them *senpai*. This is also important, but I remember that person calling someone else *senpai*. Incidentally, all of them were wearing Minakami High uniforms."

"You say this is important?"

Kengo groaned.

"I don't get it."

"Let's phrase it differently, then. Since there is a *senpai* of a *senpai*, Sakagami is a *kouhai* of a *kouhai*. In other words, he is a first-year student, assuming that there are no considerably strange circumstances at play."

"I understand that much. What I don't get is why you think it's important."

I let out a small chuckle.

"That's not like you. This kind of official procedure should be within your field of expertise."

"Official procedure...?"

Kengo parroted my words, then raised his head as the penny dropped.

"I see. A first-year student in high school, and we're..."

I nodded excitedly.

"Fifteen or sixteen. However, the type of license that you can get at the youngest age, which is the motorcycle license, can only be gotten starting from the age of sixteen.

"It is June now. About five out of six first-year students are still fifteen, and cannot apply for a license. Basically, there's a one to five chance for us to be suspicious."

"....."

Kengo stared on vacantly for a moment. Not giving him any time, I raised three fingers and pointed them at him.

"Now for the third question, about his attitude."

"Let's assume that he's sixteen, and that he's trying to get a motorcycle license at Kiyoshi North Driving School. If I'm not wrong, you don't need to have taken lessons to apply for a motorcycle license. Now, Sakagami-kun, who has the nerves to steal someone else's bicycle without batting an eyelid, was running late in getting to the driving school. The shuttle bus had already left, and to catch up with it, he could only rush from the southern part of town straight to the northern outskirts of town on his bicycle at full speed.

"The question is, would he rush to that extent?"

An answer came my way without a moment's pause.

"If it were me, I would probably do it."

I also immediately replied.

"You would do it, Kengo, but I wouldn't. The question is whether Sakagami would do that, all for the sake of getting a motorcycle license. It might be an exam or a lesson, and while you can't say that he could have it any day, taking that exam or lesson is not limited to that one day. Why didn't he skip out on that day?"

"Anyone can be temporarily serious about getting their license. Also, he could have some circumstances that were compelling him to do it as fast as possible."

"I do think there were some circumstances behind it. The way I see it, it would be unnatural if Sakagami were not in some kind of situation. So what is that situation?"

"It would be smooth to think of it this way. Sakagami was told to get his license by someone of higher standing."

Kengo's gaze sharpened as he tucked his folded arms deeper in.

"Someone, you say? What would they do that for?"

I had a start. I'd never even considered that person of higher standing to be strange. Why did I say that? Was it just my intuition that someone of higher social standing was involved? As soon as I had that thought, a face appeared in my mind, of the only genteel-looking person in Sakagami's group... No, I don't have any evidence or rationale to support this, so I shouldn't be considering his involvement now. I spoke vaguely.

"Well, I mean, we can answer that when we come to it.

"Anyway, I'd like you to make a judgment. How suspicious is this earnest behavior of the bicycle thief?"

Kengo made a short sigh.

"Alright. Seven to three that it's not suspicious."

I see.

"These are my three doubts. Right, now let's calculate your suspicion for Sakagami."

From my pocket, I retrieved my mobile phone and brought up the calculator program that was listed in the menu.

"For the first issue, you trusted Sakagami for 65 percent. For the second, you said it was one to five, which is roughly 17 percent. The third is 70 percent.

"Kengo, how much do you think you believe that Sakagami is trying to get a driving license for a perfectly natural reason?"

The square face crumpled and distorted. He must have realized that he'd walked into a trap. Laying such impromptu traps is my forte. I showed him the monitor of my phone.

"It's 0.077, or about 8 percent.

"I can get you to agree that even by your thinking, you find Sakagami to be 92 percent suspicious, right, Kengo?"

Kengo unfolded his arms and tightly curled his hands into fists. He then groaned bitterly.

"Damn... This is exactly what you were like back then. You're not down and out yet, you can do it if you want to. You sure are an unpleasant fellow."

"For now, I'll think of that as a compliment."

I retorted, while sticking my tongue out in my heart.

Actually, the second of my three doubts was a little strange, although I'd managed to cover it up with my skill at conversation. For the other two points, you could say 'that might be true, but there is nothing unusual about it', but the same cannot be said for the question of age. You cannot say, 'He is fifteen years old, but there is nothing unusual.' Grouping the three ratios and multiplying them is not a correct calculation. Additionally, even if fifteen year olds cannot get a license, it doesn't necessarily mean that they cannot enrol in a driving school. They just have to be sixteen at the time when they apply for a license. However, I did not touch on that point.

Anyway, even if we let the age question go, with 65 percent and 70 percent, the total suspiciousness would still be slightly under 50 percent. If there's a fifty-fifty chance that Osanai-san is in danger, I would definitely move to help, and Kengo would lend me his strength. Even so, I did lay a trap, so there is no helping getting called an unpleasant person. What a troubling personality I have, adding to the difficulty of becoming a petit bourgeois.

"It seems that there is some kind of questionable aspect about Sakagami trying to obtain a license."

I continued the discussion. Thirty minutes had already passed, but I didn't panic, instead thinking that I should steadily build the chain of logic.

"Now, we get to the question of what kind of ways there are to use a driving license for questionable activities.

"...We're talking about an official identification document, after all. You can do as many bad deeds as you want with it."

"This may have nothing to do with this case in particular, but..."

Kengo cut in.

"...When you talk about bad deeds using official identification, criminal organizations come to mind, domestic or international."

Well, that is true. I can't say that the image of some kind of organized criminal groups like the mafia, gangs or the yakuza didn't come to mind. However, just as Kengo had suggested, I didn't think that they were relevant to the case at hand.

