

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with short, dark brown hair and green eyes. She is wearing a dark blue school uniform jacket with a white collar and a red tie. She is holding the collar of her jacket with both hands. A green speech bubble with the text 'Lv.8' is positioned near her chest. The background is white with some faint, light blue lines.

YUKI YAKU

Illustration by
Fly

Lv.8

Bottom-Tier
CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Bottom-
Tier
CHARACTER
TOMOZAKI

Lv.8

YUKI YAKU

Illustration by
Fly









Bottom-Tier
Character Tomozaki, Level 8

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6 Whenever you set up one flag, another one always seems to break

Design Yuko Mucadeya + Caiko Monma
(musicagographics)

1P Found



Bottom-
Tier

CHARACTER
TOMOZAKI

Yuki Yaku

Illustration by Fly

Lv.8



Copyright

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki Lv.8

YUKI YAKU

Cover art by Fly

Translation by Winifred Bird

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JAKU CHARA TOMOZAKI-KUN LV.8

by Yuki YAKU

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Illustration by FLY

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Original Japanese edition published by SHOGAKUKAN.

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Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: April 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Yaku, Yuki, author.
| Fly, 1963—illustrator. | Bird, Winifred, translator.

Title: Bottom-tier character Tomozaki / Yuki Yaku ; illustration by Fly ;
translation by Winifred Bird.

Other titles: Jyakukyara Tomozaki-kun. English Description: First Yen On
edition. | New York : Yen On, 2019— Identifiers: LCCN 2019017466 | ISBN
9781975358259 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975384586 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975384593 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975384609 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975384616 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975384623 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975320386 (v. 6.5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975333461 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN
9781975335502 (v. 8 : pbk.) Subjects: LCSH: Video games—Fiction. | Video
gamers—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PL877.5.A35 J9313 2019 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019017466>

ISBNs: 978-1-97533550-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-3551-9 (ebook)

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Bottom-Tier CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Lv.8

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki

Second-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami

Second-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami

Second-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi

Second-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi

Second-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi

Second-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa

Second-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura

Second-year high school student. Class boss.

Takei

Second-year high school student. Built.

Tsugumi Narita

First-year high school student. Easygoing.

Erika Konno

Second-year high school student. Queen of the class.



Atafami Terms



Attack

The Attack is a powerful move activated by pushing the stick completely in any direction while pressing the regular attack button. Often has considerable lag and a high degree of strength. There are three types—forward, up, and down—called F-Attack, U-Attack, and D-Attack. This is the source of the game's title, *Attack Families*.

Tilt attack

Activated by tilting the stick in whatever direction you want while pressing the attack button. Often has a good balance between lag and strength. There are three types—forward, up, and down—called forward tilt, up tilt, and down tilt.

Standard attack

A swift attack activated by pressing the attack button while keeping the stick upright. Often, the lag is small, and the strength and range of the attack are low. Also called a jab.

Dash attack

Activated by pressing the attack button while moving. Typically done during a dash. Also called DA.

Aerial attack

Activated by pressing the attack button in midair. There are five types depending on the direction in which the stick is directed: forward, back, up, down, and neutral. These are called forward air, back air, up air, down air, and neutral air. For neutral air, the stick is kept upright.

Special attack

Special moves for each character, activated by pressing the special-move button. Depending on which way the stick is directed at the time, there are four types: side, up, down, and neutral. These are called side special, up special, down special, and neutral special.

Grab

Activated either by pressing the grab button or the shield and attack buttons at the same time, this move can't be shielded against. When it hits the opponent, the player is in position to begin a throw.

Throw

An attack activated from a grab by moving the stick in any direction. There are four types—forward, back, up, and down—each with different characteristics.

Dodge

Activated by moving the stick while shielding, this move makes the character invincible while also moving them a certain distance. There are two types, right-left and down, called roll and spot dodge.

Stealing turns

An attack launched while being comboed or otherwise attacked by one's opponent. Depending on the specific move used, the player can mash jabs or neutral airs, or use other attacks to break out.

Shield Cancel

Moving directly from shielding to another action. Called SC for short.

Start-up Lag

The lag between inputting a command and when the hitbox appears.

Ending Lag

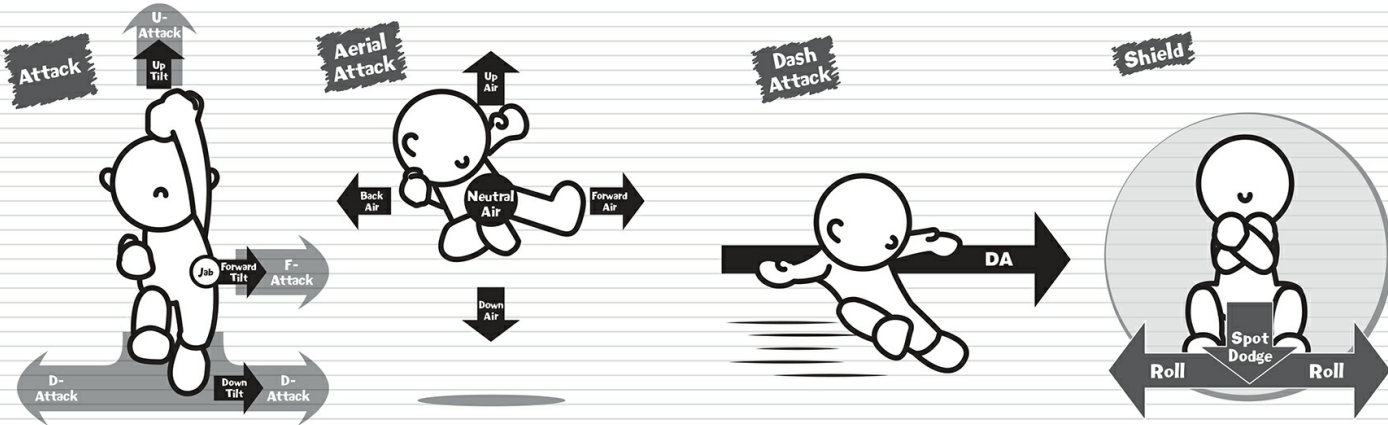
The lag between when an attack or invincible period ends and when it becomes possible to transition to another action.

Start-up Frames

The number of frames between inputting a command and when the attack, invincibility, or other state begins. If the start-up time is 7F, the six frames after inputting the command are the start-up lag. Frames are the smallest unit in the game's animation, and in the case of *Atafami*, 1F lasts about 0.015 seconds (1/60 of a second).

Total Frames

The number of frames between inputting a command and being able to begin another action. The time between when the attack or invincibility begins and the end of the total frames is the ending lag.



Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

No honorific: Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or reason, addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

-san: The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness, this is the fail-safe honorific.

-kun: Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

-chan: An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference to girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

-senpai: An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization. Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

-sensei: An honorific indicating respect for a master of some field of study. Perhaps most commonly known as the form of address for teachers in school.

1

New stories always start in the first town

Today was one of those days when the sun lights up the world with crisp, clear rays and everything feels new.

I was standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, locked in an inner struggle.

“...No, that’s not quite right...”

I had a black Chesterfield coat in my right hand and a black down jacket in my left, trying to decide through trial and error which one to wear.

“This one would be the safe Hinami-style choice...but...” I slipped on the Chesterfield.

I could wear a white sweater underneath with my black slim-fit...what were they? Slacks. If I put the round red scarf thing—I mean, “snood” on top of that and wore my red socks, my easy Hinami-style outfit would be complete. The black-and-white elements tied the whole thing together, but the splash of red at the top and bottom made me seem stylish enough that you’d never guess I was a born-and-bred gamer. I’d worn that very outfit on multiple occasions and personally experienced its effectiveness.

But...

“Three times could be pushing it...”

Yeah. This outfit Hinami chose for me is my trump card for going out in street clothes in winter, and I’ve played it eagerly every time I had a chance this winter break. If this was a Hydro Pump, I’d have just two PP left.

“I don’t want her to think I have only one outfit...”

That wasn’t fun to imagine. I’d seen Kikuchi-san twice over break so far, and both times, I’d thrown down that trump card without hesitating. I might be able

to get away with wearing the same clothes twice, but I bet even Kikuchi-san would have some questions if I wore them a third time.

She might even change her opinion about me. I could see her now, trying not to hurt my feelings.

In my mind, she struggled to find the words, then finally said—

Tomozaki-kun...have you ever washed that?

“Ahhhhhhh!!”

I leaped away from the mirror, stung by her imaginary voice. This time, it was just an emotional wound, but if Kikuchi-san said that to me in real life, I’d instantaneously turn into a blade of grass or something. Considering that I’d managed to advance from a completely unsophisticated nerd to a somewhat sophisticated nerd, it would suck if I turned into a plant and lost all that progress.

“...So maybe this one, then?”

I put on the down jacket in my left hand. I’d bought this without any help from Hinami.

After wearing my “mannequin clothes” enough times, I’d gotten both a logical and an instinctive sense for how they’re different from what I used to wear before. Lately, I’d also been looking at the outfits posted by stylish people on a fashion app that Hinami told me about, then trying to see what they all had in common.

Strangely enough, that’s allowed me to start seeing things that I used to filter out because I thought stylish people lived in another world—and now I kinda have something resembling a personal preference.

I mean, this down jacket is the first item of clothing I ever bought because I liked it. Well, to be more accurate, I actually stole the idea from an outfit I liked on that app. Come to think of it, it’s basically the online version of buying the whole mannequin.

Kikuchi-san had never seen it before. Even if I wore it with the same slacks, the overall look should be different enough that she wouldn’t think I had only

one outfit.

Without giving it much thought, I put the down jacket on over the white sweater I'd worn with the Chesterfield coat.

"...Nice!"

The white sleeves were sticking out from the sleeves of the jacket, which were surprisingly short given its bulky width. I'd figured that with the pants, I'd be all black, but the white at my wrists made for a nice contrast that seemed fairly intentional. Since the jacket's sleeves were so short, you'd be able to see the sweater from behind, too.

"Aha!"

Suddenly, inspiration struck, and I pulled off the red socks I'd had on to match the snood and replaced them with a white pair.

I checked myself in the mirror again.

"...Oooh!"

The reflection staring back at me had on a black down jacket, a white sweater, black slacks, and white socks, which ended up giving me a black-and-white stripe vibe. It would probably sound better if I knew a more style-savvy word than *stripes*, but I don't—point is, I looked like one of those guys on the app.

"It works!!" I shouted, spinning around.

I was excited about this kinda-almost-stylish version of myself in the mirror. If my mind wasn't playing tricks on me, I might have just discovered a new outfit.

Then I realized something. I'd always been either cribbing off the mannequin or basing off the ones that Hinami had designed for me—which would make this my very first original outfit, right?

"Yoooooooooooo!"

I was getting all wound up now as I struck various poses in the outfit I'd created for myself. I was, again, taking inspiration from the app, since the models didn't usually take their pictures just standing there like a statue. I thought I looked pretty good, which got me even more excited.

“I did it!!”

“Shut up!!”

Suddenly, the door banged open.

I froze in my model stance, face-to-face with my little sister, who was very annoyed.

“...What are you doing?”

“Um...”

She looked extremely dubious—scornful, even. I looked back at her, my weight still on my right foot and my right hand resting on my right shoulder. Uh.

Very gradually, I unfolded myself and straightened my body. Slowly, ever so slowly. Maybe she wouldn't notice anything had happened.

Once I was standing upright again, I took a breath and said solemnly, “Sorry for being so loud.”

“I saw you, y’know.”

“Yeah.”

The attempted cover-up was a bust, and my sister was having none of it.

“...You’re such a weirdo.”

With that, she shut the door in my face.

“H-hey, wait...!”

But she didn't hear me, and I was left alone in my room. She was a year younger than me, but her words hit like a punch to the face.

“Oof.”

I was dying of embarrassment—but at the same time, the nuance of the word felt slightly different from when she'd called me a weirdo in the past. The phrase *when she'd called me a weirdo in the past* is very sad, but anyway, the point is that I noticed a difference.

I used to feel powerless when she said that, or even a sense of failure, like I was lower than her—I still did, a little—but it wasn't as strong as before.

I checked myself again in the mirror.

“...Hmm.”

Yeah, a few months ago, I couldn't have even imagined myself looking like this.

My hair, which I'd styled this morning, was decently neat.

The smile I'd worked so hard to master was fairly natural.

My newly invented outfit was pretty stylish.

All that gave me—the character Fumiya Tomozaki, who's living this life—a kind of confidence in my ability to raise my stats.

And best of all—I was on my way to meet someone I wanted to see in a place I wanted to go.

I was familiar with this feeling; nanashi would never think he was a weak player just because he lost one game.

The results of the work I'd put in bit by bit was showing on both the inside and the outside. That was my winrate in life, and getting caught in an embarrassing moment by my sister didn't make me a loser.

And now I could see it myself.

So I stepped confidently in front of the mirror one more time.

I struck a pose. The door banged open again.

“You're doing it again? Weirdo.”

The door slammed shut, and for the second time in several minutes, I was plunged into shame. Okay, this was different. Two times in a row was rough. Seriously, though, what's with her? *At least knock.* I dived onto my bed.

“Gahhhhhhhh!!”

Even for me, being called a weirdo twice in five minutes sent my confidence right into the red. I buried my face in my pillow, hoping to purge some of the embarrassment by screaming it out. It was hopeless. I'm an embarrassment to society.

At a few minutes to ten in the morning, I was standing in front of the Bean Tree sculpture at Omiya Station.

In my new outfit, I awaited *her* arrival.

Normally, Omiya Station is packed with all kinds of people, from students and drunks to talent scouts and girls in crazy outfits. It has a kind of messy feeling. But today, everyone walking through the station seemed to share the same feeling—probably because today was New Year’s Day.

Everyone had put down the baggage of the previous year and was getting ready to take in fresh experiences and emotions. We were all drawing a line between past and present and putting an end to certain intangible things in our lives. There was something ritualistic about it. Not exactly the most logical thing in the world, but I like the way this day of the year feels.

It’s a chance to end some things neatly, to free up a little bit of your limited capacity so you have room for something special and new. Like when your inventory is full and you find mini medals— Okay, sorry, I know this is getting old, but comparing this stuff to games is just a habit of mine by now.

I smiled wryly at myself, and then I noticed the person I’d been waiting for was walking toward the ticket gate.

“Tomozaki-kun.”

Kikuchi-san walked toward me from the station’s east exit, wearing a green coat. It was long and had a fancy-looking, slightly furry texture that suited her perfectly. I’m fairly sure the fluffy sky-blue scarf she had on was a blend of wool and angel feathers.

“Morning, Kikuchi-san.”

“Good morning.”

After our greeting, which hadn’t changed one bit from before, she stepped alongside me. I loved how easy and natural that movement was. She wasn’t unsure anymore whether she was in the right place.

“Should we get going?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

We set off, walking very close to each other—which was a huge change from before.

It all started at the school festival; the play we put on as a class was the catalyst for me and Kikuchi-san to start dating.

As individuals, we were basically the same people, but our relationship had changed drastically. I was her first boyfriend, and she was my first girlfriend.

We walked down the stairs outside the east exit and cut in front of the bronze statue of Toto-chan the squirrel. A little boy was leaning over the banister next to the statue, battering Toto-chan with his hand warmer like it was a beanbag. He stared curiously at us. I can’t see Kikuchi-san’s holy aura anymore, but I bet for an innocent child, it’s clear as could be. Kikuchi-san must have felt him looking at her, because she looked back and smiled quietly at him. He waved at us happily.

“...He’s so cute,” she said, shifting her gentle gaze from him to me. She seemed to be enjoying the moment.

“Yeah.”

You’re the cute one, I thought, but even the words were so corny that I told myself not to say them. Man, her priceless smile and those warm feelings are good omens for the year. They’ve gotta be right up there with seeing the sunrise on January 1. This really is a happy New Year. No complaints.

Kikuchi-san waved daintily at the little boy, then continued past the front of the station with me. Hikawa Shrine, where we were headed, was actually closer to Kita-Omiya Station, but the route was simpler from Omiya. But really, I thought walking through the Omiya neighborhood together like this would give a different feel to a familiar place, so I chose that station as our meeting spot.

Good choice, I think.

Somehow, the mood was lively and calm all at once. The time drifted by pleasantly, with no positive or negative expectations. It reminded me of when we went to see the fireworks. We were just walking along together, our hearts full of warmth.

“Um...” We reached a corner, and Kikuchi-san seemed unsure where to go next.

“It’s this way.” I pointed and kept walking calmly ahead. She smiled, reassured, and strolled alongside me like she was putting herself in my hands. She was dressed for the weather, and her breath as she spoke was a misty white.

“Think all these people are going to the shrine for their New Year’s visit?”

“Probably,” she said, giggling a little.

“Ha-ha, yeah.”

The crowd swelled more as we neared Hikawa Shrine. The flow of people naturally pushed us closer together, but I didn’t totally freak out. The cold January air cooled my very slightly flushed cheeks.

The long road was paved with cement blocks. We passed rows of beauty salons and vintage shops until we came to the end of Ichinomiya Road and took the crosswalk. Then we passed under the shrine gate, looking at the big rocks on either side. We were now on the road leading to the main building at Hikawa Shrine, which was arrow straight and probably a few hundred meters long, with three paths running parallel between rows of trees. When you think about it, this lengthy, wide triple road that goes right through a residential neighborhood is fairly strange. I bet you wouldn’t see it anywhere else.

The crowd was even thicker now that we were near the shrine, and Kikuchi-san and I were so close that our shoulders kept bumping. Suddenly, out of sight, my fingers brushed hers.

But it was fine. I mean, this was naturally what should happen between us... right? Yeah, no.

“...Oh!”

“Uh, s-sorry! Ah-ha-ha!”

Overreacting to Kikuchi-san’s very quiet gasp of surprise, I withdrew my hand. Strange. We’d full-on held hands during the school festival, but I guess now that we were back to everyday life, we weren’t up to it.

We kept heading down the tree-lined path, passed under another shrine gate, and found ourselves in an open plaza paved with stones and gravel.

Hikawa Shrine is one of the biggest shrines in Saitama. I've heard that more than two million people come here every year for their first shrine visit of the year.

There are a lot of places called Hikawa Shrine in Tokyo, but this one in Omiya is the head shrine of them all. I guess that means in terms of the Shinto religion, Omiya is the capital of Japan.

The plaza was surrounded by trees. A lively crowd jostled inside it, as if they were trying to fill the expansive, flat gray ground with their shoes. Boredom alternated with the sense of breaking from routine; the crowd moved at a snail's pace, restless.

"Wow..."

Kikuchi-san peered around her like she wasn't used to any of this.

"You don't come to places like this much?"

She shook her head. "I always visit with my family, so..."

"Huh?"

I didn't get what she meant. She looked up at me and smiled calmly. "Oh, I just meant that when you come for a different reason, everything looks different."

"Oh..."

Her comment could have been embarrassing depending on how I interpreted it, but I did sort of understand what she meant.

"Same. Feels like I'm actually seeing everything now."

Kikuchi-san's eyes sparkled like a child's. "I know just what you mean!"

She nodded enthusiastically, which was good to see.

"Instead of tagging along with someone else, I'm going where I wanna go to."

“Exactly!” She smiled innocently, and her voice rose energetically. “It makes sense, since we chose the place and the person we’re going there with ourselves,” she said, casually as could be. I wasn’t ready for that.

“Oh...uh, yeah. R-right.”

When I shied away a little, she tilted her head in confusion.

“What’s the matter?”

“Um, uh, it’s just...”

“Yes?”

I’m not sure how to put this, but ever since we started dating, Kikuchi-san had started saying what she was thinking more directly, which made me more comfortable with her—but sometimes, I got thrown off because she would mention things without seeming to realize the implications.

“The person you’re with...”

“Hmm? ...Oh.” If her cheeks were apples, they would be ripening very quickly, and since I was standing so close, of course it spread to me. That kind of statement is a OHKO if you’re not careful.

“Uh, yeah, so...yeah.”

“Oh, um, yes...”

Once again, we’d drawn close and then stepped back, shy even though we were comfortable together.

“Oh, uh, look! People are lining up!”

“Oh, y-yes!”

Still, I liked our time together—even the shifting sense of distance.

*

“We’re next.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kikuchi-san and I fidgeted nervously, the shrine building looming over us.

The couple ahead of us swung the hanging rope to ring the bell, then brought

their hands together in prayer and stood silently for a moment before giving each other a slightly embarrassed look and walking off to the right. They were joking around happily about what they'd wished for.

Not long ago, I'd probably have been watching them with a feeling even I couldn't define, somewhere between hatred and jealousy. But not this time.

Of course, being there with Kikuchi-san was part of the reason—but really, I think my view of dating itself had changed.

I even thought that couple was kinda cute. Amazing how people can change.

"Here we go!" I was a little silly about it as I took a step forward. I think I wanted us to have fun, or maybe I just wanted to shake off my slightly sentimental mood. Kikuchi-san smiled at me.

She stepped forward, too, and the two of us grabbed the thick rope hanging down and clanged the bell. The sound melted into the blue circle of sky above the trees, a little different to my ears than when other people had rung it.

We let go of the rope, then each brought our hands together and closed our eyes.

But what to wish for?

Every time I come to a place like this, I remember that I don't like praying for things.

I mean, I've always tried to get what I wanted through my own effort—usually something related to *Atafami*. I completely ignored the things that didn't matter to me, which, until I met Hinami, included "real life," and did what I made up my mind to do. That's the type of person I was.

In my opinion, effort was the quickest way to get what I wanted, and there was no reason to force myself to do stuff I didn't want to do. Even now that I'm playing the game of life and deepening my relationships with people, my fundamental way of thinking hasn't changed.

I'm my own person. When it comes to actualizing my choices, even choices about depending on other people, effort is hands down the best strategy.

In which case, when it came to what to pray for—I figured I'd better go with

my old standard.

I prayed, made my wish, and opened my eyes. I shifted my gaze from the imposing shrine to Kikuchi-san at my left. Her eyes were still closed and her lips pressed together. The even line of her nose and chin were as pretty as a doll's, and the smooth texture of her white skin brought to mind fresh snow.

“...”

I couldn't help staring at her.

Her presence was so still, I could get lost in it. Obviously, she was quiet because she wasn't saying anything, but I felt like the air around her and even time itself had stopped moving. The cold rays of the sun slanted onto her, deepening the black of her long eyelashes.

Her eyes stayed closed for a long time. She must have been wishing for something big. Her expression was so earnest and beautiful.

Suddenly, her eyes opened. Startled, I quickly turned away, then looked back. She looked at me, too, and when our eyes met, we both smiled a little shyly. Without saying anything, we nodded at each other.

“Um, should we go?”

“Y-yes.”

That shyness was still there, weird, and hard to explain as we slipped off to the side of the shrine. I'd definitely been missing this vibe.

“You were praying for a long time.”

“Tee-hee, I guess I was.”

Side by side, we started to stroll around the grounds of the shrine.

To the right and left were stalls selling amulets, souvenirs, and little bamboo rakes covered in decorations. The path running through the center was packed with people. We chatted as we walked.

“You finished before me, right? What did you wish for?”

“Um...what did *you* wish for?” I asked, instead of answering her. Hmm, am I misusing my newfound communication skills?

“Um...,” she said, looking away awkwardly. “It’s a secret.” She was blushing.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tee-hee. I told you—it’s a secret.”

“Now I’m curious.”

We went on talking contentedly about nothing much.

We were just the same as the couple in front of us—and suddenly, I remembered. *Oh right, I’m dating Kikuchi-san.*

*

We were having a nice, relaxed time when I remembered something else. This sort of peaceful time never lasted long in the record-breakingly successful game of life as engineered by Hinami-san.

Right. My assignment.

I stood next to Kikuchi-san, thinking back a few days, back to what Hinami-san had told me.

It was the end of December, and we were in an Italian place in Kitayono. Hinami and I sat facing each other.

We’d come to the same place after I told off Erika Konno. Hinami is crazy for the salad here. I’ve gotta admit, it really is good.

“Anyway, about your winter-break exercises...”

“You’re not going to slip that by me just being casual about it. What exercises?”

Hinami sighed softly. Since I started this game, she’s never once given me an easy assignment. She always aims for the very limit of what I’m capable of. It’s why I’ve been able to raise my level, but I knew this wasn’t going to be some simple little holiday training.

“Now, now, if you’re going to talk like that, maybe I should make it as hard as usual.”

“What?”

“I just can’t decide,” she said with a smile. She was baiting me, and I tried to ignore her because she was being so annoying, but I was too curious.

“...Can’t decide what?”

“Oh, you want to know?”

“N-not especially.”

I tried to play it off, but she just said, “Is that so?” and smiled. Then she picked up her fork, elegantly stabbed several pieces of salad, and eagerly shoved them in her mouth. She was definitely doing this on purpose. Which of course made me more curious.

“Ahhh, this is so good.”

“...Yeah.”

Grinning, she delicately sipped her black tea. She had a certain childishness when she ate that wasn’t visible in Hinami the final boss. I couldn’t take my eyes off her as we talked.

“The veggies are fresh, of course, but I think the combination of flavors and the dressing are what truly make it delicious.”

“O-oh.”

“You haven’t eaten much. If you don’t want it, I can help you out,” she said, extending her fork in my direction.

“No thanks...I’m gonna eat.”

My brain wasn’t working right after the two-hit combo of Hinami’s intriguing words and her strangely attractive way of enjoying her food, but I knew enough to defend my salad. I mean, it really was good stuff.

“...So what were you starting to say?”

“You want to know?” She gave me a smug smile. God, what a jerk.

“Not especially...”

“Oh?”

I’m virtually incapable of just doing what I’m told, so my resistance was

instinctive. So she ignored me and went on eating her salad. Damn her.

“...You said something about ‘as hard as usual,’ didn’t you? So that means this one is going to be easier?”

“I knew you were curious.”

“Argh...”

That was all I could get out, and she was satisfied. *Ready to stop tormenting me yet?*

“I was just going to mention that you could take it easy around the New Year holiday.”

“Huh?”

I hadn’t expected that. She’s obsessed with efficiency and hates wasting a single second. I figured she’d say something like *The New Year is just another day a bunch of idiots decided to make special*. So her proposal surprised me.

“You sure?”

She smiled kindly and nodded. “Well, I can’t let you do absolutely nothing. I just meant that you can take a few breaks here and there.”

“I c-can?”

“Yes,” she said, displaying another kindly smile. “After all, you were able to achieve your mid-term goal with time to spare.”

The compliment was my reward for my hard work.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

A wave of happiness washed over me.

The objective she’d given me was to have a girlfriend by the time I started my third year.

When I’d met her in June, that seemed like a completely impossible task, but by the end of the second semester, I’d told Kikuchi-san I liked her, and we started dating. I’d reached my goal more than three months early.

Within six months of working at the game of life, I’d managed to get my first

girlfriend, which seemed like a major checkpoint on the path to victory.

I was happy simply to be dating the person I liked, but I was also feeling that primal excitement at accomplishing something I really wanted to achieve.

Whatever game you're playing, that's always one of the best moments.

"I do...have a girlfriend now," I said with some emotion.

"You do," Hinami said calmly and nodded.

When she looked at me, her expression was scornful.

"Why are you getting all worked up? Ugh."

"Sh-shut up! I can't help it!"

As soon as I felt my nostrils flaring in excitement, I half expected her to say something like that, but her reaction was mean. I had to push back at least a little.

"Anyway, you were saying I get an easy assignment for winter break?!" I asked, changing the subject.

Giving me a sudden smile, she finished off her salad and looked down regretfully at the plate.

"Right. I mean, you chose her yourself, so you'll be moving things along without me telling you, right?"

"...Move things along how?" I echoed.

"You know, hold hands, kiss, things like that," she said casually.

"Hold hands and kiss?!"

"Keep your voice down."

"But you said...holding hands? And kiss!"

"Stop repeating yourself." She scowled at me for being stupid, and... Yeah, I was talking like Takei now.

I was sounding as stupid as Takei now, and she glanced down and paused for a moment like she was resetting the mood before looking up at me again.

"But that part's not so important anyway."

“...I-it’s not?”

She raised one finger and pointed at me. “What is your big goal?”

“Um,” I said. “To reach the same status as you?”

If my calculations were correct, she was probably about to say *Hexactly*. She pointed at me.

“Hexactly.”

“Called it,” I said, before I could stop myself.

“Called what?” She tilted her head.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to avoid the topic even as I recognized my mistake.

“Hmph. Then would you mind not interrupting me?”

“Oh, u-uh, sorry.”

Somehow, even though I had predicted what she would say, she still had control of the conversation. Very strange.

Meanwhile, she continued as if nothing had happened.

“By reaching my status, I mean when it comes to our school. You can hold hands with Kikuchi-san or kiss her or do whatever comes after, but that’s all part of your own little couple world. It has nothing to do with becoming a normie in the world of school.”

“Oh...that makes sense.”

I was slightly unnerved by the casual way she mentioned, “whatever comes after,” but she did have a point. Even if people talk about me because of our relationship, developing that relationship wouldn’t make me popular at school. If I told my guy friends what was happening, all they’d do was say that I had it going on or poke me in the ribs.

“Of course, some people consider themselves normies as long as they’ve got a happy relationship, and I don’t intend to contradict them. But *your* goal is to rival me.”

“Yeah, you definitely don’t get your status from dating.”

When I thought about it, I'd never heard anyone say she had a boyfriend, at least since second year started, yet she still had an iron grip on her place at the top of the heap. You don't normally see someone with that status without a significant other.

"You're aiming for the same position. So you may have found a comfortable spot with your girlfriend, but you can't just sit there. You need to keep breaking new ground."

"Yeah, I get what you're saying," I said cooperatively.

"Good," she said, smiling confidently. "Your big goal is especially useful as a guidepost at times like this when it's hard to know how to proceed. Do you see now why it was so important to decide those at the beginning?"

"...Yeah."

I had a girlfriend, which at first glance looked like the finish line. I wanted to be a normie, so I got a girlfriend—now what? If I didn't have a bigger goal in mind, I probably wouldn't know what to do next.

But simply having that overarching idea sharpened my thoughts. Most games have clear objectives and standards for winning and losing, so you don't waste too much time wandering around, but the level of freedom in this game is too high.

"That's why I'm going to tell you what your next mid-term goal is."

"Th-that sounds important..."

A goal to replace the goal of getting a girlfriend. I'd come to that major fork in the road, and now I was heading for the next one. Guess you could call it part two of the game of life.

"It is. This one's slightly difficult, but I'd like you to achieve it by summer."

As she spoke, she placed a small, closed notebook on the table.

Then she slowly announced the big reveal.

"Your next mid-term goal—is to become the central figure in a group of at least four people."

“...The central figure?”

I kind of understood what that meant, and I kind of didn't. I couldn't quite picture what I'd need to do or how hard it would be.

“Um, so what does that mean?”

“Well. Basically...” Hinami opened the notebook and took out a black ballpoint pen. Our empty salad plates had been cleared away, leaving only my iced tea and Hinami's lemon tea. “So there are several groups in our class, right?”

“Right...”

She tapped the first page of the notebook with her pen. “Do you know which groups there are?”

“Well...there's Nakamura's, then yours. And Konno's *gyaru* group...”

“Correct.” She wrote down the groups I'd named in the notebook. “That's what I mean by the central figure.”

“What?”

That's what “what” meant?

“Need me to explain?” she asked smugly, circling the name of each group.

Nakamura Group. Hinami Group. Konno Group.

“Ohhh...”

Gotcha.

“You mean I have to make my own group, like Nakamura and you and Konno.”

Again, I had a feeling I knew what she was about to say.

“Hexactly.”

“Called it.”

“Called what?”

I was starting to have an intuitive sense for when she'd bring it out.
“Nothing.”

This time, I was the smug one, but I pulled myself together and took another look at the names in the notebook. Hinami was grumpy with me now.

Nakamura Group. Hinami Group. Konno Group.

Which meant...

“...I gotta make the Tomozaki Group, right?”

I sensed it again.

“He— That’s correct.”

“Huh?”

Where’d her *hexactly* go? I felt like I heard her start to say it, but...

She threw me a victorious look.

“Weird...,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“...Nothing.”

“If it’s nothing, could you please stop interrupting me?” She sighed reproachfully.

“S-sorry.”

She was right that I’d been cutting her off with my strange reactions all day. I should cut that out.

Hinami sharpened her gaze, apparently refocusing herself.

“You can do it in class or in some other group. Either way, you need to create a clique that you can confidently call the Tomozaki Group. That’s your focus from now on.”

It sounded simple, and I had a clear image of the destination I was aiming for. But with my current strength, getting there would be difficult, and I still didn’t have a concrete idea of what I should do. Just like last time.

I realized something. “Oh, I guess that does make sense.”

“...What does?” she asked, checking her messages on her phone, which had just buzzed.

“I was just thinking you’re right that it’s not very connected to what Kikuchi-san and I do.”

Hinami raised her eyebrows, and the corners of her mouth rose, too.

“So you get it. Anyway, the point is that being a normie is about more than romance.”

“Huh...”

I recalled the assignments she’d given me.

“Now that I think about it, you even made developing friendships with guys one of my goals.”

Her assignments were like that from the start. I don’t know if she’d always been planning for this checkpoint, but at that stage, she’d already decided on the direction I needed to aim for.

“That’s right. And now you’ve met your romantic goals, to some extent. That’s why moving forward, I intend to make your assignments focus mainly on gaining skills and taking actions that will position you as the central figure in a wider network of people.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“All right, then, let’s talk about your next small goal. Your first assignment in working toward your real red-letter event...”

I gulped, waiting for her to go on.

“Hold hands with Fuka-chan by your third date.”

“Hey, you said you’d lay off the romantic stuff!” I shot back, confused.

Hinami just looked at me with a teasingly sadistic smile.

*

With that grand lead-in, she threw me an assignment that was aimed straight at my love life. When I asked her about it, she said she wasn’t trying to lie or scare me with that preamble—it was just that she had no other choice. We weren’t going to school over winter break, so I couldn’t do much else. She also said she definitely wasn’t making my life difficult with an anxiety-inducing

assignment for her own amusement, which I'd like to believe is at least half-true.

By the way, I'd already met with Kikuchi-san once when she had me read the story with the changed ending, and we hung out alone together another time after that, which made this the third time, aka the deadline for holding hands. I had some qualms about doing this as an assignment, but if you asked me if that meant I didn't want to hold her hand, I could tell you no in an instant. I mean, I wanted her to let me hold her hand, so I decided to earnestly give it my all.

Following the flow of people, I stole a glance at Kikuchi-san. I could probably grab her hand casually to make sure we didn't get separated in the crowd—but of course, I didn't have those skills. On the other hand, we already drew back when our fingers brushed that one time, which made things even harder. But I was determined not to fail.

Oblivious to my nervousness, Kikuchi-san smiled quietly as she observed the hustle and bustle at the stalls.

Just then—

“Hey, Tomozaki!!”

The cheerful female voice was coming from somewhere behind us to the right. That voice was very familiar... In fact, I was almost certain who it was.

I turned around and saw a couple.

My eyes met theirs.

“Um, hey.”

I wasn't sure what to say. This guy was as grumpy and domineering as ever.

“...Well, well, it's Farm Boy. Whaddaya doin' here?”

“Uh...visiting the shrine.”

“I can see that.”

“What a coincidence! So you decided to come here, too!”

Yes, that's right; we'd run into Izumi and Nakamura.

Izumi was wearing a furry white coat with a voluminous scarf. The fabric was

kind of glossy and vaguely glamorous. Despite the cold weather, her legs were bare all the way up to the thigh. I figured she had to be wearing some sort of stockings, but I didn't know where I could safely look.

Nakamura was standing next to her in a camouflage North Face down jacket and a pair of black pants with huge rips in the knees. It was the kind of power-plus-power-equals-super-power outfit that would make me look like an elementary school kid but somehow made him look trendy and hot. His face was scary as usual. But when the two of them stood next to each other, they were an attractive pair. Or maybe I should say a power couple.

Given that this was the biggest shrine in the area, it wasn't surprising that we bumped into some kids from our class, but did it have to be these two? Kikuchi-san poked her face out from behind me and looked back and forth between the two of them.

"H-hello."

I was surprised; I'm sure it took quite a bit of courage for her to greet them. *Nice job, Kikuchi-san—that wasn't easy!* I felt like giving her a gold star.

"Hi, Fuka-chan!"

"Sup."

Kikuchi-san smiled slightly at their responses. Izumi smiled back. Aww, this is nice.

"So you guys *are* dating!!" Izumi said, her eyes glowing with excitement and her whole face cheerful, bright, and childlike. She really does love to talk about relationships. I glanced over at Kikuchi-san, who was looking at me with obvious embarrassment. I could practically see sweat flying from her head like Bonobono the sea otter.

I wasn't sure what to say, but I decided I had nothing to feel weak-kneed about.

"Yeah, we are," I said boldly.

"I knew it! You're so lucky!"

Wait, what does that mean? What's she jealous of? Does she just say

whatever seems to fit the mood?

“Why are you jealous?” I asked, smiling wryly. “Aren’t you dating Nakamura?”

“Um, yes, but...!”

“But what?”

“I hardly even feel like we’re dating anymore. It’s like I’m used to it or something!”

She turned to Nakamura, who nodded and mumbled, “Yeah.”

“What the heck?”

I smiled again. They hadn’t even been together that long, but they were already acting like some couple who’d been married for fifty years. Was that love? Or were they at the age where they wanted to say stuff like that?

“Oh, by the way! Have you gotten your fortunes yet?” Izumi asked suddenly.

“No, not yet.”

“Then let’s go get them together! We were just on our way over there.”

This was an unexpected invitation. Would that make this a double date? *Fine by me, but how does Kikuchi-san feel about it?* I looked over at her, and our eyes met like two master fencers sussing out each other’s next move. En garde! What is happening.

“Wait, won’t it be bad luck to go with Farm Boy?”

And now Nakamura was messing with me. Hmm. Typical. There’s no reason for him to do this, but he’s doing it anyway. Better think of a comeback quick. I couldn’t let Kikuchi-san see me go down without a fight.

“No way, it’ll be good luck.”

I ended up just saying the opposite, but I think it was better than nothing. I should probably brainstorm responses to stuff like this beforehand.

“Ha-ha, you wish,” Nakamura said, casually brushing me off.

“I’m serious! I challenge you to a battle of luck.”

“Bring it on!”

A fortune competition was pretty dumb, but Nakamura hates to lose and instantly latched on to it. He's so predictable. Honestly, I could possibly fight off all his attempts to mess with me with this same strategy. He wrapped his arm around my neck and steered me toward the window selling fortunes.

