

Volume 6.5, Bonus Track

When the lights of those Christmas candles flicker...

Drama CD

This bonus track takes place after volume 9.

Part 1 – Part 2 – Part 3 – Part 4 – Part 5 – Part 6 – Part 7 – Part 8 – Part 9 –
Part 10 – Part 11

Christmas.

It was, festive all over town along with the couples jammed packed everywhere and the parading of the young spouting “weeey, weeey”¹, a frightening event. For those who were ostracized by society, look no further for something so hateful.

But, wait. Just a moment.

To those who cursed Christmas, hold your intentions higher.

On the internet, you shouldn’t mess around, posting things like “those who agree Christmas should be discontinued retweet this”. That was just the ramblings of a loser.

What you should be cursing wasn’t Christmas, but those who unreasonably recited “wey, wey” all year long. The merry city and the frivolous couples were, Christmas or not, annoying. The idiotic students going “wey, wey” were in fact even more troublesome like the beginning of spring.

To those who denied Christmas, hold your intentions higher.

You shouldn’t be giving worthless excuses like “I’m actually Buddhist (lol)”. That was just nonsense of the weak.

In the first place, mentioning the names of God and Buddha and proceeding to deny Christmas was nothing short of being arrogant.

If you were truly a loner, then you wouldn't be relying on other people, let alone gods.

Bringing up the god that you didn't even know existed wasn't something you should do, but instead, using your resolute mental fortitude, you should be denying Christmas.

Don't pray to god, lest your heart be crushed.² Don't demand, but take.³ Do so, and it shall be given you.⁴

To begin with, livestock had no gods nor did corporate slaves.

Whether you were alone or with someone, Christmas would visit this year as well.

In other words, Christmas was...

It was... Um, in other words, you know, it's that thing, yeah. Anyways, how should I say this, this is really bad... To this day, I've never actually properly enjoyed Christmas before, so I don't know what I'm supposed to do, seriously, what the heck am I going to do about this...?

× × ×

The school campus that was already on winter break was empty.

The sun had already set in the scenery that peeked in from outside the window. Faint voices of those engaged in the activities of their sports could be heard coming from outside as well.

The fields were slightly lit up by the glow that spilled out from the school building and gym and the street lights. With no presence of people and minimal lighting, this campus was bleak as barrens. The chilly winds that blew from the sea shook the windows.

However, thanks to the slight heating, this room was submerged in warmth.

“Haaaa... The tea sure is good!” Sitting diagonally opposite of me, Yuigahama let out a voice that resembled a sigh of relief as she gently placed her mug on the table.

Both Yukinoshita and I returned a small nod to Yuigahama and placed our hands around our tea again. Yeah, yeah, we had better treasure our teatime!5

“It’s a good thing the Christmas event went well...” said Yuigahama laidback, easing up from the sensation of finishing a job.

Yukinoshita smiled. “That’s true. I wasn’t sure how it’d turn out, but it looks like we’re relieved of a burden now.”

“I guess so. Feels like it’s been a while since we’ve had the chance to relax too...”

In reality, these past few days were filled with unease as if something had been chasing us the entire time.

The Culture Festival, the Sports Festival, the field trip, the student council election, and lastly, the Christmas collaboration event. All those days appeared and disappeared, faded out and faded in..... Weren’t those just floating lanterns6? Did I die or something, non?

As I was reflecting about that, I drank the rest of the remaining tea. Although the cup was empty, it was still slightly warm.

I let out a short sigh. In that timing, three sighs overlapped.

Yukinoshita casually lifted her face and looked at Yuigahama’s mug. “Yuigahama-san, would you like another serving of tea?”

“Ah, thanks!” said Yuigahama as she happily extended out her mug.

“Hikigaya-kun, hand me your tea cup.”

“Mm.”

I handed over my cup without any particular complaints, but after thinking about it more closely, I had the feeling her words were oddly different for me.

“...Uh, wasn't the reception just a little unequal there? The disparity's a little too obvious, you know?” I said.

Regardless, Yukinoshita quickly directed her gaze to the box atop the table. As she was preparing the tea, she opened her mouth, “Also, there's quite a bit of cookies left over so could I ask you two to help finish them?”

“Totally not listening to me either... Okay, well, I'll still eat the cookies though. It'd be a waste since we won't be at school for a while.”

I rustled through the cookies or whatever that were bunched up in the box and Yuigahama peeked in from the side.

“I'll take two!”

“Sure, please help yourself.”

“Yay! The cookies that Yukinon makes are so good!”

Yukinoshita showed her a small smile and Yuigahama happily tried to bite into her cookie. But suddenly realizing something, she vigorously stood up from her chair.

“...Er, wroooooog!”

Yuigahama's voice echoed in the quiet room.

“Oh, what's the deal, suddenly standing up like that?”

“You'll spill your tea, you know.”

But since Yukinoshita and I were long familiar with her noisiness, our reactions were composed. Heck, Yukinoshita was acting like a mom of the sort too.

Unhappy with our reactions, Yuigahama abruptly shot open her eyes and continued further. “You two are just way too laidback! Today, weren’t we supposed to talk about what to do after this!?”

Remembering once it was mentioned, Yukinoshita tilted her head. “Speaking of which, we were, weren’t we...”

“Yeah, yeah! So, today’s Christmas, what should we do? It’s a rare opportunity, so let’s all do something crazy!” Finally obtaining a satisfying response, Yuigahama nodded as she abruptly stretched out her hands.

Still, we were at a loss to her question. Reflexively, I scratched at my head. “Even if you say let’s do something... I was planning on spending Christmas normally at home though.”

“Eeeh? Is that reaaally normal? Isn’t Christmas, more like, where everyone goes PAN with that PAN-PAKA-PAN kind of feeling? 7 kind of feeling, right?”

“What kind of feeling is that? I have no clue what that means...”

Especially that PAN-PAKA-PAN part. That PAN-PAKA-PAN.

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and began to think. “I don’t believe spending Christmas at home is anything unusual. In the west, celebrating it with your family is supposedly commonplace.”

“But we’re in Japan...” Yuigahama opened her mouth, moaning in discontent, but I stopped her there.

“Wait, calm down, Yuigahama. The European founding fathers were the ones saying that. So the correct answer here is to obediently spend your Christmas with your family. This is what they call the Christmas that was GLOBALIZED by way of the WORLD STANDARD.”

I retorted with an argument, but Yuigahama’s reaction seemed somewhat indifferent. She shook her hands in front of her face.

“No, no, I don’t know what the deal with THE WORLD or the STANDARD, but does that really matter? Everyone’s enjoying it like normal even if they aren’t too knowledgeable about it.”

“...That’s true, after getting localized over here, it’s become a unique aspect of Japanese culture,” said Yukinoshita after some consideration. For Yukinoshita to be persuaded like this was rather rare. Still, there was something else that was more shocking.

“Yuigahama actually made a sound argument...”

“Fufuun.” Yuigahama displayed a triumphant smile, teeming with pride.

“Well, fine. Let’s suppose that what Yuigahama said is right. So, what’s the correct way to enjoy Christmas in Japan then?”

Yuigahama tilted her head and went “hm?”

“Eh, like I said, normally—”

“To me, normal means to spend Christmas at home. I’ve never spent Christmas with anyone outside of my family before. What exactly are we supposed to do? Should I just go ‘wey, wey’? It’s not like we’re in front of a station of a college in April here...”

Yukinoshita nodded. It looked like she agreed as well. “Certainly, stations near colleges in April tend to be annoying in various ways.”

“Those guys were seriously saying ‘weeey’ for sure... Especially if it’s Christmas in the city, then those guys were definitely going ‘wey, wey, yolo, yolo’. When I think about how I might end up seeing guys like that, that alone already made me...”

I despaired to the thought of those guys who were sure to cause a ruckus no matter when or where regardless of whether it was at the beginning or end of the year.

Yuigahama waved her hands that went no way. “No, no, they don’t say stuff like ‘weeey’ or ‘yolo’ or whatever.”

“They totally do. Like Tobe.” I retorted instantly.

Yuigahama was at a loss for words. “Aah, Tobecchi is... But it’s Tobecchi, so there’s no helping it or something...” You sure had your way with words even if you were trying to brush it off with a smile.

Yukinoshita, who was listening, tilted her head and of course, said some horrible things as well. “Tobe-kun doesn’t really matter right now, but, um, what does ‘weeey’ and ‘yolo’ mean?”

It really didn’t matter to Yukinoshita and it seemed like she was more interested with ‘weeey’ and ‘yolo’ than with Tobe. When asked, Yuigahama cocked her head to the side inquisitively.

“Who knows? I wonder..... Maybe, English?” Yuigahama said innocently, causing my cheeks to loosen. I couldn’t help but mix in a smile, letting out a voice that was meant for speaking with a child.

“That’s right. To Yuigahama, any word she doesn’t know gets treated as English, see. It’s okay, she just can’t help herself.”

“The way you’re saying it so nicely makes me upset!” Yuigahama retorted back sullenly. But look here, you were using the same kind of logic where all foreigners were Americans, so I couldn’t help but think of you as a little child, so what’d you expect...?

On the other hand, Yukinoshita had earnestly considered Yuigahama’s remark and was contemplating about something. “So ‘weeey’ in English... would be the equivalent of ‘wait’, which would be the meaning of ‘matsu’, I suppose...”

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s not it.”

In fact, they probably didn’t even know a lick of English, especially with their Japanese already being suspicious. But apparently, it had nothing to

do with them having issues with wording or having low communicative ability. As a matter of fact, actually managing an actual conversation with a limited arsenal of vocabulary like “crap”, “totally that”, “ooh right”, “that, for sure”, and so forth indicated their communication ability was stupidly high. It was one super contextual culture. It really emphasized “our cultures are soooo different!”

While I was thinking that, Yukinoshita tensely looked in my direction. “Hikigaya-kun, wey. Stay, house.”

“So treating me like a dog, huh...?”

Don’t tell me you were betting your life on that? What do you know, that’s pretty sophisticated.

“Don’t even bother; I was ready to hit the road to my house a long time ago...”

When I attempted to head home obediently as I was instructed, Yuigahama forcibly pulled my sleeve and sat me back down.

“Wait, wait! Just wait! We haven’t even decided on anything yet.”

“Yeah, but still... Besides, you say to spend Christmas with everyone, but what are we supposed to do?”

Although I readjusted in my seat, I didn’t see any signs of progress from here. As usual, I still didn’t understand what you’re supposed to do when you hang out. By all means, I’d appreciate it if someone made a manual. Please put it on the Daijisen⁸. I feel there were a lot of people who could get the job done as long they knew the step-by-step process.

Well, a manual like that couldn’t possibly exist, as people learned through hearsay and under those who were experienced.

Yuigahama, who lived a life of hearsay, nodded her head as she thought. “Go nuts...! Is something Hikki probably wouldn’t like... The illumination is pretty? Then again, Hikki would just say he’ll go look at it by himself... Ummm, ummm...”

I couldn't help but find myself slightly impressed with her.

“Oooh, she's thinking ahead... It looks like we can finally see Yuigahama's growth.”

“Actually, I think Hikigaya-kun's growth is what we can't see here... You're going to be coming along anyway, so why not give up? You sure don't learn.” Yukinoshita said with a look of amazement. But I had a thing or two to say about that.

“Look who's talking, it doesn't look like you're learning either. You can't expect me to tag along if you put it like that...”

“Oh, I can't have you looking down on me. I'm making sure to learn myself,” said Yukinoshita, showing an unyielding smile. But midway, it lost its spirit. “...Yuigahama-san, she may not look like it, but she can be really stubborn, so there are times when turning her down is pointless.”

“That's not learning, that's being whipped...”

Well, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama's slightly unhealthy relationship was in its own way a sign of progress, so that's fine, yes.

Or so I was thinking until Yuigahama shot up her hands. “Ah, I know!”

“It looks like you have something in mind. Can we hear it?”

Once Yukinoshita was ready to hear her out (fully whipped), Yuigahama lifted her finger. She spun it and opened her mouth not looking very confident. “Umm... W-We can all eat chicken together, or something!”

“We can already eat that at any time, can't we...?”

“With that logic, then places like the yakitori stores would have Christmas every day. Besides, there's already chicken at my place anyway.”

Yukinoshita adjusted herself towards me with a smiling face. “‘There's'? Are you sure you don't mean ‘I am'?”

“Hey, hey, I can’t have you lumping up other chickens with the ones at my place. They’re super easy to eat since they’re boneless too. Include my pops and we have two lively ones. Compared to houses elsewhere, our place was extravagant. By the way, when we count chickens, can we count them using ‘lively’?”

“If they’re still alive, then ‘lively’ should be fine.”

“Don’t say things like ‘still alive’! Grotesque things are banned! I won’t feel like eating chicken anymore!”

Yuigahama let out a heart wrenching scream. Still, if it ended on that note, then Yuigahama’s suggestion wouldn’t mean anything anymore.

“If you’re not going to eat chicken, then that means we won’t need to hold a party. The objective is gone.”

“Hikki, you schemer!” said Yuigahama, choking on her words, but still continued. “O-Okay, if chicken’s no good, then... Let’s eat cake instead, cake!”

“Cake, huh...”

I tried giving some thought to cakes. Honestly, back during the earlier Christmas event, we had made a mountain of cakes, so I wasn’t sure what to think if we had to eat even more of them. Besides, whether it was chicken or cake, we could eat those whenever we wanted. The condition, “during Christmas”, seemed just a little too lackluster.

Hmmm.

Yuigahama looked into my face apprehensively and asked, “Huh, you don’t seem too interested... Hikki, were you bad with sweet things?”

Just as I was about to open my mouth to answer, an individual did so before I could.

“Not at all. As a matter of fact, he likes them.”

“Why did you answer, Yukinoshita...? Was this self-introduction time or something? Well, I do like sweet stuff though...”