"If you go down that line of thought, it is certainly possible, but I'm not sure that it's probable. I can't imagine that Sakagami is such a bigshot of an underling. He's just a high school student, after all."

"'Bigshot of an underling' has such a weird ring to it."

Kengo quipped as a light smirk appeared on his face.

"So, what is it that the simple high school student Sakagami, who is neither a bigshot of an underling nor a virtuous student, can do after obtaining official personal identification?"

I muttered and fell into thought. But only one idea rose from the waves of thought in my head. To be precise, it was more like a rough direction rather than an idea.

"...Unless he's secretly hiding some grand ambitions, I think he most likely wants to get a license for the sake of earning some petty pocket change."

"Putting aside the question of whether it's petty..."

Kengo stated his preamble, then nodded.

"That sounds right."

"...You're satisfied with that?"

I would have been stuck if he'd asked me to prove it, so I was quite surprised by his agreement. Following my unrestrained cry, Kengo remarked.

"On the contrary, I would be surprised if the motive of that kind of guy isn't money."

Since he'd already obediently accepted my conclusion, I would sound like a contrarian for saying this, but I felt like it would be good to solidify my foothold. It might be hasty, but I had no choice.

"If he wants to misuse his personal identification, it would certainly be to earn some pocket money. However, he might not necessarily intend to misuse it."

But Kengo made a counter-argument, as if our positions had been swapped.

"That's not right. If he doesn't intend to misuse it, he would be using it normally, to show his identity. In that case, he can obviously use other things, like his student ID, Certificate of Residence or Certificate of the Family Register."

"...I see. That is true."

Kengo switched the positions of his folded arms.

"But Jougorou, I'm starting to see some infeasibility about misusing the license. That's a license for a sixteen-year-old. What could it possibly do?"

He thought for a while, then continued.

"Couldn't he at least show his license when trying to sell off a CD that he shoplifted?"

I shook my head slightly.

"If that's the case, he wouldn't need to obtain the license. His student ID would be enough. Furthermore, if Sakagami got a license just to sell stolen goods, his main motive becomes unclear. The profit margin is too small, with so much effort being put in, but so little reward."

"...I don't get what you're trying to say here."

"Basically..."

I started, then took a breath. The infeasibility that Kengo mentioned was that even if Sakagami abused his personal identification document as a sixteen-year-old, he couldn't earn a lot from it. So, basically...

"...All we need is a method to increase the profit margin."

Feeling my mouth go dry, I gently licked my lips. We would soon be getting to the climax of this discussion. I could feel chills in my head, a sensation that I don't usually experience. I could still express myself fluently, but I was starting to feel annoyed by the clumsy movement of my tongue.

"The amount of money that can be earned with the license of a sixteen-year-old is certainly of little significance. Even if Sakagami does intend to make that small amount of money, it would be ridiculous to use his own personal identification."

"What I'm trying to say is this. If you clearly want to make some pocket money, all you have to do is make a license using the name of someone else over the age of twenty. It would all be possible if you have that."

I recited multiple lines that sounded like catchphrases of consumer credit personnel.

"Hey, Jougorou, do you know what you're saying?"

Kengo chimed in with a somewhat perturbed slur.

"That's forgery of an official printed document."

Is that so? I hadn't considered criminal charges. In any case, that's only preparation for the next step, which is, essentially...

For now, I ignored Kengo's objection.

"What do you need to enrol in a driving school? We have to do a little investigation into that."

"...Shall we make a call?"

"That's also fine, but..."

I suddenly remembered. In the last two days, I'd gathered some materials, which included the pamphlet for Kiyoshi North Driving School. I opened up my bag to search for my favorite white loose-leaf notebook, which had all the materials wedged in it. There it is. Kiyoshi North Driving School Enrolment Guide. Something that you can find anywhere in town.

I placed the pamphlet in the space between Kengo and I. The two of us looked down at it, and found the correct heading. Using his finger as a guide, Kengo read it aloud.

"Items to prepare for enrolment."

Hm.



“The applicant’s Certificate of Residence and *inkan*<sup>30</sup>.”

...Is that it?

That means we have a bit of a problem. I began thinking about it in my head, then remembered that Kengo was still there, so I vocalized my thoughts. I started out slow, but gradually sped up as my thoughts solidified.

“Certificate of Residence and *inkan*, huh... To get the Certificate of Residence, you don’t actually need proof of identity; all you need is the *inkan*. This means that to make a license in the name of someone over the age of twenty, all you need is one *inkan*. After that, you can choose a victim. A resident of this town who is over the age of twenty, and does not possess a driving license.”

Hold on. I pulled the brakes on my words. Don’t I know someone who is related to Sakagami and meets all those conditions? When he stole Osanai-san’s bicycle, he hadn’t bothered to peel off the bicycle license seal. Thanks to that, Osanai-san was called to the Student Guidance Office twice. The second time was three days ago, about the broken bicycle being found. What about the first time?

I continued thinking.

“...Furthermore, the *inkan* can be just a ready-made seal. I’m not sure about ‘Kobato’, but I’m pretty sure you can buy one that says ‘Satou’ at any stationery shop in town.

“But Sakagami... or to be precise, the group that uses Sakagami targeted someone with quite a rare surname.”

Kengo frowned. It was only natural since I was furthering the discussion based on information that he didn’t know. I quickly followed up.

“There’s a student called Io Kibe in this town. When he went out to vote, his empty apartment was burgled. Since he has the right to vote, he’s a resident who is at least twenty years old. His bankbook was not touched, but his *inkan* was stolen. And Sakagami’s bicycle... or rather, the bicycle that Sakagami stole from Osanai-san was spotted nearby.

“I don’t think you can dismiss that as a coincidence.”

