

Chapter 2

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**Little Happening of Last
Night/Such a Thing was
There Yesterday**

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'The city is the spirit world below the mountain.
But I think once you're used to it, it gets a little easier to settle in.'

He sighed weakly.

Casting his eyes down at the winter schoolyard, Soujuurou Shizuki was unusually lost in his thoughts.

At the corner of the chalkboard was the date of December.

It was already ten days since Soujuurou's transfer.

The calendar was now following the progress of the last month of the year, and the traces of fall that were still remaining have all since disappeared.

With most of the trees in the schoolyard bare, the dancing fallen leaves covered the ground.

Classical Times.

Viewpoints that were adopted by the old teacher were carried so straight-to-the-point from the podium.

Soujuurou was finally used to his classroom, but he still fell behind in his lessons for fourth period.

Getting caught off-guard by the basics made daily classes a one-on-one fight for him.

Now that he was accurately memorizing details even without correctly understanding them, he was determined to keep that level of focus.

So idle thoughts among other things were beneath him.

Though he sternly told himself that he had no spare time to be distracted,

".....*sigh*."

to his annoyance, today his attention was somewhere else during class.

He had no idea what was making his concentration so weak today.

A winter in the city was especially easy to live in compared to the mountains, such that working part-time each and every day was in no way exhausting for him.

His physical fatigue was, well, not caused by something so ordinary.

It would also be wrong of him to say that the lesson itself being dull was the cause.

Unlike his classmates who thought classes were boring, Soujuurou felt that they were important.

Choosing between "good" and "bad", it was definitely time that he placed them in the "good" category.

Therefore, the cause was nowhere to be seen even from an emotional aspect.

Puzzling over his concentration's sudden downswing, Soujuurou slumped down in low spirits.

".....No good. It's only distracting me."

He scolded himself while paying more attention to the chalkboard. Unfazed by the rhythmic, lulling sounds of chalk scraping its surface, the guileless transfer student still managed to behave himself after all this time.

But it was no good; he was having difficulty concentrating on the lesson.

".....*Hmm.*"

Sighing heavily, Soujuurou gave it some thought of his own. Not wanting to dwell too much on it, the cause was...well...

Baffled everytime he played it back in his mind, it was no use trying to omit the incident from last night.

With the chime announcing the end of class, the old teacher took his bow before leaving for the hallway.

Seeing him out of the room, all thirty students left their seats.

The clock's hands, which were crawling up sometime after half past 11, now pointed to noon.

The atmosphere was a lot more relaxed now.

A short break from stiff lessons, the start of lunchtime was said to be the highlight of school life.

No one liked the food prepared by Misaki High's school cafeteria.

Even when they complained about this lack of care being in a private school, its quality dropped and rose on a day-to-day basis.

With meals sold at a fair price and the quality being less than it was worth, a huge scramble for lunch groups ended up taking place at this school.

This also happened with year 2 class C, which was Soujuurou's class.

The boys would push together roughly ten desks to fashion a dining table out of a long table.

Meanwhile, the girls would neatly use two to three desks as their tables, and then start chatting with each other in separate table groups.

Their precious lunch break ran on a really short time limit.

They had different ways of arranging themselves, but the two groups acted on the same principle.

"___"

Soujuurou found himself speechless at how coordinated they were.

Ten days after his transfer, and he just watched them push chairs and desks around while still preferring to sit in his chair.

"Yooo! Shizuki, get over here!"

The voice calling to him came from a large dining table occupying the window-side of the classroom.

Calling Soujuurou over was Housuke Kinomi. Slouched in his chair, he tilted it back on its two back legs before letting it fall down again.

Known to run his mouth off without meaning to in their class, it was his thankfully natural personality that saved him from making enemies in school.

Sometimes, his classmates wondered if he was just too natural for his own good.

"Feed me please, feed meeee!

Got all these leftovers from last night's job. Spring rolls, man, spring rolls! My old man told me to quit bein' a brat about leftovers when he saw these! All I got's spring rolls for eats, yo!"

So, Kinomi's plan was to get more food for his lunch by making a scene with it.

With him and Soujuurou working at the same restaurant, Kinomi was one of the few friends he made since before his transfer.

He was also the fellow that people started to think was always seen tagged after by Soujuurou.

"Niiiiice! Shizuki, grab a seat! Aaaaand put your hands together for our long-awaited Canned Food Festival, openin' today!"

".....We're really goin' for it, man.....I guess it's cool to stick to your guns, though, seriously....."

"Fool, this'll be loads o' fun, I swear! Looks phony but there's all the canned crab you can eat! That ain't canned mackerel, boys!"

"Really!? Awwright, count me in!

Is there only one can of corned beef, or maybe whoever grabs it first gets it?"

"Hey, man. It ain't about shovin' down as much as you can. The first can you get's the only one that tastes great at all!"

"Counting you and Shizuki, the quota for each soldier comes down to seven. Real helpful, these guys....."

"By the way, Kinomi's lunch looks stiffer than canned food, innit?"

The boys were usually poking fun at the hash of things in each other's lunches. Today, they put something different together.

On the boys' table was a stacked pyramid made out of canned goods.

These were all the expired cans that they managed to fish out of storage at their houses, and they scribbled out the expiration dates with oily felt-tipped markers.

"Boys! Get ready the can openers 'cuz, uh, we're goin' straight into it!"

Hell awaits once we eat, Hell awaits if we leave one crumb! This is where we'll make our stand against the iron devils before fifth period comes rollin' in! It's gonna get ugly, it's gonna get fierce----

Ummm, and they're all brought to you by Market Nakayama and McCoy's Tradin' from downtown!"

"Whew! It takes yea years for you to be done talkin', bro!"

Can openers were hoisted skyward in one go.

"Shizuki, grab a can! If you need another can opener--"

"No thanks. You've already apologized for yesterday's poison tasting for all of your lunches.

And more than half of these canned foods are past the expiration date."

"Heeeey! Not cool, maaaan!"

The boys immediately fired back.

chum

Getting at least one more victim to boost their ranks was definitely on their minds at that time.

Touched by how lively the boys were, Soujuurou decided to just leave his seat and go. Then,

"Hey, we'd love to have you with us!

Shizuki-kun, how about sitting with us girls instead?"

He was caught by the Federation lying in wait on the other side.

Calling him over was a pretty, short-haired girl.

Several days ago, she also tried to get Soujuurou to join the track and field club.

".....Erm, I'd like to pass on that, too. Thanks."

He answered uncomfortably.

The girls had a mountain-sized pile of fruits that **only** Soujuurou had never seen before.

"Whaaat, why not? You don't like papaya?

We've also got mangoes and coconuts, and psst! *We even have a couple of Yubari King Melons right here if you want!*"

The fruit group clenched their fists for emphasis.

"Wait! You guys got coconuts? You're not gonna eat those, are ya?"

"Hey! I'll take some mangoes if you girls got extras!"

"Fool, carnivores eat meat! That's why you nerds don't get any muscles, dammit!"

With all the voices flying back and forth, Soujuurou was stuck in the Neutral Zone.

".....I like solitude. I like the anomalous life. I like a quiet life."

Even when he said that, Soujuurou had no choice but to pick a side. For someone who was given so much positive attention by his classmates, he had nowhere to go. And people who were never treated this nicely before, had a hard time getting past the idea of turning down anyone vouching for their company. Then, someone reached out to pat the little lamb's shoulder.

"Not so fast, you. Putting yourself in the company of all the morons here'll wreck your plans for a brighter future. It'd be less of a problem if you fit right in with these jerks. As for the rest o' you! Good sheep like him don't get wrangled into the Garden of Evil, y'hear me?"

Behind Soujuurou sounded a sharp voice that was not a regular in this classroom at all.

"The vice chief?"

Turning around, Soujuurou was faced by a boy who was a head taller than himself.

