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# TOMORROW IN THE BOX

STORY

YASUMOTO TORU

ART

IKEDA YASUHIRO  
(5PB.)

SUPERVISION

HAYASHI NAOTAKA  
(5PB.)

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STORY: YASUMOTO TORU ART: IKEGA YASUHIRO [SPB]  
SUPERVISION: HAYASHI NAOTAKA [SPB]

PRESENTED BY NS2C



August 2019, Tanegashima

“There we go...”

As he lifted his gaze away from his PokeCom’s screen, Yashio Kaito lazily stretched his arms overhead and looked up at the sky above. His gaze met with a contrail in the distance, climbing its way up the faraway firmament. The sky was blue, and the clouds were white—just as they had always been.

Ever since he had grown aware of the world around him, Kaito had always been fond of the sky. He felt as though he’d often find himself looking up at it without even realizing it, but perhaps that was just his Tanegashima blood playing tricks on him. Above all else, though, looking up at the vast sky spread out before him made anything and everything else seem trivial to him.

On the other side of that sky lay the cosmos—a space so terrifically immense that it stretched out eternally toward infinity. When Kaito viewed the world around him through a lens like that, everything—anguish, pain, and sorrow alike—felt minuscule to him.

And, although not necessarily for the same reasons, the ongoing conversation between two of the other Robotics Club members in the hangar felt just as trivial to Kaito. Their lively voices, which he had grown accustomed to hearing over the last few days, rang out from within the prefab building, which showed signs of aging in a few spots.

“Come *on!* Why don’t you get it? Building a giant humanoid robot is our dream! It’s the legacy that’s been passed down for generations and generations in the Robotics Club!”

“How many times must I repeat myself? The fact that you’re so fixated on GunBuild-1 is utter nonsense in the first place.”

Those voices belonged to the Robotics Club’s president, Senomiya Akiho, and a second-year student, Hidaka Subaru. It had been a month since Subaru joined the club after giving into their



“proposal”—or, to put it more accurately, the combination of Akiho's pushy invitation and Kaito's half-threat.

The two's constant bickering had started right then and there due to the conflicts that arose when Akiho, who was obsessed with giant humanoid robots, and Subaru, who meticulously sought performance and efficiency, couldn't come to an agreement.

*Do those two never get tired of arguing?* Kaito thought to himself. Although he certainly felt surprised—if not shocked—at the fact that neither of them ever gave in, he also felt a sense of admiration for their unwavering resolves; both fought hard to see their own ideals through to the very end.

Kaito was a member of the Robotics Club, formally known as the “Chuo Tanegashima High School Robotics Research Club.” Although it was labeled as a full-fledged research club, the Robotics Club's member count had been reduced to just him and Akiho until a month ago. It was thanks to Akiho's persuasiveness that the total member count had gone up to five, Subaru included. Even so, they were still just five members—five members that, despite the odds, were still striving to build a giant robot.

“GunBuild-1,” as Subaru had called it, was the “Life-Size Gunvarrel Prototype No. 1,” a robot that had been worked on little by little, generation after generation over eight years of the Robotics Club's history. Its official name was “Let's Build a Life-Size Gunvarrel Project Prototype No. 1.” The project took its name from Gunvarrel, a robot from a certain anime that had aired between 2012 and 2015. Simply put, the goal of the project was to build that one giant robot in real life, and the Robotics Club was making use of the Old Tanegashima Airport's hangar for its construction.

“Anyway, we'll be taking GunBuild-1 to the Expo! I'm telling you, if we took another robot there, our work would lose all meaning!” Akiho exclaimed.

After securing his PokeCom in its case, Kaito stood up and walked toward the hangar. When he reached the entrance, he could hear Akiho's impassioned voice quite clearly.

“You say that, but as it stands, this GunBuild of yours is nothing more than a cheap knock-off that can't so much as walk. Can you even call it a robot at this point?”

Compared to Akiho, Subaru spoke with composure, logic, and factuality. No matter what anyone else might have said, there was no denying that he was an individual with true talent behind him. At the time, he was the two-time consecutive champion of a hobby robot contest that was held twice a year in Tokyo.

When it came to robots, Subaru was overwhelmingly more knowledgeable than Akiho. But it was precisely *because* he tended to be right that Akiho would get riled up, and as a result, her emotions would end up getting the better of her. There was no doubt that Subaru was aware of the effect his words had on her, but the fact that he couldn't help but voice his opinions regardless was proof of his honesty.

“Y-Yashio-kun, don't just stand there like nothing's happening! Please, do something!”

Kaito had been lost in thought, gazing up at GunBuild-1's enormous frame lying horizontally in the hangar, when a petite girl with healthily-tanned skin called out to him. She was Daitoku Junna, a girl that had also joined the Robotics Club via Akiho's invitation. Another victim of hers, so to speak.

"Akiho-chan and Hidaka-kun have been at it since this morning, and I... I don't know how to stop them!" she cried.

"C'mon Jun-chan, it's not like they only just started arguing today," Kaito replied. "Worrying about it won't solve anything, so there's no real point in losing your head over this, don'tcha think?"

"You're not wrong, but..."

Junna had a concerned expression on her face all the same. Unless the matter was resolved, she wouldn't be able to get it off her mind. That was just the kind of girl she was.

Nevertheless, Kaito couldn't stop the two quarrelers—or, more accurately, he didn't feel like stopping them. As far as Kaito was concerned, he was a club member in name only. When it came to anything robot-related, he made sure to steer as clear as possible. Perhaps that was cold-hearted of him, but Kaito had no intention of changing his ways.

"If you want me to do something about it so badly, why not challenge me to a match of Kill-Ballad? If you beat me, I'll do it, no questions asked," Kaito offered.

Kill-Ballad was a fighting game for the PokeCom based on the Gunvarrel anime. Whenever someone asked Kaito for a favor, the condition he would impose was to beat him in a match of Kill-Ballad. However, anyone who tried to do so was faced with an enormous ordeal. After all...

"B-But that's impossible! Aren't you the fifth-best player in the world?" Junna responded.

Kill-Ballad's total playerbase was said to exceed twenty million players worldwide, so the odds of a total amateur beating the fifth-best player in a fair match were simply impossible.

Kaito had made his suggestion precisely because he was well aware of that fact. To put it simply, Kill-Ballad was just his way of gracefully refusing another person's request; Kaito tended not to involve himself in anything troublesome—that was another one of his policies.

"If you're gonna be like that, then no one's gonna stop those two... since Koujiro-san doesn't seem willing either..."

Junna looked over at the girl in question, who had surrendered herself to exhaustion and was sitting limply in her chair.

"It's... hot... Way too hot... Who the hell works outside on a day like this?! Gimme a break! Someone, h-halp... please..." the girl called out. She had fair hair parted to either side, and she looked and sounded as if she was about to melt into a puddle right then and there. Her name was Furugoori Kona, but she was also known as "Frau Koujiro."

One might have asked, "Why does she look so unmotivated at a glance?" Or, "Why does this languid girl have an alias?" There were a number of reasons why.

"Wh-Why does someone like me, who's responsible for their own home's safety, have to go

outside into the scorching sunlight? And during summer vacation, no less! Depending on your answer, you must let me lick Yashio-senpai's collarbone!"

"Fat chance," Kaito retorted. He had tried to play it cool with a swift and witty response, but truthfully, he had no idea why the conversation had ended up where it did. Besides that, he couldn't even tell whether or not she had been joking in the first place.

What he was certain of, however, was that geniuses deviated from the norm. And yes, Furugoori Kona, A.K.A Frau Koujiro, was undoubtedly a genius. Though she might have seemed unreliable at first glance, and though her word choice was often peculiar, she was still, in spite of it all, a genius programmer and the creator of the aforementioned fighting game, Kill-Ballad. That was one of the reasons why Furugoori Kona maintained an alias.

To Kaito, the fact that the creator of Kill-Ballad had come to Tanegashima—as well as the fact that she was even younger than he was—came as a huge surprise. However, the surprise he felt quickly shifted from her intelligence to her quirky speech patterns.

"It's t-too hot. I wanna go home. In fact, I utterly refuse to come back tomorrow," Frau complained.

Kaito strongly agreed with her sentiment. He would have preferred to spend the next day at home, without a care in the world.

"Um, are you all right, Koujiro-san? Would you like some water?" Junna asked.

"Sure I'm okay... NOT!" Frau spat back. "I'm sweaty all over, and it feels awful. Th-The things I hate the most in this world are physical labor and sweat. Although, when it comes to boys covered in sweat, I'm all for it, TBH! Don't you agree, Karate-senpai?"

"Huh?! I-I don't, um... I don't exactly... follow you. Besides, we should be focusing on stopping Akiho and Hidaka-kun instead..."

While Frau and Junna had been exchanging a meaningless conversation, Akiho and Subaru's discussion had gradually escalated, with new arguments springing up no matter where their conversation ventured. Or, perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that Akiho had made the discussion escalate all on her own...

"If you'd at least let us build it smaller, for example..."

"You don't get it, do you, Subaru? The romance of it all, I mean. Just like how a mountain climber looks at a mountain and feels like they *have* to climb it, or how a pirate aims to sail faraway seas, robots aspire to be giant and walk on two legs," explained Akiho. "It's the duty of robot enthusiasts like me to fulfill that wish."

"I don't believe pirates necessarily *aim* to sail faraway seas," Subaru retorted.

"Ugh, there you go again, nitpicking at every little detail," Akiho whined.

"You're the one who doesn't pay the necessary attention to details, Prez."

"Stuff like that doesn't matter! What we actually need to focus on is the romantic stuff!"

When Akiho made her stance on the matter clear, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and let out a long sigh of disappointment. It seemed as though he had given up on trying to convince her

after all. Given some time, however, the same argument would likely sprout up again in the near future.

“In a way, your admiration for robots has gone from annoying to impressive, Prez,” Subaru remarked.

“Hehe, you really think so?”

“I’m not necessarily praising you.”

Kaito completely agreed with Subaru. If she directed that passion toward her studies, her grades would surely benefit from it. Still, Kaito had no room to talk; Akiho always said the same of him and his passion for Kill-Ballad.

“It really is amazing how much you love robots, Akiho-chan. How did you come to like them so much in the first place?” asked Junna, followed by a soft sigh from her. Seeing that reminded Kaito that Junna always seemed to look terrified whenever she laid her eyes on a robot; he suspected that was the reason why she had some doubts about Akiho’s passion.

Frau cut in. “S-Surely you’re planning to build a handsome robot that suits your tastes someday, right? I get it.”

“There’s no way she’d do something like that. She’s not like you, Kona-chan.”