Kengo, who had a grimace on his face, abruptly faced downwards. Just when I thought he would stay still in the position, he spoke up in a subdued voice.

“In that case, he doesn’t need a motorcycle license. A scooter license would be cheaper, and easier to obtain.”

I considered that for a bit.

“The motorcycle license is more convenient because you can use it for actual driving on roads. Moreover, using a scooter license for social credit is simply suspicious, don’t you think? You don’t hear about that.”

“I see, but...”

Kengo replied solemnly.

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<sup>30</sup> A stamp or seal used instead of signatures to close contracts and as an acknowledgement of understanding between different parties.

"You have no proof."

"You're right."

I slapped the table. The sound caused Kengo to look up.

"I've finally read what Osanai-san is trying to do. Why did I think that she was in danger?"

I took a deep breath, then looked at Kengo square in the face.

"I'll summarize it in one sentence.

"Osanai-san is confronting a group with a scheme for fraud."

Feeling that the chain of logic was secure with those words, I continued.

"Osanai-san will never forgive Sakagami, who stole her bicycle, broke it, and caused her spring-exclusive strawberry tarts to go to waste. She is sensitive to his movements, and will probably go for the jugular if he shows any gaps. Three days ago, when we found out that Sakagami was going to that driving school, she said, 'We've got a lead.'"

"Come to think of it, I wonder if Osanai-san intends to secure proof with the digital camera she's so proud of. The evidence she should secure is clear. She needs is a photograph showing that Sakagami's name is indeed Sakagami, as well as a photograph showing that Sakagami is registered to the driving school under a different name. All that's left..."

"All that's left?"

I mumbled the last part of my sentence, but under Kengo's hawkish gaze, I had no choice but to continue properly.

"...All that's left is to see how far Osanai-san goes. I don't think she'll resort to blackmail or extortion, but..."

"Wait a minute."

Kengo tilted his head, unable to comprehend what I just said.

"The Osanai-san you're talking about is that Osanai-san, right? I can't remember her given name, but that girl came to my house the other day, and, um... she seemed to be the very personification of shyness."

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Yeah, that's Osanai Yuki."

"But you said she would go for the jugular or even resort to blackmail or extortion..."

My voice grew softer.

"Well, Kengo, I used to be a smart aleck, but I didn't like that, so I started aiming to be a petit bourgeois."

"....."

"She wants her past self to be kept a secret, but she's similar to me. Both of us swore to master the path of the petit bourgeois. However, what Osanai-san wants to discard is not craftiness."

I peeked at my surroundings, expecting to see Osanai-san standing behind me without my knowing, but thankfully, she wasn't there. Even so, I stifled my voice even more.

"If I can be compared to a fox, she was like a wolf in the past."

Kengo's mouth opened wide, painting a simple picture of his mental state.

"Now, Osanai-san makes a happy face only when there is something sweet in front of her. But it wasn't like that in the past. She used to enjoy herself the most when she thoroughly crushed opponents that posed a threat to her."

I probably don't need to explain to Kengo what kind of counterpunches the people that tried to lay a hand on Osanai-san took, or how well she outmaneuvered them to get that result. It should be sufficient to say that there were all sorts of situations. In the first place, I don't even know everything about her.

The matter of her bicycle being stolen probably didn't really matter to Osanai-san, and perhaps neither did the matter of her strawberry tarts going to waste. The truly important aspect of this case is the part that gave Osanai-san a pretext to seek her revenge. Her heart must be fluttering from being able to take revenge on someone after such a long time. However, the two of us decided to be little citizens. I decided to leave behind my craftiness, while Osanai-san decided to leave behind her vindictiveness. The day after her bicycle was stolen, she said, "I'll feel much better having something else to think about right now," then helped me, which was uncharacteristic of her. It wasn't that she wanted to think about something else to forget the shock of the bicycle theft. She's not that pure of a person.

I understood that what she was trying to forget about that day was her own propensity for vengeance.

"No, I don't believe it, at least with what I can see," Kengo said. That's fine. Even Osanai-san would no doubt be thankful for that. Anyway, what's important now is not her past, but her present situation. Without waiting for Kengo to get over his wavering, I continued.

"In any case, Osanai-san is approaching that dangerous bunch. Based on our calculations earlier, there's a 92 percent chance that they're doing something shady, right?"

"On one hand, I feel that there's no need to worry about Osanai-san. You probably don't know, but Osanai-san is amazing. Her body's so tiny, so she can stealthily approach her target, although I can't explain how she does it. She's dextrous, and her body's in great shape. Sometimes I think that she can even throw *shuriken*. She should be able to do something simple like gathering photographic evidence without a hitch.

"But if what I've surmised is true, that would mean that Sakagami is the weakness in their plan.<sup>31</sup> They might actually be putting up a strong guard around him. All of them are men, so even Osanai-

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<sup>31</sup> Actually, before this sentence, there is another sentence in the original text that goes, "ただ、ぼくの読み通りなら、相手には今回の絵を描いたやつがいる", which means "But if my read on the situation is correct, that group of people she's dealing with includes the guy who drew the picture the other time." I believe this is referring to Ōhama-senpai in chapter 2, but that doesn't really make sense, because there was no mention of Ōhama-senpai or pictures before and after that line, so I removed it.

san would be in danger in a contest of strength. If she gets captured by a group of men who cannot be described as virtuous..."

I shivered.

"...I don't want to think about it."

"Give me a bit of time to digest all this."

Go ahead, I replied and closed my mouth. Kengo temporarily released the arms that had been folded all this time, swung them two of three times to stimulate blood flow, then folded them again. His eyebrows were knitted, which showed that he was thinking hard about it.

