



THE DIARY OF MODERN CINDERELLA

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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PROLOGUE

Throughout all my life, mom is always by my side. After all, I spend most of my time with her. We do pretty much everything together, from playing to cooking in the kitchen. She even helps me with my homework. She can be strict to me most of the time. But she doesn't feel angry when I make mistakes. "I want you to keep this in mind, Risa," she says, "We learn a lot more from mistakes. Don't feel bad only because you've made a mistake. Everyone does."

I feel relieved when mom says that to me. Thanks to her, I don't blame myself for the mistakes I've made. That's also the same with my friends' mistakes. Instead of making them feel guilty, I encourage them to reflect their mistakes. At least they won't repeat the same thing again next time. Mom sure taught me many lessons about life, but this one lesson struck me the most.

Mom may only be a typical Japanese housewife, but it doesn't mean that housework is the only thing she knows. She also knows a lot of things. But she keeps on telling me that she doesn't know everything. Even at such a young age, I

already know that mom doesn't know everything. But the fact that she's knowledgeable about many things is enough for me to envy and respect her.

Back then, mom used to work as a police officer in the traffic division in Yokohama Police Department. And dad was an inspector in the criminal investigation division. They got married a few years after that. Before they got married, dad already knew that she was suffering from a heart problem. And she could die at any given moment. So, he suggested her to quit her job and looked after the family instead. He didn't want her health to deteriorate because of their hectic working schedule.

With mom who was no longer working, dad became our sole breadwinner in the family. He was willing to do anything for her as long as she wouldn't fall sick. And dad became stricter to her after I was born. After a few years have passed, he's still working in the same division. But now, he's a superintendent of the criminal investigation division.

Because of his job, he rarely comes home. He will only come back when he doesn't get involved in the major criminal cases. He also doesn't get an off day that frequent. So, we usually plan for the family outing whenever he has a break. I always assume that dad may not want to go anywhere whenever he has a day off. But he doesn't seem to mind at all to bring me anywhere I want to go during his break.

"Let's go to Mount Fuji next time," I say to mom, feeling enthusiastic about it. Mom only smiles and nods at me. "Sure, I'll tell him about it when he comes back," she replies. For some reason, I have a feeling that mom is hiding something from me. She may be smiling at me and behaves like her usual self. But I can't seem to brush it off that something is not right with her. She usually looks enthusiastic whenever I'm suggesting a place we should go. But this time, her enthusiasm seems to wane off. Is her heart problem bothering her?

I don't feel like asking her anything. Maybe I'm being way too sensitive about it. Even if my hunch is right, I don't even know how to broach this subject without making her feeling guilty. Ever since I notice mom's strange behavior, I begin to pay attention to how she behaves around me. For the most part, I don't

see anything strange about it. The only thing I notice is her mind seems to wander off. And there is also a time where she puts her hand on her chest.

Because of her strange behavior, I begin to worry that something bad will happen to her as soon as she's out of my sight. I wish that I can do something to ease her pain. It pains me to see how much she's been suffering. "Mom, can I skip school for today? I don't want to leave you alone, especially when I see you in this condition," I say to her. I may only be a fifth-grader. But I can tell that mom is suffering from her heart problem.

"It's alright, Risa," she replies, "You shouldn't skip school for my sake. Don't worry. I'll be fine after I take my medication." Despite feeling reluctant, I still go to school like I always do. I wish that I can stay at home and look after her. But mom doesn't allow me to do that. I can only hope that mom will be alright after she takes her medication. I feel relieved that she looks much better when I come back from school.

Every day, I always imagine what I will do if something bad will happen to mom. I never thought that my nightmare becomes a reality so soon. Mom was lying unconscious in the corridor when I came back from school. I already had a bad feeling before I came home. So, I rush back home after the school over. It looks like my hunch is right, after all. Mom's condition becomes even worst for the past few days. So, she collapsed when I was in school.

Feeling panic, I call the ambulance. I also call dad to inform him about mom. "Risa, I want you to give the first aid to mom while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. So, calm down and follow my instructions," dad tells me. I can't help but cry. I become panic since it's my first time seeing mom like this. "But dad, I've never done it before," I say to him, crying. "Don't worry, Risa," dad says to me, "I know you can do it. I may not be by your side. But I'm right here with you. Remember, you're not alone."

Despite feeling panic, I begin to perform the first aid on mom by following dad's instructions. Dad then instructs me to check mom's breathing and identify if there is any sign of injury on her body. I feel relieved when I notice that mom is still breathing. And there are no injuries occur to her when she collapsed. After

that, dad instructs me to position mom on her back. He also wants me to grab a stool from the kitchen to restore the blood flow to her brain. The stool seems to be high enough to raise her legs above the heart level. So, I guess that should be good enough for her.

“Is mom still unconscious?” Dad asks me. I shake my head. “No, she’s not,” I reply. Dad pauses for a while and begins to instruct me again after that. “If that’s the case, then I want you to check any sign of breathing or any movement. If there’s no sign of breathing or any slight movement, then I want you to perform CPR on her. Use both of your hands and press it on her chest. You need to keep on doing it until the ambulance arrives.”

Dad hangs up after that. Without wasting time, I begin to perform CPR on mom, hoping that she will wake up anytime soon. Even after doing CPR for a while, mom remains unconscious. I can’t help but cry even more. Now I begin to doubt if what I do is correct or not. I may have made a mistake that will jeopardize mom’s survival rate. But I continue to perform CPR on her despite the doubt feeling. I don’t even leave mom’s side to inform the neighbors about her. Mom’s survival is depending on me right now.

The ambulance arrives around twenty minutes after I’ve made the call. The paramedics come inside, bringing in necessary equipment to check mom’s condition. “Were you the one who gave her the first aid?” One of the paramedics asks me. I nod my head, looking worried. “The reason why she fainted was because of her weak heart condition. Your first aid somehow was able to prolong her life. But we still need to bring her to the hospital,” the paramedic says to me.

The paramedics then put her on the stretcher and transport her inside the ambulance. “May I know about your relationship with the patient?” One of the paramedics asks me as they’re about to leave. “She’s my mom,” I say to them, “Can I come with her? My dad is working in Yokohama. It will take a while for him to bring me to the hospital. So, I want to be by her side for the time being.”

The paramedics seem skeptical of allowing me to ride in the ambulance with them. But after a few minutes of discussion, they finally allow me to be onboard with mom. “I guess you should come with us. Your mom may feel much better

when you are by her side. It's also possible for her to wake up on our way to the hospital," one of them says to me. Without wasting time, I begin to lock the door and hop into the ambulance.

Once we're inside the ambulance, the paramedics begin to diagnose mom's condition. "We're going to check your mom's condition with this. It's called electrocardiogram," one of them explains, "It's also known as ECG for short. We need to see her heart's rhythm. Did she tell you anything about her sickness?" I nod my head. I'm aware of her heart problem. But I don't know the severity of her condition.

One of the paramedic pats my shoulder. "It's alright. We'll do what we can to save your mom until we reach the hospital. You did a good job with prolonging her life with CPR," one of the paramedics says to me. I feel somewhat relieved when I find out that my action can save mom's life. The only thing I need to do now is to pray that mom will be alright after this.

Dad arrives at the hospital while mom is still in the emergency room. I cry as soon as I see him. "Risa, I'm sorry. It must be tough for you to handle something like this on your own," dad says to me while trying to comfort me. After that, we wait until the operation is over. As soon as the emergency room light goes off, the doctor then walks toward us with a grief look. "There's something I'd like you to know," he says to dad.

The doctor leaves us after that. As dad is about to follow the doctor, I pull dad's arm, hoping that he will bring me to see the doctor as well. "Can I bring my daughter with me?" Dad asks him. "You can choose not to bring her. But she deserves to know. With your wife's current condition, I don't think it's wise to keep something like this from her," the doctor replies. I nod my head. Dad only sighs and brings me to the doctor's office with him.

Once we're inside, the doctor then begins to explain about mom's condition. "Judging from her current state, we're not sure how long she'll be able to live. We'll do what we can to treat her. But you need to brace yourself for whatever outcome that will happen to her." I become speechless when I hear the doctor's word. My chest feels tight as I find it hard to swallow the news.

Seeing that mom's condition is rather critical, we're not even allowed to visit her. Even after the long hour in the operation room, her condition doesn't seem to improve at all. I guess that the only thing I can do for now is to hope for a miracle. While I do believe in the miracle, my heart is saying otherwise. Since we don't know when mom will regain her consciousness, the nurse will let us know when she wakes up.

Ever since that day, we have never received a call from the hospital. We go on with our usual life. That is until one day, we finally receive a call from the hospital. "We're sorry, Inspector Akagi. We failed to save your wife. She suddenly had a heart complication as her condition was about to stabilize. We did what we could to stabilize her heart rate again. We're sorry from the bottom our heart." Both dad and I cry when we hear about the news.

Mom's funeral is held a few days later in a temple which is not far from our house. Only close friends and families are attending the wake. Grandma comes all the way from Sendai to attend the ceremony. Mom's cousin, Aunt Sayaka is also coming all the way from Osaka to attend the funeral. She seems to resent dad whenever she sees him. She looks more like she's blaming him for mom's death.

I feel so uncomfortable during the wake. I can't stand the smell of the incense burning throughout the ceremony. I understand that burning incense will calm the spirit of the deceased. And it can also purify the surroundings and the people who are at the funeral. In fact, it can even help to sweeten the air. But I hate the smell. It looks like I have to bear with it until the priest is done with chanting a sutra in front of mom's coffin.

Dad begins to offer his prayer to mom while the priest is still chanting the sutra. After he's done with offering his prayer, I'm the next person to do the same, followed by grandma afterward. The rest of the guests are following suit after that, with each of them offering prayer one person at a time. The wake is over once everyone is already offering their prayers and bow to the immediate family.

A cremation process begins the next day. Only an immediate family and close relatives are present during the cremation. It's hard for me to describe how I feel

when I'm holding mom's bones with a special chopstick and place them in a small pot. We're going to bring her ashes back to our home and set it on the altar.

I'm glad that the funeral is finally over. I never thought that a funeral could be this exhausting. "Risa, forgive me for asking you this. But I'm curious if you ever blame your dad for not looking after your mom. He knew that your mom was sick all this time. In fact, it was a miracle that she could live until you were in the fifth grade. He wasn't even there when she needed him the most. He was rarely around too," grandma asks me after we're back from the crematory.

At that time, dad already brings the small pot to the living room, leaving grandma and me in the hallway. I shake my head. For me, it's useless to point a finger and blame someone for mom's death. My hunch already convinced me that it would be my last time to see her. And her deteriorating heart health has nothing to do with dad. It's unfortunate that she can't live long enough. So, I don't see the rationale for blaming dad.

Grandma seems relieved when she finds out that I don't blame him for what happened to mom. A few days after the funeral is over, we're sending grandma to Kannai Station, a railway station in Yokohama. She's heading back to Sendai by bullet train. "Shinya, I know how hard it is to take care of a child as a single father. It becomes even more challenging with you having a hectic job. And Risa is still young to be on her own. You may only be my son-in-law. But I care about you as much as I care about Rumiko," grandma says to him.

"Don't worry about it, grandma," I tell her, "I'll do what I can to help dad with the family matters." Dad smiles when he sees how confident I am. "Hey, that's good to know. But you'd better be prepared," dad teases me. Grandma chuckles when she sees that we're doing fine even without having mom around. "I'm glad to know that you're doing alright. But please take care of yourselves from now onwards." I nod at grandma while making a pinky promise with her.

I admit that my life will be a lot different from now onwards. But I know that I'll be alright with dad by my side. And having him around is what matters to me the most.

1.

It's been three years since mom had passed away. I'm not going to lie here that I do miss her sometimes. The same feeling becomes even stronger when I'm about to enter the middle school. It feels weird when mom is no longer with me during the first day of my middle school year. But I no longer feel that way when I'm in the second year. I guess that I'm already used to the feeling of not having mom around.

Throughout the year, I'm the one who is looking after the house. I admit that it's a bit too much for me to handle it at first. Just like not having mom with me during the first day of school, I manage to do it just fine. Maybe it's because I'm old enough to do the housework with ease. So, some of the things become much easier to do such as cooking and doing laundry. I no longer need dad to help me with the housework anymore.

My daily routine isn't that different from the one I had when I was in the elementary school. Every day, I will wake up early and prepare breakfast for dad and me. I still have to wake up early even if dad is not around. Once I come back from school, I will begin to clean the house and cook dinner. I can only study and do my homework at night once I already finish the housework.

I don't feel that the household chore is a burden to me since I always helped mom with the household chores back then. I don't want dad to get himself bogged down by something petty like this. I want him to give his full attention on solving the case. I don't want him to worry about me and other mundane things. Household chores are one of them.

My relationship with dad has changed ever since then. I become much closer to him a lot more than before. It's not that I wasn't even close to him when mom was still alive. It's just that my closeness with dad and my closeness with mom were equal back then. But my closeness with dad overshoot after mom died. Well, it's not that I'm complaining. I'm happy to know that our relationship is changing in a good way. And I don't have anyone in the family other than him.

Like the last time, dad will always tell me about the criminal cases he had solved whenever he's at home. I'm not going to deny that those cases can be violent and gory. Dad has been telling me about them even when mom was still alive. She was worried that those cases would give me a nightmare. Instead of taking mom's warning, I ended up pestering dad to tell me more about them. It seemed like I didn't even care about having a nightmare at all.

So, what makes me so drawn to the criminal cases that dad has been telling me? For one is because of my love for reading detective novels. Dad has a huge collection of detective novels in his room. He even has many political and military thriller novels. But detective novels seem to be my favorite among the many books he has. And I've been reading them since I was in the elementary school. I admit that it's a difficult book to read, but I don't care.

Dad only knew about it years later, though. He only discovers my dirty little secret while we're talking in the kitchen. "So, that's the reason why you seem to be so hooked on my criminal case stories? I find it weird at first that you love to hear such things. Your mom hated those kinds of stories. She even told me to stop. She didn't want to have a sleepless night because of that," dad says to me.

I chuckle when I hear dad's response. "As much as I love reading such books, nothing beats the real thing. On top of that, I already have someone who is experiencing something similar in real life," I say to dad. Dad smiles when he

hears my answer. “You know,” he says, “It wasn’t as fun as you thought. You have no idea how gruesome it is to see a murder right in front of you. And it doesn’t help that the crime scene itself smells horrible too.”

