

Dysfunctional

by

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Step Zero

My current goal as a writer is to publish my own visual novel (a cross between anime, novels, and the decision-making mechanics of video games). To this end, I've come up with a basic premise, as well as a cast of characters to follow, but there's a lot more that goes into it, art music, a branching narrative that affects character development—it's overwhelming. Daunting. So, in order to better prepare myself for the larger task looming ahead, I took it upon myself to use my senior project to explore my characters in a collection of short stories, each focused on the inner workings of their minds in daily life before the plot of my visual novel was set in motion. This is step zero; it looks something like this.

Takahashi Rin is a recluse, comfortably living out of their room for eight years. Despite chagrin of their nagging younger brother, they have no interest in going back into a world that tormented them. Yukimura Kazuki is an antisocial misanthrope with one friend. Maybe. Between juggling college and work, he strains against his conservative father that refuses to understand him. Akiyama Aki is a proud swindler and exploiter, who cares first and foremost about herself. Within the depths of her soul, egging her on, is unchecked rage at betrayal she can't get over. Satou Yuuta is an music idol whose charm and charisma thinly veils his existential insecurity. He clings to everyone within reach, his mother, his manager, his attempts at dating, for guidance, for anyone that can tell him who to be. Fujita Mari is a sociology grad student, and her life is pretty good, she'll tell you. She has a paid job in her field (that's kind-of weird...) and a really good roommate (who she might be in love with), and supportive parents (even if they only care about her career prospects). She's fine; everything's fine. What do these strangers, unrelated and incongruent, have in common? What brings these characters, together in

one collection? The answer is none of these people, these messy and incomplete people, know how to relate, to connect, to exist with another. In a word: they are dysfunctional.

At different points in my life, I have been all of them. Sometimes, I've been several at once. The type of person who keeps themselves locked away in their room, the type of person who refuses to think kindly about anyone, the type of person motivated by undealt with rage and trauma, the type of person who is so faithless in themselves they leech off of others, the kind of person who lies to everyone and themselves to avoid an upsetting truth—the deeply flawed are the only people I know. They are the only people I have ever been.

Picture a high school freshman. She has 'friends' but not friends, and she'd like to keep it that way. Other people are good for fun, a good audience for the kind of longwinded rambling stories that she loved to tell, a way to kill time, but otherwise unreliable. After all, it's people who like to take her backpack and stash it away in a locker you can't open for a day, or yell at her because they lost their own shoehorn and somehow that's her fault, or taunt her when she chooses to sit alone. It's better to be alone, isn't it? After all, nobody can hurt her. Nobody can take the existing wounds and open them, nor fuel the underlying fire. They can't find any insecurities that pervade her every action. Everyone stays at a safe distance, shoved back if they lean in closer.

Now, picture the same high school freshman, sitting in the nacho cheese colored dining room at the old wooden table, by her somewhat clunky laptop. Behind her are some earthy striped curtains, but in front, on the screen is the only thing she enjoys: anime. Specifically, it's infamous horror anime *Higurashi: When They Cry*. All teenagers are edgy, filled with hate towards anything, but especially other teenagers, so what's a better pastime than an anime where kids around her age brutalize and kill each other in fits of paranoia, over and over again as time

continually resets? A den of monsters cannibalizing on each other, indefinitely. That's true to life, isn't it? Or at least she thinks so. The desire to connect is to be betrayed and betray in return, to leave a sea of broken hearts and broken bones. And as the episodes pass, as *Higurashi* sinks its claws in her, pulling her deeper into not only the mysteries, but the characters involved in them, something changes. As the colorful characters, characters who struggle with abuse and depression much like she does, strain to survive their problems, slowly, they start to reach out. Instead of succumbing to distrust and vicious impulses, they struggle and strive to understand, to even save one another. It turns out their distrust, their unwillingness to believe in their friends caused them to misinterpret each other as out to get them. It was not the act of friendship that led to tragedy, it was fear and paranoia. It seems so obvious now, but it wasn't to her. It wasn't to *me*. In the last loop of *Higurashi*, the final arc, where the kids who once seemed like devices for torture porn, now fleshed out and human, finally overcome all adversaries with the strength of only their bond, I cried.

Finally, picture me, once a high school freshman, but different now. It took time, and a lot of effort, but the 'friends' that I had became friends. Real friends, people you talk to for more than just casual entertainment. People you want to hang out with, and when they're in need, you want to help them out, because you know they'd do that for you. I even got a therapist, which I probably needed years earlier, but it's better late than never. Change is never overnight; to this day I still prefer to spend most of my time alone in my room, and I'm reluctant to make new friends. I'm terrified of what happens when you get so close that boundaries begin to blur and personalities become enmeshed. Codependent. But even as flawed as I still am, I am not the paranoid cynic I was.

But what if I didn't change? More than just me, what about those who are still stuck in their unhealthy mindsets, stagnating, who won't move forward? The ones who refuse to listen as their loved ones beg them to please try just one thing, or the ones who have stewed in their own self-doubt for so long they've forgotten that the limbs needed to act are their own, or the ones who've made their trauma into their identity and don't see how it's dictated their personality in cruel ways, what about those who will not grow?

In fiction, we love stories where characters develop, where they go from being a lesser to a greater person. And sure, there are tragedies; there are stories where characters are subsumed by their egos and self-destruct, but even that is its own metamorphosis. Transformation is the driving force of many stories. It is a journey from step one to the last, where the characters you start with and that you end with stand apart as changed entities, whether the end result is empowered and healthier, or left in decay and ruin. But there are those who do not change: they don't get worse, and they don't get better, where are the stories about those? My senior project, *Dysfunctional*, contains no turnaround. The recluse, the misanthrope, the swindler, the leech, and the pretender all end the way they began. Unchanged. If the larger work, my visual novel, is a journey, a movement from step one to the last, then this is step zero. Step zero is the status quo before the world shakes. In order to get to know my characters, before I put them through the wringer in my visual novel, I wrote this series of character studies. They're snapshots into the lives of people gladly stuck in place. They can't get worse and they won't get better. Though the setting and character design are inspired by Japanese media (and I've left footnotes for the many parts of Japanese culture that just aren't intuitive for a western audience), the ideas behind it are universal. Who are the people that must mature, before the plot begins, before they're inspired and forced to become better? What are they like every day at their worst?

I think a lot about my past self, who didn't want to change. I think a lot about my present self, who still has a lot of work to do. Sometimes I worry that there is still too much of myself in the characters that I've created. The way we grow so comfortable with our present selves, and so fearful of the future, and the ways our complacency damages our ability to connect with others, reinforcing our unwillingness to grow, is something I've desired to explore in my works, ever since *Higurashi* through its own exploration of similar themes, inspired me to change. What are the lies we tell ourselves so that we can continue to do nothing? How easy is it to empathize with the headspace we build to stay in place? I write in hopes that someone will read my work and through it come to an understanding about themselves that encourages them to move forward, instead of stubbornly sitting where they are.

Part One: The Hikikomori¹

Knock-knock-knock. “Rin, open up,” says the familiar voice of my brother, Satoshi.

I glance at the doorway, before turning back to my computer screen. He either wants to play Mario Kart, or he’s here to nag me again.

I don’t answer; he can let himself in. I have to focus on this Arena match to get the daily, and right now this guy is destroying me.

That’s what I get for using an experimental deck. I sigh, scanning my terrible hand trying to figure out a good play, and the door opens.

Satoshi turns the lights on as he enters, as usual, revealing the few scattered empty bags of snacks (potato chips, shrimp chips, chili sticks, an empty box of Pretz...). There’s my black jacket hanging carelessly off the back of my chair. After losing the match, I face him. He picks up an old Gameboy that’s sitting on top of a stack of books about web 1.0. Then, like always, he sighs. “You clean everywhere except your room.”

“You don’t clean at all.”

He shrugs, taking a seat at the top of the ladder to my bunk bed. “I think my room is better than this though.”

Is it? Maybe it’s missing the snacks, but Satoshi’s clothes never make it to the hamper. *The flavor text on it is probably ‘lonely and unused’.* I go back to my game, and he asks “How long are you gonna do this for?”

I don’t answer; I just start replaying story mode.

“Rin.”

Maybe he’ll go away if I ignore him for long enough.

¹ Japanese term describing both the phenomenon of teenagers and adults becoming recluses and the recluse. Hikikomori are known to largely isolate in their room, and are taken care of by their parents.

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“Silent treatment again?”

No response.

“You can’t do this forever. You’re 24. Mom and Dad aren’t always going to be able to support you. You know that.”

My mouth opens, then closes again. The colorful characters on the monitor run from something offscreen, but I can’t focus on them. They’re fuzzy, but they’re not. I’m here, but I’m not.

“I can help you study for the college entrance exams, since I know it’s been a few years. I’ve been doing that myself now anyway—”

I shake my head, chunks of deep purple hair falling in front of my eyes. The girl on the screen talks but I can’t hear her. *No*.

“If not now, then when?”

No! I continue shaking my head, over and over, tugging at the dotted, red scarf I always wear. The fabric tears a little; I still don’t stop. My vision blurs, wet and cloudy.