"Ah-ha-ha. Guys are such kids, aren't they?"

"Tee-hee, I know!"

Izumi and Kikuchi-san walked along side by side, talking quietly. That's good; I'm glad they're making friends.

*

"I win. You're no match for me."

"Come on. I clearly won."

Nakamura and I were bickering like preschoolers.

The reason we were still both insisting we'd won even after picking our fortunes was simple.

I got "*Luck is yours*," and he got "*You're in luck*." What the heck? Sometimes, confusing shit like this happens when you choose a New Year's fortune.

"It doesn't even matter!"

"Tee-hee, it really doesn't."

Izumi and Kikuchi-san exchanged exasperated smiles as they watched us. They seemed to be getting along well. Occasionally, Izumi acts older than her age, and I actually feel like she and Nakamura aren't such a bad match. But I was in a battle now, and I really didn't want to lose. It was kind of like Nakamura and I were two kids and they were our parents.

I shoved the slip of paper my fortune was written on under Nakamura's nose.

"Look, 'luck' comes first on mine. I win, see?"

"The hell are you on? 'Luck is yours'? I've never even heard of that fortune before, so that means I win. Bam!"

"And nobody's ever seen a 'You're in luck.'"

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing...”

I was starting to crack under the fear, but I’d managed to hold my own. Impressive, huh?

“Oh, geez, you guys!! It’s a tie, okay?!”

Thanks to our all-powerful referee Izumi and her emotion-based decision, my victory was postponed until our next encounter.

“A tie with Farm Boy? Dammit, come on.”

“My feelings exactly. Next time, I’ll kick your ass so bad, you won’t be able to argue.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing...”

“Y-you’re going to do this again...?”

The battle over for now, the four of us walked farther into the shrine grounds.

We were around the center of the Hikawa Shrine complex.

Underneath a broad roof was a large stone basin where some apparently sacred water bubbled up. We stood side by side scooping up the water with a ladle and taking turns drinking it. That naturally cool water seemed cooler than the mineral water I always grab out of the fridge, although I couldn’t say for sure if it really was.

For some reason, Nakamura, who usually rebelled against everything, performed this Japanese custom quite solemnly. It was kind of heartwarming. I bet it really stirred up Izumi’s maternal instincts, too.

“Man, that’s cold! It’s making my teeth hurt!”

“You need to brush more.”

“What?! I do brush them! It’s not a cavity—they’re just sensitive!”

Kikuchi-san and I exchanged glances and smiled furtively at this little lovers’ quarrel. We didn’t get to see them acting like a couple very often at school, so it

was entertaining.

As I set the ladle back in its place, I realized something. It was all well and good that Izumi and Kikuchi-san were becoming friends while Nakamura and me had our stupid arguments, but—

—as long as the four of us were together, wasn't holding Kikuchi-san's hand going to be even harder?

I mean, if I suddenly took her hand in front of everyone, it would be like PDA, and also, holding hands for the first time around other people felt meaningless. By the way, I googled *holding hands first time* the other day, and according to the Internet, the key is to just do it, like it's completely natural. Needless to say, that would be impossible in front of Nakamura and Izumi.

As I racked my brain over this impossible problem, the four of us continued walking toward the back of the grounds. This place sure is big.

Just then, Izumi pointed to one of the stalls.

"Look, Shuji! Isn't that cute?!"

She grabbed his arm as she gestured to a *maneki-neko* cat keychain.

"What is?"

"This one!"

They looked at the display and continued their conversation, although I couldn't make it out.

But just now, what she did? Linking arms with him for a second like it was totally normal? It didn't feel weird at all—more like the natural thing for a couple to do. Here I was struggling over it, and she'd done it so casually. Natural normie.

In which case...I guess my only option was to follow her lead. I'd just gotten an up close lesson in how to do it, and you've gotta strike while the iron's hot, as they say.

I took a deep breath and glanced at Kikuchi-san's white fingers. She was smiling, watching the happy couple with her beautiful straight-as-an-arrow gaze. Her sleeves were pulled partially over her hands—maybe they were cold?

—and the glimpse of her pale-peach nails gave off an attractive aura of delicacy blended with sanctity.

“Buy me one, Shuji!”

“Buy one yourself!”

“These only mean anything if it’s a present. I’ll buy you one, too.”

“Oh, fine, fine.”

He sure gave in quick, I thought, smiling to myself. Kikuchi-san giggled, too, and then maybe because she noticed my smile, she turned and locked eyes with me. It felt good, the way we understood each other without saying anything. *Uh, is this my chance?*

I was super nervous, but action was my only choice. The mood felt right, and Izumi and Nakamura were distracted. The planets were in alignment. When you know your enemy is about to counter, a gamer unleashes maximum firepower.

I got ready to say the line I’d come up with for a crowded situation (I’d mentally rehearsed a bunch of potential scenarios), summoned my resolve, and reached out.

“Kikuchi-san...oh...”

My strategy had been to say, *Watch out*, grab her hand, and then keep holding it, but...

...I had to reach my hand out while saying the line, so I hadn’t looked around first. And the instant I was about to warn her, I realized something.

Not a single person was walking toward her.

“...”

I abruptly stopped after saying her name. I could have recovered easily enough, since all I did was start talking to her.

But my hand did not do me the favor of stopping.

“...Uh...”

After all my effort to get it moving, my hand continued along its original trajectory and followed the original plan.

My fingers twined around her cold, white fingers.

But unlike my original strategy, the only words that came out of my mouth were “Kikuchi-san.”

The meaning of this was simple.

I abruptly said Kikuchi-san’s name, then grabbed her hand.

Predictably, this confused her. Although we’d held hands when we talked after the class play, the moment called for it back then. But this time, we were out in the open and right in front of Namakura and Izumi. We had other options. I was the one who’d reached for her hand, and I was super shocked myself. It had to be so much worse for her. And in fact, despite what was happening, she’d frozen stock-still. But if I let go of her hand now, I felt like it would come off as skeezy, so I stubbornly held on.

We were surrounded by people, but no one was paying attention to us. A few moments passed by, just for us.

We spent those hidden moments in this oddly private space.

“...Ah!”

“Uh, um...sh-should we buy one of those, too?”

Kikuchi-san had made only the tiniest of sounds, but like an overblown balloon popping, I let go of her hand and hurried toward the stall where Nakamura and Izumi were browsing.

“Oh, um, y-yes, let’s!”

“O-okay, let’s!”

All the air rushed out of my lungs as we tried to ignore what just happened. We walked up behind them, scanning the goods on display.

“Hey! Are you guys gonna buy some of these, too?”

Izumi held up one of the miniature cat keychains between her fingers.

“...Um...”

I thought for a second. That particular cat key chain was what Nakamura and Izumi had picked out as a matching couple item. Even if we were going to buy

something here, choosing the same thing as them felt a little insensitive.

“Oh, no...we were thinking of getting something else.”

“You were? Okay!”

Izumi gave us a smile that conveyed no ulterior motives.

Hmm. I’d abruptly taken Kikuchi-san’s hand, and now we were about to buy matching tchotchkes. I’d hardly had time to process the fact that we just held hands secretly for twenty or thirty seconds, and the next instant, we were buying something together. This rom-com was packing a lot into its timeslot, that’s for sure.

“...D-do you like any of these?”

“Uh, um...”

Kikuchi-san seemed equally surprised by the high drama. I mean, so was I, and I was the one who’d spoken first. But despite it, I decided to play it cool and act all like *This is what dating’s about*. Besides, that’s what Mizusawa would probably do.

I glanced over the items hanging from the rack, wondering if I could afford any of them except the one Izumi had already chosen. And that’s how I realized I didn’t actually know what Kikuchi-san’s taste in this stuff was.

“Which ones do you like?” I asked offhandedly.

“Oh... This is nice,” she answered, picking up one of the amulets with a cute retro-style picture of a cat on it. She went to it like a magnet. “...It’s so cute.”

“Yeah, it is.” *All right, let’s do this.* “Let me see it.”

“Sure.”

Taking it from her, I walked over to the elderly woman running the stall. “I’d like to buy this, please.”

“That will be six hundred yen.”

“All right.”

With that, I swiftly paid with my own money. Kikuchi-san hurriedly pulled her coin purse out of her bag, but I ignored her, finished buying it, and handed the

amulet to her.

“Here you go.”

“Um, but the money...”

When she tried to pay me back, I copied Izumi’s strategy.

“Don’t worry about it. Just buy me one of the same... Uh, I know I’m copying Izumi,” I said shyly.

Kikuchi-san smiled happily, quickly picked another one of the amulets from the rack, and trotted with it over to the cash register. *Um, it’s okay, you can calm down...*

“H-here...!”

For some reason, she was out of breath when she returned, holding the same amulet in a different color.

“...Thanks.”

“S-sure...”

We weren’t used to this kind of conversation.

Um, yeah. Right now, Fumiya Tomozaki is very happy.

*

The four of us were walking toward the gate leading out of the shrine.

“This sure is an unusual combination...”

Looking around our group, I intentionally brought up a new topic.

“Ah-ha-ha, I know! I feel like this is the first time I really talked to Fuka-chan! I didn’t get much of a chance to take part in the play!”

“Yeah, you were doing committee shit the whole time,” said Nakamura.

“Exactly! I hope we can hang out more in the future, Fuka-chan!” Izumi grinned at Kikuchi-san, who smiled back at her.

“Me too, Yuzu-chan.”

“Yay!”

They were getting along great, and it warmed my heart to hear Kikuchi-san calling Izumi “Yuzu-chan.” *You got this!*

“What are you smiling like a girl for?”

“Huh?”

And Nakamura was messing with me again. But I was used to it by now. *Don’t think you can get away scot-free, dude.*

“‘Like a girl’? I’m just smiling.”

“Whatever. I’m asking why.”

A decent comeback, but he underestimated me. I actually had a reason.

“It’s so great to see Izumi and Kikuchi-san getting along.”

“Oh, that,” he said, like that explained everything. “...Kikuchi seems different now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked—although it made me really uncomfortable to hear Kikuchi-san’s name without the *san*.

Nakamura was watching the two girls. “It’s easier to talk to her. Or something.”

“...Uh-huh.”

I couldn’t help breaking into a smile again. Nakamura looked at me.

“C’mon, seriously, what’s with the girly smile.”

“It’s a completely normal smile.”

“What’s the difference?” He guffawed, then looked in front of him again.

Kikuchi-san was talking to Izumi in a sort of gentle cloud.

“Guess that’s what happens when a girl gets a guy,” Nakamura said in a mocking tone before grinning.

“...Nope.” I wasn’t gonna give him this one.

“Huh?”

“It’s not about getting a boyfriend as much as...”

“What? Spit it out.”

I told it to him straight, just as it occurred to me. “She wanted to change, so she changed.”

“...That so?”

He looked down at his phone, and we were silent for a few seconds. Then he turned to me and gave me a smile that asserted his dominance.

“Nice,” he said curtly, but I couldn’t tell if there was emotion in his voice or not.

As usual, he gave no sign that this had affected him in any way. But I didn’t think he meant any harm.

“Yeah,” I said, matching his casual disinterest. “It really is great.”

I smiled at him, trying as hard as I could to display my own power.

*

“I went with getting into my first-choice school.”

“That’s so typical, Shuji!”

“What’s wrong with that?”

The four of us walked under the torii gate, leaving the grounds of Hikawa Shrine. Okay, technically speaking, the grounds also cover the few hundred meters of road outside the gate, but for most of the year, it’s just an ordinary road, so it doesn’t feel like part of the shrine.

“Well, it *is* test season,” I said, nodding.

We were talking about what we’d wished for when we prayed at the shrine. I was joining in, although I was nervous about what I’d say when it was my turn.

“If I’m so typical, what did you wish for, Yuzu?”

“Who? Me?”

“I just said your name; who else would I be talking to?”

“Um, I can’t remember... World peace?”

“Liar.”

Izumi was blushing a little and obviously trying to hide her real wish. I wondered for a second what it might be before realizing that even I could guess this one. They'd been dating for a couple of months now and were in full lovey-dovey mode, plus she'd blushed when Nakamura asked her, which probably meant—

“Leave me alone! What about you, Tomozaki?!”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! I just said your name, so who else would I be talking to?”

“This sounds familiar.”

“Shut up!”

There was too much pressure to answer, and I caved. That kind of core emotional strength is a normie feature.

“Um, I...”

I wasn't sure what to do. Not like I *couldn't* say my wish, but it was totally boring...

“Tell us!”

Izumi turned up the pressure on me, even though she was just getting the spotlight off herself. Very sly.

“Y-you probably wouldn't be interested.”

Nakamura seemed to be getting annoyed at my floundering.

“Who cares; it's not like we expect much in the first place.”

“W-well...”

“The longer you put it off, the harder it'll be to say it.”

“G-guess you're right...”

I'd be forced to say it anyway, so the sooner the better. With all this weird attention on me, it was already getting harder to throw it out there. Kikuchi-san was acting slightly expectant, and I didn't want to let her down.

So I decided to be honest about what I'd wished for at the shrine.

“I...wished that I’d get back as much as I put in.”

Nakamura and Izumi both gave me a confused look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Does that even count as a wish?” she asked.

“Um, well...”

She did have a point. Why did I have to be so practical even when I was praying to the gods? I mean, it was kinda like wishing for results without heavenly intervention. If you want to call that pointless, I can’t argue with you.

But as a gamer, I can’t help thinking that my progress should come from my own effort. I don’t like it when anyone else interferes, whether it’s a god or my next-door neighbor. They might end up improving my results, but I don’t need improvements that come from depending on others.

“Even if my prayers made me successful, it would be meaningless...”

I tried to put it in simple words, but Nakamura just stared at me.

“...Hmph.” He snorted, before suddenly smiling pleasantly. “That does sound like something you’d say.”

“Right?”

He even sounded a little friendly. Like he was starting to understand me slightly as a person. It made me happy to hear those words come out of his mouth.

“Yeah, it’s a very Tomozaki-like wish,” Izumi added.

“I agree. Very much like him.”

“You too, Kikuchi-san...?”

I had mixed feelings about them all ganging up on me now. Was I that transparent?

“So what about you, Fuka-chan?!”

The flow of the conversation shifted toward Kikuchi-san. This was good, since I’d been wondering myself. When we were alone, she’d dodged the question.

“Y-you’re asking me...?”

“Yeah, I’m curious, too. You seem like the type who doesn’t want anything.”

“I do...?”

This was rare, Nakamura and Kikuchi-san having a genuine conversation. I waited to see what would happen. Sorry, but just this once, I was on Nakamura’s side.

“I get you. I’m wondering, too.”

“T-Tomozaki-kun...?!”

Kikuchi-san turned her head toward me, her eyes moist. Oh no, should I get back on her team...?

“Um...”

“What? Tell us!”

“Can’t I say it’s a s-secret?”

“Come on, just tell us!”

“Um, well...”

Izumi’s cheerful but persistent persuasion was gradually breaking down Kikuchi-san’s defenses. And her face was getting steadily redder... Um, what? Redder? Which means...?

I thought back to a couple of minutes earlier. Nakamura had asked Izumi what she wished for, and she’d blushed just like Kikuchi-san. In the end, she hadn’t revealed her wish, but it probably had something to do with romance. Like, *I wish Nakamura and I blah-blah-blah*. At least, that was my guess.

And now...just like Izumi, Kikuchi-san was blushing at the same question. Hmm? Hmmmm?

Oh, just a second now, there’s no way..., my logical mind was saying, but all the same, my instincts were having an undeniable premonition. I glanced at Kikuchi-san. Her face was beet red, and she had the watery eyes of a damsel truly in distress. The instant our eyes met, I looked away. What was going on?

“Fuka-chan...”

Izumi was hanging on Kikuchi-san's shoulder pleadingly, like some kind of honest, friendly cat. I doubt anyone could resist her very long.

"Uh, um..."

"Won't you tell me? Please?"

"Um, well...all right." Kikuchi-san had accepted her fate.

"Ooh! I knew you would!"



“Um, are you sure you’re okay with that...?” I asked her.

She gave me a determined look and nodded. “I th-think you might have already guessed, but...”

“Uh-huh...”

My heart pounded in my chest. S-seriously? If my hunch was right, was it really okay to say here? It would be super embarrassing, but I guess she was ready for that. Really?

“A-actually...”

“What?!”

Izumi was the chorus whipping up excitement. There was no going back. I closed my eyes tight and prepared to hold steady no matter what happened next.

“...I wished that the novel I’m writing right now wins a prize!”

A beat.

My heart deflated, while Izumi and Nakamura latched on with avid interest.

“Ooh, I didn’t know you were so ambitious!”

“Kikuchi’s writing a novel? Well, that’s not a surprise—that play was pretty good.”

“Ah... Ah-ha-ha, I knew it...”

I was the only one anxiously trying to bluff. What was I thinking, “something to do with romance”? I was way off.

Hoping my mortifying mistake wouldn’t be discovered, I pretended to have already guessed the truth, but Kikuchi-san just glanced at me and blushed a brighter red.

“I-it’s so embarrassing,” she whispered.

I knew exactly how she felt. But I didn’t think what she said was embarrassing at all. And I had a good reason for that.

So this was what I said, with an almost unnatural level of confidence:

“Kikuchi-san, that’s not embarrassing at all.”

“I-it’s not?”

“Nope, definitely not.”

Why? Because I was a hundred times more embarrassed than her right now.

*

After the four of us left Hikawa Shrine, we parted ways in pairs. Kikuchi-san and I headed to a café in Omiya.

The double date with Nakamura and Izumi was fairly fun, but wave after wave of drama had left me exhausted. It was a relief to sit together drinking hot cups of tea.

“I didn’t realize you were writing something to submit for the new author awards!”

“Um...actually, yes, I am.”

She looked down shyly at her plate of *omurice*. The gesture was so dignified and moving, I could hardly bear to watch. (Also, Kikuchi-san really likes *omurice*.) “I was thinking...I’d submit it to some competitions.”

“That’s great!”

I tried to react positively without skipping a beat, since she sounded more unsure. I bet she was super nervous to tell me about this, and I wanted to minimize the amount of time she had to spend feeling anxious.

“D-do you really think so?”

“Oh yeah, for sure. It’s a great idea.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Oh, it’s definitely great. Um...yeah, it’s great.”

I felt like I was beating her over the head with the word *great* now, but I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t have a lot of dynamic strength in this area, so coming up with a reason why it was great on the spot was way too hard. Sometimes, my habit of saying what I’m thinking leads to this problem.

“Hmm...it’s great you think so.”

Nevertheless, Kikuchi-san seemed to take my words seriously, even kind of echo them. We understood each other so well. If I got too used to this, my vocabulary might take a dive. But when I was with Kikuchi-san, it was fine.

“I’m still just trying to see what I can do, so I don’t know how it will turn out... but I’ll do the best I can.”

“Yeah, go for it!”

“I will,” she said, glancing down. “It’s like I...”

“What?”

She touched the small gold necklace around her neck lightly. “Thanks to you, I’ve been able to try out lots of new things... It makes me so happy.”

“Really...?” I said, nodding and looking her in the eye. “But that’s all thanks to your own effort.”

“...I wonder.” She seemed vaguely worried. “It’s like you have a strange power to motivate me.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I definitely don’t think that’s a thing.”

“I think it is,” she said a little sullenly, glaring at me with an injured look.

Her expression and eyes were not even slightly threatening. I felt a wave of affection for her surge up inside me.

“Ha-ha. Okay, I’m sorry.”

“...Why are you laughing?” She pouted.

This time, her glare was a little shy. She still wasn’t the least bit threatening—in fact, glaring seemed so new to her that she was struggling.

I nodded firmly and grinned. “When it’s done, I hope you’ll let me read it.”

She broke into a sunny smile. “Of course!”

Her way of talking to me was more natural now. We were growing closer.

It was strange, the way nervousness coexisted with this warm feeling like sitting in a patch of sun.

From the bottom of my heart, I was happy she was my girlfriend.

2

The adventure only begins for real when you can choose the destination yourself

“Happy New Year.”

“Thanks... Same to you.”

It was the first day of the new semester, and I was in Sewing Room #2.

This was my first meeting of the new year with Hinami.

Neither of us gave a damn about appearances when we were together, but Hinami delivered her proper New Year’s greeting. I guess that’s the sort of thing that makes her Hinami.

“So how was winter break?”

“Uh...well...”

When I reflected on the past few weeks, the main thing that came to mind was Kikuchi-san. I got all warm and fuzzy just thinking about it.

“It was...y’know, fine.”

“Your nose is growing, Pinocchio.”

“Shut up.”

She saw through me in a second. Am I really that transparent?

“I can tell from how you’re acting that it went well,” she said in an extremely bored tone. “I’m relieved to know everything didn’t go to hell because you were thinking too hard about ‘oh no, dating!’ *Sigh.*”

“You sound like you wanted that to happen.”

I mean, she even sighed at the end. *Stop wishing for bad things to happen to me already.*

“Anyway, what happened with holding Fuka-chan’s hand?”

“God, you’re horrible...”

Honestly, do ordinary people ask about things so directly? I know it’s an assignment, but you’d think she would have a bit more human emotion.

“It’s a hand. You do know what a hand is, right?”

“I know what a hand is.”

“So did you hold it like you were supposed to? Or what?”

I did, but...but only when Izumi and Nakamura weren’t looking. And it felt like such a secretive act that I almost had a heart attack. Even remembering it made me slightly dizzy.

Weirdly enough, as the memory resurfaced, Hinami appeared to be enjoying the whole show immensely.

“...You know what?” she asked.

“Wh-what?”

Her expression was insanely sadistic. Whatever she wanted to say, she could not contain it.

She looked me straight in the eye.

“You don’t need to blush that much from one little question.”

That was when I realized how hot my face was. “Huh?”

I touched my skin experimentally. Wait a second, I’d been unable to control my blushing multiple times in the past, but I always at least knew it was happening. I was surprised at myself.

“Uh, um, I’m not...”

“Blushing?”

“Uh, um...”

She seemed to be looking straight into my heart. She was close enough for me to feel her breath.

“Hmm...so you got that excited? That’s adorable.”

“Shut up!!”

The way she was admiring me from her lofty perch made my heart pound even harder. Not fair. She was way too good at embarrassing people. She took advantage of any little vulnerability to deliver a zero-to-death combo. What a jerk.

“You’re the one who needs to tone it down. You sure are full of energy this morning.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Is that so?”

Easily shrugging off my comeback, she giggled happily. *Stop playing with me, Hinami.*

“If you’re that energetic, I’m sure you can handle another assignment on top of the one with Kikuchi-san and take some more steps forward.”

“F-further forward?”

My mind was in such total chaos that I didn’t even understand what she meant.

“Not following?”

“Um...”

Once I calmed down slightly, I understood right away. Based on our conversation the last time we met, it must be...

“...You mean toward being a normie in the broader sense, beyond my relationship with Kikuchi-san?”

She nodded. “The new semester is starting, so I can finally give you a proper assignment.”

For once, even though I did have one small task, she gave me a bit of a break for a few weeks over the winter. I’m glad I had time to recharge, but it was true that I’d made zero progress toward my new mid-term goal.

“I’m supposed to create a group of at least four people, with me at the center, right?”

“Yep.”

This was my new checkpoint, intended to push me toward becoming a normie on par with Hinami. And I could vaguely imagine how a fuller life would be waiting on the other side.

What I still couldn't imagine was the road that would get me there.

The signposts would be Hinami's training.

“Drumroll, please.”

“Bring it on.”

I pounded my chest, welcoming my new task. It was a new year and a new semester, and I was about to get a new assignment to guide me toward my new goal. The whole world felt fresh.

Finally, Hinami stuck one finger in the air and puffed out her chest.

“Go out in a group of at least four people, with you as the manager.”

“...‘Manager’?”

She nodded.

“Basically, you decide where to go and get everyone together. You decide where to meet, and if you need a reservation, you make it. You make sure everyone has a good time. That's your role.”

“Okay, I get that. That's central, for sure.”

And sure enough, I'd never done it before in my life.

“Obviously, if you want to create a group of at least four people, you'll need to know how to be the leader, right? The most effective way to get EXP in that area is of course to get some ground-level experience.”

“That sounds simple enough. Got it.”

Simple, and easy to accept. Now all I had to do was attack it through trial and error.

“It's so nice when you understand quickly. Any questions?”

“No, I'm fine for now,” I answered right away.

Her eyebrows rose. "...Well, you certainly seem relaxed about this. Are you sure you're not letting your guard down because you cleared one big goal?"

"What? No, it's not that, but..."

But now that she mentioned it, even though I'd just been given an assignment I had zero previous experience with, I didn't feel very anxious. I didn't have an answer for the question of what I'd actually need to do, but I was weirdly calm all the same.

"It's like...it's my first time, but I feel like if I give it a try, everything will be fine..."

"...Wow." Something close to anticipation was in her eyes.

"Right now, I can't even imagine what I need to do in practical terms...but part of me feels like I can handle this..."

I was surprised by my feelings once I put them into words.

Even though I hadn't come up with a concrete solution or attack strategy, I felt confident about the future simply because I felt like *a person who could handle it*.

After going through so much of life thinking, *A person like me can't do that or A bottom-tier character doesn't have the right to choose*, this was a new feeling.

If I'd managed to chase out the confidence destroyer who lived in my heart even a little, then— Suddenly, I looked up. Hinami was observing, an unreadable expression on her face.

"...You did achieve your last mid-term goal, but..." She was speaking slowly; whatever she was about to say was important. "I think you may have grown in an important way beyond that, too. Congratulations, Tomozaki-kun."

She grinned boldly.

"Wow...thanks."

I nodded, accepting her praise without protest.

I mean, now that I thought about it, it really was an important development.

It had taken me over six months to achieve this tiny mental change.

Hinami gazed at me silently for a moment—and then nodded deeply.

“Guys really do turn into egomaniacs when they get a girlfriend.”

“Are you trying to ruin what you just said?”

As usual, she couldn’t let a good thing be.

*

“Hey, Fumiya, ’sup?”

“Sup.”

It was the first day of third semester in the second-year Class Two room.

By the time I got there, the other members of Nakamura’s group were already standing around together. I walked over to him, Mizusawa, and Takei, which had become my routine.

I figured we’d just chat about random stuff, which was also part of the routine.

But something unexpected happened.

“Hey, Tomozaki! You finally showed up!”

The person talking to me wasn’t Nakamura or Mizusawa or Takei... It was Daichi Matsumoto. He’s a normie in the jock group I’d spoken to only a little right at the start of this game, that time I walked home with Hinami.

After that, we’d hardly interacted at all, at least until the school festival. Maybe because I was dating Kikuchi-san now, he’d start elbowing me all the time.

...But so far, that was the extent of our relationship. I didn’t understand why he was acting like he’d been waiting for me. Did I do something wrong?

“Uh, what’s up?” I answered, confused.

Matsumoto threw his arm around Tachibana, who was standing nearby, and the two of them walked over to me. For some reason, he looked really cheerful, while Tachibana looked like he didn’t want to be anywhere near me. Another guy from their group, Kyoya Hashiguchi, followed behind them.

Still holding Tachibana in place with his right arm, Matsumoto swung his left arm around my neck to capture me.

“Wh-what...?” I asked warily.

But Matsumoto didn’t appear particularly hostile. He just grinned, showing his white teeth.

“How’s it going with Kikuchi-san?”

“H-how’s it going?”

So that’s what this was about. They wanted to ask the guy with the girlfriend how he was faring. I’d never experienced this kind of guy curiosity or whatever it was in real life, but I’d seen it a lot in games and manga.

“Not much to tell. We went out to eat and went to the shrine on New Year’s—that’s about it...”

“Hear that, Tachibana?”

“Shut up already.”

When Matsumoto teased Tachibana, I realized what was happening.

Whether his friends knew about it from the start or found out at some point along the way, they were on to his feelings for Kikuchi-san—but since she ended up dating me instead, they were probably giving him hell about it. Poor Tachibana. Well, that’s what you get for making a pass at her.

“Anything else? This guy *really* wants to know.”

“Daichi, you ass!”

They shoved each other. Glad they got along so well.

Mind if I get in on the fun? It’s a necessary sacrifice.

“Also, we held hands. Sorry, Tachibana,” I said triumphantly.

Matsumoto and Hashiguchi laughed.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Hear that, Tachibana?”

“Sorry, man,” I said, pushing my advantage with a nonapology.

“I’m gonna kill you,” he muttered, smiling in resignation as he grabbed my

side.

I fought off his attack—I didn't want to die, after all—but actually, this was fun. It wasn't such a bad thing to be able to play along with this mundane back-and-forth. It was about half as fun as *Atafami*, so pretty good overall.

"I'm gonna kill you, too!"

Suddenly, Takei decided to join the fray and grabbed my other side. *Stop messing around, dude—this has nothing to do with you!* He didn't know how to control his strength, so the damage was naturally way worse.

"Owowowowow!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! This is fun!"

"Ouch! Not for me! Geez!"

Takei was such an idiot—his attack was no joke, seriously painful. *Thanks for ruining the fun, Takei. This sucks, man.*

*

Morning homeroom arrived.

"Okay, so the deadline for returning this...", our teacher, Kawamura-sensei, was saying.

She had just handed us a survey about our postgraduation plans. There were narrow columns asking if we planned to go to university or not, what our top three choices were if so, and what we planned to do if not. Since we were now in the homestretch of our second year, the school was checking in on our plans for the final time.

That said, Sekitomo High is one of the top college-prep schools in Saitama, so this survey was something of a sham. Usually, around 80 or 90 percent of students go on to university. Even the piece of paper with the survey on it was small, like they didn't expect anyone to write a long essay about doing anything other than more school. Well, that's what college-prep schools are like. I feel like I've had that thought before.

Kawamura-sensei finished her explanation, and homeroom was over. We had a short break before first period.

“What did you write?”

Suddenly, Izumi was talking to me. With no warning whatsoever, she was in my personal space. Typical Izumi.

“I haven’t filled it out yet. I’ll probably just say I’m going to university...”

“Yeah?”

Meaningless chitchat. Anyway, even though most kids at our school were probably going to university, I bet not many had a particular reason for doing it.

“How about you?”

“I wrote university, too! I heard the model China-chan went to Aoyama Gakuin, so I want to go there, too!”

“Huh...so you already decided where you want to go?”

Never heard of China-chan, but anyway.

“Yup,” Izumi said casually. “Not you?”

“No. To tell the truth, I haven’t really thought about what I want to do in the future...”

Of course, the surveys I filled out in the past always had a column for writing what school I wanted to go to, but I never gave it much thought and just put down a couple schools I’d be able to get into with my grades.

“Seems like you have, huh?” I asked her.

“Yeah, but my reason is really dumb!” She laughed.

“Ha-ha-ha, gotcha. But you’re still doing better than me, since all I have is a vague idea that I probably want to go.”

“Really? Do I get a gold star?”

“Sure. You deserve one.”

I kept in step with her as the conversation rolled along. Izumi likes to sprinkle her conversations with very friendly jokes, so I’ve gotta keep my guard up to make sure I don’t misinterpret anything. If you didn’t know her very well, you’d probably think she liked you and then remember too late she’s Nakamura’s

girlfriend.

Anyway, the point is that her reason might be dumb, but she's still thought about what school she wants to go to. You could say I'd let myself avoid the question a little too long, but on the other hand, I think that's normal for a second-year student preparing for entrance exams. I wanted to ask some more people about it.

Glancing around, my eyes met those of Nakamura, who was sitting three seats away. I don't know why he happened to be looking at me just then, but why not ask him? I'd never really done anything like that before, but my terror of him was fading lately.

I walked over to him and glanced at the survey lying on his desk.

"So, Nakamura—"

"Yeah?"

Maybe because we'd made eye contact before I walked over, he answered me without any suspicion.

"Did you fill out the survey?"

"Yeah. I put university."

"Oh yeah?"

As we were having this casual chat, Mizusawa and Takei wandered over.

"Talking about the survey?" Mizusawa asked in an easygoing tone. He was looking back and forth between us, so I asked him, too.

"Yup. You said you wanna be a stylist or something, right?"

For some reason, he smirked.

"Oh, that? Unfortunately, I'm going to university like everyone else."

"You are?" I thought he'd talked about beauty school a couple of times before. "Did you change your mind or something?"

He shook his head, still smiling in his usual sardonic way.

"Not many kids jump from our school into being a beautician. My brother

used to be one, so I do have some interest, but realistically, I figure I'll go to university, and if I'm still interested, then I'll rethink it."

"Ah...gotcha."

That made sense. If he was really serious about it, he probably would've gone to a technical school right out of junior high. It's rare for people to go from a college-prep school to beauty school, and I guess he was half saying it to create a character for himself. I could see him doing that. I mean, that image was super ingrained.

"Anyway, I'm thinking I'll try out a bunch of part-time jobs while I'm in school and figure out what I want to do that way. I'll probably find something, right? This is me we're talking about, after all."

"Ha-ha-ha, you sure are confident."

Making stuff like that sound convincing was one of his strengths. And one of his annoying points.

"How 'bout you, Fumiya?"

"I...haven't given it much thought. Looks like college for me, I guess."

"Huh..."

He sounded a little taken aback and peered intently at me.

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, I was just thinking you'd do something weird."

"Uh, what is your image of me, exactly?" I retorted, but I did understand what he was getting at. I mean, nanashi had ignored all the rules and done what he wanted up till now. If that was my playstyle, it made sense that I'd do the same in the game of life.

Mizusawa ignored my comment and asked casually, "So you go to college, then what?"

"Then what? Uh..." I didn't have an answer. "No clue, to be honest."

Mizusawa widened his eyes. "That's a surprise. Thought you'd have a vision for like ten years down the line."

“Seriously, what is your image of me?”

Now and then, Mizusawa had these weird misconceptions about me. Usually in a good way, though, so I felt like I was letting him down when I admitted the truth.

“How about you, Takei?”

The conversation veered casually away from me, and immediately after I let Mizusawa down, too. It only made my mysterious guilt worse.

“...Haven’t thought about it much,” Takei said gloomily.

“Figures.”

“What, you’re not surprised if it’s me?!” he snapped, but I’m fairly sure anyone would have thought the same. I couldn’t even imagine him thinking about the future. If he thought about it at all, I bet tonight’s dinner was the furthest he got. Tomorrow’s breakfast was probably beyond him.

“How ’bout you, Shuji? Thoughts about after college?”

“Me? My dad’s got a friend who’s some corporate big shot, and he said he’d help me out, but I’ve gotta at least get into Waseda or Keidai. That’s my main worry right now.”

“That’s some shady shit, man.”

Takei and I listened in on their conversation enviously. They claimed to only have a hazy idea about university, but their vision seemed super clear.

Huh...so both of them had thought this through.

Feeling a sense of impending crisis, I turned to Takei. He had a similarly panicked expression.

“Th-those two really have this planned out, huh...?” he asked, like he was hoping I would save him.

“Dammit.”

It was extremely disturbing that Takei and I just had the exact same thought. Was I on the same level as him when it came to future prospects?

I was heading home from school that day.

Since it was the first day of the semester, school ended at noon, and everyone stayed in class talking for a few minutes, then headed home in a big group. I was used to that enough by now that even if I didn't play a starring role, I could at least hold my own without feeling too uncomfortable. So that wasn't a problem, but...

...I was nervous about what came next.

"Wow, we haven't walked home together in ages!"

I was headed home from Kitayono with Mimimi, who sounded extremely cheerful.

Yes, I was with Mimimi, the very same girl I'd gone through so much with during the festival. We'd walked home together once after the closing ceremony, and we'd talked about wanting things to be as normal as possible between us...but that was easier said than done.

"Yeah..."

I couldn't help being overly self-conscious.

Mimimi must not have been nervous, or maybe she just hid it well. She wasn't acting particularly unnatural, and as usual, she was cheerfully pulling out one topic after another.

"So how was winter break?!"

Her chipper, energetic voice joined the cold January wind.

It was two in the afternoon. The slanting rays of the sun only seemed to make the air colder, and I stuck my numb fingers into my pockets.

"Winter break..."

I thought back on it, at a loss for words. I mean, all I could think of was going to a café with Kikuchi-san, going to the shrine with Kikuchi-san—every memory involved Kikuchi-san. Even I knew that this wasn't the time to be too honest about my thoughts.

Clever Mimimi must have guessed the truth because she laughed brightly to

relax the mood.

“Oh, sorry, sorry! Fuka-chan, right?!”

“Um...”

“I told you! You’re supposed to act normal and not worry about this stuff!”

“Oh right.”

I guess that wasn’t confident enough for her because she shouted, “Pull yourself togetherrrrr!!” and slapped my shoulder.

“Ouch!!”

She giggled. I reacted involuntarily to her signature move, Pound, which I swear she delivered with more power than ever before.

“You hit too hard!!”

I resisted her tyranny with all my might, but she just laughed and refused to answer. *What a jerk!*

“You’ve had winter break to get over it! Just be normal already! I don’t even care anymore!”

“...You don’t?” I asked, peering into her face.

She laughed off my anxiety. “No way!”

Her smile was so completely cheerful, I couldn’t even tell her apart from the pre-drama Mimimi, and even though I knew she was doing this intentionally, I had no choice but to believe her.

Even if she was still hanging on to various feelings, she wanted things to be normal. Which probably meant I should try as hard as I could to be normal.

“Okay, if you insist, I’ll tell you!! From the start to the end, in detail!!”

“Oh, by the way, Brain, did you decide what you’re doing after high school?”

“Changing the topic on me, eh?”

Mimimi giggled at my silly act. “Yeah. I’ve heard enough about winter break.”

“What the hell...?”

I smiled wryly. Now I was remembering how she always did things her own way. Although, it felt ten times more like her own way now than before.

Anyway, plans after high school. Yikes, she found my weak spot.

“Still thinking about it.”

She gave me a surprised look. “Really? You’re not just going to college like everyone else?”

“Oh yeah, that’s probably what will happen, but...”

“But what?”

Although her voice was even, I detected a gleam of avid interest in the depths of her eyes.

“I just wonder if it’s okay to decide without really thinking it through first.”

“Hmm...” She slowly turned from me back to the road ahead of us. “That sounds like something the Brain would say. Like, you’re not gonna cut corners. You’re gonna take this seriously.”

“It does? But what about you?” I asked casually in return.

I was getting more and more accustomed to the basic conversational flow, so I could do it fairly mindlessly now. You practice the same combo over and over in training mode, then use it in a real game. After a while, it becomes pure reflex. Gamers will understand.

“Me? I just thought I’d be normal and go to college.”

“Huh. Just the fact that you’ve decided is amazing. I’m still not sure what I want to do.”