Yukinoshita flicked away the hair against her shoulders and looked at me with a composed expression. “It’s not something we need to check. Coffee that sweet isn’t something you can drink unless you have a considerable sweet tooth, right?”

“Hah, you’re underestimating MAX COFFEE too much. Sweet tooth or not, I drink it out of necessity. The farmers of Chiba are extremely likely to buy them in bulk too. When it comes to replenishing body fatigue, it’s the most optimal.”

In reality, the farmers of Chiba did tend to buy MAX COFFEE in bulk, even 4-koma magazines too. I saw it in an extracurricular lesson during elementary when we went to a farm so there’s no doubt about it. Times of exhaustion called for something sweet. To be consuming this much MAX COFFEE made me wonder if the residents of Chiba were just way too tired.

Just when I figured I’d enlighten them to the sweetness and wonders of MAX COFFEE, Yuigahama tilted her head. “Hikki, you don’t really seem like you’re tired though... Like how you’re always conserving energy... or maybe being economical, or laidback? You always feel like that.”

“Just so you know, conserving energy and economical doesn’t mean to take it easy...”

“So you’re aware that you’ve been cutting corners in life... However, from the perspective of people you don’t know, your rotten eyes would certainly give the impression that you’re tired... Yet you’re completely healthy... As usual, your eyes are formidable.”

“No, as a matter of fact, this conversation is making me tired. So can I go home?”

“Like I said, you can’t go home yet! Argh, whatever’s fine! For now let’s decide on something! Something, okay!”

“So pushy...”

So this was the mysterious hardheadedness that whipped Yukinoshita, huh...?

The rude thought floated in my head and Yuigahama casted her face downwards.

“If you don’t really want to, then, that’s fine too...” said Yuigahama, shooting me suggestive peeks with upturned eyes.

“Er, no, it’s not that I don’t want to, but when I hear Christmas, there’re just too many little things that I can’t wrap my head around or something...”

When she showed me that kind of expression, I couldn’t help but feel incredibly guilty. But if I pardoned the framework-like thing called Christmas here, I had the feeling she might go “hey, hey” and nag about other things too. Unless we could draw a line that I’d be okay with, it wouldn’t work... Uwaah, this guy sure was a pain. By this guy, I mean me.

As I was groaning while conflicted, Yukinoshita who was watching our exchange let out a short sigh. “It’s not something you need to think so hard about. Instead of Christmas, think of it as a simple party. I’ll be accompanying Yuigahama-san.”

Yuigahama’s face instantly lit up when she heard that and she flew at Yukinoshita.

“Yukinon, thank you! That’s right! Maybe a simple party might be better. Iroha-chan and the others are probably busy with the student council too. Besides, we can think of it as a thank-you to Sai-chan and Komachi-chan for helping us earlier.”

“Yes, if you think of it as something to appreciate their help, then I believe that would be enough of a reason to go.” Yukinoshita said, peeling Yuigahama off of her. I listened to the suggestion and contemplated.

“...I see, you have a point... But, well, today won’t work for me.”

“Why?” Yuigahama removed her face from Yukinoshita and looked at me.

It was either from chicken or cake that I remembered I was entrusted with the task of bringing home the party barrel we reserved.

“I need to bring back chicken for my family. Besides, you know, at least for today, I need to prepare dinner instead of Komachi.”

Yuigahama made a surprised expression. “He’s surprisingly a devoted husband……?”

“It’s rather rare for Hikigaya-kun to have any plans.”

I instinctively smiled bitterly in response to Yukinoshita’s words. You’re absolutely right. For the most part, I’d never have any plans, but in regards to family, mostly Komachi, I made sure not to ignore them.

“Sorry, but anyway, that’s how it is, so today is a no go.”

“I see... If you have things to do, then there’s not much we can do, I guess...” Yuigahama nodded her head, looking convinced of something. She made an “ahaha” laugh and quietly sighed.

It may have been a sudden suggestion, but Yuigahama was probably looking forward to Christmas. In her case, she had plenty of friends she could spend time with. That’s why I felt apologetic when she was making this kind of expression for someone like me.

Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama anxiously, presumably feeling the same way. She then shifted her gaze to me. “If today doesn’t work, you won’t mind tomorrow then?”

“...Well, I don’t have anything particular to do.” I answered as I scratched my head.

Realizing what that meant, Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita, then me, and clapped her hands.

“Eh, eh, ah, right, I see! Okay, tomorrow it is then! So tomorrow, we’ll get ready and get everyone to go buy presents and stuff!”

Quietly watching the energetic Yuigahama, Yukinoshita nodded as well. “Sure. I think that’s fine. Today, I’m feeling, just a little tired...”

It looked like that was a relief for Yukinoshita. But thanks to that, our conversation ended on a good note and I stood up from my seat. *Now I just had to go pick up the chicken and go home...*

“...Okay, so we’ll leave it at that.”

I put my hands on the door to the room. –Aah, right. I had to say this just in case. After rethinking, I turned back to the two.

“See you, tomorrow.”

Yukinoshita looked slightly surprised, but she quickly showed a small smile while Yuigahama energetically waved her hands.

“Yes, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow!”

Taking those remaining words with my back turned, I left the room. It felt like it had been a long time since I was able to exchange these kinds of trivial goodbyes.

x x x

I headed home after picking up the chicken at KFC.

“I’m baaack.”

I called out and went up the steps. When I opened the door to the living room, Komachi, who had been lying on the sofa, stood up and jogged over.

“Welcome back, onii-chan!”

“Yeah, here. The chicken.” I handed over the party barrel I was holding to Komachi. She carefully took it and carried it to the kitchen.

“Thanks ♪ Mom’s going to be home soon too.”

“That so, how about pops?” I took off my coat and tossed it onto the sofa.

Komachi picked it up, straightened it on a hanger, and said, “Who knows?”

What a stone cold reaction... What did you do this time to make Komachi hate you, pops?

So pitiful, you’re so pitiful pops. There wasn’t much he could do about his daughter hating him, but needing to work on a day like this, corporate slaves were truly pitiful...

“Putting that aside, are you sure you shouldn’t be spending time with Yukino-san and Yui-san today?”

“Spending Christmas Eve with family gets first priority, after all.”

Komachi made an odd face. “Mmm. You sound like a girl that says no because she has something else in mind.”

“...Eh? That’s how girls refused? Gosh, the boys who honestly thought ‘she sure is a good girl to be spending time with her family...’ were totally pitiful... Why do you always have to feed me unnecessary information like that?”

Scary... Girls were scary... Now that I’ve been exposed to this story, I couldn’t help, but suspect almost all the girls who behaved a certain way meant something else. You thought “she sure is a nice girl to give me cough drops”, but it turned out she actually meant “You’re so boring, shut up, here

have some candy”, or something like that. Again, which middle school me was this?

As I trembled from the fear, Komachi placed her hands on her waist and threw out her chest. “The thing about onii-chan is that while you’re extremely cynical, you also like to dream a lot. I just think I should gradually destroy those illusions of yours. This is a little sister’s love, you know?”

“Aah, why thank you missy...”

I didn’t really need that Imagine Breaker though...

As I felt disheartened, Komachi glanced at the party barrel in the kitchen and then looked at me anxiously. “Onii-chan, you didn’t have to worry about us. You could’ve just enjoyed your Christmas Eve, you know?”

“That’s not it. We just rescheduled a party to tomorrow, that’s all. We’re going to buy some presents and then have the party or something afterwards.”

“Really? What the heck, I want to go too!” Komachi leaned forward and blurted and it made me remember.

“Aah, speaking of which, they did say they wanted to thank you for the help today... But you’re still in the middle of tests...”

“Gosh, taking a day or two off from studying isn’t going to change anything. I just need to make up those two days of work on another day!”

“That’s what they call a death flag. ‘I’m still okay’. ‘Just a bit more and I can do it’. ‘I think I just might make it’. While you’re reciting all that, it’d be long over; that’s what they call a deadline. Listen here, Komachi. You can push back your deadlines, but you can’t do that for test days.”

“Normally you can’t push back deadlines either, onii-chan...” Komachi looked at me with deep, but pitying eyes.

Ha, ha, ha... You're right about that. You couldn't push them back... The recent memory of the collaborative Christmas event chasing after me gave me nightmares. Urgh, just why did things like deadlines exist in this world...? Especially when there'd be people who could be happy without them... The fact that these formidable enemies called deadlines were causing many people to suffer, it might as well be considered as an evil. Therefore, the solution that could destroy the existence of that formidable enemy would be justice. But I digress.

Deadlines weren't the issue right now, but Komachi. Deadlines, important. Little sister, much more.

“But messing around given the season, I'm not so sure about that...”

Dear, was this really fine? Dear, was this really in the best interests of Komachi? The person in question, however, looked unperturbed and was even happy-go-lucky.

“No worries, no worries. See, ‘just what is onii-chan doing right now?’, ‘did he do something again?’; it's a big problem since I can't concentrate with these thoughts!”

“Well, I understand where you're coming from.”

I was the same way. “What's Komachi doing?” “I hope there aren't any weird bugs sticking to her.” “Kawasaki Taishi isn't pushing her against the wall as he talks to her or anything, right? Because if he is, I'm going to murder that damn brat...” Those thoughts would consume my mind and it'd be common for my fist to transform into various shapes.

When she saw me looking convinced, Komachi forced one last push. “Also, as far as Komachi's concerned, being told to study just makes me lose my drive.”

“That's it. Exactly that. Seriously that. Totally exactly that. There's nothing, but that.” I reflexively pointed at Komachi. “When you get told to study or work, your efficiency just drops, strange as it is.”

I sighed in exhaustion and Komachi roped me in with a smile. “Riiiiight!? And. That’s. Why...”

“...Well, as long we don’t stay out too late, then I guess.”

“Yay! I better figure out what kind of presents I want to buy!”

Although Komachi was raising her hands up in the air in joy, I should at least give her a warning. If she failed her exam because of this, I wouldn’t be able to look her in the eyes.

“You better make sure to study. Ah, that’s right. Almost forgot the present.” I grabbed the bag that was tossed onto the sofa, took out a bag from inside, and rested it on Komachi’s head. “Here. Merry Christmas.”

Making a curious expression, Komachi placed her hand on the bag atop of her head and fixedly looked at it. After that, Komachi’s face from her mouth to her ears gradually turned to a smile.

“Is this... a present for me? Onii-chan, thank you! Hey, can I open it?”

“Go ahead. Though it’s just something I bought on the spot after I got Yukinoshita and Yuigahama’s recommendation. If you’re going to thank someone, thank them.”

Komachi’s hands stopped just right before she was about to open her present with a look of surprise “...Huh? You chose it together?”

“...Well, it just kind of happened.” I answered.

Komachi made a wicked smile. “Hoooh, is that sooo? Oh, I seeee, together, huh?”

“...What’s with that irritating face and tone of yours?”

That’s totally getting on my nerves. I glared at Komachi, but she kept her teasing smile while giving me a lukewarm stare.

“No, no, this is just a smile overflowing with happiness, that’s all. As a matter of fact, what you told me just now was the absolute best Christmas present ever.”

“Oh yeah? Well, as long you’re happy, then whatever.”

I spoke from my shoulder and Komachi lifted up a finger and took on a haughty attitude.

“Ah, but listen to this, onii-chan. When you’re giving a present to a girl, you shouldn’t mention that you chose it with another girl. As far as Komachi’s concerned, that’s very low in Komachi points. Well, since I’m your sister though, it doesn’t matter. In fact, it makes me very happy. Seeing onii-chan, Yukino-san, and Yui-san united is the best thing I can see.”

“Yeah, yeah. I very rarely give presents to people in the first place, but I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, guess I’ll get dinner ready.”

“Yeah! Ah, that’s right. I better mail Yui-san about tomorrow...”

As I took note of Komachi’s advice, I headed for the kitchen.

Alright, first off was Christmas at the Hikigaya household. Let’s show them what I got... Or so I said, but aside from the chicken, it’s mostly just side dishes.

x x x

It was the day of Christmas, following the night of Christmas Eve.

Komachi and I were heading to the shopping mall where everyone would meet. Since it was Christmas, the streets up to the shopping mall brightly glittered from the illumination and ornaments and people going to the city were in high spirits.

Amongst those people, my little sister, Hikigaya Komachi, I knew all too well was the peppiest. She had been humming energetically since a while back.

“Pretty lively first thing in the morning, aren’t you?” I said.

Komachi who had been walking further ahead, turned around to me with a twirl. “Duh, it’s Christmas, you know? And we’ll be going shopping with Yukino-san and Yui-san too, see? And after that, we’ll be having a party and exchanging presents, see? Of course I’ll get super excited!”

Komachi seemed to have understood our plans. Heck, she might even know more than me.

“Really? Well, I guess girls do like things like present exchanges and stuff. Whenever I hear present exchanges, I end up recalling the encyclopedia I didn’t fill up and the guys I couldn’t evolve...” I reflected, with the nostalgic regrets enveloping me.

With a gentle voice, Komachi encouraged me. “Onii-chan, it’ll definitely be a lot better from here on... See, even Ruby and Sapphire got remade, you know!”

“Your reason’s weird... Also, I’m more of the original type of guy...”

Well, if they decided to implement the Wonder Trade9 feature, then a lot of issues would be solved. *Then again, Komachi, exchange something with me...* I looked at Komachi.

She tapped my shoulders and pointed to the entrance of the mall. “Don’t sweat the details. Look, we made it, onii-chan. Ah, they’re both here already too.”

I moved my eyes to the entrance of the shopping mall and Yuigahama and Yukinoshita were standing there. They looked like they noticed us a well and Yuigahama made a big wave with her hand.

“Yahallo!”

“Yui-san, yahallo! Yukino-san too, yahallo?”

“Hello.”

Komachi gave her greetings to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, but I really wish they'd stop doing that... It's a little embarrassing. I found myself checking around us anxiously.

“You guys sure are early. Is this everyone? If we're all here, let's get going.”