By all rights, Kengo doesn't need to do any thinking here. Even if he doesn't verify that my deductions are correct, he could have just perfunctorily accepted my request and only done the thinking when I actually require his help. However, he's treating this seriously now that he's accepted the request. That's what makes him so reliable. I've held Kengo in contempt over various aspects, but I recognize his worth in a much greater number of aspects. He probably knows this, too.

Finally, Kengo moved. He thrust his right hand into his pocket and retrieved his mobile phone.

"I can do a simple check right now. Let's do it."

He muttered, then pressed a button without waiting for a response from me. I couldn't tell who he called, but they answered immediately. It seemed that they were someone Kengo was familiar with, for he instantly broached the subject.

"Are you free now? There's a guy with the family name Sakagami who apparently graduated from Kido Middle School last year. I want to know his date of birthday. Yeah, sure. You can use whatever method you want."

I see. Kido Middle School is one of the middle schools in this town, but Kengo had put some thought into that selection. If Sakagami's house is somewhere near Minakami High School, there is no doubt that he studied at Kido Middle School. With that information, we can find out his birthday. I hadn't considered this, but a person with many connections could get into contact with someone who graduated from Kido Middle School last year. All that's left is a simple task. There is a very high chance that the graduation album contains the birth dates of each student.

But Kengo started saying weird responses.

"No, that's not it. Yeah, it's related to Kobato... What did you say? So, you accepted it? No, it's not particularly bad. So, you have the results? ...I see. Yeah, that's all. I'll hang up, then. Sorry to take up your time."

He put down the phone. Wondering what had happened, I waited for him to say something. Kengo roughly brushed his head.

"We've been overtaken."

"By Sakagami? Who were you talking to, anyway?"

"My sister. She prides herself on having a hundred friends, so we can definitely rely on her connections. Anyway, it wasn't Sakagami. It was Osanai-san who got ahead of us."

What?

"She asked the same thing yesterday. My stupid sister thought that Osanai-san had switched from you to Sakagami, and was feeling sorry for you."

I felt like laughing. Not from Chisato-senpai's misunderstanding, but Osanai-san's initiative.

"I didn't know that Osanai-san was on such good terms with Chisato-senpai."

"Well, by my sister's standards, you're a friend if you exchange a few words with her. You two have come over to our house, so you would be treated as close friends."

Well, we didn't just visit. Chisato-senpai, Osanai-san and I are three comrades who have bested "Kengo's Challenge".

"...More importantly, the results are out."

The results. I straightened my posture. Thankfully, Kengo didn't leave me hanging.

"There is one guy with the family name Sakagami. My sister forgot the date, but said that he was born in December. Now, there is no question that Sakagami is only 15 years old."

I swallowed my saliva.

"I see..."

With this, the chances of Sakagami getting a driving license in an honest manner is reduced by a considerable amount. It isn't zero because it is worth considering the possibility that Sakagami failed his high school entrance examinations, then eventually went to Minakami High... no, not really.

As if to psyche himself up, Kengo exhaled sharply.

"I understand the situation now. Call me if you need my help. I'll drop everything and run over as fast as I can. But if you know that much, you should spend some effort to make her stop."

"I tried, but it didn't work."

I replied as the two of us stood up at about the same time. Kengo looked at his watch. Come to think of it, he'd mentioned that he had an errand to run, but this ended up becoming a long conversation. I feel bad for him.

We were at the point where we would say nothing but our goodbyes and split up.

That was when my phone rang. I don't use music for my ringtone, but I've become able to tell from the sound if it is a call or an email. This one was telling me that I'd just received an email, so I unconcernedly took out my phone.

"...It's from Osanai-san."

"What is it about?"

Kengo stopped moving as he was about to leave the classroom. I felt my body temperature plummet while I was opening the message. Probably sensing my abnormal state, Kengo approached.

"What's the matter?"

"No... I don't know. What is this?"

On my mobile phone screen was the email from Osanai-san, but nothing was written in it. There was no subject, and only a URL was affixed to the body of the email. Upon clicking the URL, all I got was a blank, white page.

It would be fine if it were just a blank email. But what is this for?

I didn't want to think that way, but my thoughts kept drifting in a bad direction. Unconsciously, I murmured.

"What if she's in a situation where she can't type out the message..."

Hearing that, Kengo swiftly came to a decision.

"Jougrou, do you walk to school?"

"Ah, yeah."

"I see. We can take my bicycle, then. Kiyoshi North Driving School, is it? Let's go."

With just those words, Kengo dashed out of the classroom.

To be precise, I didn't actually witness Kengo doing that. That's because I was one step earlier, and had already sprinted out at full speed.

## 5

I ground my teeth. Worrying won't make a difference, but it's hard not to. It's not so bad if it's the first time, but haven't I had an awful experience like this in the past?

I thought back to the words I'd exchanged with Kengo just now, about my three big failures in middle school. The first of which – *Because I was putting on airs, I was too late in helping someone.*

Indeed, I'd wanted to have Kengo's cooperation. If things go south, taking down one target along with me would be all I can do alone. If we don't act in a group of at least two, escaping will be beyond our control.

But now that it's come to this, that choice might have been a mistake. Being unable to persuade Osanai-san to stop her rampage, I should have stood by her side, brandishing cheap heroism or rash courage. In the most perilous moment, I was unable to fulfil the promise between us. If one of us wants to escape, the other should be a shield. But I didn't do that.

...No, that hasn't been decided yet. It could be that Osanai-san's empty email holds some deep meaning that I can't think of, or it could be a simple mistake, and Osanai-san might not actually be in danger. Another possibility is that I'm not the fox I like to think myself as, just a huge fool who made a serious error in the deduction just now.