Even though I suspected I’d ultimately end up going to university, choosing a path with no reason or basis for it went against my gamer’s creed, so I hadn’t fully made up my mind yet. “*Now Loading...*” was probably the most accurate way to describe my current status.

“Interesting...,” Mimimi said, looking up at the sky with a serious face. “In that case, I’m actually worse than you. Since I just said I was going to university without really thinking about it.”

She squinted into the bright light.

Honestly, a few months ago, I probably would have insisted on raising her up and putting myself down, but...

“Really? I don’t think one is better than the other.”

...now I was able to measure the distance between me and her and say honestly that we both had our pluses and minuses. Which seems to me like a healthier response.

“I wonder.”

“It’s true. Or at least, I think it is.”

That’s why I was able to believe in myself enough to push my point. In the game of life, Mimimi’s level was still unquestionably higher than mine, but in my own way, I was able to confidently state my view without being servile.

“Well then, let me ask you, what are you unsure about? What’s wrong with going to college?”

“Um, I’m not sure how to put it.”

If I explained my gamer values in those terms, she might have a hard time understanding. Putting in an effort to reach your goal was the basic principle of gaming, and to be blunt, practicing or advancing to the next stage without knowing what you wanted to do was not a good approach. So how do I put that in layman’s terms?

“It’s like, I don’t know which way to go until I decide for sure what I want.”

That felt right. When I wanted to find a basis for my path, what I wanted came first.

“What you want?”

“Yeah.”

That being the case, the reason I couldn’t decide what to do after high school was probably because I still hadn’t figured out what I wanted to do in life over the long term.

Unlike normal games, preset goals don’t exist in life.

The whole theme is deciding on a direction based on what you yourself want to do.

Essentially—what Hinami calls my “big goal.”

“...Hmm, what *you* want...” Mimimi repeated the words, mulling them over.

What did I want to do? Which way should I go?

Here we were, standing at a fork in the road of life when we hadn’t even really thought about the future.

But time wouldn’t stop for us. We were being swallowed by an unstoppable wave.

“Yes, that’s the question. What do I want?”

It’s the winter of our second year of high school. We’re seventeen years old.

We’re still a long way from adulthood, but you can’t call us kids anymore, either. I realize it takes some nerve for me to act like an expert on life—but that’s beside the point. It’s a maddening age, because we don’t even have the means to decide what our day-to-day life will look like.

But there’s surprisingly little time to think about what lies ahead and make a decision.

“I wonder what we’ll all be doing in ten years.”

“...Ten years, huh?”

Mimimi’s comment was both sudden and vague, and it was hard not to give it serious thought.

Ten years. Our twenties would be coming to a close, and our efforts would be starting to bear fruit.

“I wonder what kind of work I’ll be doing or if I’ll be married by then.”

“Yeah...”

I couldn’t envision my own future at all, so I tried to picture Mimimi’s.

“I can imagine you...taking a bunch of younger coworkers out drinking, like *Come on, just one more bar!*”

“Ah-ha-ha, what the heck? I definitely sound single!”

“It’s possible!”

We smiled at each other.

“A girl starts getting nervous if she’s still single by twenty-seven! You’re really rude, you know that?!”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry, sorry.”

We smiled at each other again. Yeah, we do really well with these silly back-and-forths.

“And what about the Brain...?”

For some reason, she looked a little sad as she licked her lips pensively.

“I bet you’ll be far away. Somewhere I can’t even imagine,” she said.

“Ha-ha-ha. What’s that even mean?”

I laughed casually. The sadness was still in Mimimi’s eyes, but she smiled along with me and nodded as if she understood something. In a way, she was acting like this was her good-bye, and I was walking away.

“I mean, I really do feel that way. You’ll be like, *I wanna do this!* and dash off, and you won’t even stop when people tell you you’re weird, and then one day, you’ll do something amazing and be like, *Told ya so!*”

“Wow, I sound awesome!”

Was that how she saw me?

“Definitely! Or maybe you’ll run off and be a huge failure.”

“One extreme or the other, huh?”

She laughed teasingly. “...But seriously, I really do think that’s what’ll happen.”

“...Just running off somewhere?”

Honestly, I couldn’t say she was wrong. I was the one who’d gotten obsessed with playing *Atafami* and ended up as the player with the top winrate in Japan, and right now, I was trying to figure out what I wanted in life. When I thought

about it, I could find my future life as engrossing as *Atafami*.

When I do find it, I'm fairly sure I'll stay single-minded about it no matter what anyone says or who says it. It's in nanashi's blood.

"You could be right."

"Right?!"

For some reason, she looked really happy that I'd agreed with her.

"When I think about it like that, I feel like we'll be able to live our own lives!" she went on.

"Yeah, maybe..."

Live our own lives.

A little sad, but also realistic, and definitely not regretful.

We were both walking through the residential streets of Kitayono toward our own houses, on a day still too cold to call the end of winter.

"What *do* I want to do...?"

It was the winter of my second year of high school.

I was seventeen.

High school felt like it would go on forever, but it was already more than halfway over.

There was only a year and a few months left.

I had to choose one thing and leave behind the other possibilities—and I still didn't have the reason or motivation I needed to make that choice.

Would I be able to decide?

"That's the question."

When we got to the corner where we usually parted ways, Mimimi and I looked in opposite directions.

Finally, Mimimi mumbled a few words—I'm sure more to herself than to me.

"...I'd better give that some more thought myself."

I wasn't surprised to see the same vaguely sad, lonely look in her eyes.

"I hope we both figure it out," I said, turning back toward her.

She turned toward me and paused for a second, but then she nodded cheerfully.

"Me too! Well, see you later, Brain!"

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

With that, we each set off in our own direction.

3

When you're fighting in your element, you hardly ever lose

It was Saturday, a few days later.

I was walking outside a train station in Tokyo with Hinami.

"Still, I'd never have guessed *this* was where you *wanted to take me*."

"Ha-ha-ha, caught you off guard, huh?" I asked triumphantly.

She rubbed her temples like she was sick of me.

A few weeks earlier, right after the school festival ended and I'd told Hinami that Kikuchi-san and I were dating, I'd also told her there was somewhere I wanted to take her.

Unfortunately, we'd been too busy to go before school started again, but we were finally there.

"Listen. You can do what you want, but I'm not gonna talk about myself."

She was still putting up a little resistance, but I ignored her and nodded confidently.

"That's fine by me."

"...*Huffff*." She sighed audibly.

"Okay, off we go."

"Yeah, yeah."

Still, the fact that she followed me despite all her whining made me think she wasn't completely uninterested. After all, NO NAME would never do something totally pointless.

"...Anyway, I'm pretty nervous about this, too."

I glanced back at her, but she ignored my confession and cut in front of me.

“Your problem, not mine. If we’re going, let’s hurry up and go.”

“H-hey, wait for me!”

She walked briskly forward. All that complaining, but when I show the slightest vulnerability, I get this. She always has to be in control.

With that, we headed off toward *an offline Atafami meetup*.

*

“...This is it?”

We’d been walking from the station for couple of minutes, using a map I’d pulled up using the address listed on the More Info page.

We were at the venue.

“I’d hardly call this a venue... More like an ordinary apartment,” I said, peering around.

Hinami nodded. “Yeah, looks that way. I read that some people who live together just started holding regular events.”

“Wow, you did your research.”

“Shut up.”

All her complaining aside, she seemed like she might actually be excited... which was a good thing.

We were at a venue called AtaHouse—or more accurately, a group of adjacent apartments occupied by *Atafami* players who held regular offline tournaments. Hence the nickname.

“The room number is...”

I pulled up the More Info page on my phone and checked the number again and again to make sure I had it right, then rang the bell on the intercom in the lobby.

A few seconds later, a male voice answered. “Hello?”

“Um, we’re here for the tournament.”

“Okay, come on up.”

The lock on the door to the first floor clicked open, and the two of us walked into the elevator.

“M-man, I’m nervous...”

“You are?”

I was the one who’d invited her, but she was still way calmer than me.

“Wh-why are you so unaffected by this?”

“I mean, all we’re doing is going into a room with around ten people we don’t know, right? We’re in our home field.”

“Uh, I beg to differ. I’d call this an away game.”

I smiled cynically, but her business-as-usual attitude was slowly dissolving my anxiety.

“What are you talking about? This is your home field even more than mine.”

“I guess so...,” I said vaguely.

Hinami grinned. “I mean—you are *the* nanashi.”

“...True.”

She was right.

The room we were about to enter was one of the few places in Japan I could call my home field.

We walked up to the door and pressed the intercom. “Door’s open, come on in,” the voice said, so I put my hand on the knob.

“Ready...?”

“Yup.” Hinami nodded.

I gripped the knob. Then held it for a few seconds.

“...We’re really going in?”

“Just hurry up and do it.” Hinami’s grin was gone.

At her urging, I opened the door—and we stepped into the gaming venue.

I shuffled in with tiny, embarrassed steps; nearly ten people were already inside. Hinami was behind me, but she was brimming with confidence.

Three monitors were lined up on a table, their cords snaking around, and of course, *Atafami* was on the screens. On two of them, one-on-one games were already underway, with two players and a small audience in front of each one.

“H-hi.”

At the sound of my voice, a couple of the people watching glanced toward me, then quickly shifted their gazes to Hinami with obvious surprise. Predictable, I guess. Everyone here aside from Hinami was a guy, and even if that wasn’t the case, a girl of Hinami’s caliber would cause a stir anywhere she showed up. I mean, people turned their heads even when we were walking down the street.

“Welcome, uh...?”

A guy who I guessed was the host walked up to us, smiling. He appeared to be in his early thirties, the neat and tidy type you’d see working at an electronics retail store. He glanced back and forth between me and Hinami like he didn’t know what to say. He was probably wondering which of the registered participants we were.

“Uh, we’re here for the first time...”

“Gotcha, nice to meet you! And your names?”

He opened his phone and started looking through what must have been the list of participants. I took a nervous breath.

“Uh, my name is—”

Come to think of it, I probably hadn’t used that name in the real world since I’d met Hinami.

“I’m nanashi.”

In that instant, every eye in the place turned toward me. Both the players in the middle of games as well as those watching. *Uh, I think you should focus on your screens, guys...*

When I looked back at the host, even he seemed nervous. What do I do now?

I knew my name was fairly well-known, but to get such an openly shocked reaction made me unsure what to say.

“Uh...you mean *that* nanashi...?” the host asked timidly, peering into my face.

“Uh...yeah, I mean, I’m the nanashi on the leaderboards.”

A murmur went through the room again. Right away, everyone’s eyes drifted to Hinami but then were redirected back toward me. Probably because she was so blindingly attractive. Nope, you never get used to someone that beautiful. By the way, she was giving them a friendly smile as she bowed adorably. *So we’re in this mode today, huh?*

“Wow, you’re younger than I expected. Oh, I’m Harry, the host for today.”

“Nice to meet you. And this...”

“Nice to meet you! I’m nanashi-kun’s friend Aoi.”

Just as I glanced over at Hinami to introduce her, she beat me to it. She’d registered using her real name written in English letters.

“Pleasure’s mine, nanashi-san and Aoi-san. Do you play *Atafami*, too?”

“I do! But I’m still nowhere near as good as nanashi-kun...”

“Ah-ha-ha! You could say the same about basically everyone in Japan.”

“Very true!”

Hinami was smoothly easing into a friendly conversation with Harry-san, using her skills to full effect.

By the way, Harry-san was an *Atafami* player as well as a play-by-play commentator on YouTube. His voice was famously velvety, attracting a steady audience.

“So about the system we use here...,” he began, evidently about to start a little tour.

“Th-this is nanashi-san...?”

A guy who looked to be in his late twenties had walked up, addressing his question to Harry-san. He was short with cropped black hair, glasses, and a muscular build. He kept making eye contact with me and then looking away,

obviously nervous. *Hey, no need to freeze. I'm just a high schooler who's good at video games, dude.*

I tried to make my expression as natural as possible.

"Nice to meet you. I'm nanashi."

I bobbed my head at him. He clammed up for a minute, seemingly panicked, then dipped his head down and up.

"N-nice to meet you. I'm Max."

"Oh, so you're Max-san."

"Wow, you know who I am?"

I nodded. I didn't know all that much about him, but he showed up in Harry-san's videos sometimes, covering games with him. He played the role of question-asker—I guess you could say he was the Watson to Harry-san's Holmes.

"I've seen you on Harry-san's videos a couple of times. Now that we're talking, I recognize your voice!"

"Ha-ha... Yup, that's me. I'm honored that you watch us."

"Oh, no, it's great to meet you."

Once we finished introducing ourselves, Max's gaze flicked back to Hinami.

"Um, is th-this your girlfriend?"

"Oh, no, no way!" I almost burst out laughing as I firmly shot that question down. "Not at all, she's a friend. Just a friend."

As I waved my hand back and forth, Hinami smiled impishly. "You're so mean! You *really* want them to know I'm not your girlfriend!"

"Come on..."

I knew she planned to hide the fact that she was NO NAME, but now I realized she was going full throttle into perfect-heroine mode. Understood.

"Ah-ha-ha, you two seem like very good friends..."

Max-san's slightly probing words sounded a little envious. So I explained, "Uh,

she likes *Atafami*, too, and that's why we decided to come together."

"Really!" Max-san exclaimed, his eyes glinting. "Not many girls like *Atafami*!"

He looked at her, and she nodded.

"Ah-ha-ha! Is that so?"

She must have guessed that he had accepted her because she swiftly moved to consolidate her advantage.

"It really is a great game. It's fun to play in a group, but when you get into it, it's so deep."

"Exactly!"

"And the balance..."

She went on like that, hitting all the right spots in her performance of game-talk. Well, she is genuinely a fan.

"...I just love that part of it!"

"I know! Me too!"

Max-san and Harry-san had both lost their initial nervousness by now and seemed to be enjoying the conversation, enjoying Hinami's presence. I mean, she was already incredibly good at communicating, so add in the common language of *Atafami*, and they were going into this battle with Fullheal on their side.

I was joining in here and there, awed by Hinami's skill, when the other participants started coming over to us. I guess their games had ended. Their sparkling eyes were focused fervently on me. Who would've guessed that I'd be attracting more attention than the one and only Aoi Hinami?

"Um...I played you online once, and you crushed me... I really wanted to meet you!"

"Uh, thanks?"

"I've learned a lot from watching your games!"

I didn't know how to react to this flood of emotions from my *Atafami* fans. Then they started asking me questions, like "Can I shake your hand?" "When

did you start playing?” “Do you do offline tournaments?” and on and on. Wow, I really was a celebrity. I knew I was somewhat well-known in the *Atafami* world, but I had no clue this would happen.

As I was fighting my way through the wave of people and words, I suddenly heard something unexpected.

“—And you’re so good-looking!”

“What?”

I couldn’t help feeling surprised.

I’d never heard that before in my life.

I started to protest, but then I thought about it and stopped midsentence.

I mean, I was probably getting compliments because I’d chosen my outfit carefully based on what Hinami had taught me, gone to the salon regularly, and practiced doing my hair every morning. On top of that, I’d dutifully trained and taught my face how to look cheerful.

Which meant I shouldn’t reject the compliment, but I shouldn’t get all full of myself and let my guard down, either.

What I should probably do is simply accept it.

That’s why I chose to reply:

“...Thank you.”

I stood there confidently, smiling back and meeting the eyes of the person who complimented me.

I don’t know if that was the right response, but after I said it, I felt refreshed.

Interesting. I’d never done that before.

Maybe accepting compliments felt better than I thought.

But the other participants kept on talking.

“He’s also stylish!”

“And he even sounds cool when he talks!”

“It’s like nanashi’s a top-tier character in real life, too!”

My whole set of internal values was threatening to crumble under this rush of unfamiliar praise. No one had ever said this about me before. “Stylish”? “Sounds cool”? “Top-tier character in real life”??? Everything I thought I knew was breaking.

“Uh, um, how about we talk about *Atafami*...?”

Unsure what to do, I made a feeble attempt to stop them, but the rain of words kept coming. It even intensified.

“Don’t be modest! You’re so cool!”

“You seem like a real extrovert!”

“Um...she *is* your girlfriend, right?”

Okay, this is not how I pictured a real-world *Atafami* tournament would go. I was imagining more of an epic battlefield where players stoically won and lost — “Enough!!” I didn’t mean to shout, but I was truly suffocating. “I’m just nanashi, guys!! I play *Atafami*. Nothing more, nothing less. My looks have nothing to do with it! And this is just my friend, definitely not my girlfriend!! Okay?!”

My sudden outburst was followed by silence, and then everyone broke into grins.

“This guy’s pretty interesting!”

“Yeah, definitely an extrovert...”

“I bet he’s on the leaderboard in his class, too.”

I took in their words, my eyes squeezed shut, and then it dawned on me.

“No matter what I say, it’s not gonna make a difference...”

Behind me, Hinami was smiling as I caved. *Stop enjoying my suffering!*

That’s when it happened.

“Excuse me!”

To my surprise, the voice that came out of the blue from my right side, by the door, sounded feminine.

And the speaker clearly was not Hinami.

I turned toward the voice—and saw a girl I didn't know looking back at me with glittering eyes. So there was another girl here aside from Hinami. She seemed to be around my age. Her dark-brown hair was cut straight across, and she was wearing a black beret-like thing over it.

“...I've been wanting to meet you, nanashi-san!”

Her voice was nasal but somehow warm, too.

She was wearing a tight, grown-up-looking gray sweater with long sleeves—which had a heart cutout over her chest. Seriously? (Well, I'm fairly sure there was one there anyway. I didn't look directly, since I've heard girls always notice.) The neck was high and unobtrusively frilly, and she had on a gold chain with a white charm on it.

Despite her unusual sweater, she looked more elegant than eccentric, maybe because of the simple black skirt she was wearing with it. It was relatively short and tight around the hips, then flared out above her slim, fair-skinned legs. Overall, she reminded me of a Korean pop star or something. I sensed an animal kind of strength in her.

The vertical stripes on her tight sweater made the contours of her body quite obvious—overly obvious, actually—and to be honest, I'd never been so lost as to where I could safely look. It was overwhelming. No matter where I directed my gaze, I was pretty sure I could be accused of sexual harassment. So I stood firm and stared her straight in the eyes.

“Pleased to meet you. I'm nanashi.”

I visualized Mizusawa and grinned. Channeling Mizusawa at moments like this is crucial. When you have a model, things tend to go better, and focusing on imitating him prevented me from being distracted by the parts of her I shouldn't be looking at. I'd even say that went well.

“I was so surprised when I looked at the list of participants! It's amazing! It's really you!”

She brought her hands together in front of her face, her eyes still sparkling. This meant her arms were squeezed against her sides, which I'm pretty sure

were also squeezing something else at the edge of my field of vision, but I was Mizusawa. I kept my eyes focused unwaveringly on her eyes and searched for a conversation topic.

“Ha-ha-ha, thank you. Uh...what’s your name?”

“Rena!”

“Rena-chan, got it... Ah.”

As I fought to keep my gaze upward, I’d channeled Mizusawa a little too much and accidentally called her “Rena-chan.” That was way too chummy for someone I’d just met, and I scrambled to correct my mistake.

“I’m sorry. I meant to say Rena-san.”

For some reason, her eyes glittered even more brightly when I said that, and she sidled up to me.

I think she was even closer than Izumi gets. The heavy scent of flower nectar and shampoo tickled my nose seductively, and for a second, my thoughts dissolved into a haze.

“Oh, you can call me Rena-chan!” Her voice was high and sweet, and her eyes were moist.

I felt like that scent was melting down my brain and eating away my consciousness as it dreamily wafted around me. Logic was disappearing into a dizzy fog.

“I—I can? Okay, then Rena-chan it is.”

Damn, that was fast. The Mizusawa software currently running my brain might be one reason I was being so friendly, but I also felt manipulated.

Well, I do use *chan* with Tama-chan, so maybe it wasn’t so weird...right?

“Yay! Can I call you nanashi-san?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s fine.”

She was kind of controlling the pace, but I think I was managing to carry on a fairly smooth conversation without getting too flustered. I’d already been sucked into an unusually casual interaction, but I guess that was fine.

“Back off a little, Rena-chan, you’re overwhelming him.”

I guess Max-san couldn’t bear to watch anymore, because he finally jumped in for the save. Sounds like he knew her.

“What? No, I’m not! Are you overwhelmed, nanashi-san?”

“Very.”

“You are?!” she squealed, before eventually laughing and turning toward me. It was an intimate gesture, as if she was wordlessly saying, *This is fun, isn’t it?*

By the way, the joke I made is like a basic combo that I’ve done a million times since I started playing this game, so I’m able to use it fairly freely now. It’s a form of teasing that’s just exaggeratedly agreeing with whatever the other person says. To put it in Found’s terms, it’s like a down throw, up air.

“You’re so mean!” she said, looking at me with sleepy eyes and lightly touching my shoulder. Why was she acting so vulnerable? I could probably get her into a fully charged Attack right now, no problem.

She was staring at me, so I looked back at her. Her skin was so pale, it seemed almost blue, and her dark eyes were bottomless wells. Her near childlike features were symmetrical, and her constant smile was mysteriously magnetic.

I glanced at the bottom of her sleeves, which were as tight as the rest of her sweater, and noticed she was wearing a bunch of heavy black bracelets. Their design was so rough that they struck an interesting contrast with her girly frilled collar and sexy, tight-fitting clothes, and the wrist beneath them was worryingly fragile.

She kept staring at me as she spoke.

“So it turns out nanashi-san is a stud!”

There was something inviting in her moist eyes. Earlier, I’d felt embarrassed when the other participants said I was good-looking and stuff, but having a girl look me in the eye and say it hit way harder. And on top of that, Rena-chan’s gaze and voice seemed glued to me. My head was heating up; this was a major assault on my instincts.

“Ha-ha-ha, um, thanks.”

Somehow, I managed not to stutter. I bet Mizusawa wouldn't even say *um*, but for me, that's unavoidable. She smiled, then suddenly glanced away. For a second, I almost thought she was sad. What was going on?

Once the conversation had passed like a stormy wave, she blinked exaggeratedly at Hinami.

"...There's another girl here!"

She stepped closer to Hinami, sounding genuinely shocked.

"Hello, I'm Rena."

She peered into Hinami's face with observing eyes, her lips forming a smile. I was struck by the contrast between Rena's cool gaze and her soft tone.

"Hi, I'm Aoi," Hinami answered cheerfully with a five-star smile, looking her over from head to toe. "Those are so cute!" she said, pointing to her clunky black bracelets.

Um, are they? I think a word like cool might be better for that design.

"Ooh, you get it! They're so clunky!"

"I know! They look good on you!"

But apparently, they were cute. There it was again, that unique normie take on the word *cute*. It was the same with the famous haniwa key chains, and I didn't get it this time, either. How does clunkiness equal cute? Can cuteness and clunkiness cohabitate?

"But you're the stylish one, Aoi-san! I love your earrings!"

"Thank you so much! They're my favorites! I think we have the same taste."

"We do! Wow! And your hair is so soft and your face is so small and your skin is so nice! Like a pretty doll!"

"But look at your figure, it's amazing!"

I didn't get it, but they seemed locked in a relentless competition over who could compliment the other one more. Really. It felt like an actual battle.

"This is your first time here, right?" Rena-chan asked Hinami.

“Yes!”

“If you have any questions, you can ask me!”

“Thank you! Do you come a lot?”

“Yeah, I’m becoming a regular here!” Rena-chan smiled wanly before continuing. “Did you...come by yourself?”

“Oh, um,” Hinami said, glancing around until her gaze landed on me. “I came with nanashi-kun.”

And then.

Rena-chan swiveled her head back and forth, bewildered.

“...You did? ...Are you friends?”

“Yes! *Atafami* friends, I guess you could say.”

“Huh...”

Rena’s face was blank, or maybe I should say frozen.

Then she took one more look at us and grinned. “What a handsome pair! I hope you come often!”

“Ah-ha-ha. I plan to.”

They both smiled. I felt like they’d just completed a round of hand-to-hand combat. Were girls always this intense when they first met? I couldn’t even keep up.

As I was reeling from this unknown world, Rena-chan slid over to my side again and tapped me softly two times between my back and my flank. I think she was just trying to get my attention, but her touch was oddly ticklish—if my guard wasn’t up, I would have made a noise.

“What’s up?” I asked, pretending to be calm.

She brought her face up to my ear. Since she moved her whole body along with it, our clothes rubbed together, warming my upper arm like a fever.

“Um...”

Along with her breathy voice, that sweet scent washed over my consciousness

again.

“Y-yeah?” I asked, staring straight ahead.

“...to be totally honest, it seems like you two are dating,” she said in an even breathier voice.

I turned toward her, intending to correct her—but since she’d just been whispering in my ear, we ended up facing each other at close range. And yet she didn’t retreat—she just kept watching me. How was she able to stay so close? We were centimeters apart, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her pitch-black pupils.

“W-we’re really just friends,” I said, taking a step away.

She continued to stare me down. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“...Well, that’s good.”

She turned suddenly back toward the rest of the room. I was finally free from the pair of eyes holding me in place, but what was “that’s good” supposed to mean?



*

After the question attack by the other participants and my conversation with Rena-chan, the group started up versus mode, which was more what I'd imagined an offline *Atafami* meetup would be like. That was a relief. By the way, Harry-san encouraged Hinami to join in, but she said she wasn't good enough yet. I guess she'd blow her cover if she played at her real level, and knowing her, she probably couldn't bring herself to go easy on her opponents. Watching was a wise option if she didn't want to give herself away.

"Nanashi-san, let's play!" Harry-san said, rolling up his sleeves.

Even though he's better known as an announcer, he's actually a solid player with a steady upper-middle ranking in both online and offline games. He uses a little one-head-tall character called Wigglypoff, who's a fairly unique fighter thanks to her high number of jumps and fast aerial mobility.

On the upside, her aerals are solid in terms of damage, active frames, and hitboxes, so she's great at midair encounters and close-quarters combat. On the downside, she's super vulnerable to characters with good reach, which makes her a challenge to play. I don't often come across people online who use her well, so I'd been wanting to play Harry-san for a while.

"For sure!"

We headed over to an empty screen and sat down to get ready to play. I could hear Rena-chan shouting, "Ooh, exciting!" in the background. I would've recognized her voice even if Hinami wasn't the only other girl there.

We checked our controller settings and chose characters. To decide on a stage, we figured we'd go old-school and do rock-paper-scissors, with the winner picking from a couple of simple options.

"You good?"

"Yup!"

I won at rock-paper-scissors, so I got to choose the stage. I went with Buono Volcano.

It's a simple stage, a little narrower than average with one platform each on

the right and left.

Since Wigglypoff can move so freely in the air, she generally does best on stages with multiple platforms. That's why I ruled out the Arena, where she'd be able to use that advantage to the max, but since I was curious to see how Harry-san used platforms, I went with Buono Volcano.

It took a couple of seconds for the game to load. I got myself psyched up, spinning the stick around with my left thumb. It made a satisfying sound as it scratched the edge, firing up my instincts.

The game ended after a couple of minutes...

"Man, you really are good," Harry-san said, smiling bashfully.

Like before, I thought rejecting his compliment would be wrong, so I just thanked him.

"That was a surprise for me, too. I didn't know Wigglypoff could do that much."

I'd watched videos of the character before, but playing was different. Wigglypoff's playstyle is basically just throwing out attacks and then striking during an opening; it isn't such a threat as long as you kept an eye on your spacing. And managing that spacing is my specialty.

What *is* a threat is the way she uses her aerial mobility to edge guard.

"I was getting worried there—you just kept coming after me," I said.

Harry-san's style was to mercilessly pursue his opponent when they got knocked off the stage, trying to KO them as fast as possible. Since Found, my character, has a recovery move that makes him disappear briefly, he's harder to edge guard. But the range on that move is short, so it's not the most versatile. If Wigglypoff uses her aerial mobility to guard multiple routes, the situation gets a whole lot tougher.

"Ha-ha-ha. Thank you. But you react fast, nanashi-kun."

"Ah-ha-ha. No one's gonna kill me without a fight."

I smiled. At first glance, Harry-san's edge-guard style, which involved pursuing his opponent dangerously close to the blast zone, did seem like a threat to

Found. But if you looked a bit closer, you'd see fairly quickly that before he had a chance to guard multiple routes, he dived into one choice and threw away the others.

You wouldn't notice it if the edge guarding freaked you out, but he would always reveal the route he was going to guard.

"With Found, if you up-B early as you're approaching the stage, you can intercept and use the i-frames to avoid attacks. Even when the invincibility ends, Found can get back to the stage faster than Wigglypoff, so he won't get punished for it."

"That is exactly right. Once you know that, I can't do anything!"

Harry-san sounded regretful but also somehow happy.

We each started with four stocks and were playing first-to-three. The final score was 3–0. Harry-san KO'd me first, but after that, I figured out on the fly how to deal with him, and in the last game, I won with three stocks left. I think being able to come up with countermeasures midgame is one requirement for staying at the top.

"It really was an honor to play the famous nanashi."

"No, it was my pleasure."

With the postmortem finished, I glanced over my shoulder. An audience was gathered around, avidly listening to our conversation. Next to them, there was Rena-chan, with a slightly different kind of glint in her eyes—and behind her, obviously spoiling for a fight, was Hinami. *If she wants to play that bad, she should just play.*

I walked up to Hinami and smiled wryly.

"You *sure* you don't want to play?" I asked.

"...Oh, no! I mean, I'm not worth playing."

"...Really."

She wasn't budging. She'd be better off dropping the act.

After that, since this was an offline meetup, a simple tournament got underway. Of course, I joined in. Everyone aside from Hinami, including Rena-chan, was competing for the top spot. Hinami watched, chewing her finger.

First round. The guy I'd just played had his jaw on the floor.

"G-good game, man...! Dang, I couldn't do anything..."

"Good game!" I answered, taking the controller from the stand.

I won the next game easily, too—obviously, I guess I should add. Anyone who came to a meetup like this would be a decent player, but that said, I'm still the long-standing top player in Japan. From what I saw, I was a level or two above anyone else here, so I didn't think I'd lose to anyone in the first-to-three system they'd set up.

Second round. My Found was zipping around the screen, and my opponent was at my mercy. I seized an opening to deliver the KO.

"Oh my god! He just took advantage of the ending lag from that dash attack to up tilt out of shield! How does he keep so calm?"

"You can see why he's number one. He just calmly comes and takes everything he can when he gets a freebie."

"He was on the edge of the platform, too. If it was me, I'd want to grab the other guy and do a back throw. He's watching really carefully."

"Yeah. The basics are so key."

The audience was vigorously analyzing my play. *Just stop, okay? It's kinda embarrassing.* And terrifying, because everything they said was spot-on.

But I also realized something.

Up till then, I'd never openly admitted just how obsessive a gamer I was, but in this setting, everyone understood technical stuff about *Atafami* as if it was totally natural.

After racking up another win, I looked around the room again.

Everyone here loved *Atafami*, and each of them took their game seriously.

That was enough to make them feel like old friends, even though we'd just

met. I felt strangely at home.

“Good game!”

Everyone I was playing loved this game. We were all different ages, and we had no idea what one another’s real names or occupations were.

And yet I was able to be my real self around them, no-holds-barred.

“How come he was able to charge an Attack there?”

“He saw right through that tomahawk grab. Was the reason he shielded so hard to prepare for that...?”

“You’re right that he could KO with an up throw at that percentage, so a grab would make more sense than an aerial.”

“So that’s how nanashi thinks...!”

...But still, having my thought process analyzed this closely made it a little hard to play.

“Ooooh!”

That’s when it happened.

Cheers erupted from the next table over.

Thinking someone must have done something cool, I glanced over during the pause before my next game—and burst out laughing at what I saw.

Who was in front of the monitor but...?

“You killed me! Aoi-san, you’re so good!”

“I am? Thank you for the compliment!”

A male player was grinning in defeat as he complimented the girl who’d just won.

Yes, it was NO NAME, the second-best player in Japan, wearing the guise of the perfect heroine. What the hell was she doing?

“Uh...she’s in the tournament, too?” I asked.

Max-san, who was standing behind me to observe my games, nodded.

“She is! She said she wanted to play after all, so I added her in a match against a seeded player.”

“Ah-ha-ha...got it.”

I thought she'd been watching enviously this whole time, but as it turned out, she couldn't stand the temptation. Well, she did get super emotional when it came to *Atafami*. Normally, you had to bring your own controller to places like this, so I guess she'd brought hers? Which meant she'd been raring to go all along.

But would she be okay? Her playstyle was so precise that it was almost otherworldly. *I don't think many people use that style with Found. Some of the people watching might recognize her.*

Well, better focus on my own game first.

I turned back to my third match and took a deep breath to regain my concentration, when Max-san burst out excitedly.

“Wow, *her Foxy* sure is strong!”

“...Foxy?”

I glanced back at Hinami. I was fairly sure her main wasn't Foxy—it was Found, like me.

I wonder if she'd gritted her teeth and chosen a different character because she wanted to play without getting caught. If that was true, she must really, really like *Atafami*, although I'm not one to talk. If she was going that far, why not just admit who she was? I smiled cynically to myself, then refocused on my own game.

“...Here we go, game number three.”

“I-I'm ready.”

With that, I kicked his ass again.

*

Having safely won the second round, I headed over to Hinami's table. A game was just starting. According to the people watching, this was the third, and

Hinami had won the first two.

“She’s...really, really good, isn’t she?” Harry-san asked me.

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I just nodded and made a noncommittal noise. Rena-chan, who was standing next to us, jumped in.

“Did you train her?”

“Train her? Uh, not exactly, but...”

Rena-chan stared at me as I groped for words. *Come on, Hinami, you want to hide that you’re NO NAME, but what story do you plan to use? You went and started playing without telling me, and now I’m stuck. I don’t want to blabber on inanely to these people, so you’re really on your own here.*

“We play here and there...and she’s gotten a lot better, partly by copying me,” I said, avoiding any specifics. She genuinely had improved by copying me, so I wasn’t lying. Thanks to all the time I’d spent with Hinami’s mask, I was getting a lot better myself at lying without really lying.

Harry-san nodded, impressed.

“Wow! I haven’t seen many girls that good.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Rena-chan seemed to enjoy poking fun at Harry-san’s offhand comment. But her face quickly grew serious again as she turned back to the screen.

“But you’re right... I was totally defenseless against her.”

“You played her?”

That was a surprise.

“Yeah, I played her in the second round, and she beat me three times in a row,” she said casually.

“Ha-ha, sorry to hear it.”

I smiled weakly. Her tone was lax, but ever so slightly empty. It probably was bothering her.

But wow, three victories in a row with Foxy. I didn’t know how good Rena-

chan was, but if they'd faced off in the second round, she'd beaten someone in the first. Which meant Hinami had done more than beat a beginner three times in a row.

"Get her back for me, okay, nanashi-san?"

"Wait, am I on your team now?"

"Oh? Were you on Aoi-san's team, then?"

She stared at me with a challenging expression. Her gaze was direct, but not open like Tama-chan's. It was more like Hinami's—impossible to read beyond the surface.

"I'm not on anyone's team... I mean, I'm on nanashi's team."

"That's so mean. I hate you."

"Wait, why?!" I said in my well-practiced style of cheerful comeback-slash-reaction. She smiled happily, then thumped my shoulder. I'm not sure how to describe how I felt every time she touched me—ticklish, or maybe fidgety. *Anyway, I have zero resistance against that, so please stop.*

"You're funny, nanashi-san."

"Ha-ha...thanks."

While I was chatting with Rena-chan and Harry-san, Hinami's game started. Since her usual character was Found, I didn't know how good she was as Foxy.

When the game started, Hinami's Foxy used his blaster to poke and pressure the opponent and kept him moving with some minor punishes while doing fast-fall nairs. (A nair is a neutral aerial attack, which you do by leaving the stick in a neutral position while pressing the attack button.) While it's not that powerful on its own, it sends them up at a good angle and has good landing lag, so as long as you're able to land the blow, it's a really convenient way to start all kinds of combos. Hinami got the hit and skillfully segued into a combo.

"Very steady..." Harry-san said, nodding softly.

Even if your opponent shields, neutral air doesn't have many vulnerability frames, so you won't get punished much. Actually, depending on the character, there might be no punishment at all even if they shield. To be blunt, it's one of

those moves you can just kind of do and get good results. In addition to using it to segue into a combo and deal damage, if you land it when their percentage is high, it can be powerful in itself while also leading into an attack. It can even be used to KO. It's pretty scary.

"Aoi-san sure is good at those nair combos."

"...Yeah."

Hinami unleashed her short hops, fast falls, and preemptive forward airs and back airs, at the same time predicting what her opponent would do and taking the initiative. Then she suddenly landed a beautiful fast-fall neutral air, flowing into a high-firepower combo. Her opponent fled out of her reach, but she came after them with a blaster attack, determined to up the damage by even 1 percent.

"Damn...," I couldn't help saying as I watched.

The precise way she moved around was so completely Hinami. She repeatedly chose low-risk, mid-return moves, waiting for her opponent to make themselves vulnerable. When they did, she went to a spot where she could unleash her firepower, then used precise movements to initiate a combo and inflict more damage. When she couldn't do that, she blocked her opponent's combo starters to limit the damage she took to single hits. The result was that she was landing combos while her opponents were only getting single hits. It wasn't a showy way of playing, but before you knew it, she was way ahead.

But when had she found the time to practice using Foxy? The character has good specs to start with, so you can be a bit sloppy and still get okay results, but combos that good had to require some practice. If you want to main Foxy, you've gotta put in some serious work, and even Hinami would have a hard time getting to that level without investing the time.

"That tomahawk was very accurate," Harry-san suddenly commented next to me. I nodded.

"Someone uses that many nairs on you, you're gonna freeze up even if you don't want to."

The tomahawk throw. It's a mind game you use against a shield, where you

don't attack with an aerial but instead land right in front of your opponent and grab them.

There's a chance you could get hit when you land, but Hinami used it so precisely and smoothly that it was a pleasure to watch.

At first, it seemed mysterious, but the trick was simple.

"She's baiting those shields."

Hinami's neutral airs were always accompanied by fast falls after a jump. Unlike the normal version, which started up quickly and suddenly from the ground, she was always in the air before she did it, so in a sense, as long as her opponent always shielded when Foxy was in the air, he wouldn't take damage from neutral airs.

And she was clearly using a lot of them, so her opponent knew that if one of them made contact, he'd take a lot of damage from the combo. At a high percentage, he might even get KO'd then and there.

That image would be seared into her opponent's mind whether they liked it or not.

I can't let myself get hit by that attack. That's dangerous.