It was Christmas, so it was considerably crowded. I was fed up with having to walk through this congestion of people. There'd be nothing better than to get this over with quickly.

But Yuigahama motioned us to wait. “Hold on. I invited Sai-chan too.”

“Oh really? Then let's wait forever until Totsuka gets here.”

“Okay, that works, but somehow that bugs me...” groaned Yuigahama.

Komachi spoke up from there. “Yukino-san, Yui-san. Thank you for the Christmas present.”

“Not at all, if you're happy with it, then that's great.” Yukinoshita smiled, shaking her head telling her not to worry about it while Yuigahama nodded her head going “yup, yup”.

“I mean, I'm not sure what to expect from onii-chan with tastes like that, but I'm glad the two of you chose it for me!”

This time I was nodding to Komachi's words. No, really, they really saved me some trouble by choosing for me. Well, she was probably happier from the fact those two chose the present for her than what she received.

Watching the smiling Komachi, Yuigahama happily returned a smile of her own. “Ah, right. We did give some advice, but the one who chose the present in the end was Hikki.”

“That’s true. Although he normally doesn’t think all that much, he was worrying and worrying all the way until the end...” Yukinoshita winded her long hair with her fingertips and looked at me.

Komachi’s mouth was stuck open with surprise. “...Huh? Is, that what happened?”

“Uh, you didn’t need to mention that... Really stop, don’t say anything...”

I was supposed to look cool because I nonchalantly chose a present, but actually seriously worrying about what to pick was too embarrassing. Because Komachi’s stare that was focused on me was uncomfortable, I decided to shift my gaze and the topic to something else.

“Anyway, what’s this about me not normally thinking all that much? I’ll have you know there aren’t very many who think as much as I do. I could literally get a bronze statue for it.”

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her mouth, holding back her smile. “Oh? I’m sorry. ‘You don’t think of anything worthwhile’ would’ve been more correct.”

“You’re not wrong there, so I’ll give you that.”

“So you’re okay with that... Ahaha... Ah, but look, Komachi-chan. Hikki really did think about— Er... Komachi-chan?” Yuigahama said to Komachi.

Komachi who had been in a daze restarted. “...Ha! Shoot! I almost got fooled by onii-chan being a hinedere10 again! A-Anyway, thank you two very much. Also... onii-chan too.”

What, who’s getting fooled here...? I was always getting fooled by Komachi’s cuteness, you know. Both Komachi and I looked away from each other from embarrassment.

“Mm. Well, it’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

“Right, right.” Yuigahama looked at the both of us and let out a chuckle.

Yukinoshita watched us with a gentle expression, but looking like she realized something, she spoke. “In any case, Komachi-san, I know you’re having a difficult time with your exams, so I’m sorry that we had to call you out like this. We did invite you, but was it really okay for you to come? If by chance you’re just forcing yourself, then...”

“No, it’s fine. Relaxing is necessary too.”

Yukinoshita glared at me. “If all you do is rest, not only do you get complacent, but your knowledge will too.”

“Ugh, you hit it where it hurts...”

Certainly, taking a break or trying to change gears was often used as excuses to ditch.

Seemingly in pain from those words, Komachi was mumbling something in a small voice next to me. “I wonder if Yukino-san’s more of an education-conscious mom... A reliable older sister... One day, I want her as my onee-chan.” Komachi’s eyes visually sparkled.

“Yukinon, it should be okay. Komachi-chan’s very responsible so you don’t need to worry too much.”

Certainly, Komachi’s very responsible.

Seemingly happy with that follow up, Komachi was whispering something in a small voice next to me. “I guess Yui-san’s more of a Wise Wife, Good Mother¹¹, huh? A tolerant older sister... Eventually, I want her as my onee-chan.” Komachi’s eyes visually sparkled.

“Just what have you been mumbling about...?”

“Mmm? That’s a secret! ♪” Komachi sent me a wink, waving her index finger.

...Damn it, this girl was too cute to the point it was irritating, seriously.

“Well, anyway, we don’t need to be all that worried, right? Besides, look, even I passed the tests!” Yuigahama lightly hit her own chest.

Yukinoshita made a difficult expression. “When you put it that way, there’s not much we can say...”

“Please say something! You need to follow up somehow!”

Yuigahama’s crying voice was interrupted by Yukinoshita’s composed tone.

“Then, question. Name the prefecture that’s ranked first in the production of Satsuma sweet potatoes. Further, Ibaraki Prefecture is ranked second.”

“Eh, eh!?” Yuigahama panicked from being quizzed out of the blue.

You don’t really need to think twice about this...

“Isn’t this way too easy...? You gave a big hint away.”

“Easy and a big hint... Potato, Ibaraki... Ah! It’s Chiba Prefecture!”

“Incorrect. I said Satsuma, didn’t I...? The correct answer is Kagoshima Prefecture. By the way, Chiba is ranked third.”

“Yukinon, trick questions are unfair!”

“There was no trick. It was really simple actually...” said Yukinoshita with amazement, and Yuigahama groaned in discontent.

Then again, how the heck did she get Chiba from those hints? What’s this, were you saying Chiba was the same as Ibaraki because they gave off this feeling of potatoes somehow? Could you stop trying to diss Chiba?

Komachi, who had been watching their exchange, asked with a confused expression. “...Yui-san, just how did she pass?”

“Miracles and magic, right? Well, Komachi should do okay on the tests. By virtue of being my little sister, her problem solving skills are good. She’s an idiot, but she’s good at handling things.”

“Your appeal of trying to show how good you are at problem solving is a little bit annoying, but I can see what you’re trying to say.” Yukinoshita nodded her head, seemingly having no qualms with my opinion. Really though, what’s with the “annoying” part...?

Still, it looked like that evaluation was odd for Komachi and her face turned into a frown. “Mmm, it doesn’t sound like a compliment at all though...”

“Aah, that’s true. When you get told ‘you’re good at handling things’, you feel like you’re cheating or something.” Yuigahama expressed her agreement.

Hoh, surprisingly it was bothering her. Well, it’s true that Yuigahama was good at handling things. That’s probably how people saw it from the way she’d maintain just-right distances with people. So it wouldn’t be odd to hear one or two unpleasant things about it. Girl society’s pretty scary, after all.

“I see. Then, let’s think of something else..... Little sneak, or something.”

“It got even worse!?”

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin in disregard to the surprised Yuigahama and after thinking, she majestically opened her mouth. “Impertinent little... or the like.”

“Yukinon, you’re like a boss character!”

I had no absolutely no idea why Yuigahama was looking at Yukinoshita with admiration, but in contrast to Yukinoshita, Komachi opened her mouth with a twinkle. “Little devil, or something! ☆”

“You’re going to say that about yourself!?”

Aah, no, Komachi's just that kind of girl. So including that, that part was what made her good at handling things. In other words, if we were going to change how we described being good at handling things, then...

"Komachi's cute, or something."

Yuigahama had a disgusted face. "There's the sis-con... It's fine that you get along, but Hikki's response kind of hurts..."

"Nope, not at all. Even if she got into my eyes, that is."

"Just how much do you love her!?" Yuigahama withdrew midway.

But there was also someone next to her doing the same thing. "Uhhh, just now, even I was just a bit grossed out there, onii-chan. I'm okay with it at home, but doing that outside is just a little problematic."

"So it's fine at home..."

"A-Ahahaha..."

When Yukinoshita stated with half amazement and half surprise, Yuigahama laughed with the same feeling. There, Yuigahama noticed something and lifted her hand.

"Ah, it looks like Sai-chan's here. Heeeey, over here!"

When I looked myself, running over here in the distance was Totsuka.

"Hachimaaan!"

"Oooh~, Totsuka, you're here!" I stepped forward, ready to catch Totsuka in my arms, but behind him I could see a wild boar running my way like the surging waves of a storm.

"Hachimaaaaaaan!"

"Aaah— Zaimokuza, you're actually here..."

While Zaimokuza was steadying his violent breathing with a “fushururu!”, Yuigahama spoke to Totuska.

“Sai-chan, yahallo!”

“Uh huh, yahallo!”

A refreshing greeting. On second thought, it really is a good greeting. “Yahallo” sure is cute.

As I was thinking that, the revived Zaimokuza turned to me and raised his hand. “Indeed, Hachiman. Yahalloooo!”

Then again, this greeting was really embarrassing... Even so, why did he greet only me?

“Y-Yeah... So, who called Zaimokuza?” I checked with Yuigahama and Yukinoshita with a quiet voice and the two’s faces distorted in confusion.

“Eh? You weren’t the one that called him, Hikki?”

“I thought for sure he was under your care...”

“No, I didn’t call him...”

Still, the one good thing about Zaimokuza was that you could place any doubt to rest with just “it’s because it’s Zaimokuza”. It also included not having any interest in what he did. In other words, it’s basically “whatever works” ☆!

“...Well, that’s fine. I was going to thank him at some point anyway.”

“Indeed. If you wish not to turn bald, then I would advise to not fret over the specifics. So to speak, for what reason do we gather today?” Zaimokuza spoke.

Komachi looked at both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. “Ummm... We’re going to have a Christmas party, but before that, we’ll be doing some

shopping and buying presents for the gift exchange. Does that sound about right?”

Yuigahama nodded in response. “Uh huh. Since we’re all here now, we should get going.”

“I suppose. Let’s get this over with quickly.” Yukinoshita said, heading inside to the shopping mall.

We all followed right after her.

× × ×

Presents. They were a type of Christian stepping tablets¹²

If you gave someone something mediocre, “Aah, so this person actually thought I was someone who’d want something like this, uh huuuh”, of the sort would come to mind.

Foresight. Tastes. Financial fidelity. Resourcefulness; it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that those qualities were all judged... No, it might be an exaggeration. Probably, an exaggeration... It’d be nice if it was an exaggeration. Well, I’ll just ready my nerves just in case.

The inside of the shopping mall was overflowing with people as well. Christmas carols were incessantly playing and people who passed by were carrying large bags. All of the stores were decorated with wreathes and tinsel. Just a quick glance revealed that a fair number of stores were inside.

“Oooh. I’ve never actually stepped foot in this shopping mall since it was built, but there’s a lot of things in here, huh?”

I looked around finding it rare since this was my first time stepping foot in here. In the same way, Yukinoshita was anxiously examining the area.

“It’s rather big, isn’t it...? Also, there’s quite a lot of people since it’s Christmas as well... Just walking is tiring...”

Yukinoshita had no endurance and also wasn’t comfortable with crowds of people. Despair was fading in and out from every alternating letter of her words. In contrast, there was Yuigahama.

“You’re right! It’s so lively, this actually might be kind of fun! Ah, look, there’s a Santa here!” Reinforced by the merry atmosphere filling the interior of the mall, Yuigahama was elatedly enjoying herself, pointing at the person in a Santa outfit distributing balloons in the area. She then pulled at my sleeve. “Hey, hey, Hikki, how long did you believe Santa-san for?”

“I think I believed in him up until elementary school, maybe.”

“Heeh, that’s kind of surprising.” Yuigahama opened her mouth in surprise.

Wait, it shouldn’t be that surprising. Even I had a time when I was just a pure, naïve child. Just when I thought I’d give her a piece of my mind, Komachi quietly stood next to me.

“My brother when he was younger was sooo adorable, you know~. Especially in the pictures and home videos..... His eyes weren’t rotten at the time either.”

“What the heck? That makes me super curious!”

It didn’t look like Yuigahama’s voice reached Komachi as she had a regrettable expression with a distant look in her eye. It was like she was mourning those long days past. I-I’m sorry, okay? Sorry that onii-chan turned out this way...

After watching Komachi and Yuigahama, Yukinoshita smiled with a look of pity. “Just how did he turn out this way, I wonder...? Time can be quite cruel.”

“You got that right. Everything was time’s fault.”

“Waah, as usual...” Yuigahama let out a resigned sigh.

Yup, that was also time’s fault. I wasn’t the one at fault here.

“Hikki’s beyond help, but Yukinon, did you believe in Santa?” asked Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita looked into the distance and murmured, “By the time I was old enough to understand things for myself, nee-san already told me...”

“Aah, she was that kind of person after all...”

Poor Yukinon, poor Yukinon... Both Yuigahama and I couldn’t help but, send her a gaze of sympathy. But since it was Haruno-san, there wasn’t much she could do. Well, it might’ve been different if she blurted out “that’s onee-sama for you!”¹³ and clung onto her though.

“Hachiman, since the dawn of time, I had never placed any faith in Santa! In this world, I have no God, Buddha, Santa, or giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiirlfriend!” Zaimokuza screamed out loudly as he clenched his fist.

“I understand your feelings, but why are you talking just to me...? Let’s talk about these important things with the others, yeah?”

I couldn’t deny the fact that girlfriends were on the same vague plane of existence as gods, Buddhas, and Santa. It was only that point alone that made it worth listening to Zaimokuza’s opinion.

Since there were so many people on the side that denied Santa’s existence at a young age, Yuigahama let out an embarrassing “ahaha” laugh. “Then again, it looks like most people find out pretty early, huh? I believed in Santa up until my third year in elementary~.”

“Ahaha.” Komachi laughed in the same way. “Oh you’re such a joker, Yui-san.”

“Ahaha, I know, right? I was just a teensy bit dumb back then...”

No, that still holds even now, not when you were just a kid...

“Anyway, with the mall being so large, it’s hard to know which area we should start looking around in.” Yukinoshita stated as she looked around.

Well, there was a part of you that had no sense of direction after all...

Having been told that, Komachi groaned as she did a little thinking. “Let’s see. What kinds of presents does everyone want to buy?”

“I was thinking of like maybe accessories or general stuff, but... What about everyone else?”

Then, surprisingly, Zaimokuza responded with a suggestion.

“When you hear Christmas, you think of toys. And when you hear toys, you think of ‘R Us!”

“Aah, their commercial tune has some pretty nice lyrics. It really made you sympathize.”