“Seriously, we’re all—Rin?”

Satoshi’s concerned questioning voice follows me as I bolt from my chair, out of my room, and leave the apartment.

“Mama?” I pull the bottom of her pink shirt to get her attention. She’s sitting at the computer, doing...something. I don’t know. I can’t see it. “Is it my turn?” She said I could play on it after five minutes, and I counted. I looked at the clock in the office the whole time. But she doesn’t move, still pushing buttons and clicking. “Mamaaaa!!”

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“Just a minute,” she says, playing with my hair. I let go of her shirt and grab mine instead. Pushing my nails in is nice when they’re covered in soft shirts. *You’re slow, mama!* Then she gets up, and when she sees me, takes my hand away. “**** you can’t pick at your clothes like that. What have we talked about?”

I look down. Mama always tells me we can’t buy new clothes just because I put holes in them. “Sorry...” Is she gonna take away computer time? “I don’t mean to.” I pull my fingers so I don’t pull anything else. Crack! Pop!

Mama takes my hands in hers. “Maybe we should get you something that you can put as many holes in as you want. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah! Like a big blanket.”

Mama laughs. “I don’t know about that, but I was thinking about a scarf or two. Do you want to go out and pick some with me?”

“Yeah, but later.” I crawl into the big chair, and Mama opens the weird game with the squares. I think it’s a game. I always try to find a bomb square first. “It’s play time!”

“Okay, I’ll come and get you when time is up. Have fun!”

I click the square in the middle. The first bomb goes off and all the other bombs blow up super fast. *Game over.* I win!

The teacher says “Lunch time!”, and everyone puts away their books on katakana.² All the kids get in groups; one goes off to get today’s lunch from the cafeteria, and the others sit at their desks and talk a lot about anime or play games I don’t understand.

² There are three Japanese alphabets: hiragana, katakana and kanji. Hiragana and katakana are taught to first graders, because they’re phonetic (although katakana is generally reserved for foreign words), with Kanji being taught at an older age.

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“Gian is so mean!”

I don’t watch *Doraemon*.

“Your mom lets you watch Yu-Gi-Oh? My mom says it’s too scary...”

I don’t watch TV in general.

“I wanna deal! You promised I get to deal today!”

Maybe I should join? Shimizu-chan³ starts dealing, and everyone at her table looks at the desk like staring will give them a good hand. Maybe that’s part of the game. I didn’t get the rules last time either. Nobody sees I’m watching.

While I wait for lunch, the blocky characters from today’s lesson dance around in my head. The notebook I put away is back on my desk—all practice sentences in messy writing—and with nothing else to do I start comparing characters. See, ‘wa’ and ‘u’⁴ are almost the same! And ‘ku’ and ‘ke’ are like that too.⁵ Everything is the same! This is stupid! Hiragana is better.

Saitou-kun⁶ doesn’t say anything when he puts my tray of food on my table. The part with the cup of juice leans over the edge and could fall, but he doesn’t care to fix it, running off to his chair and talking to his big group of friends.

With all the food given out, everyone eats. Today there’s pork (gross) and beans, almond toast, and corn salad. Using chopsticks, I pick the pork pieces out of the bowl one by one, and leave them at the side of the tray. Saitou-kun looks my way and gives me a weird look, with bits of toast stuck in his long red hair. Pointing at it only made him glare at me. The food is still in his hair when he tells the teacher I’m picking at my food again.

³ More cutesy honorific typically used for girls and children/juniors/family. Uncommon for adults unless you’re close/affectionate with that person.

⁴ ワ = wa. ウ = u.

⁵ ク = ku. ケ = ke

⁶ Like chan but more for boys. Sometimes used in the office for people who work under you (even women).

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“Rin?” calls Satoshi from beyond the door, accompanied by a knock. I grunt in acknowledgement, and the bedroom door creaks open. I place the last block of quartz needed for this floor, and spin in my chair to face him. He rests against the door after turning on the lights; *he’s gotten taller again*. “I wanna—” He stops when his voice cracks and clears his throat, “I want to ask you something, for the sake of mom and dad.”

“Where are they?”

“At work. They’re working late all the time.” he says, and I nod. There’s a long pause as Satoshi ponders his words. His expression is hard to read, and out of character. Serious. Very different from the normally energetic and carefree boy I’m used to seeing. I thread my fingers aimlessly through the fringe of my red scarf, watching as the little strips of fabric slip in and out between them.

What does he want? Why for mom and dad?

“You need to start running errands. And doing chores like cooking. You just need to be doing more than sitting in your room playing video games all day.”

Oh. This. I nod and whirl back around to my Minecraft game, and start working on the second floor of my new house.

“Rin.”

“Mm?”

“Rin, this isn’t a joke.”

“Mhm.”

“Tch,” Thump, thump, thump, and then a hand grabs the back of my chair and spins it back until I’m facing him again. That serious expression is worse now. Severe. “You *have* to

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start doing more. Mom and dad work late all the time, and then they have to make dinner, and clean up any mess, and run any errands, while you sit here and build your tenth Minecraft server that you'll just grief⁷ again in a few days! Is that fair?"

"All you do is play Fire Emblem and Wii Sports." The quiet sound of wool slowly tearing is audible only to me.

"Not true. I also *go to school*, and *cram school*, and *soccer* and *study* for high school entrance exams."

Silence hangs in the air. Somewhere in this small room that the sun hasn't seen in years, filled with old gaming consoles and snack foods, are years old results from the secondary school proficiency test⁸ in an envelope that I never opened. Mom and Dad stopped asking me about it a long time ago. This time, when I turn away, Satoshi does nothing.

"Sorry. But you get my point." He sighs. There's a few quiet thuds and the telltale squeak of an opening door. "Just, try asking mom if there's anything you can do. She'll appreciate it."

The sun slowly sets in Minecraft's cubed world, and everything is still. My avatar stands unmoving on their quartz block.

'You just need to be doing more.'

It's just more chores. I should be able to manage it. Even the shopping. My scarf is scrunched up between my fingers, shifting with every muscle movement.

Yeah.

Even the shopping.

⁷ Griefing is purposely sabotaging other players in a video game. In Minecraft it's destroying things people built.

⁸ Certificate for Students Achieving the Proficiency Level of Upper Secondary School Graduates. Like a GED.

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Saitou-kun has been whispering with his friends all day today. It's always been a big group with loud and rude Saitou Ryou-kun in the middle, but even he's being quiet today as the teacher sends us to pick up lunches. The six of them are bunched up together. Whisper, whisper, whisper. At one point, Otsuka-kun says something to Saitou-kun, while looking my way and laughs. They all seem to giggle a little, until Saitou-kun says "shh! Takahashi's right over there!" He's still grinning when he says it. I reach for my scarf, wanting to pull it over my ears to block them out, but grab nothing. The school uniform doesn't allow for my scarves.

All throughout the day, everyone talks quietly to their friends.

"Are you going to Saitou-kun's house later?"

"Mhm mhm! A birthday party sounds fun!"

I grab the messy strands of my hair and yank them over my ears.

"Do you think his mom will bake a cake for us?"

"Of course, she will! My mom is the best baker in town!"

My head hurts. Tiny strands of purple hair fall onto the desk.

"Did you remember to get a present? We were invited two weeks ago!"

"Oh no! Can you come with me after school to get something really fast?"

My hands and hair are pushed up against my ears, but no matter how much I tug and yank, I can still hear them.

The locker room is loud, filled with the aimless casual chatter of Matsubara Minami Junior High School. Nervous ninth grade girls chattering about upcoming high school entrance exams. Seventh grade boys passing around an issue of *Shounen Jump*⁹ before stuffing it in

⁹ Popular manga (comics) magazine.

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someone's bag when they think they see a teacher. And like every normal day, the giggles begin when I step up to my shoe locker. Down a few lockers is Saitou-kun, surrounded by his party of friends and fans.

“Why does Takahashi wear scarves in August?”

I sit down, untying my shoelaces. Too many people are watching.

“Probably to hide their pimply face.”

Right shoe off.

Stop staring at me.

“Shimizu-chan's so kind, using they...” Saitou-kun says with a loud laugh. Both shoes are now in the shoe locker. His voice switches to a sly hush. “Takahashi's more of an it, don't you think?”

The crowd around Saitou-kun murmurs in agreement, giggling and whispering. I stand perfectly still in front of my locker, one hand on the scarf I have to take off.

“Didn't Takahashi try coming in the opposite uniform last year?”

My grip on my scarf tightens.

It wasn't like that.

“Yeah yeah! It was so gross!”

Too many people are watching. *They don't understand.*

“Kept fidgeting with it all day too. Probably didn't fit!”

My only form of defense, warm and scratchy and wool, is slowly taken away.

I just thought maybe I'd feel like myself if I wore it.

“More like even that idiot realized it can't fool anyone in that!”

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The two pimples on my chin are revealed as the last of my scarf slides off my shoulders and into the folded ball in my hands.

I didn't.

“Gender bending freak.”

Bang! The shoe locker door’s metallic rattle echoes in the now quiet entry hall. My knuckles throb as they fall back to my sides.