Dad then stands up. “It’s getting late already. You should be heading to bed. We’re going to fetch grandma in Kannai Station tomorrow. She’ll be with you throughout the summer break.” He then lets out a loud sigh. “I wish that I can be with you during summer. It’s too bad that I have to get involved in a covert mission. I don’t know when it’ll be over. But I do hope that I can still spend the time with you before the summer break ends.”

I turn to dad as he’s about to leave the kitchen. “Dad, please be careful. I don’t know what kind of covert mission you have. But please be careful,” I say to him. He then heads to my direction and pats my head. “Don’t worry. I promise you that I’ll be back here safe and sound. We’ll go to the amusement park in Yokohama once I’m back, okay?” I nod at him. We then head upstairs. I need to get up early tomorrow. After all, grandma is coming here.

Dad and I head to Kannai Station the next day. We arrive at the train station a bit early, so we’ve decided to stay there until the bullet train arrives. The railway station is bustling with people because of the summer break. We thought that it must be hard to find grandma in this kind of situation. Luckily, we notice her when she waves at us with a smile on her face. I hug her as soon as we see each other. I miss her a lot.

Sure, dad and I always celebrate New Year with grandma in Sendai ever since mom passed away. But it’s a different feeling when I’m here to welcome grandma in Yokohama. After all, she hasn’t been to Hakone for so long. The last time she was here was during mom’s funeral. We’re the one who always goes to Sendai to visit her. So, she doesn’t have to go all the way to Hakone to visit us.

“I’ve got to go now. Sorry that I can’t come with you,” dad says to us. Grandma doesn’t even complain at all when dad has to leave us in a hurry. “That’s alright, Shinya. We can go back to Hakone on our own. Besides, Risa is here with me. So I’m not alone,” she says to him. Dad then looks at me. “I’ll be going now. Be a good girl and don’t cause any trouble to grandma, okay? I

promise that we'll go to the amusement park once I'm back, even if the summer break is over."

I smile when dad insists on going to the amusement park even if the summer break is over. It's amusing to see that dad seems to love going there even though a roller coaster ride terrifies him the most. I guess that I should forget about it if I'm going there with dad. There are other things to do, anyway. So, I'm pretty much okay if I don't get to ride one.

Both grandma and I head to Yokohama Chinatown after dad leaves us. The place itself is bustling with people. And there are many restaurants and food stands along the street. Of course, these are Chinese dishes, with some of them have been Japanized to some extent. But I don't care about it. The only thing I care is not to miss the opportunity since we're already here in Yokohama.

We then head inside a Chinese restaurant that sells authentic Chinese food. The price is reasonable too, so there's no reason for us to say no. Grandma doesn't seem to mind at all about me wanting to have Chinese food. After all, I doubt that she can get something like this in Sendai. My eyes glisten as the waitress starts to bring a plate of steam buns. I'm not going to deny that it feels like in heaven when the steam bun starts to melt in my mouth as soon as I munch it.

"Risa, I'm curious," grandma says to me, "Have you ever thought about your dad remarrying again?" I almost choke when she asks me that. "Remarrying? What do you mean by that? Did he say anything about marrying someone to you?" I ask her with a surprised look. "No, it's only a possibility. I want to know about your thought. Are you okay with his decision to remarry again?" she asks me again as she puts another steam bun on her plate.

I remain silent for a while when grandma begins to address me about this issue. To be honest, it never crosses my mind that dad wants to remarry again. I thought that we're doing alright with only the two of us. Well, that's only my opinion. I have no idea what dad is thinking, considering that I've never asked him about it. Maybe dad does think about remarrying again. But he never talks about it. He's worried that I will oppose his decision.

“I don’t know,” I answer, “It depends on the person he wants to marry. I don’t mind if she’s as kind as mom and willing to look after me. I doubt that anyone wants to marry someone like dad, considering that he may not be at home most of the time. And it doesn’t help that he already has a daughter too.” Grandma chuckles when she hears my answer. “So, you’re telling me that he doesn’t stand a chance against the other bachelors?”

I blush when I hear grandma’s word. “No, that’s not what I mean. To be honest, it’s hard to guess dad’s age. And he doesn’t even look like someone who is already married and has a daughter. Even some of my friends also think that dad is hot for someone in his age. So, he has a chance even among the bachelors.”

Grandma then pours Chinese tea on my cup before she continues. “So, you’re okay with him remarrying again as long as he’s happy? Is that what you want to imply?” I nod my head slightly. “Yup, I guess that I’m okay with that as long as he’s happy. And his new wife can treat me like her own daughter. I know that she will never replace mom. But I will still treat her with respect even though she’s only my stepmother.”

We then head back to Hakone after we have our lunch. Throughout the journey back to Hakone, I can’t stop thinking about grandma’s question. It bothers me a bit, considering that dad and I never have a serious discussion about an issue like this. We usually talk about the criminal cases and the detective novels I’ve read whenever we’re together. An issue like this never seems to pop out during the discussion, even if we have nothing to talk about.

Dad comes home a week before my summer break is over. I’m glad to find out that dad is coming home in one piece without any injury at all. “Of course I’m going to be safe. You and your mom’s protective charms have been protecting me all this time. I’m lucky to have two women praying for my safety,” dad says to me in a joking manner. I only chuckle when dad says to me in his carefree attitude.

“So, do you still remember your promise?” I ask dad. He laughs when I ask him. “Of course I am! Have I broken any of my promises to you before?” I laugh when I shake my head. He’s right, after all. He never breaks any of his promises

to me before. Dad is the kind of person who will keep his word. He never fails to keep his promise despite having a hectic job.

“We’ll go to the amusement park in Yokohama tomorrow. We can spend the rest of the day there if you want to. But please, don’t drag me to come with you for a roller coaster ride. You can play whatever you want, except that.” I nod my head, promising him that I won’t drag him to come with me for a roller coaster ride. Even if he doesn’t want to, I’m old enough to ride it on my own.

We head to Yokohama the next day with a car. We have to head there early so then we can play as much as we can. Of course, we don’t plan to stay until the amusement park is about to close. But then again, it doesn’t hurt to stay there until the night time. After all, the amusement park itself has beautiful scenery at night. It’s all thanks to the illuminating Ferris wheels. Now, it all depends on dad whether he wants to stay until the night time or not.

As soon as we reach the amusement park, we head to the food court instead. I find it weird that we’re heading there right away. I thought that dad eats plenty during breakfast. Maybe he feels hungry after a long drive. But it doesn’t make sense to me since it only takes an hour drive from Hakone. I have no idea what dad has in mind. Maybe he wants to get something light before we begin our main agenda.

Once we’re there, dad then grab a chair and sit down. He then instructs me to sit down as well. “What are we doing here, dad?” I ask him. Dad is fiddling with his finger when I ask him about it. “We’re going to meet someone here. It seems like we’re a little bit early,” he answers. He then begins to check his smartphone to see if there is any incoming message from his chat app. A smile carved on his face after he’s checking his phone.

“It looks like she’s already here,” dad says to me. That’s when I notice a woman comes towards our direction. And she’s also bringing another girl with her. She seems a bit older than me. Maybe she’s a high schooler. Are they the one that dad is referring to? Dad is waving at them when they’re coming near us. So, I guess it’s true that they’re the one that we’re going to meet now.

Both of them take a seat after that. The girl then looks at my direction and smiles at me. I have no idea who she is. But it doesn't hurt to smile back at her. It doesn't cost me anything, anyway. "Risa, I'd like you to meet Ms. Riko Sakuraba and her daughter, Chiyu. I know that it may seem sudden to you, but we have seen each other for quite sometimes already. We even plan to get married as well. In fact, grandma already gave her blessing to me," dad says to me.

Now I understand why dad seems enthusiastic to bring me to the amusement park. And it makes sense why grandma was hinting me about it back then. Sure, he honestly wants to bring me here. But his reason for bringing me here is more about introducing his new girlfriend to me. I become speechless when I find out about it. It's even more surprising that he blurts out about their plan to get married. Even Ms. Sakuraba's daughter seems surprised with the news as well.

"Wait, I don't get it," I protest, "How do you guys know each other? You never told me anything about you meeting someone." Both of them blush when I ask them. "Well, we met on a group blind date. At that time, my single subordinates were pestering me to join them. They didn't have enough people on the guys' side. I agreed to tag along because I doubted that any of the girls would be interested in someone like me. So, I didn't expect anything," dad answers.

Both of us find it hard to believe that dad would meet Ms. Sakuraba in such situation. We thought that only high school and college kids would go for something like that. Well, it's not that grown-ups will never go on a group blind date. But it seems bizarre for someone like dad who ends up with a new girlfriend. Now I begin to wonder how his subordinates would feel when they found out about it.

"To be honest, I felt awkward when my friends wanted me to join them. But I felt relieved when I realized that I wasn't the only person who felt that way. It felt even more reassuring when I found out that he was a single father with a daughter. We clicked with each other only because we had something in common," Ms. Sakuraba continues.

Chiyu clears her throat after both of them are done with telling their story. "Well, that's great to know how you two met," she says, "But I still feel frustrated

that you've been keeping this secret from us. Mom only told me about seeing Mr. Akagi and his daughter. I never thought that there was something special between the two of you. You should be punished for what you did to us." She then turns to me, smirking. "Your name is Risa, correct? What do you think about this idea? Don't you think they should be punished for keeping a secret from us?"

For some weird reason, I seem to be in alignment with Chiyu's idea without any hesitation. "Well, that's not a bad idea," I reply, "I was thinking about having dad to take a roller coaster ride. This place seems to have a ride that isn't for the faint-hearted. I'm going to punish him for that." I then look at dad. "Don't worry. You won't be riding it alone. Ms. Sakuraba will ride together with you."

Chiyu laughs when she sees that I share the same thought like her. "Wow, that's a good idea. As for my mom, I'm going to punish her by forcing her to enter the haunted house. Like your punishment, Mr. Akagi will go inside with her. I think that Mr. Akagi is okay with the haunted house, right?" I giggle at her. "It shouldn't be a problem for someone like dad. Well, he's the superintendent of the criminal investigation division in Yokohama Police Department. He has seen something far more terrifying than that."

Both dad and Ms. Sakuraba seem paranoid when we're punishing them according to their fear. Well, there's nothing I can do about it. They should have told us about their relationship. We won't be this merciless if they admit to us about their relationship in the first place. After telling them about their punishment, we then head to the haunted house first. It's a bit far from the food court. But then again, we want to save the best punishment for the last.

We head inside the haunted house when it's our turn to enter. As expected, Ms. Sakuraba seems to be terrified of the fake ghosts. Both Chiyu and I don't find anything spooky about the haunted house, though. But it can be too much for someone like her. Dad seems calm when we're inside. He's hugging Ms. Sakuraba tightly to calm her down. That's when I begin to realize that dad does love her as much as he loves me, seeing how much he cares about her.

Ms. Sakuraba looks pale once we're already outside of the haunted house. It must be way too scary for her that she becomes so white. I grin at dad once we

reach our next destination. And that is our roller coaster ride. Dad seems petrified when he sees the length of the track. Not only the roller coaster track is long, but it also has a few whirlwind tracks. Besides that, the track also goes underneath too.

“Have fun,” I say to dad as we buckle up for the roller coaster ride. Like Ms. Sakuraba, dad already becomes pale even before the roller coaster starts to move. The whole ride takes about 10 to 15 minutes. While everyone is having fun, it’s a hellish experience for dad during the 15 minutes of the roller coaster ride. After all, he can get motion sickness with riding a roller coaster that easily.

Dad barely stands up after the roller coaster ride. Not only that, he barely walks straight. As a result, he has to sit down for a while until he no longer feels dizzy. Ms. Sakuraba lets him rest on her lap when she sees dad in his worst shape. Somehow, they don’t feel embarrassed at all to show how lovey-dovey they are. I assume that they’ll be a bit reserved when they’re with us. But they don’t seem to care about it. They want to show to us how much they love each other.

Chiyu and I take a seat nearby while waiting for dad to recover. Both of us remain silent until Chiyu starts to speak up. “I’m amazed that they’re willing to take the punishment without worrying about looking like a fool. At first, I thought that they were willing to do it because of guilt. But I began to realize that they wanted to show to us that they were serious about this relationship. I guess that they’re not kidding when they say that they want to get married.”

I nod my head. Like Chiyu, I also notice the same thing. I bet that dad already expects that I’ll be angry at him for keeping something crucial away from me. But he knows that I won’t be mad for long. Even if I do, he knows that I’ll be enjoying myself in the end. After all, I have someone else tagging along with me. “So, you’re okay with having my dad as your stepfather?” I ask Chiyu.

She chuckles when I ask her about it. “Well, what about you then? Can you accept my mom as your stepmother? Most importantly, will you be able to accept me as your stepsister?” I can’t help but chuckle at her questions too. “Well, I do have the same concern as you. But since you ask me whether I can accept you or

not, I guess that I should be frank with you then. To be honest, you're not that bad. So, I don't mind to have you as my stepsister."

Chiyu seems surprised when she hears my answer, though. "I don't expect that you can accept me that easily. But I'm glad that you do. Like you, I'm accepting you as my stepsister with an open arm. We may not get along very well in the beginning. But I do know that we can foster our relationship if we try. But after seeing you were on board with my idea, I guess that we can get along very well even before they get married."

We both laugh at each other, as if we find it funny. We then begin to talk about each other since we're going to be in the same family sooner or later. That's when I find out that Chiyu is a manager for the basketball team in her school. Sure, they've lost the preliminaries for Inter High. But she knows that the team will never give up and will eventually make it to Inter High.

I even tell her about my penchant for arts. She even encourages me to enter Minagawa Academy since she has a friend who is prolific in arts. Well, I'm currently considering to enter Minagawa Academy since it's quite near from our house. But after talking to Chiyu, I've decided to choose Minagawa Academy as my high school. Another reason for that is Chiyu is there as well. So, it's going to be much easier for me since she's in the same school as I am.

As we're busy talking, dad and Ms. Sakuraba approaches us. "We're going to the food court now. My head still feels dizzy. But I will feel much better after I have something to eat. Riko wants to get an ice cream. So, she'll be coming to the food court later," dad says to us. "If that's the case, then I'll come along with Ms. Sakuraba. I also want to get an ice cream too," I say to him. Dad nods at me, allowing me to go and buy the ice cream with Ms. Sakuraba.