He had long, untidy hair that he managed to get nicely combed back on his head. He was proper and handsome, equipped with a crotchety glare that he antagonized the rest of the class with.

Unlike the listless Soujuurou, the boy was an undeniably attractive young man who charmed people with one glance.

Anyone would be in awe of this fellow. The collective response to his dignified appearance was, however.

"Look who's here, if it ain't the vice chief himself!"

"Hey, dummyface! Shouldn't ya be at the cafeteria with all th' other dummyfaces?"

"He-he-he. Welcome to Shantytown! Population: all these jerks right here! Would ya like some cafe-brand tea while you're here, Your Highness?"

"Caesar's probably here for Shizuki. It's usually either him or Miss Aoko. Shizuki, are you in some kind of trouble.....?"

"Whaaat? Shizuki-kun doesn't do anything wrong at school.

And he'd have to do worse than breaking school rules!

"Ohhh, then I bet he's---- Tsukiji-kun, you ran into our classroom because Aozaki turned you down, is that it!?"

"....."

Their verbal abuse was full of love and friendship.

Soujuurou felt sorry for the boy who was letting them talk.

To make things worse, he was completely unresponsive to everything they were saying.

Glancing nonchalantly in the direction of the classroom's noise, the boy suddenly yelled.

"What the hell are you still goofing around for, idiots!?
We're still short on ingrates fired up enough for the Winter Cleanup Team! So knock it off!
There's only one o' you useless bums in the whole school who gave a damn, dammit!
Getting all you lazy jerks in 2-C to pitch in would get me and Aozaki off your tails already.....!"

He threatened the whole class with a face that was too good-looking to be so vulgar. The thunder god brought the Men-At-Arms & The Sweets Enthusiasts to a screeching halt. They were struck by his presence, but the words "Winter Cleanup Team" were what paralyzed the whole class into total silence.

Winter Cleanup Team.

It concerned the old school building, which was left to rot way after the previous student council decided to let it be. Sweeping around the whole mountainous, forested area behind it on the students' winter break, was torture disguised as a school activity.

It just wasted three days of their freedom during the holidays. And of course, they were going to pull their backs doing it all for free. To this end, the student council members would try to get as many students drafted before school let out. Getting even one willing participant was close to being a blessing.

"Ehhh.....nah, we ain't cut out for physical stuff.....so we'll just eat our lunch cans in one corner here. OK, boss?"

"Us girls are anemic.....uhhh, we'll die if we don't eat fruit, you see.....and uhhh, all of our holidays are booked for other stuff, too....."

Save for one of them, the whole class moved to different corners of the classroom as fast as they could.

"Alright, I knew you guys couldn't be quiet during lunch hour. There's complaints about second years bein' noisier than first year punks, so let's prove 'em wrong, eh?"

They groaned weakly in response before quieting down again. Soujuurou was about to follow suit when,

"Oh. Soujuurou, you're comin' with me. I need to talk to you."

The taller boy pulled him back by his shoulder.

".....Man, council jerks are so pushy. What's a fella gotta do to make 'em remember their table manners, right?"

Kinomi swore loud enough for only the other boys to hear once he thought the two were out of earshot.

"*Ey!* Kinomi, you rat! That makes you the second person I'm remembering today! Winter's comin', just you wait!"

As if on cue, the vice council president stuck his thumb out to show that he meant what he said, and the threat was real.

"Ha-ha! Whatchu talkin' 'bout, man?
I don't feel like signin' up, and the vice chief can't make me!"

Heeheehee, the proud problem child of year 2 class C snickered.

"That was yesterday.
Our chief proposed something that the school gave the A-OK. Starting today, the student council's authorized to make official referrals.
Getting endorsed specifically by the chief and me is the law. Say no, and Aozaki gets to do whatever she wants and there's nothing I'll be able to do to stop her. Get it?"

"Haaaaah!!!!? Hey, you're sendin' me to the noose, dude!? You council jerks *really* are pushy!!!!"

Kinomi's swearing turned into screaming. Turning their backs on the boy's last hour on earth, the vice chief and Soujuurou left the room.

"You really know how to make trouble, Soujuurou."
"As the vice chief, you have some free time yourself, sir."

The two spoke as they went into the empty student council room.

The student council room in Misaki High was divided into two sections: one section was a large room made for the use of the student council, and the other section was a reference library where they had all the research materials.

The reference library had document shelves full to the brim with files and folders. All the document shelves stood in a tight row against the walls. The room always seemed too cramped for it to be a comfortable setting.

It was more fitting to call this part of the student council room a secret hideout. Soujuurou found a chair to sit down on, while the other boy sat across from him.

Tobimaru Tsukiji.
Son of the chief director of Misaki High Private School, and vice council president at the student council.

He and Soujuurou were in the same year. Roughly a week ago, he was put in charge of the transfer student by the student council president herself.

"Hey, none o' this 'sir' crap. Much as I hate sayin' it, I'm just the chief's dog, OK?"

He hated it as much as he ridiculed himself for it.

Tobimaru fetched the snack he had in his pocket. Not as tempting to eat as it should be, he ate it with even less enthusiasm.

He proceeded to finish off a hundred kilocalories' worth of block-shaped food, tearing at it with his teeth like he was eating jerky.

"I see. But it's not that great to be a dog, Tobimaru."

Soujuurou sat in his chair, making a difficult face.

"Hm? What's wrong with dogs?"

"Like I said, it's not that great to be a dog. For one, they're not like other animals, and they're the scariest things of all."

"? So what you're sayin' is, dogs that live in the mountains are scary?"

"Most animals are scary, but dogs are scary in a unique way.

There's nothing worse to deal with than feral dogs that have formed themselves in a group.

While they're a threat with how fast they can run, they're the most persistent animals by and large.

They don't let their prey get away when they chase it up on a slope; it always comes down to one dog in pursuit for them to pull back."

Soujuurou unwrapped his lunch as he talked.

Wrapped in bright green cloth were three perfectly triangular onigiri.

".....Unbelievable."

"? 'Unbelievable'? What is?"

"Uh, well.....it's the first time I'm seeing rice balls that look out of this world. I don't know what to say."

".....Um, which is it?"

"It's a compliment, you fool."

This was what he got for saying it in a way that was insulting and appreciative of Soujuurou. Subtlety made roundabout sarcasm hard to spot, so he chose to be roundabout with his wording instead.

But, no one ever broke his words down into good or bad like Soujuurou just did.

It was Tobimaru's guess, but this boy apparently saw things for what they were, which was what he clung to the most.

"By the way. Does it taste good, the packed flour-sort of thing?"

Soujuurou became keenly interested in what Tobimaru was eating.

"Its bad taste makes it the opposite of tasting good. Can't stop eating it, though. People, y'see, they like to finish what they started. All the more so if it's one of their three major needs."

Tobimaru made crunching noises as he ate the block-cake. He saved a piece and placed it on the table, and took one of Soujuurou's onigiri while he was at it. Ignoring what he just did, Soujuurou picked up the block-cake he was offered, and bit into it.

".....It's, sort of like, eating soil."

"You're not wrong. It's a hell of a way to take the joy out of someone's life."

Scrunching up his face, Soujuurou faithfully chewed the snack down. Strange things that got his interest, made him stay true to the end when he would try them for the first time.

"Hey, it's no use finishing it off now. It's supposed to be food you can carry around with ya. The ingredients make it taste like crap, so the taste of it is so-so even if you eat it all. Anyway, let's talk about something else. How're things in school going for you so far?"

"It's going well. You and Aozaki take care of me, afterall."

That carefree smile of his made Tobimaru look the other way. Soujuurou was definitely an absent-minded fellow through and through, but he also had an honest and trusting face that hid nothing from anyone. To a selfish person like Tobimaru, he had to take it with a grain of salt.

".....*It's no wonder Aozaki ran from this.....*"

Tobimaru took his first bite of the rice ball in his hand while muttering to himself. He got his second surprise at the soft yet firm texture of the cold, polished rice.