“H-How rude! If I were in her shoes, I’d build two of them to do all sorts of things with... Huff, huff..”

Kaito didn’t understand what exactly was so rude about his reply, but it was clear as day to him that whatever Frau had on her mind wasn’t anything good. For the time being, he turned his attention away from Frau and her ragged panting to ponder Junna’s question: why *did* Akiho like robots so much?

The answer to that lay in the family she was born into. Akiho’s father was the president of the JAXA Tanegashima Space Center; that wasn’t to say that his position was a factor, but he was quite attached to mecha anime. As a result, he was a big influence on Akiho.

But, above all else, there was Akiho’s older sister: Senomiya Misaki. Misaki was working for Exoskeleton Company in Tokyo, and she was the one who had originally drafted the “Let’s Build a Life-Size Gunvarrel Project.”

Of course, since he was Akiho’s childhood friend, Kaito knew her older sister very well. Senomiya Misaki was a woman who had the power to bring people together. Her words and actions left a lasting impression on the people around her, and before long, they would all end up getting wrapped up in her schemes. Even Subaru was indirectly affected by her, though Misaki herself didn’t have the slightest idea about it.

Naturally, Kaito, who had known Misaki since childhood, had been greatly influenced by her as well. The reason behind his Kill-Ballad obsession also lay within his memories of his time with her.

There was no mistaking the fact that Misaki’s overwhelming presence was a major factor in Akiho’s love for and fixation toward robots. Nevertheless, there was something else that was

bothering Kaito.

“Um, what’s wrong, Yashio-kun?” asked Junna, who had noticed his troubled expression.

“Ah, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about the question you asked earlier,” Kaito responded.

“Are you referring to the question of why Prez is so infatuated with robots?” Subaru, who had suddenly appeared by their side, joined in on the conversation. “It’s simple. Her unique family environment is the cause. Her father is the president of the Tanegashima Space Center, and her sister is the one who originally proposed the creation of the GunBuild-1, no less. Considering the fact that she was raised in a household like that, it’s no wonder she ended up so obsessed with robots.”

“S-Sounds like it’s Four Eyes who’s got the hots for robots if you ask me!” Frau teased.

“I-I don’t have the ‘hots,’ or anything of the sort!”

“Th-That’s what they all say. Besides, a pervert like you has no room to defend yourself, considering you went to a robot tournament in that *weird outfit*.”

“I-It’s not w-wike I did that because I wanted to!”

Ignoring Subaru and Frau’s dispute, Kaito continued. “Yeah, her family’s definitely a part of it, but there’s still something that doesn’t quite fit. I don’t know if it has anything to do with Aki’s love for robots itself, but...”

Akiho and robots. Kaito felt that those two subjects were somehow related to an episode from his childhood, but he could only vaguely remember it.

“Hey, what are you guys talking about?” Having finally taken notice of the conversation, Akiho herself joined in.

“We were talking about you, actually,” Kaito replied.

“About me?”

“Yep. Say, Aki-chan, when did you start liking robots so much?”

“When did I start liking robots? Hmm, I’ve never actually thought about it until now, so I don’t really know. I only really realized it after the fact...”

“But back then, you didn’t like them as much as you do now, right?”

“Hmm, you sure about that? Well, I was definitely a fan of magical girl anime back then, but I have a feeling that I liked mecha anime even before that...”

“Magical girl anime?!”

An uproar broke out in the hangar at Akiho’s sudden confession—in response to that, a dissatisfied expression rose to her face.

“H-Hey! It may not seem like it, but I’m a girl too, for the most part! There was a time when I was super into magical girls and all sorts of other girly stuff!”

The tumultuous air in the hangar quickly shifted into one of laughter when the club members heard the desperation in Akiho’s voice.

“I don’t think that ‘for the most part’ bit really helps your case, Aki-chan...” said Kaito.

“Okay... I-I get it... Come on, you guys are laughing way too much!” Akiho complained.

"S-Say that all you want, but the thought of Prez-senpai watching girly anime... pfffffft. Telling me not to laugh won't do you any good, FYI. Literally impossible," Frau snorted.

"Unfortunately, I will have to agree with Furugoori on this one, Prez. I'm afraid it's too late to start pitching for your girlishness," Subaru reported.

The sharp-tongued duo aside, even the reserved Junna had a hint of a smile on her face, which seemed to displease Akiho greatly. "Grr... Even Junna? C'mon!" she pouted.

"Ah, I'm sorry... it's just that, um, imagining you playing magical girl is, well..."

"And Kai, why are you laughing with them? We used to play house all the time when we were kids! We'd even play doctor too, among other stuff."

"H-Hey! Hold on Aki-chan, TMI—"

By the time he realized what had happened, the damage had already been done. Upon hearing what Akiho had said, a certain someone raised a commotion without skipping a beat.

"P-Play doctor, you say?! Wh-What manner of forbidden acts have my upperclassmen indulged in?! Heresy, I say! Heresy!" Frau shouted.

"H-Heresy...? C'mon, we're just talking about our childhood..." Kaito groaned.

"S-Srsly, kids these days really are to be feared... They think they have permission to do whatever they want just because they're children...!"

Frau had officially gone off the deep end, and it was too late to calm her down.

"Aki-chan, look what you've done."

"I-I'm sorry... Everyone was laughing, and I just let it slip..."

"Jun-chan, Subaru-kun, just so we're clear here, this is all in her imagination, okay? At the end of the day, me and Akiho were just kids."

"Y-Yeah. I know," Junna replied.

"Of course. Only someone like Furugoori would dream up something like that," Subaru responded in turn.

Kaito was relieved that they were using their common sense, even though they were the type to do so anyway. Getting hit with questioning stares from people with the wrong idea was an uncomfortable feeling, even for someone like Kaito.

"But still, is it true, Yashio-senpai?" Subaru inquired.

"Hmm? Is what true?"

"Keep up, Yashio-senpai. The thing about Prez's childhood."

"Ah, that."

In the next instant, Junna and Subaru both went silent, awaiting Kaito's response. It seemed like neither of them could believe in that aspect of Akiho's childhood, but...

"If I remember correctly, what Akiho said is the truth... or at least, it should be. Back in the day, she acted relatively girlish. Compared to what she's like nowadays, of course," Kaito remarked.

"Hold on, Kai, what do you mean 'relatively'?" Akiho probed.





“Prez? Liking *magical girls*? It’s just so hard to believe. We’re talking about *our* Prez, after all. If you were to tell me that she was born into this world with a robot toy in hand, I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised,” said Subaru.

“Subaru, what the heck do you see me as?” Akiho shot back.

After what she had been through that day, it was only natural that she was so displeased. Even so, she had brought it all upon herself thanks to her own mannerisms, so there was nothing she could have done about it.

“Anyway, I really did like girly anime more than robots back then. That’s the truth, no matter what anyone else says!” declared Akiho. “Look, I can still sing the opening song to one of them! Um, what was it called again? Uh...”

“You seriously can’t expect me to believe you if you can’t even remember the show’s name,” Subaru remarked.

“But it’s the truth, I’m telling you!” Akiho protested. “...Ah, I got it!”

“It’s true that Aki-chan used to watch girly anime and other stuff when she was a kid,” Kaito interjected, “but her love for robots came way before she started elementary school.”

Kaito’s sudden interruption stopped the quarrel between Akiho and Subaru right in its tracks, just before it could reach its boiling point.

“Huh? Is that true...?” Akiho asked. Her expression clouded over, a stark contrast from a moment ago.

“Yeah. You used to make me play robots with you on the way home from kindergarten. Don’t you remember that?” Kaito continued.

“D-Duhuhu. K-Kindergartener Kaito. Wearing shorts, of course!”

“But even so...” Kaito pressed on, ignoring Frau as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. “After that—a little while after we started elementary school?—there was a period of time when she suddenly stopped talking about robots altogether.”

“Ah! Now that you mention it, I do remember something like that, yeah!” exclaimed Akiho. Her eyes narrowed as she relived a burst of nostalgia. “Back when we were in kindergarten, there wasn’t a difference between ‘boys’ and ‘girls’—we were all just ‘kids,’ right? But when we started elementary school, we were divided into those two groups all of a sudden. The teacher told me that girls should behave like girls, so I felt like I had to hurry up and get caught up with what my friends were talking about. And then...”

“And then?” prompted Subaru.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. Anyway, after that happened, I kinda stopped caring about robots for a while.”

Kaito knew immediately what Akiho had almost just said—what she chose to keep to herself. What she was trying to keep a secret was a certain incident that she and Kaito had been met with in the past. Ever since that incident, both Akiho and Kaito suffered a permanent, tormentous aftereffect; it had also played a major role in Akiho’s loss of interest in robots, if only

temporarily.

“That’s odd. In most cases, when a child loses interest in something, they live on without ever picking it back up again. So how, despite that, did Prez manage to regain her adoration for robots—an adoration that one might even call abnormal?” Subaru inquired.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem like the other club members had given much thought to what Akiho had almost let slip. Speaking of her...

“You wanna know?” she asked. It seemed as though she was back in high spirits because of Subaru’s supposed “compliment” to her charm. Akiho was a simple person, but even so, Kaito considered that one of her good traits.

“Truth is, there was a certain event that started it all...” When she said that, Akiho shifted her gaze toward Kaito.

“What was it?” Kaito asked.

“Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“C’mon Kai, it concerns you too!”

“...It does?”

An event that had been able to revive Akiho's love for robots... What was it, again? Kaito looked through and pulled at the threads of his memory, but nothing came to mind.

“Was there really something like that?”

“There was!”

Once again, he tried to remember. But despite his efforts...

“Do you really not remember?”

“Sorry...”

“Oh, c’mon! If you can’t even remember it, then everything I’ve said’s gonna seem like a total lie!”

“You don’t really need to worry about that. Everyone believes you. Isn’t that right, guys?”

“Um... yeah. Well...” Junna mumbled.

“In...deed...” Subaru followed.

“Yeah, no, don’t trust you in the slightest, TYVM.” said Frau.

While Subaru and Junna had hurriedly tried to keep up appearances, Frau, who had returned from her state of arousal without notice, decided to speak her mind. A foreboding chill ran up Kaito’s spine. *No, if you say that, Akiho’ll—!*

“All right, fine! I get the message! If that’s what you all think, then I’ll show you proof!”

*See, that’s what you get,* Kaito thought to himself. *I knew it would turn out like this.*

“A-Aki-chan, you don’t really have to—” Junna stammered.

“Yes I do! If I don’t address these suspicions, my sense of dignity as a girl will be in danger!”