“Whoops, it heard us!” Saitou-kun snickers. He glances at me wearing a mean grin; I glare and say nothing, my hands still balled in fists. “You wanna say something, Takahashi, or are you just gonna clam up like you always do?”

I'll kill him. I'll kill him I'll kill him I'll kill him.

But I don’t say anything, and Saitou-kun leaves, his friends trailing along behind him.

“Uggghhhh!” I groan, throwing the controller in my hands to the floor. On the tv are the words ‘Game Over’ in white, underneath the boxy bunny head that is my enemy. My loss isn’t a surprise—it’s the tenth time today Pyxl’s final AoE¹⁰ killed me—but even if every forum online talked about the glitch that causes Pyxl’s last attack to automatically do max damage, I’m still sitting here. Playing only to lose.

“*****-chan?” Satoshi waddles over to my seat on the wood floor in front of the TV on his tiny legs. It doesn’t feel right to be called that, but I don’t say anything. He picks up the controller and presents it to me. “Mama says you shouldn’t throw things.”

I grunt in acknowledgment, taking the controller back and restarting the level for the eleventh time. “Sorry. It’s just frustrating.”

¹⁰ Video game term short for Area of Effect. Used for attacks that damage anyone/thing in a given radius of the enemy.

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“Whatcha playing?” he asks, taking a seat next to me on the floor. In the corner of my eye I can see him watching the tv with big curious blue eyes.

“Pyxl.”

“Can I try?”

I laugh. “Do you wanna lose?” Satoshi pouts, causing me to ruffle his hair a little.

“Nobody is able to beat this game because it’s broken.”

“Eh?” Now he looks confused, watching the screen with a frown. “That’s unfun. I like winning.”

“Mmm, yeah everyone does,” I agree as I dodge another blue laser beam. In a bit Pyxl will do their AoE and kill me again. “It’s still fun though.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe this time, I’ll figure out the secret trick to win. Then all of this time spent will pay off!”

Satoshi makes a long thinking noise, his brows furrowed as if this is the most important thing he has to figure out. Well, maybe to him it is. He’s only four after all. “I think...I think it would be better to play a game you can win and be happy.”

As he says that, Pyxl’s AoE explodes in a pattern of green and pink dots, and then the game over screen returns. I nearly toss the controller again, but don’t. “Maybe you’re right.” That’s enough being angry for one day. “Hey Satoshi, you want to try Mario Party?”

“Okay!”

The neighborhood is quiet today, as everyone grabs the last of the boxes and loads them onto the mover’s truck. The house, once small and bursting with light, sits in its own eerie

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darkness in the broad daylight. I glance through the front door's window as I slide the key into the lock for the last time and am greeted with empty space with the occasional hints of dust. I wonder if when the new family moves in that dust will still be there. A click and I turn away from the door and head to the car.

“Promise I'll be able to visit my friends?” Satoshi asks for the third time today as he gets into the car. He's still frowning. He has been all day—no, for weeks now, like an NPC with only two-character animations: grumpy and sad. The loud rumble of the truck pulling away only makes him frown even harder.

“We'll do what we can, but we are moving a few hours away,” Mom says closing the door behind him. “But try to make friends at your new school, okay?”

“I don't want new friends. I want my friends!”

“You'll still be able to keep in touch with them,” Dad says from the driver's seat, ignoring Satoshi's ongoing protests. “Oi Rin, it's time to go.”

I nod, dashing to the car and hopping in. Nobody in the neighborhood is around, but it's still instinct, even after I stopped regularly attending school. Like computer data or blood, it never truly goes away. The vacant house shrinks further and further as dad pulls out of the driveway. Mom tunes the radio to some older J-pop, and she and Dad engage in some quiet conversation about logistics. Satoshi says nothing, only huffs with his arms folded and stares out the window. Normally on long trips he's very talkative, but he hasn't spoken to me in a while.

When the neighborhood disappears from sight, I exhale, and pull down the scarf that's normally wrapped so tightly around my face.

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At the end of the school day, the entrance hall is mostly cleared out, as all the students of Matsubara Minami High School head off to their clubs. The only people found here by the lockers are those like me, quietly putting their shoes back on, popping their headphones in the jack, and thinking about what to pick up from the convenience store as a snack. The ‘Go Home’ club; my favorite part of the school day.

But the quiet sounds of lockers closing, and shoes shuffling off and on are loudly interrupted by sudden obnoxious voices. It’s a normal conversation, plans about where to grab a snack, what games they’re going to play, but I freeze. Mixed among the noise is a baritone I never want to hear. From my seat on the wood bench I scramble to tie my shoes, fingers fumbling over the laces. But it’s too late.

“Oh? It’s you. Figures,” says Saitou with a look of bored disdain. Next to him are Otsuka and Shimizu, who pass each other a worried glance as they trail behind him.

“Come on Ryou, Takahashi’s going home, just—”

But he brushes past Otsuka, and heads straight to me. “Guess nobody would want you in their clubs anyway, huh?”

I don’t answer; I’m just going to go home. I reach for my scarf, the last thing still in my locker when it suddenly shuts. Clack. A part of my scarf sticks out the door, but it’s soon blocked by Saitou’s body. He looms over me with a mischievous look as he leans against the locker. “You really shouldn’t ignore people talking to you.” Shimizu desperately tries to get his attention, but he ignores her too. Hypocrite. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Please move.” I’m still sitting on the bench, glaring up at him.

“Oh? It speaks! I thought your vocal chords were busted.” He stays right where he is.

“Please move.” My knuckles blanch from squeezing the wood I’m seated on.

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A frown. This is not the game he wanted to play. He leans forward, looking me right in the eye. When I back away, he smirks again. “What’s the problem? You want your scarf?”

I nod.

Big mistake.

“This ugly thing?” He says, grabbing it. His friends are still protesting, but he doesn’t seem to hear them.

“Let go.”

“Huh?” He feigns innocence, his hands still wrapped around my scarf. “But you,” pull “said,” tug, “you wanted it! I’m just trying to give it to you.” Another jerk, and there’s a ripping noise.

Of the four people still in the entrance hall, not a word is spoken. Ootsuka and Shimizu, still awkwardly hanging by the edge of the hall, stand their mouths agape with worried eyes. Saitou blinks, staring down at the now torn scarf like its newfound form is a bug or a glitch. He lets it go, and the ends of my scarf falls, hanging on to the rest of itself by an inch of wool.

“Oops,” he says in a voice dripping with insincerity, still grinning, that smug grin happily plastered against his face as he laughs and laughs and laughs—

A crash, Saitou stumbles back into the lockers clutching his nose. There’s hints of red oozing between his fingers. “What the fuck, Takahashi?” Otsuka and Shimizu only stand there in stunned silence when Saitou drags me up by the collar, bloody hand staining my school uniform. He’s shaking me when he asks “You want to fight?”

The answer comes in a knee straight to his balls, and he collapses to the floor. Otsuka and Shimizu, finally realizing what’s happening, dash down the halls to find a teacher, but I don’t care. Saitou whimpers on the floor. The sound is crystal clear despite the loudness of my breaths

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and the blood rushing to my head. With a grimace, he gets back up, cursing, red boiling in his eyes, and gets knocked back down again. I tackled him.

“Stop!” A teacher calls out, rushing into the room.

There’s a loud ongoing scream, or maybe a roar. Saitou Ryou gets punched in the face again. And again. And again.

“Takahashi stop!” There are hands on my body; only when I’m dragged away do I stop kicking and screaming. His face is swollen and covered in blood, staring at me in disbelief and rage.

I’m going to be suspended for this. For how many weeks? Two? Three? Maybe a month. A laugh. Suspended huh? The longer the better!

Part Two: The Misanthrope

Beep-beep. *Beep-beep. Beep-beep! Beep-beep! Beep-beep!! BEEP-BEEP!!!*

“Ugh....” A warm brown hand reaches out from under the cozy butter-yellow blankets, fumbling around the dark bedroom towards the nearby mahogany desk. That’s paper. That’s a pen. That’s the desk. That’s a half carved wooden figure, probably the one he’s been trying to make of Sasaki. That’s the desk again. Where the hell did he put his phone? “God damn it,” he groans, throwing off the blankets somewhere to the other side of the bed. He rubs his eyes and blinks, scanning the cavernous void for the telltale arctic blinking light of his phone—*seriously where the fuck*—there! It was in his bed. *I’m an idiot*, he thinks, snatching his phone out of its tangled nest in the sheets. Once his thumb brushes over the familiar metallic home button on his Samsung, the phone unlocks, blinding him with the overbearing white of the alarm app that’s been screaming at him for the past minute or so. Upon turning it off, he drops the phone back into the messy bedding and collapses face first back into his bed.

It’s five a.m. He has work in an hour. Does he have to go? Doing the morning shift at the convenience store is the worst. So is the afternoon shift. So is the night shift. It’s all the worst. With a sigh, he shuffles out of bed and turns the lights on revealing the disaster den that passes for his bedroom. There’s an array of clothes sitting next to the neater arrangement of paints, sketchbooks, and wood carving knives spread across the faux-wood tile floor. Some of the clothes are dirty. Other clothes are dirtier. He forgot to do wash last night. Or rather, he refused to do it once his father got on his case about it. He won’t hear the end of it as soon as he leaves the room. *Fantastic*, he picks up a slightly sawdust-covered pine button up and a pair of tan trousers, shakes them off, and grunts. These will work for now. Swiping the binder off the back

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of his hand-carved wooden desk chair—it's more of a stool; it's slightly rickety, and he has yet to finish it—he heads for the bathroom.