".....Hm? What, hold on. *I'm* the one who's been looking out for you this whole time! All Aozaki did for you was say, 'He's trouble, so keep an eye on him'. That's all she did, right!?"

".....Why is it making you mad?"

"No, look here! Aozaki assigned me to be the one that spies on you while we're at school, so she gets to check and file everyone's bad points in this room, that's it! Man, if you think I'm not putting myself on the line for ya here----"

At that point, he set himself up to look like a fool. Soujuurou was right; Tobimaru was getting mad for nothing.

".....OK, fine. I wouldn't be doing this either if Aozaki didn't tell me to look after ya. Y'got any idea?

Why she put me up to this?"

"Because you're the vice council president."

His words made a deep frown form on the other boy's handsome face.

"Hey, you! It is *not* acceptable for the vice chief to be in charge of just one transfer student!

Pft, whatever. I'll ask her myself the next time I get her alone. I know what that Aozaki's really like, anyway."

He swore while biting into his rice ball again.

The rice was dry, but wow, how fresh the taste was! "Rice ball" was not the right word for this. It was made without making the rice so stiff. The skill it took to make it had to have gently concentrated its purest form into an "onigiri".....

"And using salt to season it above other things. How'd you get just the right amount of mystery soy sauce coming out of the rice itself? ----This is doing more for my brain than my appetite----woooooow----"

"Tobimaru, you don't have to speak your mind while eating."

"Sorry, just got worked up, is all.

Heeey, Sou-ji. What kind of filling did you use for this?"

Tobimaru asked what the surprise filling was going to be.

By the way, he was only chewing his way around the rice ball rather than biting straight into its main ingredient.

"Oh, that would be locust."

"Are you kidding me?!"

The vice chief coughed and sputtered.

Of course, Soujuurou was bred on wild game and not seafood from living in the mountains, but him eating locusts never seemed possible.

"Oh my God, tell me what I'm eating first before I eat it! Who the hell stuffs locust meat in rice balls!?"

"Oh, I was lying to you."

For a moment, the eyes of the two boys met.

"It's actually salmon. No matter how you put it, it's the fish."

"----Of, of course. I mean, *thank God*.

No matter how you put it, it's not locust."

"Right, there's no way to get them stiff and preserved anywhere in this city."

"....."

Tobimaru decided it was time to stop asking questions.

".....Damn. That was a horrible way to mess with me. I almost threw it all back up. That was mean as hell of you, Soujuurou!"

"It's because you said bad things about Aozaki, that's why."

Eyes closed and glumly eating his rice balls, Soujuurou said it. He actually said it.

Tobimaru gaped at the other boy, who just sat there chewing unhappily.

"----Wait. Back up. You slammed me just now, because I was being a jerk about Aozaki. Is *that* what you're telling me?"

"....."

Chew, chew, chew.

The honest countryboy let his protest speak for itself, making it more and more obvious that way.

'Uh-oh, this *ain't* good!' The vice chief bemoaned the headache that he got sprung with all of a sudden.

"Get out of here! Is Aozaki someone you're in love with now?"

Is that it? Is that what you're saying?! Hey, quit sleepin' and tell me the truth, dammit!"

Leaping out of his chair, Tobimaru reached over to vigorously shake the other boy's shoulders.

He forced a miffed Soujuurou to open his eyes.

"My God.....you weren't told about what happened last year.

Look, I gotta warn ya -- you're flyin' too close to the sun doin' this."

".....I have to correct you on some things you said, but maybe later. But tell me: what exactly happened last year?"

"----Urgh."

Calming himself, Tobimaru switched tactics and sat back down.

"Y'gotta know. I hate spreading gossip about other people, though."

But Tobimaru told himself that he had to play the hero, and make sure Soujuurou was on his way to the best life this world had to offer him.

"This was when Aozaki was still a freshman.

On our first day of school, nobody knew back then what Aozaki was like. She was a girl that walked into our school like a perfect dream. And boy, were all the guys so happy to see her."

And, no one could imagine that they would be so ecstatic over something else after that.

"From April up to May, things were crazy. Back then, there were no seniors or juniors. The fellas would duck around, find teams, and even duel. They just made a lotta noise, those guys. The only thing they marked as off-limits was getting anywhere near Aozaki."

"? I don't understand. Why did they do all these things?"

"Because Aozaki's just one girl, and there's about a hundred of these idiots in our school.

Getting all of 'em to have lunch alone with her? That's like three months, give or take. That's why the first thing they did was settle things like men."

"....."

"Hey, c'mon. If ya can't work it out for yourself, then don't bother with it. Those're the memoirs of the losers of that fight, y'know. Let's just get to the point."

"So. The guys who won all queued up to try and get a freshman girl to go out with 'em. And Aozaki was, how do I put it? Not that keen on going out with anybody? Or, maybe she didn't think they had it in 'em? Either way, they got the message real quick. She shot every single one of 'em down, with no hard feelings."

"But, there was one guy who didn't seem to get it. He was a third year who went after Aozaki *a lot*, thinking he had a shot with her.He must've been off his rocker, that guy. Looking back now, he really was."

Tobimaru left out the part that labelled the same third year as their student council president for the first half of that year.

"He tracked Aozaki down all the way up to where she lived. That was where she completely lost it. And I'd rather not tell you what she had to do to make him go away."

"After that, he changed schools, and hightailed it out of our town. Aozaki got suspended for a month.

The whole thing got slapped with the name 'Bloody Assembly Hall Incident'. You wanna get the details?Count me out, the school newspaper has the story. Their editor-in-chief is the cavalier type. They'd be happy to tell ya how it all went."

".....Tobimaru. Can't you just tell me without using specific words?"

"Lemme tell you something. Being the chief director's kid makes every bad thing happening in school a thing I gotta run from. Highschool's just where I have to graduate without any screwups.

I don't want to start crying everytime I see our girl's uniforms, OK?"

"....."

Soujuurou tilted his head, not sure what to say.

Whatever it was that the other boy meant, he had absolutely no inkling.

"And that's it.

Anyway, Soujuurou. Why Aozaki?"

Soujuurou tilted his head again at the shift of topic.

"Hey, you! Do you seriously like Aozaki?

If you're just telling me that your heart beats a mile a minute for her, there's a joke in there that it pounds out of fear and not love. Sou-ji, even an oblivious guy like you has a reason to like her, right?"

Soujuurou looked even more confused.

Tobimaru's point also had the wrong idea, but he let it go for now.

There was too much in what Soujuurou felt for Aoko Aozaki for him to know what his feelings meant.

"Yes, it's true. It's strange. I barely know her at all."

It was the truth. Ever since she gave him a tour during the school's Foundation Day, they never once spoke to each other while at school.

Aoko would quickly run off as soon as he would go up to talk to her.

And while they had to work together during that one Sunday, they just had short exchanges from the day's start to the day's end.

"But...Tobimaru, you're just not aware.

I'd look back sometimes when I feel like I'm being watched, and there would be someone watching, worried that I'll do something wrong.

It's like you said, I'm just being watched in the hallway, maybe to simply check on how I'm doing. Actually, maybe you just wanted to pass through without having to worry about me.

But her worry, however she does it, is very much real."

"And so, I think that's the most important thing right here.

This is the truth -- it's all thanks to Aozaki, that I never fall down helpless."

Without being too eager, he spoke with as much sincerity as he could.
Listening to him made Tobimaru sigh, and with it came a touch of his regret.

Not counting what he just heard, Soujuurou was introducing him to a girl he liked at school and was now making arrangements for a peaceful school life.
Tobimaru never really went to huge lengths for any of his friends.
If his friend were the useful type, they would lie, manipulate, and help each other to get what they want.
Useless people were placed far off the grid for him until they actually became useful.
This was how Tobimaru Tsukiji felt things should be.
For Tobimaru, Soujuurou Shizuki had nothing to give him in return, but he was the kind of person that the former wanted to help.

