

~VII. The Young Lady and Schooling~

Chisa's record from her previous school was well understood, so expectations were high for her to be just as astonishing in the coming years. At orientation on her first day, the current student council president said he expected to be ousted in no time by 'one of you or another', but Chisa knew who that meant. Not to mention her astonishing study record, her industrious positions in student council and the Archery Club...

This was all difficult when you had a poor habit of occasionally slipping into what Chisa now recognized as somehow being *Osaka-ben*, despite having never even *visited* Osaka. Mio's theory was that Raven's country accent had somehow translated over into what Chisa understood as the relative equivalent, and that made some manner of sense, Chisa supposed, but it was still an obnoxious habit. Not to mention—

“—Inomiko, to the front of class, please,” a teacher might say, intending her to demonstrate something, or perhaps begin a line of presentations. The Chisa of middle school might have done it with a placid smile, but today's Chisa couldn't help but give a little squeak—who could actually manage to stand up in front of a whole crowd of people without being a *little* nervous, right?

“Y, yessir!” Chisa would say, heading up to the front of the class. “Howdy, everyone—!”

She wasn't a *hick*! But then, on the other hand, she couldn't deny that she kind of was. These were genuine socialites—rich kids, powerful kids, and here she was dripping into a voice best suited for comedy, and with all the knowledge of how to milk a cow and raise a sow! Why couldn't she have just gone to a normal school?!

Cracking under pressure, that was a bad habit for a girl like her to have—all of these 'perfect' habits that Chisa Inomiko had, she still had, but her brain wouldn't let her quite get to them through the occasional bout of pure, primal terror that came with being observed by people she didn't know. It took a while to get used to—

Thwack! An arrow landed directly in the center of the target, and some polite clapping came from an audience that mostly consisted of other Archery Club members and their families. Chisa reached up to her forehead to wipe off some sweat and let out a breath.

“Nice shot,” said a black-haired girl who'd been standing behind Chisa, clad in the same uniform. She patted Chisa on the shoulder. “You're going to show me up in front of my own sister, Inomiko. Can you do a little worse? For me?”

Chisa laughed. “Come on, Kujo-*senpai*, you know I can't do that.”

This was Tsubaki Kujo, a second-year that Chisa had quickly befriended in the club. She was a fair bit taller than Chisa, and built like a steel wire—Tsubaki came from one of the least proud families in all of Hibikino, and apparently she'd had to do a fair amount of manual labor in odd jobs to assist her parents in getting the money to help her come here. Her long black hair,

unmarred by any red streaks like Chisa's, flowed in the wind like a streak of night in the midst of day—and her rough, slightly tanned skin showed her attitude toward work.

Tsubaki's parents and younger sister had come to watch the demonstration today, as had many other families in the Club. Chisa couldn't see anyone from her family, though. “See, I just don't want her to think I'm a hick, is the thing,” Tsubaki said, grousing toward nobody in a somewhat joking manner, “and being shown up by such a sparkling young lady as yourself—”

“Oh, that's ridiculous!” Chisa laughed. She didn't mention her own doubts about her social status, of course, but she continued, “Even if you are *relatively* a hick, that's not the important part. You're really good at this, Senpai.”

—Tsubaki had outdone Chisa by an arrow or two, as apparently she'd hunted wildfowl with one occasionally. That would always be better experience than simple practice. “Oh, so I am relatively a hick?” Tsubaki grinned, and Chisa groaned. “You're a nice girl, Inomiko, y'know that?”

“I don't think I'm *abnormally* nice or anything,” Chisa said. “I'm just being honest. If I didn't have anyone I could talk honestly to this whole high school thing would be an absolute *nightmare*.”

The two of them wound up sitting somewhere by themselves on the stands of the auditorium, where this demonstration was occurring, and Chisa continued, “I mean, I didn't really have anyone to talk to in middle school, and it may seem like it's only a month between when middle school ends and high school begins, but it was a wild month for me and I'm not sure I could've kept going having to just be—”

“The *legendary* girl genius, student council president of Sanba Academy?” Tsubaki offered.