“What kind of song was it again?” asked Totsuka, and I tried to sing the lyrics from the ‘R Us commercial song. Uhhh... I think it went like this...

“I want to staaaay a child, funfufufu— funfufu? No, that’s not right. Nya? Nyanya—nya—, I don’t want to become an aduuult, I don’t want to work...” As I was singing, I could feel the mood get muddy and depressing. H-Huuuh? Was this song really that much of a downer?

Totsuka made a slightly strained smile, wondering the same thing as I did.

“W-Was it that kind of song...? Although most of it was made up on the spot, you’re amazing to remember only that last part properly... Ah, but it looks like there’s a ‘R Us over there.”

“Indeed. Let us enter.”

“Oh, sounds good. I’m starting to get kind of giddy now.”

The boy group was eager to go inside, but Yuigahama made an obviously displeased face.

“Eeh, we’re really going inside?”

Looking to calm Yuigahama down, Komachi took her arms. “Now, now, they might have stuff like party goods, so why not give it a shot?”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. I wonder if they sell crackers.” Yukinoshita nodded after thinking.

Totsuka agreed with that as well. “Yeah, let’s try taking a look.” As Totsuka headed inside the store, we followed right behind him.

...Still, Yukinoshita-san, crackers of all things? You were totally looking forward to this party, weren’t you...? No, well, that’s not a bad thing or anything.

x x x

The inside of the store plastered with Christmas special displays was submerged in a unique fanciness liken to a toy store, becoming a small land of dreams and magic. Though Yuigahama was reluctant earlier, she was raising her voice in happiness going “waah”.

Toy stores were truly places that allowed you to revert back to a child. Really, I don’t want to become an adult, I don’t want to work...

As we walked about in that exciting space, we came across a familiar individual. That person was squatting in front of the plastic model shelves.

It was Hiratsuka-sensei.

As I stood there with my tongue tied, Hiratsuka-sensei noticed us as well. “Oh, Hikigaya...”

“Se-Sensei...”

“Ah, it’s Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“Oh, so Yuigahama and the others were with you.”

Coming from behind me was Yuigahama and the others and they noticed Hiratsuka-sensei as well.

“What could you be doing at a place like this?”

“R-Right. Basically... W-Work.”

No, that had to be a lie... You were totally mumbling your words and even though the heating wasn’t all that strong, your hands were totally sweating. Still, Yuigahama looked at Hiratsuka-sensei with innocent eyes.

“Huuuh, that must be rough. Even though it’s Christmas too.”

“Urg, nnggh, y-yeah, well, it is work after all... It’s just part of my job as a guidance counselor. It’d be a big deal if students caused problems during winter vacation from playing around too much. A-Aah, what a bummer. You know what they say about privacy and work. Even dinner conversations were becoming work related recently too. A, ha, ha, ha...”

“Sensei, your eyes aren’t laughing...” Totsuka looked at sensei with frightful eyes amidst the space that shook with Hiratsuka-sensei’s laughing voice.

Once she finished her laugh, Hiratsuka-sensei took back her calm demeanor as if something had blown past inside of her. “...So, I’m in the middle of my work, but what are you all doing?”

“We’re thinking of holding a party soon so we’re doing some shopping for that. Ah, I know. Sensei, why don’t you join us?” Yuigahama asked and Hiratsuka-sensei crossed her arms and contemplated.

“Fumu... Well, it doesn't hurt to cut loose for a bit. Maybe I'll bother you guys for a bit. Not like I had any plans anyway...” She added those words with a small voice.

Komachi tilted her head. “What ever happened to your work...?”

“Komachi, stop. Don't ask.” I gently grabbed her shoulders and stopped her. Luckily, those words didn't reach Hiratsuka-sensei's ears as she started to rummage through the shelves energetically.

“So now that's decided, I'm suddenly feeling super excited! C'mon, look Hikigaya! There's a ton of fun toys around!”

Looking at how Hiratsuka-sensei was, Yukinoshita muttered. “She's energetic all of a sudden now...”

“I guess the lid's finally off...”

Well, being able to change gears quickly was a good thing! As I explained her behavior in a positive light, Hiratsuka-sensei took a number of things from the shelves and showed me a wonderful smile.

“Look, Hikigaya, how about something like the Mini 4WDs? Once you're an adult, you get really hooked. There're also B-Daman, Hyper Yo-Yos, Beyblade... But I guess I still prefer Transformers. No, ZOIDS are hard to let go too. Aah, you can't forget about the trading card games too.”

Zaimokuza was pulled in from the lineup that was close to our senses as boys. “Indeed, bundled with golden cards signed by the cast and new specially drawn illustrations, Precious Memories with raving reviews from Movic is on sale!”

“What's with the sudden commercial...?” I was surprised by his unexpectedly good voice.

Totsuka nodded as well. “But card games are pretty fun. I used to play all the time... Let's abide by the rules and have a fun duel!¹⁴”

“Your hunger is lacking! But for men, then Chogokin¹⁵ is the way to go! Become the liiiiiiiiiiiiiight!¹⁶”

“Hey, seriously, your screaming is making me want it now...” Because of Zaimokuza’s exclaimed in a cool voice, I found myself leaning forward and checking out the toys as well.

On the other hand, speaking of the girl group, they were looking at us with cold stares at a distance away.

“...Haa, I guess boys just like that stuff, huh?”

“Boys will be boys wherever they are after all.” Komachi said to pacify Yuigahama’s given up voice.

“So why is Hiratsuka-sensei with them over there...?” Yukinoshita said with her head tilted.

Well, it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. I mean, it was Hiratsuka-sensei after all. In this world, there was no such thing as something mysterious.¹⁷

We boys along with Hiratsuka-sensei looked at more of the ‘R Us shelves. Totsuka tugged at my coat’s sleeve (cute). “Ah, hey Hachiman, look, look. They have a lot of Gunpla here.”

When I looked, a bunch of Gunpla was overcrowding the shelves.

“Oh. You’re right. Are you interested?”

Considering Totsuka’s typical image, it didn’t suit him very much. Obviously this included his facial features and body type, though there’s also his sports club, he didn’t really give off the impression he’d like this kind of stuff.

When I asked, Totsuka’s gaze lowered to the floor and he muttered with embarrassment. “...Yeah, I am”.

“...M-Me too!”

“Eh?” Totsuka looked at me with a blank face.

Whoa, not good, not good. My hot pathos almost gushed out right there. I had better revise my statement. “Aah, no, sorry. I couldn’t hear you very well there so I said something weird. Sorry, but could you say that five more times?”

“Stop right there! Hachiman!” Zaimokuza gripped my shoulders, keeping me in check which allowed me to return to my senses again.

Th-That was close. The way his face was blushing bright red as he looked away trying to muster his words out earlier was one thing, but also how cute the way he lightly tilted his head with a mix of surprise and confusion as he narrowed eyes almooooost made me slip out something weird. Thanks Zaimokuza! I sent him a look and Zaimokuza lifted his glasses as he operated his smart phone.

“I will ready the recording, so buy me some time!”

“Yeah, leave it to me!”

What a reliable fellow Zaimokuza was! I’d never had guess to use a recording of Totsuka’s voice as an alarm clock to wake up in the morning and night! This guy really was disgusting! But no objections from me! Except streaming it was NG! I want to monopolize it, after all!

The moment I tried to open my mouth in hopes of buying some time, Komachi interrupted me with a sigh. The strategy was a failure!

“Uwaah, what a good-for-nothing combo. But onii-chan, you used to make this a lot back then.” Komachi said as she snatched a Gunpla from the box and lifted it up.

“Aah, you used to break them all the time too though... Well, that’s the fate of the older sibling.”

Well, if you had a younger brother or sister, plastic models getting destroyed was common. To add, save data was no exception. It was natural for your adventure log to get deleted the moment their feet hit the console. Heck, “I want to see this scene again” and you’d go out of your way to save

on a different slot only to hear “I wanted to start a new game, so I overwrote it ☆” which caused you to lightly cry.

Filled with my young memories, I could hear Totsuka’s sweet voice. “So Hachiman, you made them before too, huh? Me too. It was my dad who was into it at first though.18”

“Heeh. That’s actually kind of surprising.” I replied back. I was totally under the impression Totsuka was brought up gracefully. For him to be influenced by his pretty dad— I mean, dad, was a bit surprising.

Totsuka covered his mouth with his hands and chuckled. “Really? I mean, I *am* a boy after all, you know?”

The way Totsuka gently tilted his head and peek into my face from below was as if he was testing me. In the small distance that he covered by getting close to me, I reflexively lost my words and Zaimokuza in the same way emulated Totsuka. For what reason?

“That is right, Hachiman. There is no way this cutie could ever be a girl!”

“Urg, right, he *is* a boy after all, kuh...”

Watching our worthless exchange, Hiratsuka-sensei approached us. She held a Master Grade set and looked it over.

“Oh, Gunpla, huh? I hear girls have been making them too recently... Surprisingly, this kind of hobby might affect popularity in the future.”

“Are you serious? Now I’m starting to get interested... Kirara ☆19”

When Komachi’s eyes sparkled, Hiratsuka-sensei laughed with provocation.

“Oh, Hikigaya’s little sister. Want to have a match with me in gunplay then?”

As Komachi and Hiratsuka-sensei took opposing stances, for some reason, Yukinoshita slid to the front.

“If you mean match, then losing won’t be forgiven.20”

“So you got hooked by the word ‘match’, huh? Even though you’re always being Yarukinainen-san21. You sore loser...”

Still, how exactly do you have a match with Gunpla... A match of craftsmanship? As I thought that, Komachi didn’t seem to care at all about that, but was just ready to go. She displayed a fearless smile and then pointed at Hiratsuka-sensei and Yukinoshita.

“Fufufu! Very well! Then let’s have a match! Should you win against me, for the prize... I will present you my brother!”

“Hohoo...” Hiratsuka-sensei looked at Komachi with a sharp glint.

Crap, those eyes were serious!

“...Now just a second, Komachi-chan? Could you stop trying to sugarcoat your attempt at getting rid of a nuisance? I’ll just say for the time being, but that’s—”

“No, you can’t! You definitely can’t do that!” Yuigahama interrupted the words I tried to say. The way Yuigahama barged into made me look in her direction.

“Y-Yeah... Well, they certainly can’t, do that...”

“Ah... Um, it’s not that they can’t do that, er...”

When our eyes met, we both averted our faces.

“.....”

“.....”

We also went dead silent too. What the heck was this? I really wanted to jump to my death right now. And then, remembering a feeling of discomfort from watching Yuigahama and I, Komachi looked at the both of us.

“Oh? Oh? Is it just me, or a mood I don’t know of is... Could this possibly, be...?” Komachi’s eyes were illuminating.

Please, Komachi-chan, don't look at your onii-chan with those kinds of eyes... As I was thinking that, watching that exchange from a distance, Zaimokuza let out an incredibly dull voice.

“Hachimaaan, I totally don't care, but can I like go pick a Gunpla already, huuuh?”

“Eh, aah, right. I'll go look over there for a bit too.” When I headed to where Zaimokuza was, I could hear Komachi click her tongue from behind.

“Tch, that darn chuuni-san... He interrupted at a good spot too...”

“Phew, I guess we're putting the match on hold. Well, why don't we go check it out too?” Hiratsuka said and everyone rummaged around inside of the store.

I lined up next to Zaimokuza and Totsuka who were looking at the Gunpla.

“I'm suddenly feeling tired now...”

“Ah, Hachiman. Why don't you pick something?” Noticing from my voice mixed with a sigh that I had lined up next to him, Totsuka did a turn.

“So you say, but I don't know what's what nowadays. I don't have the confidence I'd build them nicely either...”

“That's okay. You don't need to worry about it too much. With Gunpla, you can freely make things with whatever you can think of!”

Totsuka's smile as he fervently talked with sparkling eyes was bright...

“When you put it like that, now I really want to try building something... Okay, maybe I'll go with this...”

I looked through numerous ones and I reached my hands out for something that struck a chord with me.

Zaimokuza spat out an exaggerated sigh. “Aaah, Hachiman, you’re going to choose thaaat? You’re really going toooo?”

“Eh, what, is this no good?” I looked at Zaimokuza wondering what the problem was and his answer was vague.

“No, it’s not that it’s not good... It’s not that it’s not good, buuut... But the thing issss.”

“You’re so annoying... This is the problem with otakus... Whatever, this works for me. With this suit, I will... become a Super Pilot.” I stated with an attentive face and Zaimokuza made a needlessly determined face.

“Hohoh, if that is so, then I will go with this suit that shines brightly in the eye of the storm and I’ll return it twofooooooooooooooooooooold!” We both glared at each other and showed an unpleasant smile.

Yuigahama then barged in, clapping her hands and said “Okay, stop, stop. These are presents you won’t know who will get.. Hikki and chuuni, you both need to think more about it.”

“Mmg, I see...” Both Zaimokuza and I obediently put back the Gunpla on the shelves. *So maybe a more mainstream Gunpla will work...* As I thought that, I reached my hand out to another Gunpla, but Yuigahama stopped me there.

“Okay, choose again! One present per person!”

“Are you my mom or something...?”

Watching the terrible spectacle of the boy group from afar, Komachi groaned and thought for a little bit. She then clapped her hands. “It looks like we’re not going to get much shopping done if we stick with my brother and the others. Is it okay if we go look around on our own?”

“Uh huh, I think that way might be better.” Totsuka agreed.

Yuigahama also raised her hand. “Agreeeed! Okay, when you’re done, meet up in front of the cake shop.”

“Yes, see you in a bit.”

With Yukinoshita’s words as a signal, everyone broke off into small groups.

...Now then, guess I’ll go get some presents.

x x x

After leaving the ‘R Us, I aimlessly wandered around the shopping mall. Although there were a variety of stores located inside, nothing seemed to click even from quick glances at the store. I also found myself running away whenever the clerks would run over to me just from a brief look.