The bathroom is also a disaster zone. His towels hang off the faux gold hook on the back of the bathroom door, while his father's sit on the white tile floor. Still damp. And with the tiny puddles of water on the speckled laminate counter underneath the toothbrushes and his neon-green glasses case, it means his father is awake. *Joy*. With a heavy sigh, he throws on the clothes he picked out. The shirt is a little wrinkled, but he can't be bothered. Nobody is going to say anything; half the people who come in this early are the poor salarymen bastards, who weren't able to go home and need to buy a new change of clothes, and criminals. Slipping on his pair of red-rimmed glasses, the mirror greets him with the face of a scowling man. Himself. Ignoring the faint trace of ashy bags under his annoying, asymmetrical, celadon and maroon eyes, and how his vaguely curly hair is sticking out in 20 different directions even if his greenish-brown bangs are stuck to his skin from sweat, he thinks he spots a singular chin-hair. It's not enough to pass, and it's probably a fluke given he's not on hormones, but hey. Maybe God has decided to be in his favor today.

“*****!! Hurry up. You have to make breakfast!”

My name is Kazuki. Or maybe he's just gotten ahead of himself.

Unlike many other rooms in the Yukimura's tiny flat, the kitchen is relatively well kept. No unwashed pots scattered about the smooth stovetop, no crumbs or juices of meals past decorating the white countertops—all is clean, save for the bowl and spoon in the sink from Kazuki's late night snack. At the table sits a middle-aged man, his grey hair speckled with the occasional hint of nearly black green hair that's started receding in places. Kazuki ignores those watchful green eyes, picking the bowl out of the sink and meticulously scrubbing it clean. “That

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can wait until after breakfast,” his father, Yukimura Benzou, says, but Kazuki carries on tediously washing every square centimeter of the plain glass bowl, ridding it of ice cream stains that no longer exist. “I really raised a good for nothing daughter, huh?”

“Maybe if you went to the convenience store you wouldn’t have to wait for your worthless son to heat up miso soup for you,” Kazuki says. Probably shouldn’t have retorted. Too late; where’s the kettle? He sifts through the overhead cabinet for a moment before pulling it out. The fact that Benzou said nothing in response probably just means he’s looking at him with that signature pitying ‘you’ll understand one day’ gaze, and Kazuki has no interest in seeing it. Once the kettle is on the stove, he starts rummaging through his 20 colorful boxes of different types of tea. *Not this one, no, no—I know you’re still staring at me; cut that shit out.* The eyes glued to his back are overbearing.

“You didn’t do laundry, did you?”

“It’s clean.”

“And after all the reminders...”

“Wash your own clothes then, and maybe you wouldn’t be stuck wearing a sweat stained undershirt right now.” He doesn’t have the energy for this. As soon as the kettle whistles, Kazuki speeds through shutting off the stove, pouring the hot water into a thermos, dropping the teabag in, running the kettle under warm water (not how it’s supposed to be washed, but frankly he doesn’t care) and leaving it in the sink. “I’m heading out,” he says, tossing the teabag into the garbage.

“What about breakfast?”

“Just go to the convenience store!” He doesn’t really care what his father does; he’s already out the door.

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The walk to work is quiet, at least as quiet as a walk at 5:30am in the city can be. There aren't many people around: just salarymen who spent the entire night out like spineless idiots, delinquent teens who need a hobby other than vandalizing the backs of alleyways with their poorly designed tags, and himself. He's probably the lowest of them all. But at least it's somewhat quiet if he ignores the whispering of the 17-year-old fuckwits who think they're really cool because of their pompadours and illegally bought motorcycles. The salarymen, with their misshapen ties and their half-untucked shirts, are too exhausted to speak, as best seen by the dark bags under their eyes. They probably have been doing this for weeks now. Does no one with a 'career' have a backbone? They all just cower and kiss up to their fat cat bosses just for a hint of a pay raise? Pathetic. Not that he's much better. He's been doing this convenience store gig for so long at every hour he can take that doesn't interfere with classes. Maybe if he gets promoted, he'll get more money to afford the college he's still attending or even move out because he's a useless art student with no skill in any other area, as his dad is quick to remind him. *'Maybe you should focus on being a stay at home wife'—fuck off. I left the house; I don't need the ghost of my dad following me to work.*

Yes, he's just as pathetic as everyone else wandering the streets at this hour. A disgrace among disgraces.

The convenience store's bell rings as soon as he pushes open the glass door. The place is tiny, even for the usual convenience store joint, hidden away in the back of an unused street that consists mostly of apartments even worse than the one his dad has rented out. He's pretty sure no one even goes here except for other low-lives. A worthless shop for worthless people.

“Ah, Yukimura-kun,” the shop-owner Kirigaya greets, an overweight man with a scraggly beard and meaninglessly sunny disposition. The fluorescent rectangular light still

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flickers above his head, meaning he hasn't changed it yet. *I'm just going to have to do that myself...* "You're here early again."

Kazuki grunts. How does anyone expect him to do small-talk this early in the morning? Or ever?

"Since you're here, can you check stock first?"

"Sure." He's not sure why he has to bother, given they almost always have an overabundance of anything that isn't quick and easy snack food. But he's getting paid, and he needs the money, so there's no other option.

The good part of the morning shift is that when it starts, virtually no one shows up. It's a blissful few hours sitting behind the cash register by the front door, or checking the two aisles worth of inventory—*yes, there's enough chocolate pastries to last this place for at least 5 days*, he thinks as he puts the one in his hand back on the counter—and he doesn't have to smile. Nobody talks to him because nobody comes in. He doesn't have to thank people or be thanked for his service, and no miserable greasy old men come and hit on him because they're completely wasted like they do during the night shift. He's allowed to sit, or stand, or change that god damn light bulb that should have been changed over a week ago, with his resting bitch face that his father always complains about, and nobody will say anything. They won't even look at him funny. It's the only pleasure of working for the earliest few hours.

The customers go from the rare straggler at five-six in the morning to a more consistent flow around seven. Rather than just one person floating about the aisles, rubbing their eyes, wasting minutes of their life as they decide whether they want this boring white button up, or this boring off-white button up,¹¹ there will be three or so people in the aisles. This is when things

¹¹ At some convenience stores in Japan, they sell shirts for businessmen who were out so late doing work related things they didn't have the chance to go home.

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start to get annoying. The good news: they move faster. The bad news: there's more of them. A woman with a too tight bun and a too loose shirt, who came in just to grab one of the salmon onigiri off the refrigerated shelving unit leaves without so much as a thank you. *Rude*. No wonder she looks like *her*. It's not her though. He hasn't seen her in years. *Deep breaths*. Actually, it's better she's rude. He doesn't talk to anyone who won't talk to him. It's easier that way then forcing a smile and a sunshiney 'thank you'.

But the worst hours hit at eight, when students on their way to class, and all the business folk who actually managed to go home the night before arrive. Now it's crowded, at least for this place. There's even a line. Noisy. What could possibly be so exciting or necessary to blather about at this early in the morning? All chatter is too much chatter. *I need more tea*. But he doesn't have any more tea. Just several more hours at this boring people-strewn job, until finally he can get out at one.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. The analog clock that hangs above the snack shelves on the back wall across from him ticks far too loudly as time slowly crawls along.

Nine.

The owner of this place comes downstairs from his run-down apartment with small dirty windows. He does this for no reason, just to look around, smile at Kazuki and the seven or so customers in his store he barely manages, and heads back upstairs.

Ten.

A girl, maybe three, is running her first errand.¹² This is inherently terrible. Like all toddlers, she didn't know where she could find the Lipton Milk Tea, so on her stubby legs she waddled up to the counter and tripped on thin air, banging her head into the linoleum floor. If

¹² Japanese culture fosters independence in children from a very young age by sending them out to do small errands for their parents. It also teaches them they can rely on other people to help them if needed.

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real life were an American cartoon, her tears would have flooded the entire store, and maybe put him out of his misery. Instead he has to help her up, dry her tears with the crinkled tissue pack behind the counter, smile and offer to get her the tea himself, and show her on her way. He didn't charge her. He probably should have.

Eleven.

Several college students from his school show up. They don't recognize him, but he recognizes them with their poofy hair, tattered jackets and overly familiar attitudes, and their appearance means the floods of people are coming back. *Ugh.*

Noon.

The line to his sole register is looping through the aisles. Every time he checks someone out another person gets on. Even as he approaches the end of his shift, it seems he'll never be free, because of the endless nature of this regenerating line. The bell at the front of the entrance has not stopped ringing since 11:30. He only has fifteen minutes left on the clock, and Matsushita has already arrived, so he doesn't have to wait even longer to leave. At least there's that.

As soon as the second hand completes its rotation, Kazuki's out the door.