No matter how much Junna tried to calm Akiho down, she refused to back down. Once she hit the gas, the only thing she had left to do was power through. That was the kind of girl Akiho

was.

“But Aki-chan, what do you mean by ‘proof’? Do you have a photo or something?” At the very least, Kaito had no recollection of taking such a picture, or even having seen it, and his statement made that quite clear.

“Yeah, I know you don’t remember, Kai. You forgetting all about it is what got us here in the first place!”

That was certainly true. If Kaito had in fact remembered the event she was referring to, there would have been no problem at all.

Akiho slowly looked around in order to meet everyone’s gazes, and then, she shot her fist up into the air. “With that said, I’ll bring the proof tomorrow, so make sure to assemble here by then, everyone!” she announced.



Apart from Kaito, who had already expected that turn of events, everyone showed signs of disapproval. The first to raise their voice was Frau, who protested almost instantly.

“But I refuse!”

Frau, who had already been utterly defeated by the heat, was craving the opportunity to spend the next day in her room, air conditioning on at full blast. To her, Akiho’s announcement was nothing short of a death sentence.

“Wait just one moment, Prez. When it comes to matters like these, isn’t it best to inform everyone in advance? People may have prior engagements—things to do,” Subaru explained.

“Do you have anything planned tomorrow?” Akiho prodded.

“No, I have nothing in particular planned. I am merely presenting this as a problem relating to common sense.”

“That’s why I’m telling you guys about this ahead of time!”

“That’s not what I—”

As if to brush Subaru and his vehement arguing aside, Frau took the lead. “I-I can’t come tomorrow, as I simply must attend Yashio-senpai and Four Eyes’ wedding...”

“Wh-What?! Yashio-kun and Hidaka-kun’s wedding?! B-But aren’t they, um, both guys...?!” a flustered Junna said.

“Jun-chan, please don’t take her seriously,” Kaito interjected. “Either way, Aki-chan, aren’t you being a bit too pushy about this?”

“Nope. Participation is required. President’s orders.”

Everyone proceeded to lash back at Akiho’s callous declaration.

“C-Cruel! How cruel! You demon! Fiend! Potemkin!”

“Say what you will, but orders are orders. My pride as a girl is at stake here!”

Frau’s complaints hadn’t been able to reach Akiho either. It was true that there was absolutely no need to obey her, but deep down, everyone was well aware of what kind of trouble they’d be stirring up if they turned her down.

“Well then. Tomorrow, same time, same place. Got it?!” yelled Akiho, seeking confirmation.

There was no one left who would dare to try and oppose her. All that remained were the club members’ resentful gazes, all of which pierced Kaito deeply and painfully.

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The next day...

The Old Tanegashima Airport was engulfed in relentless waves of sunlight, putting even the previous day’s heat to shame. Conversely, the club members’ faces were completely clouded over.

Having surveyed all of their faces, Akiho nodded happily despite their demeanors. “All right, everybody’s here! I’m impressed!” she said. “Hm? You guys don’t look too good. What’s wrong?”

“Are you really asking that right now?” Kaito sighed. It would not have been a stretch to say that Akiho’s utter inability to read the room was worthy of praise.

“It’s at times like this that we do the thing! C’mon everyone, all together now! Storm and surge! Blast of Spirit! Gunv—”

“A-Aki-chan, more importantly—the reason we’re all here today? Can’t you show us that proof of yours already?”

“Whaaat? C’mon, that was the best part...”

Akiho seemed unhappy, but Kaito couldn’t have cared less. If she kept things up any longer, neither Kaito nor the rest of the club members would have been able to put up with her antics any longer.

“Fine, I get it! I’ll show it to you guys. The proof I mentioned waaas.... *this!*”

Akiho revealed the object she had been concealing up until that point: a small box.

“Ta-da!”

“*That’s* your proof?!” exclaimed everyone else in unison.

It was a dirty, rusty aluminum box. Judging by its design and the letters on it that could still be made out, it appeared to be a candy box. Sure enough, none of the other club members had any clue as to how a measly box would prove Akiho’s girlishness from days long past.

Even so, Kaito did vaguely remember it. A small box. The sea. And...

“You see this? It’s something Kai and I found when we were kids. It was on a clear and hot day, just like this one,” Akiho said.

Indeed. It was exactly seven years ago, and it all happened within Chikura-no-Iwaya...

September 2010, Akihabara

“Nghhh...”

As he faced the dirty, rectangular box, Okabe Rintaro groaned like a cat that had been straining in the litter box over the course of three painful days.

The Future Gadget Laboratory. In Akihabara, Tokyo, there was a small building located not too far from the Suehirocho intersection. It had a shop dealing in CRT TVs, and right next to that shop was a staircase that led up to the laboratory. Although it was labeled a laboratory, it wasn't as though major research or anything of the sort was conducted there. Its affiliated laboratory members—“lab mems” for short—were few. Since almost all of them were students, it was more akin to a friend group.

Inside one of the lab's rooms was Okabe Rintaro, who had been frowning at a small box for quite some time. Rintaro was a freshman attending Tokyo Denki University, and he was also the founder of the Future Gadget Lab. However, despite what one might have otherwise thought, he didn't possess any exceptional talents. He was neither a world-renowned researcher, nor were his grades particularly stellar. Therefore, it was no surprise to see him grumbling like he was. The truth was...

“Hey, Daru-kun? Mayushii has something she wants to look up. Could you let me use the computer for just a little bit?” Paying no mind to Rintaro, Shiina Mayuri spoke up—she was addressing a large young man facing a computer, completely engrossed in its screen.

“Daru-kun, there's this costume that Mayushii wants to make, but she doesn't remember what the back of it looks like...” Mayuri continued. “That's why I really need to look it up on the computer, so...”

Shiina Mayuri was Rintaro's childhood friend, and she was also the mascot-like entity of the lab. Given her childlike voice and speech patterns, most guys would have found themselves unable to turn down any of her requests. However...

“J-Just wait a sec! I'm at a really important part here, so can't you save that for later? You're not in a hurry or anything, right? Look, see these choices here? My gut's telling me that there's a major plot twist ahead!”

The bulky young man, Daru, refused the girl's plea.

Pictured on Daru's cherished PC monitor was a girl smiling bashfully back at him. Her hair was cheerfully colored, and was accompanied by her big, round eyes and blushing cheeks. He was playing one of those so-called “dating sims.”

“Can't you just save there?” Mayuri asked.

“What are you *saying*, Mayushii? Saving on the first playthrough of an eroge is utter heresy! You *have* to start off by playing all the way to the end without saving. That shows respect toward the developers, and it's considered good manners among perverted gentlemen such as myself!”

Having finished preaching, Daru used his middle finger to swiftly slide the glasses resting on the end of his nose back into place. Despite having just spouted such deplorable things, his confident posture gave off a refreshing aura.

“Daru,” of course, was just a nickname—his real name was Hashida Itaru. Aside from being a lab mem and one of Rintaro's classmates, he was also an extremely skilled hacker, which was a frequent source of pride for him. His peers also generally acknowledged him as a fierce otaku.

“Ohhh! Mayushii understands now! Playing a dating sim sounds really tough...”

“Exactly. No matter if it’s in the real world or the virtual world, perfection is no easy feat.”

“Mmmhh, nnnhhh... Nghhh!”

As Mayuri and Itaru casually chatted away, Rintaro continued to groan by his lonesome. The sounds he made grew louder and louder as time passed. In essence, Rintaro wanted the other lab mems’ attention.

“That said, can you wait a bit longer?” Itaru asked.

“Okay. Mayushii will wait a little longer, then.”

“Sorry about that, Mayu-shi. I’ll help you out when I finish this, all right?”

Both Mayuri and Itaru continued their chatter, unaware of Rintaro’s obvious efforts to get their attention. If one wants to be heard, one should say so clearly—however, Okabe Rintaro was precisely the kind of person who couldn’t do something as simple as that.

After recognizing that staying silent would do him no good, Rintaro’s formerly unintelligible complaints finally took the form of actual words. “How troubling. What secrets could this box possibly hold? Would it be wise to dare to open it? Hmm...” he mused.

Rintaro pulled out his phone and held it up to his ear. “It’s me. Indeed, there exists the likelihood of this being yet another Organization conspiracy. Understood. However, on the slim chance that things don’t go according to plan, I shall leave the rest up to you. El Psy Kongroo.”

With his phone still raised to his ear, Rintaro glanced at the other two lab mems.

“Wooow, she’s so cute!” Mayuri swooned.

“Well, the childhood friend character over here is the real best girl, IMO,” Itaru remarked.

“True, she’s cute too! And that uniform design! Mayushii wonders if she should make a costume like that...”

“Nghhh... Hey! You two!”

Unable to endure being ignored any longer, Rintaro was left with no choice but to employ the use of more direct tactics.

“Can you not see how afflicted I am? Moreover, Daru, why must you insist on playing eroge so nonchalantly? What happened to that thing I asked for? If you have the time to play games, then you should work on improving th—”

“Oh, that. I finished that up a while ago. Here you go.”

Itaru’s calm reply to the irrational anger that had just been thrown at him left Rintaro at a brief loss for words.



“I-If you had done it already, you should’ve said something...” Rintaro said, exasperated.

Itaru took the aforementioned object out, completely ignoring Rintaro’s mutters of complaint. The object had two flat, wing-like pieces sticking out of the end of its thin handle. Frankly, it looked quite like a bamboo-copter... No, not a single person would have so much as batted an eye if they were told that it was an actual bamboo-copter.

When she recognized its shape, Mayuri’s eyes lit up. “Whoaaa! It’s Bamboo Helicam-chan!” she exclaimed.

Given its name, it was not as though the members of the Future Gadget Laboratory spent all of their time idling about. Their daily endeavors had a single purpose: to continue to research and develop gadgets in hopes of leaving something behind that would benefit the future.

Dating sims and costume-making were simply activities akin to interludes, while gadgets were the driving force behind the main act. Though, many doubts remained as to which of the activities played the bigger role overall.

In any case, among the lab’s finished products was Future Gadget No. 2: a bamboo-copter-shaped camera dubbed the “Bamboo Helicam.”

“Huh? Hmm... But Bamboo Helicam-chan is looking a little different than Mayushii remembers...” Mayuri said, a quizzical expression on her face.

“Oh, it seems you have a keen eye, Mayuri. This gadget differs greatly from the Bamboo Helicam you’ve known up to this point! In other words, it’s a cutting-edge Bamboo Helicam!” Rintaro declared.

“Cutting... edge?”