Both Ms. Sakuraba and I are heading to the ice cream shop while Chiyu and dad are heading to the food court. "Risa, you don't have to be so formal to me. You can call me Ms. Riko. That should be enough. It feels weird when my soon-to-be stepdaughter is addressing me by my old surname," she says to me. I nod at her, making a mental note that I'll be calling her Ms. Riko from now onwards.

After a long walk, we finally reach the ice cream shop. There are a few people who are lining up to buy an ice cream. Ms. Riko seems like she's not feeling well. So, I've decided to buy the ice cream for her instead. She then sits on the bench which is near the ice cream shop. I hope that it won't take that long for the ice cream shop to serve the queue. It's getting hot out here. And I don't know how long I can last in such a hot weather.

As I'm lining up to buy the ice cream, I suddenly hear a loud scream. The scream seems to be not far from where I am. Feeling curious, I've decided to take a look. It turns out to be that the scream comes from Ms. Riko. She looks like she's terrified of something. And she keeps on using her handbag and flapping it into the air, as if she's trying to get rid of something. She must be trying to get rid of bugs around her. But I don't see any bugs anywhere in that area.

"What's going on, Ms. Riko?" I ask her when I come near her. "I saw a black butterfly," she replies without hesitation, "And it keeps on coming near me. I don't know where this black butterfly is coming from. And I don't get why it keeps bothering me. So, please help me get rid of it." She keeps on flapping her designer handbag, trying to get rid of the black butterfly. I know it may seem crazy, but I don't see any black butterfly. I don't even see a fly, let alone something prominent like a black butterfly.

"Ms. Riko, are you sure that there's a black butterfly around you? I don't see anything," I say to her. Ms. Riko seems confused when I tell her that I don't see any black butterfly flying around. "Are you sure you don't see any black butterfly? How can you not see any? Are you sure you don't have any problem with your eyesight?" I shake my head since I don't see any black butterfly at all. At the same time, I become insulted with her remark about my eyesight.

People around us are looking at her like she's some kind of a mad lady. She keeps on insisting about the black butterfly while still flapping her handbag. She's trying to get rid of something that doesn't even exist. I understand about her concern with the black butterfly. After all, a black butterfly symbolizes death in many cultures. If the black butterfly is heading towards that person, it means

that this person will die soon. Ms. Riko must be terrified of death. And that's the reason why she's trying so hard to get rid of it.

Ms. Riko stops flapping her handbag around after a while and turns to me. "I don't get why you can't see the black butterfly. But that's okay. It's not that the black butterfly is harming me and everyone else here. Even if I'm the only one who can see it, I still feel embarrassed with my behavior. Since it seems erratic to some people, I hope that you don't tell anyone about what you witness, especially your dad. I don't want him to worry about this silly superstition and cancel off our wedding."

She leaves me after that. I become dumbfounded after witnessing her unexplainable behavior. To be honest, I don't get why she's behaving like that. I try to convince myself that she's only over-exaggerating and won't behave weirdly after this. But somehow, I have a strong feeling that the same thing will happen to her again. And it's only the beginning.

2.

Dad's and Ms. Riko's initial plan is to get married a few months after we first met in the amusement park. They assumed that we would oppose their marriage. And they were also worried that Chiyu and I would never get along. But after seeing how close I am with Chiyu, they've decided to hasten their marriage. There's nothing wrong with that. But it gives me the impression that Ms. Riko must be already pregnant. And she may not be able to fit into the wedding gown if we wait any longer.

Thank goodness that it's not true at all. I'm okay with accepting Ms. Riko as my new mother and Chiyu as my stepsister. But I'm not ready to have another new person in the family. Even Chiyu is also in the same boat as I am with this issue. "Don't worry. I'm not planning to have a baby for the time being. I'm pretty sure that Shinya will agree with me on this issue," she assures us. Well, thank you for reassuring us, Ms. Riko. We'll keep that in mind.

As the wedding day is getting nearer, I've decided to ask dad why he wants to marry Ms. Riko in the first place during dinner. We still have dinner with only the two of us, though. It's the same like before. I always thought that having me is enough. Is he not happy with his life right now? Dad chuckles when he hears my

question. "I won't deny that I love Riko," he answers, "But I can't marry her if our marriage will ruin my relationship with you. I was happy when I saw how receptive you were towards Riko when you met her for the first time."

I sigh when I hear dad's answer. "But you're still going to marry her even if I'm against it, right?" Dad chuckles again. "Well, that's true. If you're against it, then I'll do my best to convince you that Riko is the best person you can have in your entire life. And I'm pretty sure that she can take care of you like how your late mother would always do. At least I don't have to worry so much about you whenever I'm away on a mission," he says to me.

To be honest, I don't expect that dad will think this far. I always assume that he wants to marry Ms. Riko out of love. But then again, his reason for marrying her has a lot to do with me. He needs someone to look after me whenever he's not around. Sure, I may be old enough to be on my own. But he's still worried about me. That's what a typical father will do. He's putting my need first before his own need.

"So, you're not happy with our marriage?" Dad asks me. I sigh before I answer his question. "To be frank, it's a big no. But then again, I have to consider your happiness as well. I can tell how happy you are whenever you're together with Ms. Riko. In the end, I can't just go against your marriage. I did discuss this matter with grandma before. I'm willing to accept it as long as you're happy with your choice. Your happiness matters to me as much as mine." Dad smiles, feeling relieved to hear my honest confession about his action.

The day is passing by so quickly. Without realizing, today is their marriage ceremony. It's only a small ceremony, though. We only invite close friends and family to this ceremony. Grandma also comes all the way from Sendai for this occasion. She seems happy that dad finally has someone else to complete his life.

She's also happy when she meets Chiyu for the first time. "It's great to know that now I have another granddaughter besides Risa. Shinya may only be my son-in-law, but I don't treat him differently from my late daughter. So, I'm doing the same thing to you too," she says to Chiyu. Grandma then looks at me. "Risa, from

now on you should call Chiyu sis. You should also start addressing Riko as your mom.”

I chuckle at grandma’s advice. “Sure, I have no problem with calling Chiyu sis. But I still need to get used to addressing Ms. Riko as my mom. She seems okay with me calling her Ms. Riko. She even tells me to take my time until I get used to it.” Grandma smiles when she sees that I can accept Chiyu and Ms. Riko into Akagi household. “That’s great to hear. I feel relieved when I see how close you are with them,” grandma says to me.

My life changes dramatically ever since dad marries Ms. Riko. By having Ms. Riko in our family, I no longer need to become a part-time housewife anymore. She’s the one who is doing the housework instead. She even refuses our help whenever we want to help her with the housework. It looks like she can handle the housework despite her busy job in the investment banking.

She even spends her time to make a bento for us before she heads to work. Well, dad is right after all. Ms. Riko is indeed an amazing person. She’s able to do everything by herself. “That’s mom’s true power. She’s a super mom,” sis says to me in a joking manner. “Stop that, Chiyu,” Ms. Riko says to her, “You sound like you’re making fun of me.” Sis pouts when Ms. Riko is scolding her. “No, it’s not. It’s a compliment. You should be happy with that,” she says to her.

I can’t help but laugh at their interaction. That’s a glimpse of our usual, everyday life. We love to goof around. Some of my friends seem worried that Ms. Riko will treat me differently than sis. But so far, I don’t see any bias treatment towards me. It looks like she loves me as much as she loves sis. She’s being fair to both us. She praises us for whatever good things we do. And she will nag at us if we’re slacking off. She’s behaving like a typical mom.

Our usual, everyday life starts to change when I’m in the third year in the middle school. And sis is in the second year in the high school. I’m currently busy with the high school entrance exam. And sis is busy with her preparation for the school’s basketball team. It seems like the basketball team is almost close to qualifying for Inter High. And it doesn’t help at all that next year will be her last year. So, she’s hoping that the team will qualify for Inter High next year.

As we're busy with our school-related things, we don't realize that there's something wrong with Ms. Riko. She seems fine to us. That is until one day, Ms. Riko comes back later than usual. She doesn't say anything to us that she'll come home late. So, we assume that she must have a last minute ordeal and is unable to inform us. We don't make a fuss about it, anyway. So, both of us decide to go down and greet her. Maybe we can make a dinner for her if she hasn't eaten anything yet.

To our surprise, she only lies down at the entrance, without moving an inch. We can't say for sure if she trips herself at the entrance and falls. But it doesn't look that way to us. We didn't hear her screaming, so we assume that she wants to lie down at the entrance. Her face looks so red, and she barely says anything when she sees us. Not only that, but she also reeks of alcohol too. She must be drinking too much after work, making her unable to stand properly. She's too intoxicated to do anything in such condition.

Seeing her in such condition, we can't just let her stay there until morning. And we can't just wait until dad comes home and carry her upstairs. Dad did tell us this morning that he may not be coming back tonight. Feeling contemplated, we've decided to carry her to the living room instead. We doubt that we can carry her upstairs even with the two of us. We're not strong enough to carry her upstairs.

I almost vomit because of the strong smell of alcohol. Sis also looks like she's going to puke in any given moment. But somehow, she manages to carry Ms. Riko without having the smell bothering her. Maybe she has a better tolerance towards alcohol than me. With strong smell pricking into my nose, I can only hope that I can carry her to the living room as fast as I can. The living room isn't that far from the entrance. But somehow, it feels so far to me when I have to carry Ms. Riko there. It's indeed a hellish experience for me.

Ms. Riko seems to regain a bit of consciousness as we begin to carry her to the living room. "Curse you, old man. Now you're going to regret for not accepting my avant-garde ideas. I've already resigned from my job, anyway. I'm not going to work for someone like you. I can tell that you're hoping that I will die someday.

Being off-topic during the meeting was only your stupid excuse. Everyone in the company wants me to die!” She mutters to us.

We become confused when we hear her muttering. We know that drunk people usually say something nonsense. But within their nonsense talks, they will blurt out the truth unconsciously. That’s usually the case. We assume that Ms. Riko must be having a lucid dream. But then again, it doesn’t matter whether what she says is a plain nonsense or not. We find it disturbing when we hear her muttering. We can’t just brush it off. We feel that something must have happened to her during the day.

We head upstairs after we place Ms. Riko on a sofa in the living room. I still feel uneasy with what I’ve heard just now. I wish that I can bring this issue up, but I don’t know how to say it. “Risa, are you still thinking about the muttering?” Sis asks me. I nod my head. I’m glad that sis is bringing this issue up. Maybe she notices how uneasy I look because of Ms. Riko’s word.

“To be honest, I find it strange as well,” sis says, “This isn’t the first time she came home in a drunken state. The last time she was drunk was when she found out that my dad was two-timing her. Other than that, I never saw her looking so drunk, even when she came back from the group blind date. She didn’t get herself drunk when she was drinking with her colleagues. So, I know that the muttering doesn’t sound like a running gag to me. I’m pretty sure that she means what she says.”

I start to become even more uneasy when sis told me how unusual Ms. Riko’s behavior is today. Like sis, I can tell that something awful must have happened to her today. She won’t be in this mess if nothing bad happens to her. People will only drink this much if they have a problem. It will then turn into an addiction if they see drinking as the only way for them to forget about the problem. And they refuse to think of a way to solve it. Now it becomes another problem on top of another problem.

Sis then goes inside her room to grab her smartphone. “What are you planning to do?” I ask her. “I’m going to ask Ms. Ichikawa. She’s mom’s friend from her workplace. She attended the wedding before. She may know something

about mom,” she says to me. Sis then begins to send a message to Ms. Riko’s friend through her chat app. We receive her message a few minutes after our first message to her. She then starts to read the message as soon as she receives the notification.

Sis’s phone keeps on beeping after the first message. It indicates that she receives many notifications from her chat app. Sis doesn’t say anything other than scrolling through the message with a frowned look on her face. I only stand there without saying anything. Judging from sis’s expression, it seems to me that Ms. Riko is in a dire situation. And we may be helpless to help her.

Sis sighs after reading the message. “What mom said was true, after all. Ms. Ichikawa was there at that time. According to her, mom had a fight with her boss because he refused to accept her avant-garde ideas. She resigned right off the bat only because of that. She threw her resignation letter to her boss right in front of everyone in the meeting. She even yelled at them for trying to conspire against her. Everyone became confused as she stormed off from the meeting room. They found it hard to believe with her behavior. She never acted like that before.”

Sis then continues to scroll down to read another message. “It wasn’t that her idea was bad. The only problem was her ideas were rather unrelated to their discussion. When the boss warned her for being off-topic, she was fuming. Everyone agreed with what the boss said to her. And they convinced her that the boss didn’t have any ill intention towards her. But mom took it that everyone was conspiring against her. Ms. Ichikawa was as speechless as everyone else when they saw mom’s strange behavior.”

Both of us find it bizarre as well because of Ms. Ichikawa’s message. We don’t know what sort of things they were discussing during the meeting. But I don’t think anyone can tolerate if she keeps on derailing them from their meeting agenda. We have no idea what she’s trying to do by behaving such way. All we can say is that it’s so unprofessional. “Was it true that her boss was hoping her to die? Can you ask her about it? This statement is the one that bothers me the most,” I say to sis.

Sis then sends Ms. Ichikawa another message. It doesn't take that long for us to receive her reply. "She said that she didn't remember mom was saying such things. Again, that was only her assumption. She was sure that no one wished her to die no matter how irrational her behavior was," sis says to me. We can't help but feel that the whole situation is indeed bizarre. We've decided to put this situation aside since it's getting late already.

The next day, we realize that Ms. Riko is still sleeping in the living room. We try to wake her up, so then we can have breakfast together. But she refuses to wake up, brushing us off for trying to disturb her sleep. We don't feel like forcing her to get up. Maybe she has not recovered from the hangover yet. I guess that we shouldn't disturb her anymore. It's not like she needs to go to work, anyway. She already quits her job.

Since Ms. Riko didn't even get up to prepare breakfast for us, we have to prepare breakfast on our own. We head to school after that. We also leave some food for her, in case she needs something to eat after she wakes up. We're not sure how severe is her hangover. So, we can only hope that the food we left will be enough for her since we may not be coming back from school so soon. Sis is busy with her club activity. And I'm busy with preparing for the high school entrance exam.

Ms. Riko still hasn't woken up yet when we come back from school. We thought that she might have gone back to sleep. But it doesn't look that way, judging by the food that we left for her this morning. It seems like she doesn't even touch the food we prepared for her. It looks like she has been asleep for the whole day since last night. Is she alright? We hope that she didn't catch a cold because she has been sleeping in the living room for the whole day.