And those thoughts invited hasty shields.

He wasn't just shielding to protect himself from neutral airs; it was almost like he was being *conditioned* to shield now that he had been taught to fear.

And when her opponent saw Foxy in the air and shielded to protect himself from an illusory neutral air, that's when she made her move.

Without attacking, she landed right in front of him and grabbed him.

As I watched her play, I was steadily coming to understand her overall strategy.

"...Actually, she chooses that option essentially every time."

"Really?" asked Rena-chan, who had come over to listen.

I nodded.

Hinami was doing this well with Foxy, who wasn't her main. I wondered when

in the world she'd found time to practice, but the answer was simple.

She'd done it during the tournament.

Or more likely, during all the games she watched earlier.

Pokes and the bare essentials aside, she was basically only using combos from neutral airs and tomahawks.

Of course, she used the blaster while she was moving around and throwing out back airs. There were also the various aeries she pulled out during combos, the dash attack for when she got attacked or whiff-punished unexpectedly, and the jabs she used when her neutral airs were shielded.

But basically, it was just those two moves—nairs and throws—that she used to rack up damage. All the rest was just window dressing, thrown in to make her maneuvers look better.

In other words—I'd been wondering when she managed to practice so much with Foxy, but I wasn't coming at it the right way. She wasn't using all of Foxy's abilities; she'd just practiced neutral-air combos in a couple of ways until she could do it flawlessly, and she was using that to lay waste to her opponent.

Her moves were all performed perfectly, so if you looked just at that, you'd think she was a seasoned Foxy user. But in truth, the only moves she used were the handful she'd practiced. Everything you could see had been baptized, you might say. That was about it.

"She's probably trying to hide that she's only using that one pattern...but the fact is, almost every time she deals damage, that's how she does it."

Foxy moved fast on the ground and vertically through the air, so even if her attacks all followed the same pattern, it was hard to notice because you naturally focused on the speed. On top of that, after the neutral air, she used a wide range of combos depending on percentage, so at first glance, her attacks looked varied.

But even though she was trouncing her opponent through her underlying mastery of spatial management and maneuvering—when it came to her core attacks, *she was relying solely on two options*. What the hell kind of playstyle was that?

“...Now that you’ve pointed it out, you’re right.”

“You sure picked up on that fast, nanashi-san.”

After watching her play a little longer, Harry-san and Rena-chan both seemed to notice it, too. It was simple once you knew what to look for.

“Doesn’t mean it’s easy to deal with, though...”

Foxy attacked fast, and once Hinami’d created an advantage for herself, she would bring on the pain. It was less like her opponent was rationally making choices and more like he was being guided into certain actions while his brain was floundering to keep up with the angry tsunami of her attack—which was exactly what she wanted. If this was a game of rock-paper-scissors, she wasn’t predicting which one he would make; she was whipping him into a panic so he’d clench his hand into a rock, then make paper herself.

And if that was the arena you were playing in, the crucial thing—even more crucial than noticing her trick or being good with the controller—was to not panic. That wasn’t something you could learn overnight.

“Oh...it’s over.”

The game ended with two stocks remaining for Hinami. That made the final score of the first-to-three 3–0. She’d won.

“Thank you so much!”

Hinami smiled happily and gave her opponent a shallow bow. Her attractiveness and innocence apparently affected him, because he didn’t seem to mind the loss. I’m afraid to imagine her when she’s all grown-up.

As I was gazing at her with a wry smile, she suddenly noticed our group of three. She stuck her finger in the air and smiled at us.

“Nanashi-kun, Harry-san, Rena-chan! I won!”

“Yeah, congrats.”

“Ah-ha-ha. Congratulations. I love that cheerful attitude.”

“Congratulations!!”

Hinami was stacking up one win after the next while easily putting everyone

present under her spell. She was staging such a good performance, in fact, that I was almost starting to worry if she'd be okay with everyone liking her this much. Her technique is unrivaled, both in *Atafami* and life. She uses the combos she's practiced at just the right moment.

"Uh, guess I'm up next...," I said, looking at the leaderboard. That's when it dawned on me. "Which means..."

"You noticed?" Hinami said, grinning boldly.

Yup, you guessed it. Well, of course you did.

If I won my next game, Hinami and I would be facing off in the final round.

*

"There we go."

Yeah, I knew this would happen.

"Oh my gosh! There's no way I can beat you, nanashi-kun!"

"Uh-huh..."

The final round. Predictably, we'd both won our earlier games, and predictably, we were now colliding head-on. That's what you get when the players with the best and second-best winrates in Japan show up at a tournament. Hinami might be using a different character than usual, but her basic level was still on a different plane from her average opponent.

But what was her plan now? She was fairly good at using Foxy, but now that I knew her only highly polished weapon was nair combos, it wasn't going to work against me. She probably knew I'd been watching her last few games, and she must have guessed that I saw through her trick.

On the other hand, if she used Found, she risked revealing her true identity, so she couldn't do that. All the more so if she was playing nanashi. I mean, there's only a handful of people in Japan who can go toe to toe with me using Found.

With those questions on my mind, I sat down at the table, connected my controller, and let it rest lightly in my hands.

“Hey, nanashi-kun?”

I turned around at the sound of her voice.

From the way she was grinning, I just knew she had some plan up her sleeve.

“...What?”

It was enough to get me excited, strange as that sounds.

Her next words were like a single drop of water on the surface of a smooth pond.

“Since I could never beat you on regular terms...”

She proposed this:

“...can we play with special rules?”

I didn’t know exactly what she had in mind, but an alarm bell was blaring instinctively in my brain.

““Special rules’... You’re not asking me for a handicap, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Maintaining the bare minimum of cuteness, she gave me another bold grin.

“It’s simple. We ban both of our mains. So neither of us can use Found or Foxy.”

“...Okay, I get you.”

This would be a showdown of pure *Atafami* skill, played with characters we weren’t used to. Found would blow her cover, so she wanted to use someone different.

“Fine. A contest of skill, then?”

I grinned, and she looked back at me like she was really having fun. This plan would let her keep her identity hidden but still enjoy facing off with nanashi. I was starting to relax, now that I saw her strategy, but then she added another condition.

“And let’s make it a ditto.”

A murmur ran through the crowd of people watching us.

Once again, a jolt of excitement shot through me at her hawkish suggestion.

A ditto match.

So this depended completely on our skill and ability to read each other as players, regardless of our characters' abilities or compatibility.

"Ha-ha... So a contest of skill and nothing else, no excuses allowed."

Instead of nodding, Hinami just grinned at me again.

"That's right. What do you say?"

The challenge was from NO NAME, hidden behind the perfect heroine's mask.

And I was nanashi, without any mask at all.

Of course, I couldn't turn down a proposition that good.

"I'm in."

Another murmur went through the audience. The setup would be rare enough with nanashi taking part, but to have NO NAME as my opponent brought it to another level. No one realized just how incredible the battle they were about to see was. The final match in the tournament was a ditto match between the top two players in Japan.

"Heh-heh. Well then, time to choose the character."

"Exciting."

Our eyes locked, neither of us backing down. We were so fired up now that a couple of people in the audience shouted, too.

The final match between Hinami and me was about to begin.

A ditto match with our main characters banned. Obviously, the key point now was which character to use.

If one of us got to choose, it was possible we'd cheat by choosing a character we were decent at, and while I highly doubt either of us would do that, the important thing was to rule it out completely.

We discussed and came up with a plan.

"Harry-san!" Hinami called over to our host.

“What’s up?”

“Choosing at random would be boring, so I was wondering if you’d do the honors!”

Harry-san hesitated. “I don’t mind, but what do you think, nanashi-kun?”

I nodded. “I’m fine with it.”

“Well, in that case...”

He paused, looking at the character-selection screen on the monitor. Then he gave a satisfied nod and looked back at us.

“Gonna go with Wigglypoff. I want to see how you two use her so I can get some tips!”

Hinami nodded solemnly. “Understood! Nanashi-kun, is that okay with you?”

“Fine by me.”

Continuing our little act, we casually accepted his choice. He threw us a slightly worried look.

“I’m just curious... How much experience do you two have with Wigglypoff?”

“Almost none!” said Hinami. “I’ve done the bare minimum. Seen a few videos. That’s it.”

“Same here.”

“Okay, then it’s fair!” He smiled boyishly. I guess he was just crossing his t’s and dotting his i’s as host.

I half suspected Hinami was fishing for Wigglypoff by calling on Harry-san, but I don’t think that’s in character for her. She probably simply wanted to create the appearance of fairness.

“All righty then, it’s a Wigglypoff ditto between nanashi-kun and Aoi-san! I have a feeling this is gonna be good!”

The audience buzzed with excitement.

“Oh, by the way...,” Harry-san said bashfully. “Would you mind if I put this one on my channel? I think people would like to see it...”

“...Oh, on YouTube?”

“Yeah.”

He probably wanted to livestream it, specifically.

Well, there were already plenty of videos of me online because people I play against would post them without asking sometimes, and I wasn't trying to hide the fact that I was at this meetup. I didn't see an issue.

“Sure, but...”

I glanced at Hinami, who turned to Harry-san with a pleasant expression.

“It's fine! Just don't share my face or voice, please!”

“Oh, don't worry about that! I'll be covering it myself!”

“Ooh, commentary? Got it, ha-ha.”

She giggled. The fun, bright aura she gave off at little moments like this was another characteristic of her perfect-heroine mode. I'm fairly sure anyone watching her would be willing to do whatever it took to make her smile some more. Although strictly speaking, I wouldn't be.

“Okay! I'll get everything set up. It'll just take a minute.”

Well, that was decided fast. Hinami and I were going live on YouTube. All I had to do was play without talking—so the usual—but who can help being nervous in that kind of situation?

*

An offline meetup five minutes from a train station in Tokyo.

A dozen or so people stood around one of three tables, waiting to watch the game. The monitor was hooked up to a laptop via some little device.

“Hello, hello! Harry here.”

“And Max.”

Harry-san and Max-san were speaking crisply into a mic connected to the laptop via a different device. Compared with a minute earlier, they'd taken on their usual roles. Guess their announcer switch just got turned on. I'd never

seen a broadcast being recorded before, and I was struck by how they commented on the most insignificant stuff. Also, they were a lot louder than I expected.

“Believe it or not, today...”

Harry-san gave his viewers a brief rundown of the day’s event. He explained that this was the final match in a tournament at an AtaHouse meetup, that it was a ditto match—and that one of the players was nanashi. In order to keep unnecessary information out of my brain, I didn’t listen or check the chat to see how many people were there or what kinds of comments they were making.

“Well, I hate to keep everyone waiting, so let’s get this game started! Please nod if you’re ready, players!”

At that unspoken hint from Harry-san that we didn’t need to say anything, we both gave our silent approval. Personally, I was ready the second I sat down.

“Then let’s begin!”

That was the signal for Hinami and me to choose Wigglypoff as well as the stage we’d agreed on in advance. It was a simple, medium-sized stage with a platform on either side.

A new screen appeared. Two Wigglypoffs floated down to the stage.

“Three! Two! One!”

I released the unnecessary tension from my hands around the controller.

Sweeping all other thoughts from my mind, I calmly took in the screen.

“GO!”

As the game’s announcer signaled the start, Hinami’s and my Wigglypoffs both did a short hop at almost the same instant. We moved closer to each other in a rapid swirl of air attacks, taking advantage of Wigglypoff’s excellent horizontal air speed and ability to jump multiple times—both of which she did better than any other character—and then moved away again.

We both did a series of jumps, performing long-lasting moves while watching our start-up and ending lag. To the people watching, this negotiation might look like we were simply flying back and forth, desperately inputting a bunch of

random moves that never hit their mark. You see the same kind of strategy a lot with other characters, but only a Wigglypoff ditto could have this level of repeated aerial approach and retreat.

“What are they doing?” Max-san asked Harry-san. I guess his voice was traveling through the mic to people all across the country.

“Well, they’re sizing each other up, getting a sense for the timing they’ll need in order for their attacks to capitalize on the other player’s lag. They’re also figuring out if they should move forward or back when they attack.”

“Ah, I see.”

Our negotiations continued against the backdrop of Harry-san’s commentary.

If this was any ordinary opponent, I’d be able to assess their attack timing, movement quirks, and distancing, and that would give me a sense of timing, so if I closed in at x moment, my attack would be sure to hit home—but in a way, that strategy depended on my opponent making mistakes. And with a player as good at judging the situation as Hinami was, mistakes hardly ever happened. My inability to easily create an opening for myself was the sure sign I was playing a high-tier opponent.

What happens when neither player exposes themselves to attack—it’s a deadlock. The two Wigglypoffs did not expose themselves, instead repeatedly poking at each other in the hopes of baiting out a whiff and shouting “Wiggly!” “Poff!” as they desperately kicked at nothing in midair. That was all that happened for nine or ten seconds.

“They want to be sure their poke will catch their opponent if they happen to come flying toward them. Or they want to be ready to act in the lag after their opponent makes theirs. They’re adjusting their timing and positioning over and over so that it stays advantageous.”

“Ah, I see.”

But if you don’t at the very least take *some* risk, you don’t get any results. Hinami moved first. She took a step into my space to shake me up.

But my forward-air hitbox was waiting for her. And Hinami’s Wigglypoff crashed defenselessly into it as she tried to narrow the distance between us. A

low-risk poke on my part had worked out perfectly.

“Ooh, the first hit!”

“Nanashi-san has just successfully attacked.”

Hinami’s Wigglypoff bent backward slightly. But I’d only grazed her, and she didn’t freeze long enough for me to start a combo. I bore down to follow up with another hit, but she dodged.

And back to the stalemate.

“In situations like this where your opponent approaches to attack, if you’ve already made a move in advance, that will hit your opponent before their attack hits you. That’s what we call a poke.”

“Interesting. So the other player crashes straight into the hitbox.”

“Right. Since they’re sussing each other out, the hit is almost inevitable. You could also call it luck, though.”

The game moved on. Most players would probably get a little scared and pull back slightly, but Hinami was not so weak. Realizing that she was going to come after me again, I maneuvered steadily, preparing another poke.

Right then, with exquisite timing, she caught me in my own ending lag. A hit.

“And you can see here that it goes the other way sometimes. If a player reads their opponent’s poke and punishes during the ending lag, they’ll land the hit instead. Of course, the timing is very difficult.”

“You’re talking about whiff punishing a poke, which is really hard to do.”

“Exactly.”

We’d both scored a hit, but too late in the animation to start a combo.

“You know there’s a lot of different patterns, but essentially, you can think of it as a game of rock-paper-scissors where you’ll do best by fading back.”

“...That’s part of rock-paper-scissors?”

“It’s a little hard to explain. Basically, when you make an attack, it’s a good idea to keep your distance.”

“What do you mean?”

Hinami had faded away from me, then attacked during my ending lag. Even though it didn't lead into a combo this time, either, I'd probably made a mistake by giving her the chance to punish me.

“See what just happened? If you fade in tandem with an incoming attack, as long as your opponent isn't way more mobile than you, you can dodge, right? Which also means that you can go after the ending lag from the attack you just dodged.”

“Right.”

“So basically, you can't lose if you fall back.”

“Why not just do that all the time, then?”

Apparently, instead of proactively attacking me, Hinami used a main strategy that seemed to be to evade and counter. In terms of return on risk, that makes sense for Wigglypoff.

“...You'd think, right? That's what the platform is for.”

“How so?”

“I mean...it ends.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Hinami had backed up all the way the edge of the stage, shielding. If I landed right where I was and successfully baited her, I could throw her off the stage, but Wigglypoff can go from shielding to aerials really quickly, and she's also got good damage and hitboxes. It wasn't a choice I could make lightly. Watching and waiting was probably a good idea.

“Since you've got that to worry about, falling back is a no-risk, middle-return action only if you've got plenty of room behind you. But as soon as you run out of room, that's the end of that.”

“Right, 'cause there's nowhere to go. And then you're in danger of losing neutral, right?”

“Exactly. Meanwhile, the player who pushes the other person to the edge still

has plenty of room, so they can fall back as much as they want.”

“Ah, I see.”

Hinami was close to the edge, so now she could only win through reading me. She was reduced to desperately doing rock-paper-scissors with only two options.

That’s why I poked with an aerial just close enough to barely touch the edge of Hinami’s shield. This prevented her from gaining more ground, was low risk for me, and put pressure on her. I’d wait until she couldn’t hold out any longer and made herself vulnerable, and then I’d fire the decisive shot. After all, I could retreat as much as I wanted to avoid Hinami’s attacks.

“When you’re in a good position to fade, you have an incredible advantage because you can choose that option as much as you want. It’s a very strong action, but the more times you use it, the less times you have left to use it, and the more opportunities you give your opponent. That makes it a fairly unique choice.”

“So it’s a superpowered double-edged sword?”

“Pretty much.”

I watched Hinami’s movements intently, poking at her with my Wigglypoff from positions where I could predict her jumps and rolls, and where I’d be safe from any out-of-shield counterattacks. Once nanashi has you at the edge of the stage, he doesn’t back off.

“If you fade back, it’s hard to lose at that particular round of rock-paper-scissors, but if you do it too much, things get harder and harder. That’s why people fall back after lunging way forward and keep an eye on their opponent’s moves as they attack. It’s what they call ‘playing footsies.’”

“Ah, that makes sense. Each player is trying to make the other one move back to the edge of the platform and choose the moments when their opponent doesn’t fall back to deal damage... Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but that’s the essential structure.”

As Harry-san and Max-san were carrying on their smooth and pleasant commentary, Hinami and I were continuing our negotiation at the edge. I could fall back freely, but she could not.

Finally, my relentless pressure paid off.

“Bad move.”

She couldn’t afford to fade, but moving forward was tough, too. Without forgetting the light shield she’d done to keep an eye on the situation, I grabbed Hinami’s Wigglypoff.

Down throw, forward air, forward air. At a low percentage, I could segue from the throw into a combo. Hinami’s Wigglypoff flew off the platform, and I chased after.

“Ooh, here we go!”

Harry-san’s cheer got me fired up.

Now for the all-important edge guard. When I did the combo, I used up two of my jumps, so I couldn’t chase her that far. Still, as soon as I landed on the stage, I got all my jumps back, and she hadn’t been blown so far back that I couldn’t go for a wall of pain. I went in the direction she’d fallen and launched an aerial.

But she expertly used a downward air dodge to escape my strike and grab straight onto the ledge.

“Aww! Anticlimactic.”

“Would that have led to a combo?”

“No, not a combo, but nanashi-san would still have an advantage. When an attack lands, the person getting hit freezes for a period of time. If that period lasts longer than the attacker’s ending lag, then the victim gets that much of a later start on their next move.”

“You’re talking about frame disadvantage, right?”

“Right. If that happens, then the victim starts at a disadvantage in the next round of rock-paper-scissors.”

“Huh...so it’s like you lose even if you both do scissors and it’s a draw?”

“That’s a good way of putting it. And if the person who has an advantage wins that round, then they have an advantage again in the next round. So even if you don’t land a combo, it’s important in this game to hit your opponent as hard as possible when you have an advantage.”

My Wigglypoff returned to the stage before Hinami finished her recovery.

“And you were saying that this time, he only got in one hit.”

“Yeah. Aoi-san judged the situation well. She knew that from that position, her downward air dodge would be faster than her opponent’s fast fall, and she could grab the ledge, too.”

“Very simple.”

“Yes, very simple—but even if you know that mentally, it’s scary to angle it downward there, so personally, I have a hard time doing it when it counts. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Not exactly a laughing matter!”

She’d avoided another hit. But she still had virtually nowhere to go, and I still had the advantage. I ramped up my poking and put pressure on her again.

“...Thirty percent, down throw.”

But what was this? Hinami was muttering something, and I didn’t have to see her face to know she was cool as could be.

She tried to leap over my head to recover more ground, but I moved back and prevented her from doing so. At the same time, I landed another hit. Hinami had to continue fighting at a disadvantage.

I maneuvered so she wouldn’t retake her space now that I had it, maintaining my advantage. That’s one important element of this game.

“Nanashi-san sure is tough.”

“He sure is. Aoi-san’s been in a fairly bad way for a while now.”

“Since they’re using the same character, she can’t brute force it with an advantage in mobility or hitboxes. If she keeps taking damage, she’s gonna be in real trouble before too long.”

When you're edge guarding, obviously KOing your opponent was ideal, but when their percent was very low, racking up damage is important, too. Using Poff's jumps to the full, I continued to make scattershot air attacks, building a wall of hitboxes. The person on the receiving end of this strategy would want to get back on the platform—but moving forward would put them in range of my attack, and they couldn't fade because they were already at the edge. The noose gradually tightened until they finally cracked. Even a top player like Hinami was no exception. All I had to do now was carry it through.

"...Five," Hinami mumbled.

At the same time, her Wigglypoff landed from a double jump and dashed on the ground toward my midair position a slight distance away.

Oh.

That's when I realized.

My Poff had run out of jumps.

"...Shit!" I hissed.

Normally, I'd be able to parry with my extra jumps and midair mobility to retreat. But my Wigglypoff couldn't do that, so she was doomed to drop to the ground from her current position. I could air dodge to change the position and timing of her fall, and I could attack while landing, but to a certain degree, where she would land was predictable. And the instant she hit the ground, she'd have some landing lag, tiny as it was.

The second I used up my last jump, Hinami predicted all this, landed right away, and started running. She was ready for me. From here on out, I was at a disadvantage in our game of rock-paper-scissors.

"Ouch."

Wigglypoff could do five jumps altogether. She must have been counting my jumps.

The second I landed, I tried for an aerial. But Hinami had control, shielding out of her dash to block my aggressive attempt and grabbing my Wigglypoff.

And then.

“Thirty percent...,” she hissed. “Down throw.”

As she said it, Hinami’s Wigglypoff pressed mine onto the ground and then hopped up at an angle. I was in the thirties, the same level of damage Hinami had when I grabbed her before.

“Forward air... No,” she mumbled in a terrifyingly cold voice. Done with her throw, she pivoted, jumped diagonally, and hit me with a back air.

“Uh-oh, a back air!” Harry-san shouted excitedly.

I was surprised myself.

I’d grabbed Hinami at a similar percentage and done a down throw, too. And I’d followed up with a forward air.

But that was wrong. Wigglypoff’s back airs were just a tiny bit more powerful than her forward airs. They’re a little harder to perform, but if you were going from a down throw to an aerial combo, then rather than jumping straight into forward air, you’d get more damage if you switched directions right when the throw ended, did a backward jump after your opponent, then attacked with a back air.

...But if I wasn’t mistaken...

...Hinami had just copied me by doing a down throw at 30 percent, then segueing into an aerial.

The percent where a particular throw will lead into a combo is different for each character, and of course, while anyone would know those numbers for their own character, it’s really hard to memorize them for every fighter. Okay, so I actually *have* done that, but unlike me, Hinami took the shortest possible path to becoming a top player: She copied me.

Since she wants to spend time on other parts of her life, she probably divides necessary from unnecessary information so she doesn’t waste any time. She probably considered combo memorization unnecessary, and instead of asking herself which direction to throw those characters in order to segue into a combo, she’d only have to ask which direction she should alter her own launch angle after being hit so they wouldn’t be able to start a combo. For example, if such-and-such character grabs you, you’ll be okay if you jam the stick all the

way in such-and-such direction—that sort of thing tends to exist for a lot of characters, Wigglypoff included.

Thinking back to what Hinami had said before her attack, it's probably safe to assume that she had learned about the throw-to-combo route from me, which I learned from watching someone else.

Which meant that she was learning combo routes from her opponent during a battle, then *improving on them from the very first time she used them to make them hit harder*, and turning them back on that same opponent.

“...You're kidding me.”

It would be scary enough if she watched her opponent carefully during the game and completely absorbed everything they did, but she was actually making their strategies better, as if that was a totally natural thing to do.

This player, Aoi Hinami—her specs were just too high.

*

“Now that was a match!”

“Ha-ha-ha, yeah, that was exciting.”

The final match was over, and I was running through it in my mind as I smiled at Harry-san.

“Also, you're amazing, Aoi-san.”

“Ah-ha-ha. Thank you.” Hinami gracefully accepted the compliment.

“Seriously, you're a star in the *Atafami* universe to give nanashi-kun that much of a run for his money!”

“Thanks,” she said, looking down. “But...in the end, I still lost.” She couldn't hide the regret in her eyes.

We'd played the match according to the usual first-to-three rule.

I beat Hinami 3–1 to take first place.

“Ha-ha-ha. Better luck next time.”

“...Hmph.”

Hinami intercepted my boasting with a razor-sharp glare. I think she was genuinely pissed off. *Hopefully it doesn't affect my assignments.*

"I knew I could count on you, nanashi-san!! We won!"

"Uh, you didn't do anything."

"Hey!"

For some reason, Rena-chan seemed overjoyed to get a brush-off. Maybe she's the type who likes being mistreated.

Harry-san was looking at his laptop with a satisfied expression.

"Thanks to you two, that stream went great! Chat couldn't believe nanashi's first live game was with Wigglypoff, but in general, everyone really enjoyed it! Some people were asking who Aoi is. Got some new subs, too. You guys are awesome!"

"Ha-ha, happy to be of service."

This guy was definitely more at home with streaming than I was, but I made an effort to sound natural when I answered. I may be a nerd, but I'm purely a game nerd, and I don't spend much time in that culture.

"Actually, this was a really great experience for me, too, since I've never played so many people in real life before. Thank you!" I replied.

That seemed to remind Harry-san of something.

"Oh right! There's a question I've been wanting to ask you!" He pointed at me, his tone tense.

"What's up?"

"Ordinarily, players who start out online have some trouble adjusting to the real world. But even though you mainly play online, you were a natural with the controller. What's your secret? If you have some special way of practicing, I'd love to learn from you!"

"Uh..."

The words stuck in my throat.

I mean, the main reason I was so good at playing offline was...

I glanced to my side. The second-best player in Japan, who I'd played a million offline games with, was looking back at me with an expression that said, *Whatever*. I think she meant I could tell them the truth as long as I didn't connect NO NAME to her.

So I decided to go with that.

"Actually...NO NAME and I play each other offline a lot."

"What?!"

"*That* NO NAME?!"

"You're kidding! How do you know each other?!"

At this earth-shattering news, even the silent onlookers craned their necks toward me. Yeah, I mean, the mysterious top two players in Japan, who'd never showed their faces offline before today, had actually been meeting in secret all this time? I think it was enough to shake up everyone slightly.

"Ha-ha...that's a surprise."

"What's your winrate?!"

"How many times have you met?!"

"What's NO NAME like as a person?!"

Without waiting for me to answer, they were shooting questions at me rapid-fire. I glanced at the player in question, and this time, she scrunched her eyebrows irritably. So she didn't want me to give away the details. Understood. I could see her point—if I said the mysterious NO NAME was a second-year high school student like me and went to my school and on top of that was a beautiful girl, the *Atafami* world wouldn't be able to handle it. No doubt it would be the start of some kind of myth.

"Well...they prefer to keep a low profile, so I can't say much..."

"Oh, th-that makes sense... No worries!"

Harry-san sounded disappointed, but he quickly obliged and dropped the subject. Man, I felt guilty. He'd helped us out so much throughout the day, I wanted to say a little more.

“But if I keep it to what I *can* say...”

“Yeah?!”

A murmur ran through the crowd. Just as *NO NAME* implied, the player’s age, gender, and everything else were totally unknown. Whatever I said was sure to cause a stir in the *Atafami* world.

I racked my brain for personal information about Hinami that wouldn’t reveal her identity.

“Well...if I were to compare them to something...”

“What, man?!”

I thought for a second, then hit on the perfect answer. There was probably only one phrase that accurately summed up *NO NAME* as a player and a human being.

I turned to the crowd, full of confidence, and told them:

“...*NO NAME* is like—a final boss.”

“A f-final boss...”

A shiver seemed to run down the spine of everyone listening.

“...Huh?”

Somehow, I felt like I’d just created a massive misunderstanding, but I hadn’t lied, so I was in the clear...right?

By the way, the player herself was staring at me with the face of a captured princess as she mingled with the crowd. *Sorry, you’re the one doing the capturing here.*

*

Half an hour or so passed. After the excitement from the tournament died down, everyone hung out and talked more calmly for a while.

“Wow, you’re all so connected.”

We’d split the bill for a pile of snacks and juice and alcohol from the closest convenience store and were chatting about the *Atafami* world while we shared

everything. I was learning that all kinds of new information was flying, since I usually only played online. Obviously, Hinami and I and the rest of the underage crowd were having soft drinks.

By the way, Harry-san and Rena-chan were sitting by me, and Rena-chan in particular kept bumping my feet because we were fairly close. Also, every time I looked at her, I saw that heart-shaped hole, which I wish she'd just cover up. If I didn't install Mizusawa quick, I'd probably die.

"Yeah, we are. Oh, by the way, Ashigaru-san shows up here a lot."

"Ashigaru-san? The pro gamer?"

"That's the one."

I latched on to the meetup gossip Rena-chan was doling out. Ashigaru-san is the top Lizard user in Japan. He's a pro *Atafami* player who regularly participates in international tournaments, and when he's in good form, he sometimes ranks at the top. He's incredible.

"I bet he's really tough."

"He is! At least, when I played him, I was totally useless."

"Ah-ha-ha. That's not surprising."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Rena-chan complained, but she smiled at the same time and touched my leg between the knee and the thigh. *Please stop, I'm ticklish.* Weirdly, even after she took her finger away, the sensation stayed.

Next to us, Harry-san nodded enthusiastically.

"I mean, his main is Lizard. If you don't know how to handle him, you're gonna be useless."

"Yeah, with Lizard, you have to be extra careful."

Lizard's a thief character who scatters firecrackers and steel traps and other projectiles like that all over the stage, and he fights at mid-to long-range with heavy blows. There's a lot of techniques and set plays you've got to learn, and when you're fighting, you have to always be thinking about multiple things. So even though he's a top-tier character, people say he's hard to use.

But once you've mastered him, you can really control the game, and if your opponent doesn't know how to deal with Lizard, you have a huge advantage. I've seen a lot of games where Lizard's opponents short-circuit mentally from dealing with all projectiles, so he's able to seize control and beat them before they can do anything.

Ashigaru-san probably used Lizard better than anyone else in Japan. Maybe in the world.

Harry-san picked up a piece of smoked squid and went on in a pained voice.

"Oh yeah, you've gotta take some serious special measures. When we played, I knew I was screwed."

"I know what you mean! He's beyond me, too," Max-san said, which convinced me they weren't making this up.

"If you're playing someone who's mastered him, I don't think you can even get him with mind games."

"Right?! I mean, you can't get close to him. And if you do, you gotta be perfect, or he'll intercept you with a dash attack or a forward tilt, just like *wham!* You've gotta keep your cool, but it's so hard..."

"Huh...I'd like to play him some time."

As we chatted about *Atafami*, Harry-san, Max-san, and Rena-chan were all drinking canned cocktails, while I had a cola. Just being able to talk openly about what I love made those totally ordinary convenience-store snacks and drinks taste like the most delicious things in the world.

...Uh, wait a second.

"Rena-chan, are you drinking alcohol?"

"Yes, and?"

Wait, I thought underage drinking was illegal...

"Um, how old are you?" I asked her. She smiled nonchalantly.

"I know what you're thinking! I'm twenty."

"What?!"

She was way older than me! No wonder she had that weirdly adult magnetism. I'd gotten carried away and started calling her Rena-chan and using casual language with her, but we never properly introduced ourselves. I did say I was in high school, but now that I thought about it, I hadn't asked anyone else how old they were. Damn, human interactions are tough.

"I should be calling you Rena-san! Sorry about that," I said.

Rena-chan...Rena-*san* smiled invitingly.

"Oh, no, nanashi-kun gets to call me Rena-chan."

"Um..."

She just took a giant step closer to me—metaphorically and literally. That sweet scent blurred my awareness again. Shit, I had to install Mizusawa. Otherwise, I was going to sit there gaping like a fish.

So what would Mizusawa do?

I remembered a conversation he and I had a little while ago.

And then...

"You're right... I *am* technically nanashi-kun. I'll stick with that," I said in a confident, joking tone.

I don't know if that was the right answer, but that's what my inner Mizusawa said. I think it's because of that conversation we had about our plans after high school, when he very confidently said he'd be all right because "this is me we're talking about, after all." Aside from the discomfort of acting so full of myself, I think it worked in the conversation.

"Ah-ha-ha! That was a very nanashi-like answer!" Rena-chan said happily. Maybe she really does enjoy it when someone messes with her or talks down to her. Weird.

"Um, so, Rena-chan?" I said hesitantly.

"Yes, nanashi-kun?" she answered.

I felt like we were so close, we were actually touching—is that normal when you're twenty? I was trying to act like it was totally normal for me, too, and I

think I was scoring a ton of EXP.

As I was successfully navigating this new kind of conversation with grown-ups...I suddenly heard Hinami's voice from a slight distance.

"Nope, no one! I mean, there are some guys, but no girls. That's why I don't talk about it much at school."

I glanced over. She was surrounded by three or four guys, apparently talking about herself at the center of the circle.

"Yeah, I haven't seen many female players."

"Right?! One reason I came today is because I felt so lonely."

I think they were talking about whether there were any other *Atafami* players at her school. She was babbling on in a leisurely, charming way, and the guys listening and nodding along seemed to be enjoying themselves just as much—wonder if she was fine with acting like a princess? I just hoped this didn't turn into a clash of the princesses. I glanced over at Rena-chan. For a few seconds, she stared at Hinami, her black eyes unreadable, before looking away.

"You never go to offline tournaments?"

Harry-san's question brought me back to our conversation. Max-san and Rena-chan were looking at me curiously. Offline tournaments?

"Honestly, I was never very interested before now."

"Really?" Rena-chan asked.

I nodded.

Until now, I'd stayed in the online world, but of course, that didn't mean I hadn't thought about it.

"Winrates are calculated from hundreds or thousands of games, but the results of a tournament might depend on how I feel the day of. So I thought maybe it didn't mean as much."

"Yeah, I can see your point."

It was similar to how I used to think about life.

No matter how high your winrate normally is, if you get nervous on the big

day and mess up, you're treated like a loser. *Atafami* is the best of the best, and I didn't want it to be contaminated by elements of a shitty game the second it got pulled into the real world—aka life.

I wanted to remove as much randomness as possible from a competition of effort and ability.

"But..."

"But?"

I thought back on my literal "life experience."

"...lately, I've started to think I should just enjoy all of it. That's why I came here today."

Harry-san grinned. It was a kind smile, with deep lines at the corners of his eyes.

"Interesting... So you've gone through some mental and emotional changes. Well, you are a student, after all!"

"You could be right," I said casually and smiled. Hinami is my mental image at moments like this when I want to seem approachable. "I'm planning to check out some of those tournaments in the future."

"You are? That's great! I'll let you know next time something's going on."

"Would you?"

"Sure. How should I get in touch? I can't remember if you're on Twitter or not."

"Uh...no."

I did have an account, but it was a private one that I basically just used to keep an eye on other people and never tweeted myself. So I actually didn't have one for interacting with people.

"You don't? It'd really be handy for you to have an account as nanashi."

"You think so?" I asked.

Rena-chan nodded. "Twitter is the main way everyone stays in touch around here, with replies and DMs."

“Guess I better make one, then.”

“The second nanashi makes an account, I bet you’ll get tons of followers,” Rena-chan said, eyeing me. She seemed pleased, although I’m not sure why.

“Do you have one?” I asked her.

“Of course! Wait a second...” She took out her phone and showed me her profile.

“Thanks.”

The account for rena@atafamiaka was pulled up, with an icon that was very obviously a selfie. She followed 56 people and had 521 followers, which was fairly impressive.

“This is the account where I chat with everyone!” she said, handing me her phone. I took it, slightly embarrassed by her trust, and scrolled down through her tweets. There was a big mix of content—a picture of an *Atafami* screen with the words *Training mode, anyone?* as well as tweets about her everyday life with selfies attached, and comments about real-world meetups. There were even lists of stuff she wanted from Amazon and ones saying, *It’s here!* I wonder if she’s well-known in this world. I guess you stand out if you look like that in the *Atafami* world.

“Cute!”

I’d found a picture of Rena-chan holding a cat, with the words *At the cat café.*

“I know! Actually...”

She sidled up right next to me and started telling me about the picture. Since we were both looking at the screen, we were super close, and our shoulders were actually touching. That sweet scent drifted into my nostrils and attacked my brain again, and a warm sensation was spreading steadily from my shoulder. I’m fairly sure I’d be in trouble if she stayed this close for long.

I mumbled the appropriate responses as she told me her story, then when she paused, I handed back her phone and continued talking to Harry-san and Max-san.

“Anyway, I’ll get in touch after I make an account.”

“Got it. But you still haven’t told me how,” Harry-san said jokingly, laughing a little.

“Ah-ha-ha. Very true. Wanna exchange LINE info?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Me too!”

I traded info with Harry-san, Max-san, and Rena-chan. These days, that’s not enough to get me flustered—but I did feel slightly guilty about doing so with a girl while I was dating Kikuchi-san...

Once we were friends on LINE, Harry-san turned to me with wide eyes.

“I saw you use your real name on there—are you okay with that?”

“Oh yeah...”

I only realized after he pointed it out; I’d been using my gamer handle the whole time at this meetup, but my LINE name was just Fumiya Tomozaki.

I felt a little shy about having the two names connected, but it wasn’t like anything was going to happen just because people knew my real name.

“It’s fine! No loss for me!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Gotcha. I’ll still add you as nanashi, though.”

“Fine by me,” I said, nodding.

By the way, Harry-san was just Harry, Max-san was Shibata/max, and Rena-chan was R*.

Rena-chan gazed at her phone intently, then smiled.

“Your name is Fumiya-kun?”

“Um, yeah.”

She locked eyes with me. “Can I call you Fumiya-kun?”

“Um, I guess so...”

It was technically fine, but again, I was dating Kikuchi-san. I felt guilty—but I would sound crazy if I said, *No, you can’t call me Fumiya-kun because I have a girlfriend*. This was a tough situation.

“Yesss! Fumiya-kun it is!” she joked.

“‘Yesss’? What’s so exciting about that?” I joked back.

Wow, we sure were getting friendly. It was strange; I felt like my position was being eroded but not in an unpleasant way.

Now that we’d all exchanged info, we went back to talking about *Atafami*. I wanted to ask them a lot of things.

“Interesting! So depending on the location, some characters are easier to defend against than others?”

There were YouTubers like Harry-san and Max-san, and others who wanted to be pros. There was the Kanto region and the Kansai region, the online scene and the offline scene. A whole wide world was out there, and of course, as an *Atafami* player, I wanted to know about it.