“Precisely. Do you perhaps desire to know what it is that makes it ‘cutting-edge’? You do want to know, I assume? Very well then, I shall show you.”

Even though no one had answered him in the first place, Rintaro continued to ramble on, maintaining his usual habit of one-sided conversation.

“Surely, you must be aware that the Bamboo Helicam is a groundbreaking gadget that can take photographs in mid-air, which was made possible by attaching a CCD camera to the fulcrum. However, this invention had a major defect: namely, its inability to take photographs at high altitudes due to it requiring manpower to fly!”

“No, the problem is that it spins while it’s taking pictures, which means you can’t get a proper photo at all! That’s just common sense, SMH,” Itaru interjected. Just as he had said, the Bamboo Helicam’s greatest flaw was that the CCD camera spun along with the main unit. Nevertheless...

“Did you get all of that, Mayuri?” Rintaro pressed on, unfazed by the accurate observation that had been thrown at him. In other words, that meant that the flaw Itaru pointed out hadn’t been addressed in the slightest.

“It’s here that the Bamboo Helicam (Mk. II) takes the stage. It now has a built-in motor, which was originally absent. Do you understand what this means?”

“Ummm... sooo... does it mean she can fly even higher than she could before?” Mayuri guessed.

“Precisely,” Rintaro affirmed.

“In fact, that wasn’t the only thing I improved,” Itaru said, standing up. His glasses—which were quite small considering the size of his face—shone for a brief moment. “Here, take a look at this section of the wing.”

“Th-This is...”

Upon hearing Itaru’s words, Rintaro, who had been cautiously inspecting the Bamboo Helicam (Mk. II), suddenly took on an expression of shock.

“Impossible...!” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, that’s right. I installed a solar cell on it, too,” Itaru explained.

“What... did you say...?”

Not only did the Bamboo Helicam now have an integrated motor, it also had a solar cell installed. That meant that the gadget could fly higher and for even longer.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Daru! I’d expect nothing less from my Favorite Right Arm!”

Delighted as he was, Rintaro couldn’t help but enthusiastically shake both of Itaru’s hands. The core issue caused by the screen rotating still hadn’t been resolved, but apparently, it wasn’t that much of a problem from Rintaro’s perspective.

Rintaro’s lab coat—a characteristic born of his time at the lab—was flung outward as he opened his arms wide in a grandiose manner and began to speak. “Muhahaha! It has begun! All doubts can be cast aside—the Bamboo Helicam (Mk. II) shall provide our lab with the vast funds it requires! With it, I, the insane mad scientist Hououin Kyouma, shall be one step closer to my true ambition: *plunging the world into chaos!*”

“There you go again, going on and on about random nonsense. Honestly, no matter how much time passes, you stay as chuunibyou as ever.”

Rintaro turned to face the abrupt voice and found a sole girl standing at the lab’s entrance. Her straight hair reached as far as her hips, adorning her personally-arranged outfit, and long, slender legs emerged from her black shorts.

“Ah, Christina. And here I thought it was someone else,” said Rintaro. “Despite your duties as my assistant, you sure do find time for an awful lot of ‘business excursions.’ Am I wrong?”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself?! I’m not Christina, nor am I your assistant!” the girl spat back before entering the room.

Her name was Makise Kurisu. She was enrolled at America’s Viktor Chondria University, and many considered her a genius in the field of brain science. During the summer, she had returned to Japan as an exchange student, and soon after, she started visiting the lab on a regular basis for reasons only she knew.

Why *did* a genius like her even bother with a rather unrefined group of students? The answer to that involved certain circumstances and some rather dramatic events, but that was a

story for another time. At any rate, the genius scientist Makise Kurisu was a member of the Future Gadget Lab—Rintaro’s assistant if you asked him—and still frequently visited the place.

“What’s with the box?” Kurisu, who had entered the room as if she was completely used to the place, took notice of the small, old box sitting on top of the table.

“Ohhh, yes. This. The singular source of my troubles. I almost forgot about it since you all were getting worked up over foolish nonsense.”

Completely disregarding the fact that he, too, had been part of the fuss up until then, Rintaro took the small box in hand.

“It’s a candy box! Does that mean it has some candy inside?” Mayuri asked.

“It looks pretty banged up... What’s the deal, Okarin?” Itaru asked, continuing the line of questioning.

“You do well to ask me, Daru. In truth, yesterday...”

Seeing that Mayuri, Itaru, and even Kurisu had at last taken interest in the box, Rintaro finally decided to tell them of its circumstances.

It had all begun during the morning of the day prior. Rintaro’s family managed a grocery store in East Ikebukuro. Normally, Rintaro spent his time at the lab, but as rare as it was, he had found himself at his parents’ home, and with too much free time on his hands at that; that was why his parents seized the opportunity to send him out on an errand. His destination: Shimokitazawa.

Taking the train from Ikebukuro to Shimokitazawa would have taken approximately twenty minutes, which was essentially the same amount of time it took to get to the lab in Akihabara. However, in order to get to Shimokitazawa from Ikebukuro, at least one train transfer was needed. That sole fact had aggravated Rintaro particularly.

Besides, such matters weren’t meant to be undertaken by an insane mad scientist with plans to overthrow the System in the near future... or so he had tried to explain to his parents. Nevertheless...

“As it is unmannerly to refuse desperate requests from others, I decided to comply despite my reluctance. Yes... I dubbed it, ‘Operation Hermod!’”

Thus declared Rintaro, naming his most recent scheme. Hermod was one of the Supreme Deity Odin’s sons, appearing in Norse mythology. He was the god that, in order to bring back his late brother Baldur, ventured deep into Helheim as per orders from his father.

“At the time, however, not even I, Hououin Kyouma, knew how long and treacherous the journey would be.” Upon reaching the end of his speech, Rintaro gazed theatrically at some random spot in the distance. His face contorted as a pained expression colored it.

“So, in other words... it was a normal errand. You’re not a kid, so what was so difficult about it?”

Mayuri and Itaru followed up on Kurisu’s words of disbelief.

“Oh, Mayushii knows! It’s like that one show where they send out a little kid to go on their

first ever errand, and a hidden camera follows them the whole way. Mayushii always cries every time she watches it...”

“So it was Okarin’s first ever errand. Sounds about right.”

“Hey! Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

Truth be told, his parents had simply told him to “stop making excuses and go already,” to which he had no choice but to obey and go on his way, tears in his eyes. The rest of the lab mems, of course, didn’t know the details of the task beyond the fact that it had been a mere child’s errand.

“Besides, none of you know of the kind of dreadful sorcery the land known as Shimokitazawa holds. It is thought to be the holy grounds of various subcultures, but in reality, it is but a town used exclusively for hideous experiments, all of which are performed by the Organization. For brevity’s sake, it’s enemy territory. There was no doubt in my mind that if I had dared to so much as take a single step into that area, it would have immediately transformed into a scene ripped straight from the festering maw of Hades, and assassins would have converged from every direction in order to try and apprehend me.”

Rintaro had figured that, as old as he was, an errand would have been child’s play. And in fact, he did manage to finish his business without any problems. After successfully completing his task, he deemed the idea of going home only to be sent on yet another errand unbearable; thus, he triumphantly headed to the station, thinking it best to go to the lab instead. Perhaps, just that once, he shouldn’t have been so careless.

En route to the station, a thought had crossed Rintaro’s mind: taking the train from Shimokitazawa to Akihabara would have cost him 310 yen, but if he took a train from Shinjuku instead, the cost would have been about half that—160 yen. There were five kilometers between his location and Shinjuku, so walking there would have only taken him about an hour, and then he’d end up in...

“Shimokitazawa... I always knew it to be a town none of us should have ever approached,” said Rintaro.

“You say that, but in reality, you just got stingy with your transport money and ended up getting lost, right?” Kurisu retorted. “How embarrassing. What kind of a man your age lets something like that happen to themselves?”

“Mayushii knew it! I should’ve brought a camera and came with you after all...”

“This is no laughing matter. Thanks to what came to pass, I nearly met my end in the Great City of Tokyo. ‘The Tokyo Desert’ truly is a fitting moniker, I must say.”

He had completely misused the expression oft-used to represent the *actual* deserts of Tokyo, but Rintaro spoke earnestly in spite of that.

“So, I get that you got lost in Shimokitazawa, but what does that have to do with the box?” Itaru asked.

“A fine question indeed. That’s precisely it, Daru.” Rintaro bent down, gently took hold of

the box, and raised it to eye level. “It had been over two and a half hours since I had set off toward Shinjuku. My fierce thirst threatening to overwhelm me, I finally came across a vending machine that sold Dr P sitting across from a small, vacant lot.”

“Geez, how long were you lost for? And did you seriously waste the 150 yen you were so stubborn about saving on soda? Please tell me you’re joking,” Kurisu interjected. Despite her remarks, the young woman wasn’t seriously criticizing Rintaro—she knew how bad the heat could get.

“Don’t concern yourself with such trifling minutiae, Assistant—just be silent and listen well. The vacant lot I came across was once a park, in all likelihood. Additionally, judging by the heavy machinery I found on-site, there was probably some construction planned there. Such was also apparent by the ground, which had been dug up for leveling. And, within that dug-up mound of dirt...” Rintaro briefly paused before continuing. “...I found this small box poking out.” Having finished telling his tale, he placed the box back on the table.

It was an old, aluminum box. On close inspection, faint traces of the candy’s name could be made out on its exterior. The box probably didn’t contain candy, though. It had been buried in the ground, and it was thought by Rintaro to only have been surfaced from the earth by the whims of the ground-leveling work that was being done at the location. If the contents were candy, there would have been no need to bury it in the first place. Therefore, the box must have had something other than candy inside it.

“Well, Mayushii thinks the box has dreams inside it, for sure!” Mayuri said in a cheerful tone.

“Dreams... you say?” Rintaro responded in turn.

“Yup! You see, the box is filled with dreams, and when you open it, a whole buuunch of them come flying out, spreading across the entire world!”

“Rejected.”

The one who promptly shot her down was none other than Rintaro, of course.

“Answers plucked from the realm of dreams are all well and good, but this discussion must remain grounded in reality. As such, I reject your idea.”

“Fine, then what do *you* think is inside, Okabe?” Patting Mayuri—who had grown disheartened after being so readily dismissed—on the head, Kurisu bluntly probed Rintaro in return.

“Right... If my suspicions hold true, then this box holds an OOPArt, be it a fragment of the Lost Chain, an Ancient Globe, or perhaps even the Crystal Skull...”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a raging chuunibyou, we get it,” Kurisu said, rolling her eyes.

“Actually, wouldn’t you normally expect to find porno mags or something?” Itaru posed.