A list of things that are good about his university: the studios. That's it. That's the entire list, but it's a damn good list, he thinks, entering the vast, gray woodworking room with long hanging rectangular lights. A few of his classmates are already littered about the large square tables, some hovering by the table saws, others meticulously sanding the edges off what they carved the week before, there's even one person whittling down a rectangular wood block into a vaguely more distinct shape. The nature of this class, particularly in dedicated lab days, means

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that virtually nobody talks to him. (Actually, it's more that people have long since stopped trying, but what difference does that make?)

Although there's a myriad of tools at his disposal, Kazuki's current project is actually rather small. From his locker outside he pulls out a misshapen several inch hunk of wood as well as a few scattered papers. Bringing it all back to his worktable, he lays out the papers. Messy pencil sketches of a dark-haired young man in cape and crown sitting on a throne, his head leaning against his fist as he glowers ahead. Bored. Among the papers is also a print out of the reference sheets for the anime he came from. It's not a good anime, but it's good practice for small details given the intricacy of his patterned armor, and that's the idea for this current project. Clack; the carved out circular base slides into the carver's vise. With a mid-sized wood-chisel in hand, he gets to work, refining the lumpy edges into more defined shapes.

This part of the process is perhaps his favorite, as it involves the least amount of attention with the most amount of payoff. Whittling down a block of wood into a shape defined by a few carpenter's pencil marks, one that vaguely resembles the finished product is a satisfying time-killer that doesn't involve the meticulousness of adding details that comes later down the line. He doesn't have to think, and so he's free to think. *Sasaki better appreciate this.* A while ago they were talking about anime, and Sasaki had run a hand through his soft-looking, dirty blonde hair and moaned *'there's no good merchandise for Atsumu,'* and now here he is. Making a figure of a character from an anime he didn't like. There are still a few weeks before Sasaki's birthday, but Kazuki is a perfectionist, so he could use all the time he can get. It'll be worth it to see that bright smile come his way.

Carve. Chip. Scrape. Sawdust and wooden fragments decorate the table beneath him, which he only brushes aside from his workspace when it gets too cluttered or dirties his glasses.

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Other people stare at his mess, judging it, but fuck them. It's his job to determine when he takes out the trash, and he'll do that at the end of class. Seeing the little pieces and sawdust stack and gather is its own reward. Gratifying to see the remains of his artistic carnage. Maybe that too is art. Or maybe he's just a miserable messy bastard making excuses for his bullshit. Cut. Grate. Nick. The three hours of class are peacefully whittled away into nothingness.

“Good work, Yukimura-kun,” Professor Fujioka says to him as class comes to a close. Her stern eyes contain a hint of pride. “Although you've always been rather talented with smaller projects.”

Kazuki nods sweeping up the trash onto a large sheet of paper and pouring it into the neighboring trash can. Is there some way he can join them? He hates these conversations. Without fail she always brings up—

“You should try opening up an online storefront, like your classmates.”

That. Sasaki tells him the same thing. *'I'm sure if you did commissions you'd take off!'* Maybe they would. He's good at this, isn't he? He's been honing his skills for so long, so shouldn't he? And his professors all seem to agree so—no. The wooden figure in his hand, a man on a throne missing the details of his armor, and his hair, and his face, looks at him. He's not even sure Sasaki would really want this, once it's completed. Besides, being a freelance artist is hard to make work. Maybe if he was more into drawing or painting, but even then! *Then why are you going to an arts school?* He doesn't know. To learn? To maybe be good enough? Spite against his father? That last one sounds possible. After all, he isn't helping him pay tuition. *'Art is a waste of time! Learn something that will actually help you, like teaching, or nursing.'* He said, with that trademark 'I know better than you' look. Maybe he should do commissions out of spite, actually. *But I probably shouldn't.*

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“I’ll think about it.” He will think about it until he dies.

There’s an hour to kill before his shift at a nearby café. And since it’s not worth going back home, or so he tells himself despite the walk only being a few minutes and his dad is at work, he sits himself on the usual bench at the park that neighbors the university. He pops the earbuds in, turns on some anime soundtracks, and watches. People watching is a miserable activity. It’s just staring at clowns and hoping they’ll juggle, but they’re all off duty. A new couple holding hands and giggling. Some kids playing catch. Office workers using the park as a shortcut to get from A to B. Routine, boring, bullshit. Maybe if he had his sketch-book he could at least pass the time doodling something and making it more interesting, but he forgot his sketchbook. Guess he’ll just have to scroll through Instagram while pretending not to look for Sasaki.

Is that creepy? Maybe. The whole university has probably pegged him as an antisocial loner, and they’re not wrong. He is. The global population is full of bitches and assholes, and he wants no part of it, but—in the back of his mind flits a memory of the empty campus theatre, a show just for him, the stage lights beaming on a man reaching for the stars, muscles quivering from exertion. Quiet panting echoes throughout the otherwise silent theatre, until hazelnut eyes meet his, and with a tired but still brilliant smile, Sasaki asks, “So what did you think?”—maybe there’s one person who is worth something. Someone who could be art.

And then his phone vibrates, pulling him from his memories. A text from Sasaki pops up; it reads ‘Sorry! Practice is running late today! You’re on campus tomorrow, right?’ Figures. The only thing he might have had to look forward to is canceled. *You can never have anything*, *Kazuki*, he thinks, sending back a quick ‘okay’. He might as well just go to work early,

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then. Maybe he can get an extra hour.

Halfway through dinner his dad wanders into the kitchen. A long pause stretches on for seemingly minutes as he stands there, eyes boring holes through the leftover soba plate sitting on the cheap off-white table, and Kazuki groans, before shoving down another mouthful.

“You didn’t make dinner,” Benzou says. *Of course, we’re doing this.*

“I got home at nine thirty.” He’s not making a whole meal at this hour. That takes far too much effort. “If you want a home cooked meal, make it yourself.” His father gets home well before Kazuki does; he had plenty of time. But he won’t. Despite being a man in his 60s, he has the cooking skills of a ten-year-old who just figured out how to use the microwave. Kazuki has to do everything; it’s a ‘woman’s traditional job.’ *Ugh.* These leftovers better last a week.

Benzou moans, running a hand through thinning hair, as he reluctantly starts the process of heating up his own leftovers. “First your mother, now you...”

Black chopsticks clatter against a now empty plate. The sounds of his dad moving about the kitchen, juggling between the microwave and the miso soup from last night on the stove, are somehow distant even if he’s only a few feet away. The white table, the tile floor, and even the yellowing wallpaper all start to blur together into a vague soup, as echoes of a brunette woman, still giant in his memory, plague him. “Excuse me,” Kazuki says. He ignores the protests of his father as he leaves the empty dishes in the sink, unwashed, and slams the door closed to his room.

He doesn’t bother turning the lights on, or getting changed, skipping that step straight for the part where he flops into bed. In his hand rests his phone, displaying one facebook page he doesn’t have the strength to close. Most of the details of the profile are private, so all he can see

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is a name, Miyamura Mizuka, along with a select few pictures. A woman, maybe in her late 50s, with dark brown hair kept in a too-tight bun and maroon eyes smiles. The other pictures are similar, sometimes with a man who can only be her second husband, sometimes with children who aren't him.

“Your father will pick you up,” Yukimura Mizuka said with a smile when she dropped him off at school that day, 15 years ago. He hoped they'd make omurice¹³, because he loved seeing what she'd doodle with ketchup. But they didn't have omurice. She never came back.

His mother's new family looks so happy. How fucking dare they.

Kazuki throws the phone aside. It thumps softly, landing somewhere on the bed. He'll deal with that tomorrow, he decides, pulling the blanket over his head, and closing his eyes.

¹³ Omelet with fried rice, usually decorated with ketchup.

Part Three: The Swindler

Akiyama Aki's apartment is cramped, both in size and in occupation. Although she's quite good at getting cash, she's not so eager to spend it, so after her...unceremonious falling out with her former 'roommate' she downsized substantially, grabbing a cheap studio apartment on the third floor in an half century-old building that somehow manages to be up to code, all the way across town where only yakuza¹⁴ and fellow scum live. Frankly, it's a miracle she's managed to not join their ranks, even with her current line of work. (Despite this, they do make pretty good business partners, honestly.) The downsize did mean however, a new system of organization was required, but that's alright. She's much more used to small spaces; it's what she grew up with. While she thankfully lives alone, with no plan of living with another person ever again under *any* circumstance, any nook and cranny across the apartment has a thing or two or twelve stacked and shoved in deliberately picked places; it's a miracle anyone can live here at all. Or if you asked her, maybe nobody else could ever use such a small space on the questionable side of the city this deliberately. What little walking space there is has been arranged in little pockets of tatami floor surrounded by a chaotic collection of crap still kept in moving boxes that she steps between to get wherever she needs to be. Much of it is books: books she hasn't read in a long time about the nature of counterfeit money, or high society galas, or how to get ahead in business (even a few old college textbooks she still finds interesting). Probably won't need to read them anytime soon either, but it's a collection of nonfiction relevant to her interests, and what isn't relevant to them, unfortunately, can't be returned or sold. (What more does she need with Company Marketing Strategy Guidebooks? Nothing. Maybe she can burn the old work stuff? Nah, that would take too much effort). Beyond the books but still in

¹⁴ The Yakuza are basically the Japanese Mafia.