“Are they seriously calling me things like that?” Chisa shook her head and let out a groan. “A lot's happened, and I still feel nervous about talking to a lot of people. I know it's how I was raised and all, but I'm just never sure how long I can keep this whole, uh, this whole... this whole unflappable, never-fearing wunderkind thing up, you know?”

“Oh, totally,” said a suddenly-appearing Mio, who sat down next to them. She'd politely removed her sweater and scarf for this demonstration. “I mean, it's so unlike you it's almost laughable to think about. Hey, Kujo-san.”

“Akaneno,” Tsubaki said with a nod.

—The two of them were in the same homeroom, but apparently they hadn't spoken much before their mutually knowing Chisa meant they ran into each other more often. As far as Tsubaki knew, the two had wound up meeting during March, and had become quick, surprisingly close friends—which wasn't *entirely* wrong, really.

“So, here, while we've got a minute,” Mio said, and pulled out her guitar case, her 'Otaku Container' or 'Otacon' as she so lovingly called it, and produced some rolled-up sheets of paper, bound together loosely with rubber bands and staples. “I poured my heart into it, but it's not a total story yet or anything—a lot of this is still just drafts and outline stuff in between my messy prose, plus there's sketches of the character designs in the margins and stuff. You are allowed to look over her shoulder, *Kujo-san*, but if you laugh I'll put a hex on your bloodline and curse you to never be at peace for the rest of your days.”

—This was the beginnings of what was currently Mio's light novel, *KyuuKare*. Chisa thought she was a bit unkind to her own prose—it was light, yes, hence 'light novel' and all, but it wasn't *bad* by any means. This was only a setup, start, and some starting romantic comedy shenanigans, but Chisa flipped through it fairly quickly and found herself enjoying young Raquel's misadventures in navigating vampirism, though she couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the ethics of the Edelweiss family as a whole. “Who's the cloaked man?” she asked, regarding a cloaked individual who had visited the home when Raquel was a child.

“Not sure yet,” Mio admitted with a blush and a rub of the back of the head, “but I figured, get things down first, then figure out how it all comes together—you were supposed to be the only person who saw these anyway, but I've been *suuuuuper busy* and so now we've got a lookie-loo.”

—Tsubaki was reading over Chisa's shoulders, and nodding. “Oh, so this is what you're into, Akaneno? That seems cool. Wasn't there that big vampire craze over in America recently, too? The premise is a bit contrived, but—”

“Now, now,” Chisa said, raising up a hand, “a contrived premise is only contrived until you know why it happened. I mean, plenty of stories have pretty contrived premises—like, a bunch of people wake up in the same building and have to play death games, or something like that. This seems neat, but...” She hummed to herself. “Do you take constructive criticism?”

“Sure, sure,” Mio said with a nod.

“I can't really visualize this,” Chisa said, staring at the paper. “I mean, I know what the characters look like, but I can't picture where they are, or what the actions they're taking are. Do you mind if I keep this for a while? I want to try something.”

“Oh, uh...” Mio blinked. “Sure.”

Chisa bagged the papers in her own school bag, then spent a few more moments pondering before a bell rang out to signal the end of the demonstration. That meant that it was time to disperse, so Mio ran away with a hastily-called 'buh-bye'.

—Things were often like that, catching single meetings amidst the chaos of school, stealthily getting kisses planted on her cheek when Mio felt a little cute. Of course, other times, they'd linger after school, behind the school, and just talk about nothing—it was a good nothing, a pleasant nothing.

That demonstration was in July, and it was a bit into August when Chisa, on an expedition into town, finally managed to find a place to meet Mio—it was a net cafe that Mio was fond of, and even in her fairly unassuming clothing, there was definitely something odd seeing a girl like Chisa at a place like that.