He was no stranger when it came to friendship,
and he never really had anyone he could consider a close friend.

.....Therefore, if Soujuurou really was in love with Aoko, as his close friend, he wanted things to go Soujuurou's way.

".....Aw, man. What can I say? Reason doesn't decide love for a guy."

"That's not true. I have one reason.

Whenever I'd look at her, I'd always think she was pretty."

"Huh?"

Tobimaru's shoulders sagged.

"Are you crazy!? You're goin' outta your way to tell me now that you're in love with her only because she's pretty?! How forward are you!?"

"But it's not bad to be charmed by her beauty, is it?"

Making an effort to show how pretty she is, will also reflect who she is on the inside. I don't think that's strange at all."

"Hmph."

It was a sound argument. Opinionated, but sound.

".....Oh, well. I get it. Let's just stop here. Sou-ji, whichever girl you wanna make yours, it's your call."

That was that.

And there, Tobimaru made one huge mistake.

Soujuurou Shizuki's bullet list for his emotions went like this: he had a good feeling about Aoko Aozaki. To be specific, he probably liked her beyond belief. And he had no wish to be together with her with the two of them being lovers.

One day, on that promised day, these two naive boys would be paying dearly for the unholy catastrophe that was coming for them.

"Soujuurou, I've got one piece of advice for you. She doesn't have it out for someone who fights her. If I gotta say the opposite, I think she doesn't like the friendly types. One good example of that, is me."

Remembering a previous heartache, Tobimaru sighed heavily as he spoke.

"I see, tell me more."

"Right. A long time ago, I used to raise my hand at her holier-than-thou attitude. It was during this summer, just six months ago. Getting through one year of being on the student council with her made me see her more as a fellow soldier than a girl. I whipped my right hand up to just slap her with everything I had. ----Turns out I can twist my body like a cleanup hitter like it's nobody's business. Knowing that, I was so sure I'd be the winner."

His eyes somewhere else, he skipped the part where the fight actually happened.

"The next day, I was braced to be put on her hit list once I walked into the student council room, but Aozaki just acted like nothing happened. So, that's how I knew my place, with her being chief and me being her second-in-command vice chief."

Hearing the end of his tale, Soujuurou gave his impression of it. Feeling quite sure of himself,

"Tobimaru. Given everything you've told me, do you just want to tell me how much you love her?"

gave his clueless idea of it all with a straight face.

"*That's* what you took from that!?!? Where the hell was I getting weepy during that!? That was the point where I stopped seeing her as a girl, was I just vague on that part or what!?"

"What? That's not true, is it?"

Soujuurou was disappointed to know that he got it wrong.

'.....He really just tries to make things simple.' Tobimaru wound up changing his mind about the boy.

"This is my point. Aoko Aozaki has an upside-down frame of reference for her likes and dislikes.

It's never just her liking what she likes, and hating what she hates. She's quite a princess that way."

Soujuurou made a note to remember that, and his eyes went to the clock.

It was a long talk. There were only a few minutes left before their lunch break was over.

"Tobimaru. Do you have anything else to talk about?"

"Huh? I never had anything to say at all, honestly."

"....."

'Then why did he bring me here?' Puzzled, Soujuurou had a new topic to discuss with him.

"Great. Then there's more.

Tobimaru, I wanted to ask you something."

"?"

For the first time, Soujuurou was making a serious expression. It made Tobimaru straighten in his seat.

Leaving his half-eaten onigiri untouched, Soujuurou cleared his throat to start.

"----The truth is that last night, I ran into something....."

There was weight in his words.

Telling it the only way he could, Soujuurou began to accurately describe the incident that he saw last night.

"Is Shizuki-kun here?"

Their lunch break was ten minutes away from ending at 1 o'clock.

Year 2 class C was as rowdy as ever as she poked her head into their classroom.

.....Acting like this was normal for her to do.....

Aoko Aozaki came to visit.

Aoko was a stranger in class C, but without thinking twice, she just let herself into their classroom.

One minute, they were as loud as baby birds chirping for food. And then they all became quiet as she casually walked in, and they started to go to their respective seats without even being told to.

".....*What is going on here.....?*"

Tsking to herself, Aoko had a look around.

There was no sign of the boy she was looking for.

He was mostly hard to spot, but she was sure that he was not in any of the corners hiding from her.

"Arisato-kun. Where is Shizuki-kun in seat number twelve?"

Aoko kept it short and businesslike.

"Huh, me.....? Uhhh, Shizuki went with Caesar a while ago."

The boy she called on answered her question -- he was surprised that Aoko knew his name at all.

On a separate note, being the son of the chief director.....was not how Tobimaru Tsukiji earned his title as "Caesar". Tobimaru really acted like he was part of the royal family. And he was apparently a fan of his own nickname.

"Tobimaru.....? Is he close to Shizuki-kun?"

Aoko's surprise question,
was thrown in with some surprise responses from the rest of the class.

"For better or for worse, we girls never see Tsukiji-kun hang out with the other boys before.

Oh, Kinomi doesn't count because's he's a dummy."

"That's true, man. Me an' Caesar din't talk much the first time, but we were smack talkin' each other gettin' to day three!"

"It's probably fate that he's paired up with Shizuki, right? He's a weird guy, but he's OK."

"It's so true! Soujuurou-kun's an OK guy!"

Making its comeback, year 2 class C started up their usual back and forth with each other from every direction in their classroom.

Aoko was listening to it for a while, when she suddenly turned and left the room saying, "Later!"

For a short while, Soujuurou told his story.

Their lunch break was close to ending in several minutes.

Soujuurou sat back happy when he was done talking,
and Tobimaru sat looking upset at him from across the table after he heard everything.

"So, what did you think?"

Soujuurou told him all that he had to say.

Tobimaru looked like a cross between angry and worried as he pressed a finger to his forehead.

".....Yo, Sou-ji. You're not great at makin' people look stupid, are ya?"

"How rude. I do so have it in me."

His answer made it dead certain that he was terribly clumsy at it.

There were two ways to go about this.

Either he was telling the truth with the story that he just told.
Or, he was seeing things from being so tired.
And Tobimaru was leaning onto the latter himself, but.....

".....Soujuurou, I want you to know, from me directly -- I like you.
People like you who got nothing to hide aren't people *typically*. I don't like our kind in general, so even though I find myself liking your type.....if I even hear something so crazy from a guy like you, what am I supposed to do for lunch tomorrow?"
"Is there something wrong with the cafeteria?"
His quick answer made Tobimaru look even less happy.

"Alright, I'll be straight with you. What you saw was a figment of your imagination. Like a 'ghostly encounter that turned out to be withered silver grass' thing. If me telling you this isn't working out, we can get you started on what we call 'psychiatry'."
"Is that what you think it was? Alright, then I'm OK with that."
Soujuurou was taking the other boy's derision as an answer he could live with.

"I was thinking that it had the element of being spirited away.
I wasn't sure that it could happen here in the city, though. I needed to know for sure."

Mystery solved. Finishing the last of his rice balls, Soujuurou folded the cloth he had them wrapped in.

".....Uhh. What gives?
Do you think we blow fire and make our arms long in the city? You think that's normal for us down here?"
".....Umm, I think those are strange to do, but they're not particulars either.
There's so many things here that we don't have in the mountains. This is a place where anything can happen. So, it's not for me to know what's doable and what isn't."

Looking at that serious face, Tobimaru was struck with the weirdest feeling that he and Soujuurou were two people coming from two different worlds.
This boy survived without electricity up in those mountains.
Nights up there were dark and dangerous. His people were just assigned small parts to play instead of leading roles. A boy like Soujuurou was capable of staying behind at one detail where it was all nature.

There was nothing wrong with the idea of a grown man still seeing the world through a baby's eyes. There was no need for a civilization's advancement when it was made up of so few people.
Better yet, it was a simple world that could live without expanding its body of knowledge.