I finally managed to go inside to a variety store where the clerk couldn’t call out to me, but I still didn’t know what to pick.

“Still, they say to pick out a present, but... We won’t even know who it’ll go to ... Choosing something that would be useful in some form, but not a nuisance to anyone is pretty difficult...” I blabbered to myself (special skill) and organized my thoughts. Then, there was a person who had been quietly standing behind me.

“Fu, fu, fu, you seem troubled.”

“Ooh, Komachi. Well, I most certainly am.”

When I turned around, Komachi was assuming a daunting post. She then lifted a finger.

“Times like this are where expendable things are good, onii-chan.”

“Expendable things?”

What do you mean by “expendable”? Like a NINJA? That’s a bit suspicious, isn’t it...?

I tilted my head and Komachi continued. “Yup, it won’t feel depressing if there’s nothing left. Throwing it away wouldn’t be an issue too.”

“R-Right... So with the assumption it’ll get tossed, huh...”

Now just why would this brat say something so scary...? But, well, I see what she was getting at. In short, expendable things were, in other words, consumable things? Candy, tea, or daily necessities, well, stuff like that, I wonder? I see, it’s just like Komachi said, they’re easy to get rid of.

Once I was convinced, Komachi went further. “Things you can wear are just a little heavy too. Like accessories or expensive stuff.”

“Scary... My little sister’s showing the face of a woman... Well, I’ll see what I can find.”

“Okay, good luck. I’ll see you later then.”

“Yeah.”

Komachi dashed off looking like she some things in mind. Remaining there, I raised my hand, saw Komachi off, and scratched my head.

“‘Things you can wear are heavy’, huh? Well, that sounds about right...”

Heavy things didn’t only trouble the giving side, but also the receiving side, after all.

“Alright, let’s look for something— something that’ll make Totsuka happy— something that’ll make Totsuka happy— or so...”

I readjusted my mood and decided to enter the closest store.

x x x

There was a store with a relaxing atmosphere in contrast to the shopping mall congested with people. After entering, I was, as usual, looking through all the items.

It looked like this store was a home decor store, with many types of interior items, accessories and tableware.

I couldn't complain about having an assortment of items to browse through, but the more choices a human had, the more he's unable to act and that happened to be the very predicament I was in.

"Aah... What to buy... I've been looking around for a while now, but I have no idea what's good..."

As I was grumbling to myself, a voice called out to me from the shelf across.

"Ah, Hikki. You're checking out this store too?"

"Mm, Yuigahama, huh? Yeah, well, for me, I have no idea which stores had variety goods or not though."

I gently placed the miscellaneous item I picked up which had some incomprehensible Asian style to it back on the shelf.

Yuigahama, who was watching, came up next to me and wryly smiled. "Mmm, right. Since anything could work, it's actually kind of hard..."

"Picking anything would be a bad idea, wouldn't it? Things that changed based on a person's preferences definitely never become anything worthwhile afterwards."

It's not like this was limited to presents either. Things that couldn't find a consensus always ended in a dispute. It was especially at times like these where we'd need a GRAND DESIGN CONSENSUS that had an INNOVATIVE WIN-WIN relationship. Not good, my head's ascending.

"You don't need to think all that hard about it. I mean, your feelings are what's important, or like how you'd be happy from the fact they thought so

much about their gift to you... That's why anything works." Yuigahama said as she poked her index fingers together.

Well, "feelings are important" wasn't all that difficult to understand.

However, just how much worth was placed in the feelings that weren't conveyed and the thoughts that couldn't reach? Besides, I felt "it's the thought that counts" wasn't all there was to it.

I let out a small sigh. "The anything part is what's getting me though... Besides, look, you wouldn't know what to do if you were given a Gunpla, right?"

Yuigahama blinked several times and slightly averted her eyes.

"Aah... Erm, that's, well, I guess so... I guess I'd end up worrying about what they thought of me instead, maybe."

"Right? It's one thing to have the person you're giving a gift to be considerate towards you. If that's how it's going to turn out, even if I don't want to, I'd have to seriously consider what I want to pick."

Once you gave the gift and after a slight pause, they told you "...Thank you—", forcing themselves to be energetic, that's the moment when you'd want to die. With those imaginative thoughts being drawn in my mind, I scavenged through the shelves in dejection.

Yuigahama broke into a smile. "You're so serious about the strangest things... In that case, I'd better think a little harder about what to pick too."

"Right, you do that. We won't know who gets what, after all."

"I guess so," said Yuigahama. Both Yuigahama and I placed the tableware and accessories in our hands back on the shelves. Yuigahama then reluctantly opened her mouth. "...But it'd be nice if it did go to the right person. That is, returning the favor for my birthday, I haven't really properly given one to Hikki yet, so..."

“Eh?” I asked back, but what that was referring to came to mind. Although it felt like a rather long time since then, it was at most only half a year ago. It’s likely she was talking about that present I gave to her back then. However, I felt that was just a gift I used as an excuse to settle my entirely selfish sentiment using her birthday as a cover.

“Aah, no, it wasn’t that kind of thing, so don’t worry about it. It was just my return gift in the first place. If we keep going back and forth, it’ll never end.” I felt this was also a part of my selfish reasoning. However, since I had no other reason as of now, this was the only way I could put it.

But, Yuigahama wasn’t looking at me and instead gently whispered, “It’s not like, it has to end though...”

Those casual words pulled at my heart.

“...I, guess so.”

“...Uh huh.”

Both of us were quiet.

A relationship that didn’t end was something I couldn’t imagine at all. It was probably just a dream, a delusion, or possibly an ideal; something that I didn’t think could ever be real.

For how beautiful it was, it was painful, and I couldn’t find the words to say back to Yuigahama.

The silence was destroyed by Yuigahama’s bright smile. “Ah, that’s right. Actually, it’s almost Yukinon’s birthday.”

“Oh yeah, I remember hearing about that.” I wasn’t sure of the specific day, but I believe it should’ve been in winter.

Yuigahama grabbed something from the shelf and quickly put it back. After doing that a few more times, she glanced at me. “When it was my birthday, um, my present, you went to buy it with Yukinon, right?”

“Pretty much. Komachi was there too though.”

“U-Uh huhh.” Yuigahama responded nonchalantly. The miscellaneous item she had in her hands, she placed it again back on the shelf and stared at it. “Then, it’d be nice, i-if you could go out, with me... Um, shopping that is...”

I looked at the shelf as well and somehow tried toying with the item Yuigahama had in her hands from earlier.

If it was just “shopping”, there wasn’t a reason to refuse. I think. Just like the time when I went with Yukinoshita before, the objective this time was clear as well.

We did make the promise of going out together at some point, but that, too, should’ve been something else. So it might be okay to be a little more easygoing regarding this.

I let out a quiet, unnoticeable sigh and lifted my face. “Mm... Shopping, huh...? Well, if it’s just shopping, then whenever works for me.”

“Okay...” Yuigahama gave a short reply and looked away in embarrassment. Ahead of where she looked, she noticed Yukinoshita who seemingly came to this store to choose presents too.

“Ah, it’s Yukinon. Okay, let’s leave this talk for later. Heeey, Yukinoooo!” Yuigahama spoke quickly and she dashed off towards her.

“Oh, Yuigahama-san and Hikigaya-kun.”

Yuigahama placed her hands on Yukinoshita’s shoulders after she turned around. “Yukinon. Have you decided what to buy?”

“No, not yet. I received quite a bit of advice from Komachi-san, but...”

You don’t say. Yukinoshita was with Komachi, huh?

“I don’t see Komachi anywhere though...”

“Komachi-san’s over there.” Yukinoshita pointed.

When I looked, Komachi really was there. She was... but she was just a little odd.

“Oh, there you are. Hey, Komachi... What are you doing?” Upon looking, Komachi was collapsed on a gigantic cushion, as if there was no response. She was spacing out, her eyes somehow hollow. But when she noticed I was calling out to her, she quickly returned to her senses.

“Ah, onii-chan. This is good! This sofa that turns people into good-for-nothings! Uwah, amazing, I’m totally going to become a good-for-nothing. Ah, not good, Komachi, at this rate, I’m going to...” Komachi mumbled and mumbled as she sank further into the sofa. Was this what they called the power of the sofa that turned people into good-for-nothings...?

“Eh, is it really that good...? Now I’m totally interested.”

I want to give it a try too. As I thought about how I would collapse on the sofa with Komachi and how it would feel to have afternoon nap time with her, I tried to take a step forward only to be stopped by a voice.

“Oh, I believe that isn’t necessary for Hikigaya-kun, right? You’re already a good-for-nothing after all.”

When I turned around, Yukinoshita was smiling.

“Stop with that nice smile of yours. Did you not know? If you multiply a negative with a negative, it becomes positive.”

“If you add negatives, then it just becomes a bigger negative. Did you not learn arithmetic in middle school?”

“No, wait. Think in reverse. We can also try propagating this so everyone becomes a negative. Look here, Yukinoshita. If everyone’s a good-for-nothing, then the good-for-nothings will disappear.”

Yukinoshita let out a big sigh. “That misguided equality mindset is just like always. As I thought, that sofa really isn’t necessary for you.”

Listening to our helpless exchange, Komachi finally got up.

“Phew. Up we go... Well, I guess so. What my brother wants is something more family oriented. As far as Komachi’s concerned, rather than a sofa that made people into good-for-nothing, I want a wife that’ll make my brother into a good-for-nothing ♪ Hint, hint, hint!”

“Heh!? Eh, eh, no, ummm, I’m just, umm...”

Yuigahama who had been smiling wryly from the side tried to speak up, but her words just wouldn’t come out. I’m glad... I get the feeling I’d drop dead if I were to hear anything right now... On the other hand, speaking of Yukinoshita, she shrugged off Komachi’s gaze.

“Komachi-san, unfortunately, I don’t believe that wish of yours will be granted. It’s impossible for Hikigaya-kun.”

“Eeh, really? What a bummer. I really want someone to succeed me already...”

Mmm, Komachi-chan, you’ve been trying to get rid of me too much lately, haven’t you? I think it’d be okay if you delayed our inevitable parting just a little bit, okay?

Well, I was grateful for Yukinoshita writing off Komachi’s pointless appeal, but still, I wasn’t quite too satisfied with what she said.

“Hey now? Could you, like, not destroy a person’s dreams with just a few words?”

Yukinoshita sent me a cold gaze. “Despite what you say all the time, you’re someone who actually goes through with things, aren’t you?”

“Aah, I can see that. Hikki, you seem like you’d work despite complaining all the time.” Yuigahama nodded her head.

Komachi turned towards me. “There you have it, onii-chan.”

An unpleasant image came to mind. “No, honestly, I really just can’t get into the mood... Perhaps I’ll get worked hard on mediocre pay, and as I spit out curses towards the company, I’ll find myself working overtime, bringing me up to an average salary. By the time I become used to it, I’ll end up giving up thinking, “Phew, maybe this life isn’t so bad after all...”, and end up living a life as a healthy corporate slave. I’m just so worried and worried that I’ll end up like this... I’m seriously worried about my future.”

“His imagination is strangely realistic...”

“Yet, the point he’s worried about is off the mark...”

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita both had disheartened expressions. Really, I had no hopes or dreams.

“That’s exactly why I want to at least have some dreams. I will definitely, become a full-time house husband...”

“I can’t help, but find it mysterious how only rubbish conclusions result from someone so imaginative...” Yukinoshita let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Now, now, as you two know very well, my brother has that kind of personality. It’ll be a big help to me if you don’t expect too much from him.” Komachi supported me with not very supportive words.

“I suppose so. I’ve already given up.”

“A-Ahahaha. W-Well, he’s a lost cause.”

The two were saying harsh things, but only Komachi looked happy as she peeked into my face.

“Hear that! Isn’t that great, onii-chan!?”

“No, no, that’s not great at all. They’ve given up on me and think I’m a lost cause, you know.”

That hopeless feeling wasn't something to scoff at. Consider at a part-job time: It was on the level of not being expected of anything "...Aah, aaah, aah, you don't need to do anything anymore".

To Komachi though, that didn't seem to be the case with her smile still intact. "Mmm? I don't know about that. I think it's a good thing though... Fufu, oh whatever. Then we won't need this sofa huh?"

"Right. In place of a sofa, we have a fluffy fur ball rolling around at home anyway."

Komachi nodded in agreement. "Aah Kaa-kun, right? But I bet Kaa-kun would be happy with this sofa though. With this, he might just yawn all day."

Yup, yup, I can see that. Just why do cats go straight for sofas and futons anyway? I thought that, but apparently that wasn't something limited to just cats.

Yuigahama hit her hands, imagining something in particular. "That's true! I can see Sabure hopping up and down on the sofa too! Maybe I should buy it."

"Nah, I'm pretty sure he'll just sink into it... If our cat just laid down, he'd probably just sink too."

In that instant, Yukinoshita stopped her movements with a jolt. "...If the cat, laid purrfectly down...? That cat is, so cute."

...J-Just now, there was an extremely, cold punny onee-san here... No, the voice was really quiet, so I might've misheard it. I looked at Yukinoshita.

With a turn, she had an attentive face, looking my way. "Hey, Hikigaya-kun, are you sure you shouldn't buy this sofa? After all, pets are a part of the family and if you treasure spending Christmas with your family, then a present would be perfect, right?"

"No, could you stop acting bashful with that 'it's perfectly logical!' elated face of yours? That theory of yours was as full of holes as beehives..."

Maybe it was something like that; it was a theory structured like a honeycomb that she was being bashful about... *Just how am I going to avoid her suggestion?*

Komachi pulled at my sleeve. “Ah, onii-chan. This sofa has a small cushion version. This size should be okay, right?”

When I looked, there was another cushion made from the same material.

Yukinoshita gently rubbed the cushion and nodded. “I believe this size would be perfect for a cat. Right? Hikigaya-kun.”