“Yeah. The number of players in a certain area who’ve mastered a given character is surprisingly important.”

“It’s so...mundane, you know?”

I tried to sound as cheerful and funny as possible as I asked the questions I wanted to ask and responded to other people’s questions or made my own comments. What was slightly different from other parts of my life was that it was all based on *Atafami*, which I love.

To my own mild surprise, I felt totally at home here.

I hoped that Hinami was feeling the same way.

*

The next morning, I was sitting on my bed, checking various social media sites and smiling awkwardly.

“Top Online Player nanashi Turns Out to Be a Hunk...”

As I was scrolling through the feed on my private Twitter account, an *Atafami* news roundup with that title popped up. I opened it and saw that the main *Atafami* threads were all about nanashi appearing at a real-world meetup, sweeping the tournament with overwhelming skill—and being a stud who

brought a beautiful girl with him.

“...Oh man.”

That wasn't all.

An *Atafami* player who I followed had rt'd a tweet saying *nanashi-san is super handsome, can't believe he's in high school!* by someone who was at the meetup and then added *For reals?* There were clips of the live broadcast of my final match against Hinami and videos of past online games posted by my opponents. Nanashi had apparently been the talk of Japan's *Atafami* world since the day before.

“Wow...this is getting more attention than I expected.”

I knew I was somewhat well-known because of my ranking, but I honestly had no idea that just taking part in an offline meetup would get this much attention. Even famous pro players who went to international tournaments were tweeting stuff like *So nanashi finally showed up offline and Good-looking on top of it all. S-tier?* My stomach was full of butterflies just reading them.

There were also some tweets saying stuff like *Good at Atafami, handsome... God's unfair. Unforgivable, nanashi*, where I couldn't tell if they were being mean or joking or both, which made my stomach flip.

But anyway, if the rumor was that the top online player in Japan was a high school student and handsome to boot, I felt like I needed to say something.

“‘Handsome,’ huh...?”

I'd gotten that compliment multiple times the day before. It was the polar opposite of what I'd always been called in the past—*gloomy* or *creepy* or *ugly* or *a freak*. And now I was being hit with words like *stylish* and *easy to talk to* and *chatty*, which I normally associated with the normies in my class. This was definitely a first for me.

I stood in front of my full-length mirror and stared at my reflection.

“...Interesting.”

I realized something.

In the past, I'd looked at this guy in the mirror, with his hair done and his

mannequin clothes on, and thought, *He's pretty stylish*. That gave me a confidence boost.

But this was different.

The guy in the mirror hadn't styled his hair, and he was wearing his pajamas. He sure as hell wasn't stylish. The real me was on full display.

But that didn't matter.

My own reflection didn't gross me out.

My hair was a mess, considering I'd basically just woken up and run my hand through it.

I was wearing a set of threadbare black sweats that were obviously very well-loved.

My ordinary bedroom added nothing.

But...I didn't feel like I was a freakish nerd.

I don't know if that counts as growth or vanity.

Maybe I just felt that way because I could see the changes in how I was holding myself.

Or maybe I was a little buzzed from all the compliments I'd gotten the day before.

But I was sure those changes meant more. Way more than dressing well or being able to hold a conversation.

"...All right!"

I was staring at my face.

I'd been living with this face for seventeen years. It was the first thing people would see about me, and I couldn't change it.

My features weren't especially even, but they weren't too bad, either. I didn't hate it quite as much as I used to—and as I studied, I found myself accepting it unconditionally.

"'Handsome,' eh? ...Well, I'm not sure about that," I muttered—to who, I

didn't know. Eventually, I started to feel silly and laughed to myself.

It's not that I wasn't happy. But I didn't think those compliments determined my value.

Any value I had came from the action and determination that made me decide to change and then follow through.

I'm a gamer to the core, and that was my genuine belief.

"...Here I go!"

I pulled myself together and sat down at my computer to start doing some research.

I wanted to find out more about the world of *Atafami* that Harry-san and Max-san had told me about the day before.

First, I looked up Harry-san's YouTube channel and scanned the list of uploaded videos. At the top of the long list was one titled "Japan's top player is even better than me at using Wigglypoff! nanashi VS Aoi on *Atafami*." I smirked. I got his point, but that's really the kind of title he uses?

Skipping over my own video out of embarrassment, I played some of his other videos in the background as I continued my research.

I looked up schedules for real-world meetups, and the differences between Kanto and Kansai style. I read about players like Harry-san with profitable YouTube channels, and pros who played internationally.

These days, the majority of pro players actually seemed to have YouTube channels, too, and when I searched for famous pros on Twitter, a high percentage of them had links to their channel. They all posted fairly often, but how did they balance practice with making videos? Considering that a lot of them also had regular jobs, I figured they must be posting their practice games on YouTube.

And how did they cover the costs when they went overseas for tournaments? How did sponsors support pro teams? How big were the prizes, what social standing did pros have, what was the history, and how did future prospects look? I researched all of it.

Unlike the game itself, this way of having your life wrapped around *Atafami* was new to me. I'd assumed I knew about that world, but I'd never actually looked into it, and now that I did, its breadth and depth surprised me.

"These guys are incredible..."

I looked at some videos by people other than Harry-san, too. I'd watched a lot of serious games and tournament videos in the past, but I'd skimmed over the lessons for beginners and the character intros. I hadn't realized it, but like Harry-san, a lot of people made money off this stuff. I could tell from the variety of the editing choices, conversational styles, and structures that a lot more went into it than simply playing the game.

"Interesting..."

I'd thought online winrates were the be-all and end-all of *Atafami*, but maybe I was wrong. I mean, even a quick glance around revealed this hugely varied universe.

It was like...well, like real life.

Some people played for fun, and others more seriously. Some were pros, others were YouTubers.

Some pros specialized in serious matches, while others were entertainers who attracted viewers more with their commentary than with their playing.

There were people who did this as a job and others who did it for fun on the side.

Their perspectives and the information they provided were all over the board, and none was "better" than any other.

Well, in that case...

...if I wanted to do it myself, what approach would I choose?

Part of me was casually mulling over the question now.

4

Ultimately, the people in front of the screen determine the outcome of the game

It was Monday, and I was in Sewing Classroom #2.

“Well, well, Tomozaki-kun. Allow me to congratulate you on your victory,” Hinami said grumpily.

That’s hardly the way to greet someone first thing on Monday morning. What was with her?

“You mean at the thing?”

“Yep. ‘Grats.”

Obviously still hung up on her loss at the tournament, her tone was dripping with malice. The perfect heroine was nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t even see the final boss. Right now, she was just a little kid bitter over losing a game.

I decided to take the bait.

“Thanks. It was a pretty easy win.”

“What?!”

I could hear the blood vessels in her head threatening to burst—which is impressive, since that doesn’t actually make a sound. If I needled her any more, I’d probably get myself killed. I’d better get serious and calm her down.

“I think your last-minute assessments of the situation were weak. And as long as you’re tied to probabilities, you won’t be able to move past that. Good game, though.”

“What?!?!?”

I heard one of her capillaries actually burst that time—which, again, is impressive, since that doesn’t actually make a sound.

But Hinami took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then blew out her anger along with the dark flames inside her and glared at me.



“I’m not making excuses. I lost this time. Next time, I won’t. End of discussion.”

She abruptly looked away from me. Props to her for holding back her anger well enough to give me a straight answer, but the gesture afterward was ridiculous. I wondered if she acted childish at moments like this on purpose.

“You’re such a brat.”

“Shut up. I’ll give you more assignments.”

“Hey, that’s an abuse of power!”

“Shut up.”

I was sure she had a better vocabulary than *shut up*, but she was really badgering me with it now. It was like Foxy only using nairs, and both had a strength in their way. Her brain wasn’t running at full capacity, but I backed down. I knew if I resisted any further, she might actually give me more assignments, and then I’d be in real trouble. See how mature I am?

“So what are we doing today? An assignment?”

I changed the subject because I felt like if we stayed on the current topic any longer, we would both lose. Effective use of my skills.

“Yes. Although, you haven’t made any progress on your current one since last weekend, have you?”

“Nope.”

My next task—to go out in a group of at least four people, with me taking the lead.

I didn’t hang out with anyone over the weekend, and I hadn’t made any progress.

“In that case, you should get going. If you don’t reach it by Thursday or Friday at the latest, you won’t succeed.”

“Th-that’s sooner than I expected.”

Going out as a group of four or more required some arranging of schedules, which meant I’d better get serious about it ASAP.

After we went over some details about my assignment, the conversation turned casual.

I decided to ask her about something that was on my mind. “Hey, I was wondering...”

“What?”

The meetup had gotten me thinking even more after they handed out the survey in class.

I wanted to ask Hinami about it.

“What are your plans for the future?”

Yup—the future.

Where would I end up? What did I want to do?

At the same time—I wanted to know what my “mentor” was planning to do.

“...My plans for the future?” She frowned.

“Are you planning to go to university or to do something else? If you do continue with school, have you thought about what comes after that?”

“Oh, that,” she said casually, then continued without hesitation. “Of course I’m going to university. Todai.”

“T-Todai? Tokyo University?”

That’s the top school in the country, but she said it like it was nothing. Well, I guess that was obvious, considering her academic ability. They say it’s super hard to get in, but every year, several thousand people are accepted. There was no reason to think she wouldn’t be among them.

“And after th-that?”

When I dug down, she didn’t even pause to think.

“After that, I’ll get a job at the most competitive company possible. I haven’t decided on a specific place, but I’ll probably aim for a general trading company or a multinational investment bank or something like that. In that sense, Keio is also an option, but I think I’ll go for Todai first.”

“I—I see...”

She was reeling off these grand-scale plans, which made me wonder how long she'd been thinking about them. They probably weren't unreasonable given her abilities, but hearing her treat Keio as a backup with Todai as a shoo-in made me scared to imagine her future self.

“And a-after that?” I asked, half in the spirit of a kid eager to scare himself looking at a monster. Once again, she answered without missing a beat.

“I know I'll have to get married at some point, but of course, I don't view that as my goal. I also don't plan to stay at the same company forever, so I'll only be choosing my starting point. That experience will reveal new insights. Naturally, a high school student can't be expected to see all the way to their end goal. There are bound to be generational changes as well.”

“Oh, um, right.”

This rapid-fire description of a detailed yet idealistic vision was making me dizzy. But at the same time, her words were so quintessentially Hinami that I couldn't help being convinced. Sure, I'd taken her to an *Atafami* meetup to do the one thing she really loved, and that was great, but it had no influence on this machinelike part of her.

“Why did you ask? You wanted to know, but you don't seem to have much to say back.”

“I thought we could talk about it, but you're on such a different level, I don't even know what to say.”

I'd imagined us having this fun, interesting conversation about our futures, but it was more like she was flying alone up a huge staircase where each step was impossibly high. She's always saying this stuff that's both grandiose and specific. *Please don't leave me in the dust, Hinami.*

“Huh,” she said flatly. “Well, what about you, then?”

“Me...?” I sank into thought.

What did I want to do? What was my life goal?

I'd given a bit of thought to the general direction I ought to take, but I still

hadn't glimpsed what lay there.

Where the hell was I headed anyway?

"...I..."

"Listen, can you stop getting so serious about small talk? You're dragging me down."

"Well, excuse me!"

I'm trying to be serious, and then here she comes to ruin it. There's nothing more embarrassing than to be told you're a drag when you're trying to be serious. I couldn't take that lying down.

"Anyway, don't you think you're treating this decision a little too lightly?" I asked her.

"Lightly? Everything I mentioned is hard. Todai and general trading companies and investment banks. All of it."

"That's not what I meant."

I was sure she was intentionally misunderstanding me. "Did you really think through your choices?"

"Do you think I'd be able to answer so smoothly if I hadn't thought it through?"

"Oof."

Of course, she was right. That wasn't what I wanted to say. But—it was like her ideals lacked the most important premise.

Yeah, that was it. If I put it in words—

"No, what I mean is, are you sure that's what you *want* to do?"

"...Oh, there's your favorite phrase." She sighed loudly with a combination of boredom and disappointment. "Are we seriously talking about 'what we really want' again?"

She looked down and shook her head in exasperation. She was treating me like an idiot.

“Shut up. Of course we are! I told you I’d teach you about how to enjoy life! And stuff!” I shot back incoherently.

She laughed. “And you’ve taught me absolutely nothing so far.”

“N-no, that’s...not true.”

“Well then, what? What have I learned?”

“Um...” I hesitated, then remembered something.

That’s why I took her there in the first place.

“The meetup! It was fun, right? The tournament?”

“...Yes, and?”

“Sooo...?” I said smugly.

She frowned. “But I’ve always liked *Atafami*. You didn’t teach me that.”

“Uh, um...okay, but...”

“...Sigh.”

She cut off my counterargument. Amazing how much pressure she could exert without even saying anything.

“Also, my future has nothing to do with the fact that *Atafami* is fun.”

“I—I don’t think that’s true...”

Even as I contradicted her, my voice was growing quieter. My own goal was pretty vague, too, so I couldn’t tell her about it with confidence.

“You don’t?”

“Um, not necessarily.”

“You don’t sound so sure...”

She was gradually shifting to the tone of an adult who was being careful not to hurt a child as they played. *Come on, I know you’re better than me, but now you’re just showing off.*

“Hmph. So what? Do you plan to tell me you’re going to play *Atafami* for a job?”

“Uh...”

For some reason, my heart skipped a beat at hearing the words out loud. It was as if a storm of anxiety, uncertainty, and something like an accusation unsettled my emotions. Suddenly, I was very uncomfortable.

“N-no...I’m not saying that.”

“You’re being very evasive.”

Hinami sounded disappointed. Still...I couldn’t really put it into words, but I was resistant to talking any more about it.

I vaguely tried to change the topic.

“S-still, your plan doesn’t really sound like something you want to do. More like something you’re aiming for because society sees it as impressive.”

“Hmm,” she replied with disinterest. My words weren’t reaching her anymore.

Finally, she pointed right between my eyes, as if she was pointing out my insincerity or tendency to run away.

“Do you really think you can lecture me on my future when you haven’t even decided on your own goals?”

She was absolutely, completely right, and I had nothing to say in response.

“...No.”

She shook her head, a pitying look on her face. All I could do was hang my head. I’d lost again. I’d like to know what it feels like to win.

*

“And I went to an offline meetup...”

It was lunch break, and I was in the cafeteria.

Kikuchi-san and I were having lunch together, taking our time talking about what we’d each been up to lately. By the way, we meet for lunch a couple of times a week, not on any particular schedule. I’d be happy to eat together every day, but she said she didn’t want my other friendships to suffer, so we should only do it when it’s convenient for both of us.

Today, I wanted to tell her about a bunch of stuff, so I suggested we meet up.

“...and I won the tournament.”

“Wow! You really are good, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve got the top online winrate in Japan,” I said casually, holding a tray of the sweet-and-sour pork lunch in one hand.

“Wh-what does that mean...?”

“Um, I guess you could say that out of all the people who play *Atafami* in Japan, I win the highest percentage of my games. Although, the real meaning is a little different...”

“Wait, so you really mean the top winrate in Japan?” she said, repeating the phrase. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised by her reaction. I’d basically said I was the best in the country at this.

“Ah-ha-ha. Yup. Pretty much,” I replied.

She froze for a few seconds. “...That explains a few things.”

“It does?” I said, surprised by her response.

She smiled teasingly. “Yes.”

“S-such as?”

“...Well...”

She grew serious, searching for the words. I could hear her making soft *hmms*, which made me want to support her somehow.

Finally, she looked up at me. “I thought you were a very strange person...”

“Hey, all that thinking, and that’s what you came up with?” I joked.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she said, smiling back at me.

Of course, part of the reason we could joke around in this intimate kind of way was that we were dating—but I also felt like I’d gotten the hang of it from talking with people like Izumi. Life was all about learning.

“But what I mean is...I noticed you were a little bit different from everyone else, and that’s why...”

“Y-you did?”

I know that my attitude toward *Atafami* and other games is different from other people’s, but I didn’t really have a sense that the difference showed up in the game of life, too, like Kikuchi-san was saying.

“Yes. You seemed very sincere—or maybe *serious* is a better word.”

“Oh...that.”

I couldn’t deny it.

“You know, the other day when I was walking home with Mimimi, she said it was kind of strange how sincere I am.”

“You mean...Nanami-san?” Kikuchi-san asked softly.

I nodded. “You know that survey we filled out the other day?”

“Yes.”

Kikuchi-san was listening eagerly to what I had to say.

“I figured I could just write down that I was going to university and then put the name of a school that I could probably get into, but then I started to wonder if that was enough. I mean, I can’t stop thinking about it. And when I told her about it, she said I was very sincere.”

“I agree with her,” she said, smiling mildly.

“She said that she thought I’d find something I wanted to do and dash right into it. That I wouldn’t stop no matter what anyone said, and then when I got results, I’d say, *Told ya so!*”

Kikuchi-san pressed her hand over her mouth, giggling. “Somehow, I can imagine that.”

“Or I’d rush headlong into something and fail completely.”

“Ah-ha-ha. I can imagine that, too.”

“You can?!”

Why did I have such a contradictory image? Now that I had two people telling me they could imagine me totally screwing up my future, I was even more

uncertain.

“You and Nanami-san...get off at the same station, right?”

“Um, yeah.”

I nodded, caught off guard by her question. The topic was connected on the surface but actually totally different.

Kikuchi-san sank into pensive silence for a moment, then finally said, “It sounds like Nanami-san might think you’re a strange person, too.”

“Hey!”

Kikuchi-san’s been starting to make that sort of candid joke, although she thinks about it a bit first. I like that.

“But you’re right... I do want to take gaming seriously.”

“I thought so!”

“Yeah,” I said and decided to talk a little about my principles. “This goes for *Atafami* and for the effort I put into changing myself on a daily basis, but I have a hard time motivating myself if I don’t think past the immediate task to what I really want...”

“Tee-hee, that sounds like you.”

“Maybe that part of me is a little weird.”

From what I can tell after asking around, not many people think like I do. I looked Kikuchi-san in the eye. She nodded slowly, like what I said made sense.

“...Yes.”

“What?”

She stared at me, batting her eyelashes.

For some reason, her next words sounded happy.

Like she was satisfied.

“I think you’ve leveled up in your everyday life, too—like a video game.”

My breath caught in my throat a little.

It wasn't just that she'd put my feelings into words—she'd drawn out the premise that formed the backdrop for my whole life, and that really got to me.

“Yeah, you could be right,” I couldn't help saying. I smiled.

I felt like I understood now why I'd been so unsure about my own future.

So when I said *those words*, I was careful to keep my tone positive.

“For me—life is a *game*, and that's why I want to take it seriously.”

My mind felt suddenly clear.

I may be a little strange. But it's only because I take games more seriously than anyone else.

There was no reason to feel embarrassed. If anything, it was something to be proud of.

I made up my mind. In life, too, I'd think and think and think things over until I couldn't think anymore.

After all, I'm nanashi—and I like this game.

*

“Wow...Hinami-san plays *Atafami*, too?”

“Yup.”

After lunch, Kikuchi-san and I were drinking hot barley tea and chatting. Once you get used to the free tea being about worth what you paid for it, it starts to taste nostalgic. Funny enough, it even starts to seem charming.

“And we played each other in the final match...”

“You did?! Hinami-san really is good at everything.”

I was telling her about what Hinami did at the meetup. I figured I should be honest about the fact that even though a lot of people were there, she and I really had gone as a pair. I mean, Kikuchi-san and I are...um, y'know...dating and stuff.

“That's... Hmm.” Kikuchi-san took a sip of her tea.

“What?” I asked.

“Um, you’re...good friends with her, aren’t you?” She stared at me.

“Uh, I g-guess so?”

I’m not sure we’re friends so much as master and disciple, but when Kikuchi-san named her out of all the people I’d made friends with over the past six months, a shiver ran down my spine.

“Remember, you came to my restaurant together, too.”

“Oh yeah, we did.”

Kikuchi-san had taken an interest in Hinami’s behavior and motivations ever since the play, and knowing her, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d figured some things out, but I’d forgotten that the three of us had that run-in way back before that. Well, I just had to be careful that I wasn’t the one who gave away Hinami’s real personality.

“But I’ve made lots of friends recently,” I said, trying to shift the focus.

“...Is that so?” Kikuchi-san said, sounding slightly dissatisfied. She was still staring straight at me.

“Yeah. Like Nakamura and Mizusawa and Takei...and lately, Tachibana.”

“Yes...I guess that’s true.”

“R-right?”

The darkness in her eyes was still there, and I couldn’t hide the panic I felt, but I managed to smile. Kikuchi-san was very sharp when it came to sensing something off in situations like this.

“And you’re also friends with...um...Nanami-san and Izumi-san.”

“Yes! See!”

I was trying to make the point that Hinami wasn’t my only friend, but instead, Kikuchi-san looked even more unhappy.

“Yes...you get along with everyone, don’t you?”

“Yeah, lately. It’s not just Hinami.”

“...Uh-huh,” she said in a vaguely lonely way. But then she thought for a

moment and smiled.

“Oh, by the way,” I said. I wasn’t changing the conversation to leave an uncomfortable topic—I really had just remembered.

“What?” she said, tilting her head.

“Look,” I said, showing her my phone. “I’m on Twitter now, too.”

She scrutinized the account for nanashi that I’d pulled up, her head still tilted.

“...Nanashi?”

“Oh, um, that’s my *Atafami* name. There’s no deep meaning in it or anything...”

I wanted to be genuine with her, and I tried not to be shy about what I said next.

“I wanted...to tell you first,” I said, looking her in the eye and smiling.

Yup. The account on the screen had zero follows and zero followers.

It was Fumiya Tomozaki’s, aka nanashi’s, genuinely brand-new account.

“Since we’re dating and this is important, I wanted you to be first.”

“Really?” she said, widening her eyes in surprise. Slowly, a smile spread over her face. “I’m glad to see it.”

I nodded kindly and looked down at my phone. Then I searched for Kikuchi-san’s Twitter ID and followed her.

“So...looking forward to getting to know you better?”

I wasn’t sure what to say, but Kikuchi-san was gazing happily at my phone. My account now read *1 Following*.

“I’ll follow you, too,” she said warmly, and a second later, my account read *1 Following 1 Followers*. For right now, it was a secret account that only the two of us knew about.

Yeah, the time I spend with Kikuchi-san is always sweet and slow.

*

After school, since I’d clarified my stance toward life, I decided to take a step

forward.

I want to figure out my life goal—what I want to do over the long term. I don't care if people think I'm being overly serious. After all, I'm nanashi, and life is a game.

In which case, there's only one thing I can do—gather information. The usual. That's how it works in these games.

"Tama-chan!" I called.

She was sitting at her desk on her phone.

I wanted to interview her about her future plans. I'd already asked Mizusawa, Mimimi, and Hinami about it, so now I thought I'd ask Tama-chan. When it comes to doing what we want to do and saying what we want to say, she and I are similar.

In a way, our approach to life is similar, so I figured her thoughts on the future might give me some hints about my own.

"What's up?" she called back cheerfully in a welcoming tone. I smiled naturally and asked her exactly what I wanted to know.

"Have you decided what you're doing after graduation?"

She thought for a second, then murmured, "Actually...I don't tell this to many people, but..."

"Yeah?"

"My family runs a cake shop...well, a Western-style pastry shop."

"Really?"

This was news to me. I mean, none of us talk much about our families.

"I do plan to go to university, but at the same time, I'm thinking I'll start getting more serious about helping out in the shop."

"Wow!"

Tama-chan as a pâtissier... The image was a surprisingly good fit.

"You mean you eventually want to take over the business?"

“Well...,” she said, sounding unsure. “I won’t know till I give it a try! I already help out on the weekends...”

“Yeah?”

“But I’m really not sure if I want to take over. So going to college will give me some time to think on it.”

“That does make sense.”

If she’d started helping out in earnest now, she’d have plenty of time to make a decision. It sounded like a good plan.

“But I like our cakes, and I like the work, so right now, I think I’ll probably end up there!”

“...Wow.”

I was impressed. She not only had a specific plan for her future, but she also intended to make her final decision based on whether she liked the work, which was very much in character. No one would choose her path for her—she’d decide of her own free will.

I think I’ll probably do the same thing.

Just then...

“Taaaaamaaaaa!!”

Of course, the person flying toward us was Mimimi, but one thing was different than usual—Takei was following her, waving just as enthusiastically.

“Hiiiiiii!! Tamaaaaaaa!! Farm Boyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

What the hell? In one second, everything was mayhem. I knew those two had a similar energy, but I didn’t know things would get this crazy when they came together.

“Both of you, be quiet!” Tama-chan scolded sharply.

““Yes, ma’am,”” they said in unison, straightened their backs, lined up, and saluted. What, they’re soldiers now?

“Ha-ha...but seriously, what are you two doing?” I asked, smiling wryly. Mimimi laughed.

“Nothing! I just noticed Takei kept looking at you two, so I figured he wanted to join in the conversation, and we both came over! I’m a girl who can read the signs! Charming, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, uh, what she said!”

In contrast to Mimimi’s cheerful openness, Takei sounded slightly confused.

“...Hmm...”

Just then, I remembered something Takei had said at the beginning of the school festival.

“Tama’s really my type!”

As his voice played inside my head, I gave him a pensive look.

“...Hmmm?”

I looked back and forth between Takei and Tama-chan. I noticed that he kept glancing furtively at her, which made me wonder even more about what was happening.

“Takei. Come over here for a second,” I said, gesturing to him.

“Who, me?! What?!”

We turned away from Mimimi and Tama-chan and conferred in secret.

“Didn’t you say a while ago that Tama-chan’s your type?”

“Wh-what?! D-d-did...I say that?!”

“Is that why...you came over here just now?” It was a very direct question.

In response to my very direct question, he flushed beet red and looked away.

“I c-c-can’t tell you that...!!”

He was clearly freaking out.

“Okay, I understand.”

I craned my neck around, then turned back toward Tama-chan and Mimimi. Mimimi immediately latched on to my obviously suspicious behavior.

“What, what?! Were you two talking about something secret?!”

I couldn't very well tell her what Takei was feeling—or I should probably say that if I did put it into words, it would become real, so I didn't want to say it.

"I can't tell you."

"What?!" she said, pouting. Once again, Takei was repeatedly glancing at Tama-chan and then looking away. Takei. Oh, Takei.

I sighed—and at the same time, a sense of mission overcame me.

"But I have to protect Tama-chan. That's all I know."

"Brain?! Are you suddenly proposing?!" Mimimi asked, leaping up.

"Tomozaki...what are you saying?" Tama-chan said, her suspicions rising, too.

The sense of mission did not go away.

"Oh, nothing. This is my burden to bear..."



With that, I cut off the conversation and changed the subject. Mimimi was still not happy with this, but once we were talking about something else, she should be fine.

“Hey, Tama-chan, do you mind if I tell these two what we were talking about a minute ago?”

“Sure, fine by me.”

“What, what? Tell me!”

Mimimi’s ability to follow right along was always impressive as I drove the conversation around a hairpin turn. I told them the interesting tidbit Tama-chan had revealed earlier.

“Tama-chan said her family runs a Western-style pastry shop.”

“Really?! You mean, like, a store that sells cakes and things?!”

“Uh-huh,” Tama-chan answered, while I decided to tease Mimimi a bit for her childish phrasing.

“‘A store that sells cakes and things’? Honestly, Mimimi?”

Everyone was following their own script. By the way, Takei waited a beat, then said, “Wow, they do?!” It was revealing that the natural-born normie reacted more sluggishly than I did. I guess he slows down when he’s nervous.

“You didn’t know that, either, Mimimi?”

“Nope! First time I’m hearing it!” she said, pointing to both ears.

I’m fairly sure the gesture was meaningless, so I just said, “Oh,” and moved on.

Tama-chan had said she didn’t really talk about it, but I was surprised that even Mimimi was unaware. It was probably safe to assume that aside from the three of us, no one else knew. I wonder why she’d suddenly decided to tell me.

“So what’s it like? Just your ordinary sweet shop, or...?!”

“Yeah. We sell cakes and cookies and pudding, stuff like that.”

“What?! Do you help make it?!”

“Uh-huh. In fact, I’m going to help *tamarrow*,” she said, seeming to realize her pun only after she said it. “But only then!”

“There it is!!” Mimimi said, smiling happily. I’m glad they’re such good friends.

By the way, when I glanced over at Takei, his eyes seemed to be spinning from the fast-paced conversation, and his face was slightly blue. I felt like I was looking at a version of myself from not so long ago, which put me in a benevolent mood.

“I can’t believe this! If you help cook, then we have to go try everything out!”

“I knew you’d say that. That’s why I never mentioned it.”

“Aw, meanie!”

Tama-chan gave an impish smile as she delivered her bull’s-eye to Mimimi. Even though she was being her usual blunt self, the mood was very gentle. It was like that smile afterward completely changed our impression of what she said. It wasn’t a skill I knew how to use, which meant she was already several levels above me. I’m so proud of my student.

“But why did you tell me out of the blue?” I asked.

She thought for a second. “‘Cause you asked.”

“That’s it?” Mimimi asked, leaning forward. I agreed that it sounded random but, at the same time, very, very Tama-ish.

Tama-chan laughed happily at Mimimi’s exaggerated reaction, before adding frankly, “Also, I’ve been trying to be more open lately, and I’ve been enjoying it. I figured I might as well tell you.”

The way she said it made me feel sure that she wasn’t hiding any other motivation—those were clearly her honest feelings.

“...Ah,” Mimimi said, smiling and nodding with a protective, gentle look in her eyes.

Hearing Tama-chan’s real feelings must have reassured her, too. Tama-chan was genuinely enjoying her life at school these days.

“Hey, I have an idea...,” I said, smoothly taking a big proverbial step forward.

Partly it was because I'd remembered my assignment, but even more than that...Tama-chan's openness made me want to do it.

"On our way home, how about we all stop by Tama-chan's shop?"

*

And then there we were, being guided by Tama-chan to her house. Incidentally, a little earlier, I'd gotten a LINE message from Kikuchi-san inviting me to walk to the station together, but I had to tell her I'd literally just made other plans. Sometimes, you want to do so many things that they don't all work out.

Still, we did eat lunch together, so it was a bit unusual for her to want to also walk home together. I'd better make it up to her later.

"I've never gotten off here before! How far is your house from the station?" Mimimi asked excitedly as we walked through the exit gates.

"Uh, about three minutes."

"Oh, that's so close!"

"Yeah, very c-close," Takei said, still obviously nervous.

Tama-chan led the way. After a few minutes walking through the cold, dim evening, we arrived at a shop called Le Petit Bois.

A stylish brown and green sign that I think was modeled on a tree hung over a large plate-glass window. A warm orange light shone onto the sidewalk, and I'm not sure, but I think I smelled the toasty scent of butter and flour wafting toward us.

"Wow! It looks just like a sweet shop! No Tama-ness at all!"

"This way."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'Tama-ness'?"

Tama-chan flatly ignored Mimimi's joke, so I had to pick it up. To be precise, that was normally Takei's job, but right now, he was so nervous that I couldn't count on him for any help.

The four of us walked down the two or three stairs leading from the street to

a glass door. Opening it, we entered a kind of partially underground space. It must have been about half the size of a normal convenience store, with a counter a little bigger than average for a sweet shop, packed with cookies, financiers, rusks, and other baked goods.

The display of cakes by the register ranged from the usual shortcakes and chocolate cakes to more unusual selections like mango tart, peach cheesecake, and lemon cake rolls.

“It smells a-awesome in here...”

Takei’s animal instincts were taking over.

As we were looking around, a female employee came out from the back room. She looked to be in her forties, with noticeable laugh lines around her eyes and mouth, which made her appear slightly girlish even though she was clearly an adult.

She smiled brightly at us.

“Oh, you’re back, Hanabi! Are these your friends?” she chirped.

“Hi, Mom. Yes, and please leave us alone.”

“Hanabi, don’t talk to your mother like that!”

I couldn’t help smiling to see Tama-chan being her usual self even at home. Or maybe growing up in this environment was what made her into the Tama-chan we know. Anyway, the older woman apparently was her mom.

“Pardon my daughter. Please make yourselves at home!” she said playfully, pointing to a cloth partition next to the register.

“Do you mind if all three of them go in the back?” Tama-chan asked.

“Of course not.”

“Thanks! This way, you guys!”

She pushed aside the cloth, slipped off her shoes, and stepped up into the room. Even though she spoke almost rudely to her mom, that little “thanks” told me they actually got along well.

“Thank you!”

“Yeah, thanks!”

“Uh, th-thanks!”

Mimimi thanked Tama-chan’s mom energetically, and I followed her lead by bowing my head. Takei was choking on his words.

“You’re welcome! Hanabi, why didn’t you warn me you were going to bring home such a handsome boy and his strong-looking friend?”

“Mom, stop it!”

“She just called me h-handsome! I’m blushing!” Takei said happily. I wasn’t gonna be the one to say it, but process of elimination should have told him he wasn’t the one being called handsome. No one would look at me and come up with the word *strong*. Unless we’re talking about *Atafami*, then I’m like Hercules.

“Is someone there?” a male voice suddenly called out from farther back.

“Hanabi brought some friends over!”

“You don’t say! Give me a minute! As soon as these are done baking, I’ll come say hello!”

“Keep your shirt on, they’ll be back!”

The man in the back was having a very informal conversation with Tama-chan’s mom. Must be her dad.

“Go on, make yourselves at home, kids!” her mom said, giving us a friendly smile as she shooed us along.

“Damn! Come back when these are done, okay? Lemme meet your friends!”

“We’re going in,” Tama-chan said, ignoring her dad and pulling Mimimi toward the back of the shop. What was the dynamic? They didn’t seem to get along badly, but why was her dad so worked up? Was he shy around strangers?

“Wait for me!” Takei cried pitifully as he followed behind them. I bowed to Tama-chan’s mom again, then followed Takei into the back room.

Incidentally, when I glanced over my shoulder, her mom was still smiling as she watched us disappear. Yeah, she strikes me as a really good person.

Tama-chan led us to her room.

I glanced around and was surprised to see how girly it was, full of pastel knickknacks and stuffed animals. I was expecting something more all-business. When I asked her about it, she said most of the stuff, her parents got her when she was little, so it wasn't particularly her taste. That totally made sense. They seemed like the type to hold on to things.

The four of us were sitting around a little table, talking.

"Wait, so the stuff you cook gets sold in the shop?"

"Of course. My granddad inspects it first, though."

"Wow!"

Mimimi was asking Tama-chan all sorts of questions while we chatted. She told us that on the weekends, if she didn't have plans, her grandfather would teach her the specifics of the recipes, and then she'd try them out.

Her grandfather had started the shop from nothing, and until a few years ago, he'd run it himself. Eventually, he couldn't handle the physical labor and retired. Now he was teaching his craft to Tama-chan's parents, who had taken over, and to Tama-chan herself, who might one day take over from them. His role was apparently to decide whether the cakes and cookies were good enough to go on the shelves.

I was genuinely impressed by the way they were handing down the secret family recipes over the generations.

"It really seems like the business will stay in your family for generations. That's pretty rare these days, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Although, I still haven't decided if I'll take over or not..."

That attitude was refreshing. My family was your typical company family, so getting a glimpse of this different environment was fascinating. Takei was mumbling periodically to show he was impressed, too, but why was he sitting with his legs folded under like we were at a tea ceremony or something?

Tama-chan said that since she was an only child, if she didn't end up taking

over the business, a relative or trusted employee probably would.

As we were talking, someone knocked on the door.

“Hanabi! I brought you some tea and sweets.”

“Come in!”

The door opened, and her mom came in, carrying a tray with big mugs of black tea and a plate piled with pastries.

“You didn’t have to do that, but thanks!” Tama-chan said in her unvarnished way.

The three of us thanked her, too. Her mom answered cheerfully that it was no problem at all, setting the tray down in front of us on the table.

“This is our special tea...and these are financiers and macarons that Hanabi made, believe it or not!”

“Really?!” Takei blurted out, transparently delighted. He’s so easy to read. What happened to the quiet, polite boy from earlier?

“If you’d like, you can have Hanabi show you around the bakery,” her mom said, waving good-bye to us as she backed out the door. She seemed like such a positive person, with that innocent expression of hers.

Every one of us was staring at the pile of sweets.

“This is amazing! Did you really make all these?” Mimimi asked. Tama-chan looked embarrassed.

“Yeah, I think these are the ones I made the other day. Granddad said we couldn’t sell them.”

“What?! He sounds tough!”

“Well, people are paying good money for it.”

During this conversation, the usually talkative Takei was staring fervently at the plate of pastries Tama-chan made. *If you want them that bad, go ahead and eat them already!*

I picked up a financier and took a bite.

“...Oh my god, this is so good!”

I was honestly surprised. The second I put it in my mouth, the fragrance and pure buttery sweetness spread through my mouth and brought with it a rush of bliss. The way it crumbled in my mouth was new, and I wanted another bite so I could feel it dissolving on my tongue again.

“Really? ...Thanks.”

For once, Tama-chan sounded bashful. She seemed happy as she watched me. I ignored her and finished off the financier, surprised again.

“You m-made this?”

“Yes, and?”

“It’s so good! I can’t believe this didn’t make the cut.”

It was just one surprise after another—not only did a girl in my class make something this delicious, but it still wasn’t good enough to sell.

“Oh, um, he did compliment the flavor...but the shape was no good.”

“Oh...you have to worry about that, too?”

“Yeah. He said it wouldn’t look right unless I planned for how much it would rise when I baked it.”

“Wow...”

I didn’t understand the details, but clearly, this was a job for pros. The standards were way beyond me. It’s always like that—beginners just don’t get the things that S-rank players care about.

“Th-this is awesome...”

Takei’s eyes were actually welling with tears as he ate one of the financiers. Although, in Takei’s case, I think the emotion might have been related to something else.

“Ah-ha-ha. Thanks, Takei.”

“Y-y-y-you’re welcome!!”

Takei was really stuttering now. *You okay, man? You’re acting like me.*

“You’re right!! This macaron is so good, too!”

Mimimi was similarly impressed, which made Tama-chan hunch up her shoulders again. What was with this warm and fuzzy interlude?

“On this one, it was more the color that was off. Granddad said color is crucial for macarons.”

“So trendy!”

Yeah, I’ve never heard of a grandfather who knows how to make macarons look their best.

“You know, they’re actually a traditional Western cookie.”



“Ohhhh. So they’re not just a trend.”

There we were, talking about sweets. Tama-chan wasn’t usually the center of attention, but it wasn’t a bad feeling at all.