He must have felt like a fish out of water after moving to the city. He knew next to nothing about any of the things he would find here, but in turn, he was forced to think like this: anything was *possible* as long as it actually *happened*.

"Relax. Y'get a lotta shady types in this city, but there're no wizards here. Got it?"
"I hope so."

Soujuurou was far from convinced.

.....Actually, Tobimaru was also having difficulty in swallowing the details of that story. Aside from whether or not any of it was real, what happened last night involved something inhumane.

"Alright, nevermind 'fact or fiction' and getting the facts straight. This is how it looks: you, one of our own students, saw somebody killing somebody at the park last night. And they were both acting funny in every sense of the word."

"One guy was armed with a flamethrower, and the other guy was.....**cough**, pulling out a sharp, halberd-sized weapon that he stretched longer than a vaulting pole."

Soujuurou made a small nod while listening to Tobimaru's shocked recap of last night's incident. The details were really sketchy when someone said them out loud like that, and using those exact words.

"I'm not making this up. The way you tell it's very out of the way, though."
"Soujuurou. Just tell me you're yankin' my chain with this and I'll believe ya."

"No, absolutely not.

But hear me out: people like that aren't found in the city, are they?
Then it's like you said, it was all just a dream. It has awful timing, cropping up with my part-timing and the exams."

It was almost winter break. Their term exams were a week from now, and it was Soujuurou's biggest hurdle by far.

"I'm still trying to master the basics, so I can't even make twice the effort needed to study for the exams. Wait, what if I'm suffering a breakdown from all the studying?"

"Not a chance, but you know what? Don't make it hard on yourself. Why don't you cut back on work, at least until exams are over?"

"I did. Lots of people take a break from part-time work at the end of the year, though. So I get requests to take over for them."
Soujuurou just shrugged at his problem.

It was easy to tell just how busy he was from how he was talking.

Breakdowns aside, it might have been his lack of sleep that made him see that dream while fully awake.In fact, he ran into said dream while he was out late last night.

"You're in for a ride through Hell, Soujuurou."

"I know. I've given up fighting it now. Life in the city is just a dangerous one."

The boy answered, completely serious about the trouble he was in. Seeing him look so free from fatigue was upsetting in its own way.

"I gotta hand it to you, though -- you can handle stress without wanting to shoot yourself.

Maybe you don't like letting people see you be worried, huh?"

"? That's because being worried doesn't hurt me anywhere."

Soujuurou answered while glancing at the clock on the wall. Their lunch break was about to be over soon.

"Tobimaru, we need to go."

"Huh? Oh wow, it's time already? Yeah, you go on ahead. I still have things to do here."

Soujuurou looked straight at their vice chief and his excuse for "official council business".

His eyes were appraising a piece of artwork of unknown worth.

"Tobimaru, you're so lucky to be in a position where you can skip classes.

But I thought you didn't like being easy on yourself?"

"That is absolute bull! Cutting class isn't me taking a load off! I told you -- *I get a free pass to not be in class!*"

In a flash, the vice council president was on his feet, making that statement. The transfer student stared back at him, unimpressed.

"*Come on!* Do I need to tell you everything for you to get it?!"

Alright, you're asking for it. Take a seat and *listen up*, Sou-ji!

I was blessed with extraordinary luck and vigor beyond mere mortals! I have the power to move these mountains! And still I won't have a cent to my name when I leave this institution?!"

"There's the punchline!

They say I won't rise beyond being a 'nothing' beneath my family's eyes until another year goes over!

You envy *me*, the Colossus, for that?

I've been riding my father's coattails for the past three years to secure a life like a straight arrow!"

"As an object of labor, don't I deserve quiet and a recess?
Damn this world! Damn it all if I'm counting gold and arranging pipe heads with fools who don't see anything to damn! Holy mother of mercy---- this world, the adults that live in it, it mixes envy and jealousy together in one receptacle! It's more than enough to melt my heart and swallow it whole like wafer paper!"

"----"

Caesar's dramatic speech almost made Soujuurou believe that he was being real. He felt himself envying Caesar and his perfect diction. Soujuurou personally thought he was right with his view on things. However,

"Wow. Why don't you keep staying back for another year? You can use *all* the free passes you'd have as a son of Tsukiji. If we work together, we can make your ambition a reality."

the door to the student council room flew open, tossing back Soujuurou's witless agreeing with Tobimaru.

Those words deadened the comfortable atmosphere that was in this room. Tobimaru Tsukiji's authority over this area flew straight into her hand out of sheer force instead of fear.

".....No thanks. I've always thought of making my dream come true using the strength of my own two hands."

"I see. Well, don't make a scene that you'll be paying for later. Because, Vice Chief? We could hear you out here in the hallway."

Without pausing in her speech.....Aoko Aozaki entered the student council room. Her long, raven hair was in slight disarray, probably from running to this room. Aoko focused on her raving vice chief, completely ignoring Soujuurou sitting there.

"Tobimaru, good luck."

Soujuurou quietly stood up, not wanting to run late for his next class.

".....I can't believe you're jumping ship on me, man."

Tobimaru grumbled with Aoko just a few feet away from him.

"I don't have much time, though."

"I don't either if you jump ship on me.....!"

Tobimaru bit his tongue before he could say more.

Aoko's eyes briefly went to Soujuurou.

"I don't have much time, either. But you're a Time Lord, as far as we all know."

It seemed more like the truth for her instead of a complaint.

"OK? Is Soujuurou the deal here or what?"

"Don't worry. I'll deal with you after."

".....?"

He got a glimpse of a ruthlessness in her eyes.

Tobimaru was used to Aoko's grumpy countenance, which was how she always made her face look. That was how he could note such a subtle difference.

.....For reasons unknown, he could only say for sure that Aoko Aozaki was in an unusually foul temper.

"Shizuki-kun. Which do you like better: to run, or to swim?"

Aoko suddenly asked without warning.

Soujuurou furrowed his brows a little, saying either was fine.

"Sorry, you need to pick one."

".....To swim, I suppose. But, how come?"

"You're not a member of any of the clubs here in school yet, are you?"

She told him so matter-of-factly.

Soujuurou was left without anything to say for himself.

"Please read up on the school regulations. Students have to have club activities, nobody's an exception.

It's inconvenient, I know. Rules are rules, though."

"That's silly. I'm sorry, but I don't have the time to spare for them."

"I agree."

She only had two words for him.

Aoko usually gave no leeway, but to Tobimaru, it looked like she was trying to avoid getting into a conversation with Soujuurou.

"____"

"____"

They looked at each other in silence.

For Tobimaru, it was enough to choke the air out of this room. Then, Soujuurou himself broke the silence with,

"I see. Aozaki, I thought you'd be understanding about this. Oh, what I mean to say is, that you'd be very understanding.

Alright. That's why you're pushing me into doing this."

Soujuurou left his seat.

He passed Aoko as he made a quick exit for the hallway.

"Can I start tomorrow?"

"Yes, Shizuki-kun. If it works for you."

Forcing himself to smile at his luck, Soujuurou left the student council room.

After seeing it all happen, Tobimaru was in complete awe of Soujuurou.

Instead of getting himself roped into an argument with Aoko like she wanted, Soujuurou kept his cool, evading the attack by saying the right words.....and slipped away without any feathers ruffled.

Tobimaru thought that even Soujuurou would have gotten more than a little upset. He felt that he just witnessed the countryboy managing a first-class trick without letting on that he was doing it.

"But *man*. What are you being so uptight about, Chief?"

Tobimaru then noticed Aoko and her puzzlement.

Stiller than a stone, her eyes were burning holes into the wall.

".....Aozaki?"

He called out to her, but there was no response.

"Yoooo, Chiefey? Aozakiiii?Miss Aoko?....."

Yo! You listening to me, Aoko Aozaki!"

"*SHUT UP!* I'm right here, OK?!"

Her shout rattled the student council room.