To confirm that, please speed up, Kengo. Or please reply, Osanai-san. But no matter how many emails I sent, there was no reply.

"...Damn, as I thought, this is impossible!"

Kengo groaned. We were on a road approaching a hill in the outskirts of town, the same hill that I'd crossed with Osanai-san three days ago. Even with Kengo's strength, cycling up the hill with the two

of us would be tough. I hopped off and pushed Kengo's bicycle from behind. In no time, we reached the peak of the hill. It was at that moment when I had an idea hit me.

"Kengo, what time is it!"

Looking at his watch, Kengo shouted back.

"Half past four!"

"To be precise?"

"Four... twenty-six!"

Good, we're just in time. I'd brought my bag while we were rushing out of school. It was with Kengo's bag in the front basket of the bicycle.

"Kengo, wait a moment. Let me get my bag."

"Your bag? Aren't we in a hurry?"

"It's because we're in a hurry!"

Though he seemed to be unsatisfied by my response, Kengo stopped pedalling. Since it would be a pain to take my bag out of the basket, I opened it there and looked at its contents. I was looking for an item that I usually use.

"Here it is."

It was a completely ordinary, white loose-leaf.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"You don't need to worry about it, let's hurry."

After urging Kengo on, we cleared the hill. I got on the bicycle again at the top, upon which we descended to the other side in one go. Probably as a result of a difference in daily conduct, the chain of Kengo's bicycle did not come off. We approached the T-junction, where the leftward path led to the urban area, while the road on the right led to Kiyoshi North Driving School. Once again, I asked Kengo to stop the bicycle, to which he became visibly annoyed.

"What is it this time?"

"A bus will come. Just leave it to me, and lock the bicycle."

As soon as I said that, a shuttle bus that I'd seen before appeared from the other side of the road. Carrying my bag in front of me, I faced the bus and raised the loose-leaf notebook. Then, I slowly waved it over my head, as if it were a legitimate permit. If my deductions are correct, all I need is for the driver's eyesight to be lower than expected.

I waved it a few times, then put my hand down. I held my breath.

...The lights on the shuttle bus flickered. That must mean that they've confirmed that I'm a student of the driving school.

If they got any closer, they would immediately find out that I actually wasn't holding a document folder carefully produced by Kiyoshi North Driving School. With an innocent look, I kept the notebook in my bag.

“Jougorou, you...”

Kengo sounded amazed. How disappointing, to be wowed by an amateur trick like this. The bus stopped right before our eyes.

However, twenty minutes had already passed since I received the empty email.

I was silent for the entire ride, because my molars were clenched as I was pushed into the uncomfortable bus seats, which didn't seem to have any working springs. What can happen in twenty minutes of cornering one person? I couldn't help but be besieged by bad visions from my imagination.

When I was in middle school, I was too late. By the time I'd triumphantly revealed my deductions, everything had already ended. Something happened without me knowing, and the resolution was meaningless to everyone. I was too late. Will this case be like that too? Will I be unable to make it in time again?

A little over five minutes, and we would reach the driving school. It was an awfully long five minutes.

We were now in the dreary lobby of the driving school. There weren't a lot of people around, but there was quite a diverse range of age groups. On one hand were youths dressed in modern-patterned shirts, and on the other were elderly folk whose ability to lawfully get a driving license seemed doubtful at best. But Osanai-san was nowhere to be seen. What should I do... I thought in panic.

“Gueh!”

At that moment, I was grabbed by the scruff of my neck. To be precise, my back collar was dragged by a force from below. A weird cry escaped from my throat as I almost fell onto my knees. I turned around, only to have the strength drained from my knees.

Standing in front of me was a girl dressed in boyish clothes who looked so familiar that I wanted to ask if we'd met before. She was wearing a brown jacket that was frayed at the hems, a pair of ripped jeans and worn-out sneakers. The leather hat she had on looked asymmetric, giving a lack of congruence in terms of fashion.

“Ah...”

As soon as I opened my mouth, that girl put a finger to her lips.

*Come over here*, she beckoned with her hand. I did the same gesture to Kengo, who was standing behind. The three of us shuffled into a small room which had a sign on the door that said, “Coffee Room”.

After Kengo closed the door, the girl removed her hat and smiled in satisfaction.

“You didn't need to come here so quickly.”

That was Osanai Yuki in disguise. That hat that seemed so inappropriate in terms of fashion was just a prop to hide her *amasogi* hairstyle.

So I managed to make it in time, with some time to spare... Then again, it's weird to say that I made it in time, because I don't see any sources of imminent danger.



"T-This is Osanai-san?"

Kengo pointed at Osanai-san rudely. It seemed that her attire came as a shock to Kengo, who had only seen her in a sailor uniform, as well as that outfit that was like the definition of simplicity she wore when we visited Kengo's house. Realizing that she'd just been seen in her disguise, the smile on Osanai-san's face promptly disappeared, and she whispered into my ear.

"Why is Doujima-kun also here?"

While I was unable to completely grasp the situation, it was a fact that Osanai-san was safe. Which meant that it was a waste for us to worry about her. With a face that showed my displeasure in having run a fool's errand, I answered.

"What do you mean, why? It's because I'll be troubled if I'm alone when things get dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"You were following Sakagami, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was, but..."

Question marks appeared on both our faces.

"Didn't you call for help?"

"I did no such thing."

"But you sent a message. An empty message."

As I said that, the confusion on Osanai-san's face cleared up. She brought out her phone. It was a new model, with a camera function.

"Yes, I did. It was photographic evidence that Sakagami enrolled here under Io Kibe's name. You noticed that I was doing some investigation, right?"

Photographic evidence? I opened up her email and showed it to her.

"Where's the photo? Your email had nothing but a URL in it, and there was nothing even after I accessed that link. Of course I would be worried."