“He says I have to get a lot of experience, because the length of cooking time and the oven temperature and the humidity and air temperature all have an effect.”

“Hmm,” Mimimi said, gazing at Tama-chan with sparkling eyes. Her expression was both envious and lonely. I wonder what she was thinking about.

My guess was—the future.

“When we’re married, I’ll have you bake me things every day!” said Mimimi.

“I’m not getting married.”

So she was thinking about the future, but the boring part. She made a shocked face.

“Brain! She didn’t say she can’t, she said she *won’t*!”

“I think she means that even if she can, she wouldn’t want to.”

“Thank you for explaining,” said Tama-chan.

Mimimi was all wound up, I did my best to tease her, and Tama-chan was deadpan. That was how the three of us always had fun in our own ways.

But in the middle of it all, Takei was stiff and almost silent. *Come on, Takei, you can do this!*

*

About an hour passed.

“And this is the main cake-display area.”

At her mom’s suggestion, Tama-chan was giving us a tour of the bakery.

“Hanabi’s cakes go in there, too!” her mom added from behind the register as Tama-chan pointed out their signature items.

“Mom, just let me explain!” she protested, but her mom said that made her feel left out and kept adding comments. They really got along too well.

“What’s this?! You’re giving your friends a tour?! As soon as these come out of the oven and I get the next thing ready, I’ll join you!”

I couldn’t help smiling. Her dad seemed very busy.

“Your family...is so interesting,” I said.

“They are not!” she shot back.

“Yes, we are!” “You said it!” her parents called out enthusiastically. *Okay, Dad, just go bake your cookies.*

Mimimi must have been fascinated by the pair of them because every time we went near the register, she made conversation.

“Wow, this looks like a jewel!”

“Well, actually...”

As Tama-chan’s mom gave us a detailed explanation of the cakes, her dad finally emerged from the back, and the three of us did our greetings all over again.

Her dad was small but apparently very energetic, with even features that made me think he must have been really handsome when he was younger. He had on a fairly tall chef’s hat, and like Tama-chan’s mom, there was a strong sense of innocence about him. Also, from what I could tell at first glance, he was shorter than her mom.

As Mimimi was asking them about what the store did differently and various other questions about the sweets, she suddenly asked, “What was Tama like as a little girl?”

The two of them looked at each other, giggled, then looked back at Mimimi. Meanwhile, Tama-chan blushed and glanced around nervously.

“Well, Hanabi has never lied,” her father said.

“I thought so!”

“Yes. She always said whatever came to mind, and if someone was being bullied in her class, she would put a stop to it, and if she didn’t want to do something, she would say so.”

“Really?!”

As I listened to Mimimi talk with Tama-chan’s dad, I thought back over the year.

Just last semester, she’d spoken out about the bullying in our class. I guess she’d always been like that.

“And that’s why her grandfather likes the honest flavor of her cookies and cakes, but...”

“But?” Mimimi asked.

“...he’s always telling her they have a long way to go in terms of looks,” her mom said teasingly.

“And then she’ll say, ‘The flavor’s what matters!’ and it becomes a whole argument,” her dad said nostalgically. Very Tama-like.

“Please just stop!” Tama-chan protested.

“But lately, she’s starting to understand,” her dad said slowly, a kind smile spreading over his face. Deep wrinkles creased the corners of his eyes as he gazed at his daughter.

“It’s not just the flavor that matters—how you communicate that is important, too.”

*

After talking with the whole family for a while, the three of us headed home.

“Thanks for everything!”

“Thank you!”

“Th-th-thanks!”

Takei was the only one who acted all nervous when we said good-bye to Tama-chan’s parents.

“Come visit again! Here’s a little something to take home,” her mom said, giving us each a paper bag. The bags were made from sparkly light-green Japanese paper, the kind of fancy high-quality thing you could just stare at forever.

“We can’t take all of this!” Mimimi said, peering into her bag.

I checked mine, too. It was stuffed with tons of different individually wrapped cookies. If they sold this at normal prices, I’m sure it would cost a small fortune.

“Of course you can! The sell-by date is tomorrow, so we won’t be able to keep them on the shelf.”

“R-really...?”

“Oh, they won’t go bad or anything, but Grandpa always says you can’t sell something that will lose its flavor in three days. These should be fine for two weeks or so!”

Her mom smiled happily, ruffling Tama-chan’s hair.

“Hanabi doesn’t bring friends over very often, you know!” she said, but Tama-chan wiggled away from her hand. We watched them, smiling.

“Well, in that case, I’m grateful to have them!” Mimimi said, taking the lead.

“Good! And by the way...,” her mom said, smiling conspiratorially before looking at Tama-chan.

Tama-chan made a grumpy face, like she’d just realized something, and returned her mom’s gaze.

“I didn’t know our daughter had such an adorable nickname! *Tama* is just perfect for our Hanabi!” her mom finally said.

Then she and Tama-chan’s dad started teasingly using her nickname every chance they got. Oh man. Tama-chan’s face was getting redder by the second. She glared at us.

“That’s why I didn’t want to bring you here!” she shouted.

So that’s why she never invited us over before. Personally, I think it’s a good nickname, but I could see how she’d be embarrassed having her parents know about it.

*

After we said good-bye, we walked toward the station, carrying our paper bags. Takei was beaming as he looked into his. I felt like even though he wasn’t

very open about it in the past, he must really like Tama-chan. Or maybe he just got that way because I said something about it.

“Wow!” Mimimi suddenly said.

“What?”

I turned my head. She was holding up her phone.

“Look at this! They got three and a half stars on Tabelog! They’re really popular!”

“Wow, you’re right.”

The Tabelog page for Le Petit Bois was pulled up on her screen, with a score of 3.58, which is fairly high for that site.

“Th-that’s amazing...! Takei said. The three of us skimmed the reviews. All of them were good, and I couldn’t help feeling happy just reading them.

“Man, their stuff really is good! She beat me!” Mimimi slapped her forehead.

“Ha-ha-ha. Beat you at what?”

“I never thought Tama would get ahead of me, too.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, smiling wryly before it eventually dawned on me. “Oh, you mean about deciding on future plans?”

“Yes!”

Mimimi was worried about her own future. True, Tama-chan was still trying to decide if she’d take over the family shop or not, but her choice was very concrete, and it was right in front of her eyes.

“You shouldn’t worry about it so much. It’s unusual to have a family business like that.”

“I guess you’re right. But they seem so fun!”

“Tama-chan’s family?” I asked.

Mimimi nodded. “They’re so lively...kind of like your family.”

“My family?”

“You’ve been to Farm Boy’s house?!” Takei really latched on to that.

“Um, we went as a group one time.”

“Y-you did...? I wasn’t invited...”

He was suddenly sad. He reminded me of a little dog left out of playtime with his friends—although he’s a little too built for that image.

It was true, though, that when everyone came over to my house in the summer to plan how to get Nakamura and Izumi together, we left Takei out because we thought he’d get in the way. I still think that was the right decision, but it was a little mean.

“I’m sorry, Takei! We’ll invite you next time!” Mimimi said with a smile.

“P-promise!” he answered tearfully.

“There’s nothing interesting even if you do come over.”

“There’s not?” Mimimi said. “I thought it was fun! Very lively.”

“Really...?”

I remembered that she said something like that when she came over.

“Wh-what’s it like...?” Takei asked, as if he could make up for being left out that way. I didn’t realize he missed us so much. Or maybe his emotions were loosened up in the aftermath of visiting Tama-chan’s house.

“Uh, just...normal,” I said.

“Well...his mother and sister were there, and they all seemed like friends. That’s why I said his family’s similar to Tama-chan’s.”

“Wow!” Takei said. I was actually interested to hear someone else’s perspective on my family.

“Okay, I can see how we’re close like friends, but I also feel like they just don’t take me seriously,” I said jokingly.

Mimimi and Takei laughed.

“Ah-ha-ha! Farm Boy–style!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I shot back, then explained that my dad had an ordinary company job, my mom was a stay-at-home mom, and my sister

was a first-year student at our school.

“What?! She goes to our school?!”

Mimimi was surprised. I guess I hadn’t told many people that before. Izumi knew, but since my sister’s in a lower grade, Mimimi wouldn’t know unless I told her.

“Yeah. Since we’re so close in age, she’s always bitching to me about something or other.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I can imagine that. They got really worked up when we came over.”

Mimimi smiled, like she was remembering the scene. Takei seemed sad that he couldn’t keep up with the conversation, and he just said things like “Really?” now and then and stared at the two of us helplessly.

“And Tama-chan’s family was so amazing, too! They’re even crazier than your family!”

“They are kind of unusual, the way her parents are always there and always working.”

They not only worked together but their workplace was also their home. That doesn’t happen too often.

“It could get annoying for a teenager...but in a sense, I think she’s lucky.”

“You might be right!”

As we talked, I started to wonder what Mimimi’s and Takei’s homes were like. Now that I thought about it, I realized neither of them had ever mentioned a word about it.

“What are you guys’ families like?”

“Me?!” Takei yelped excitedly. The question was to both of them, but maybe he’d been feeling left out.

“Oh, uh, yeah, what about you, Takei?”

He grinned when I said his name and started talking about himself. “I’ve got four siblings!”

“What? Really?”

I’d partly asked just for the heck of it, but his answer was more interesting than I expected. Five kids is fairly unusual these days, right?

“Both my parents work, and I’m the youngest! And we’re all boys!”

“What? That’s insane! Let’s see...a one-in-thirty-two chance, I think!”

“I really like being the youngest...”

I think Takei could only have turned out the way he did as the youngest of five kids. He’d probably be the youngest even if he had ninety-nine siblings.

“My oldest brother’s already married and living in Tokyo, but the other three are close to my age, so they’re still in college. And all three of ’em still live at home!”

“T-talk about lively...”

I couldn’t help smirking as I imagined it. At times, his three brothers and his parents would all be in the house with him. A nightmarish vision of four Takeis in a living room together flashed across my mind, and I shook my head to banish it.

“But that must be hard, sending five kids to university!”

“Yeah, true.”

Mimimi had a good point. If every one of them went to university, it would cost a fortune. And if they went to private school, it’d be virtually impossible to pay for.

“Right! That’s why I figure it’s a public school or nothing for me.”

“Makes sense...”

“Man, our situation now really affects what we wanna do after graduation, huh!” Mimimi said, and I realized she was right.

The direction that emerges when you think about what to do is a product of tuition fees, your parents’ work, and even the structure of your family.

“That definitely goes for Tama-chan!”

You might not be able to go to a private school, or like Tama-chan, your family might want you to take over their business.

Or in some cases, you might be able to do whatever you want, or you might be under tons of pressure to go to a good school. You always hear about doctors' kids becoming doctors and stuff like that.

Come to think of it, when I was taking entrance exams for high school, my parents didn't say anything about wanting me to go to a private school versus a public school. Sekitomo High is private, so considering both my sister and I are able to go there, we must be better off than a lot of people. I'd never even thought about that before.

"Interesting..."

Talking about these things helped me think about my own future. I'd invited everyone to hang out on the fly, but I ended up getting a lot more out of it than I'd imagined.

In that spirit, I pushed along the conversation. Man was I putting my skills to good use.

"What about you, Mimimi?"

"Oh, me? Well..." She paused, sounding just a little uncertain what to say. "I'm an only child, and my mom works, so usually, it's just me when I get home. Latchkey kid, y'know?"

"Are you still a latchkey kid if you're in high school...?" I joked, but her words hit home. In some families, like Tama-chan's, the parents were always around, and in others, there was a noisy pack of five kids. But some kids went home to an empty house.

"My folks split up in middle school, so now I just live with my mom."

"Really?"

The casual admission caught me off guard. Did I ask something I shouldn't have?

"Oh, it's totally fine! Everyone already knows! You knew, right, Takei?"

"Yeah!"

“Y-you did?”

I felt a little better knowing that, but I couldn’t shake the sense of guilt anyway.

“What’s that face for? I mean, divorce isn’t even unusual anymore! One in three couples in Japan get divorced!”

“I guess you’re right...”

That would mean that around ten kids in our class had divorced parents. Given that, it probably bugged Mimimi more when people got awkward about it.

“Yeah!” Takei was backing me up. “And Takahiro’s parents split up.”

“I heard that, too.”

“Really?”

Another surprise. I wasn’t sure it was okay to be hearing this information secondhand, but given Mimimi’s casual reaction, I guess it was fine. Everything was so complicated. As usual with Mizusawa.

“Well, it’s like we saw with Tama and her cake shop! Everyone’s different. We’ve all got our own lives.”

“...True, true.”

I nodded a few times at no one in particular, unsure what to do with my emotions. I’d never thought about any of this before, and the new realities were slowly taking root in my brain.

“As they say, every person is different, and every family is different.”

“Yeah!” Takei said, clearly having recovered his good spirits. Every family is different. Hmm.

When I thought about it like that, my family seemed superordinary. In a sense, picture-perfect “ordinary families” like mine might actually be the exception rather than the rule.

“But I was wondering, Brain, why’d you ask Tama about her family to start with? No one even knew they had a cake shop!”

“Good question! So tell us, Farm Boy!”

“Well...”

It was hard to explain.

I could say that other people can say what they want, but as a gamer, I’ve decided to take life seriously—but they’d probably think I was weird. Another way to put it is that you need goals in order to decide on your path in life, and I was collecting information in order to create a goal. Which meant...

...that if I translated it into gaming terminology...

“I’ve told you this before, Mimimi, but I’m really trying to figure out what to do with my life, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So Takei just told us he’s shooting for a public university because of his family situation, and that’ll affect whether he lives on his own or not, too... What I mean is, when you’re thinking about this, a lot of issues come up that are related to your family.”

“I know what you mean!”

“Look at Tama-chan. Her future will probably be decided by her family situation...so I figured that if I asked a bunch of people their thoughts about the future and the factors that play into it, I could pick up some tips for my own life,” I said, managing to summarize my thoughts into a form Mimimi and Takei might understand.

“And that’s why I asked Tama-chan about her family,” I added.

Mimimi nodded pensively.

“Ah-ha-ha. You really are serious, Tomozaki.”

She giggled, then gazed kindly into my face. *Wait, what does that mean?*

“Farm Boy’s the shit! I haven’t thought that much about it...”

“Yeah, not surprised.”

“I better think some more about this stuff.”

“No harm in that.”

“Yeah!”

There we were, all talking about the future—about what we wanted. About how to get there. About all the choices facing us.

“But you’re at least sure you’re going to college, right?” I asked Takei.

“...Uh...” He made an uncertain noise. “Hmmm...I’m almost sure I’m going to college, but I kinda want to think more about what to do after that, like you! You’re kinda cool, Farm Boy!”

“I—I am...?”

Yikes, I just let Takei make me feel shy. What a defeat.

“Yup, that’s one of the Brain’s good points. Pretty annoying.”

“Sh-shut up.”

Even though Mimimi teased me a little, I felt shy about the compliment that came before it. I’m so weak when it came to compliments.

But this was interesting.

All three of us were unsure what we wanted to do with our lives.

I remembered my assignment—and now I was considering what I wanted even more strongly.

Well, then...

I decided to make a suggestion.

“Hey, you guys...let’s go out somewhere like this again!”

I was thinking about my assignment, but I was also taking a step toward finding what I wanted.

I was sure that picking intentional choices would make the game a whole lot more interesting.

“Go out where?”

“I love it! I’m in!”

Mimimi wanted more details, but good old Takei jumped right on my vague invitation. Interesting how two up-for-anything types reacted differently. Of course, as people, they were basically polar opposites.

“Well, it’s like, none of us have decided what we want to do in life...so I was thinking...we could search for ourselves?”

“Brain, that sounds super shady.”

“Sounds exciting to me!”

Once again, opinions were split. I didn’t like that the one on my side was always Takei.

Mimimi looked at the two of us and burst out laughing. “Could be fun! Like a team that tries out different stuff together?”

“Uh, yeah, basically!”

That was the general idea, and I wanted to say yes anyway because she was getting more positive about it.

“Okay, I’m in! Let’s make a LINE group!”

“Nice!”

“Great idea!”

I pulled out my phone and opened up the LINE app. “...Um, how do I do this...?”

“Never mind, I’ll do it!”

So with Mimimi handling the details, the three of us formed the Searching for Ourselves Alliance LINE group. Next time, I’ll learn how to do it myself.

“Great! Looking forward to our next field trip, guys!” I said, making an effort to take the lead. Mimimi and Takei echoed my sentiments. Now that I thought about it, I realized that since both of them were so enthusiastic, they could be the perfect pair for me to try out my leadership skills with.

Hinami had said I had to lead three other people in an outing, and considering we’d all gone to Tama-chan’s house because of my suggestion, I thereby completed my assignment.

Of course, my main motivation was searching for what I wanted to do in the future. The assignment was just a side benefit.

*

Kitayono. From here on out, it was going to be just me and Mimimi. I felt bad because of Kikuchi-san, but this was one situation I couldn't do anything about.

We were still talking about our future paths.

"I've thought about it even less than Takei! How humiliating!" Mimimi said, pretending to be woefully defeated.

"Ah-ha-ha. True, Takei did say he planned to go to a public university. And you've got nothing so far!" I teased. She made a pained sound.

"...I guess I better give it some serious thought, too."

"Yeah, I think so," I said casually.

She scratched her neck and smiled sadly. "I know... I can't be so half-baked about everything."

"...What?"

The word *everything* bothered me, but she continued on so smoothly that the flow washed away my next question.

"What do you feel unsure about, Tomozaki?"

"What do you mean?"

She paused for a second. "You said you're thinking about what you want to do, but don't you have a few ideas at least?"

"Oh...um..."

I did have some ideas, but they weren't solid enough to put into words.

"I'm not sure. I want to pin it down more... When it comes to games and stuff, I like to hit the lab hard before diving in online."

"What are you talking about, 'hit the lab'?"

She was confused by the gaming lingo I used instinctively. I may be more "normal" these days, but I still have a habit of using jargon.

“Oh, that’s slang for training mode. Instead of fighting someone else, you build your skills...”

“Ahh, got it.”

“In fighting games, some people go right out and start battling other players, but I always practice a lot first. It’s pointless unless I can do what I need to do. Fighting other people is more like the test.”

“That’s so interesting!”

“So when it comes to university, first, I want to think about what my abilities are and what I should try out there, like I’m in training mode.”

“Wow! What a Braintastic idea!”

Mimimi really accepted me for who I was. She was just too good at this stuff. I couldn’t let myself get used to this!

“Sorry for using weird slang,” I said, apologizing reflexively. Mimimi thumped my shoulder.

“Ah-ha-ha! You did confuse me for a second there...but I kinda like hearing you talk like that!”

“Hey, that hurts!” I said. It really did hurt, but I also wasn’t sure how to react to what she’d just said. *I wish she’d stop saying stuff like that after everything. I’m a bottom-tier character, you know.*

“Anyway, don’t you have a general direction you want to go in?”

“A general direction?”

“I mean like a video game company or something. You started talking about gaming, so I thought that’s what you were going to say.”

“Oh...I’m not sure.”

A career related to gaming... She was right that I hadn’t ruled it out. Actually, I was considering it quite a bit.

But that usually did mean a job at a video game company, like she said.

“If I do something gaming-related...I’d wanna be the one playing them, not the one making them...”

“Playing them? Like a pro gamer or something?”

“Well...”

It was hard to say yes when she asked me directly. It sounded like a total fantasy, and it wasn't like my heart was set on it. I didn't even know all that much about the pro-gaming world.

It wasn't the sort of career I could just lightly say I wanted to pursue.

“I'm not sure. Honestly, I don't even understand myself at this point.”

“You don't...?”

I nodded. “What do I want to do? What do I like? ...Okay, I do know what I like, but that doesn't mean I should choose that as my career. I don't know if it's realistic or if I'd like doing it as a job just because I like it as a hobby.”

Mimimi listened to me very earnestly and finally nodded. “Hmm. I don't know those things, either. What do I want to be? What do I want to do? I don't even really know what I like...although I do know who I like. ♥”

“Uhhh?”

I was rendered completely incoherent by her bombshell announcement.



“Just kidding! Come on, Brain! You’ve got Kikuchi-san now—don’t let a little something like that throw you off!” She thumped my shoulder again. About three times as hard as the last one.

“Owww!!”

“Ah-ha-ha! Anyway, let’s find ourselves, Brain!”

“Uh, okay?”

Landing a final blow on my shoulder, she disappeared down the street.

“Wh-what just happened...?”

I was left alone, my shoulder throbbing from her assault. My emotions were smarting, too.

Don’t worry, Kikuchi-san. You’re the only one for me.

*

That night, I was looking at Twitter...

“...What the hell?!”

...when I suddenly leaped out of my chair.

A few days had passed since I created an account as nanashi. After telling Kikuchi-san about it, I’d told Harry-san, Max-san, and Rena-chan using the LINE accounts they gave me. They all retweeted my account, and in the space of a couple of days, I had five hundred or so followers. That was fine.

After that, I followed the people I met at the meetup and replied to some of their posts about *Atafami* and stuff. That was fine, too.

The problem was a reply from Rena-chan posted an hour or so earlier.

You’re so mean, Fumiya-kun.

Even I couldn’t make her stop using that intimate tone, but she’d used my real name. Honestly speaking, I wasn’t dead set on keeping it secret, but it made my blood run cold to have it leaked like this. And it was in response to one of my random tweets like *But I can’t go easy on people* on an *Atafami* thread.

An hour had passed, so some people might have already seen it, but I figured I

should try to do something anyway. I sent Rena-chan a LINE message.

[You used my real name on Twitter!]

The “read” check mark popped up immediately, and she wrote this in response: *[Oh, I’m so sorry! I’ll erase it right away!]*

I checked Twitter and saw that the reply in question was gone. She seemed to have dealt with it.

[I erased it!]

[Thanks! I saw!]

She read that message immediately, too, and since there were no more messages for a few minutes, I figured the conversation was over. But ten or fifteen minutes after that, she sent another message.

[I’m sorry! You told Harry-san, too, so I thought you didn’t care that much... Are you mad at me?]

She seemed pretty upset, so I decided to not make a big deal about it. Like she said, I didn’t care all that much.

[I’m not mad! Anyway, it’s just a reply, so hopefully, not many people saw it!]

[I’m so sorry! I’ll apologize for real next time I see you.]

[Sure! But really, no worries!]

After that, she didn’t write anything else. It wasn’t a totally unnatural place to cut off the conversation, but it was slightly weird.

Then again, in this game of life, the more you expanded your scope of activity, the more unexpected and surprising things happened. In a sense, this was just more EXP.

With those thoughts on my mind, I set my phone on my bed.

*

The next morning...

“Really? Well then, I suppose you passed.”

“Yesss.”

When I told Hinami I'd suggested the four of us go to Tama-chan's house the day before, she signed off on my assignment. I told her about the Twitter incident, too, but she didn't seem very interested. Which reminds me, I think the only social media account she has is the Instagram under her own name.

"Actually, I've never been to her house, either. So Hanabi's family runs a cake shop?"

"Seems that way."

I nodded and gave her a rundown on what it was like, Tama-chan's relationship with her family, the sweets she'd made, and the bags of cookies her mom had given us when we left. At that part of the story, Hinami's eyes took on a different shade.

"What? No fair! What about mine?"

"You don't get any!"

"Hey..."

Hinami gazed out the window mournfully. I'm sure part of it was a silly act, but I'm also fairly sure she genuinely wanted to some. After all, she's crazy for good food, especially cheese, and she's also crazy about Tama-chan.

"Anyway, it sounds like the assignment went well. Bonus points for making a LINE chat. When a group forms, it's important to set it up so it's easy to stay connected."

"Oh...yeah, I *will* be able to get in touch with everyone quickly."

"Exactly. But it's still too early to call it 'the Tomozaki Group,' so you're a long way from your mid-term goal."

"I know."

Just because we'd made a LINE chat didn't mean I'd formed a community with me at the center. I mean, my group had to be on the same level as Nakamura's group or Konno's group. Also, we'd hung out as a group of four, but the LINE chat only had three members.

"So your next assignment will be an extension of this one. I want you to go somewhere outside the prefecture with at least three other people, or go

anywhere with at least five other people. Please aim for one of those two options.”

“Got it. Backward compatibility, huh?”

“That’s right. It feels like climbing a staircase, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

But even as we were reviewing the desired outcome of the assignment, I wanted to ask her about something else.

The same thing I’d asked Takei and Mimimi.

“Hey, Hinami?”

“What?”

I tried to stay on the surface, as if I was touching a wound. “I was wondering... what’s your family like?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Um...”

I told her what Takei and Mimimi and I had talked about, about how each family was so different and how that affected people’s path in life and way of thinking. I guess the question was too abrupt without some context.

“...So I was wondering about yours.”

“Well, let’s see.”

Actually, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t partly motivated by a less-than-noble curiosity about *that* bit of information Kikuchi-san and I had stumbled on when we were interviewing people about Hinami. But I’d phrased the question so that she only had to say as much as she wanted. And I wanted to know, both for the sake of informing my own thoughts on life and out of simple interest in her as a person.

“Both my parents work, and I have one younger sister. I’m your typical little princess who grew up wanting for nothing.”

“Do people normally call themselves princesses?”

“It’s the truth.”

She sounded as confident as ever, and I didn’t sense she was lying or hiding anything.

But she hadn’t said anything about what we’d heard—that she used to have two sisters. If she didn’t want to talk about it, then I wasn’t going to force her to. Everyone has one or two things they don’t like to talk about. Except for me, maybe.

“My parents let me take whatever classes I wanted, and they always praised me for whatever I made or did. Other people might see them as overprotective. There was a time when that made me happy, but now I find numerical results are better proof of my own efforts. It’s far better than praise.”

“That last part was pure Aoi Hinami.”

But it was interesting. I wonder if the constant praise contributed to her ridiculous level of self-confidence. Or would she have been super strong either way?

“As far as your future goes, you’ll be fine as long as you keep up with school right now, so you need to keep your focus on assignments from me and schoolwork. Don’t get drawn into anything unnecessary.”

“‘Unnecessary,’ huh?”

I caught a little on those words. I’d brought up Hinami’s family partly out of curiosity, but basically, asking various people about their future plans in order to figure out what I wanted was what I needed to do in terms of my life.

It would connect to fulfillment as I understood that term—and I thought Hinami was definitely lacking in that realm.

Which is why...

“Hinami?”

“...What?”

Usually, when I use her name like that, it’s the lead-up to an annoying comment or question, which was why she was so clearly irritated. Not my problem.

“Actually, I got this invitation.”

I showed her my phone. A LINE chat with Harry-san was open on the screen.

The content was straightforward. This weekend, he wanted to have a meetup with four or five well-known players, and he was inviting nanashi. He’d promised to let me know the next time an event happened, but only the host of a regular meetup could have done it this quickly.

“...A small meetup. I see.”

I couldn’t tell if she was interested or not. I think she was intentionally hiding her feelings.

“You must be at least slightly interested.”

“Oh, I am, slightly.”

She sounded vaguely dissatisfied.

“He said Ashigaru-san’s coming. You know that name, don’t you?”

“...Really? The one who uses Lizard?”

“Yeah. Of course NO NAME would know.”

The fact that I could casually throw a name out and she’d know who it was proved again what a top player she was. She didn’t slack when it came to gathering intel.

“I bet we’ll hear a lot of interesting stuff. Why don’t you come? ...I mean, will you please come?” I said, joining my hands in pleading.

She gave me a dubious look. “Why do you want me to come so bad? Is this some scheme of yours?” She frowned, taking a step back.

“I told you. I’m going to teach you how to enjoy life.”

“And that means going to an *Atafami* meetup?”

“Yes.”

After all, the only two things I was aware of that she genuinely liked for no logical reason were *Atafami* and cheese. As far as I knew, almost everything else she did was determined by her own brand of rationale.

But I don't think what a person wants *is* logical.

"You have nothing to lose by going, so why not? Right?" I pressed my palms together again, and this time, I bowed my head, too.

"If you're this desperate, it actually makes me not want to go..."

"Hey," I whined.

She seemed tired of me, but all the same, she sighed and said, "Fine, as long as I don't have other plans. What day is it?"

That was a yes, if a reluctant one.

"You will?! Um, it's next weekend! On Saturday!"

She opened the calendar on her phone. "...Dammit, I'm free."

"Why do you sound so upset? You're available!"

"I sure am."

I grinned. "Okay. Then we'll both go. I'll get in touch with the details later."

"Sigh... All right."

"Why are you sighing?"

I had plenty of opportunity to poke at her, but the important thing was that I'd succeeded in snagging her. By the way, I'd already gotten permission to invite Hinami. Harry-san said that if she'd fought like that with Wigglypoff against nanashi on stream, then she should do just fine against Ashigaru-san.

"I have no idea what you are trying to do..."

"Don't worry about that."

Like I told her before, I was trying get her to understand what I meant when I said "what I want." Call it a favor for the magician who painted the world for me.

"Well, playing Ashigaru-san is kind of exciting, so it's fine..."

"Right?"

I wasn't sure if I glimpsed a light in her eyes as she spoke; I could only see the outside of the mask.

But all the same, I plan to keep moving toward what I want.

*

School was over for the day.

“Ooh, this place is so nice!”

Today, Kikuchi-san and I had walked to the station together and gotten off the train at a different stop than usual; this time, we were going to a fashionable café I’d looked up online. Since I’d turned down her invitation to walk to the station the day before, I wanted to make up for it by inviting her here.

“Wow, it’s just like in the pictures I saw.”

The café was full of antique furniture, and the walls were practically covered with rows of foreign books that apparently were meant as decorations. The multiple chandeliers, old-fashioned lamps, and other stuff like that was actually for sale, with price tags attached in unobtrusive locations.

“I read that they sell the furniture, too,” I said, showing Kikuchi-san one of the price tags.

“Oh my goodness...!” she replied, her eyes darting all over the place. She was as innocently awestruck as a little girl. “This is so fun!”

We hadn’t even ordered drinks yet, and she was already saying that. I was so glad I’d brought her here. My heart was thumping.

We both ordered sandwiches and black tea, then settled into our usual chitchat.

“Really? Hanabi-chan’s family runs a cake shop?”

“Yeah!”

I told her about my visit to the shop, making the story as interesting as I could. After all, I’d turned down her invitation because I already had plans, so I wanted to share as much of what happened as possible with her.

“That’s amazing. I want to try their sweets, too.”

“I’ll bring you some! She said they’d be fine for two weeks.”

“Really, you will?”

Her expression suddenly brightened. It was too bad I had to skip walking with her that day, but if it meant being able to tell her about all the yummy things we got and then actually bring her said yummy things, maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

Kikuchi-san watched me as I nodded smugly to myself.

"And...on the way home...?" she asked in a quiet voice. What did she mean?

"On the way home?" I asked, puzzled.

Her eyes darted anxiously around the room.

"It's j-just that...the other day, you were telling me...how you talked to Nanami-san about your future..."

"Oh yeah, I did."

"I was wondering what happened on the way home yesterday...", she said, glancing over at me. Why was she tiptoeing around the subject? I guess she wanted to know if I'd made any progress, since I'd been so unsure last time we talked. It was unusual for her to ask such a specific question.

"Well, we talked about..."

I thought back to our conversation on the way home, and this was what came to mind: *"I do know who I like. ♥"*

"..."

Those were the words that stayed with me most from that day.

I knew it was one of Mimimi's mean little jokes, but even remembering it felt like a punch in the gut— "T-Tomozaki-kun?"

"Huh?!"

Kikuchi-san was acting concerned.

"Oh, s-sorry."

"Wh-what's wrong...?"

"Oh, um...nothing."

I had nothing to feel guilty about, but I also couldn't tell her what had

happened. I wasn't sure what to say.

"Really...?"

"Yeah. Um...you were asking about the walk home?"

"Y-yeah..."

I chose my words carefully. "We were just joking around and stuff."

"...Oh. Okay."

She nodded, lowering her head slightly, then said softly, "Everything is okay, right?"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Um...", she said, then paused for a moment and smiled a little sadly. "Well, um, I was a bit worried..."

She pulled her phone out and started searching for something.

"About what?"

"Um...actually, I was looking at your *Atafami* account...and I saw this tweet."

What she showed me caught me off guard.

"...What?"

She had a tweet pulled up on her phone.

The handsome, much-discussed nanashi has a meaningful chat with Rena (original tweet deleted).

A chill ran down my back when I saw the attached image—a screenshot of a tweet.

You're so mean, Fumiya-kun.

It was yesterday's reply from Rena-chan that I had her delete after one hour. That was what was attached to this other tweet.

"...Can I see that?"

Panicking a little, I took her phone and clicked on the profile of the person who posted the tweet.

Their avatar was a male Ameba Pigg, and their username was masa. Scrolling through their past tweets, I saw that they posted really short comments about *Atafami* and other video games every couple of days, and besides that, there was a lot of stuff about current events and retweets from content aggregators. A lot of the retweets were political, so maybe the account's owner was a little older than me.

Most of the tweets were only a short sentence, but suddenly, these longer extreme statements would pop up, like *The poor are exploited and become even poorer. That's Japan.* and *We need a new government now!* To make things even weirder, about one in ten tweets was a retweet from a bot called @languageofflowers that put out information on the symbolic meaning of flowers.

"Wh-who is this...?"

I kept scrolling back and noticed a retweet that didn't quite fit with the rest. It was one of Rena-chan's tweets, with a selfie attached of her holding some kind of mechanical gadget.

This is what it said:

The face massager from my wish list arrived! Thank you, masa-san!

The pieces fell into place. So that's what was going on.

"This guy must be some weird fan of Rena-chan's...", I muttered, frowning. I realized Kikuchi-san was probably confused, since my comment kind of sounded like it was directed at her. To tell the truth, I was freaking out a little.

"Wh-what does it mean...? Is this girl...Rena-chan?"

I nodded and decided just to give her a quick rundown. This wasn't worth avoiding.

"Um, this woman named Rena-chan was at the *Atafami* meetup I went to, and I think she has some weird followers since she posts so many selfies... My guess is that masa is one of her 'fans,' and when he saw her acting like we were close, he got pissed off or something."

It was true that she'd deleted the tweet right away, which could have made it

look more meaningful than it was.

“Yes, she did call you Fumiya-kun...”

“Um, yeah...”

I realized that Kikuchi-san now knew that Rena-chan was calling me by my first name with the chummy *kun* attached, which made me freak out in a whole new way. Okay, now I had to explain that, too.

“She’s a lot older than me, and that’s why she calls me Fumiya-kun...”

“O-oh, okay... I did see some pictures of her with alcohol.”

“R-right!” I said, clinging to the lifeline. I’m sure Kikuchi-san was forcing herself to stay calm, but she still managed to smile, like my explanation was enough for her.

“But...is that okay? Your name is public now...”

“To tell the truth, I don’t care *that* much...”

Honestly, *Fumiya* is a super common name, and as long as my whole name wasn’t revealed, I didn’t think I’d suffer any real harm. And even if my full name did get out, I was fairly sure none of my other personal information was scattered around anywhere.

“I might just get some hate...but that’s the worst of it. Unpleasant but not that bad.”

“Yes, you’re probably right...”

She still seemed concerned, which made me want to reassure her.

“But from what I can tell, it’s just this one person. It’s not like he has a bunch of cronies.”

I studied the tweet again. It had been retweeted five times and had zero likes, which was sort of strange. I checked who had retweeted it, and only one person showed up. The other four must have private accounts. Puzzling.

By the way, when I checked the replies, I saw that Rena-chan had tweeted *masa-san would you mind deleting this? I’m sorry!* She was probably trying to avoid causing me any more trouble, but wouldn’t her reply just increase the

chance of other people discovering it?

“I don’t mind if people find out, so I’m not going to worry about it. Actually, I feel like Rena-chan is the one who actually might be in danger...”

Masa-san was Rena-chan’s fan—and if she got too friendly with anyone other than him, he’d probably go after her, not me.

“Um, can you wait just one second?”

“...Yes,” Kikuchi-san said, nodding anxiously. I handed her phone back, took my own out, and opened a LINE chat window with Rena-chan.

[I saw masa-san’s tweet. Is everything okay?]

After sending the message, I closed the LINE app and went to masa-san’s Twitter account from my own phone. I saw that he had followed me. He probably followed anyone who seemed to have a connection with Rena-chan. For a second, I considered blocking him, but then I quickly changed my mind.

“Blocking him...would be bad, wouldn’t it? For now, the important thing is to not upset him...”

“Blocking...?”

Kikuchi-san didn’t seem to know what that meant, but I just went back to my timeline and anxiously refreshed it for no good reason.

Just then...

“What...?”

The Twitter app was suddenly replaced by a selfie of Rena-chan, with red and green icons below it.

“...Oh, she’s calling me.”

The timing was suspicious, and I’m not used to getting calls to start with, so for a second, I wondered if she’d been hacked by masa-san, but that was unlikely. Rena-chan probably saw my LINE message and decided to call.

But...I glanced timidly in Kikuchi-san’s direction. She was looking back and forth between my face and my phone with a vaguely uncomfortable expression. Understandably so. I mean, she’d just seen Rena-chan’s selfie on my phone. It

was a really trendy picture; seeing that on your boyfriend's phone would not feel good.

"Uh...I won't answer."

"What? No, don't worry about it—pick up!"

"No, it's fine." I swiped the red icon, rejecting the call.

"B-but what if she's in danger...?"

She sounded worried, but I shook my head reassuringly.

"It's not like something's gonna happen today or tomorrow, so I can ask her about it later."

Kikuchi-san glanced down, then echoed the word *later*.

"This is our time," I said soothingly. Kikuchi-san's expression stiffened, but once again, she smiled. She was forcing it.

"Yes, you're right. You should ask her about it later."

She reached for her handbag and softly stroked the amulet we'd bought together, which was attached to the zipper. I looked at my own bag. There was the amulet I bought with Kikuchi-san, and the charm Mimimi had given me and our other friends.

After a minute, Kikuchi-san suddenly checked her phone and jumped up.

"Oh, look at the time! I'd better head home soon."

I looked at my own phone and saw that it was already seven. I could see her parents being worried if she didn't get home soon, but her timing was a little odd.

"Y-you do?"

"...Yes, I have to go."

We called the waiter and paid our bill.

As we walked outside, a cold, dry wind chilled my face. Kikuchi-san was avoiding my gaze, and her lips were pursed.

"K-Kikuchi-san...", I said timidly, but she still seemed off-kilter, and I couldn't

tell if she was angry or apologetic.

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering what was wrong...”

“...It’s nothing!”

Her tone was slightly emotional, which was unusual. She looked down.

“O-oh...ha-ha.”

I had no clue what to do in a situation like this, so my only option was to smile and hope for the best.