“Your criterion’s becoming completely cat-centric..... Well, I’ll think about it. I’ll go look at other things too.”

I had the feeling the longer I stayed, the closer I’d be to buying that cushion just for my cat. So I ended the note with vague words. It looked like Yuigahama and the others respectively still had things they wanted to buy as well.

“Okay, then, see you in a bit.”

After I saw Yuigahama and the others leave, I left the area as well.

x x x

Since I finished buying what I needed for the present exchange and, well, a couple of other things, I decided to go to the cake shop that was designated as the meeting spot..

I readjusted the paper bag with the present inside in my hands and checked the clock.

“Phew... For now, I managed to buy the presents... No problem with the meeting place around here either. It’s almost about time too...”

The others should be coming about now. I decided to stand there and wait. As I was fiddling with my smart phone, I could hear a listless voice you'd hear at a part-time job at a convenience store.

"elcome, 'come."

"Hm? This annoying voice sounds awfully familiar..."

You're so loud. I sent him a menacing gaze and the person with the listless voice was wearing a Santa outfit and seemed to be selling cakes at the front of the store.

"elcome, 'come."

You sure are annoying. I thought, but I couldn't really move from this meeting place. I tried to not let it bother me, but the annoyingness was too much for me that I ended up looking. It was then the eyes of that listless Santa met with mine.

"...Ah. Oh snaps? Ain't that Hikitani-kun!?"

The listless Santa openly started talking to me. *Aah, this guy sure is annoying.* As it turned out, it was Tobe.

"Ooh, surprised me there... Tobe, huh...? Talking to me out of nowhere like that, I almost thought he was a friend for a second there..."

Tobe acting so familiar made me cringe a bit, but that didn't seem to bother him as he tried to talk even more. "Beh, ain't that a coincidence for us to be meetin' at a place like this, yeah? I'm tryin' to sell some cakes right now, but I'm freakin' bored here."

"Aah, so that's why you're a Santa... Wait, isn't it a bit odd you have free time while working...?"

"Not a single customer's comin'. Beh, I'm seriously bored here." Tobe blabbered on with a lazy attitude while pulling the hair at the back of his neck.

But even so, there was no way I could relieve him of his boredom and I could only respond with repetitive, brief replies.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, totally so.”

“Hoooh...”

“Yeaaaah, totally man...”

“I see...”

Noticing that our conversation wasn't heading anywhere, Tobe awkwardly stuttered. “..... Aah... But sup? Hikitani-kun, whatcha doin' here?”

It was a topic that he had to squeeze out forcibly. Um, having to be considerate of me and all, sorry, okay?

“Nah, just doing a little shopping of the sort.”

Since he changed the topic, responding was basic manners.

Happy that he found a way to continue the conversation, Tobe leaned forward. “Shoppin' fer real? What, what, what kinda shoppin' are we talkin' about here? Seriously? Hikitani-kun, ya shop too? I gotta know what's up here!”

No, even I do some shopping every now and then... Just what does this guy think I am...?

Crap, what do I do? I don't really want to talk any more than this, not like I had anything to talk to Tobe about anyway... While I was unsure what to do, someone was standing nearby.

“Hikigaya-kun, is something wrong?”

“Oh, Yukinoshita. Nothing, I just happened across Tobe here.”

It looked like it was almost time for everyone to gather since Yukinoshita was here. When she heard “Tobe”, Yukinoshita tilted her head mysteriously.

No, Tobe as in Tobe. Why was that mysterious to you? You don't know him?

But well before Yukinoshita, Tobe had been tilting his head mysteriously. He was looking at the both of us.

“Oh? Oh? Yukinoshita-san? Why are both of ya shoppin'...? Ah! Uh huuuh.”

“Hey, what's with that pause just now? What the heck did you just imagine?” I tried asking Tobe.

But Tobe seemingly had already made his own conclusion internally, going “uh huuuh” while looking between me and Yukinoshita.

Displeased by Tobe's curious stare, Yukinoshita squirmed uncomfortably.

“.....It seems like there's a misunderstanding here, but it's not like, that's, the case...”

At first, Yukinoshita glared at Tobe with a tense expression, but near the end, her strong voice had shriveled and I couldn't understand what she had said last.

Tobe, like the usual Tobe, wasn't listening to Yukinoshita and hit my shoulders. “Aww man, if that's how it is, ya shoulda just said somethin', and we coulda given both of ya some time together at Destiny.”

“No, that's not how it is...” I said, guessing at what Tobe was referring to, but he wasn't listening.

Watching Tobe, Yukinoshita looked like she was in a bad mood.

“...Do you mind if I leave now?”

“Eh, yeah. Well, you were the one who talked to me first though.” I looked at her with eyes asking her if she needed me for something.

Yukinoshita stuttered with her words and she abruptly looked away. “Oh, right... Because Tobe-kun was wearing the Santa outfit, I didn’t notice him, so I just...” Still looking away, Yukinoshita’s small voice disappeared midway.

When I looked ahead of where her gaze was, Yuigahama was approaching. Noticing us, Yuigahama waved her hands to us. “Hikki, Yukinon. What’s wrong...? Huh? It’s Tobecchi.”

Following her, Tobe, standing next to me, made a surprised face as well.

“Eh, eh? Yui was here too.....? Ah! Uh huuuh.”

“Again, what the heck did you imagine?”

Tobe pulled at his hair again and hit his forehead. “Say what, the heck! Goin’ shoppin’ with two girls is totally crazy! Seriously, Hikitani-kun, ya a total normie man! Serinormietani-kun, fer real. Heck, ya might as well be Seritani-kun?”

“No, I don’t have a clue what that means. Also, my name was never Hikitani in the first place.” I said, but he wasn’t listening. He was spouting “beh, beh” and all sorts of stuff.

Yuigahama spoke to him. “Tobecchi, are you working? We’re actually here to shop for a Christmas party.”

“Ah, that so...”

It looked like that explanation somehow convinced him. As Tobe was nodding his head, it looked like it was just about time for everyone to gather. Totsuka and Komachi arrived as well.

“Aah, it’s Tobe-kun.”

“Waah, long time no see!”

Getting excited from having met people he knew, Tobe did hand signs that Stan Hansen would do.

“Ooh! Ain’t it Totsuka and Hikitanikun’s little sis! Weeey!”

“What kind of greeting is that? That’s pretty annoying.”

“A-Ahaha... I mean, it’s Tobecchi, so...” Yuigahama said so hopelessly and Yukinoshita was fixedly looking at Tobe.

“It’s like a greeting from some tribe... I don’t understand what he’s saying at all...”

“Right? Trying to understand it causes pain.” I sent an apathetic look to Tobe, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Merry XMAS, weeey!”

“Look, he’s yelling aga—“ Just as I was about to say, Komachi greeted him back in the same way.

“Weeey! Merry XMAS!”

Because Komachi next to him was in high spirits, Totsuka looking a bit confused joined in as well. “W-Weeey!”

“Weeey!”

“Huh!? Even Hikki joined in!?”

Hah! Shoot! I reflexively lured myself in... B-But, you know, if Totsuka and Komachi were there, surprisingly, it might just work, weey.

Overjoyed that everyone returned his greeting, Tobe happily looked at everyone.

“What’s this, what’s this? Havin’ ya’ll really here really gets ya pumped up or somethin’...? Uh, oh? If I look a bit harder, ain’t that Zaimokuzaki-kun there? Zaimokuzaki-kun, weeey!”

Who the heck was Zaimokuzaki-kun? It looked that was referring to Zaimokuza. Just when did he get here? Tobe, you have some good eyes... When I looked in Zaimokuza’s direction, he looked bewildered having been spoken to.

“Wey? Wey, wey!? Wey, weeey!?”

“Tch. Seriously, he should go die with those wey’s.”

“Onii-chan, you sure are blunt.”

No, Komachi-chan, you know? Annoying things were annoying. The source of that annoyingness, Zaimokuza, was mumbling about something in confusion.

“Wey, wei, to... u, Eightman!? In Japanese, Hachiman!?”

“Huh?”

“Who is that? Who is he? What kind of man is he?”

“Yeah, he’s in my class, Tobe. He’s annoying, but he’s a good guy. Also, fundamentally, he’s annoying.” I briefly explained.

Zaimokuza nodded. “I see, I see. Indeed, that truly is annoying. Particularly that long hair and his loud voice, and further, that familiarity.”

“That’s one amazing boomerang you just tossed there...”

The entirety of what you said applied to you too, you know...

“Still, that mongrel, why does he know my name...? Further, he even turned my name into a codename.... Ha!? Could he be from the organization!?”

“I guess so. Unlike you, he belongs to a group, so I guess he’s a person from another organization.”

“Yes, yes, I do not belong anywhere after all... Uh, heeeeeeeeeeeey! Hachimaaaaan! Heeeeeey!” While saying, he was hitting my chest. What is this, a one-man comedy routine22?

“On second thought, Zaimokuza’s more annoying...” With that in mind, even Tobe’s voice wasn’t that bad. And speaking of that Tobe, he opened his mouth looking like something came to mind.

“Ah, actually, Yui and everyone, ya’ll havin’ a Christmas party?”

“Uh huh, that’s right.”

“Oh, oh, then wanna buy this cake? This place here is my senpai’s cake store, ya see. They asked me fer a favor. It’d be totally bad if we don’t sell out.”

“Mmm, cake, huh? What should we do?”

Yuigahama worried about what to do and a sudden loud voice reverberated inside the shopping mall.

“I’ve heard what you had to say!”

“Huh? Hiratsuka-sensei?”

Hiratsuka-sensei’s appearance with her coat flapping despite no presence of a breeze bewildered Tobe. Her heels clacked nosily as she approached.

“It looks like you’re in a bind with the leftovers.”

“That’s totally right. We’re in a total bind here.” Tobe looked at the stack of cakes.

Looking at that, Hiratsuka-sensei nodded. She directed a sympathetic gaze to the cakes. “I understand... I’ll buy all of them..... The ones that don’t sell, are very lonely after all.”

“Wait a second? Let’s stop giving the cakes feelings, okay?”

“Tobecchi, that didn’t count, okay?” Yuigahama quickly told Tobe, realizing all the cakes really would be bought out at this rate.

“It’d definitely be difficult eating them all if we bought them.”

“But even if we buy one, that doesn’t change anything.”

Komachi and Yukinoshita’s words caused Tobe to become dejected and he spoke with a feeble voice. “But seriously, if we don’t sell these out, it’ll totally be bad. Senpai’s totally gonna snap, fer real. How should I say it? Power harassment or somethin’? So could ya’ll help me out here?”

Listening to his story, Totsuka tilted his head. “So you want a way to sell the cakes?”

“Even if you say that... There isn’t much we can do right now though.”

As I thought, Yuigahama energetically shot up her hands. “Here!”

“Hoy, Yuigahama. Letz hear it.”

“Make it cheaper!”

“That could work.” Tobe nodded to Yuigahama’s straightforward and simple answer.

Furthermore, Zaimokuza thought of something as well and confidently cleared his throat. “Hapon, including a special bonus will increase the value! Here, we can use my specially written novel...”

“That ain’t gonna work.”

The American attitude Tobe took when he lifted both his hands was just a bit annoying, but Totsuka's contemplating face blew that all away.

Totsuka looked like he thought of something and opened his mouth. "How about a service where you write names on the cake, like on your birthday or something?"

"That's totes possible, I say."

Listening up until that point, Yukinoshita nodded. "How about labeling it as a limited item?"

"That could work." Tobe responded back.

This guy's obviously fine with anything, wasn't he...? But despite all of what we brought up thus far, I felt leaving it up to Tobe's judgment wouldn't get us anywhere.

"No, all of those are pretty difficult, aren't they? We're limited to what we're allowed to do by the store's authority. If you don't want to get harassed by the top, why not just ditch your work?"

"Pretty dark, Hikitani-kun, pretty dark. Gettin' harassed by the top is totally bad. Just one thing that's real good, countin' on ya!"

Coldly refusing him after he clapped his hands together like that would've given me a bad conscience. As I looked at the cart stacked with cakes, wondering if there was anything Tobe could do at the moment, I noticed stickers near the registers... Well, it's almost about that time.

"Mmm... Ah, how about that? The cakes will be half-off, right? Why not push that up? See, the half-off stickers are over there too."

Then, for some reason, Hiratsuka-sensei, instead of Tobe, reacted. "Uu, half-off... I know, right... When you pass 24, you're half off... And when you're past 25, you're ready to get thrown out..."

“This is about cakes, right? We’re talking about Christmas cakes, right?” I tried confirming, but my voice didn’t reach Hiratsuka-sensei.

“Why won’t they sell even though they’re on bargain...? Haa.” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she reached out to the half-off seals.

“C-Crap, Hiratsuka-sensei’s putting the stickers on herself. Hurry! Someone hurry up and take her!”

Yuigahama went in to stop Hiratsuka-sensei as well. “S-Sensei, it’s okay! Half-off is totally a good thing! I mean the sales tax goes up!”

“That’s not a follow up, you know...”

“That’s right, if it’s the consumption tax, then that means there’s last minute demand, so that’s different from Hiratsuka-sensei.”

Hold on! Yukinoshita-san!

Please stop cornering her! Someone please buy her! Someone please take her! The cost performance’s the best too!

I really wanted someone to take her already. If no one did, then I just accidentally might end up taking her instead. Actually, was there a reason why this person couldn’t get married...? It’s one of the top three mysteries amongst the Seven Wonders of the World, seriously.

“Well, given our situation, the only thing we can do is call out normally.”

“Calling out, huh... If only we had something to attract attention with.”

Yukinoshita’s idea caused Tobe to react.

“Ah, that totally could work! Like check it, we even have some extra Santa outfits. Also, reindeer horns too! Tobe said, taking out a Santa outfit from behind the register.

Yuigahama examined the outfit and groaned. “But this doesn’t look like it’d fit a girl.”