“*Normally*, money would be the first thing someone would put in a box like this, don’t you think?” Kurisu continued, deliberately pretending she hadn’t heard Itaru’s words.

“Hmm, perhaps it’s the buried treasure of a feudal lord... Something like that would make us a mint,” mused Rintaro.

“And why would something like that be inside a candy box?” Kurisu retorted.

“I love mints! Do you think there are mints inside?” Mayuri, having brightened up once again, spoke up cheerfully.

“What I’m referring to is something more realistic than that. Like if someone had to get rid of money for the sake of tax evasion, and they chose to bury it or something,” Kurisu explained.

“Tch, you truly are a woman with no sense of how to dream. This is precisely why you’re just an assistant.”

“How do dreams have anything to do with being an assistant?” Kurisu shot back. After a pause, she continued. “...Whatever. If you really think that’s the case, then why don’t you just open it already?”

Upon being spurred on by Kurisu’s earnest proposition, Rintaro looked oddly daunted. She was completely right, of course—rather than dance around the issue with fruitless questions, their time was better spent actually opening the box and getting it over with. Once they did so, any and all doubts regarding its contents would be dispelled at once. Despite that, Rintaro made no attempt to open it—all he did was mirror his previous actions. In other words, he continued to groan at the little box sitting in front of him.

“This is the very Pandora’s Box of modern times—something that could literally bring about the complete destruction of the System should we act unthinkingly. Are you telling me you’re prepared for such a turn of events?” Rintaro prodded.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just a box,” Kurisu replied.

“D-Do you not realize that there is a possibility that the world may meet its demise the second this box’s lid has been lifted? Do you have the resolve to knowingly allow that to occur?” Rintaro challenged. “Well, if that is your resolve, then I shall not impede you any further...”

As he spoke, Rintaro inched away from the table little by little. Mayuri and Itaru stared at him, confused by his demeanor. On the other hand, Kurisu alone had a slight grin on her face as she watched the scene unfolding before her. Now with a joyful attitude about her, Kurisu reached out toward the box without a second thought. “I’ll take that as you giving me the go-ahead, then. Guess I’ll—”

“Wait, wait, wait! I said *wait!*”

Though he had relinquished the great duty of opening the box to Kurisu just a second prior, the one who voiced the plea to stop was none other than Rintaro himself. Naturally, Kurisu, who was just about to lay her hands on the box, frowned in annoyance.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Didn’t you just say it was okay to open it?” asked Kurisu.

“Don’t you think you should show even a mere inkling of hesitation, Assistant?!”

“Hesitation? Why? I just want to know if there’s anything inside!”

Rintaro had forgotten something very important: at times like this, Makise Kurisu was the kind of woman whose curiosity would win over any other impulse of hers. Even as they spoke, her eyes were shining like two little jewels, brimming with curiosity.

“Well then, let me just—”

“I told you to wait! Listen, this is... Yes, there’s no doubt in my mind—this is an Organization conspiracy. Those agents from the Organization that are after this genius brain of mine sent this box here to—”

“Didn’t you just say you picked it up by chance?”

“Ngh...”

“Besides, I don’t really think the ‘Organization’ or whatever would know about your little errand.”

“Making light of their information network is a grave mistake. They are constantly monitoring our movements, and—”

“Aha! I get it now.”

A different fire had begun to burn in Kurisu’s eyes; it seemed she had caught on to Rintaro’s true motive.

“I see now... You’re scared, aren’t you?” Kurisu observed.

“Wha?! Y-You’re mistaken! What need is there to be scared when one is merely opening a box?” protested Rintaro.

“If there happens to be something strange inside...” Kurisu started.

“Something strange? Wh-Wh-What do you mean by that?”

“Well, for example... someone’s hand, perhaps?”

Itaru, grimacing at the thought, said, “Uh, are you into that, Makise-shi?”

“That’s why I said ‘for example.’ *For ex-am-ple*,” she responded, taking special care to enunciate her words.

“E-Even so, that’s quite the despicable imagination you’ve got there. If you truly are a scientist, how about putting that imagination to better use?” said Rintaro.

“You’re right. I can’t say that was of good faith on my part,” Kurisu replied. “Well, in that case, how about a bomb?”

“A... A *BOMB*?!” Rintaro exclaimed.

“It’s very possible it contains dangerous goods, if not an actual bomb.”

Rintaro treaded carefully as he stepped further away from the box. Conversely, Kurisu approached it with determination.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Rintaro asked fearfully.

“Like I told you, I’m checking its contents. Ascertaining results is a major obligation we scientists have.”

“You... There might be dangerous goods inside! You said so yourself!”

“Well, I doubt any care was given to it during transportation—this is *you* we’re talking about, after all. If there were a bomb or something like that inside of the box, it would have detonated well before now, which is why I think the chances of that being the case are low,” Kurisu explained. “Either way, the odds of there being something dangerous in the box are only

fifty-fifty until you open the box—just like that one cat. With that said—”

“*BOOM!*”

A deafening sound took Rintaro’s ears by surprise.

“AHHHHHHHHH!”

“EEEEEEEEK!”

A sudden clamor.

Then, silence.

And then, from that silence...

“*Juuuust kidding!* Teehee.”

The carefree voice that had spoken those words belonged to none other than Itaru. Apparently, the loud sound had simply been Itaru shouting next to Rintaro’s ear—something that Rintaro had only just realized. And so, his bewilderment quickly turned into anger.

“D-D-D-Daru.... YOOOU...!” Rintaro screamed.

“S-Sorry, Okarin. I couldn’t help myself. My bad,” said Itaru.

“If all it took was a ‘sorry’ to solve a problem, we wouldn’t need the police!”

“I-I didn’t think you’d get so worked up, man!”

“Anyone would if someone screamed that close to their ear!” exclaimed Kurisu.

“Er, well, you may be right, but—”

“Hehe, Okarin and Chris-chan really are close,” Mayuri cut in. Thanks to her and Itaru’s telling looks, Rintaro and Kurisu finally realized that they had been holding each other the entire time.

“Wha... Okabe, what are you—?!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! You were the one that flew into my arms!” Rintaro shouted.

“Me?! Why would I—”

“How long are you two planning on staying like that, anyway?” asked Itaru.

After a brief exchange of glances, each of them promptly pushed the other away as if they were repelling each other. The accompanying coughs that quickly followed only served to make the situation all the more awkward.

Rintaro began to speak in an oddly loud voice, in an attempt to dispel the awkwardness that had arisen among them. “It appears... that I shouldn’t have left this matter in my assistant’s hands. I’ll have to be the one who opens the box.”

“Are you sure? We still don’t know what’s inside,” Kurisu said.

“That is precisely why I must do it. I cannot afford to allow misfortune to befall my lab mems.”

Of course, Rintaro’s sudden willingness to open the box was caused by Kurisu’s earlier remarks about the low chance that it contained dangerous goods.

“At any rate, stay back—I shall assume control from this point forward. But be warned: I will not halt. This is my duty as the leader of this laboratory, but also my fate as a mad scientist,”



Rintaro declared. “However, if, and only if, the worst comes to pass, I leave the rest to all of you. If catastrophe should strike, I ask you to deliver this message to my parents: ‘Your son, Hououin Kyouma, while splendidly fulfilling his deeds—’”

“Can you stop blabbing and just open it already?” While Rintaro had been getting carried away in his own little world, Kurisu had grown tired of waiting. “Despite all the theatrics, you really *are* scared, aren’t you?”

“I-I’m not scared! Why would I be scared?”

“So he says. Just ignore the fact that he’s been slowly stepping away from the box for a few minutes now.” Itaru shrugged his shoulders at the newly-sprouted quarrel and made to face the computer, when...

“Here we go... open sesame!”

Everyone turned their heads toward the ever-present, gentle voice. The girl who had spoken was the ever-present, adorable Mayuri... and she had the box’s lid in hand.

“Huh?”

Everyone froze.

“Hehe, Mayushii opened it!” Mayuri said in the same gentle voice.



The others, finally realizing what had happened, shivered as they stepped away from the box. Despite everything that had been said, they still couldn't discard the small possibility that something terrible awaited.

However, the box did not emit a blasting noise, or any sound at all. Nor did it release an odd smell—no stench of blood, no stink of rot.

“Are we... safe?” asked Rintaro timidly.

Because the situation differed greatly from what they had imagined, both Rintaro and Kurisu felt a wave of relief wash over them. As if she considered their reactions unremarkable, Mayuri raised her voice cheerfully.

“Hey, Okarin, Kurisu! Look, look!” Mayuri, smiling from ear to ear, presented the box to the pair. Within it were...

...two pieces of paper...

...and a small toy.

December 2009, Shimokitazawa

As she gazed at the crowd of people passing through the ticket gates, Sakihata Rimi let out a light sigh and checked her watch. A few minutes had already passed since the time they had scheduled to meet, but the person she was waiting for had yet to show up. Of course, Rimi wasn't expecting a shut-in by nature to show up early, but even so, she couldn't help but feel a bit saddened by the delay.

"Well, guess I'll just be patient." After whispering that to herself, Rimi looked up at the sky—at the blue sky that covered the world.

The sky...

Until just a short while ago, Rimi had constantly dreamt of the sky's blue. The sky *was* blue—she knew that much, of course—but during that period of her life, she had forgotten what kind of "blue" it was.

When she had been a child, the sky was always available to her, and in those days, she hadn't thought it to be anything special. Nevertheless, the sky would soon take on a special color in her mind. When she could see the sky no longer, she began to yearn for even a mere glimpse of it... but it was not until then that she realized how special that color was.

By that point in time, however, Rimi had no longer possessed any memories of the sky's blue; no matter how hard she struggled to remember it, it was no longer a color she could have ever hoped to grasp.

*Qualia.*

Suddenly, that word appeared in her mind. Was it one she had heard from Kishimoto Ayase?

"Qualia"... Apparently, that was what the mutually-recognized sensations people experienced within themselves were called. For example, the "red" and "green" that came to mind when one heard about "the redness of an apple" and "the greenness of vegetation," or the subjective sensation one experienced when confronted with the sluggishness from a lack of sleep, or the pain one felt on stubbing their pinky toe.

It was never the same among different people, and it was impossible for one to ascertain their own qualia. Nevertheless, it was a sense that undoubtedly existed within every single person. And apparently, it was that indistinct sensation everyone felt that was referred to as "qualia"... or so Rimi thought. She didn't quite have a clear grasp on what the word meant yet.

Why was it that she remembered the word in the first place? The answer to that lay in a related thought experiment that came to her mind.