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boxes are dresses and suits neatly folded but still kept in the wrapping from the dry cleaners so as not to risk a stain when she buys cheap ramen again for maybe the third time that week. While the books are kept closer to the bed and desk, the dresses and wigs and hair-dye are towards the bathroom. Seems intuitive, doesn't it? After all, if she has to get ready for a night on the town, it might as well all roughly be in the same place. Although the wigs are new and come in an array of different browns, the clothes are largely repurposed from her old job. There's no better way to dress for a business affair where she pretends to be some client's new wife just to sleep with a (usually unmarried) woman at the party than clothes she used to use for attending those events the normal way.

The only floor space not covered is obviously the kitchen area. Cooking after all should never be an obstacle course, right? Not that she cooks much. She spends a lot of time on her feet, so it's often easier to just grab something from the nearby street food joint, support the local crime rings (ha!), and relax. It's nice to just sit on the tiny white counter (a chair would waste space) with some surprisingly good yakitori made by a man who would rather be skewering other things. Yet even if she doesn't cook much, should she ever get the urge, she still keeps her kitchenette spared of the cluttered floor. This doesn't mean the space isn't well used, however. Though the stove and oven are clean, and the refrigerator contains a handful of leftovers and ingredients, the cupboards are crammed to completion without even a centimeter to spare. Old pots and pans and cooking utensils she took with her after they fell out because they're better than anything new she could buy, and perhaps too much instant ramen (she's a busy woman, so it'll have to do)—all these are standard fare, and even if it's overstocked, it still makes sense. Perhaps it's the most normal-seeming part of her home. Maybe. This wasn't what the kitchen

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was like in her old apartment, but this wasn't what her life was like either. It's better off this way.

For work, however, madness is seemingly required. Her small tan table/desk, which already eats up a sizeable portion of the only room she has, in the corner by the window is overloaded. A visitor, rare as they may be (it's better for her that none of her associates know where she lives), often wonder how it's possible she uses it at all. Of course, her desk has what you'd expect from her line of work. There are counterfeit tickets crafted by deft hands to highly sought concerts and galas and auctions and shows not yet sold, a smattering of templates and references (ie: real deals she managed to get her hands on), an ancient burner laptop she used to use as a teenager she forcibly revived and rebooted for work now disconnected from the internet entirely loaded with a bunch of programs (Photoshop, Microsoft Office, the usual) she skates around having to pay for by using her former employer's license (a fact that still gives her spiteful glee). The decades-old color printer for those tickets is stashed away under the desk, never running low on ink because she buys in bulk (again, using her former employer's name) kept stored right by its side along with another full box of references intermixed with a set of matches. Yes, even with all this there's still room for her feet and a chair, specifically the kind of chair often found in college dorms where if you lean back, the chair will prevent you from falling, and yes, hanging off the back of the chair are a jacket and a sweater that didn't fit in her pathetic excuse for a closet, but these are beyond the point. The myriad types of paper and foil required to fake each type of ticket are neatly labelled and filed away in the top drawer, and there's a couple of pens and markers sitting in a cup right next to her work laptop, because no matter who you are or what you do, at some point, you'll need a pen.

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In the final drawer, buried amidst the sea of burner flip phones and miscellaneous tools she doesn't have a container for, is a photo album, and a tiny velvet box. She should have sold the box a long time ago; now it's not going to fetch nearly as good of a price even if it's in pristine condition. Knowing herself, it's probably not. Although it never left the box to begin with, no matter how many times she's thought of ripping it out and bashing it against the desk until it dents and cracks, she's never maintained it either. She refuses to look at it. It exists, of course it exists, it haunts her every nightmare and lingers on in the back of her mind behind all the busywork, but it doesn't. She wills it not to. If everyone agrees there is no elephant in the room, then there is no elephant. As for the photo album, mostly it sits upside down collecting dust because it too exists and yet doesn't. There's no need to open it, because from the custom-made leather cover that says both of their names in cursive romantic font to the letter folded into the last pocket with Miki's her former roommate's big and bubbly signature is permanently burned into her memory. To think they used to joke about maybe getting a second one, because of the 'inherent romanticism of a physical album.' Yeah, look how that one turned out. Yet sometimes, on late nights where she drank too much to tolerate the boring man she's playing the role of high-society arm-candy to, she rifles through the pages, taking it one picture at a time, while dreaming of the box of matches right beside her feet.

But enough of that, after all, none of that matters anymore, what matters is her closet, which is especially nice because all of the clothes within are clothes she picked herself. Punk jackets and ripped knee socks, shirts that bare her midriff—the things one can indulge in when no longer restricted to a boring office job. If it weren't for the fact that she still had uses for her old wardrobe, she would have tossed them in the trash once Miki and former employer threw her out. (Well, she might be blacklisted, but that's not going to stop her from sneaking into industry

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events to scam the naïve bastards into giving her money. In a way, they're all still paying her, and repaying her, and they will be until she dies). Why did she work for them anyway? She didn't exactly care very deeply about the cars they sold, after all she doesn't even drive. Was it the money? Well, let's be real, of course it was the money. She didn't go to that prestigious high school and fancy college for nothing; all that effort had better pay off. It did, for a few years. It was easy to send money back home so mom and dad could finally afford to fix the home falling down around their convenience storefront, even with the stuffy outfit and long hours with too much corporate drinking, and helping sniveling snakes who later sold her out on a scandal they solicited from her scheming shit-spewing ex!

...Moving on. None of that matters anyway. She gets to look at herself in the bathroom mirror every morning and admire the pinkish highlights in her auburn hair that she was never allowed to have while she was on the fast track to being an executive with endless ennui. It's fun, isn't it? She actually figured it out herself, during her free time now that she operates on her own schedule. The medicine cabinet, besides containing a few painkillers and cold medications, has a collection of hair-dyes and styling supplies in case she gets bored again. It's liberating. Even during her school years, there was always a need to tie her messy wavy hair back into an orderly bun, so all her classmates who looked up to her were met with a good example when they asked her to join their study groups, or misguidedly asked her out. It wouldn't do having a scholarship student whose name tops the list of tests scores¹⁵ to dress like a poor delinquent. She had to keep the money; it's always been about the money. At least now she makes money on her own terms.

¹⁵ Japanese school systems have all tests scheduled during a week once at the end and in the middle of every trimester, whose top scoring student's results are ranked and organized by grade and displayed for all to see on a corkboard in the hall.

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It's been a long day of convincing exhausted wealthy stooges that their brand will *definitely* get more attention if they get into the big expo coming up in a month, and lucky for them she can get them in easy for a price. She even thinks one of the men she talks to works at her old place. Perhaps he's the guy they eventually replaced her with, none the wiser. And maybe like her, he'll be foolish enough to believe someone loves him more than money before his partner tells the boss that their make-out session in the break room was actually harassment, no matter how eagerly they jumped your bones both there and in bed so many nights before. Or maybe he won't. He's a man after all. Plenty of her ex-coworkers got away with similar because of that. Or maybe, like her, he's realized that money is valued above all else. Because money is what fixed the rickety floorboards in her childhood room, or the leaking piping along the bathroom wall, or the heating system to the storefront. It afforded her family food from the better supermarket in the nearby district when they earned enough that they didn't have to eat what they couldn't sell that day. It's all buying and selling, from products to skills to trust.

Akiyama Aki is a great seller, and never ever again will she be bought.

Part Four: The Leech

You have one new voicemail, June 3rd at 12:07pm:

“Mama? Oh, um, wait, you’re supposed to say your name when leaving a message, um, it’s Yuuta! They’re sending me home today because I puked. It got all over the desk, and also, my notes. The teacher wasn’t very happy... Oh, I have the keys! To get into the house! But later, can we redo my notes together? My handwriting isn’t so good...Aaah, they want me to get off the phone! Okay, I love you, bye-bye!”

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, November 19th 3:49pm:

“Hi Mama! I’m at the convenience store because you asked me to pick up breakfast, remember? I got you your favorite! The chocolate croissants! But I was wondering if I can also get myself pocky? Oh also, do we need more milk tea? I don’t remember. I love you. Bye-bye.”

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, January 4th 5:01pm:

“Hiiiiiii Mama! I know you said you’re suuuuper busy at work today, but I was looking around in my drawers, so I could find something to wear for the audition next week, and I can’t find anything good...I really want to make an impression to get into the talent show! Do you think we can go shopping this weekend? Oh! Also! I want a nice hat! Okay, I love you, bye-bye!”

End of new messages.

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You have two new voicemails. First message, April 15th, 3:42pm:

“Hi Mama! I just wanted to let you know that I might be home later today. The boys in my class are playing soccer, and I wanted to join in. It seems like fun! I love you. Bye-bye!”

Next message, April 15th, 3:57pm:

“Hi mama...I got...I got hit in the face with the ball...I was playing goalie, and I couldn't catch it, and...I don't think I'm any good at soccer...oww...I'm...I'm going to head home now...”