At that moment, Kikuchi-san abruptly turned toward me.

She was pouting, and her eyes were full of determination. Yeah, I had no idea what she was thinking.

She glanced down, then looked up at me through her bangs.

“...Your hand,” she mumbled.

“What? My hand?” I repeated. She nodded, and then...

“Can I hold your hand?!”

Wow, wasn’t expecting that. Her tone was emotional again.

“Uh...o-okay. Huh?”

A second ago, she seemed angry, and then she said that? I couldn’t keep up. I managed to stick out my hand, but I had no idea what was happening.

“What, wh-why...?” I sputtered.

“Um...I—I just want to!”

She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the station.

“Wait, wait, what?”

I couldn’t make heads or tails of this, but I was really happy to be holding her hand, so we walked like that all the way to the station. *A-am I doing okay?*



*

“Oh, don’t worry. That guy won’t come after me in real life.”

“Well, that’s good to hear...”

That night, I was talking with Rena-chan on LINE. After everything that happened with Kikuchi-san, I was slightly hesitant to talk to her on the phone, but when I sent her a text message, she called me again.

“He could see me if he came to events, right? But he never does, so I think he doesn’t have the guts to meet in person.”

“So you don’t have to worry about him?”

“I don’t think so. Were you worried about me?”

“Of course. If I thought I was putting you at risk...”

“Thank you. That makes me so happy.”

Her tone somehow sounded more grown-up than when we’d met in person. The conversation was going very smoothly, although I’m not sure whether it was because she was leading me along or because I’d installed Mizusawa in my brain. I couldn’t help feeling reassured by the calm atmosphere that contrasted so sharply with the confusion of earlier.

“I should be apologizing to you for using your name on Twitter!”

“Oh...don’t worry about that.”

“But that’s what led to all this in the first place.”

“Ha-ha-ha, that is true. But nothing bad actually happened, right?” I said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“You’re very kind,” Rena-chan said with a surprising amount of emotion. “Can I ask you something weird?”

She was building up anticipation in the conversation. It’s a skill that confident people like Mizusawa and Hinami use.

“What...?” I asked a little defensively. She lowered her voice, like she was telling me a secret.

“I was wondering...”

Her grown-up voice took on a silky, breathy tone as she asked: “...have you ever had sex?”

“Wh-what?!” I yelped. I was not ready for that.

“Ah-ha-ha. That’s not so weird, is it?” she said teasingly.

“I—I guess not...”

I was getting swept along at her pace now. She was an adult; I was a seventeen-year-old high school student. She had way more life experience than me.

“But have you? Slept with a girl, I mean,” she asked again. She was so blunt about it, too, like she wanted to underline the question. I’d never heard those words come out of a girl’s mouth before in my life, and they were a shock to my brain. *No, no, no, channel Mizusawa fast!*

I took a deep breath, let it out, and said slowly, “No, I haven’t.”

I’d taken my time summoning my inner Mizusawa, so I was able to answer her without sounding too shy. I bet Mizusawa’s done that already, but even if he hadn’t, I was sure he’d answer her confidently.

“Oh, you haven’t?” Rena-chan’s voice was slowly taking on its usual sweet, caramelly tone. “But you must be curious, right?”

This conversation was going in a different direction than the ones I had at school. Each word reverberated more in my body than my mind. I didn’t even know what I should be thinking right then.

This bug in the system was threatening to shut down my brain entirely, so I struggled to make Mizusawa diagnose the problem.

“If it’s with someone I like,” I said, trying to put an end to the conversation.

“Really?” Rena-chan asked, caressing my ear with the word. “Guys usually are interested even if they don’t really like the person.”

“No way.”

I was upset by how she was trying to define me, but her voice was so alluring,

it had the power to overcome my discomfort.

“Okay, I have another question.”

I braced myself.

“Would you want to do it with me?”

“No. Not at all.”

I instantly shot her down, which is the one thing I’m good at, but for some reason, she just giggled. The truth was, when she asked, I had a flashback to when she touched me—but I managed to shake it off.

“Is that so?” she asked with seductive sweetness, then giggled. “Are you free this Saturday, Fumiya-kun?”

“Huh?”

My heart skipped a beat. My brain automatically conjured up an image of the scene, as if the momentum of the conversation had taken over me. As if I wanted to know what came next, even though I didn’t like it.

“...Um...”

That desire to know was too strong to hide. Forcing myself to ignore the images unfolding in my mind, I pulled myself back to reality.

Then I finally remembered. “...I have plans on Saturday.”

Saturday was the meetup with Ashigaru-san and everyone.

“Oh, okay, then never mind.”

“...Yeah.”

She casually withdrew her offer, which was more disappointing than I’d like to admit. I mean, I was in such mental chaos that I even forgot about the meetup I’d been looking forward to.

“I’d better get going. I’ve got to take a bath.”

“What? Oh, okay. Talk to you later.”

“Okay, good night.”

“...Good night.”

Before I could hang up, she was gone. It was strange. She was the one who came after me, but now I felt like I'd been dropped in the dirt. What was with her? She was like a cat or something.

I mean, that last line of hers!

"Did she really have to say that? ...About the bath."

Especially after she half forced me to imagine that suggestive scenario.

It was like she'd just casually pushed a button she shouldn't have and then sauntered off.

The sensation of her touching my thigh...the warmth of our shoulders touching...the fully displayed curves of her body—it was all forcing its way from my subconscious into my conscious mind, and I couldn't get it out.

"Arghhhhhh! Dammit!!"

I dived onto my bed, started up *Atafami*, and buried myself in my winrate to escape.

"...God! Come on!"

After playing for an hour, I finally felt calm again.

I'm not sure, but I had a feeling that my winrate for that day was pretty low.

*

A few days passed, and the weekend arrived. It was just before two PM on Saturday.

Hinami and I were outside Ikebukuro Station.

We were twenty minutes early. Five of us, including me and Hinami, were supposed to meet there and go together to a space that had been rented for the meetup.

So far, Hinami and I were the only two people there. I'd gotten on the same Saitama Line train as her because I thought introducing ourselves would be easier if we showed up together, but we ended up getting there really early.

"...But honestly, are you sure I don't need to worry about it?" I glanced at the clock on my phone, fretting over something entirely different.

“You mean what happened with Fuka-chan?”

“Y-yeah.”

“I already told you, it’s not a problem,” Hinami said, sounding slightly exasperated.

Even though things with Kikuchi-san were getting back to normal after the café incident, I still felt too awkward to ask her what all the holding hands was about. Also, I was having a hard time talking to her about Rena-chan after that phone call.

I told Hinami enough to get her advice without going into details, and she said I shouldn’t worry, so I’d been acting normal around Kikuchi-san since then...but I wished Hinami would tell me *why*.

“A-are you sure?”

“Why would I lie to you about that?”

“O-okay, I know, but...”

I swiped my message log and pulled up the LINE text Kikuchi-san had sent the night before. Even though we were talking about completely different topics by now, I was still fixated on the café. But I didn’t have the courage to ask her about it.

“At the end, she said she wanted to hold hands, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“In that case, you’re fine however you look at it, right?”

“I guess so...”

I nodded half-heartedly. She was right that Kikuchi-san had asked me shyly at the end, which I guess led to that interpretation. It would also explain why she didn’t want to talk about it.

“Okay,” I said. “I believe you.”

“Good. You should.”

Having forced the vague worries out of my mind, I turned to responding to Kikuchi-san’s LINE message. Since we started dating, we’d gotten into the

pattern of sending each other one or two longish LINE messages every day, and that slow-paced exchange was our main interaction outside school. I'd gotten a message from her the previous night, which meant it was about time for me to respond.

"Hmm..."

I typed and retyped for a while until I had something I was fairly happy with. That was one thing taken care of.

As I let out a long breath, I spotted a small group of people heading toward us.

"Nanashi-kun and Aoi-san! Hello!" Harry-san called, waving at us. Max-san was next to him, along with one other guy—so that must be him.

"Hey, nice to meet you," the third guy said in a quiet, pleasant voice. There was a longish pause, although not a nervous one, and then he bowed politely to us.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Aoi."

"I'm nanashi. It's a pleasure."

In response to our cheerful greetings, the guy raised his eyebrows and nodded slightly.

"Right. I'm Ashigaru."

His voice was slick and aloof. He didn't strike me as driven, but at the same time, I didn't sense any timidity, either. The best way to put it is that I couldn't read his thoughts on his face—but I guess that's a given so soon after you meet someone.

This was the pro gamer who used Lizard.

He looked like he was in his mid to late twenties. He was on the skinny side, wearing a basic outfit of blue jeans and a black trench coat, and his longish hair was parted on the side to reveal a good chunk of forehead. His eyes were sharp, but more in an intelligent way than a threatening way. I'd seen his photo online before, but my first impression in real life was that he didn't look like a gamer. A brilliant young entrepreneur was more like it.

“Anyone else coming?” Ashigaru-san asked Harry-san casually. Harry-san said this was everyone, to which Ashigaru-san replied in the same casual tone, “Then let’s get going,” and started walking. I’m not sure if *living at his own pace* is quite the right expression, but he definitely had a distinctive tempo.

“Sounds good. It’s over this way, nanashi-kun and Aoi-san,” Harry-san said.

“Okay,” we answered, and the five of us set off toward the venue.

*

“Are you two together?”

“No way!”

Ashigaru-san’s question made it sound like that was the obvious conclusion, so I was very forceful in my denial. Hinami snickered. *If you’re gonna laugh, then tell him yourself!*

“Oh, no? Well, I wouldn’t want to date another *Atafami* player, either. I’m sure we’d be fighting all the time,” Ashigaru-san said flatly, with just a hint of humor. His tone was somewhere between talking to himself and having a conversation, but somehow, it was clear that the comment was directed at us. Maybe the best way to put it is that he was talking to himself with the intention of being overheard.

“Ah-ha-ha. You might be right!” Hinami said pleasantly and smiled.

We were in a multiuse space a few minutes from the station. A couple of monitors were set up on a long, white table, with folding tables lined up in front of them. Apparently, a lot of people use the place for small tournaments, since all you need to bring is the console. Incidentally, since there were only five of us today, they’d only brought one console. I had to remember to thank them for supplying it.

Harry-san briskly plugged the console into one of the monitors, and a moment later, the opening screen for *Atafami* popped up on the screen.

“All right. Should we start by testing everything out and then playing some games?”

“You don’t waste much time, do you? Can I go first?” Ashigaru-san asked.

“Be my guest. The truth is, I think everyone here today wants to play you,” Harry-san answered.

“That’s a heavy burden to bear...,” Ashigaru-san replied, raising his eyebrows as he slowly walked over to a folding chair and sat down.

He craned his neck around to look at us.

“Who wants to go first?”

“I will,” someone said without missing a beat.

That someone was the one and only—

“Oh, nanashi-kun?”

Yup, it was me. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that Hinami’s hand was raised to around belly-button level, which made me think she might have wanted to go first herself. Too bad, my windup was faster.

“I’ve been wanting to play you for a long time.”

“Ha-ha. Of course the guy who makes me the most nervous has to be first.”

Ashigaru-san scratched the back of his neck, like I’d beaten him at something, but I didn’t detect any panic or nervousness in his face.

“What should we do about rules? Rock-paper-scissors to decide who gets to choose the stage?” he asked. I gave him my most serious look.

“No...,” I said quietly, but with determination.

After all, I hadn’t come here out of pure curiosity.

“I’d like to use the rules from pro tournaments, like the ones you play in. Where we can anyway.”

I looked him straight in the eye. He nodded, his face blank.

“Hmm...” His eyes remained uninterested, but his mouth formed a smile. “Why’s that?” he asked bluntly.

“...Uh...”

I felt vaguely resistant to saying the truth out loud.

But the guy in front of me was a pro gamer who actually played in that world.

This wasn't the time to crawl into a protective shell.

"I want to know how I'll do playing a pro using pro rules."

I definitely hadn't managed to express all my feelings or thoughts. But Ashigaru-san nodded and slowly shifted his serious gaze toward the screen.

"Then you better be ready to play hard," he said.



*

The match between Ashigaru-san and me began.

We were playing by the rules they used at the higher levels of international tournaments—the first person to win three games would win the match.

I chose Found as usual, and Ashigaru-san naturally chose Lizard.

To decide the stage from a limited number of predetermined options, we did rock-paper-scissors. The winner got to rule out one stage, then the loser ruled out two, and the winner chose from those remaining. That's how they do it at international tournaments. The predetermined options are slightly different in Japan, which always makes me wish everyone would get on the same page.

“Here we go.”

“Yup, here we go.”

By the way, since I'm constantly battling for my online winrate, I almost always play on either the Ends of the Earth or the Arena. Sometimes, when I play Hinami, we choose a different stage, but my guess was that I had way less EXP than Ashigaru-san when it came to stages.

I won at rock-paper-scissors and ruled out Buono Volcano, and Ashigaru-san ruled out the Arena and Battleship Claycia. From what remained, I chose the Ends of the Earth. It was a little bigger than the other options and notable for its total flatness and lack of platforms. I had a hard time knowing what would give me an advantage against Lizard, and my priority was going with something familiar.

“Three! Two! One!”

As the announcer counted down, a ninja and a lizardman descended to the stage.

This was my first offline match against a pro, so I was pretty tightly wound up.

“GO!”

The game began. At the same instant, Ashigaru-san started turning the stage into a minefield. Lizard's firecrackers are essentially projectiles that go off at a

fixed time. One was at the approximate midpoint between Lizard and me, and another had landed right next to me, creating an advantageous situation for him.

I calmly evaded the firecracker with a short hop, then got a throwing knife ready and launched it at the right moment, hitting Lizard. Even though the damage was minor, it would stack up.

Lizard kept me in check by firing skyrockets (his U-Attack) and laying steel traps, while at the same time doing low-risk pokes like down tilts.

My Found withdrew, then turned around at the right moment and threw a knife, scoring some damage. At this point, both of us were only using projectiles.

“Throwing knives can be a real pain when you’re walling each other out.”

“Yeah, ’cause they’re so fast.”

Harry-san and Max-san were chatting as they watched us play. Compared with when they were broadcasting, they sounded calmer and didn’t talk as much.

By *walling out*, I meant how neither of us was going in for a melee attack. Instead, we were keeping each other at bay with a bunch of projectiles and trying to bait each other into attacking. Found and Lizard use different but equally powerful types of projectiles, so both are good at zoning this way.

I spotted a firecracker, moved to a safe position, then got a throwing knife ready.

The key when you’re up against a projectile character like Lizard is to make it risky for them to just drop a bunch of explosives and wait for them to go off.

Since projectiles let you attack your opponent from a distance, you’re not very vulnerable to counterattacks. Although it doesn’t allow for direct attacks, it’s a no-risk, failproof move.

If you want to prevent that, you can create risk. If tossing out projectiles and waiting results in taking damage, then your opponent has to attack.

I was using throwing knives to do that. Since they’re fast and hard to dodge,

they're tough to avoid after you see them, despite how weak they are.

Even if they cause only a small percentage of damage, they still put pressure on a projectile player and limit their options.

"What do you think of this matchup, in terms of compatibility?"

"I wonder. Found is probably having a tough time because he's good at hand-to-hand combat, but his opponent can use projectiles to escape. And Lizard is in a bind because the throwing knives are putting him at risk at long distance... I give it five minutes."

"Yeah, these two characters have totally different fighting styles."

Found wants to use the enemy's lag to swoop in close and deal heavy damage with combos while skillfully reading them, while Lizard wants to keep his distance and control his opponent by showering them with projectiles, gradually racking up damage while maintaining the advantage. In a sense, their fighting styles are polar opposites.

"With this matchup, each player is trying to use his usual strats and keep his opponent from doing the same. Of course, reading each other on a detailed level is still important, but a broader perspective might be even more crucial."

"Interesting."

In a game like this against a projectile character, Found was the one more likely to carry the psychological burden. After all, at any given moment, some sort of enemy projectile was going to be on the stage, so you always had to be thinking about how to deal with that. Meanwhile, because Found's opponent could constantly create an advantageous situation, they were able to control the game. What I had to think about was how to break down the situation he'd created.

Found was hit by several fireworks and knocked back slightly. I wanted to land on the stage, but more fireworks and Molotovs flew around me, blocking my way. I remained calm and observed my opponent, looking for moves that resulted in lag and calculating where I'd need to be to punish him, managing my distance. By rattling my opponent now and then, I undermined his footing.

"I could never do that. I lose my cool when I'm that outmatched."

“Ah-ha-ha. But that’s the worst thing to do when you’re playing Lizard.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“You’re right that it’s tough when your opponent always has the advantage, but think about it another way. Your opponent has to constantly be tipping the game in his favor, right? And there are always openings when you can break that down.”

Dancing in midair, Lizard tossed out two firecrackers. Then, in order to prevent me from attacking when he landed, he launched his skyrocket U-Attack. It’s a distinctive type of move where the rocket is released into the air and falls back down to the ground after a moment.

This was my chance.

I made my play during his ending lag. Underneath the falling skyrocket, Found grabbed Lizard. Basically, the fireworks would come down after a delay directly above the two characters. Since I was the only one who would take damage, this situation wasn’t good for me.

“But he’s going to be hit by the—”

Before Max-san could finish his sentence, I waited a beat and then input the command for a down throw.

The fireworks dropped directly onto Found—but my character took no damage, instead smashing Lizard onto the ground so he rebounded into the air.

“...Huh?” Max-san asked, confused, while I transitioned to a true combo. I could read Ashigaru-san perfectly, and all at once, I inflicted so much damage that it made up for all the firecrackers that had hit me.

“Like I was saying, it seems like there’s no lag, but there actually are opportunities to break him down.”

“...But what just happened? It looked like he took a direct hit from those fireworks...”

“You don’t know about that? When you go from a grab to a throw, all characters get a few i-frames. Not many, though.”

“Oh yeah...now I remember.”

“He dived under the fireworks his opponent launched, then right as the rocket was about to hit, he got the invincibility from the throw. Seems impossible, but he made it out. Of course, it’s really difficult; only a highly skilled player could manage it.”

Lizard’s skyrockets come with lots of ending lag, but since the attack itself hits during that lag, it’s risky for the other player to take advantage of it. It’s a unique move. If you do manage to take advantage of it, Lizard gets hit by your attack, but you get hit by the rocket. And since the rocket packs a lot of punch, you usually end up taking more damage than you dish out.

But if you’re able to use the invincibility from a throw at that moment, you can make the most of the lag without any damage. It’s even more effective for characters like Found, who’s got some really good combos that start with the throw. I wouldn’t call it no-risk since you can mess it up, but it’s definitely a low-risk, high-return strategy.

“Wow...amazing.”

“You can say reads are like rock-paper-scissors, but there are also things only very skilled players can do. It makes watching a lot more fun when you think about the battlefield experience you need to get to that point and the guts it takes to do it.”

“Man, there’s a lot to this game.”

After that, I kept on using strategies that depended on my skill as a player to seize control of the match.

And—I won the first game.

*

“Well, that was interesting.”

Ashigaru-san didn’t seem upset at all after this first loss.

“...*Phew.*”

I took a breath, soaking in the situation.

I was playing a pro gamer. A real pro who played all over the world.

But I hadn't fallen behind, and I'd even won the first game.

I'd been unsure, but now I was almost certain that I—

"How long have you been playing *Atafami*?" Ashigaru-san suddenly asked me.

"Uh, I've been playing since it came out, but I got into it more...about two years ago."

"Wow, you're really good considering that. You know the game inside and out."

"Y-you think so? Thank you."

"Of course, I probably shouldn't be on my high horse, since I just lost."

"No, not at all..."

We both laughed a little.

"You said you want to play with tournament rules, right? What do you plan to do after this?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, although I had a guess.

"About *Atafami*. I was wondering if you wanted to go pro."

Rubbing his chin, Ashigaru-san casually dived into the heart of the matter. It was something I'd pretended not to think about, but that was the world where this guy lived.

"Um...I do have some interest in it."

Maybe because it was Ashigaru-san, I'd given an honest answer without even realizing.

"Uh-huh."

"But I don't know if I have what it takes...not that I lack confidence in my ability. More like...?"

"It doesn't feel like a real option?"

"Yeah."

He was helping a little, but I was managing to explain my feelings.

“And that’s why you wanted to play by pro rules?”

“...Yes, I think so.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Sounds like you don’t quite know *what* you’re thinking.” Once again, he hit the nail on the head in that casual tone. He looked at me, then went on. “In that case—your best bet is to give it a try.”

“You mean...playing as a pro?” I asked, my voice shaking a little.

“No, not that...,” he said.

“Then what?”

Rubbing his chin must be a habit of his because he did it again when he answered:

“Play under the same conditions as a pro.”

“Huh?” I asked, caught off guard. “Isn’t that what we just did?”

I’d gone out of my way to ask that we use pro rules for choosing the stage and declaring a winner, and I thought that’s what we did.

But Ashigaru-san shook his head. “Nope. I mean yes, the rules were the same.”

“...The rules?” I was so lost.

“Okay...I’ll give you an example.” He glanced behind him, then called out to Hinami. “Aoi-san, you said you’re a friend of nanashi-kun’s, right?”

“What? Yes, b-but...”

I looked back at her. She appeared slightly confused at the sudden question. She didn’t seem to get his point, either.

“Do you know any embarrassing stories about him?”

She paused for a moment, considering this unexpected question, then smiled impishly.

“Loads.”

“Hey!”

I didn’t know why we were on this subject, but Hinami was running with it.

“Ah-ha-ha, great,” said Ashigaru-san. “Okay then...Harry-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“You know lots of embarrassing things about me, right?”

Harry-san scratched his neck. “Uh, yeah...including some I can’t talk about.”

“That’s not good...”

Ashigaru-san was talking to all of us in the same elusive way, and I still couldn’t figure out what he was getting at.

“So...why are you asking?” I asked him. He raised his eyebrows.

“Okay. The first person to lose three games gets an embarrassing story told to the rest of us.”

“What the heck?!” This was pointless; what was he doing?

“What? Not following?”

“Nope.”

Also, this could get really bad considering the secrets that Hinami and I knew about each other. I was sure she could tell embarrassing stories about me all day.

“Well, you’ll understand once we do it. Of course, we’ll count the game we just played, so you’ve got to win two more, and I have to win three.”

“All right, fine...”

And so I was swept along into accepting his conditions. If an actual pro gamer was saying this was analogous to how pros played, then it must be true. I guess. It was terrifying to think about what Hinami would reveal if I lost, so I just had to win.

“Go, Ashigaru-san!” Hinami said.

“Hey!”

She couldn’t wait to tell some particular story about me; I could see it in her eyes. What the hell was she planning to say? I was already filled with dread.

“All right, ready for the second game?”

With that, we restarted our match, this time with Ashigaru-san's mysterious rule added to the mix.

*

"Uh-oh! We're in overtime now."

For the next three games, Ashigaru-san and I took turns winning, so we each had two wins under our belt—and I still didn't understand why he'd brought up that odd rule.

"Damn, I wanted to end it there! Well, next game's the last," I said, letting my emotions show. I was playing an adult, but through *Atafami*, I felt like I could relax and enjoy myself like we were both kids again. Of course, I was still technically a kid myself.

Two-to-two in a three-win setup. The next game would be the last, whether it ended in joy or tears. By the way, in the four games we'd played so far, I think I had the edge by just the tiniest bit. When I won, I won fairly easily, but when Ashigaru-san won, it was usually a close win after a tough fight. If I played the way I had up till now, I had a good chance of victory.

But I felt strange.

"I thought I'd be crushing it a little more at a meetup like this. Nanashi-kun, what's your strategy?"

"Uh...it's a long story."

If I got into the situation with NO NAME, it would go on forever. Also, I couldn't reveal anything about her.

"Ah..."

I couldn't tell if he was interested or not. The distinctive way he phrased himself left me unsure where he was headed.

"So should we get started?"

For some reason, I didn't feel like I was winning as we chose the stage—the Ends of the Earth.

I'd won the first game on this stage—but Ashigaru-san was the one who had

chosen it.

Yeah, I had no idea what his thought process was.

“Here we go.”

As our audience looked on with bated breath, the final game began.

*

The game got off to a quiet start.

Whoever won this one would win the whole set.

Whoever lost here would lose overall and have an embarrassing secret revealed.

Maybe it was the pressure of the setup, but each action felt weightier, and my level of concentration changed, too.

I'd been leading by one game up till now. I took the first game, he pulled even in the next, and I pulled ahead in the one after that. At that point, I only needed one more win, but he pulled even once again, and now here we were.

In other words, I was within reach of defeat for the first time.

“Nanashi-kun is being cautious.”

“Agreed.”

The words filtered through my consciousness and abruptly entered my head. It was Max-san and Harry-san.

Of course I was being cautious—I had to be. Naturally, being overly cautious wouldn't give me more abilities than I normally had, but I needed to concentrate and reduce whatever risks I could. I needed every bit of help I could get.

I turned my attention to Lizard, who was scattering his fireworks. Ashigaru-san was playing cautiously, too—but Lizard was the type of character who controlled the situation and then waited, so he didn't go on the offensive to start with. In that sense, you could say Ashigaru-san was playing like he had in the previous games while I was playing more carefully. The game as a whole was much slower than before.

“Ooh! He shielded against a throwing knife and got grabbed! Nanashi-kun really knows how to keep his cool in these situations.”

“He’s so good at reading the other player... It’s like he grabbed him the second he shielded.”

“Ah-ha-ha. That might be an overstatement. But I get your point.”

Threading between the fireworks and steel traps using dashes, short hops, and fast falls, I feinted a knife throw, then canceled immediately, dashed again, lured him into shielding, and grabbed him. Since Found is a ninja, he runs in a crouch, and he falls pretty quick; so as long as I didn’t mess up the inputs, it was possible to nimbly avoid Lizard’s projectiles.

Once I grabbed him, I threw him, then hesitated over which combo to go for. There were two standard options: a reliable one with slightly lower damage, and one that that wasn’t a true combo but could become a much higher-damage string if I made the correct read. Up till now, I’d been playing it safe for a high expected return and basically chosen the first, but this time, more from instinct than logic, I chose the latter.

“Huh...”

“—Nice!”

It was a good choice. After a successful read, I inflicted major damage on Ashigaru-san.

“Wow! Look at that damage! Is this where he takes control?” Harry-san shouted enthusiastically.

But Ashigaru-san was calmly moving Lizard around. He wasn’t panicking even a little as he threw out more firecrackers. It was like nothing had changed for him. Yup, he’s a pro, all right.

But I was riding the wave now. Found readied a throwing knife and swiftly jumped, then released the knife at a downward slant toward Lizard. After provoking Lizard to shield, I landed and approached for a simple read.

That’s when it happened.

I heard a loud noise.

The knife disappeared, and Ashigaru-san stopped shielding.

“No way! A perfect shield!”

Shit. He got me.

By releasing your shield in tandem with your opponent’s attack, you can shorten the lag from shielding. It’s a difficult technique that lets you quickly transition into your next move.

It would be hard enough to perfect shield a landing aerial, which is easy to predict in terms of timing, but to do it against a throwing knife that takes only an instant to reach its target, you have to basically read your opponent’s mind perfectly.

So did he know what I was planning?

He got me after I released the knife, landed, and started a dash attack. At that point, I lost a read and took several hits, which easily undid my lead from the first combo.

Yeah, he’s a pro. The usual tricks don’t work with him.

After that, we went back and forth for a while until we each had only one stock left.

I’d taken more damage than him, so if I was hit by a move with enough knockback, I’d lose. But Ashigaru-san was in danger, too. If either of us was hit hard enough, the game would end, and the winner would be decided.

Right now, I was at the edge. I couldn’t fade back any more, which put me at a disadvantage. I was close to the blast zone, too, and since Found is light, it would be easier for me to be killed than him.

Ashigaru-san was throwing out heaps of firecrackers to keep me from gaining ground on the stage. He wasn’t trying to hit me with them; he was destroying my pathways in. As I waited to avoid them all, he came right up next to me and shot off a skyrocket.

It was like the first game.

We were right next to each other. A skyrocket launched by Lizard was over my head, falling toward both characters. We probably had a little over a second

until it landed.

If there was a difference with the first game, it was that we'd both taken a lot of damage—in other words, whoever suffered a major hit now would lose.

I traced the path of the rocket with my eyes, thinking deeply and quickly with both instinct and logic.

What should I do?

The rocket is descending. I'm the only one who'll take damage, so if I don't do anything, I'll get hit, the game will end, and I'll lose. Meaning I've gotta protect myself.

The easiest option is to roll quickly toward the middle of the platform. Rolling brings an instant of invincibility and will take me a certain distance, so if I use it now, I can dodge the rocket and retake some ground.

But that option is fairly predictable, and rolls take enough frames that if my opponent is paying decent attention, it won't be impossible for him to take advantage of it even if he acts after I start moving. At my current percentage, an up tilt alone would be enough to kill me, so this option is slightly risky in my present situation. At the very least, it's not something I'd choose unconditionally.

Then another idea flickers across my mind—the move I'd made earlier.

Grab my opponent, throw him, and weather the explosion of the rocket with the i-frames. It's a difficult technique.

But it combines offense and defense, and if I do it well, there's not much my opponent can do to defend against it. The only problem is—the difficulty.

If I mess it up, the game ends then and there.

Matching up the invincibility from the throw with the full length of the explosion only allows a few frames of leeway. Of course, I've got a high likelihood of succeeding, and I did it in the first game like it was nothing.

But—is it the right choice in such a high-pressure situation?

Like I said, it's a great move that combines offense and defense, but at this percentage, I don't have a way to directly kill Lizard after throwing him. Of

course, if I throw him over the edge and then edge guard successfully, I could end up winning, but if I mess up, it's certain death. Defeat is a very real risk now. I don't think the choice is worth it.

Another thought comes to mind.

Earlier, in a similar situation, I used the invincibility from a throw and went into a combo.

It was the move that Harry-san and Max-san were so surprised by.

I'm certain it's carved into Ashigaru-san's memory as well.

Meaning he's probably considered the possibility that I'll grab him right now. And if he lets me do it a second time, he'll be at a disadvantage. Found will end up edge guarding, which he's really good at.

In other words...

...right now, Ashigaru-san is likely going to anticipate a grab. Of course, this is a read, and I'm unlikely to do the exact same thing twice. I'll probably switch it up in order to throw him off, like you switch up rock-paper-scissors, so I bet that's not the only thing he's preparing for. But I doubt he'll leave himself vulnerable to a grab either way.

In which case, the options open to him right now are to spot dodge, step back, or do some other defensive move that would allow him to dodge a throw or an attack at the same time. Or if he decided I was definitely going to go for a throw, he could do a forward tilt or something in my direction, going for a melee option. Those are the two most likely scenarios.

Assuming he's read me that far.

Then what I should do right now—is shield.

Shielding will give me a draw or better in either case.

If he chooses to attack, I can safely use his ending lag to throw him.

If he chooses to spot dodge, I still shouldn't have to read him at a disadvantage, and at the very least, it won't lead directly to a KO.

Most of all, unlike the option of using the invincibility from throwing to

weather the explosion, things will play out in a more predictable way. I can't lose the game by screwing up the move.

In the space of an instant, all those logical and instinctive thoughts ran through my mind, and in the end, I decided to shield.

All that was left was to watch Ashigaru-san carefully and cope with whatever he did next.

"Gotcha."

I heard Ashigaru-san's cold, sharp voice.

The next instant, his Lizard was *grabbing* my Found.

"...What?"

I couldn't figure out what was happening. That should've been impossible. A grab? Here?

I mean, if I'd chosen to grab him—which was the biggest risk on his end—I'd have gotten him before he could get me. I'd already shown him I could do that difficult technique, yet he'd completely ruled out my performing it again. Why?

This wasn't among my standard tactics. It was an insane choice.

He was still holding me but not doing anything else.

Because his goal wasn't to throw me.

"Shit...!"

I started shaking the stick around and pressing buttons to get out of his hold, but I already knew.

At this percentage, it was impossible.

Once Found was in Lizard's grasp, he couldn't do anything.

The helpless Found would be hit by the powerful skyrocket.

I would be blasted off the stage.

And—game.

“Whew. Good game.”

“G-good game...”

I was staring at the controller in a daze.

The familiar background music for the character-selection screen was playing over the speakers of the monitor. I felt vaguely empty.

“That was close,” Ashigaru-san said, then stopped. He didn’t seem to be seeking any response from me, so maybe he was trying to be gentle.

“...Um,” I said, still staring at the controller.

“Yeah?” he said in the same tone.

“At the end...”

“Oh, that.”

He seemed to understand from those few words. Just to be sure, I finished my question.

“At the end, when you grabbed me...was there a reason?”

I mean, most ordinary players wouldn’t make that choice.

The most typical moves for me to make in the situation would have been to short hop and quickly do a neutral air, or simply roll onto the stage, or even pull out the offensive-defensive move that I’d done before.

A grab would lose to any of those moves—and he’d chosen it anyway.

“It was like—”

The move that no one would ordinarily make was—

“It was like *you knew I was going to shield.*”

Ashigaru-san answered my question casually. “Yeah, I definitely knew.”

“...How?” I mumbled.

He sank into thought before he found the words. “That’s what it means to be a pro.”

“Oh...”

What kind of logic was that? I've got an intuitive side to me, but I could hardly believe that was something you'd "just know."

"You mean since you're a pro, you knew intuitively?"

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant."

"So..."

Ashigaru-san nodded. Then he lightly flicked the control stick in his left hand with his thumb.

"I knew that if you played under the same conditions as a pro, that's what you'd do."

The click reverberated quietly through the room, striking my eardrums meaningfully.

"It's like this." He tilted his head, as if what he was about to say pained him slightly. "If you and I played a hundred times, I think you'd probably win the majority of the games."

"Huh?" I looked at him again.

His face was serious, and I knew he wasn't just saying it to make me feel better.

"I mean, you sensed it, too, right? When it comes to movement and precision, or even your ability to update your strategies midgame, you're honestly better than me. By one or even two notches."

"Uh, um..."

It was hard to answer a question like that, but he was right that I'd held the lead for longer in our match, and until the last game, I'd even thought that I'd win if I could keep it up.

"But I'm the one who lost."

"Yes. You did." He grinned. Then he brought his hand to his chin and slowly continued. "You probably realized this," he said, tapping my controller. "But the last game was our fifth, after we'd each won two."

"...Uh-huh."

Then he shifted his gaze from my controller to my face and said pointedly:

“You were playing differently, nanashi-kun.”

He said it very clearly.

And he was right.

“...I know. In that last game, I was being cautious.”

“Yep.” His voice was emotionless, aloof, and challenging. “Were you nervous?”

“Um...yeah.”

He smiled again.

“Of course you were. Your first set against me was hanging on that game, and whoever lost would suffer consequences.”

I nodded silently. I’ve hated to lose since the day I was born, and if I lost, who the hell knew what Hinami would reveal about me. I was more nervous during this match than I’d ever been before.

“You wanted to win, and you couldn’t afford to lose that last game. The nervousness and worry threw you off. When you panic, you want to end the game more quickly. Instead of waiting it out, you *attack as an escape*. All the same, in a read where your own death is on the line, you can’t even bring yourself to take the risk you need to take.”

“What do you mean?”

“Still not with me?” he asked, then seemed to remember something. “For example... Yeah. In the last game, on your first stock, when you went into a combo from a throw. Usually, you go into a true combo, but in that instance, you chose a read with more damage on the line, right?”

“Yeah...I did.”

It was like he was looking right through me. I nodded, thinking back to the game. But that choice had worked out well, and I’d been able to inflict serious damage.

“When I saw that, I knew you were escaping.”

“...Escaping?”

“Yeah. A classic example of *attacking to escape*.”

I was starting to understand his point. “From the pressure, you mean?”

He nodded.

“I bet you’ve seen the same thing in a lot of online games. Your opponent is nervous to play you, and they can’t attack because you’ve put pressure on them, but they also can’t bear to wait for an opening. Eventually, they break down and do an easy dash throw or something even though it’s not the time for it.”

“...Yeah, I’ve seen that.”

That’s usually when I’m able to take control of the game and dominate until the end.

“They just want to be free of the pressure as quickly as possible. They want to win. That’s the kind of mental weakness that gives rise to impossible attacks for the purpose of escape. And this time, you did that.”

“...Damn.”

He’d critiqued me in very clear terms, but I didn’t have a word to say in my defense.

“If you lost here, you lost overall. And then you’d have something embarrassing said about you. Regular online games don’t carry that anxiety, so you wanted to escape the pressure, and you reflexively leaped for the possibility of landing major damage from a single combo, even if it was a less reliable choice.”

He was precisely describing my unconscious actions.

At that moment, I hadn’t had any special logic for my decision—I just made an instinctive choice. The result was that I had won the next round and damage, but that was just hindsight. The motivating factor was a desire to escape, and that wasn’t praiseworthy at all.

“I seemed to be attacking...but the truth is, I was running from the slow and steady fight,” I said, making sure I understood.

He nodded. “Right. That’s why I knew that at the very end, you’d run away again.”

“You mean...when I shielded?”

“Uh-huh.”

That last showdown on the ledge. I’d thrown him in the first game, and then I tried to outwit him by shielding.

But I’d thought it was a coolheaded, safe choice to avoid the risk of screwing up the input.

Ashigaru-san looked at the ceiling pensively.

“You’ve probably practiced that move—the one where you made it through Lizard’s fireworks with the i-frames from a throw—plenty of times in training mode, right?”

“Yeah, I have.”

I’d used two controllers and practiced it obsessively until I was satisfied.

“Given who you are, your chance of success was probably better than ninety percent, right?”

I nodded wordlessly, then realized his point. “...Oh.”

“Yeah.”

He nodded, too, and I put the thought into words myself. “I was so afraid of that single-digit risk of failing...that I ended up shielding when I shouldn’t have.”

Ashigaru-san grinned. “And there you have it. Since I knew from your attack earlier that you wanted to escape, I knew you wouldn’t try grabbing me.”

It felt less like he was doing a postmortem of an *Atafami* game and more like he was talking about me as a person.

“But you know what? That wasn’t where I felt your urge to escape most strongly.”

What he said next really got to me.

“It wasn’t...?”

Because his next words truly were about me as a person.

“Remember what you said after the first game? You said you weren’t sure what you wanted to do.”

He was right. I did say that to him.

“And that conversation...influenced the final read?” I asked, stifling my frustration.

“Of course.”

He’d noticed—not nanashi’s weakness or confusion, but Fumiya Tomozaki’s.

“So I was pretty confident,” he said piercingly, then gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder.

“That’s what it means to play under the same conditions as a pro.”