The thought experiment went like this: "What would a scientist, after spending their entire life locked inside a wholly black-and-white room, feel when they saw the sky for the very first time?"

The scientist, despite growing up surrounded only by the colors black and white, would



hypothetically know of the existence of multiple other alleged “colors” while locked in the room. The redness of an apple. The greenness of vegetation. The blueness of the sky. Those were concepts the scientist would know of, but only as words—not as self-experienced attributes. It was a question of how the “reds,” “greens,” and “blues” of the outside world would be interpreted by the scientist, and what kinds of sensations would accompany them.

Nonetheless, the thought experiment was just that: a hypothetical. It was an experiment to be carried out solely within the mind, and it had never been put into practice.

Rimi, however, felt as though she could understand how a scientist like that would feel. When she had been a child, Rimi’s world had been one filled with agony. In a confined, pitch-black room, she had been subjected, over and over again, to “experiments”—a word that was nothing more than a fancy name for torture born from the deepest circles of Hell.

Amid the pain and suffering that had tormented her every day, her mind gradually wore away, and her thoughts grew dull. At that point in her life, Rimi had been nothing more than a doll—an existence that simply breathed in and out and kept its heart beating.

There was but one joy that doll had left: surrendering itself to the thought of the azure blue, the then-forgotten blue sky.

But one day, Rimi’s world suddenly expanded; that once-closed door opened, and what lay beyond it was... the blue sky. It was what she had admired the most, what she had always dreamt of: a sky so blue, it was dazzling.

But what she felt when she saw that “blue” was completely different from the sensation she had imagined. When she thought back on it, she could hardly call what she had experienced back then a “clear sky”—it had more closely resembled a sky that would accompany somewhat dull weather. Even so, Rimi could still vividly recall the sky’s blue from back then. The blue of the sky; the white of the clouds; the green of the trees; the bustle of the city. And amid all of those things, she remembered the person who had granted her the blue of that sky in the first place.

“Wh-What are you looking at?”

A voice, so unnoticeable that it was on the brink of fading into the surrounding noise, pulled Rimi back into reality. When she turned around, she found a young man standing in front of her, a gloomy look coloring his face.

“Ah, Taku! I’m so glad you came! Bishi!” said Rimi, saluting. On being confronted with her cheerful smile, the young man in question frantically averted his gaze, avoiding her honest stare.

“O-Of course I did. Only DQNs miss appointments they set up themselves. Or were you expecting a situation where you waited for me for hours on end, only to end up sopping wet from the rain, like in those old-ass romance TV shows?” the young man rambled. “You’re a real masochist. So *that’s* why you were looking up at the sky, huh? Fuhihi.”

“Tahaha... That’s not really it,” Rimi replied. “Though, Taku, you sure are talking a whole lot more than usual today. That makes me really happy.”

“N-Not really...”



The young man's cheeks were visibly red, but it likely wasn't because he had run there in fear of being late.

Nishijou Takumi. That was the name of the young man Rimi had been waiting for.

Between September and December 2009, a series of bizarre incidents had struck the city of Shibuya, and at the center of it all had been a string of unsolvable cases known as "New Gen." Its seventh and final case was carried out in November, and not long after, the entire city of Shibuya itself fell into ruin. Many people were sucked into the chaos of that catastrophic event, and a large number of them died as a result; in light of the disaster, interest in New Gen died along with them.

In the aftermath of the collapse, Shibuya was enveloped by tranquility once again; the smiles of people everywhere colored the streets anew.

And the two people at the center of it all... were Sakihata Rimi and Nishijou Takumi.

A few months passed after the events that shook Shibuya. One day, Takumi invited Rimi out of the blue to go somewhere with him over the weekend, which had left her quite puzzled. Nishijou Takumi was a shut-in by nature, so she never would have thought he would have invited her to go somewhere. Nevertheless, her perplexity soon turned to happiness, and throughout the days leading up to their meet-up, Rimi couldn't stop thinking about what Takumi's invitation had exactly meant.

*Could this be a date...? Maybe? Maybe not?* she had found herself pondering. When she stopped to think about it, she realized she didn't really know what Takumi's intentions were when he had decided to invite her. But, the more she thought about it, the more her heart began to race, which culminated in her counting the days left until they would meet on her fingertips.

The appointed day had finally arrived. Though he was admittedly a little late, Takumi had in fact come to meet her. That was why, whether she liked it or not, Rimi had high hopes for the time they were going to spend together.

"All right, shall we go?" Rimi stepped up to Takumi in high spirits and wrapped her arm around his.

"Wha—? Go? Go where?!" Taku frantically shouted.

"Huh? This is a date, right?"

"Y-You slut! I haven't said a thing about a date! This is why you can't trust 3D women... So, thou wishest to drag me to a hotel and rape me—is that not right?! D-Don't mess with me! I haven't prepared myself yet..."

"Taku! Lower your voice!" shouted Rimi. Various passers-by were staring daggers at them.

"S-Soz, fuhihi..." Having finally taken notice of the situation they were in, Takumi hung his head and squirmed in place.

"So, Taku... This really isn't a date?" Rimi asked.

"Y-Yeah, it's not. E-Either way, let go of me! They're touching my arm...!" Taking matters into



his own hands, Takumi shook Rimi's arm off of his own and began walking. Rimi quickly followed after him.

"W-Wait!" she called out.

"...What's the problem?"

"Well... Since this isn't a date, I was wondering if you could tell me where we're going... haha."

"I-It's not that far. Just follow me for now," said Takumi, his sullenness quite visible on his face. While it seemed like she had worsened his mood, Rimi knew quite well that she hadn't done that. That was just the kind of person Takumi was.

"Wait... Hey, isn't this..."

It was then that Rimi realized where they were: Shimokitazawa. Takumi must have been headed toward a residential area away from the station. However, what lay there was... his house.

*C-Could it be?*

Rimi instantly tensed up.

*His house...*

Her mind began to race as she considered what bringing a member of the opposite sex to one's house meant.

*Does that mean... It has to...*

Paying no mind to Rimi and her internal conflict, Takumi simply kept walking in silence.

Unable to stop herself, Rimi raised her voice. "H-Hey, Taku. Can I ask you something?" she said, addressing the hunched back of the young man walking ahead of her, who had yet to give her an explanation.

"What is it?" Takumi responded. He turned his head slightly, but as always, he tried to avoid making eye contact. That was as normal as it got in regards to him, but in that situation, his actions could have meant something else entirely.

"Err, I'm just wondering where we're going..."

"I-In the general direction of my house. You should already know that it's around here."

The words "I knew it!" flashed through Rimi's mind—words that she had to struggle to keep to herself.

"Ah, yeah, I know, but..."

It was then that she started fidgeting. Her hands shot to her head, she looked down at her body... a whole host of nervous movements overtook her. Takumi, noticing her strange behavior, looked at her curiously.

"Wh-What's up with you all of a sudden?"

"W-Well, I-I... Am I... being weird?"

"Yes? Very weird."

"What?! How so?!"

“You’ve been all fidgety for a while now. Anyone’d tell you that’s weird—that’s just common sense.”

“Th-That’s because you suddenly brought me here out of nowhere! Wait, did I mess up my hair? Should I have put on nicer clothes for this?”

“Wh-Why are you suddenly so focused on that? That’s it, you’re definitely acting weird. A-Are you really Rimi?”

“Huh? What does that even mean?”

“What if someone else actually switched places with you? And now they’re watching me?”

“Hahaha, don’t say that, Taku! There’s no way that’d ever happen.”

“H-How can you be so sure? This could be a delusional attack for all we—”

“It’s all right, Taku.” Rimi gently took hold of Takumi’s hand and showed him a warm smile. “There’ll be no more of that. Okay?”

Takumi settled down, a look of relief on his face; he gently squeezed Rimi’s hand back. “I-If that’s the case, then okay,” he replied.

“Thanks for trusting me,” Rimi said.

“Y-You have nothing to th—”

“Wanna hold hands?”

“B-B-B-B-But I refuse!”

“Whaaa—?! So mean!”

After shaking Rimi’s hand away, Takumi began to walk off on his own once again.

“Ah, wait, Taku... Maybe it’d be a good idea if I went and bought some candy.”

“Fuhihi, what the hell? Candy? This isn’t some field trip. ‘Candy,’ she says. What’s next, is she gonna ask for my ‘banana?’”

“That’s not what I mean, Taku. C’mon, it’s the least I can do if I’m gonna visit your house...”

“Huh?!” Takumi raised his voice hysterically in response. “My house? What do you mean? Who’s going there?”

“Yeah, your house. That’s where we’re going, right?”

“Excuse me? What is this, some kind of joke?”

“Huh? Am I wrong? But you said so earlier...”

“What I *said* was that we were going ‘in the general direction of my house.’ No one said a thing about *actually going inside*. Besides, why do I have to bring you there? Are you stupid? Do you wanna die?”

“...Ah, I see.” Rimi’s shoulders sagged in disappointment, but simultaneously, she felt a sense of relief. “Silly me, getting all freaked out over a misunderstanding...” She found it funny how quickly she had jumped to the wrong conclusion, and she couldn’t help but smile. Takumi, however, grew more and more suspicious as he stared at the grinning Rimi.

“Wh-What’s up with you smirking like that?”

“Oh, nothing... Hey Taku, I’ve been wondering... Do you think you might invite me over



sometime, maybe?” asked Rimi, sounding slightly flustered.

“I-If you want to hang out with Nanami that badly, you can get in touch with her on your own, right?”

“That’s not why I asked... It’s because I like being with you! You know that!”

“I-I see. Well, that’s a ‘yes’ from me... as long as it’s ten thousand light-years from now.”

“What the— That’s so mean!”

It was because they had put an end to those incidents that the pair was able to have lighthearted conversations like that. Rimi was even expecting a sudden development in their relationship at some point, but from her perspective, things were fine just as they were for the time being.

Rimi contemplated that as she followed after Takumi. Suddenly, the latter came to a stop.

“Is it just me, or is it really hot out today?” he asked.

“You think so? It doesn’t feel that hot out to me, at least.”

“E-Even if it doesn’t feel that hot out to you, it does to me. Just walking’s got me thirsty. I-I’m gonna go buy some Cola from over there real quick.”

“Huh? Already? But we haven’t even walked all that far yet...”

“I-I don’t usually go outside, so I can’t do much about it. I’ll just buy one real quick.” And, without waiting for an answer, Takumi made his way toward a nearby vending machine. Left behind with nothing to do, Rimi started looking around.