Osanai-san peered at the phone monitor. The only thing displayed was an X mark.

"...Kobato-kun, can your phone view images?"

"It doesn't have such an unnecessary function. I like it simple."<sup>32</sup>

Osanai-san slowly shook her head.

"A phone that's unable to display JPEGs is on a different level than simple..."

"What level is it, then?"

"...Primitive?"

Whipping out her phone, she quickly tapped with her fingers.

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<sup>32</sup> This book was written in 2004, but I was using such a phone even back in 2015, so I can understand what Kobato's saying.

“This is what I sent.”

On the monitor of Osanai-san’s new phone was Sakagami facing a table, probably one of the multiple pieces of necessary evidence.

I finally got a grasp on the situation.

My phone was an old model. It could send and receive emails, but couldn’t open images. Osanai-san had uploaded the photos to a server, so the only thing that reached my phone was a URL, and the page was completely blank to me. Basically, the problem was that Osanai-san’s phone was a new model.

All strength drained from my body.

I turned back to Kengo, who was eyes were still wide, apparently still unable to match the boyish girl in front of his eyes with Osanai-san. I scratched my head and explained the situation.

“Erm, Kengo, I know that you pedalled as hard as you could just now, but that was a bit of an overreach. Osanai-san has already completed the mission.”

“Yes, well, no, but, more importantly, are you really Osanai-san?”

As Kengo fumbled with his words, Osanai-san tilted her head with a troubled look on her face, but before long, she politely bowed with an unnatural cheeriness, seemingly having thought of a plan.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yuki’s twin sister, Maki.”

So that’s how she’s dealing with it.

Looking at Osanai-san, who was able to calmly tell such a barefaced lie, and Kengo, who was visibly getting more confused by the second, I couldn’t hold it any longer, and released a hearty guffaw from the depths of my throat.

## Epilogue

Ten days had passed since Osanai-san obtained the photographic evidence. I, and probably Osanai-san as well, was already starting to forget this case. However, on that day, I froze while reading the morning paper. It was treated as a small matter, but there was an article in the local news section.

### *Kiyoshi Police Department – Five High School Students Arrested for Attempted License Fraud*

Reading on, I found out that a seventeen-year-old third-year student was arrested as the leader for the operation. Arrested, huh. That means that it'll go on his record. Driving licenses are the jurisdiction of the Public Safety Commission. So the reward for making an enemy of public safety is an arrest, rather than an official reprimand. Well, it's fine as long as it doesn't get covered up. That's a joke, but that thought kept crossing my mind, and I couldn't do anything about it.

It was a Saturday, so there was no school. I decided to contact Osanai-san with my phone and arrange to meet up with her at some café. I was the first one to reach the shop, and Osanai-san appeared less than five minutes later. She was in a cool sky-blue dress, and a white jacket which had laces on its sleeves. It was an outfit that was neither flashy nor plain. In a corner of the store, we found a table in front of another that was taken by a couple, so we took a seat there. From the morning selection, I chose toast, while Osanai-san ordered hot cakes.

I laid the article in question out on the table. Sensibly, Osanai-san had brought along other newspapers as well. Asahi, Yomiuri, Mainichi. While the level of importance was varied, it was reported in all of those newspapers.

I wonder what the waitress who brought us our breakfast thinks about us. Besides the fact that the two of us were both looking down at the newspapers and reading the articles, the silence between us was like what you would expect at a vigil, bringing about an awkward atmosphere, as if we were a couple whose cheating affairs were just brought to light.

When the hotcakes with maple syrup arrived, Osanai-san didn't even reach for them, and instead muttered.

"...I can't believe this happened..."

I continued.

"I can't believe it either..."

Naturally, the article did not include the real names of the students involved, only mentioning that they tried to impersonate a twenty-year-old student currently living in this town. That said, there was no way that the same incident happened twice. Also, if this incident was so widely reported, it would certainly reach Kengo's ears. Even he wouldn't believe that the girl at the driving school at that time was Osanai-san's twin sister, so this would cause a complete change in his recognition for her.

I found out a few things from the articles.

Why did the group aim to get a fake motorcycle license, which requires being taught at the driving school rather than a scooter license, which is cheaper? I thought that it was because the motorcycle license is more useful for actual transport, and more trusted by society, but I was only half-correct. Apparently, Sakagami had originally planned to get a motorcycle license upon entering high school.

When he told that to the group, it was decided that he would be used for their fraud scheme. Basically, Sakagami paid for the lessons out of his own pocket, was made to take on someone else's name, and desperately pedalled on a bicycle to get to his lesson on time, but didn't get his license and got a mark on his record for his trouble. Underlings sure have it hard.

Another thing. How was the group able to find out that Io Kibe-san didn't own a driving license? It was actually the reverse. They didn't find out about Io Kibe-san's license status, but the basis behind the entire scheme was someone in the group knowing that Io Kibe-san didn't have a license. The articles didn't mention them by name, so I don't know how Io Kibe-san and the group are linked. Well, that's a different matter. Something must have happened between them in the past.

To tell the truth, we didn't directly indict Sakagami and his gang. Osanai-san wanted vengeance, but also wasn't keen on dealing with the police. Thus, we made anonymous phone calls from a public payphone to consumer credit companies to warn them of someone with the name "Io Kibe" looking to borrow money. They would also receive a photograph as evidence the following day.

The people at those consumer credit companies are pros at lending money. They would have probably seen through the crafty plot of Sakagami and co even without our warning. Thinking about it like this would be good for conscience's sake, but we thought about it a different way: that Osanai Yuki did a great job in making them pay for ruining the Spring-Exclusive Strawberry Tarts.