I finally got it.

It could be an embarrassing story, or it could be anything else.

In fact, the penalty we were trying to avoid this time was too light.

The conditions pros played under?

On their battlefield, *they had to win that game or else.*

When Ashigaru-san played, he and his opponents weren’t just facing the possibility of an embarrassing story being told—they were betting something more important.

It wasn’t just their skill as a player on display; it was their mental state.

Their ability to face themselves without running away—their strength as a person.

“Playing with the weight of the game right in front of your eyes...is that it?” I asked, feeling as if my own human weakness were on a rampage. Ashigaru-san smiled.

“It’s like competing for the best winrate over the course of a hundred games versus winning the game you’re playing right at this moment. Those two things seem similar, but they’re not.”

After that definitive statement, Ashigaru-san set the controller down on the desk with a clatter.

*

It was ten or fifteen minutes later.

Ashigaru-san and I had handed over our seats to Hinami and Harry-san, and we were standing behind them, chatting.

“So how do you feel now that we’ve played? Did you decide anything?”

“Uh...”

Again, I didn’t know how to answer.

Up till now, I’d been groping in the dark, but now I felt like I had the compass I needed to move forward. What did I want? What was I seeking? What did I enjoy doing?

I’d realized something when we went to Tama-chan’s house.

When it comes to career paths, what you want isn’t the sole deciding factor.

“This is a really practical question...but if you become a pro gamer, is it...?”

“Is it enough to live on?”

“Uh...y-yeah.” I nodded, embarrassed.

“I get your concern. I mean, this job didn’t even exist until recently. Those practical issues are incredibly important. We pay a lot of attention to them.”

“I b-bet.”

He rubbed his chin in his customary way. “When it comes to working as a pro gamer, of course you’ve gotta be good at the game. But that’s not all.”

“It’s not?”

“For instance, it’s also important to create a character for yourself. In a sense, it’s a popularity contest.”

“Huh...interesting.”

I’d seen some of that myself. When I started checking out the Twitter and YouTube accounts of pro gamers and commentators after the last meetup, I

noticed that they each had their own strategy for managing their image. It was similar to making sure your cakes didn't just taste good, but that they looked good, too.

"And if the game gets updated and your usual character suddenly sucks, you can't just give up and say, *I can't win*. You've got to practice using a new character you can win with again. Or find a way to win with that weak character. You have to be able to adapt to a constantly changing environment."

"I can see how that would be true."

It's the same online.

"And another thing. There's a mental aspect to it. Experience counts for a lot in this world, but you gotta have the personality for it, too. Will you be able to play as well as usual even in a totally different environment or a foreign country? Will you be able to stop yourself from panicking? Those things are important."

"Like I panicked today."

Ashigaru-san nodded, smiling wryly. "Exactly. In a way, being good at casual matches is different from being good at tournaments... If you don't have the mental and emotional ability to produce steady results over time, you won't make it as a pro."

"Huh..."

As I listened, I felt like the hazy jumble of thoughts at the back of my mind was slowly being brought into focus.

It was partly from the game we'd just played and partly from the practical conversation we were having.

Or maybe it started the second I came face-to-face with this actual pro gamer.

So I decided to ask him point-blank about something I'd been strangely unwilling to put into words before.

"Um, I'm in my second year of high school right now, and..."

I decided to see what Ashigaru-san had to say about the thought that had been in the back of my mind.

I still knew practically nothing about this world—so I'd be best off asking someone who did know. That's what I've always done.

"...do you think I should consider trying to become a pro gamer without going to university?"

Ashigaru-san's eyes widened in surprise, and he paused for a second like he was unsure what to say.

"Well...I wouldn't recommend that."

"...Why not?"

I hadn't expected that response. He went on in his usual aloof and even tone.

"Some people might say that if you genuinely want to be a pro, you won't have time for school. But you could also say that you don't know how well or how long you'll be able to support yourself as a pro, so it's best to go to university."

He rested his hand on his chin.

"Personally, I think it'd be hard to dive straight into being a full-time pro."

"Um...because it doesn't pay enough?"

"Of course, that's part of it, but..."

"But?"

He answered like he was speaking from experience.

"...unless you have a certain level of numerical data to point to, the people in your life won't be supportive."

"Ah..."

Ashigaru-san looked to the side, hesitating. "Obviously, the most important thing in deciding your career is what you yourself want, and if that doesn't match up with what other people in your life want, I think you should still go through with it. But you're still in high school, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Then you're probably dependent on your parents...and you can't just

graduate from high school and immediately support yourself as a pro gamer, right? You wouldn't have enough income."

That reminded me of something.

When I went to Tama-chan's house with Takei and Mimimi, we'd talked about something similar. When you're choosing a career, you're depending on the support of other people. You can't decide completely on your own.

"That means that you need to be just as serious about gaining their support as paying the bills. I guess that's kind of inevitable, since gaming as a career is in a transitional period right now."

"Interesting..."

"It's tough," he said with a tired smile. "If you don't go to school anyway, you'll have to get a job to pay the bills and squeeze in your practice whenever you can, so you'll end up having the same amount of time as if you were in university, right? Maybe even less."

"...That's true."

His words were rooted in reality—and I'm pretty sure he was talking directly from his own experience in that world.

This was reality. This was life.

An innocent, happy expression came over his face.

"But making a living playing video games really is a kid's dream," he said.

"Yeah. I've always wished I could do it as a job."

I bet every kid who loves gaming has had that thought at least once.

"Right? And now that industry is being created."

"...What a time to be alive, huh?" I couldn't help smiling.

"But that's exactly why I want you to remember one thing."

"...Yeah?"

"Yeah." He nodded, his expression tightening.

"Because it's a dream, you have to be all the more realistic about how you get

there.”

Finally, he smiled kindly.

“Moving toward your goal one step at a time. That’s how we gamers do it, right, kid?”

*

We spent the rest of the afternoon playing each other in various matchups and finally headed home at night.

In terms of who won the most games, I think the order was me, Ashigaru-san, Hinami, and then a bit behind us, Harry-san and Max-san. But partway through, Hinami started playing with characters other than Found, so it’s questionable whether that order really reflected our relative skill levels.

“Thanks so much for inviting us today!”

“Yes, thank you!”

Hinami politely thanked Ashigaru-san and the others, and I followed her lead.

“You’re welcome. I had a great time. I never would have guessed that nanashi once trounced a classmate at *Atafami* in front of a big crowd. Like a bunch of kids!”

“Okay, let’s not talk about that.”

Ashigaru-san was teasing me about the story Hinami had told the group after I lost. Friggin’ Hinami had to choose the perfect *Atafami*-related story to entertain them with, of course...

We all walked to the station together and went off toward our various trains. Hinami and I were the only ones taking the Saikyo Line toward Omiya, so we split up from the other three there.

“Well, nanashi-kun, the pro world is waiting whenever you decide to join us,” Ashigaru-san said casually.

“...Yes, I’ll give it some serious thought.”

“You seem like you’ve already been doing that.”

With that, the meetup ended.

Hinami and I were on the train together.

When I glanced at her phone, I noticed she had Twitter pulled up. She was probably checking what people were saying about today's meetup. It's not good to read over someone's shoulder, though, so I swiftly looked away. It was true that she'd been using Found quite a bit today.

"Hey, Hinami."

"...What?" she said, throwing me a quick glance while continuing to do something on her phone, then looking back at the screen.

"Did you have fun today?"

She smiled wryly. "What are you, my dad?"

"That's not it. I just..."

She was right, though. I did feel a little like a dad taking his kid to the science museum.

"Well...that *is* why I invited you," I said simply.

Hinami turned down the brightness on her phone and stared at the black screen. I'm sure she was looking at her own reflection.

"Let's see..."

The train wasn't really crowded, but there wasn't room for us to sit next to each other. The periodic clanging of the wheels filled the space between us.

"I did. A normal amount of fun," she said bluntly.

I didn't sense that she was lying.

"*Atafami's* a good game," she said, gazing out the window.

The outskirts of Saitama were already dark. I could see Hinami's reflection in the window; the smile on her lips was slightly amused, but the image was too hazy to tell.

"...Yeah, it is. I'm glad you had fun."

"Geez, you really are my dad."

She sounded fed up with my insistence. *Well, I don't care. I'm going to*

insistently make you have fun from now on.

“I’m not your dad. I’m your apprentice.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, brushing me off. Then she looked at me and, just for a second, gave me a genuine smile. There was something childlike about it, instead of the beauty she usually used to hook people.



I thought about teasing her, but just for today, I decided to let it pass.

Soon, the train heading from Ikebukuro to Omiya was going to pass Kita-Toda Station.

5

The most important thing in any game is whether you can genuinely enjoy it

It was Sunday afternoon, and I realized I'd messed up.

"...Huh?"

I turned off *Atafami*'s training mode and checked my message notifications. A new message from Kikuchi-san had arrived ten or fifteen minutes earlier, but the content was slightly strange.

[I'm sorry, were you busy...?]

I opened the app and checked the chats. To the right of the chat message from Kikuchi-san was a notification reading "1." It was strange that even though we had ongoing conversations about multiple topics, she'd only replied with one message. When I clicked on it—I understood why.

"Shit."

The previous day, before the meetup.

While I was waiting with Hinami for the other participants to show up, we'd been talking about how Kikuchi-san acted at the café, and I was thinking about how to reply to her message. I'd come up with a decent reply, but just then, before I sent it, Harry-san had shown up, and I closed the chat—and never opened it again.

In other words, while I'd actually written a solid response, all Kikuchi-san knew was that I'd read her message almost a day ago and not sent a reply.

"Nooooo!"

I was screwed. It's not that there's some rule saying as soon as you read a message, you have to respond, but I'd definitely made her worried. I decided to start by answering right away.

I cut and saved the message I'd originally written, then replaced it with a new one.

[Sorry! I was at that Atafami meetup I told you I was going to, and I didn't realize I never responded!]

I sent off this honest explanation of what had happened.

A few minutes later, a reply arrived from Kikuchi-san, even though usually she only sends one or two LINE messages a day. There were two separate texts.

[Oh, okay, that's fine!

Would you like to get together today...?]

"Huh?"

Something was definitely out of the ordinary. Obviously, we ask each other to hang out sometimes, but this was the first time either of us had done it so last minute.

But what to do? I had a shift at Karaoke Sevens from five to nine that night. Meeting up after that...probably wouldn't work.

I glanced at the clock. It was already two. Meeting before my shift was probably unrealistic, so today was looking tough. I sent a message along those lines.

[Sorry! I've got to work until 9 tonight.

Let's get together another time!]

Her response came right away.

[Okay...sorry to bother you when you're so busy.

Hope work goes well!]

I responded with a *[Thanks]*, then started getting ready for work.

The whole exchange consisted of apologies, but I was at least glad to have cleared up the misunderstanding. I'd have to make it up to her later.

*

"I heard the news! You got a girlfriend!"

Gumi-chan approached me in the kitchen of Karaoke Sevens with intense interest.

“Uh-huh,” I said, smiling wryly.

She sidled up right next to me and started interrogating me.

“Did it happen at the school festival?! Was that your chance?!”

“I guess...”

“Oh my god! What a player!”

“What?”

For once, she was practically shouting. She was super excited. If only she could direct that energy toward our customers.

“There were so many cute girls in your class!! Which one is it?!”

“Not sure how to answer that...”

“Is it the one with the ponytail?! Is it Ponytail Girl?!”

“Uh, n-no.”

My heart skipped a beat at this sudden mention of Mimimi, but it seemed like Gumi didn’t have any actual details. I was glad Mizusawa or someone hadn’t told her for fun or something. I guess he doesn’t do shit like that.

“It isn’t?! Is it someone I talked to?!”

“I don’t think so...”

“Do you have a picture of her?!”

I was speechless before this tsunami of questions. As I made the parfait a customer had ordered, I remembered that someone had sent a shot of the whole class taken after the festival to our class LINE group.

“Actually, I do...although it’s a group shot.”

“Show me!”

“After work.”

I set the parfait on a tray and headed for the customer’s room, calling out

“Delivering!” as I left.

“Oh, wait a second, Tomozaki-san. The parfait’s for 306, right? My order’s on the third floor, too, so it’s more efficient if you delivered mine with yours.”

“Okay, sure.”

Yeah, this girl’s lazy, but she’s capable of work. Her obsession with efficiency is real.

*

Since we’re both in high school, the two of us got off at nine.

I’d changed into street clothes and, at Gumi-chan’s insistence, was reluctantly showing her the group shot from the school festival.

“Oh my god!!” she shouted, zooming in on Kikuchi-san with her pointer and middle fingers. “You’re kidding me! She’s so cute!! And her clothes are immaculate!!”

“She *is* immaculate,” I said, privately amused by the image of Kikuchi-san as a saint.

“So that’s your type!”

“I g-guess...,” I said, giving in to the force of her enthusiasm.

Gumi-chan stared at me, covering her chest with both hands. “Which means... Ooh! I’m you’re type, too?!”

“Uh, I wouldn’t call you neat and tidy.”

“You’re mean!”

I’d definitely categorize her as a *gyaru*-type mollusk. She definitely wasn’t immaculate in either sense of the word.

“Tomozaki-san, you wound me.”

“Did I?”

“You can make it up by treating me to dinner. You can even get something cheap.”

“I’m not treating you to dinner, cheap or otherwise! Stop acting like that’s a

compromise!" I said, fending off Gumi-chan's typical attempt to mooch off me.

"Good-for-nothing cheapskate!" she shot back as we left Karaoke Sevens.

As we headed toward Omiya Station, I asked Gumi-chan a question.

"Have you decided what you want to do in the future yet?"

"Well, that was sudden! Do you mean my dreams or whatever?"

"Yeah."

I nodded, and she struck a cutesy pose.

"I wanna be a trophy wife. ♥"

"Oh..."

Her answer was so predictable that I felt I'd wasted both of our time by asking.

"It would give you plenty of chances to do nothing...", I said, disappointed.

She rested her finger on her chin and pouted. "But I do think it's bad to be completely dependent on someone else."

"You do?"

This was slightly interesting. Unlike her original answer, it was unexpected.

"Yes. I have the feeling I should be able to do *something* for myself."

"Wow, I'm surprised to hear you say something so responsible," I told her.

"Obviously!" she said, puffing out her chest. "I mean, if he dumps me, I'd have to stand on my own two feet. If I was starting from zero, it would be hard even to get back to normal. Not efficient at all."

"You're not responsible. You're just realistic."

She was simply taking her laziness seriously.

In that sense, she wasn't really a dreamer. For her, being lazy was a skill, and you had to maintain the right environment for it. Being lazy brings its own problems if you simply do nothing. I think she intuitively understood that.

"What about you, then, Tomozaki-san?"

“Me? Well...”

Since she asked, I decided to tell her my thoughts about the future—or, well, my basic stance to live life as a gamer.

“The specifics don’t really matter, but what I think I want to do is take life seriously, set goals for myself, and achieve them one by one.”

“You’re kidding me. That sounds like hell.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Yeah, that would be rough for you.”

She said “hell” very casually, but the word reflected her fundamental life philosophy. She genuinely hated to work.

“I mean, to me, goals and achievements are like some kind of punishment. I’m the opposite of you. I want to avoid taking life seriously at all costs. I wanna stay as far from challenges as I can. I just want to take it easy.”

I couldn’t help smiling at all the details of her aesthetic.

But now that she mentioned it, I realized that our stances really were polar opposites.

“And I, on the other hand, think constantly taking on new challenges is fun.”

“Bleck,” she said, throwing me a look of disgust. “You really are an alien, Tomozaki-san... I could never live like that. We’re starting from different premises. We were born on different stars.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you might be right,” I said, but I was caught on something she said. “But...”

“What?”

The word *premise*.

True, we were opposites in that I wanted to pursue challenges for my whole life and she wanted to take it easy by running from them.

But.

“I think we both want to enjoy life, at least,” I said, feeling I’d hit on a key point. She tilted her head like she didn’t understand. Guess she didn’t follow.

The next day was Monday.

At our morning meeting, I told Hinami about Kikuchi-san's LINE messages.

"That's typical. It's not an issue that would threaten your relationship," she said but didn't elaborate. What was her problem? I didn't have anything new to report with my assignment, but I had that LINE group, so I'd just have to launch off that.

I headed to class and asked Takei and Mimimi if they wanted to plan a "Finding Ourselves" event. Since I'd already gotten a lot of input on my own future at the Saturday meetup, my purpose now was mainly to complete my assignment. I needed to either go out of the prefecture in a group of at least four or do something else in a group of at least six.

"Since this is about finding ourselves, I think we should go to a place where we can do lots of stuff," I said.

"Hmmm," Mimimi said, thinking, then she turned to Takei and asked, "Do you have any ideas?"

Oh boy. Well, it's true that I'm not an expert in this sort of thing—but today was going to be different. I butted in.

"How about we go somewhere like Shinjuku or Shibuya where there's tons of different places and have a look around?"

"That sounds fun!"

"Or somewhere like the Spo-Cha amusement center; they've got stuff to do."

"That sounds good, too!"

Takei seemed excited about everything I threw out. He'd make a good stooge.

As far as why I was able to make so many suggestions, it was simple—I'd done some research beforehand. It wasn't even a trick; it was the most basic of basic strategies.

"Ooh! Spo-Cha is a good idea! I've actually never been there!" Mimimi nodded enthusiastically. I felt like the plan was falling into place. I'd suggested

Spo-Cha, but of course, I'd never been there, either. And I'd only been to Round One game centers by myself. I mean, it's called "Round *One*," so I think that's what you're supposed to do.

Apparently, Spo-Cha has everything from basketball and futsal to darts and billiards, as well as a game center where you can play every imaginable video game for free. It probably wasn't a bad choice for "finding ourselves" in that you can experience a lot of things in one day. And it was all new to me, since I'd only played sports in gym class.

"Okay, so we're going to Spo-Cha, then? I heard there's a good one in Odaiba," I said, trying to take on the central role. Both of them agreed. *Ooh, I feel like I just decided something. And I casually planned it for out of the prefecture. Did you see that, Hinami?*

"You guys talking about Spo-Cha?" Nakamura said, sauntering over. Izumi was behind him, and she seemed pretty excited.

"I wanna go!" she said. Count on a popular girl to say what she wants.

"Yay! Nakamu and Yuzucchi! It'd be awesome if you came!"

Mimimi was getting excited now, too. The group did stand out, and with these two added, it was starting to sound like a party. I even felt like everyone was looking at us. Mimimi and Takei were attention-getting enough, and now we had the top couple in the class involved.

"Me too!" Kashiwazaki-san said, coming over, and Tachibana followed, saying "That sounds fun!" What was with these party animals? When I thought about the fact that I was the one who got this whole thing started, I felt like I was living a fantasy. But wait, this was supposed to be about finding our way forward. Now it was starting to be more about having fun.

Anyway, what to make of this? I was supposed to go out of the prefecture with a group of at least four or go somewhere else with a group of at least six. It looked like I'd end up going out of the prefecture with a group of more than six people. Was it okay to tick off both requirements at once?

"C-can we invite Tama-chan, too?" Takei was obviously blushing.

"Uh, yeah, but..."

I wasn't sure how to respond. Like, yeah, it was fine, but now I really would have to protect her.

*

It was break before we switched classrooms.

"Kikuchi-san?"

I was in the library.

"Tomozaki-kun!"

Her face brightened instantly when she saw me. I'd been nervous about meeting because of the incident on LINE, but seeing her in person was enough to reassure me.

"Sorry about yesterday."

"Me too."

We both apologized, which made me feel slightly shy. It was like our awkwardness was being reset to zero. Sometimes, communicating solely via text doesn't work so well.

We sat next to each other as usual and read Andi books. If we had something to say, we said it, and if we didn't, we just sat there quietly. I liked our time together.

"...Tomozaki-kun?"

"Yeah?"

I looked over at her. She was doing something on her phone. She held it up to show me the website for a café and bar.

"I'd like to go here."

"Show me!"

I took her phone and looked at the website.

Apparently, the place was famous for its nonalcoholic cocktails and especially for serving unusual drinks inspired by various fairy tales and fantasy stories.

"Oh, this looks great! Yeah, let's go."

She nodded, smiling, and said, “Yes, let’s!” Then she took her phone back and opened the calendar. “Um...how about this Sunday?”

“Sunday? Um, Sunday...,” I said, then remembered something. “Oh, sorry, I can’t.”

“Oh, do you have plans already?”

I nodded. I’d literally made plans just before coming to the library.

“Yeah, um, I’m going to Spo-Cha with some people...”

“Oh...”

Her expression clouded over—and her attempt to smile made me feel even worse.

“With...Nanami-san and the other people you were just talking to?”

“Y-yeah.”

She glanced down with a slightly lonely look, smiled bravely, and looked up again. I wanted to do something, but I didn’t think it would go well if I invited her to hang out with that group. It was an extreme normie lineup, and to further complicate things, Tachibana was coming.

“How about Saturday?”

“Yeah, Saturday sounds...” I pulled up my calendar, then stopped. “Not good. I’ve got a meetup that day. For *Atafami*.”

“Oh, again?”

The conversation ground to a halt.

Our plans for the weekend didn’t happen to mesh, nothing more, so why was the mood suddenly so heavy?

“Um...so I guess we’ll do it next week?”

“Yeah, for sure! Uh...my manager is making the schedule now, but I think I’ll have one day off. Sorry, can I tell you later?”

“...Yes, of course.”

She smiled, going along with what I said. But I felt like her smile was slightly

forced. It bothered me.

“Um...that reminds me, Tomozaki-kun.”

“What?”

“...Your Twitter is amazing.”

“Oh...you looked at it?”

After the meetup on the weekend, I told Ashigaru-san about nanashi’s Twitter account. He followed me back and tweeted about my account. The same day, the video of my match against him was uploaded on YouTube, and partly thanks to what a nail-biter it was, it got twenty or thirty thousand plays in one day.

As a result, I’d glided right past a thousand followers, and not even a week had passed since I created a Twitter account for nanashi.

“It’s getting way more out of hand than I expected...”

Over the past few days, I’d had a couple of difficult Twitter incidents not unlike when Rena-chan called me Fumiya-kun...but I think Ashigaru-san had a lot to do with my popularity.

“I can tell. But I wouldn’t expect any less for the best player in Japan,” Kikuchi-san said, giggling. I smiled wryly.

“Ah-ha-ha...thanks.”

She gave me a slightly concerned look. “Um, the woman who...called you Fumiya-kun...”

She seemed to have a very hard time getting her words out. My heart was thumping. I felt slightly guilty about my relationship with Rena, which made me suddenly uncomfortable.

“Y-yeah?”

“I was wondering...if she’ll be there on Saturday...”

“Uh, I’m not sure, but I think...she might be,” I said, fumbling for an answer.

Kikuchi-san startled and pressed her hand to her mouth. “Oh! I’m s-sorry to be so nosy...”

“You’re not being nosy!”

“Um...anyway, it’s not important. I’m fine.”

“You are? ...But really, we only met once at a meetup, so please don’t worry.”

“...Okay, I won’t.”

She nodded and then forced another smile.

A kind of sadness was settling over me, as if I’d done something wrong, but I didn’t know how to put her completely at ease. Also, considering that phone conversation we had, saying “we only met once” was probably slightly misleading.

“Oh...we’d better go.”

“Yeah, let’s get going.”

Break was ending, so we headed toward the biology room.

...I’d wanted to talk about other things, but somehow, I missed my chance.

*

That day after school, I was at Kitayono Station.

Usually, everyone went home with their own group, but today, since everyone was talking about the Spo-Cha trip, we naturally ended up walking home in a big group. Because of that, I once again ended up alone with Mimimi. I was getting used to it—but I still felt uncomfortable because of Kikuchi-san.

“So, Brain, has anything changed since our last talk? Did you make any decisions?”

“You mean about careers?”

“Yeah! About what you want to do!”

I mentally ran through what I’d thought about over the weekend. “Actually, I went to another offline meetup.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded. Mimimi’s eyes sparkled with interest.

“I actually met a current pro gamer.”

“No way!”

I told her about meeting Ashigaru-san and playing by official rules.

“You finally got to play a pro gamer! Exciting!”

“And I lost.”

“What? You did?! I thought you said you were the best player in Japan!”

I wasn’t sure how to explain.

“I am...but online winrates are different from winning or losing a single game.”

“They are?”

“Yeah, it’s like— Well, first of all, using the controller feels different offline, and you’re in a different mental state...”

Mimimi made a satisfied noise. “I think I understand what you mean.”

“You do?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “It’s the same with track.”

That made sense.

“Yeah? Like when you go to meets and stuff?”

“Right!”

She nodded with a little smile, then sighed comically. “I get really nervous. The meets are tough for me.”

“I could see it.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you can? Yeah, that’s how I am!”

For some reason, she sounded proud of the fact, then pursed her lips in a pout.

“I work so hard to get good times in practice...but it’s all for nothing if I screw up on the big day.”

“Yeah...that sucks.”

As I listened to her, I was envisioning my game against Ashigaru-san.

“But in my case...”

I’d never experienced that level of nervousness playing online for my winrate, that panic of absolutely having to win a specific game.

“...it was like...I only had that one chance, so I was really on fire.”

I should be feeling bad about my loss, but all I remembered was that seething excitement.

“Each individual game was more important than any game I’ve played before, and that was super exciting.”

My thumb twitched on an invisible controller.

“Hmm...but didn’t you feel bad because you’re number one online?” Mimimi asked.

I hesitated for a moment.

“It’s true that it’s a little *nonsensical* for the winner to be decided in that one game, regardless of winrates...but betting everything on that one game was what made it so fun.”

Suddenly, I realized I was surprised.

“...Whoa.”

I touched my lips, blinking. I’d just realized the meaning of the words coming out of my mouth.

Actually, of what we’d been talking about all along, and of what Mimimi said a minute earlier.

That if you lose the big game, you lose everything. It was nonsensical and unfair.

That’s how I’d felt about life until I met Hinami.

That’s why I’d called life a shitty game. Why I’d thought I didn’t need to play it seriously.

But what did I say just now?

“...Interesting.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Mimimi leaned forward and peered into my face.

“I said I thought of life as a game, right?”

“Yeah, you did.”

That was consistent with my core perspective on life as Fumiya Tomozaki and nanashi’s core perspective on games.

“But for pro gamers...I think the opposite is true.”

“The opposite?”

I nodded and stared down at my palms.

“They’re the opposite of me—they think of games as life.”

That’s an amazing level of determination, I thought as I said the words.

At the same time, my instincts said it must be amazingly fun.

You had one shot, and every result was final. In a sense, it was the pulse of reality that came from the illogic of life.

I was certain that was why I’d felt so excited when I was playing Ashigaru-san.

In which case, if...

...if I could make *Atafami* my life...

...could anything be more fun than that?

“...Huh.”

I took a breath and let it out, giving shape to my abstract emotions.

As a gamer, I’d always thought I wanted to be a character in all kinds of games.

I wanted to dive into each game with my whole self and enjoy that world completely.

I thought about those few minutes of fighting.

In the game of *Atafami*, and in the game of life— —there’s no question about it: I was a character.

I felt like the boundary between *Atafami* and life was melting away.

The sweat on my hands around the controller was real, but the reason I was able to get so totally absorbed in the game was because it was *Atafami*.

Found fought so hard because he didn't want to lose. He existed on the screen, but the reason I bet everything on a single game was because it was life.

Life and *Atafami* swirled together, giving off a single quantity of heat.

And I was playing with everything I had, as one character.

I was sure that was exactly what I wanted to do.

In other words—

—I wanted to make my life more brilliant by throwing myself completely into *Atafami*, the game I loved.

And I wanted to dive deeper into *Atafami* by betting my life on the game.

If that's not a hybrid playstyle, I don't know what is.

"Brain?"

Mimimi was giving me a puzzled look.

I'd been ignoring her as I came to a conclusion in my own mind.

"I'm going to try to be a pro gamer."

"Really? ...I mean, what?" Mimimi yelped, surprised by the sudden revelation. "What? That came out of nowhere! You just decided right now?!"

"I think I want to give it a real shot," I said, like that was completely normal.

Mimimi was clearly confused.

"Wait, what is going on? You're just that sure you've got the gift?!" she asked excitedly.

I thought for a minute.

"Um...that's part of it, but..."

"You really are amazing, Brain!"

"But more than that..."

I told her very directly what I'd just realized.



*

“...I thought, if I use games to enjoy life, and life to enjoy games—that should create a positive feedback loop that makes the world infinitely more fun.”

When I said it out loud, I was surprised by how childish it sounded.

“...You’re kind of an idiot, you know that?”

“H-hey...”

Apparently, Mimimi had the same thought.

6

Whenever you trigger one flag, another one always seems to break

The next morning, I was unexpectedly the central topic of conversation.

“Tomozaki, are you serious?”

“I am.”

That’s right. I decided to tell everyone else what I’d told Mimimi about trying to be a pro gamer. Since I’d made up my mind, I didn’t have any regrets about my choice, and there was no reason to feel embarrassed about it.

“Shit, how am I supposed to beat you if you’ve got the best winrate in Japan?” Nakamura whined.

“It’s your own fault for trying.”

“What was that?”

“Gulp...!”

I’d gotten to the point where I could talk back to Nakamura when he complained, which I think you could call a sign that I was closing the gap in our ability levels.

“I always knew you weren’t an ordinary kid, Fumiya. Pretty good judge of character, eh?”

Mizusawa was using my announcement to boost his own reputation, but I’ll forgive him. This was Mizusawa, after all.

“Show me your ways, too, Farm Boy!”

“I will, but you should know it takes a fair amount of thinking.”

“Awesome! Then I’m sure I’ll be great at it!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Okay, glad to hear that.”

We were all wound up. Being the best in Japan is fairly impressive, but gaming is still gaming; the excitement in the group didn't really spread outside it. Honestly, I was grateful for that, but I did want to tell them all how incredible *Atafami* was.

I wondered if having other people find out about this would negatively impact my chances in the game of life. I glanced questioningly at Hinami, but since she wasn't about to murder me with her glare, I figured I was probably in the clear.

“...Huh?”

When I looked away from Hinami, I noticed Kikuchi-san glancing at me. That reminded me that I'd meant to send her a LINE message about it when I got home last night, but in the end, I decided not to.

Now it seemed better to wait till break or after school instead of telling her right now. I wanted to be able to really talk about it with her, just the two of us.

*

During break after first period, I walked over to her.

“Kikuchi-san,” I said. Her shoulder twitched in surprise.

“Oh...Tomozaki-kun.”

She looked down awkwardly. I guess she wasn't over what happened the previous day.

“I was wondering...,” I said, trying to draw her out. “Do you want to walk to the station together after school?”

She met my gaze. But her expression was somehow dejected.

“Um...”

“What?”

She gave me an appraising look. “...Your plans.”

I was surprised by what she said next.

“You decided on your plans for the future?”

“Huh? Oh, uh-huh. I did.”

“I see...”

It was sort of a strange way to respond to my question, but it’s true that everyone was making a big fuss over it before homeroom. Since I hadn’t told her yet, surprise was an understandable reaction. The reason I had invited her to walk to the station was so I *could* tell her about it, but given how loudly everyone was talking, she must have overheard.

“Um, I wanted to talk to you more about it later...but I think I want to be a pro gamer.”

“Yes...”

Her expression was still gloomy, and I felt like she wasn’t fully there. But she wasn’t acting truly strange, so it was hard to ask her what was wrong.

“Um...why?” she began hesitantly. “Why did you decide that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh, um...”

That was a big question, and it would take a long time to answer, which was why I wanted to walk to the station together.

“Some things that happened at the meetup, and talking with Mimimi, and other stuff. Of course, I want to tell you about all that.”

“The meetup...and Nanami-san,” she echoed, then smiled sadly.

“That’s why I wanted to—”

She interrupted me, which she hardly ever did. “I’m sorry.”

“Um...” I didn’t expect that answer, either.

“Today...I think I want to walk to the station by myself.”

I had no idea what to say.

We didn’t walk home together every day. But this was the first time she turned down my invitation because she wanted to be by herself, not because she had other plans.

“Oh...okay.”

“...Yeah.”

There was another awkward pause.

“...Okay. Then we’ll go home separately today.” I swallowed the sadness that was welling up in my chest.

But it was me, not her, who wanted to walk to the station together. Even if we were dating, I needed to respect her wishes.

“Yeah...,” she said, looking down.

I didn’t know what else to say, so I just stood there, staring at her.

She held her breath for a second, then nervously met my eyes. “Um...if we go home separately, who will you—?”

Just then, the bell rang, drowning out her soft voice and cutting off our conversation.

She’d started to say something, and the classroom was growing steadily quieter. If it was important, she could have repeated it, but she didn’t pick up the broken thread of words.

We silently returned to our seats, and class began.

The image of Kikuchi-san biting her lip anxiously was burned into my mind’s eye.

*

At lunch, something else unexpected happened.

“...Huh?”

It happened when I was eating lunch with the group that was going to Spo-Cha.

A LINE message from Kikuchi-san arrived.

[I’m sorry. I do want to walk to the station together today.]

I sat there, silently staring at my phone, surrounded by the joking and talking of the rest of the group.

What the heck was going on?

In the morning, she had turned down my invitation, and now it was lunch. What emotional change had taken place in the space of a few hours? I had no idea.

And there was another problem, too.

“Let’s figure everything out after school!” Takei was wrapping up the conversation.

That’s right. We’d decided to all meet up in class after school let out. And since Kikuchi-san had already turned down my invitation, I’d said I would be there, too.

But Kikuchi-san was clearly acting strange. Leaving things as they were would be a bad idea.

I went along with the conversation as I typed my answer to her.

I was certain the most important thing in a situation like this was to tell her everything up front.

[I’m supposed to get together with everyone after school in our classroom to talk about this weekend. Would you be willing to wait until we finished? I want to walk to the station with you, too!]

I sent the message, then switched off my screen.

I’d never had a girlfriend before, so this was all new to me.

But I felt sure that if I was honest and open, we would be able to understand each other.

*

The school day ended.

The Spo-Cha meeting (aka random chat with the normies) ended up lasting over an hour, and Kikuchi-san waited for me in the library until it ended.

Chatting for so long with a group that included slightly less familiar members like Tachibana and Kashiwazaki-san took a lot out of me, and by the time I headed for the library, I was fairly drained. On top of that, I’d been worrying

about things with Kikuchi-san all day.

When I walked into the library, I saw the familiar sight of Kikuchi-san sitting there with a book. When she saw me, she smiled and closed it. It was like I was seeing her for the first time in ages. A relief.

“Hello.”

“Hi. Thanks for waiting. I’m beat.”

“You are?”

I nodded and sat down next to her, setting my bag on the table. “Can I rest for a second?”

“Tee-hee. Of course. It’s been a long day.”

“...Yeah.”

Time was flowing slowly now.

“Let me know when you’ve rested enough.”

“Okay. Mind if I run to the restroom?”

“Go right ahead.”

I walked over to the bathroom next to the library. I couldn’t tell her that I’d actually had to go for half an hour, but I got swallowed up in the normie wave and couldn’t make an escape.

I finished my business and stood in front of the mirror, washing my hands, staring at my reflection, and psyching myself up.

I was glad we’d decided to meet in the library. I felt like just being there melted away some of the awkwardness from earlier.

I was sure I’d be able to talk to her about everything— With that thought on my mind, I walked back to the library, and that’s when it happened.

I opened the door and looked inside.

I saw Kikuchi-san. She had my phone in her hand.

“...!”

When she noticed my presence, she looked over at me with an expression

that could be interpreted as panic, despair, or sorrow.

“...Kikuchi-san?”

She set my phone on the table, picked up her bag, and started running.

“Hey, wait!” I called.

But she just kept running out of the library. Should I chase after her? What in the world was happening? I tried to organize my chaotic thoughts and decided that first I had to figure out what the cause was.

So I picked up my phone—and got a shock.

A LINE message from Rena was pulled up on the screen.

It said:

[I’m sorry for bringing up sex out of the blue the other day.]

Full of regret and panic, I flew out of the library.

But Kikuchi-san was nowhere to be found.

“...This is bad.”

My relationship was in serious trouble.

Afterword

Hi, everyone, Yuki Yaku here, author of a series that inspired an anime. It's been a while.

The series has been going for over three years now, with nine books published so far. I'm thrilled, as the author of a series that inspired an anime, that those books are still gaining new readers.

And as the author of a series that inspired an anime who is approaching the landmark tenth book in the series, I hope to produce what only the author of a series that inspired an anime can produce, of course without getting an overly big head.

Yes, I got carried away. And by the way, an anime version of the series has been announced, believe it or not!

The *Tomozaki* series has grown into what it is today thanks to lots of support from fans, bloggers, other writers, and countless bookstore employees. And after more than three years, we've finally reached the point of an anime spin-off. I hope that in this way, I'm able to repay a little of what I've received. I am genuinely grateful for your support. The anime won't be on the air for a while yet, but I hope you're looking forward to it. I plan to make every effort on every front to ensure everyone can enjoy the *Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki* series in various formats moving forward.

Perhaps some of you noticed? I said I plan to make every effort on every front, and that's quite similar to the way that Aoi Hinami is grasping the cuff of her sweater with her left hand on the cover of this volume.

In analyzing this sleeve, I would like first to direct your attention to the question of gravity. No doubt you know that gravity exists on planet Earth. And gravity should exert its power over Hinami's sleeve as she strikes that pose. But does it? The fact of the matter is that gravity is powerless over this Hinami on

the cover, who is holding up her sleeve in an enchanting manner.

That's right. In order to manufacture her own image, she is subtly holding up her sleeve with her fingers.

But what is more important to understand than the holding-up of the sleeve itself is another truth that this holding-up reveals.

The holding-up of the sleeve is engineered—once we understand that, we also come to understand, like a row of dominoes being toppled, that various other things about her are also engineered. The way she is holding a strand of hair between the fingers of that same left hand. The way the hem of her skirt is floating airily, as if she flipped it up just a moment earlier. Each of these is a sensual gesture intended to seduce us with its loveliness. Anyhow, I hope I've managed to communicate my interpretation, even in part.

Now on to the acknowledgments.

To Fly-san, my illustrator, I know I'm always interacting weirdly with you on Twitter. You should probably yell at me for it soon. Only Fly-san can hold back Yuki Yaku. I'm a big fan of yours.

To Iwaasa-san, my editor. We've finally got an anime. Let's shoot for Hollywood next.

Finally, to all my readers. I'm so excited to think that soon we'll be able to watch Tomozaki and his companions in motion, and I hope you feel that way, too! Thank you for all your support.

I hope you'll join me for the next volume!

Yuki Yaku

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