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, May 17th, 4:01pm:

“Hi hi Mama...we got back the test scores today...I only managed to rank at 162¹⁶... Ruika-chan called me an idiot...I'm just...not good at math...or scienceAm I an idiot? Am...Am I?”

End of new messages.

You have three new voicemails. First message, May 18th, 4:04pm:

“Hiiii Mama! So! Ruika-chan and I came up with a plan for the finals. We're going to hang out together every day to study! Since Ruika-chan is really good at math, I thought she'd teach me! Maybe I can become a math genius like her. I'll be home by dinner! Love you!”

Next message, May 18th, 5:23pm:

“STUDYING IS SO HAAAAARDDDDD!!! Ruika-chan is a mean teacher. We got stuck on reviewing one problem for 20 minutes, and no matter how many times she explained, I just

¹⁶ In Japanese schools, midterms and finals are taken all throughout a week, and the results are posted and ranked for each school year in the halls.

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didn't get it! But she got mad because I wasn't paying attention. Said I was too busy humming when she wanted to teach me. I didn't mean to! Oh, Break time is over, bye!"

Next message, May 18th, 6:14pm:

"Ruika-chan doesn't want to teach me anymore because I don't pay attention. It's not my fault math is boring and confusing. Oh well. Who needs to be a math genius anyway? It's booooooring. I'm coming home now; see you soon!"

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, October 16th, 3:33pm:

"Hi hi Mama! The culture festival¹⁷ is coming up! We decided we were going to do a play. I wanted to write the script, but everyone told me to leave that to Watanabe-kun. Apparently, my ideas are too silly. That's okay though. I have the lead role; it's guaranteed! Everyone knows I'm the best performer in the class. I can't wait for you to see! Bye-bye! I love you!"

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, December, 2nd, 10:02am:

"Good morning Mama! I know you're busy preparing for a big concert coming up, but I finally figured out what song I want to sing! For the compilation album thing. The one we auditioned for the other week, not the one the school wants. I even came up with a dance routine!"

¹⁷ Culture festivals are events held at schools from nursery to university once a year on or around November 3rd that are open to the public. Each class and sometimes clubs are responsible for their own booth to entertain fellow students and guests.

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I'll send you a video later. I just gotta figure out how to use the camera... Good luck with the show!"

End of new messages.

You have three new voicemails, May 19th, 2:19pm. First Message:

"Mama? Do you think you can proofread a story I wrote later? I wanted to try something new. Other than performing. I'm going to run it by my classmates too! Bye-bye Mama, love you!"

Next message, May 19th, 3:31pm:

"Some of my classmates read my story...they...well...apparently it's not very good. But that's okay! I don't need to be a writer! I have music and dancing! I...I...I'm good at those, right...? You think so, right, Mama? I wish...I wish I was good at more than just this..."

Next message, May 19th, 3:52pm:

"Hiiii Mama~! I'm just calling so you don't worry about me. I know I'm good at things! I'll be waiting for you at home! Bye-bye!"

End of new messages.

You have one new voicemail, August 21st, 12:33pm:

"I GOT IN!!! I know you told me I have this audition in the bag, and we spent all that time rehearsing, but still! It's exciting! I'm going to be an idol for sure! This is cause for celebration! I know you're busy tonight, cause the group you're managing has a concert in 2 days, but let's go out this weekend! I want yakitori. Okay, class is about to start back up, so I'm going to go. Love you Mama! Bye!"

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End of new messages.

You have one new message, February 6th, 3:56pm:

“Hey Mama, do you remember where we put the paperwork for the upcoming auditions we were going to try? I can’t seem to find it. Or maybe you took it with you. It’s not on my desk, and I don’t know where they are.”

End of new messages.

You have one new message, February 6th, 6:07pm:

“You were right! They were in your desk drawer. Thank you! Bye~”

End of new messages.

You have one new message, March 18th, 6:20pm:

“Hi Mama. Do you think today can be an ice-cream night? Ritsu-kun broke up with me. Three days before our 3 month anniversary too...Am I too much? Am I? Well, I don't want to leave a long crying voicemail, so I'm going to go. Love you, Mama. See you later~”

End of new messages.

You have four new messages, July 27th, 2:01am:

“Hi mama. I know you’re asleep, I just wish I could do the same myself. Tomorrow we have our first concert, and I’m so anxious! What if I trip? What if I forget the words? What if I’m *off-key*?! Then my career will be over before it began! I’m doomed! What will I even do

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then? This is the only thing I've ever been able to do. It's the only thing I've ever done! I don't—"

Next message, July 27th, 2:03am:

"Sorry, accidentally hit the end call button. I just—I just wish you were here. You always know what to say, or what to do. But I'll figure it out, or at least try to go back to sleep. I love you!"

Next message, July 27th, 2:47am:

"I'm so useless I'm so—I'm not good at anything!" *The remainder of what can be picked up are the sounds of drunken, muffled bawling.*

Next message, July 27th, 9:36am:

"Hiiii Mama. I'm fine really. Last night I just had too much to drink, is all. I know you tell me not to drink so much before a big event, but the boys were also doing it, and I got too tipsy, and...well, you know the rest. But I'm fine! Drunken Yuuta is a whole different person from me! Anyway, I have to go, we're setting up the venue, I love you!"

End of new messages.

Part Five: The Pretender

January 15th, 2018

It feels like a lot is happening, and yet nothing is happening at all. Reina-chan and I finally finished moving into an actual apartment together! It's really nice to finally be out of the dorms~ ☺ Although I think I'll miss the shorter walk to university, but oh well! It's a small apartment. I'm surprised we managed to find one with two bedrooms, but it's cozy. Today, I put out all the ceramic bunnies and plush toys on the shelves in my room. Okay. Not all of them. I actually don't know where to fit some of these; it's very small. (Journal! Help!) I might have to move the plushies back to my bed...

But other than that, things haven't really changed. I'm still looking for a better job than the waitressing job. It looks like there's an internship being offered to graduate students at the lab that's partnered with our university. They seem to need help with some kinda sociological experiment, and that's the job for me! What else is this degree for, you know? Hopefully I can get in.

- Mari

February 7th, 2018

Well! I submitted my application for Abe laboratory, (just in the nick of time too, it's due in two days) now I just have to wait until March and they'll let me know if I made it in or not. They had a few openings in the sociological wing, but the most competitive one is the one I went for. I don't want to be just filing papers and organizing copies, you know? But this one said not only can I help with an actual experiment, I might even get a chance to run one, and doesn't that sound exciting? I wonder what they're working on. They didn't really go into much detail about that in the flyers or job applications. It's probably confidential, but you know me! I'm super

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curious, oops. Reina-chan keeps telling me to save it until I actually get the job, and she's probably right.

Speaking of Reina-chan, living together brought out a lot more of her motherly instincts than usual. It's cute! She's always fussing, making sure I eat more than burgers and pocky, or that we don't forget the laundry, or saying 'if you need anything, let me know!' She was always like that, even when we hang out with the others, she makes sure we finish out plates and clean up, but living together really emphasizes it. Earlier I said to her "Reina-chan would make a good mom." She turned so red! The same shade as her glasses frame! I could barely hear her response. I think she said something about taking care of her younger siblings? That makes sense; the triplets are a lot younger than her.

I almost told her she'd be a good wife too, but I couldn't say that! She might take it the wrong way. I just think she'd be a catch for whoever marries her. They'd be a lucky person. Instead, she just dotes on me. ~~Better enjoy it while it lasts!~~

- Mari

March 19th, 2018

I got in!!! I was starting to worry if I submitted too late to even be worth considering, or maybe I forgot the cover letter, or something and I was automatically dismissed, but I got the job! I have it! They're going to be sending me more information soon, project details, dress code, all that fun stuff. It should be starting when the next semester does, so in a week or so. I keep checking my email over and over waiting to see if I got another email, but no such luck!

I might be overwhelming Reina-chan. I keep telling her all the things the latest big experiment *might* be, and she keeps telling me to just wait. "They'll tell you in a day or so! There's no point spending all this energy just speculating, is there?" But I can't help it! This is

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what I want to do! It's a lot more exciting than just working on my thesis and reading papers all day. I feel like dancing! I might just do that, be right back!

Okay I danced! Reina-chan even danced with me! "I'm glad you're so happy, Mari-chan. I worry about you sometimes," she said. I'm not sure why she's worried; I mean, we literally just danced around the room, right?

I'll have to call my parents later. They'll want to know, right...? Yeah, of course they will.

- Mari

April 1, 2018

I'm hooome! Well, that's kind of obvious, given I'm journaling again. I didn't bring it with me when I visited my parents after all.

Speaking of my parents, since it had been a while since we talked, I told them my internship was starting tomorrow. Father said he's glad I'm finding opportunities with my degree. I think he was worried, but I can't tell whether it's because I'm trans or because as Mother says, I'm a bit of an airhead. Mother, of course, immediately asked for all the details about the lab, and if there are any opportunities to move up, do I have a career path, am I prepared—all the usual stuff. Even if I'm not living at home, she's still very meticulous, hehe. That's always been how she was. Otherwise, the trip was pretty quiet. Father left dinner early to deal with work stuff, and Mother didn't have much to say about how things were, and then it was time to go home!