When she took a moment to think about it, she realized that Shimokitazawa was a town she was not accustomed to. The two of them had been walking around Tokyo all the same, but that was precisely what made her realize that the colors they saw varied from town to town.

Compared to Shibuya’s rough and disorganized nature, Shimokitazawa gave off the impression that, despite its size, it was filled with life. Even the stores gave off the same aura.

In shopping districts like Shimokitazawa, where small stores were lined up close together, one could really feel the breathing of the people that gathered there—a direct contrast to Shibuya, a city where giant buildings and shops towered high. As Rimi gazed at the townscape and basked in all those feelings, *it* entered her sight.

Blue...

A blue sky. It was just sitting there, in a postcard rack near the entrance of a general store.

It was a mere sheet of paper; yet, Rimi was enamored by it. It was a blue sky with white clouds, drawn with crayons. Among those white clouds, a rocket could be seen soaring up toward the greater skies. It was a simple postcard, but for some reason, it reminded Rimi of her past self—of those times when she had simply admired the blue sky...

“What’s that?” Before she knew it, Takumi was standing behind her, Cola in hand. “Oh? You like rockets, Rimi?”

“Ah, not really. It just... really caught my eye, I guess,” she replied.

“Holding something in your hands as you stare at it all conspicuously... You’re signalling to

me that I should buy it for you, right? I get it. 3D girls really play dirty, SMH.”

“Taku, don’t you think that’s going a bit too far...?”

“Cool excuse, bro! ...Er, h-how much is it?”

“Huh? You’ll buy it for me?”

“As long as it’s under 200 yen, sure.”

“Ah, it’s 300 yen.”

“A-As long as we split it, sure.”

“You really are a cheapskate, aren’t you?”

In the end, Rimi gave in to Takumi’s kindness, and they split the cost to buy the postcard. After they had completed the purchase within the store, they headed back outside.

“Huh...?” Rimi looked around and realized that Takumi was nowhere to be found. She focused her gaze and looked into the distance; as she did, she managed to catch a glimpse of Takumi’s back, right as he turned the corner. “W-Wait, Takuuu!” she cried out, desperately chasing after him.

Eventually, she caught up to him, panting heavily. “..You didn’t have to leave me behind like that!” she complained as she gasped for breath.

*Now he's gonna lash out at me like he always does...* thought Rimi. However, to her surprise, Takumi didn’t react at all.

“Taku?”

As the pair had progressed through the town, the scenery around them rapidly morphed into that of a residential area. As they had ventured deeper and deeper into the area, Takumi had come to a sudden stop. He was staring at a point in the distance.

“It should be around here somewhere... I think,” Takumi said, his voice soft. He was looking at a small, quiet park, which contrasted with all the commotion of the big city.

There were no children to be seen in the park, but Rimi wasn’t sure if that was simply random chance, or if that was just the norm for the park. There was only a single person there: a lone businessman that was seated on a bench in a corner. He was smoking away, using the park as his personal ashtray.

“Where are we?” asked Rimi.

Takumi entered the park in silence, acting as if he hadn’t heard her question. He quietly made his way over to the lone tree in the park, and when he reached it, he crouched down near its roots.

“Taku?”

Leaving her questioning tone unanswered, Takumi opened the bag he carried over his shoulder, pulled a small shovel out of it, and began to dig near the tree’s roots in silence. His motives remained unknown, and he didn’t so much as ask for help. Not knowing what else to do, Rimi simply watched over him as he worked.

An unknown amount of time passed. Eventually, Rimi heard an unexpected sound: the

*clang* of metal hitting metal. Takumi finally stopped digging.

“Here it is,” he said.

There was something peeking out from within the dirt. After he set aside the shovel, Takumi carefully brushed the dirt surrounding the object aside. And then...

“This is it. There’s no mistaking it.”

What he pulled out of the hole was a small, discolored, aluminum box—most likely one that had once been used to hold candy. The box was completely covered in wrapping paper—it was so tightly wrapped that Takumi had a hard time removing it. Once he was done, however, he slowly removed the box’s lid, opening it.

As he did that, for some reason, Rimi was overwhelmed by a premonition that something terribly big was about to jump out of the box. She gulped.

Of course, there was no way something like that was going to happen. Rather than leap out of the box and disappear, the object in the box simply lay there. It was...

A robot.

A single plastic robot toy.

A small, completely ordinary toy.

As to what robot it was specifically, Rimi had no clue. Yet, the sight of the robot filled her with a tremendous sense of nostalgia.

“When I was a kid, I buried this,” Takumi explained.

“You did?”

“Yeah, I—*Nishijou Takumi* did.” Takumi said, enunciating the name slowly and carefully.

*Nishijou Takumi*, and *Nishijou Takumi*. They were both the same person; and at the same time, they were different people.

He—*Nishijou Takumi*—had been stronger than everyone else, but he had also been far weaker than any other human. It was that *Nishijou Takumi* who had shown Rimi the blue of the sky. However, he was no longer among the living. And the one who had inherited his memories—his own life—was the *Nishijou Takumi* standing before Rimi at that moment.

Rimi suddenly noticed something: a small piece of paper peeking out from underneath the robot toy. “Wait, what’s that...?” she asked. She gently lifted the robot up, as if she was handling something very fragile. With her other hand, she pulled the piece of paper out of the box and read it. It said...

*“To someone who will receive this ten years from now. August 2002.”*

*The year 2002...* Rimi thought to herself. Once she had read the note, she immediately understood. She understood why *Nishijou Takumi* had buried it. She understood what feelings this seemingly nondescript robot carried.

*Nishijou Takumi* had been afflicted by an illness. At one point in his life, his body’s natural growth ceased, and he began to age incredibly quickly. Eventually, he had to come to terms with the fact that his death was approaching. He had been around ten years old when he

came to realize that he was facing an illness of that nature.

In 2002, he would have been ten years old. He had known. He had known that he likely wouldn't live to experience adulthood.

"This... This is a toy from an anime that 'I' loved back when 'I' was a kid."

"Oh?"

"I... 'I' probably wanted someone... anyone... to know that 'I' even existed."

Such an incredibly trivial, yet enormous wish...

Takumi stared at the robot for a good while, without so much as saying a word. But eventually, he laid a hand on the box and reached toward the lid to close it.

"Taku, why...?"

"I-I only came here today to check if it was still here. Besides, you saw what was written on the note, right? It said, 'To *someone*.' I don't think 'I' wanted us to know about 'my' existence. Surely, it's there for someone other than us to know. So..."

*So, let's keep it here, just like this, for a little bit longer,* Rimi thought to herself. *I understand now. In the end, "Taku" is the one who understands "Takumi" the best.*

That fact alone filled Rimi with immense happiness.

"Hey, wait a sec, Taku. If we're going to do that, then..."

Rimi gently slid something into the box, which Takumi was about to close.

"...This should go with it, too."





It was the postcard they had just bought.

“This blue... It’s proof of the connection between Takumi, myself... and Taku, too.”

*Proof that the time Takumi, I... and Taku spent together surely took place. The emotions that both Takumis put into the box... and my feelings too...*

*I pray...*

*...may these feelings reach someone, someday.*

And, with all of those feelings packed inside of it... the two slowly, and gently... closed the box.

September 2010, Akihabara

As they peered into the rectangular box before them, the lab mems collectively let out a groan.

“It’s a robot... isn’t it...” said Rintaro.

It was, indeed, a small robot figurine, made of plastic. Black and white made up the base colors of its body, and the rest was brightly decorated red, blue, and yellow. It was a “soft-vinyl” toy, though only its shoulder joints could move.

“Oh, isn’t that Fightinger?” said Itaru from over Mayuri’s shoulder.

“Do you know him, Daru-kun?” Mayuri asked quizzically.

“If I remember correctly, it’s from a mecha anime that aired about twenty years ago,” Itaru explained. “It should be from around the time after Gunbam got popular and the super robot boom arrived. It wasn’t that popular, though, so why would something like that have been in the box?”

“Wait, look closer. It looks like there’s something else inside the box,” Kurisu said. Everyone peered into the box again.

“Wha... This is...”

What Rintaro took out of the box and placed in the palm of his hand was a small piece of paper accompanied by a postcard. The postcard didn’t have anything written on the sender line, nor the recipient line. There wasn’t so much as a message written on it, either. All it had on it was a drawing on the back side—one that depicted pop art drawn with crayons.

“What a cute little drawing!” Mayuri exclaimed in fascination.

Just as Mayuri had said, it was an incredibly charming illustration—the kind of picture that was capable of soothing the heart of anyone who gazed upon it. A sky of pure blue, decorated by white clouds... through which a large rocket simply flew higher and higher, aiming for what lay further beyond.

The sky. The blue sky.

It was something that Rintaro had disliked until only a short while ago.

“*The sky has no end.*” Rintaro must’ve been an elementary schooler when he had heard that for the first time. “*The universe knows no bounds—it is continually expanding to this day.*”

An endless, empty world. To the young Rintaro, the idea itself had been enough to invoke a sense of dread in him. And more than anything, the sky... had made him recall the scene from that day.

A scene in which a girl, still as death, spent every waking hour staring up at the sky... hour after hour, day after day... Her eyes reflected nothing—they were utterly hollow. It was as if the girl was fully prepared to depart for that empty world.

Truth be told, in that moment, when the light had shined directly down on her from the sky

above, Rintaro had felt as if that girl—Mayuri—was going to be taken away from the world. Of course, that had merely been an illusion, but it was one that Rintaro had believed in from the bottom of his heart. He truly had believed that such an event would come to pass.

*The sky... It's a place that takes those dear to you away.* That was the conclusion that Rintaro had come to, and it was why, until just a few years ago, he hadn't cared for the sky all that much.

In the end, that had only changed thanks to Mayuri. Mayuri, and her “Stardust Handshake.”

A hand trying to reach out to something... and a wish to then bring that something close to oneself... When he had first witnessed that, Rintaro realized that Mayuri's despair had become her hope.

From that moment onward, the sky came to signify infinite possibilities—not just to Mayuri, but to Rintaro as well. The dread he had felt about infinity transformed into a future that continued with no end.

Yes. The future. That's what the things that lay right before his eyes were. And...

“The question at hand that we must now address is, ‘Why was this robot and postcard buried there?’” Pulling his consciousness out of the sea of thought, Rintaro muttered those words out loud without addressing anyone in particular. He then carefully unfolded the other piece of paper in his hand.

*“To someone who will receive this ten years from now. August 2002.”*

“I wonder what that means,” Kurisu pondered aloud, tilting her head in thought. “What do you think this box is supposed to be, Okabe?”