We don't feel like waking her up again, so we let her wake up on her own. Luckily, she wakes up at night after we're done with having our dinner. At that time, I'm in the middle of cleaning the table while sis is washing the dishes. "My head hurts," she says as she's massaging her forehead. "Are you alright? Do you want me to go and get a painkiller for you?" I ask her. She looks pale even after sleeping for the whole day.

She scowls at me when I'm asking her, though. "Don't try to come near me, you filthy bitch. I thought that my colleagues were the only people who were conspiring against me. I couldn't believe it that you were just like them. You were also conspiring against me. Why did you do such things to me?" She then pushes me aside as she gets up from the sofa and heads upstairs.

I become confused with her behavior. I begin to cry after that. I find it hard to believe that Ms. Riko would scold me. She even accuses me of conspiring against her. She had never scolded us before. So, I have no idea what makes her so angry at me. Sis also finds it hard to believe with what Ms. Riko did to me. "I'm sorry, Risa," she says, "I never thought that she would scold you. Maybe she's having a bad mood today. I bet that she'll be okay tomorrow."

I feel better after sis comforts me. But still, I can't brush off this feeling. It doesn't matter whether what Ms. Riko did to me is intentional or not. I still feel hurt for what she did. I don't even tell dad what I'm going through. I don't feel like burdening him with something as petty as this. Maybe Ms. Riko did have a bad mood today. I guess that it must be the hangover that causes her to have such a foul mood.

The next morning, I hear a loud scream. And the scream seems to come from the master bedroom. I've decided to peek through the door to see what's going on. "I'm not going to answer the phone no matter what. You'd better not think that you can fool me that easily. I know that you're after me, Lord of the Dead," Ms. Riko yells at her phone. The phone keeps on ringing again after a while. But she still refuses to pick up.

Ms. Riko's behavior is getting even more bizarre than yesterday. First, she accuses me of conspiring against her. And now, she's saying that the call is coming from the Lord of the Dead. Why in the world is she thinking like that? Even kids will never behave like that. She bites her fingernails while hugging her knees to the chest after the call ends. And she looks even more unruly than yesterday. What's going on with her?

I don't feel like approaching her for the time being. I'm worried that she will scold me again. I head to the bathroom, hoping that I won't come in contact with

Ms. Riko again. After I'm getting ready for school, I head downstairs. Sis is already in the kitchen, preparing breakfast for us. "It seems like mom is still not feeling well. So, I'll be preparing breakfast until mom is getting better," she says to me as she hands me my breakfast.

None of us are saying anything after that. "Sis, did you go and take a look at Ms. Riko before you head downstairs?" I ask her, trying to break the silence. "Why? Are you referring to the call she believed from the Lord of the Dead?" Sis doesn't look too happy when I ask her that question, though. I bet that the scream must be loud enough for her to hear. Now I feel bad for spoiling her mood. I hope that she doesn't get angry at me.

"I don't mean to make fun of her. But I'm just feeling baffled with her behavior. Not only that, but she also looks unruly too. She looks even worse than yesterday. She also smells bad too. She smells like she's coming out of the trash can," I say to her. Sis sighs when she hears my answer. "To be honest, I'm also as confused as you. It looks to me that she's no longer the person that we used to know. Now I don't even know how to say to her straight to her face."

Both sis and I leave the house in a hurry. For some reason, we find it scary to see that Ms. Riko is no longer behaving like she always does. It confuses us. I guess that we should tell dad about it. At least he knows what to do. If Ms. Riko ends up becoming violent out of sudden, he'll be there to protect us. We may not be able to do that if we're the one who confronts her. We don't want to risk ourselves, especially when she looks like she can hurt us when she's snapped.

We head home right away after the school is over. As we enter the house, we notice that the TV set we have is being crushed like a soda can. Ms. Riko is standing still, with a hammer in her hand. "Ms. Riko, what are you doing? Why are you destroying the TV set? Do you realize what you've done?" I scold her for her irrational behavior. She only stares at me, as if I'm saying something strange to her.

She then starts to laugh hysterically after a while. "I knew it," she says, "You must be the messenger that the divine power is referring to. You must be working for the Lord of the Dead." Both of us become dumbfounded when we

hear her accusation. We have no idea what does she mean with working under the Lord of the Dead. Is that even possible to begin with? What makes us qualify to work under the so-called the Lord of the Dead?

Ms. Riko then points at the destroyed TV set. “Do you think that I don’t know about the surveillance bugs that you planted inside the TV? I was only able to get rid of them when I destroyed it! It must be the Lord of the Dead who told you to do that!” She’s fuming as she takes some part of the TV and shoves it into our face. Both of us become puzzled with her remark. We have no idea that the TV contains such thing. We’re sure that dad will be the first person to notice it if we do have surveillance bugs on our TV.

She then throws the TV part down the floor and starts to slap me in the face. I end up falling because of that. After that, she kicks me in the stomach, making me unable to get up again. “Mom, what are you trying to do? Why are you slapping Risa and kick her in the stomach? Are you out of your mind?” Sis yells at her. “Shut up!” Ms. Riko yells at her and starts to slap her in the face as well.

“I can’t believe it that you’re defending her,” she yells at sis while pointing her finger at me. Sis starts to tear up when she sees that Ms. Riko suddenly becomes irrational for no apparent reason. “You’re my daughter, Chiyu. I can’t believe it that you’re siding with her. Don’t tell me that you’re also the messenger for the Lord of the Dead too?” Ms. Riko stares at her. Before sis can say anything, Ms. Riko is quick enough to push her down and kicks her in the stomach as well.

I find it hard to believe that Ms. Riko acts violently towards us. She doesn’t seem like she will listen to us regardless of what we say. Before things start to escalate any further, I manage to hold Ms. Riko’s leg so then she will stop kicking sis. To my surprise, she kicks me in my chest instead. After that, she kneels down to grab my collar and starts to slap me continuously until my face is bleeding.

Sis screams as loud as she can, hoping that Ms. Riko will stop. She tries to reach her with the hope that she will realize what she did to me. It seems that her screams have no effect on Ms. Riko. She can’t even move her body at all. The kicks must be way too strong for her to withstand. After a while, Ms. Riko stops slapping me. She seems satisfied when she sees that I don’t retaliate at all.

She then let go of the collar of my shirt, making me fall with a heavy thud on the floor. I'm barely conscious after she lets me go. "That should teach you a lesson. If you don't want the same thing happened to you again, then you'd better stop working for the Lord of the Dead. You should never say that I've never warned you," she says to me with a smirk on her face. She heads upstairs after that.

Sis crawls to where I am after Ms. Riko heads upstairs. "Can you get up?" She asks me. I barely nod my head. It feels painful to move my head, even if it's just a little. She then helps me to sit down. I cry in pain as I try to sit down, with having my back leaning against the sofa. Maybe it's because of the strong kick that I've experienced in the stomach and the chest. "I'm sorry, sis. You're hurt too because of me," I apologize to her.

As I'm leaning myself against the sofa, I sense something on my fingertips. I begin to reach out for it in slow motion. After I grab the unknown thing, I realize that it's Ms. Riko's smartphone. From the look of it, it seems that she has been tossing it a couple of times already until the screen is broken. Even though the display itself is shattered into pieces, I can still turn it on. But it's hard to see with a screen like that.

"Risa, I want you to keep this phone with you for a moment. In the meantime, let's go to my room. I'll treat your injury," sis says to me. I nod my head and begin to get up slowly with sis's help. The pain intensifies as I'm getting up. It seems like my injury is far more severe than I thought. I realize that sis is also in pain as she helps me to get up. But she suppresses her pain, not wanting me to worry about her.

"Sis, your injury is as bad as mine. You also receive as many beatings as I do. You don't have to help me if it hurts you. You can't hide the pain from me even if you try to suppress it," I say to her. Sis sighs when she hears my response. "It's true that my body hurts. But yours is much worse than I am. Don't worry about me. I can still move. But it's not that fluid, though."

I'm glad to know that her injuries aren't that bad. But still, I don't want to burden her since she's not in good condition either. "Sis, thank you. Let me carry

the bags for you instead. I don't think you can carry both me and the bags at the same time," I say to her. Sis only smiles at me faintly as I begin to wrap my arm over her shoulder. Sis then holds my arm while putting her hand around my waist to support me. We head upstairs slowly. Both of us try to suppress as much pain as we can until we reach sis's room.

Once we're inside, sis then begin to treat my injury. I feel much better after the treatment. Sis then proceeds to treat her injuries after that. "Listen up, Risa," she whispers, "We better not use our phone whenever mom is around. I have a feeling that she will destroy our phones when she finds out about it. Just take a look at her phone. I bet that she will do the same thing to our phones. So, keep your phone in the silent mode. You should turn off the vibration mode too." I nod my head and begin to do just like what sis instructs me to do.

As I'm about to switch my phone into silent mode, I notice a notification from my chat app. Without much thought, I begin to have a look at it. My eyes widen when I read the message. "Sis, you'd better check your chat app now. Dad left a message for us in the family group," I say to her. Dad has created a specific group just for us to communicate with each other. He will usually send a message if he has something to say to everyone in the family.

My heart sinks as I scroll through and reread his message again. *What's going on with Riko? I tried to contact her countless times. But she didn't pick up her phone. Did something happen to her? Anyway, I won't be coming back home for the next few months. I'll be heading to Nagasaki for another covert mission. Since I couldn't get a hold of Riko, please tell her for me, okay? Please take good care of yourselves. We'll go somewhere once I return from Nagasaki. I'm sorry that I have to go to Nagasaki on short notice. See you soon.*

After reading the message, sis then grabs Ms. Riko's phone and starts to take a look at her call log. "It was dad who called her this morning. He wanted to tell her about this news. She didn't even pick up the phone when he called. Now, she's seeing everyone around her as her sworn enemies, even if they're her own family members," she says to me.

Seeing how dire our situation has become, I begin to reply to dad's message as fast as I can about what Ms. Riko did to both of us. She won't know that we're telling dad about her. After all, her phone is with us. I don't think that dad will reply back to us as soon as he receives the message. We just want to let him know about it. Maybe he doesn't have to go to Nagasaki once he knows about our situation.

My hand starts to shake when I notice that none of the messages that I've posted delivered successfully to dad. It looks to me that dad already left to Nagasaki for the covert mission. Tears start to fall from my eyes since I can't get a hold of dad. And at the same time, I have no idea what lies ahead for both of us since Ms. Riko is no longer the same person that we used to know.

3.

It's been a few months since that day, with me becoming a high schooler this year. I'm so happy that I've passed Minagawa Academy entrance exam despite the turbulence that happened to me. Well, Minagawa Academy is my first choice since the school is closer to home. On top of that, sis is also in the same school as I am. So, that will make things easier for both of us.

My life changes drastically ever since the day Ms. Riko beat both of us. She's always accusing us of becoming the messenger for the Lord of the Dead. Because of that accusation, she keeps on abusing us. She hopes that doing so will loosen up our connection with the fictional character. She also feels that abusing us will prevent us from attempting to hurt her. She feels that we have the power to hurt her thanks to the Lord of Dead who lends his power to both of us. That's only her defense for getting rid of us away from her life.

Both sis and I seem baffled by her behavior. We don't care much about her accusation. But what we worry the most is her unpredictable abusive behavior. Back then, she would only abuse us occasionally. But now, she begins to abuse us a lot more than usual. It looks to me that the threatening feeling towards us

grows stronger day by day. And we have no idea what and how we did that makes her sees us as a huge potential threat.

She will always threaten us not to tell anyone about the abuse every time she abuses us. She seems so fearful whenever she looks at us. But it's her insecurity that makes her wanting to abuse us on a daily basis. She even goes that far by accusing people around us as the messenger for the Lord of the Dead in disguise. Both sis and I have no choice but to follow her demand. We don't know what she will do to us if we don't do what she says.

Her behavior becomes irrational day by day too. She will never feel safe whenever she's at home. The feeling grows even stronger whenever we're around. It's easy for us to know how insecure she feels whenever we hear her talking to herself in an irritated voice. Her voice is loud enough for us to hear every single thing she says about us. We have no idea who she's talking to. We're pretty sure that no one is around her at that time.

We know that she's not talking to her phone because her phone is still with me. We try to decode what she's saying. But we have no idea what she's talking about. She's talking in a language that we don't understand. My body is trembling in fear whenever I sense that she's nearby. So, I end up locking the door because I don't want her to barge into my room and starts to abuse me for no reason. I do the same even if I'm in sis's room.

I head to sis's room as soon as Ms. Riko is no longer around. "Does Ms. Riko know any foreign language?" I ask sis once I'm inside her room. She sighs when I ask her that. "I don't know. Maybe she learned it while she was still working. But she never told me anything about learning a foreign language. Even if she didn't tell me, I've never seen her buying any textbook in a foreign language in our old house," sis replies.

Since I'm carrying Ms. Riko's phone with me, I then begin to take a look at her phone. It's hard for me to scroll through her phone because of the shattered screen. Maybe I can find any language app on her phone. After searching through her phone, I don't see anything that resembles a language app. I also take a look at the app history. Maybe she has deleted the language app once she's fluent

enough to speak that language. Again, the result is the same. She doesn't have any apps that resemble a language app.

"Did you find any?" Sis asks me. I shake my head. "I don't see anything that resembles a language app in her phone, even in the deleted apps. In fact, the deleted apps are the common apps that are available on every phone." Sis pauses for a while, trying to think of a possible way for Ms. Riko to learn a new language. "I hate to say this," she says, "But maybe she doesn't learn any new language at all. She must be making it up. It's all in her head."

I try to suppress my laughter because I don't want Ms. Riko to notice. We're toast if she finds out that we're laughing at her. She must be thinking that we're trying to plot something against her. That's what's happening in our home right now. We can't even laugh freely like how we used to be. Ms. Riko will start to beat us up whenever she hears us laughing.

Despite the constant abuse, we don't dare to let other people know what we're going through. We're too scared to open up. We're worried that Ms. Riko will become even more violent towards us if she finds out about it. Because of her threat, we try our best to pretend like nothing is happening to us. Despite our effort, we know it well enough that we can't keep the secret forever. It's hard to conceal the visible bruises on our body. And we may be running out of excuses before we know it.

With so many bruises on my body, I begin to feel conscious of my appearance. I no longer feel attractive because of these bruises. They're rubbing off my confidence. Not only that, both sis and I no longer want to hang out with our friends anymore. While the reason has something to do with our confidence issue, we don't want any of them to notice the bruises. We can lie all we want to hide the real cause. But we know that we can't keep on lying just to bury the secrets.