“That means a boy will have to wear it.” Yukinoshita said and Tobe looked at us boys.

“Naah, it looks a bit too tight for Zaimokuzaki-kun... Sooo, Totsuka or somethin’?”

“Eh, y-you want me to wear it?” Totsuka was surprised, but so was I.

“Why was I ignored just now, non?”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea to have onii-chan directly deal with customers, so it can’t be helped... In any case, Totsuka-san, please!” Komachi tapped on my shoulders. She then showed a smile to Totsuka.

“O-Okay, I guess I’ll try wearing it then...”

Since Totsuka was being treated properly as a boy, he looked motivated. Once he took the Santa outfit from Tobe, he quickly went behind the register to change.

“Mm... There we go.”

There was the sound of rustling clothes and a gentle voice. It looked like he was afraid of being seen directly, so he went behind everyone.

After Totsuka finished changing, he came up to us. “H-How is it...?”

Looking at Totsuka twist his body in embarrassment, I slipped out my voice. “Ooh...”

The Santa outfit he was wearing was bigger than his size, so it hung loosely resembling a miniskirt. The way he pulled at the fringes at the partition because it bothered him looked very sweet. Feeling embarrassed from being stared at, he used one of his hands to cover himself with his hat. His flush red cheeks and his white skin were adorable.

Tobe, gooooooooooooooooooooooooooooood job! Maybe Tobe really was a good guy... It's possible we could make good friends. Well, I'd probably just forget him in a week though. I will, forget about Tobe, in a week...

Tobe nodded his head in satisfaction. "Ooh, ain't that good? Alrighty, let's try callin' out together. 'elcome, cakesirs?"

Tobe was trying to demonstrate how to call people out, but was that really helpful...? Even Yukinoshita was frowning.

"Just what is he saying? I don't understand at all..."

"It's hard listening to late night convenience store lingo after all... If you translate it, it's probably, 'Welcome, would you like a cake?' I think." I confirmed for the time being.

Totsuka then looked at me with a sparkling gaze. "Hachiman, you really do understand... O-Okay, I'll try it too. W-Welcome. C-Cake... Would you like a cake?"

There was movement in that instant.

"Fumun, well then, those objects of cake, all 7 trillion of them, I will take them off your hands!"

"Ah, excuse me, could I have a cake too please?"

I lined up right after Zaimokuza and took out money from my wallet, waiting for my turn.

On the side, Yukinoshita let out an amazed sigh. "Why are you buying one too...?"

"Wha, oh shoot. The overloading cuteness made me..."

"Ah, but, it looks like it might get crowded now."

When I looked, shoppers were looking our way wondering what the commotion was about. After looking at the showcase, menu, and the stockpiled cakes, they were conversing. It looked like there were people planning to buy cakes right now. With the flow of things, the cakes just might sell out without issue.

Realizing the same thing, Tobe grew confident from relief and blurted. “Naah, that totally worked. With cute girls here, of course it’d turn out this way!”

“Cute girls!? Fu, fu, fu...” Hiratsuka-sensei reacted with high speed, displaying a happy smile.

Seeing that, Komachi’s voice choked up. “Uu, my tears are blurring the illumination... That’s right, sensei *is* a girl after all. Yes, I totally understand. Women are always maidens at heart after all.”

Thanks to other customers observing the showcase, people passing by also stopped.

Seeing how things turned out, Tobe laughed in satisfaction. “Yeaaah, but what a total lifesaver. We’ll sell out at this rate.”

“Ah, no problem. Then again, it’s not like we did anything...”

Well in truth, it’s not like we did anything particularly special either, I thought.

After looking around at the customers, Hiratsuka-sensei opened her mouth, “Fumu, this is what they call a line summoning other lines. It’s like a ramen shop.”

“Don’t they call that a trap...?”

Well, trap or not, if it solved Tobe’s problem, then that’s fine... I looked at Tobe who asked us for help and as far as Tobe was concerned, it looked like the objective was achieved.

He gave us his thanks and took out a cake from the showcase.

“Hikitani-kun and y’all are holdin’ a party, right? Have a cake as my thanks. I’ll even do y’all a candle service ☆.”

“We don’t need candles on a Christmas cake...”

For some reason he winked with a bling ☆. Annoying...

But, well, if he’s giving it to us, then we’ll gladly take it off his hands.

I took the cake and Yuigahama expressed her gratitude. “Tobecchi, thanks!”

“Nah nah, ya helped me, so we’re all good. A’ighty, Juicy! Party! Yeah!” said Tobe, giving a thumbs-up.

He was annoying, but a good guy. Annoying though.

“I don’t understand at all what you’re saying, but thank you very much.” Komachi politely thanked him.

We said our byes and left gradually. If we stayed any longer, then we’d get in the way.

Just as we were about to leave, Totsuka waved. “Okay, see you later, Tobe-kun.”

“Weeey, see ya!” Tobe waved his hands to us while helping the customers. His voice was needlessly loud.

“...Damn, I’m real jealous. I want to spend next year with Ebina-san too... Huh? Ain’t next year testing time? Beeh. That’s totally baaaaad man.”

With those murmurs from behind, we left the shopping mall.

× × ×

After leaving the shopping mall, with Yuigahama guiding us, we found ourselves in a karaoke box at the front of the station. Once we entered the room we booked, everyone held crackers in their hands.

Once everyone was ready, we naturally made eye contact. “And go” said Yuigahama in a small voice and all at once, voices and sounds overlapped.

“Merry Christmas!”

Following the noise of crackers were the sounds of opening chanmeries and toast. Everyone was celebrating Christmas.

On the other hand, I found myself looking throughout the room.

“So, why karaoke again...?” I asked.

Yuigahama set the plates and answered, “If we went to Yukinon’s place, we’d get noise complaints. Also, this karaoke place lets us bring cake too.”

“Uh, well, it’s not like there’s anything wrong, but...” As I tried to speak, Yukinoshita spoke up.

“I finished cutting the cakes. Still, I wasn’t expecting to get three whole cakes from him.” Yukinoshita said, distributing the cakes.

Komachi nodded. “Tobe-san’s a good person, isn’t he?”

“Was it just me or did you mean that he was someone convenient?”

Well, it’s true that Tobe was a good guy, but since it didn’t go any further than that, it made me feel bad for him. Not to mention Isshiki’s use of him wasn’t something to laugh at either...

“Here, Hachiman. There’s chicken too.”

“Ooh, thanks.” I said, taking the chicken.

Zaimokuza who sat next to me made a blissful face while Hiratsuka-sensei across was happily pouring drinks.

“Hachiman, meat is good. Meat is real good... Deep-fried food soothes your heart...”

“C’mon, drink up, drink up, though it’s just chanmery.”

Everyone was enjoying this Christmas party in their own way. We ate chicken, cake, got engrossed in conversation, and toasting with our glasses...

But wait. Just a moment.

Is this really Christmas...? That doubt wouldn’t leave my head.

I slowly placed my glass on the table to confirm that. The ice in the cup bounced off of each other.

“Hey, do you mind real quick...?”

“What is it?” Yuigahama looked at me as she chewed her cake.

I looked at Yuigahama’s eyes and slowly asked, “So how is this any different from a birthday party?”

“Eh?”

The moment I asked, Yuigahama stopped.

“I mean, we’re at karaoke again, eating food, cake, and doing toasts... Is this really the right way to spend Christmas? This doesn’t feel any different from going ‘wey, wey’ and now I’m starting to fear for my own identity...”

“T-That’s, um...” Yuigahama stuttered, looking away.

Ahead, Komachi had an unpleasant face. “Uwaah, you’re such a pain, onii-chan. You’re such a pain.” Komachi said.

I wasn’t the only one who had thought that because Yukinoshita stopped eating her cake and she narrowed her eyes.

“...Certainly. How exactly is this any different...?”

“Ha! Not good. The pains in the butts are spreading!” Komachi said apprehensively (Komachi only) and Hiratsuka-sensei laughed.

“Hikigaya, you’re like a Cheetah... Just when I thought you took a step forward, you immediately take two steps back...”²³ She made a smug smile.

But listening to her, Yuigahama whispered into Yukinoshita’s ear. “Hey, Yukinon, are cheetahs really like that?”

“I-I wonder? I’ve never heard of that before...” The cat professor Yukipedia-san tilted her head.

Hiratsuka-sensei groaned out in pain. “I-It didn’t get across, huh... I guess that’s how it is... Our generations are completely different after all... Haa.” With the generation gap before her eyes, Shiratsuka-sensei sank.

No, I’m sure our ages were pretty different too...

“Aaah! I don’t know what’s going on, but the pains in the butts increased!” screamed Komachi.

Totsuka looked like he realized something. “Ah, but look, Hachiman. We still have the present exchange so that should be Christmas-like!”

“Ooh, you’re right about that!”

I see, present exchanges were very Christmas-like. Unlike birthdays where it was just one side giving, Christmas had both sides exchanging presents.

When I was convinced, Komachi squeezed her fist. “Nice! Nice Totsuka-san! With that being said, present exchaaaaange! Okay, okaaaay! Everyone, please take out your preseeeents! Please put them in the middle of the table!” Komachi began giving orders in an effort to get rid of the bothersome atmosphere.

“Here, this is okay, right?”

Starting with Totsuka, everyone obediently followed Komachi’s instructions. Komachi checked that the presents were all gathered.

“Okay! Then we’ll get to mixing them!”

“Shuffle tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiime!”

Using Zaimokuza’s scream as a signal, Komachi shuffled the presents at random and began to explain the rules of the present exchange.

“So, we’ll shuffle the presents around and you’ll get whatever present when the music stops. Well, as for the rest, just read the mood as we go along.”

“This girl, she tries to be considerate, but sometimes her explanations can be very crude...”

Just like Yukinoshita said, I didn’t understand how things worked from Komachi’s crude explanation. If you weren’t nice to the beginners, they’d just quit, in things like beat ‘em games.

“Well, it’ll be faster if we just get to it. Now then, the music’s starting!” Hiratsuka-sensei said and she operated the karaoke remote controller with beeps.

It looked like it functioned for these kinds of parties too. What a convenient world.

When the music started to play, everyone quietly passed the presents right to left. Everyone was quiet in the meantime.

Noticing that the atmosphere was oddly rigid, Yukinoshita spoke reluctantly. “What exactly is this bizarre silence...?”

“This is, like, a lot more normal than I was expecting... Hey, Yuigahama, is this how it’s supposed to go?”

“U-Ummm... Well, for the most, it’s something like this, I think. Surprisingly, the Christmas parts tend to be less exciting...”

“I think I was subjected to a really regrettable story just now... Oh, the music stopped.”

“Okaaaay. Then let’s start off with onii-chan’s present!”

Called out by Komachi, I took the present in front of me and proceeded to unwrap it.

“Me first, huh? Let’s see... Oh, this is... a USB flash drive.”

“Gefukon, gefukon, okopoon. It appears that you have received my present.” Zaimokuza named himself after making weird coughs. Were those really coughs? Still, this was a present from Zaimokuza, huh...? It was kind of surprising.

“Ooh, Zaimokuza’s huh? This is pretty darn practical of you... What’s up with you?” I asked, caught off guard by the fact that he actually picked something useful.

Zaimokuza adjusted his glasses upwards and displayed an elated smile. “Worry not, Hachiman. I made sure to put the documents with my story in there for you.”

“What to do, I don’t really need that.”

“Fuhahaha! During the winter, do yourself some good and read it! Now then, from whom did I get my present from?” Zaimokuza began opening the present in front of him, ignoring my disappointment.

“Oh, what is this, what is this!? Is this not what they call a cushion!?”

In Zaimokuza’s hands was a fluffy cushion.

Looking at that, Yuigahama raised her voice. “Ah, that’s the series of cushions that turn you into a good-for-nothing.”

“So that means it’s a present from Hikigaya-kun?” asked Yukinoshita.

“Yeah. The sofa was too big and expensive, so I went with the cushion.” I answered.

In the end, I couldn’t decide on what was good and went with what they recommended at the store that time.

Zaimokuza fiddled with the cushion and checked its quality.

“Indeed, this is quite good. Starting today, I shall hug this while sleeping.”

“Er no, stop that, that’s gross.”

Not listening to a thing I was saying, Zaimokuza placed the cushion to the side and rested his head on it.

“Hm, let’s give this a try... Oh? Ununu.... T-This is!” Zaimokuza’s eyes shot opened. “This abundant warmth and this fluffy softness, and how it adjusts its shape to my needs.... Ah, I, can’t, no more... I aaaaaam faaaaaaallling...! Drop.” Zaimokuza went silent.

“...Ooh, Zaimokuza became quiet. That cushion sure is useful.”

Ignoring Zaimokuza who fell asleep, the present exchanged continued.

“Um, okay. Shall we go with Hiratsuka-sensei next?” Komachi called her name.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded and placed her hand on her present. “Umu, this is wrapped very cutely... Mmm, oh, hand cream, huh?”

When we looked around wondering whose present it was, Totsuka reacted.

“Ah, yes. This season will get you really dry so that’s why. There’s also shea butter in there too, so it really moistens you up. I use it a lot myself during club.”

“S-Sai-chan, you’re amazing...”

“Overwhelming girl power...”

Yuigahama and Komachi were taken aback. Of course I was too. Hiratsuka-sensei, though, wasn’t anywhere close to that.

“I see, so this is girl power... So if I use this, I wonder if it’ll increase mine... Haa, I could, use some moisture... Since I’m so dried up...”
Hiratsuka-sensei kept going “dry, dry” repeatedly like curses.

Somehow, the atmosphere was getting dried too. Sensitive to that, Komachi barged in frantically.

“Ha! Shoot! The atmosphere’s becoming a pain again! Okaaay, Komachi’s next! Oh, this is a wrapped rather fancily... The inside is, ah, tea leaves. So that means this is from Yukino-san!”

Inside the wrapping was a rectangular can. It looked like something I’ve seen before in the club.