But it seemed that the vengeance seeker was unable to be in good spirits.

"Even when I decided to stop that habit..."

Osanai-san spoke in a voice that made it seem like she was about to burst into tears, while picking up the maple syrup and spreading it over her hotcakes. She waited for the last drop of syrup to fall, then continued.

"Even when I decided to become a petit bourgeois."

Setting the butter aside, she used a knife to split a hotcake into four pieces, but it seemed that her appetite failed to rise to the surface. Osanai-san looked up at me from under her *amasogi* haircut.

"Sorry, Kobato-kun. You even tried to stop me, as promised."

I slowly shook my head.

"I also broke the promise. I decided to stop playing the detective, but thinking back..."

One, two, three, I counted with my fingers. The case of the pochette, the case of the two paintings, the case of the delicious cocoa. Even if the case of the broken drink bottle can't be counted, adding Sakagami's case...

"I've done it four times already."

"...How sinful."

"That goes for the two of us."

Almost in sync, we let out a deep sigh. Looking at the newspapers spread before us only made me want to sigh even more, so I folded all the newspapers up and stood up to return them. After returning to my seat and calming down, I took a sip of the coffee that I didn't even feel like drinking.

Osanai-san murmured.

"Shall we stop this?"

With the coffee cup in my hand, I looked at Osanai-san.

"Being vindictive is part of my personality, and always wanting to poke your nose into other's affairs is part of yours, Kobato-kun. We can't do anything about that, so shall we give up? No matter how much we try to deceive ourselves, our faults still come to light in the end. If we try so hard to resist those urges but act on them anyway, then in the first place..."

I put down my cup, causing the saucer to clink.

"I can understand your wanting to give up, Osanai-san. But we weren't exactly deceiving ourselves. We were trying to improve on our shortcomings; of course it would seem impossible. Weren't you the one who told me some time ago that being wildly impudent while knowing that it is wrong shows too little self-control? We're still in the middle of correction, I say."

"...Yeah."

I looked at her with unyielding spirit in my eyes.

"We can't achieve that overnight. We're a little too impatient to immediately become perfect petit bourgeois. Let's not give up. Let's do our best, and get there, slowly but surely."

We should develop the understanding, acceptance and civil indifference within us, and reach for the stars, the stars of the petit bourgeois.

Osanai-san looked back at me. I could sense her determination from her eyes.

"Yes."

She gave a powerful nod.

At that moment, a spurt of water hit the back of her head with a splash. Unaware of what had happened, Osanai-san fluttered her eyes and whirled around.

Since I was sitting opposite her, I knew what exactly had happened. There was a couple sitting behind us, and the woman had thrown some water at the man. Well, to be precise, she tried to throw water at him, but with brilliant movements, he twisted his body and managed to dodge almost all of the water.

Aghast, Osanai-san didn't let out a sound, and I was exactly the same. Slamming the now empty cup on the table, the woman spoke.

"It's over between us."

Leaving behind just those words, she stood up and left the shop. After coming to his senses, the man stood up, placed a few thousand yen at the counter and immediately began chasing after her. And right behind him... was Osanai-san, who was silently tailing him while wiping her head with a handkerchief.

I could imagine her yelling something like, "Just when I'm trying to become more unaffected, you get water splashed on a maiden's easily-damaged hair and just strut off without so much as an apology you cretin?" I definitely shouldn't stop her, then. With that thought, I looked down at the hotcakes and my toast on the table. Then, I took a look at the table that had just been vacated by the couple

moments ago. A half-drunk coffee, a black tea, a morning set, cigarettes, a ball-point pen. There were also a few slightly interesting things there.

I whipped out my mobile phone, and started composing a new email. It was addressed to Osanai-san, and it read:

*“You don’t need to be in a hurry to chase him. Based on what I can see, those two are not just a normal couple, and there are some shady details beneath their relationship.*

*“I think we can settle this by analyzing the things they left behind.”*

Well, it’s as I said. We can’t achieve it overnight.

...But starting from tomorrow, we’ll be one step closer to becoming proper, petit bourgeois.

## Commentary by Gokuraku Tonbo

So, were Kobato-kun and Osanai-san able to remain as petit bourgeois? ...Well, let's leave such details for another time.

Read. Just read.

Greetings, and nice to meet you for most of you readers. I, Gokuraku Tonbo<sup>33</sup>, the administrator of "Maijar<sup>34</sup> Promotion Committee!", a website mainly for promoting light novels, has taken on the role of writing this commentary after being requested to by some strange coincidence. I am an amateur who has absolutely no connection to the writing industry and publishing industry. Because of that, I believe that there may be some unsightly points in the following text, so please bear with me.

Moreover, this essay was written mainly in consideration for the light novel readership, so it might be lacking for mystery readers, so I would be greatly obliged if you can consider that there is such a way to enjoy it too.

Well then, since I will talk about the unique charm of Honobu Yonezawa's works, let us start with my encounters with those works.

Since I usually spend the day reading light novels, I don't keep a lookout for mysteries, so naturally, I didn't know of Honobu Yonezawa-san's existence. But there was one occasion near the end of February 2004 that I will never forget. The administrator of a website that deals in mysteries, "Tasogare Spring Point", Metsu Kooru-san, introduced me to a "novel that should be read by light novel readers<sup>35</sup>", letting me come into contact with a masterpiece of a youth mystery novel, *Goodbye Fairy*<sup>36</sup>.

As someone who is preoccupied with introducing good works buried in and unearthed from the web day and night, I had no choice but to accept that recommendation. It would be a disgrace to my name as a light novel reader if I didn't accept it! With that, I obtained a copy of *Goodbye Fairy* and began reading.

(While reading)

...Oh.

.....Ohh?