Presently after Tobimaru's impassioned speech was a lovelier-sounding voice that spilled out into the hallway.

"Why don't *you* shut up if you're gonna scream at me!?"

Tobimaru shot back -- it was either the shout still ringing in his ears, or him paying her back with a yell of his own.

"Don't ever do that to a guy again, OK?!"

Well? How was your trip in dreamland?"

"Never you mind that. I could hear you just fine. I was only ignoring you on account of you were being a nuisance. So I screamed at you to be quiet."

"Hey. What am I to you, some kind of mosquito?"

"If you ask me, things are better when we can't hear each other at all."

".....Ya don't say."

"Neither of us really see eye-to-eye with each other when we talk. Dating wouldn't help either; you and I would just ramble on about nothing useful."

"....."

Given what she thought of as being true, people dating each other had nothing substantial to say to one another.

".....The problem here's what you pass for useful when talking to.....ahh, forget it. You really caught me off-guard, Aozaki."

"Maybe. It's neither the time nor place for me to act charming."

"Isn't that something. Even though we've never seen our council chief be charming at all in these last two years."

"Oh please, the charm just stops when you walk into the room."

"Aha. So you *do* have a bone to pick with me for last time."

Tobimaru could only be referring to one thing by "last time".

When they turned the student council room into a martial arts stadium this past summer.

"What? That was ages ago, wasn't it?"

That was no big deal. Why are you wasting space in your brain for it? Not that you put it to a lot of use yourself."

Their conversation was probably putting Aoko in a better mood compared to before. Even her pointed gaze was a rare and refreshing thing to see. As of now, only Tobimaru Tsukiji was bearing witness to this side of Aoko while she was inside the walls of their school.

"Duly noted. I did forget the whole thing by now.

.....But, I got triggered by that memory thanks to Sou-ji and the damn crap that he started to talk about with me. Oh for crying out loud, now I've realized that this is the exact same room where I almost died because of you!"

Tobimaru deeply lamented the past while cursing his heart out at it.

Aoko, on the other hand, was frowning.

"Wait a second.

You told him about that.....?"

"Sure. Right up to where you got under my skin, saying,

'Only one of us gets to be council chief here, and you don't look fit to run for anything other than vice chief',

and I went in with a straightforward jab."

For some reason, Aoko sighed at that. It stood to say, 'Lucky him for not knowing what followed after.'

And neither one of these two could really say why that was a good thing.

"I gotta admit -- I wasn't expecting you to go all the way with that cool jab you made. I just reacted and let my body do all the work.

By the way, did I really say that to you?"

"Yes, you did. Then you landed me in the nurse's office. And that was when you made yourself my boss, no questions asked."

And ever since, Tobimaru was used in his losing position as vice council president.

"It's fine, though. I know I'd never live up to the job as council chief. Being the damn vice chief suits me just fine. If I did get the chief's position, it's almost like I'd be the old man himself."

"You have a lot of pride in yourself. You know you can do anything you put your mind to.

Although, seeing you end up on the honor roll as our hardworking council chief wouldn't have been too bad, would it?"

"Quit it, get out and take your sack o' bullcrap with ya!
Your 'cute cat' act's the only migraine I can stand so cut the crap!"

Tobimaru waved her off.

Only this kind of bad language could come from someone who fought without genders in mind.

"----So? Why does he know?"

"Huh?"

"Why does he know about what we did last summer?"

"Oh, that.

Yeaaah, he was running his mouth off about somethin' silly and----"

He stopped right there.

Tobimaru refused to spell out the words, "Soujuurou and Aoko sittin' in a tree.." in bold letters in front of Aoko Aozaki, of all people. He made a man's unspoken promise to Soujuurou, so he had to keep it for sure.

Even if he *was* getting the wrong idea.

"Here's a better question -- Aozaki, just what were you trying to start back there, huh? How far are you actually taking this thing you have against Soujuurou?"

"Excuse me, but drawing out my issues with one guy for the last seven days like a princess isn't what I'm doing here, you know."

'Princess? More like the Queen herself.' Tobimaru kept the thought to himself, though. Even he became thoroughly knowing of Aoko Aozaki in these last two years.

"Like hell you're not out to get 'im. I bet you there's tickets to your upcoming sparring match. So, what's to not like about the guy? Maybe he's not an easy fit in our school, but that Soujuurou's actually a nice guy you can't find anywhere these days, y'know?"

"----"

"Hey, hey! What's wrong with you? Is there a termite you're tryin' to step on?"

"Well, you know -- the only thing that I'm getting from what you're saying, is a contemptible hate for someone of his caliber."

".....I can work with that. He's a nice guy and a decent human being -- good for him. I couldn't have asked for a better sparring partner! If nobody wants to hate him, at least I'll give him something to think about."

Aoko cheered up at the brilliant solution she had to her problem.

"He's not gonna fight ya, for God's sake!"

Tobimaru could hardly believe his ears.

No matter how used he was to Aoko Aozaki's impetuous leaps of thought, Soujuurou and his incapacity to hurt even one fly floated up in his mind. The idea of such a person being disliked for no reason whatsoever,

"He likes you, yet you still don't like him?"

made him break his sworn oath as a man in a matter of less than two minutes.

"Shoot---- I mean, Aozaki, I didn't--"

It was too late to shut his mouth.

And he still had to. Praying that his mistake would get the reaction he hoped to get from her----

"Of course. Everyone has their likes and dislikes.

But that's all there is. Even if he wants to be friends with me like you said, I can't help not liking him."

It was as dry as being dry could be.

Saving no doubt for her answer, Aoko was nothing if not unusually annoyed at what he just told her.

"No, no! I'm not talking about getting friendly with each other!

Likes and dislikes be damned, because Sou-ji's seriously into you!"

Tobimaru made the seriousness of what he was saying loud and clear for her.

This took Aoko by surprise.

He never saw her look like that before, and it faintly reminded him of someone who just realized that their wallet was gone for a long time and failed to notice.

things

Tobimaru had only a moment to reflect on how reality turned out for all three of them.

And in that one used moment,

"And?"

Batting his words away, Aoko patiently answered back with a question of her own.

'What's it to me if he does?' was what she meant by.

"That's it?! You're a goddamn devil when you're not being an ogre! You're a *woman*, for God's sake! Oh, what the hell? If I have to repeat the whole thing, I will!"

Tobimaru readied himself, knowing that even his word as a man had nothing to do with any of this.

"No, spare me. I don't want to, OK?"

She immediately turned down his offer to help, completely uninterested in having her views changed.

"....."

For now, and for the sake of the boy in this school who dared to love without having his love returned, Tobimaru tried to look for a fitting name that he would probably never find for Lamashtu herself.

"Now, I see. That's why you told him about last summer.
Gee, Caesar. I didn't think you were the friend that nobody thought you were!
Did you completely and utterly ruin his chances by talking about the incident I got involved at here in school?"

Aoko cast a secretive smile his way.

Tobimaru made his penitence to God somewhere out there that he did, indeed, tell this friend of his about a boy's love affair.

"You sure did the right thing, Tobimaru! I like where this is going, so come on! I want to know exactly what you told him!"

For all her smile was worth, she was daring him to try.

".....I told him about your magnum opus, and I cut our moment in this room into two parts at least."

Tobimaru's reluctant response gained Aoko's satisfaction.

"That rumor sure is handy at times like this one. It gets rid of all the fuss made. But, you can't just go around flapping your lip about it wherever you please, so don't let that happen, 'k? Because I'm *watching* you!♥"

Her little heart and her sweet smile sent chills up his spine.

Whether she was being angry or she was being happy, Aozaki had a cute-sounding voice when she reduced her emotions to cinders.....

And while it was a new addition to Tobimaru's list of discoveries, blurting it here would make things even more awkward for himself.

"Yes, please. I value my life. Don't hurt it. My lips are sealed.

.....Just be honest with me. Aozaki, do you really not like Soujuurou?"