It's really nice to be home! I got my fuzzy pink slippers and cute kitty pjs back on instead of that stuffy pantsuit. Although, I guess I'll have to adjust to wearing stuff like that for my job, but at the very least I should be allowed to use the hair extensions I like (my hair is still too

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short; I wish it grew faster!). They said they're not super particular about the dress code, but it's best to see what everyone else is wearing and go with that. I'll still be able to wear frilly dresses elsewhere! It suits my image best.

- Cute, airheaded, Mari-chan

May 12th, 2018

It's been a month, but I still can't get a good read on my boss. Kuroshita-san is very...closed off, I think. I don't know how I'd really explain it. He smiles, and makes small talk, and occasionally if you do a good job, he'll tell you about it, but at the same time, he's very distant. Professional, I guess. I think if Mother met him she'd tell me to aim to be more like him—"you don't know how to restrain yourself, Mari!" she'd say—except ironically enough I don't think he minds how cheery I am.

Like, today the vending machine gave me two melon sodas, right? And so Kuroshita-san saw and asked if I was thirsty, so I explained what happened. I even did a little victory cheer, just for emphasis, and he chuckled! I think he likes me, or at least is warming up to me. Then he wrote something down on his notepad, and told me to get back to work. So maybe not. I don't know. Am I overthinking things? What if the notes were my performance review or something? Would they do that this early in? I've been on top of my work, I think, but it's hard to tell with him.

Deep breaths, Mari. You're doing fine. They gave this job to you, after all.

I'm going to check my email again.

- Mari

June 25th, 2018

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I got an email from one of my coworkers, Fujioka-san, today. That's not news, of course I get emails for work, but it was a survey for the big experiment we've been building up to. They finally came up with a draft of what the applications look like. I don't think I should get into a lot of details about the experiment here, it's confidential, and I might accidentally leave this out in the open somewhere which would be bad, but we've finally gotten to a point where we can start looking for people!

It was weird though, the questions asking if I'm the type of person to bottle things up, or 'how many smiles throughout your day are fake'. They just seemed too specific, didn't they? I mean I know the upcoming experiment is just a small test with only a few people, but getting this specific is just going to limit options, isn't it? And she had me fill it out too... Said that all the interns were, something about working out all the kinks... ~~It's not for me, right? I mean I'm working on the experiment; I can't be in it.~~

I think I might have been talking about it too much, oopsie~! Anyway, Reina-chan and I are going to go out with the girls in a bit! I should get ready. It always takes too much time to put on my whole outfit.

- Mari

July 3rd, 2018

It's starting to get too hot out. Lab wear in particular is super stuffy, even with the air conditioning, and I'm melting. It got to a point where I just stopped wearing my jacket even if my white shirt was close to sticking to me because of sweat, haha. Ran the risk of exposing myself, but I didn't! When I called my parents today, because they wanted an update, mom scolded me for 20 minutes for being careless. "As a woman you need some propriety! No matter

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how hot it is!" so oops. I don't know which I prefer: when she's constantly nitpicking or when she's actively disinterested. Would it kill her to just laugh? I thought it was funny.

Honestly though, work has been incredibly slow. Not much has happened, presumably because we just opened up for applicants. It'll probably be a while before we can finally move forward. Instead, I'm just sitting at my desk reviewing files from older experiments and organizing them. It's not really what I signed up for, but it's neat to see all these old results! There was actually a really weird one they did before I joined where they observed a bunch of speed-dating events and kept tabs on how they went and the relationships formed then after to see if being formed in that kind of setting has any noticeable differences compared to other ways of beginning dating. It was a really long read, lotta quotes from the surveys or the date nights, but it was so niche it was fun! Also, a distraction, especially with nothing better to do.

I hope I have things to do. At least I'm getting paid.

- Mari

August 18th, 2018

My coworkers are being a little...strange, lately. I don't know. Is it just me? I think I might be overreacting. There's been several meetings I was explicitly not invited to. I think it's probably because I'm an intern. None of the other interns attended... ~~I thought I saw one of the interns from the med lab at the meeting today though....~~ Maybe there's something wrong? ~~Sometimes I catch Fujioka-san playing Minecraft on public servers, but she gets dodgy once I ask... Are they hiding something from me? Why did I see information on crime rings...?~~ Kuroshita-san said there's been a bit of trouble getting this upcoming experiment together, but he'll keep me updated soon enough.

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Reina-chan asked me if I was doing alright. Of course, I am! Work's just a little weird, but everything is just peachy! She keeps looking at me when she thinks I'm not paying attention with concern. I'm fine, I promise! Things will clear up and there won't be anything to worry about.

- Mari

September 6th, 2018

Tonight, we celebrate! Why? Because Reina-chan got a job! She'd been applying to different newspapers and magazines, and she just accepted her best offer! I'm so proud of her! I mean, I knew she would be able to go anywhere she wanted to, because she's extremely smart, but for the past few days she's been anxiously checking her email or her phone whenever I saw her. I'd tell her not to worry—"you've got this in the bag!"—and she'd start anxiously rambling about all the things she'd want to fix in her cover letter, or resume, or maybe she didn't answer the interview questions properly—~~it was cute~~ it wasn't good for her. Either way, we're going out for dinner later! It's my treat! What kind of place should we go to? Maybe somewhere fancy. There's that new place in the neighboring district with all those good reviews, and I think I heard Reina-chan wondering about it the other week, so maybe there. I should check to see if they'll have open seats. ~~Hopefully she doesn't want to invite the other girls. I kind of want us to have time alone. I know we live together and all, but for just one night it'd be nice to pretend.~~

Oh, I just missed a call from my mom. Wonder what she said.

- Mari

~~There wasn't any point in checking. She just wanted to know if I was back in the loop with my job again. I'm sure she thinks I did something. I've always been too spacy or ditzy. I'm not professional. Maybe I'll get fired. I'm hopeless.~~

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October 21st, 2018

I don't understand why they even keep me in this office at this point. It's been so long since anyone has told me more than "we're still weaning down applicants." How long can that possibly take? They only need four or five, right? Isn't this just for like an alpha test for some larger experiment later down the line? How precise can it be? Today they told me they need to make sure that everyone is compatible with the system, which in that case, why haven't I seen any new faces come down to test it? Are they worried about that bad of a reaction?

Even the people who I thought I was friendly with are being weird. At times I catch them watching me. Are they waiting for me to slip up? Did I ask too many questions? I don't know! I don't understand what's going on! I've started telling everyone that my boss loves me and that everything is fine. I've made something up for when my mom asks what I'm doing so I don't have to tell her I'm triple checking old data for the eightieth time.

They should just fire me. At least then I'd understand what's going on. This opportunity was too good to be true. Run my own experiment? Who would ever let me run anything? I'm an airhead and a ditz! Your average cute girl without a care in the world, who's too happy to be competent! I'm always happy! Always cheerful! I try so hard to be perfect, to be accepted, but I keep doing it wrong. Maybe I'm too much. Maybe I should tone it back. I don't know. I never know.

This was a mistake. Go back to being normal Mari. It'll work itself out.

November 10th, 2018

I've met the participants in the experiment! Or well, I haven't. Kuroshita-san says I'm not allowed to as it might mess with the integrity. So, then what do I mean, you ask? Well! It means I was told their names! I actually have a much bigger part than I thought I would. They want me

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to go in with the subjects as one of them and monitor them from within the group. Basically, to pose as a participant. Everyone knows it's an experiment, but they're worried they might miss something if they don't have an inside man to help things run smoothly. Hence, I can't meet them, not really. I'll meet them one day though. I think it's coming up next year.

For now, things are still calm at the lab, but I think there will be a big rush as the deadline approaches. There have been strange men and women coming in and out; Kuroshita-san says that they're testing the hardware and operating systems, although a few of them have been from our sponsors or the government. Probably to make sure that everything is up to code and no one is in any real danger.

It's an exciting time to be here.

- Mari

December 31st, 2018,

It's the last day of the year! Reina-chan and I decided to have the rest of the girls over for a party, which is going to be really fun! We bought a bunch of fun decorations to put around the apartment the other day. Hopefully we'll have enough time to actually put them up before everyone shows up. It's going to be a little bit of a crunch, because I'm currently at work and I'm not going to get out until late this evening with the mandatory drinking celebration, but we'll make it work! Or maybe she will just start setting up without me. That's practical, and just like her.

Next year is going to be extremely busy. We're almost set up in terms of the experiment. Things should be getting off the ground early 2019, assuming there aren't any further delays. I can't wait to finally begin. I feel like everyone has been rushing around making phone calls, fixing code, updating files for the past few weeks, so when it finally comes together it's sure to

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~~be something! I still feel like I know so little. If I'm supposed to be an inside man, shouldn't I at least know the basics about the types of people I'm going to be interacting with? Am I going in blind? Are *they* also going in blind? Maybe that makes sense? I mean we're supposed to be strangers learning to cooperate, so I guess...but...I can't help but feel like something is wrong. Something will inevitably go wrong.~~

Ah! I have to go! They're gathering for the office party! I'll see you next year.

- Mari