We're lucky that both sis and I don't have the time to hang out with our classmates after school. We're busy with the club activities. Sis is the manager of the basketball team, and I'm a member of the art club. We always go home right away after the club activities are over. In sis's case, some of them are staying at

school until the night time for the extra practice. Sis doesn't have to be there unless the preliminaries for Inter High are getting nearer.

Ever since I enter the high school, I barely make any new friends. It's not that I have a problem with making new friends in a new environment. It's just that I don't want any of them to find out about my darkest secret. I never even talk to my classmates. I'd rather be alone most of the time. My classmates just don't care much about talking to me. They just assume that I like to be alone. So, they don't bother to hang out with me during the break.

Despite my reclusive behavior, there are still some people who will try to talk to me. One of them is Mayuko Kirisaki. She's my class rep. Well, it's her job to talk to everyone regardless of their behavior. "Akagi, can you help me with carrying the books to the teacher's lounge? I can't carry the whole stack of books by myself. And the other class rep is already heading to the student council meeting. I hope that you don't mind."

I find it weird that Kirisaki is asking me to help her with carrying the books. She can always ask the other guys to help her. Instead, she wants me to help her. I can tell what she intends to do. She doesn't want me to feel excluded from the rest of the class. She must be thinking that I'm a socially-awkward person and has a problem with talking to other people. She probably doesn't realize that I'm only being repulsive just to hide my darkest secret. It's not that I'm always behaving like this.

"I'm sorry, Kirisaki," I say to her, "I have to go to the art room now. I'm already late for the club activity." For some reason, she smiles when I refuse to go to the teacher's lounge with her. "Oh, you're in the art club? That's great! I thought that you prefer to be alone most of the time. So, it seems unlikely for someone like you to take part in the club activity. I'm glad to know that you're doing alright," she replies.

I smile at her. "That's rude. I don't mind talking to people. It's just that I don't feel like talking to anyone for the time being. I need to come up with another inspiration for my artwork. So, I prefer to be alone most of the time. I don't want people to disturb me." Kirisaki chuckles when she sees that I'm not like what she

imagines all this time. She then apologizes to me and asks someone else to help her with carrying the books to the teacher's lounge.

To be honest, it's hard to pretend that there's nothing bad happened to me. But I have to pretend just to avoid any suspicion. Now I feel like a criminal who tries to fit herself into the society. It's too bad that I didn't read any books where the main character is a serial killer who tries to blend in with the society. I wish that I've read such book. At least I know what to do when I have to deal with someone like Kirisaki.

So far, I don't see any of them paying attention to me in class. Kirisaki is the only person who tries to talk to me. As for the others, it's either they're oblivious to their surroundings or my acting is just plain flawless. But then again, I can't let my guard down yet. I have to be careful with another person in this class. He's sitting right behind me. So, I shouldn't be doing something that will make him suspicious.

His name is Makoto Izumi. I don't know much about him other than he's one of the members of the basketball team. Well, we met during the first day of school. It was sis who introduced him to me. We didn't talk much even though he was sitting behind me. And we still don't talk much even until today. Besides him, sis also introduced me to the captain and the vice-captain of the basketball team. They were Takumi Ichirou and Hideki Nakamura.

According to sis, Izumi is an amazing player just like the captain. In fact, his playstyle is almost the same as Senior Takumi. She also says that having him on the team feels like having Senior Takumi clone. For some reason, he seems to be the complete opposite in class, though. He doesn't pay attention during class. He even falls asleep during class! He's not the talkative kind of person. So, I have no idea what he's thinking.

During recess, I also notice that many girls are flocking around the corridor just to get a glimpse of him. He sure is popular among the girls despite his bad boy look. People may not know that he's one of the members of the basketball team only because of his appearance. I guess that girls must be digging a guy with

bad boy look and attitude. Again, I have no right to judge him because I don't know him much.

Just like any other day, I will always eat my bento all by myself in class. I won't deny that it feels lonely to eat bento alone. I wish that I can join them and eat bento together with them. But I'm too terrified to join them. I don't want them to realize that I've been hiding something from them and forced me to tell them the truth. Of course, it's not that I got myself involved in criminal activity. It's just that I don't want Ms. Riko to become furious when she knows about it. I may lose my life only because she starts to become more violent than usual.

After the school is over, I begin to head to the art room as fast as I can. To be honest, I doubt that I can walk fast enough because of the bruises I have. Ms. Riko keeps on beating me at the same spot most of the time. As a result, the bruises take longer to heal. And the pain becomes more unbearable day by day. Sis also has many bruises as I am. Hers are even worst since she has to defend me whenever Ms. Riko is beating me up. "Risa, wait up." I turn around when I hear that someone is calling me. It's Haruka.

Haruka is my close friend from the middle school. She moved to Hakone when we were in the second year in the middle school. The reason why she was moving here was that she wanted to stay with her brother, Senior Takumi. Just like me, she also picks this school because her brother is here. She likes to pick a fight with Senior Takumi a lot. They're always bickering whenever they're together.

"Hey, Risa, do you have any plan after this? Let's go somewhere after the club activities are over. It's been a long time we haven't seen each other. And it doesn't help that we're not in the same class," she says to me. I pause for a while, trying to come up with an excuse not to go out with her. I can decline other people's invitation in a snap. But it's hard for me to do the same in Haruka's case. I wish that I can go with her, but I can't.

"I'm sorry. I need to head to the shrine after the club activities are over. I will become uneasy if I don't go there every day after school. Maybe we can do it next time," I say to her. Haruka seems disappointed at first. But she knows about my

reason for wanting to go to the shrine. I want to pray for dad's safety. We didn't hear anything from him since the last time he sent a message to us in the chat app. So, the only thing I can do for now is to pray for his safety.

I'm glad that my excuse is convincing enough for her. I hope that she won't come and bugs me to go out with her again. But I underestimate how persistent she is. Haruka is still insisting me to go out and have fun with her. She's even willing to wait until I already finish with my business in the shrine. Now I have a problem to make her stay away from me.

Because of her persistence, I end up avoiding her whenever she's about to come to my class. I don't even turn around whenever she shouts at me, hoping that I will stop when she calls my name. To be honest, it pains me to do something like this to her. But I have to do it. She's the last person that I want to deal with. I know that my action will jeopardize our friendship. But it's the only way for me to avoid her. I don't want Ms. Riko to find out about her. I don't want her to get hurt because of me.

Haruka is fast enough to catch up with me until we're near the gym. Before I go any further, she grabs my wrist and refuses to let me go. I scream in pain when she does that. It's only a small pressure. But somehow, the pain intensifies when she grabs my wrist. Haruka seems surprised when she sees me crying in pain. "Risa, are you alright?" She asks me and quickly let go off my arm. I shake my head while checking on my wrist. I guess that my injury becomes much worse than I thought. Even a light grip from Haruka is enough to jolt me.

Haruka only stands still when she sees me walking away from her. She seems guilty for what she did to me. But she looks more disappointed when I didn't tell her anything about the pain that I have. I can't help but walk as fast as I can. I don't want her to catch up with me like what she did back then.

After I'm far enough from her, I then stop walking for a while, trying to catch my breath. I don't dare to look back. I can't bear to see her disappointed look. And it's all because of me. My chest starts to feel tight as I'm about to recall Haruka's expression. She must be feeling sad that I refuse to tell her anything. I already leave her behind before she can even apologize to me.

The next day, Haruka is already waiting for me as I'm about to leave the class. "Risa, do you have a minute? I know that you're in a hurry. I promise that it won't be long." I nod at her and follow her outside of the school building. Once we're outside, Haruka then turns and starts talking to me. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I don't mean to grab you by force. Does it still hurt?" She says to me. I can sense that she feels guilty for what she did to me yesterday.

"It's alright," I say to her, "It hurts a bit. But there's nothing serious about it." Haruka seems concerned despite what I say. "Risa, what happened to your wrist? Did you get injured or something?" I turn away when she begins to ask me about it. "I fell. I was careless. I didn't realize that the floor was slippery at that time," I say to her. Before I can do anything, Haruka is quick enough to grab my arm and push aside my sleeve.

She looks surprised when she sees that I have a few dark bruises on my arm. "Risa, tell me. What are these? They don't look like the sort of bruises that you'll get from falling. It looks more like someone hits you in the arm." Haruka then stares straight into my eyes, making it hard for me to avoid her eye contact. "Who did this to you? Do any of your classmates bully you? Just tell me! I'm going to beat the crap out of them!" She yells at me.

I pull my arm away from her and start to step back from her. "It's none of your business!" I yell at her. Haruka looks bewildered when she sees my reaction. Despite my defensive behavior, she still looks calm. "Risa, I care about you because you're my best friend. I don't mean to butt in. But I just can't stand to see you in pain. And yet, I'm unable to do anything. I just want to help you in any way I can." I know that she's worried about me. But I just can't tell her.

Haruka only sighs when she realizes that I still refuse to tell her. "It's okay if you don't want to tell me. But I want you to know that I will always be by your side no matter what. If you feel like talking, then I'm all ears to you." She then leaves after that. Despite my bad behavior, she still treats me the same just like the last time. I feel guilty for what I did to her. Now I have no idea what to do.

Tears start to fall from my eyes when I see Haruka is leaving me without ever turning back. I wish that I can call her name. But I'm just too petrified to do so.

Without realizing, Izumi happens to walk by. He seems surprised when he sees that I'm crying. I only look at him without saying anything. I'm not expecting him to sympathize with me when he sees me crying. I expect that he will walk away, pretending that he doesn't see me.

Suddenly, he walks towards me and starts to hug me. I find it hard to believe that he will do something like this to me. He then starts to caress my hair, trying to calm me down. Despite his unexpected behavior, I feel much better. To be honest, the only man who has ever hugged me is dad. So, it feels different when there's someone else who is hugging me. I can only hope that dad won't be angry at Izumi because of what he did to me.

After that, he begins to wipe my tears with his hand. That's another thing that I don't expect him to do. "I have no idea why you're crying," he says to me, "But I hope that you feel better after that. Sorry that I can't stay here for long. I need to go now. Takumi is going to kill me for being late to the practice again." He then leaves me in a hurry. He must be close to Senior Takumi that he only calls him by his first name without any prefix.

I only look at him as he's heading towards the gym. I have no idea what is he thinking when he hugs me. But I admit that I do feel better because of what he did. In fact, it also puts a smile on my face. Thanks, Izumi. I don't know what I will do if it's not because of him. I then head towards the other building where the art room is located.

Senior Miki is already inside when I arrive. She's the club president and also sis's best friend. She has been sis's classmates since the first year. Not only she's pretty, but she always gets the No.1 spot in the exam among the third year. So, it's understandable why many people idolize her. After all, she has both beauty and brain. Senior Takumi always comes second after her. But she seems to have a negative impression of him, though.

For me, I don't just idolize her because of that. What makes me in awe of her is because of her arts. Besides being excellent in academic, she also excels in arts as well. Her artworks have received many accolades from many reputable organizations. I also heard that they're considering to offer her a scholarship to

study in Italy after she graduates. Well, it's not final yet. But I'm not surprised if she manages to get one. She's an amazing and talented artist. Just like everyone else, I'm also inspired to be like her.

I thought that I'm already late. But it seems like some of us have not arrived yet. Maybe they have a class duty. So, they'll be late to come here. Senior Miki will only be strict to the members who come late for no reason. But she's flexible enough to allow some members to come late if they have a class duty.

"Risa, you seem happy today. Is there something good happening to you?" She asks me as I'm about to head to my seat. Oh no, is it that obvious on my face? I admit that I can't stop thinking about what Izumi did to me just now. Sure, his gesture isn't anything beyond my wilderness. But then again, it's still something that I don't expect. Least of all, it comes from someone like him who never seems to care about other people in his surroundings.

"Oh, it's nothing," I reply, "I'm just being happy for no reason." I don't think I can tell her about what was happening between Izumi and me. Besides, some of us in this art club are also a fan of his. I'm toast if they've found out how Izumi treated me. Senior Miki doesn't seem to ask me anymore about it. I guess that saying I'm being happy for no reason is convincing enough for her.

I stop my track when Senior Miki starts to talk to me. "Risa, do you have a minute? There's something I'd like to ask you." My heart is suddenly beating fast when Senior Miki wants to talk to me in person. Does she realize that I've been hiding something from her? I'm clenching my bag, trying to come up with a reason not to engage any talk with her. But I don't think it's a good idea to avoid her. She'll be suspicious if I do that to her.

"Sure, let me put my stuff first," I reply. Senior Miki smiles after hearing my answer. "Okay, I'll wait for you outside." She then leaves me while I go ahead and put my stuff at the back of the art room. I begin to take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. I shouldn't panic because she wants to talk to me personally. Maybe she wants to talk to me about something else. I shouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusion.

Senior Miki then starts to talk to me once I'm already outside of the art room. "Risa, I want you to be honest with me," she says, "I noticed that there were many bruises on Chiyu's body. What happened to her? Did she get involve in a fight or something? The bruises look unusual to me. It looks something like she got herself beaten up." I feel relieved that she doesn't notice anything odd about me. But it still doesn't help since she's suspecting sis.

"Did she tell you anything about it?" I ask her. I know it sounds silly when I ask Senior Miki about sis's answer. I just want to be sure that there's no disparity in our answer. "Well, she said that she fell from the stairs. That explained how she got those bruises. Is it true?" To be honest, I have no idea if people who fall from the stairs will get such bruises. So, I understand why Senior Miki seems concerned about it.

I nod my head, playing along with sis's ploy. I can only hope that Senior Miki will take the bait. I don't feel like talking to her anymore. There is a possibility that I will blow my own cover the more I talk to her. Senior Miki seems relieved when she sees my reaction, though. "I'm glad that it's only a fall. I'm worried that she's involved in a gang or something. That's not good since she's a manager of the basketball team. It will jeopardize the team if it's true."

We then head inside and begin the club activity when most of us are already here. I head back to my seat and continue with my drawing. As I'm about to start painting my drawing, my palm suddenly feels painful. It feels like somebody is stabbing my palm with a knife. With such a sharp pain, I end up dropping the brush while holding my wrist. I don't know why I experience an intense pain throughout my arm. Maybe it must have something to do with the recent pain I had.