When Komachi guessed right, Yukinoshita returned a smile.

“Yes. I tried looking for something that isn’t too strong...” Yukinoshita then made an uneasy expression. “It’s just...”

“Just?” Komachi asked further.

Yukinoshita sent a glancing look at me. “I thought maybe Komachi-san might be more oriented towards coffee instead.”

Aah, I see. Now that she mentioned it, there were a lot of occasions where I drank coffee. Even in club, I was drinking MAX COFFEE. So that’s why, she thought Komachi, who I lived with every day, might be drinking it

normally just as well. The reason for Yukinoshita's concern was something I could understand.

But that was a needless worry.. Komachi happily held the can of leaves close to her.

“Not at all, that's not it in the least. Well, I do drink it quite a lot to match with my brother though. But, but, with this, maybe my brother just might be enlightened to the joys of tea!”

“Umu, receiving a present that'll expand your interests is something to look forward to.” Hiratsuka-sensei said as she fiddled with her hand cream.

Komachi nodded her head. “That's right! Okay, okay, Yukino-san, why don't you open your present next?”

“Sure.”

Yukinoshita reached out to the present in front of her and Yuigahama broke into a smile.

“Ah, that's mine!”

“Oh, is this bath salt? The packaging is cute too... That's very like you, Yuigahama-san. I think it's wonderful.”

“Right! Actually, you can use this with a scrub too!”

“This is one incredibly girly conversation...” I thought as I watched the two of them acting cute together.

Hiratsuka-sensei hit her knees. “Darn, bath salt, huh...? I think I overlapped with Yuigahama...”

“Eh, sensei, you bought something like that?” I asked her in surprise.

She was going “oh shucks” while pressing against her forehead. “Yeah, to think I’d overlap with a high school girl of today, huh? Oh darn, what to do?”

“This person’s *really* happy for some reason...”

The present that apparently clashed with the present that came from a high school girl of today was apparently given to Totsuka when I followed her gaze.

Yuigahama looked at that present with sparkling eyes. “Eeh, I wonder what it is? Now I’m really curious. Sai-chan, try opening it.”

“Okay. Here I go... Ummm, this is...”

When he undid the plain wrapping, what appeared was an enshrined box.

Looking at that going “hoeeh” in confusion was Yuigahama.

“An assortment of hot spring items...”

“That does certainly resemble bath salts... But there’s something decisively different about it...” said Yukinoshita as she pressed against her temple.

Komachi also had trouble commenting. “Mmm, it’s less like a girl, but... like an o-, old— an adult!”

“Uu, I can’t help but feel the consideration...”

Hiratsuka-sensei wiped her eyes, looking close to breaking down.

Totsuka quickly displayed a smile like the blossoming of a flower. “But I do like hot springs, so I’m really happy.”

I-I see... Well if Totsuka’s happy, then whatever. My image of it was different from everyone else’s, but I agreed with Totsuka. “Y-Yeah... Well, for us guys, it’d be something to happy about.”

“R-Right? It’s a little too early for you guys, but a beer after a long bath is the greatest, you know!” Hiratsuka bounced right back thanks to that and said something manly.

“I think I understand why sensei can’t get married. She’s a lot manlier than those boys over there.” Komachi said with sadness.

Okay, well, it’s true that Hiratsuka-sensei was rather cool for a woman, us boys actually being a lot timid in comparison...

“Okay, so last one is me then.”

Yuigahama reached out to the present in front of her.

“So that means it’s a present from me!”

“From Komachi-chan? Huh, that makes me super curious. Can I open it?”

“Please, please!”

Komachi urged her on and Yuigahama undid the wrapping.

“Ah, it’s soap! Thank you! This is actually one of the popular ones right now too!”

“That’s right! I’m using it right now and it has a really good smell!”

Hoh. So this is how presents between girls were... It’s like, THA GIRLS, ah, no, THE GIRLS, huh? I then felt a feeling of discomfort.

“...Huh? You’ve been using that soap? I’ve never seen it before though...”

“Ah, yup. I only bring it out when I take a bath. I mean, I wouldn’t want onii-chan and dad using it, right? That’d be kind of gross too.”

“Eeh...? I-Isn’t that a little mean? Onii-chan received a huge shock just now...”

“Gross”, huh...? C-C'mon, what's so bad about me using the soap...? I couldn't help, but be depressed.

Yuigahama clapped her hands in realization of something. “Oh, I know. Yukinon, let's use this together today. Oh, with the bath salt too! I can't wait!”

“I don't mind, but..... Eh? You don't mean to go in together, right?”

“Eh? But if we don't, then we can't use it together...”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama went, “Eh? Eh?”, as they looked at each other. I couldn't help but go “Eh?” myself, trying to confirm various things. G-Go in the bath together, you say? Then again, don't go saying stuff like that in a place like this! You're making me think about a lot of things because of that!

“Hey, Yurigahama, I mean, Yuigahama. Talk about that stuff *after* you get home, *after*... Because, you know... Just because.”

Though I tried to get the point across with vague words, Yuigahama apparently didn't understand at first, but gradually grew bright red.

“...Ah, y-yeah.”

“Yuigahama-san, you dummy...” said Yukinoshita with a disappearing voice. Um, if you're going say that with a flush red face like that, even I was getting embarrassed... It was even more so with Komachi staring at us with a grin.

“Gefun, gefun, morusu.... Fuumu... Upon opening my eyes, the atmosphere has become very odd at some point, it seems...?”

“Ah, chuuni-san, did you just wake up? It's okay if you just sleep a little longer.”

Komachi went “ufufu” with a smile directed at Zaimokuza who tilted his head with a curious face, but that was actually kind of scary...

In any case, today's main event, the present exchange, had safely ended. Now what were we supposed to do next?

"So the present exchange's over... I don't see anything else Christmas related..."

Yuigahama and Komachi thought while groaning.

Komachi suddenly lifted her face. "Ha! Speaking of Christmas, then that means Christmas carols!"

"T-That's it!" Yuigahama agreed and Komachi nodded.

"In fact, there's nothing else I can think of!"

Really?

Apparently I wasn't the only one with the same thought. Yukinoshita frowned. "Is singing enough to make it feel like Christmas, I wonder...?" Yukinoshita said with skepticism, and Totsuka started to think of something.

"Christmas carols do have a lot of imagery with it and just listening gets you in the mood too."

"Correct. A theme song can be said to be the face of a product Truly, face song! The song draws a spectacle before your eyes." Zaimokuza nodded his head, thinking he was saying something good.

On the other hand, the sitting Hiratsuka-sensei felt like she was already out there. Her eyes were flying all over the place, going "Gahaha!"

"Oh, going to sing, are we? Sounds good, sing, sing! If you guys aren't going to sing, then I'll sing Single Bell instead!"

"Hiratsuka-sensei, is she drunk...? There shouldn't be any alcohol." Yukinoshita said. Of course, there weren't any alcoholic drinks. She was probably just drunk from the atmosphere.

Influenced by the energy, Yuigahama gripped the microphone and stood up. “Okay! Yuigahama Yui will sing...! Here, Yukinon too.”

“Eh, wait, why me too...?”

Yukinoshita tried to refuse the microphone presented by Yuigahama, but cornered by Yuigahama’s immovable smile, she reluctantly took it.

“Weeeey!”

Komachi shook the tambourines to heat up the moment for the two.

...Well, if it wasn’t for this opportunity, we wouldn’t have been able to hear these two singing. That’s why, well, we could consider this an event special to Christmas parties.

If so, then, I suppose we could consider this as our very own way of spending Christmas.

× × ×

The cold wintry wind was blowing along the street that continued from the station

Once the party was over and we left the karaoke box, the sun had long set. Compared to the afternoon, the number of pedestrians had dropped considerably.

Christmas, too, was just about to end. We were walking down the night lane, a slight feeling of loneliness hanging in the air.

Yuigahama stretched. “Mmm, we sure sang our hearts out...”

“In the end, it just turned into karaoke, huh...?” I said.

What exactly was that party about, anyway...?

Yuigahama faltered with her voice. “W-What’s the big deal? It was fun.”

“But I wonder if this was enough as a thank you to Komachi-san and the others...” Yukinoshita murmured, looking worried. That’s true, at first, I had the feeling that the entire premise was to thank Komachi and the others. But, still, judging by their behavior, worrying wasn’t necessary.

“Well, it looked like they had a good time, so it should be fine.”

“Uh huh, I hope so. Ah, but Hikki, was it okay for you to come with us? I know Komachi-chan told you, but you didn’t really have to walk us back.”

“That’s true. My house is just right over there as well.” Yukinoshita said and looked further up the path. Up there was the apartment Yukinoshita was living in. The distance between the station and her place wasn’t exactly that significant, so there wasn’t a need to walk them back, but with Komachi’s insistence, I was here now.

“...Well, there’s the cake and other baggage. This much isn’t a big deal.”

“I see. That’s a big help then. There’s quite a bit of leftover cake too.”

“But, but, it’s kind of nice having an entire cake left! It’s one of my dreams! Eating it whole!” said Yuigahama with an ecstatic expression, and Yukinoshita sent her a cold stare.

“If you can really eat all of it, then that’s fine... It’s actually quite painful.”

“So you tried it before...”

While delving in that kind of conversation, once we walked through the street in the park, we made it into the main street. Now that we had made it this far, Yukinoshita’s house was just over there.

“Ah, we can see Yukinon’s place now.”

“Yes. Hikigaya-kun, up to here is fine.”

We stopped before the crosswalk that passed over the main street.

“Is that so? Alright, here, the cake.”

“Okaaay.”

I handed over the cake I’ve been holding the entire time to Yuigahama.

“...Also, can you take these back with you too?” I said, and took out two more bags from the pouch.

Although Yuigahama and Yukinoshita accepted them, they stared at it wonder exactly what it was. Upon realizing, they asked timidly to check.

“Eh? Are these... Christmas presents?”

“For me, and for Yuigahama-san... There’s one for each of us.”
Yukinoshita let out a small breath in surprise.

How they earnestly looked at them with really unexpected faces was somehow embarrassing.

“...Well, it’s like a thank you for the tea cup.” Unable to directly look at them, I shifted my eyes away in a completely different direction.

“...Is it okay, if we open them?”



“Mm, sure.” I ambiguously replied to the question asked in confusion. When I thought about what kind of reaction they’d give after opening the bag, my hands started to sweat despite being in the middle of winter.

I could hear blowing winds along with the sound of the ribbon being undone. I then heard small gasps.

“Waa...”

“They’re scrunchies...”

The breaths that the two girls let out were somehow warm and unconsciously, I felt relieved.

“Yukinon and I are matching!” Yuigahama said as she looked at hers and then Yukinoshita’s. Her voice sounded like it was full of joy.

“Yuigahama’s blue while mine’s, pink...? I feel like this should’ve been the opposite.”

“No, that’s good, or at least I think...”

Just why I decided to do it that way, I wouldn’t have been able to explain it properly at all. I was at a loss even if I was asked. However, I felt that it was surely the right, because it was something I considered in my own way; a conclusion that only I arrived at. It’s fine even if I didn’t understand it. I think gifts were just those kinds of things.

“I see...” said Yukinoshita, just quietly and not asking any further. She lifted her face from the scrunchie in her palm and smiled. “If this is a form of gratitude, then I’ll gratefully accept it.”

“Yeah, Hikki... Thank you. I’ll take care of it.” Yuigahama gazed directly at me and gently embraced the scrunchy in her hands at her bosom. I couldn’t look directly at her out of embarrassment.

“Yeah. Well, I’ll leave it to you to take care of it...” I mumbled my words, and ahead where my averted gaze was the lights of the crosswalk turning red to green.

“O-Okay, I’ll see you later.” Using that as a signal, I sent them off.

“Yeah, see you later...! Good night.”

After Yukinoshita and Yuigahama nodded to each other, they quietly began walking away.

I watched their backs as they grew further and I turned my back as well.

“Alright...”

I let out a quiet breath and looked up at the sky.

The night sky of winter was clear, and I could see Orion very well. There were probably other constellations, but unfortunately, Orion was the only one I knew.

I think there were a lot of things that you wouldn’t be able to recognize just because you could see them. Would there ever be a day I’d be able to notice the things I once overlooked?

With the guidance of the starlight and street lights, I smoothly took a step.

“Hikigaya-kun.”

“Hm?”

I turned around after being called to a stop, and standing directly in the middle of the crosswalk was Yukinoshita. Yuigahama had already finished crossing over and was looking at Yukinoshita with a slightly curious face.

She stood there idly, tying her hair together, but when our eyes met, she gently combed through that hair with her fingertips.

The pink scrunchie, highlighted against her glossy black hair, radiated even in the dead of night.

Yukinoshita stopped her hand that caressed her hair, looking hesitant, but after seeing the start of the countdown of the lights, she quietly breathed in. She then opened her palm halfway and waved slightly back and forth.

“...Merry Christmas.”

“...Y-Yeah... Merry Christmas.” I was taken back due to her suddenly speaking up, but I somehow managed to reply back.

Yukinoshita chuckled, expressing a small smile and briskly ran after Yuigahama who was waiting ahead.

The two lined up and exchanged several words. Yuigahama then made a big wave with her hand. On the cuff of her hand was the blue scrunchie swaying back and forth.

After seeing that, I turned my back once again.

“Guess I’ll go home...”

Despite having walked around the entire day, oddly enough, my steps were light, and I found myself starting to hum as well.

The curtains of night silently descended, with the cold winds massaging your cheeks. Even so, the lights of the city were faintly warm like candles, tenderly illuminating the Christmas that was soon to end.

Prayers that didn’t reach and wishes that weren’t granted surely existed.

But, peacefully, those, along with the clear exhaled breath, would surely be allowed, at least for today.

That breath that also shook someone’s light surely existed.

Whether you were alone or with someone, Christmas would visit this year as well.

That's why, to everyone out there, Merry Christmas...