.....This is really interesting!

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<sup>33</sup> The name means "happy-go-lucky fellow".

<sup>34</sup> Supposed to be a combination of "major" and "minor".

<sup>35</sup> Light novels are shorter and easier to read than novels. They also contain illustrations. All of Honobu Yonezawa's works are novels, and I can attest that they do take quite a while to get through.

<sup>36</sup> Goodbye Fairy is absolutely brilliant. You can read it [here](#). Unfortunately, it's currently incomplete.

I will abstain from commenting on the mystery aspects of the book, but as a light novel, or rather, a youth novel, it was a masterpiece that is hard to come by. I had an especially strong impression of Maya, the heroine, asking, “Is there a philosophical reason for this?” when coming into contact with bits of Japanese culture that she is not familiar with.

Anyway, now that I was attracted by the charm of *Goodbye Fairy*, I hurriedly dug out the remaining two works, *Hyouka* and *The Credit Roll of the Fool* from a gigantic mountain of stockpiled books. I did properly buy those two books, you know? It’s just that... I couldn’t match Yonezawa-san’s name to the books he wrote (‘Д `’);<sup>37</sup>, but I finished reading them in one swift attack.

The result.

Seriously, why did I only read them now! What an idiot I was! I was instantly filled with the feeling of wanting to bash my head against the corner of a block of tofu<sup>38</sup>. It’s youth, youth! Those three works perfectly captured the subtle, states of mind that adolescent boys and girls have, which are difficult to describe.

Before I noticed it, I had already become a fan. When the request for me to write a commentary for his new work came fluttering in, I readily accepted it while taking the method as my goal, knowing that I would be able to read Yonezawa-san’s work before everyone else! (^o^)

Now, I would like to finally start telling you the unique characteristics of this book, *Case of the Spring-Exclusive Strawberry Tart*, as well as Yonezawa-san’s other books that I’ve previously mentioned, *Hyouka*, *The Credit Roll of the Fool* and *Goodbye Fairy*.

Firstly, when all is said and done, no one gets murdered!

This is important. The first thing you think of in a mystery is the murder. Then, there is the usual pattern of the second, third murders, as if the culprit is making fun of the police investigation. Of course, I do think that one of the charms of a mystery is the tension borne from the life and death situation that the characters have to face, but in any case, mysteries are often bloody and gruesome.

However, Yonezawa-san’s works take a clear step back from this bloody, brutal nature of mysteries.

The mysteries that occur are minor ones that could totally happen in everyday life. They’re all in the same vein as “○○-chan’s indoor shoes were stolen. Who could have stolen it and why?”

Even so, they are treated as relatively serious matters by the characters in these stories.

Thus, the young boys and girls jump into the minor, everyday mysteries. This is the very definition of youth. They stumble and worry over trivial things, and slowly but surely move forward. There are no characters who yell at the top of their lungs with hot blood pumping through their veins like there

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<sup>37</sup> Since the writer of this commentary is the administrator of a website, I thought some *kaomoji* was in order in place of the internet slang he uses.

<sup>38</sup> There’s actually a phrase in Japanese, “bash your head against the corner of tofu and die”. It’s just a funny way of saying “go to hell” and it’s from a *rakugo* story called *Shinigami* (The god of death).



would be in a light novel, but that is the exactly why I also strongly recommend Yonezawa-san's works to the numerous light novel readers who have not encountered them yet.

Personally, I think it would be interesting if Yonezawa-san completely did away with the mystery elements and wholeheartedly sprinted down the path of pure youth stories, but... ah, hang on, why am I running my mouth in a commentary for Tokyo Sogensha? ∴ 𐤧 (≥ε≤ o ) 𐤧!

Anyway, that is how highly I view the youth aspects of his books.

Everyone, do you know of a manga called *Q.E.D. Shōmei Shūryō*<sup>39</sup>, published in Kodansha's Magazine GREAT? It's a masterpiece of a detective manga, but it contains many stories in which people don't die, and there are sometimes trivial mysteries which occur in the school that the protagonist goes to. It is probably quite easy to understand Yonezawa-san's works if you imagine that. Even though they all belong to the mystery genre, the mysteries in each book differ in direction and are diverse, just like in "Q.E.D".

Another big characteristic of Yonezawa-san's works is the strong impression that he is restrained in his writing of the characters, as if he is conscious of their inner thoughts and feelings. Some people might think, "If only he wrote them in a more detailed manner!" They might have a point there, but on the other hand, this writing style could better stir up your imagination. You could call this an extreme form of *chirarism*<sup>40</sup>. For example, in this very book, you are unsure about how strong the relationship between Kobato-kun and Osanai-san is. "Seriously, what exactly is your relationship with each other?" you might ask. Rather than having things depicted in too much detail, this method draws you in.

Oh right, these works remind me of those written by Teru Arai-san, who wrote books like the Dear series, which was published by Fujimi Mystery Bunko. They are works that are supposed to have a strong romantic element, but they take a step back from that, and are written in a restrained way, such that you can read three lines of feelings in one line of text. I certainly hope you all enjoy this comfortable frustration.

I thought I would try to simply tell you all the charm of Yonezawa-san's works, but what do you think? Was I able to communicate that to you?

If you're not convinced, that is just a result of my lack of writing ability, and that doesn't change the fact that these works have an incredible charm to them...

Read.

Just read.

(P.S. I'm really curious about Osanai-san's past... Ah, I really want to know!)

<sup>39</sup> *Shōmei Shūryō* just means QED, or Quod Erat Demonstrandum.

<sup>40</sup> A combination of *chirari* (meaning glance or glimpse) and -ism, *chirarism* means "the thrill of an unexpected glimpse of something erotically suggestive that is normally hidden".