Misato, a first-year club member who sits next to me, starts to become panic when she sees my condition. "Risa, are you alright?" She asks me. Senior Miki who sits not far from where I am also come to take a look at my condition. "Risa, what's going on? Are you alright?" Senior Miki asks me. The rest of the members stop doing what they're doing and gather around me. They seem worried when they see my condition.

“I’m sorry to make you guys worried,” I reply, “But don’t worry. I’m alright. I guess that the pain is affecting me as well.” Senior Miki seems confused when I tell her that. “What’s going on?” She asks me. I sigh before I answer her. “Last night, I also fell from the stairs while trying to save my sister from falling. She was sleepwalking. Both of us were safe. I felt a sharp pain in my arm. I thought that it would be gone by now. But it looks like I was wrong.”

Everyone seems to be in disbelief when they hear my story. But then again, I’m glad that they don’t feel suspicious about it. To be honest, I don’t feel like lying to everyone in the room. But I have to do it. I don’t have any choice. I can only hope that they don’t keep on asking me. I’m going to lie a lot more if they do that.

“Do you want me to bring you to the infirmary?” Misato asks me. I just shake my head. That’s another place I shouldn’t be. My cover will be blown in an instant. The rest of us continue with our work until the club activity is over. It feels much longer than usual considering that I have to bear with the sharp pain on my arm. But then again, I have to pretend that it’s not a big deal.

I leave the art room as fast as I can after the club activity is over. I don’t want other people to stop me and asking me more about my condition. I don’t want to lie to them anymore. Sis is already waiting for me as I’m about to reach the school entrance. It looks like the basketball practice ends much earlier today.

Once we’re far from the school area, I begin to tell sis about what happened to me just now. She doesn’t say anything back after I tell her everything. “I guess that everyone who is close to us has already noticed by now that we’re hiding something from them. I have no idea how long we can keep this secret away from everyone else,” I say to her.

Sis nods at me. “You’re right,” she says, “I notice the same thing too. Takumi already noticed that I was trying to hide something from them. I know that we can’t keep this secret forever. But for the sake of our safety, we should never tell them the truth no matter how much they pester us to open up. I know that it’s not easy, but we should do what we can to keep our secret.”

Sis seems insistent not to let anyone knows about what we're going through. To be honest, I know that keeping the secret away from everyone else is not the best course of action for both of us. But it's the only choice we have if it can stop Ms. Riko from abusing us. Judging from our situation, we feel that there's nothing much we can do other than to accept it as our destiny. We're always hoping that somebody can save us from the misery. But that's just our wishful thinking.

4.

Going to the art room after school has become a part of my daily routine regardless of my condition and my mood. Well, art is the only way I can use to express myself and forget about the misery I have back at home. It's the best way to keep me sane. And it's also the reason why I'm able to survive despite the prolonged abuse. Somehow, both sis and I are getting used to the abuse, though getting used to it sounds like we enjoy the abuse. Of course, we don't.

Every day, we're always hoping that the abuse will stop. We don't know how long we can last. We may already be reaching our limit before we realize it. The pain that I had back then is almost gone. But I experience the pain elsewhere instead. At least the pain that I have now won't hinder me from holding the brush. It's still painful, but I have to bear with it. I don't want any of the club members, especially Senior Miki, suspect that something must have happened to me.

I still can't forget what Izumi did to me back then. Well, how can I forget something so prominent? I've never experienced something like that in my entire life. And it's something that I don't expect from someone like him. I can't help but feel a bit embarrassed whenever I see him. I'm not sure what he thinks about me.

I'd like to think that he likes me. But I never do anything that will make his heart skips a beat.

Izumi seems indifferent when he sees me, though. He doesn't look flustered at all whenever we make an eye contact. Did he forget about what he did to me back then? Maybe his action didn't mean anything at all to him. It was only a gesture to calm me down and to make myself feel better. It frustrates me a bit when I see him behaving like he always does. I must be delusional to have someone like him to like me.

"Morning, Izumi," I greet him as he enters the class and takes his seat. He looks sleepy, as always. "Morning," he replies. He doesn't say anything to me after that. I wish that I can turn to him and thank him for what he did. But I'm just too embarrassed to say it to him. I don't think that I have the courage to thank him, especially not in such condition I'm experiencing right now.

Even after a few days later, I still can't seem to forget what he did to me. And it doesn't help that I need to walk past by that area again whenever I have to go to the art room. I never see Izumi in this area anymore. What am I expecting, anyway? He's not going to use this path again to head to the gym. The gym itself is in the opposite direction. So, I don't think that we'll ever cross the path again.

No one is inside the art room when I arrive. I thought that I'm already late, considering that I have to walk slowly. I can't walk as fast as I used to be because of the bruises I have. I can feel the sharp pain whenever I move. It feels like someone is stabbing me in my leg. And it doesn't help that I can feel the pain even when I'm moving an inch. Despite the pain, I still have to pretend that I'm doing alright.

As I enter the art room, I realize that Ms. Miyu Takahama is already inside. She's currently observing one of the artworks created by the other club members. She insists the club members to call her Ms. Miyu instead of her surname. She feels that it's much friendlier that way. As a club advisor, it's her responsibility to come here and observe the club activities once in a while. Unlike any other club advisors I know, Ms. Miyu's academic background has nothing to do with arts at all. She's teaching biology in class. But she also loves arts.

I can tell how much she loves arts by the way she explains any artworks that she loves. She can go in-depth when it comes to breaking down the components of a great artwork. And the way she explains it isn't that different with how she explains things in her biology class. As much as I love arts, I have a problem with grasping her explanations. They're way too advanced for someone like me. Sure, her comments make my head spins. But I'd rather listen to her explanation than deriving a mathematical formula. I can do math just fine, but I prefer arts over math.

She even has a blog talking about anything and everything to do with arts. Her blog isn't only for the sake of expressing and sharing her opinions to the general masses. She also has an online course where she teaches people about the basic drawing. Since it's a paid online course, she's giving us free access to it. She wants us to use the online course to improve our drawings.

She turns around when she realizes that I'm already here. "Oh, you're early today. Do you always come here early for the club activity?" She asks me. I nod my head without saying anything. She then starts to walk around the art room while taking a glimpse of our artwork. To be honest, I feel uncomfortable when she's around. Maybe it's because I'm not ready to receive any feedback for my artwork yet.

"Hey, what's your name? I remember the senior members of this club. But I've yet to recognize the new members of our club," she says to me. For some reason, I start to feel uneasy when she asks me about my name. Despite the uncomfortable feeling, I just tell her my name without much thought. "Risa Akagi." That seems to be the shortest response I ever give to someone else.

Ms. Miyu pauses for a moment before she starts to talk to me again. "You must be the one that Hayashima told me before. She was saying that the new members have a lot of potentials, especially you. Since she has a high expectation on you, can you show me your artwork? I'd like to see your artwork for myself," she says to me. She only looks at me, waiting for me to give any response to her question.

I bite my lower lip when Ms. Miyu wants to see my artwork. I'm not ready to let her see and give feedback on my artwork. I'm worried that my artwork isn't up to her standard. "Sure," I reply. I then bring her to my seat, so then I can show her my artwork despite feeling reluctant. "I haven't finished my artwork yet. I plan to finish the whole thing today." Ms. Miyu only chuckles when she hears my response. "It's alright," she replies, "That should be enough for me."

Ms. Miyu stands still while placing her hand on her chin when she looks at my unfinished artwork. She remains silent as she keeps on looking at it. Judging from her expression, it looks to me that my artwork may not meet her standard. That's what I get for having a club advisor who is also an art critic and a professional blogger. My heart is beating so fast as I'm waiting for her feedback on my artwork.

She then starts to speak to me while she's still staring at my artwork. "Hey, Akagi," she says, "Your artwork is giving me this dark feeling which is buried deep within you. It feels like you're experiencing an emotional turmoil when you're creating this artwork. Is this what you're experiencing right now? After all, the artwork can reflect the mental and emotional state of the creator itself. You don't need to express it in a verbal way. Your artwork says everything."

I become pale when Ms. Miyu finds out what kind of emotion I'm experiencing right now. It feels like she already peeks into my mind. And she's trying to dig deeper as much as she can about the darkest secret that I've meant to hide. "No, that's not true," I reply, "I'm just not in the mood for something cheerful for my artwork. There's nothing wrong with me." I look away from Ms. Miyu, refusing to make an eye contact with her.

Ms. Miyu sighs when she sees how defensive I become because of her feedback. "I'm sorry, Akagi. I don't mean to rub you the wrong way. I was only curious about your feeling when you created this artwork. It's true that some artworks tend to reflect the person's mental and emotional state. But it can also reflect your mood as well. Sure, you can create an artwork that gives you this unsettling feeling. But it may not necessary reflect your current emotional state.

You may be an optimistic person. It's just that you're more drawn to something darker."

Senior Miki comes in when Ms. Miyu and I are in the middle of our conversation. "Ms. Miyu, I've been looking everywhere for you. I've never thought that I will find you here," Senior Miki says to her. Ms. Miyu smiles when she sees her. "I'm sorry, Hayashima. I forgot to tell you that I'm going to have a look at the art room. I can't wait to see the artworks by the new members myself. I can be so impatient sometimes," she says to her.

Senior Miki chuckles at her. She seems to know a lot about Ms. Miyu's quirk. Ms. Miyu then continues to talk to me. "I admit that your artwork gives me goosebumps," Ms. Miyu says, "But I won't deny that you do have an artistic talent. I was thinking about wanting you to take part in the winter art competition with Hayashima. So, I'd like you to meet me in the teacher's lounge after the club activity is over to discuss about it. Will it be alright for you to meet me after that?"

I nod my head, agreeing to see her after the club activity is over. Ms. Miyu leaves the art room after our brief exchange. I feel surprised that Ms. Miyu wants me to take part in the winter art competition with Senior Miki. I'm always confident in my artwork. But I never thought that I'm good enough to take part in such competition. "Isn't that great, Risa? Ms. Miyu is acknowledging your talent. Even I didn't have such opportunity when I was in the first year," Senior Miki says to me.

I then take a seat to finish my artwork after my brief conversation with Senior Miki. I feel relieved that Ms. Miyu only analyzes my artwork. She only wants to see if I'm good enough for taking part in the art competition. I can only pray hard that she doesn't think too deeply about my mental and emotional state through my artwork. A smile carves into my face when I can't stop thinking about Ms. Miyu's compliment. It feels great when someone compliments me. It's been a long time I haven't received any praise from someone else.

Misato seems to notice that I look a lot happier than usual as she takes her seat next to me. So, I begin to tell her about my conversation with Ms. Miyu awhile back. "Wow, that's great to know. I also admit that you're a lot more

talented than I am. I still have many things to do to improve my artwork. I hope that I can take part in the art competition someday,” Misato says to me.

I smile at her when she compliments me. “Thanks for the compliment, Misato. Your artwork is great too. You need to be confident with your artwork. I guess that Ms. Miyu doesn’t look at your techniques and styles alone. She also takes a look at how you portray yourself with your artwork. I’m not an art expert, but I think that’s what Ms. Miyu is looking for when she takes a look at the artworks here,” I say to her.

Misato smiles when she hears my explanation. “You’re right about that. I need to be more confident with my artwork.” We then remain silent after the brief conversation. Misato and I are busy with finishing our artwork. I can still feel the sharp pain in my arm as I begin to paint my artwork. But it doesn’t hinder me from continuing with my artwork. It seems like the compliment that I receive is the reason why the pain becomes bearable to me.

I head straight to the teacher’s lounge after the club activity is over. I send a message to sis through the chat app, telling her that I’ll be a little late. It doesn’t take that long for me to receive a reply from her. *Don’t worry about it. Today’s practice seems a lot longer than usual. I was about to inform you that I’ll be running late. If your meeting with Ms. Miyu ends earlier than me, please wait for me at the usual place. I’ll wait for you if the practice ends earlier. See you later.*

On my way there, I realize that only a few people are still around. They must be the people from the student council. I guess that they’re must be busy with the preparation for the upcoming school festival. Even with having them around, the atmosphere feels rather quiet to me. What can I expect then? Most people already left the school around this time.

Ms. Miyu is the only teacher left as I enter the teacher’s lounge. She seems happy when she sees me. “Please have a seat,” she says to me. “Is it going to be a long discussion? I already inform my sister that I’ll be late. But if it’s going to be a long one, then I have to tell her to go home without me,” I say to Ms. Miyu. I know that it seems rude for me to tell her to make it quick. But I need to hurry. We’re going to the shrine after this.

Ms. Miyu chuckles when I tell her to make it quick, though. “Well, it may take a bit of your time. But I promise you that it won’t be long. You don’t have to tell your stepsister to go home without you,” she says to me. I find it hard to believe that Ms. Miyu seems to know that Chiyu is my stepsister.

Ms. Miyu chuckles again when she sees my surprised look. “Don’t worry. It’s not that I’m spying on you. Hayashima was the one who told me about you. She even told me that you go to the shrine every day to pray for your father’s safety. It’s great to know that both of you care about your father.”

She then continues to ask me more about dad. “How long your dad has been away for the covert mission?” I only look down when she asks me that question. “Around eight months,” I reply. Ms. Miyu smiles when she hears my answer. “Your dad sure is lucky. He has two good daughters who are praying for his safety all the time. Let’s just hope that he’s alright and will return home safely.”

I smile when I hear Ms. Miyu’s words. It may only be a simple word of encouragement, but it’s more than enough to put a smile on my face. Ms. Miyu then begins with her briefing about the winter art competition. “As you can see, we don’t have a lot of art competition in Japan. But there are many international art competitions that we can take part. So, we will submit our entry to these art competitions instead.”

I feel nervous when Ms. Miyu wants me to submit my artwork for the international art competition. I always feel confident in my ability. But I still have doubt whether I’m able to meet the judges’ expectation or not. Ms. Miyu seems to realize that I have doubt on my own talent. “Akagi, do you think that you’re not good enough to compete on the international level?” I nod my head when Ms. Miyu asks me that. I may not doubt myself so much if it’s on the local level. But I’m competing on the international level!

“Well, that’s expected. Here’s something you should know,” Ms. Miyu replies, “It’s true that judges love to see stunning artworks. And I’m pretty sure that Hayashima will agree with me on this part too. But sometimes, they tend to favor an unexpected work. What they care the most is your creative approach to your

artwork. Your artwork doesn't have to be exceptionally artistic to win their heart. At the end of the day, it's your creative approach that matters the most to them."