Even when he knew that this was a subject to be avoided at all costs, Tobimaru made one last brave attempt.

The friendship between boys and men alike could, at times, capture the light of the sun more than a pearl ever could.

"Look.....I don't like him, and it's not because I've got nothing to like about him, OK? I myself don't understand why I don't like him.

That's why it's no use talking this over with me, got it?"

To save face, Tobimaru aimed his little thought experiment at Aoko, who worried over it for a while before she gave him that answer.

And since she did without jumping to conclusions, Tobimaru was happy to drop the subject.

"OK. I guess that's just how it is for ya.

I guess I can't argue with you on how you feel about him. Both of you have the same problem with each other, and I can't see a way to help y'both anyway!"

With the case closed, Tobimaru turned his eyes up to the sky while apologizing to Soujuurou.

However.

Aoko was riveted by something he just brought up.

".....Hold on. What do you mean by that?"

The cheerfulness in her voice was gone.

Without noticing the change, Tobimaru lightly answered her question.

"Yeah, see...he doesn't actually know why he's got a thing for ya.Ah, scratch that, he just has a thing for ya, was what he meant."

Tobimaru refused to take Soujuurou's attraction to Aoko's looks as an actual reason, so he simply left that part out of his dialogue.

"He *just*, has a thing for me.....?"

"He sure does. It was no use telling him all those things about ya, too. And then there was that thing he went on about for a while.....yeah, yeah. He said that you worryin' about him is the real deal, whatever that means, and you catch 'im when he falls or somethin' like that. There were definitely things he wasn't ready to tell me, no question about it.

One thing's for sure, he's not like the other guys, not if he wasn't flinching at all about the stuff he had to hear about y--"

Having talked so smoothly thus far, Tobimaru finally noticed what was going on with Aoko.

She was glaring at the wall.

For some minutes, her eyes pierced it like sharpened daggers.

".....What is he doing!? Just now? That too?! Where the heck is he getting all of this from!?"

Aoko ground her teeth in frustration.

She was disgusted beyond belief. Being right in front of her while she was this upset, Tobimaru wanted to stay out of her focus.

'Aw, crap. I messed it up for you again, didn't I, Soujuurou?' Tobimaru's eyes went to the sky again.

".....O-K. Why don't you tell me why you can't stand him?"

'Alas, cutting words coming from a wench's barbed mouth!' Wishing her off to some other place where she could spill her heart out, Tobimaru averted his eyes. Ignoring him, Aoko proceeded to spin a hex aimed at the countryboy.

"He, is *everything* I don't like in a person.

He gets treated as someone who's nice to everybody he meets, he throws me off in the weirdest ways, and he gets on my nerves at every possible chance he gets!"

'You are the cruel'st she alive...or not, whatever.' The vice chief found himself boredly looking at the clock.

---And.

It was apparently past 1 o'clock already.

".....Alright, you can stop. I'm sorry I ever brought it up for ya.

So, what is it you wanted me to do? And just so you know, aren't you going to miss class?"

"Huh? Class? Why? *When!*?"

"Yeah, the bell rang while you were staring holes into the wall after Sou-ji left. What now, Chief? Are you going to skip fifth period with me?"

"Like *heck* I am!!!

Why weren't you saying anything!?"

On the verge of tears, Aoko screamed while latching onto Tobimaru's necktie. He gave up with his hands in the air as a protest to what she was doing. There was still room for a winner.

"The mosquito always brings his revenge down by tasteful design!

Learn it well, devil woman! For you commit the saints of men to the flames!"

"How dare you hold such a tiny grudge on me!?"

Act like a man, you spineless git!"

She pulled his tie taut around his neck.

But the vice chief was the joyful winner here, as he mocked her with the face of a hooligan.

failure

"He-he-he! Your need for extra lessons in Classics is a well-known fact. Even class A for fifth period doesn't have to say so. Granny Fujishiro hates your guts, Aozaki!"

An old teacher at their school, Fujishiro was the teacher who taught at Classics.

"Well, now! You either squeeze my neck, or you run back to our classroom! Too bad for you, though! You're about to land the coup de grâce on me!"

"Aaaaggh! You set me up, lowlife!!
And you're gonna die where you staaaaand!!!!"

She pulled hard on his tie.

Making good on her promise, Aoko began to choke the life out of her vice chief, who was suddenly seeing God before him.

"----What?! Wait, wait wait! You're killing me now!?! Ya got time -- ten minutes after 1 and you don't show up gets ya an absence from class!"

Aoko's eyes darted to the clock.

The time was seven minutes after 1. Coming from the second student council room on the second floor, she had a small chance of making it to their classroom on the third floor if she ran the entire distance to it.

"You live today, Caesar."

Aoko threw a 'tsk' over her shoulder.

She usually meant it, and it made Tobimaru's head hurt.

"Let's meet here after school.

I have this huge favor to ask from you so don't forget, OK?"

Saying those words quickly, Aoko flew out of the room like a falcon.

At last, he was alone. Tobimaru shut the door she left open, locked it, and sat back down.

".....Sheesh. Aozaki sure is fun to have around for that."

He let out a sigh, leaning back on the folding chair.

Outside the window was nothing but clear skies.

Yet, the sunlight during winter faded quickly.

It soon got dark inside the room. Without heating, the room's temperature steadily dropped.

A heater warmed the first student council room. "Getting used to it" was all anyone could settle for in this cold.

"It'd be nice if this weather keeps up, though.
They say it's gonna take a turn for the worse again."

After monologuing to himself, Tobimaru had a flashback to Soujuurou.
Cloudy weather and fine weather. Whichever of those he was more like, the answer never came to him.

At the end of the day, Soujuurou left school and went on straight to work after.
His other part-time jobs were kept a secret from school authorities, so they only had a record of his work at both the Chinese restaurant and the fish market.
The long list of part-time jobs he had were hardly the issue. It so happened that the places he worked at had a tendency to break the law in the past.

Today's part-time work featured a prime example of this tendency -- at a pachinko parlor situated in front of the station at Yashirogi.
Changing out of his school uniform and into the issued black tuxedo they gave him, he started his work at sweeping around the parlor.

The station of Yashirogi was the face of Misaki City. Dozens of shopping buildings were strewn in front of the station, all trying to outdo each other in their businesses. Even the shopping arcade added to the spectacle with the clamor it generated.
The hundreds of people here were made by the hundreds who gave birth to them.
Romantically speaking, it was a wonderful thing.
Realistically speaking, people were not so much being distributed,
as they were contributing to being dregs in the city.

In a community that wanted to build on decency and wholesomeness like Yashirogi, those two conditions were absolute.
Establishments like this parlor made for strong cases against them.
Soujuurou had to be mindful to do most of his sweeping in front of the hall during the day, the hall where the unsavory types slipped into the building.

Under the cold wintry sky, Soujuurou swept cigarette butts, picked up leaflets, and threw empty cans away.
His sweeping was as close to the lifestyle he had in the mountains as he could get.
Soujuurou cheerfully went about his work as if it were just natural for him to do.

Having swept most of the entire area, he went back inside the parlor and its cozy warmth.

The racket coming from the slot machines and their customers was harsh on his ears. Shrinking from the thick cloud of cigarette smoke hanging in the air, he passed through it and headed for the main office.

"Sir? I've finished my sweeping."

"Alright, good job. Say, do your boss a favor. Could ya go check on one of our customers upstairs? The one punched in for machine number forty? She's got deep pockets, that lady."

The manager was a good man who was once an office worker.

Hiring Soujuurou---- had nothing to do with his admiration for a student who was standing on his own two feet.

It so happened that his entire staff was made up of people who were far too menacing for the customers to be at ease in the parlor, so he needed at least one employee that was less of a heart attack.

"Really, sir? I haven't cleaned the toilets yet."

"It's fine, don't worry. See, our camera's got a blind spot where she's at so we dunno what's going on up there.