“Hmm... Now that you've brought it to my attention... Under normal circumstances, one might claim that this is some sort of time capsule, but...”

Both Mayuri and Itaru agreed with Rintaro's musing.

Time capsules had been invented to be presented at the opening of the New York World's Fair in 1939, but they were said to have been used as early as the time of the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia. Time capsules were popularized in Japan in the year 1970, a time when expositions had been extremely frequent. From that point onward, many events were organized for the purpose of “writing messages to the future.” There had even been one where patrons were instructed to write letters to themselves in the year 2000—although, many of the participants obtained their letters years earlier than intended due to an internal mishap.

“I don't have any experience with the topic myself, so I can't claim to know much about it, but aren't time capsules normally something you'd leave behind for the future you?” asked Kurisu.

“Ooh, Mayushii remembers hearing that her friend's elementary school did something like that: whenever it was time to graduate, each person buried something as a part of the ceremony, so that's probably what it's for...” answered Mayuri.

“Not necessarily,” said Daru. “For example, there are times when you'd want to leave



something you have now behind so you can use it in the future, right?”

“Daru’s right—such activity does indeed occur,” affirmed Rintaro. “However, in those cases, people typically leave behind technology or some other piece of culture that might lose its way to the future—they select items accordingly based on that criteria. But in this case...” Rintaro picked up the plastic toy that lay inside the box and stared at it intensely. It wasn’t as though it had some hidden mechanism to it, or some important microchip hidden inside it. It was just a plain old, ordinary toy.

“Now Mayushii remembers! Back in elementary school, Mayushii used to send flower seeds up into the sky in a balloon!” Mayuri said cheerfully.

“You what?” Itaru and Kurisu looked at each other, prompted by Mayuri’s sudden outburst about her past. Perhaps the toy had struck a chord in her memories.

“So, umm... then, Mayushii would wonder if those seeds had fallen somewhere and made a pretty new flower grow. And then, she’d think about how nice it would be if, maybe, that flower grew some new seeds, which would make even more flowers, and how that’d be really nice...”

“Sorry, Mayuri... I, uh, don’t quite... get what you’re saying,” Kurisu said, perplexed.

“Mm... Sorry... Mayushii knows she can’t explain it that well. She was just wondering if it was something like that.”

“If what was?” This time, it was Rintaro who addressed the two girls. In response, both tilted their heads in thought. Rintaro spoke again, addressing Kurisu. “Assistant. Did you happen to possess a plushie when you were a child?”

“I did. I got one from my dad once... A bear,” Kurisu answered.

“I see. I also received one as a child. Then again, mine was a mere toy, not a stuffed creature. I suppose it was far closer to what I have here in this box...”

When he had been a child, that toy had been like a treasure to Rintaro. And, just like in Rintaro’s case, the robot toy the lab mems were examining was also probably a treasure to whoever had buried the box. But why, then, had they gone through the trouble of burying it in that park?

*Because they wanted someone to find it ten years later.*

What on earth kind of meaning did it have to them? That, Rintaro didn’t know. However, a very important feeling had been entrusted to the box... That was what the unshakable conviction Rintaro had told him.

The box must have been holding a feeling that aimed toward the future. A feeling toward the endless possibilities the sky held. A prayer for tomorrow, carried by the seeds—just like the ever-expanding universe. Attempting to pull it toward oneself... To reach it... To link to it... Desperately struggling to do so. Wishing for it...

And that was why...

“Daru. Retrieve it for me.”

...Rintaro *had* to link to it.

“Huh? ‘It’? What, you mean this?” asked Itaru, holding up the Bamboo Helicam (Mk. II). After practically wrestling the gadget from Itaru’s hands, Rintaro closed the lid of the box and sealed it shut.

“Wha... What are you doing, Okarin?” Itaru questioned.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to launch it,” Rintaro responded tersely.

“Launch it? Where to?”

“I know not.”

“Wha— You don't know? How irresponsible can you get...?” said Kurisu, exasperated.

“Irresponsible... you say?” responded Rintaro. After confirming that the Bamboo Helicam (Mk. II) was properly secured to the box, Rintaro took a good look at lab members present and began to speak in a solemn tone. “You’re right. I hold no responsibility over this box. After all, we’re not the ones meant to receive it. That’s why we are going to launch it.”

Those meant to receive it... Rintaro did not know who they were. However...

“The ones who shall receive this box—the ones who shall inherit the feelings sealed within—will appear one day. It will be ten years after this note was written—simply put, 2012.”

“It is not yet time...” After muttering that to himself, Rintaro headed toward the roof of the Ohiyama building with the box under his arm. Kurisu and the others hurriedly followed after him.

Upon reaching the rooftop, Rintaro gazed upward; the sky was colored a clear blue—the same color as the sky on the postcard inside the box. Rintaro flipped the switch on the gadget, and its propellers began to spin vigorously.

“Now go, someone’s wish... Your place is by someone else’s side.” After Rintaro gently loosened his grip, the small box began to float upward into the sky. As it was carried by the wind, it climbed higher and higher into the heavens, the lab mems watching over it. Before long, the box was engulfed by the immense blue, and it eventually disappeared from sight.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” muttered Itaru. A slight smile formed on Kurisu’s face in response.

“You really are quite the romantic, Okabe. Hehe.” Her words likely didn’t reach Rintaro, just as Itaru’s hadn’t before her.

“This, too, was the choice of Steins Gate,” Rintaro muttered to himself.

“But *man*... There goes the two whole months of rent money I poured into upgrading the Bamboo Helicam...”

“What... did you just say?” Rintaro instantly turned pale, much like the clouds spread out before his eyes. “Y-Y-You three! After that box! We must retrieve it at once!”

September 2019, Tanegashima

“Hmm...?” As they peeked at the dirty, rectangular box, everyone except Akiho let out an inquisitive sound in unison.

“A... robot?” Subaru said quizzically.

“Yup. It washed up on the shore, right inside this box,” Akiho explained.

*Ahhh, that’s right...* Kaito thought to himself. He finally remembered: it was the box that they had found on the beach one day. And inside of it was...

*“To someone who will receive this ten years from now. August 2002.”*

“Umm... doesn’t that mean that someone wished for someone else to find it to begin with?” asked Junna.

Subaru and Junna exchanged glances.

“I don’t know who in the heck sent this thing flying, but the moment I picked it up, I knew it was destiny,” continued Akiho.

Destiny.

Alongside the robot and the memo, there was something else inside. It was a plain old, ordinary postcard.

The sky.

The blue sky, stretching out toward an infinite universe. It was the kind of scenery that could no longer be seen in Tanegashima—a dream long thought forgotten.

Kaito didn’t know whether or not it was appropriate to call finding the box “destiny”... but back when he first laid eyes on the postcard, Kaito, just like Akiho, had felt something stir deep inside of him. And as he stared at it again among the other club members... he felt the exact same feeling once again.

“From then on, I started to like robots again. Hmm, actually, I started to like them way more than ever before!” exclaimed Akiho.

A rocket. The sky. The universe. A feeling Kaito had once attempted to bury came surging up from within his chest. A future he thought he had forgotten—one that he had given up on.

He didn’t know whose box it was; he didn’t know what feelings had been put into it, either. But one thing was for certain—those feelings had reached them. The one who had bestowed those unknown feelings upon them was right there, by their side.

“Mother of God... I don’t really get all of that, b-b-but was Kaito feeling sentimental just now?! I’ll take three Listless Kaitos, NAO!” Frau shouted frantically.

“Wh-Who says I’m feeling sentimental?!” exclaimed Kaito, flustered.

“AWOOGA! D-Do my eyes deceive me...? Yashio-senpai’s blushing?! Th-That reaction’s tera moe. One more time. Say it one more time, plz. This time, with puppy-dog eyes.”

“I don’t want to! Besides, I’m not blushing!”

“Pretty please? C’mon, you ask him too, Four Eyes.”

“Why me?” Subaru asked, flustered.

Kaito had only been wistful for a few moments before Frau broke into her usual antics. Junna and Akiho, meanwhile, simply shrugged their shoulders and laughed.

“Oh, right! That reminds me—when we picked that box up, there was this weird thing all tangled up with it,” said Akiho.

“Weird thing?” asked Kaito.

Nodding slightly, Akiho took one more object out of her bag.

“What’s that?” Kaito questioned.

“Hmm, it sure looks a lot like one of those bamb—”

“Oh?” A sudden, gentle voice from behind interrupted Junna’s observation. “Isn’t that...”

When they turned around, the Robotics Club members were greeted with a lady wearing an equally gentle smile. She wasn’t particularly far off from Akiho and the others in terms of age, but the JAXA uniform she wore made her seem far more mature.

The woman was Tennouji Nae. She was the new researcher at JAXA's Research and Development Headquarters, which was also cooperating with the Robotics Club.

Nae peered at the item in Akiho’s hand, pure joy on her face. “Hey, Akiho-chan. What’s up with that?” she asked.

“Ah, this is one of those, uh, y’know... It’s kinda like a memento that Kai and I have, and...” Akiho began. She then began to inform Nae of the particulars.

“Hey, do you think I could take a closer look at that?” Nae asked. Having finished listening to Akiho’s explanation, which she herself had prompted, Nae took the object into her own hands. It was a somewhat large object that resembled a bamboo-copter. “Hehe, I knew it!” she exclaimed.

“Huh? Nae-san, do you know what it is?” asked Akiho.

“Yeah. Very well, in fact. But, huh... To think I’d find this here of all places.” Nae giggled.

“N-Nae-san, what’s up with that? How do you know what it is?”

“Hehe. Well...”

In the end, Nae didn’t tell them anything; not what it was, nor who it belonged to. All she did was smile a gentle, nostalgia-filled smile, the likes of which the Robotics Club had never seen before.

*Her smile reminds me of the blue sky...*

That was the first thought that came to Kaito’s mind when he gazed upon it.

December 2009, Shimokitazawa

“Whew...”

After lightly patting the square-esque mound of dirt, Takumi and Rimi stood up and stretched their arms skyward.

“Taku?” said Rimi.

“Hmm?” Takumi responded.

“Do you think these feelings will reach someone one day?”

“They will. I’m sure of it.”

Someone would receive that small box someday, and the two of them felt as if they could almost see them. Perhaps that was just a delusion of theirs, but surely, one day, even without using their powers, it would become reality. Both Takumi and Rimi shared that feeling.

“Ah, Taku... Look at that...”

“Ah...”

Above them was the blue sky, and right in the middle of it... was a contrail that could be seen climbing up higher and higher into the endless blue. Aiming for the distant heavens, it continued to simply, yet earnestly, push onward.



# NS2C

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