What Ms. Miyu told me seems to be an eye-opening to me. I always thought that being good enough isn't enough on the international scale. But it doesn't seem to be the case most of the time. Now I feel that the confidence begins to seep through me. I have no idea if my artwork will be shortlisted or not. But at least I know that I can do it. And I'm talented enough to compete with other aspiring artists from around the world.

After she's done with her explanation, Ms. Miyu then starts to take a piece of paper and a pencil and hands it to me. "Why don't you show me your art style? I can give you a point or two to improve your artwork." I feel skeptical when Ms. Miyu wants me to begin drawing right off the bat. It's not that I'm worried about receiving constructive criticism from her. I'm just worried that it may take a long time for me to complete the artwork.

"Don't worry, Akagi. It won't take that long. I understand that you don't want your stepsister to wait for you. I only want you to do a simple sketch for me. After that, I'll give you a point or two to improve your sketching techniques. That should be okay with you, right?" Ms. Miyu reassures me.

I feel relieved when I find out that Ms. Miyu only wants me to come up with a simple sketch. I guess that coming up with a simple sketch shouldn't take that long. "So, what do you want me to draw?" I ask her as I'm taking a piece of paper and a pencil from her table. "I want you to draw three people. And they must be complete from head-to-toe. That's the only thing I want you to do for now," she says to me.

Without wasting time, I begin to draw what she wants me to do. To be honest, I don't know what I should draw. So, I end up drawing me, sis and Ms. Riko. Sis and I are cheering for something, while Ms. Riko is standing next to us, smiling. I have no idea why this image pops into my head. But I just draw it since the rule is to draw three people. Ms. Miyu remains silent while waiting for me to finish with my sketch.

I hand over my sketch to Ms. Miyu after I'm done. She seems amused when she sees my drawings, though. "That's interesting," she says, "Who are these people? Are they someone you know?" I nod my head, smiling. "Yup, the one who is cheering is my sister and me. Even though we're not related by blood, I treat and respect her like my elder sister. The other person who is smiling at us is my stepmother. I only call her Ms. Riko since I'm not used to calling her mom."

Ms. Miyu smiles as she looks at the sketch. "What kind of person is your stepmother? Is she nice to you?" She asks me. I pause for a while, trying to figure out how to describe Ms. Riko. I'm not sure which version of Ms. Riko I should tell her. The current Ms. Riko is the polar opposite of the person I used to know in the past. I'm so torn right now since I don't know how to describe Ms. Riko.

"Well, she reminds me of my late mother. She may only be my stepmother, but she's also nice to me. She treats me equally. She doesn't play favorites among us," I reply. For some reason, I can't seem to bring myself to tell the truth about Ms. Riko. I don't want other people to see her in the bad light. It doesn't matter how bad she's treating me now. She's still my stepmother. I can only hope for now that she'll become the Ms. Riko that I'm familiar with.

Ms. Miyu sighs after she takes a look at my sketch. "Akagi, do you have any problem with drawing objects with a different scale? I notice that your mom's hand is out of proportion compared to your hand and your sister's hand. And the line on your mom's hands and legs are thick too," she says to me as she points out the problem on my sketch. I find it hard to believe that I fail to realize the mistakes before I hand over the drawing to her. Maybe it's because I want to finish the sketch as soon as possible that I fail to notice the mistake.

"It's alright, Akagi," she says to me, "It was just a small mistake, though. You probably miss this part since you need to finish the sketch in a hurry. Other than the hand part, the rest looks great to me. You need to practice more to hone your art style. Keep up the good work." I feel relieved that Ms. Miyu isn't so picky despite my obvious mistake. I quickly leave the teacher's lounge after that. I bet that sis must have been waiting for me for too long.

Sis only smiles when she sees me coming and tries to catch my breath. “Wow, you look like you’ve been running a mile. Are you alright?” She says to me. I’m still huffing when she asks me that. “I run as fast as I can. I don’t want you to wait for me for too long,” I reply. Sis chuckles when she hears my answer. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve just arrived.”

We then head home together. I begin to tell sis about the news on our way home. Sis smiles when she sees how excited I am to take part in the international art competition. She even gives me her full support and encourages me to do my best. I feel happy when I know how much sis is supporting me. Her encouragement means a lot to me as much as Ms. Miyu’s compliment about my artwork.

The next day, I receive a message from Senior Miki through my chat app. She wants me to see her at the rooftop before I head to the art room. Without wasting time, I quickly pack my stuff and head to the rooftop as soon as I can. Senior Miki is already there once I reach the rooftop. She smiles when she sees me.

“How’s your meeting with Ms. Miyu yesterday? What did she ask you to do?” Senior Miki asks me. I begin to tell her everything about the meeting, including the mistakes I did. Senior Miki doesn’t say anything after I tell her everything. “Risa, do you think that such mistakes happen because of not paying attention to the finer details?” She asks me.

Her expression changes when she asks me about it. For some reason, I start to become uneasy when she asks me that question. “I’m not sure,” I reply, “Maybe it’s true that I failed to spot the mistake because I didn’t pay enough attention to the details. That can be true if I find it to be something minor. But for some people, it can be a huge deal to them. When I think about it again, I don’t see any difference with the scales on my mom’s hand and our hand. But that’s just me.”

Senior Miki only looks at me. Am I giving her the wrong answer? “Well, you’re right about that,” she says, “Some people just don’t have that ability embedded into their DNA. But in your case, it’s not even a coincidence. You can argue that you made a mistake because of the time constraint. But the result is still the same even if you don’t have any time constraint at all. Do you know why?”

Senior Miki looks at my direction when she asks me. Is she expecting an answer from me? To be honest, I don't get what she's trying to say. But my instinct is telling me that I shouldn't attempt to engage in the conversation with her any longer. I should leave now. She then starts to speak to me again when I don't respond to her question. "It's because the mistake you make is reflecting your current mental and emotional state. You already know that your drawing can also be a window to your current mental and emotional well-being."

My heart is beating much faster than before. What Senior Miki is saying right now is the same as what Ms. Miyu said to me before. What's going on here? Why do I feel that both Senior Miki and Ms. Miyu already know what happened to both of us? It feels like she already bares my soul, forcing me to tell her the secret that I've been trying so hard to keep.

Senior Miki looks down while clenching her fist. She looks more like she's feeling guilty for what she did, though. "Risa, I'm sorry for what I did. I just want to know what happened to both of you. The drawing that you did yesterday proved that your stepmother was abusing you all this time. Even before Ms. Miyu asked you to do the sketch for her, she already suspected that you might be abused back at home."

I feel betrayed when I find out about it. It seems that they're using my drawing as an excuse to debunk the secret that I've been trying so hard to keep. Now I begin to doubt about their compliment. I'm not even surprised at all if the compliments are all fakes. I feel like a fool because they tricked me. I turn away, feeling disgusted by just looking at Senior Miki alone.

Senior Miki looks like she's about to cry as she tries to stop me from leaving. "Risa, I'm sorry. I know that it's not the right thing for me to ask Ms. Miyu for help. But she's the right person to help you. She's a psychologist by profession. She's using Draw a Person Test just to get an idea of what you're going through. We know that you're hoping for someone to help you. Otherwise, you wouldn't draw you and Chiyu in a cheering pose."

At this point, I no longer want to listen to Senior Miki's explanation. Despite that, she still continues with telling me more about the drawing I did. "The thick

line on your mom's hands and legs are also indicating something too. Same goes with the body parts that are out of proportion. It means that your mother was abusing both of you."

Feeling frustrated, I end up yelling at her. "Stop it! I don't want to hear from you anymore. That's enough! You should feel satisfied already that you tricked me!" Senior Miki looks surprised with my reaction. "Risa, please listen to me. We don't mean to deceive you. We just want to help you. We know that you will never open up to us no matter how much we force you. And asking you to take the test is the only way for you to open up to us," she says to me.

Before Senior Miki can finish what she says, I begin to run off from the rooftop as fast as I can. I almost hit everyone along the way as I'm running back to the class. Izumi is still in the class when I return to my seat. He looks surprised when he sees me crying again. He doesn't stop me at all when I take my bag and leave the class.

It's hard to believe that people who are close to me are tricking me. Now I feel that I can't trust people around me anymore other than sis. She's the only one that I can count on in this situation. I have no one to turn to if she decides to betray me, just like everyone else.

5.

I look frantic as I'm bolting through the school entrance. I almost hit a few people along the way, but I still stop for a few moments to apologize to them. My heart is aching as I run as fast as I can. I find it hard to believe that Ms. Miyu and Senior Miki are tricking me to reveal the truth. I also begin to doubt their compliment as well. Do they mean what they say? Or is it only a sweet, soothing word just to lure me to take the psychology test?

There are many thoughts running through my head at this moment. But one thing that is clear to me is they tricked me. I can still feel the sharp pain in my legs, back, and arms as I'm running towards the school entrance. But I don't care about the pain anymore. These bruises are nothing compared to the emotional pain I'm experiencing right now. My heart hurts when I realize that the people that I respect all my life are betraying me.

I still run as fast as I can even after I leave the school ground. I don't even bother to turn around just to see if anyone has been following me. I thought that Senior Miki would chase me all the way here just to clarify her real intention to me. What's there to explain? I don't need to hear any of their explanations

anymore. I already had enough. Nothing will change no matter how much they explain to me.

The street around the school area is empty as I'm making a mad dash. It looks more like I'm practicing for a marathon since I keep on running without taking a breather. I just run aimlessly without having any destination in mind. I have no idea where to go. Without realizing, I'm now at the riverbank, which is around Hayakawa River. The riverbank is usually bustling with people, especially during the weekend. But right now, I'm the only person in this area.

People always come here for flower viewing during the cherry blossom blooming season. The trees here are lining up alongside the riverbank. So it feels like we're walking through a tunnel formed by the cherry blossom trees. The cherry blossom here is also a different breed than the one we can find in other places. The one that we have in Hayakawa River is a white, snow-like cherry blossom.

We can also see the illuminations in the riverbank during the nighttime too. It's usually at the peak of the blooming season. I don't think we can see a unique nighttime cherry blossom viewing experience elsewhere. We can only experience this scenery in Hayakawa River only. The tunnel-like cherry blossoms trees only exist during the blooming season, though. Now, it looks more like a row of ordinary trees forming a tunnel in the riverbank area.

I can hear the sound of the river stream as I come near the riverbank. For me, it's one of the most calming scenery I've ever seen. I guess that I don't need anything fancy to calm myself down. The only thing I need to do is to look at the river flowing in a calm manner to get this Zen-like mind state. It's fascinating to see the river too. It looks like a mini waterfall, with the water falls in a staircase-like flow.

Hayakawa River is also known as a fishing spot as well. But for today, I don't see anyone here who is coming for fishing. Well, I prefer it that way. I don't want people to look at me like I've skipped the club activity. I then take a wooden staircase to head down so then I can sit closer to the river. Maybe I can also dip my toe into the river too if I feel like it. But for now, I'm just going to sit down and

observe the scenery around me. I'm too lazy to take off my shoes just to dip my toe into the river.

I sigh as I lay on the grass without using anything as a cover. The grass itself is dry so it won't stain my school uniform. As I'm observing the river flowing in, I can't help but keep on thinking about the things that Senior Miki told me. I admit that I'm angry that both of them were tricking me to reveal what I'm going through using my drawing. But at the same time, I feel a bit relieved because I no longer have to burden myself with keeping the secret anymore.

Since they already know our secret, maybe we should just admit and tell them the truth. Sure, we have no idea what Ms. Riko plans to do to us if she finds out about it. But maybe the outcome won't be as bad as we thought. I have no problem with admitting the truth. But sis is against it. I don't think she's scared of Ms. Riko's threat. It's more like she's doing it just to protect Ms. Riko's dignity. No matter how much Ms. Riko has changed, she's still her mother.

Since I don't have anything to do, I then take a quick look at the message that I left for dad in the chat app. Maybe dad already sees the message. And he doesn't have the time to reply back to me yet. My hope shatters into pieces when I look at the message. There's not even a single sign that the message has been delivered. And it's been eight months already! I feel like sending him another message. But I refrain myself from doing it. I don't want to feel disappointed again.

I only stare at the chat app, not knowing what else to do. That's when I realize that I haven't notified sis that I already leave the school. Thank goodness that I remember to tell her. I bet that she'll be angry at me if I don't notify her soon enough. Without wasting time, I start typing the message in the chat app. In the end, I press the delete button to delete the whole message. I feel that it's better for me to talk to her in person.

Quickly, I begin to look for sis's number in my contact list. I will only send her a message if she doesn't pick up the phone. I feel miserable right now because I don't know what to do. Maybe we can find the best solution to our problem if we discuss it right away. I make a quick call to sis, hoping that she will pick up the

phone. I doubt that she will answer the phone during the practice. But it doesn't hurt to give it a try.

Unexpectedly, sis picks up the phone. "Risa, what's up? It's rare for you to call me during the club activity," she says to me when she answers the phone. My tongue freezes, not knowing what to say to her. "Well, there's something I need to discuss with you. And I want you to come to where I am now," I reply. I almost choke on my reply. The only thing I can hope for now is for sis to come here without asking me too much.

"Is it urgent? If it's not, then we should discuss it after the club activity is over. It's difficult for me to leave the practice just like that," she replies. I sigh, knowing that sis may not be able to leave the basketball practice easily. "It's about our dark secret. We need to talk about it. And I don't think we can delay the discussion any longer," I reply.

Sis doesn't say anything back to me. I hope that it's enough to convince her to come here. "Okay, where are you now? I'll head there right away. I'll come up with whatever excuse I have so then the coach will allow me to leave early," she replies. I feel relieved when sis is willing to leave the practice early. "I'll send you my current location through the chat app. But don't worry, it's not that far from school," I reply.

After the phone call, I then start to notify sis about my current location through the chat app. I feel guilty for being selfish again. Maybe I shouldn't even run from Senior Miki in the first place. I realize that running away from her will only prove that what she said was true. Even if I didn't run away from her, I don't think I have the courage to admit it. I already promised to sis that I would never tell anyone about it. I feel guilty if I break my promise with her.

As my mind starts to drift away, I start to recall everything I've experienced all this time. Sis was the one who always came to my defense. As a result, she was also being abused just to protect me. In fact, her abuse was far more severe than mine, considering that Ms. Riko trusted her. She believed that sis would never conspire against her. But she was bewildered when sis stood up for me. The

abuse wasn't meant to threaten her. It was more like a sign of hatred due to sis's betrayal.