Sou-chan, you've gotten so much done as of now. Go take a peek for me, would ya?"

Doing as he was told, Soujuurou put his broom away and went up to the second floor.

The pachinko parlor was a typical two-storied building belonging to a wide class of establishments.

Essentially, and without setting any limits for its target revenue, the parlor made its mark in this town by steadily and greedily acquiring money from every person that lived in it.

But, its practice also drew a very mixed crowd of customers into this line of business.

Something that people did for fun, was also exploited by the pros who made a living from their gambling habits, and it eventually got the attention of those seeking to make a dishonest profit from playing the game.

The pachinko machines here were especially prevalent since the mid-80s. By tampering with the program found in the electronic features of these machines, scoring the well-known "three seven's" became an actual dream come true for those cheating at pachinko.

Obviously, letting these people get inside the parlor would be going against the wishes of the owner, but as long as there was no proof that they were up to no good, they had no right to refuse them entry.

Beyond the service industry itself, suspicion could not incur punishment.

Ergo, catching a red-handed culprit was an act of justice for the parlor.

Soujuurou had zero clue what it actually meant to call these people "cheaters".

All he knew was that 1) they were an embarrassment to the parlor, and 2) they broke the rules by being involved in dirty work.

He reached the second floor.

It was so much more quiet up here, even with the cable radio blaring along to the sound of the pachinko machines.

There were more than eighty of these machines compared to the ground floor's hundred count. The vacancies were scattered on this floor, but customers always came streaming in when it was evening.

Machine number forty was in the middle row.

As he casually leaned on the wall peering into that same row, he got a glimpse of the lady, whose lucky streak was very much on fire tonight.

"....."

One look was enough to set off Soujuuou's hunch that she was unlike the other customers.

While he should be asking what made her do so well in the game, she really was remarkable personified.

In a way, he could see for himself just how strong her luck was at winning.

Amid the other customers' feverish gusto, she just turned the machine's handle without saying a word.

She was some years older than Soujuuou.

The outline of her whole body was dressed in Western-style green. Both her outerwear and skirt seemed assembled into a single piece of clothing.

Her feet were wrapped in stockings that covered her bare skin.

Crossing her thin and pristine legs, she was poised for a model's photoshoot in a pachinko parlor.

The reddish tint of her short, raven hair complimented the striking combination of her scarlet lips and her coolly worn glasses.

In all honesty, a person as beautiful as her would never be seen striking it rich in a pachinko parlor of all places.

Four big boxes were stacked at her feet, and she showed no sign of slowing down at the game.

With her thin sculpted fingers, she boredly lifted a long cigarette to her lips.

".....*Why.....it's like.....*"

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, the bespectacled lady's eyes drifted over to the wall---- and saw him.

".....!"

A chill ran up his spine.

The scream that threatened to give him away, was stifled by the hand that shot up to silence it.

person

"*That lady, is yesterday's.....!*"

Gripped by a hunch that he had no proof for, Soujuurou bolted off and away from the scene.

He had to leave now. He sprinted for the ground floor.

His headstart to get out of the parlor was set in motion, so he hurried back to the manager's office and gave a minimal account of upstairs.

"Sir, I'll be taking off now. Also, the upstairs floor is clean."

Soujuurou made his report, somehow keeping his panicky state in check. Stuffing his uniform into a paper bag, he fled the parlor.

The overcast seemed to make the night's shadows multiply tenfold. Soujuurou cut through Yashirogi's shopping district and fled into the station.

He sprinted up the stairs, as fast as a flying arrow. Fetching his student pass from his wallet, he quickly sent himself through the ticket gate.

Crowds of people were in line at the ticket gate, chatting with each other as they each went through the barrier.

This and the reserved faces of station workers beside the automatic ticket gate, were filling him with a bit of relief in the station hassle.

It was another day at the city, if he had to say so.

Just in case, Soujuurou's eyes darted all over the vicinity, and saw nothing from the previous night coming after him.

"---- **sigh**."

He let air back into his lungs again.

He was having a moment to himself when he suddenly jerked to a halt.

Peering over his shoulder, he expected to see someone there.

Then again, there was no maniac that was going to come after him like this.

".....*Well, now that I've thought of it.....*"

He tore out of that place without warning, so it made no sense for him to be chased here at all.

Opponent

In fact, the more he thought about it, there was never anything like 'Danger' spelled out in huge letters across that lady's face, was there?

Slapping himself on the cheeks and picking up his spirit again, Soujuurou hurried his pace as he went down to the station platform.

Only to find that he had to wait for the express train, thus compelling him to sit down and collapse on himself right then and there.

"----"

Soujuurou took one more deep breath.

Around him stood people waiting to catch the express train with him.

.....Neither hide nor hair of a 'someone' coming after him.

'I've been thinking too much.' He finally let his head be cleared of any notion that he was in danger.

Yet, something was weighing his shoulders down more than his disappointment.

".....*I know why I'm tired. This is about my constitution.*"

Tireder than he thought he was, Soujuurou heaved a sigh.

Things were nothing but rough for him ever since he came down from the mountain, but he was patient enough to sit down and reflect on his life from before. Such as now.

Physically, he still had plenty of fight left in him.

It was his heart that wanted to give up on all of this.

This place and the mountains he left behind had nothing in common with each other.

Taking it as a fact and coping with his new life in the city were two very painful things for him to do.

Letting the city grow on him was easy enough. Since people were creatures that could get used to anything thrown their way, they could also manage with minding their own businesses.

And so, not having an easy time was likely to be noted.

".....It's true. Anyway, I keep finding things hard to manage."

At last, Soujuurou betrayed himself with the one complaint he always kept quiet about.

Truth be told, he was still a nervous wreck about stepping out of his apartment and going into town.

City people had their whole lives to get to know the city, but for him, it was all so strange and new. Getting the shock of his life at every turn while he was here, was bound to make him give up eventually.

".....*Of course.....maybe it's not my health giving out.....*"

"It's because, I saw something that isn't real."

Muttering to himself, Soujuurou gave a small shake of his head.

Only the things that were there were real. That was how the world worked.

Both he and Tobimaru were on the same page with that, but Soujuurou knew for a fact that last night's **incident** took place in reality.

This was a country full of magic compared to the mountains he was born in.

Then, it was completely normal for there to be actual magicians living here in secret.

Just the thought of it made his feet propped on the chair quiver. Immediately, he realized that it still scared him to death.

The last time something unnatural scared him off, was when he was jumped by a wild bear on the mountain path as a child.

"Uh, no. That's not really an example.
I would've screamed either way."

laughed

Soujuurou cracked a smile, remembering the shock of that event when he was still young.

Any animal that lumbered out of the woods growling and groaning while over two meters tall, was bound to cause any person to faint from the shock.

After seeing a movie featuring a giant unknown beast acted out by a stuffed animal just two days ago, his grit from living in the mountains amounted to zero -- because an imaginary wild animal could still unnerve him.

Remembering that, it was possible that he stood some chance from making it this far.

".....That's true. The problem right now is, errrrr.....maybe the last words I caught them saying. How are they going to 'Do away with what they seize'?"

They would have meant that literally, if they were going for too literal.

The words seemed to speak for themselves, and giving them serious thought was bad enough. Either he misheard something, or it was just a slip of the tongue, and he wanted to settle it with a throw.

"As it goes in the city.....someone always comes to deliver a penalty, hm.....?"

While speaking for himself, he also thought for sure that it could involve someone besides him, so he wanted to write his entire experience into taking place in a dream. Sighing, Soujuurou let his eyelids drift closed.

As his vision faded to black, he tucked away everything from before this.

For now, everything from the previous night was going to be put as far back into his mind as possible.

Opening his eyes again, his breathing had completely settled down.

"Speaking of which.

What happened after Tobimaru tried to hit Aozaki?"

The question just came up for him all of a sudden.

Alerted, Soujuurou got to his feet just as the express train and its lights pulled in.

--End of Chapter--