It's hard to believe that Ms. Riko would go that far only because sis betrayed her. In her eyes, we're all conspiring against her. And we're her sworn enemies. She's willing to get rid of these people, even if one of them is her own daughter. Even until today, I still don't get her rationale at all. Her accusation towards us doesn't change at all, even a tiny bit. She still abuses us no matter how much we deny it. In the end, we don't care about coming to our defense. She will still abuse us whether we admit the truth or not.

With this prolonged abuse, I begin to wonder how long can we last. Is it true that we have no chance of escaping this abusive cycle? I can only hope that this abuse doesn't lead to death. It terrifies me whenever I think of it. I don't want dad to cry when he finds out that he can no longer see us again. It's already bad enough that he already lost mom. And I don't want to be the next person that he will lose.

Sis arrives at the riverbank a few minutes later. She looks like she's been running a mile. She must be running as fast she can when she finds out that I'm in trouble. "Risa, what's going on? It sounds like you're in such a dire situation." I'm amazed that sis can throw me a lot of questions despite trying to catch her breath. She must be brimming with stamina. As expected from the manager of a basketball team. Sis then sits right next to me after that.

Before I can say anything, sis is quick to guess what I'm about to say. "Don't tell me that Miki already knew about our secret?" I only nod my head, feeling guilty of my mistake. "Remember the sketch that I did yesterday? It turned out to be that the sketch they wanted me to do was a psychology test. Ms. Miyu was able to know about the abuse by analyzing my sketch. And I only knew that she was a psychologist by profession when Senior Miki told me," I say to her.

Sis sighs while she ruffles her head. "I should have expected this much. She knew that we would be so tight lip about it. So, she had to use another method to make us tell them the truth. It's amazing that Ms. Miyu was able to come up with an effective way for us to spill it in an unconscious way." I look at sis, wondering

what we should do next. “What are we supposed to do now? Should we admit it to them?” I ask her.

Sis gets up and looks at me. She seems angry when I ask her about it. “Risa, you should already know that admitting it is not an option for us. You should already know by now how violent mom will become when she finds out about what we did behind her back. Besides, I don’t want to drag other people into this mess. It’s way too dangerous for them.”

I become even more clueless when none of the options is good enough for us. If we admit the truth, we don’t just put ourselves at risk, but also other people too. If we don’t say anything, we may lose our life before we know it. “So, do you have any suggestion on what we should do?” I ask her. She pauses for a while before she gives me the answer. “I already came up with the countermeasure long time ago. But it may sound crazy to you, though,” she says to me.

I admit that sis loves to come up with a crazy idea. Just take a look at what she suggested to me when we found out about dad’s and Ms. Riko’s relationship. I nod my head without much thought, willing to hear about sis’s idea. At this point, the only thing I care is to find our way out of this misery. I’m willing to do anything, as long as it doesn’t involve criminal activities or murdering pets in the process.

“How about we run away from here? And I’m not just talking about staying in Miki’s house or what not. Instead, we should go as far as we can from this place. It can be anywhere. That should save us from mom. No matter how smart she is, she’ll never find us, especially not in that kind of condition she’s in,” she says to me.

Well, I admit that it’s indeed a crazy idea. But when I think about it again, it’s not a bad idea either. Sis then continues talking to me. “The only problem is I don’t know where we should go. While it’s true that we’re running away from home, we still need a proper place to hide. And we need to put the school into consideration as well. They will cause a ruckus if they can’t seem to get a hold of us. They may get the police to get involved too in the process.”

Both of us remain silent after that, thinking about the place that we should go. “What about we head to grandma’s house in Sendai? If the school is calling us, we can tell them that we have to visit her because she’s not feeling well. But we need to ask grandma to play along with us. We also need to tell her what Ms. Riko did to us while dad was away. At least the school won’t question our reason since it sounds legit to them,” I say to her.

Sis nods at me, agreeing with me. “Well, that sounds good to me. If that’s the case, we should head to Sendai then. I don’t know how much it will cost for a train ride to Sendai for both of us. But that won’t be a problem. My saving is more than enough to cover the expenses for our trip to Sendai.” I feel reluctant when sis says that she’ll cover the expenses for me. So, I quickly decline her offer. “That’s alright, sis. I can cover the expenses on my own. You don’t have to do that for me.”

Both of us head home fast so then we can start packing our stuff. We make sure that we don’t make a loud noise. We don’t want Ms. Riko to find out that we’re planning to run away from here. The last thing we want is we ruin our plan for running away from home. Sis heads downstairs to prepare dinner after she’s done with packing her stuff. I head to the kitchen later after that. We need to pretend like we always do so then Ms. Riko won’t suspect us.

“What are we going to cook today?” I ask her when I enter the kitchen. Sis then points out to the ingredients that she put on the table. “We’re going to make curry today. I already prepare the ingredients I need for the curry. So, I’d like you to make the salad instead.” I begin to slice the tomatoes for the salad. For some reason, I feel so uneasy. It feels like something bad is about to happen to both of us. Despite the uncomfortable feeling, I continue with slicing the tomatoes.

As we’re busy with preparing dinner, we notice that Ms. Riko is stomping up the stairs when she heads downstairs. She looks furious when she sees us. Both sis and I are surprised with Ms. Riko’s reaction. We begin to wonder if we did something wrong to her. “Where do you think you’re going? Are you thinking of leaving this house for real?” She yells at us. Both sis and I stop with what we’re doing. Did she already find out about our plan?

“Well, we won’t be around for the next few days. Sis’s basketball team will be having training in another place tomorrow. And I have a school trip,” I answer. She doesn’t look convinced at all when I tell her about it. “Liar! You’re leaving this house under the Lord of the Dead’s order. He’s going to execute his plan to kill me in this instance! Do you think that I don’t even know your evil plan?” She yells at us.

Looking enraged, Ms. Riko suddenly comes near me and slaps me in the face. Her slap is strong enough to make me lose my balance. I rub my cheek, trying to calm the stinging sensation. She then kicks me in the stomach and my legs a couple of times. Unlike the last time, her strength is a lot stronger than usual. Not only that, her instinct becomes sharper too. It feels like she’s gaining her strength as a result of abusing us. It sounds silly, but that’s how I feel at this moment.

Sis comes to my aid as Ms. Riko is about to land her final blow on me. “Mom, that’s enough! Can’t you see what you did to her? Just leave her alone. She’s too weak to fight you back.” She then helps me by making my back leaning against the kitchen cabinet. I barely move after what Ms. Riko did to me. I bet that I’ll be a goner if sis doesn’t interfere at that time.

Ms. Riko pushes her aside and then kicks her. She feels annoyed that sis interferes with what she’s currently doing. “You don’t seem to learn your lesson, do you? You always come to her rescue whenever I beat her. I’d like to believe that you won’t conspire against me. But your action proves it to me over and over again,” she says to her. “What are you talking about? None of us are conspiring against you. It’s you who feels like someone is going after you,” sis argues.

Ms. Riko slaps her again. “Shut up!” She yells at her, “These voices were never wrong! These lingering spirits were the one who told me everything about you. They told me that you became a messenger for the Lord of the Dead so then it’ll be easy for him to kill me. You want me to suffer just like these lingering spirits whose lives were taken away by the Lord of the Dead. I can’t believe it that you want me to die so badly. All this time, you’re pretending to love me so then you can kill me without me suspecting anything.”

Both sis and I are somewhat confused with Ms. Riko's accusation. We feel hurt when she thinks that what we did to her all this time were simply an act just to kill her. We don't care that she accuses us of becoming the messenger for the Lord of the Dead. But accusing us of pretending to love her and wishing her to die? It stings us a lot.

"Mom, just stop listening to these voices. They're lying to you! Please listen to us. We love you. We will never want you to die," sis cries, pleading her to stop accusing us and asking her to come back to her senses. I have a feeling that Ms. Riko will never listen to us regardless of what we say. At this point, her irrational behavior is beyond irreparable.

Ms. Riko laughs hysterically as if what sis is saying is a joke to her. "You're saying that you love me? Stop fooling around! Explain to me then. Why there was a black butterfly when we were in the amusement park? Why I keep on receiving a phone call? If these are not the signs that the Lord of the Dead is coming after me, then what are those? These lingering spirits told me that they received the same sign before he killed them all."

Her eyes then darted to the knife which is on the table. She chuckles as she takes the knife and examines it. "You leave me no choice," she says, "The only way for me to free myself from the Lord of the Dead is to kill his messengers. And that means both of you. If I let you get away, you will come back to me with a vengeance. And your attack will be much deadlier than before."

Ms. Riko glares at me as she walks toward me while holding the knife in her hand. "If killing you will stop me from being killed by the Lord of the Dead, then I'll be more than happy to do so. Not only I'm able to save myself and the humanity, but I'm also able to avenge for the lingering spirits too. Sure, there's no reward as a result of my action. But I'm fine with that. My life is more important than anything else. I'm willing to do anything to kill the Lord of the Dead, even at the expense of the people that I love."

I find it hard to believe that Ms. Riko is serious about killing both of us. She doesn't care as long as she can stop the so-called the Lord of the Dead's track. At this point, I doubt that I have the strength and speed to escape from her. It's not

that I find it impossible. It's just that I can't even lift a finger, let alone escaping from her unscathed. I keep on telling myself to move my body by force. If I want to stay alive, then I have to move, even if it's just a little bit.

Feeling terrified of the outcome, I begin to close my eyes. I'm too scared to see what Ms. Riko intends to do to me. I'm too powerless to fight her back. As I'm waiting for my own execution, flashbacks begin to play into my head. It feels like I'm watching a movie about my life, recalling every single detail, including the minor one. I guess that's how people will experience when they're on the verge of death.

I cry when I see dad's face appear to me in a split second. I feel sad that I can no longer see him anymore. Even worst, I'm unable to bid farewell to him. All this time, I was always hoping to see dad again and go somewhere with him. It's unfortunate that my wish will never come true. My life ends here, in Ms. Riko's hand.

I find it weird that I don't feel anything when Ms. Riko stabs me. Is there such thing as divine stab where people don't feel anything at all when they got stabbed by someone else? For all I know, I may already reach heaven in a split second. I open my eyes slowly just to see how heaven looks like. Maybe I can look for mom once I regain my consciousness.

As I open my eyes, what I see is not even heaven at all. I'm still in the same house as I live. Instead, I witness Ms. Riko stabbing sis in the process. It happens in a split second, but I can see it happening in slow motion. Ms. Riko doesn't stab me. She stabs sis instead. I have no idea when sis comes right in front of me and takes the blow on my behalf. But she did. And now she falls right in front of me. She did it just to protect me from being stabbed by Ms. Riko.

My eyes widen when I see the blood starts to flow right from her abdomen as she falls. Ms. Riko doesn't look terrified at all when she sees sis lying motionlessly in her own pool of blood. She laughs hysterically instead. "That's what you get for betraying me. I was thinking about giving you another chance. But since you choose this path to defend her, then I'll give you what you want."

She then stares at me. I guess that she won't let me off the hook regardless of the situation. Her intention was to kill me first. She may leave sis off the hook if she complies with her demand. But since she stabs the wrong person, then she will continue with her second attempt to kill me.

"I never thought that she would sacrifice herself to protect you. But I still want you to die. Your tie with the Lord of the Dead is much stronger than her. It was impossible for me to kill the messenger. But I can do that just fine with the help of the lingering spirits," she says to me as she licks the knife.

My body paralyzes when I see what's happening to both of us right now. As Ms. Riko walks toward me slowly, I begin to hear a soft whisper. It seems that sis is still conscious after the stab. "Risa...run." She still wants to protect me even in this condition. "But I can't leave you behind," I say to her. Tears start to fall from my eyes when I see her pleading to me. A faint smile carves on her face. "It's okay...What matters the most to me is you're safe," she says to me.

I feel frustrated when sis is telling me to run without her. I wish that I can carry her with me so then we can run together. But that's just impossible with my current condition. And it will be a lot harder if we want to escape from this situation together. I can choose to die together with sis. But when I think about it again, that will only put sis's effort to waste. Sis wants me to survive. So, I should do what I can for surviving in this condition.

To be honest, I feel reluctant to leave sis behind. But at the same time, everything that sis did will become futile if I don't run. Ms. Riko will eventually stab me. At this point, no one will be here to save me anymore. I begin to move my body a little bit despite the pain that I have. My pain is nothing compared to what sis is experiencing right now.

Using whatever strength I have, I make a quick dash towards Ms. Riko and knock her down. As a result, she falls on her back, with her head gets knocked by the nearby chair. The knife that she used slips from her grip, making it fall far away from her reach. I breathe hard when I see her falling and become unconscious after that. And my body is aching. I must have used a lot of strength just to knock her down.

Without wasting time, I start to run as fast as I can while ignoring the pain I'm experiencing right now. I have to leave before she regains her consciousness. Otherwise, everything that I do will become futile. I don't even feel like turning back just to see sis for one last time. It will only make me feel sad since I have to leave her behind. None of this is according to our plan.

As I'm trying to escape, I end up knocking the vase which happens to be on the small cabinet in the hallway. I'm glad that I don't get any injury because of the vase. Still, I'm far from being safe. Ms. Riko may come and chase after me anytime soon. I can only hope that the broken vase will stop her track and buy me the time to escape, even if it's just a little.

I just head straight to the entrance. I don't have time to go upstairs and bring anything important with me. Heck, I don't even care about wearing shoes when I leave the house. What matters the most to me right now is to leave this house as soon as I can. My life is on the line. I'm glad that I didn't lock the door. We didn't plan to lock the door yet since we were planning to leave the house after dinner. I leave the door wide open as I make my escape from the house.

I run as fast as I can, not knowing where I should be heading. The pain that I have starts to escalate the more I run. Not just the ache that I have all over the body. My feet also hurt too since I'm running barefoot. My vision also starts to become blurry since I'm running out of stamina. My chest hurts too as I begin to run out of breath. But still, I have to keep on running. Ms. Riko may not be far from me. And the last thing I want is for her to capture me.

As my vision starts to black out, I end up knocking someone down. I fail to realize that there's someone else coming from the other side of the direction. I lose my consciousness after I knock down that person. I'm not sure what I see as I'm about to lose my consciousness. But I manage to catch a glimpse of someone who is there at that time. That person looks like Izumi. But I can't say for sure.

It doesn't matter who the person that I knock down before I collapse is. I'm fine with anyone, as long as it's not Ms. Riko.

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