Mio scooted through the door at high speed, slamming onto a scene like she had a way of doing, and disturbing two patrons (and a stray cat) as she did. “Sorry, sorry! My mom had this weird whatever she wanted to show me,” she said as she headed over to sit down, and—

It was at that moment that Chisa finally properly digested the fact that Mio had a body. The sweater usually disguised it, but Mio was a rather large girl—she had round legs, a plump stomach, squishy cheeks, generally she was just rather *wide*. If Chisa didn't miss her mark, she'd grown slightly since summer break began, which was when last they'd met—especially, ah, in the chest, which was *definitely* larger. That wasn't a bad thing, of course! It just... you know, was striking. It was proportional, really—the rest of Mio's body was catching up to the faster parts of her proportions, so to speak.

Mio had claimed that apparently her mother had been 'not nearly as hot' during most of high school, but that puberty had come late for her, and imagined that her relatively small stature despite her chubby body might be because she was the same way. Chisa found herself thinking that was rather logical—

The point was, Mio was in a tied-off shirt that showed a bit of her midriff, bat-wing purple headphones, shorts, generally speaking her figure was *visible* and it was a *cute* look. She was cute. Chisa's girlfriend was cute. Chisa had a cute girlfriend. In her opinion, it was a little silly that people apparently thought she was the more attractive of the two of them, when the opposite was obvious if you even took a second to look at them together, not that people knew they were dating but—

What the hell was she doing. “It's okay, really!” Chisa finally answered as Mio sat across from her, and she produced her school bag to show a stack of papers she'd put together. Mio took them, and as her eyes scanned them, they began to widen, then widened considerably until basically her whole eyes were visible.

“Wha... you, uh... you draw?” Mio stammered out. Chisa nodded. “How long has this—?”

“I started practicing a bit before I got to Tokyo,” Chisa said. “But really I've been doing it for most of my life. I like to think I'm pretty practiced—?”

Mio's wordless sputtering told Chisa a lot, though she hesitated to believe it. What Chisa had handed her was Chisa's concept of what the events Mio had written would be like in a visual space—essentially, Chisa had drawn a manga of the light novel. “This...” Mio shook her head. “I mean, you've got it just right! Yeah, this is how it goes! And you're—oh man, I love the details on the clothes, you got this all really nice!”

“There were a few flourishes of my own in there,” Chisa said with a nervous chuckle and an eyes-averted blush, “like finishing up details on the outfits, I hope you don’t—?”

“This is *amazing*, Chisa, what the heck!” Mio slammed the sheets back on the table—apparently she didn’t need to read any more. “You just come in here and drop this on me like it’s nothing?! You’re *incredible*! With a bit of practice, you could give Murata a run for his money!”

Chisa didn’t ask who that was out of politeness. Mio continued, “Okay, wait, wait, wait, hear me out here,” and she threw up her hands for each ‘wait’. “What if we turned this into a manga? Like, for real? I think I’m better at dialogue than I am at prose, and your art is amazing! This could be a genuine hit! We can post it serially on the web and—”

“Whoa, whoa, wait, whoa!” Chisa exclaimed. “Hold on, please! You think I’m good enough to go to print? This is r-really just a hobby!”

Mio narrowed her eyes, and leaned in across the table to affix Chisa with the ‘no, you idiot’ look—one Chisa knew well, mostly from when she underestimated herself. “It’s really good, Chisa, and I wanna see more of it,” Mio said. “Here—hold on, do you want a second opinion? Come with me.”

~VIII. The Young Lady and Homura Akaneno~

Mio’s house was significantly humbler than the Inomiko manor—it was a two-story, Western-style home, one that still implied a fair bit of affluence but not nearly so much showiness about it. Chisa physically resisted coming across the boundary of the home. “Oh, come on, she’s gonna like you!” Mio said, yanking Chisa’s arm, even as Chisa gripped the fence posts to defend herself from the inevitable.

“She’s gonna hate me! She’s gonna think I’m ridiculous!” Chisa wailed, shaking her head frantically. “I’m not ready for this! I’m not ready for this!”

—Well, she was going to have to be ready for this, because here she was at Mio’s front door. Mio rang the doorbell twice, then paused, then did it again, and then started holding up her fingers—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—

“Why *hello*, darling daughter of mine!” The door swung open, and hanging off of it like a stage prop was a woman who oh good lord that was a tiger-print bikini top, wasn’t it? She had darker skin than Mio, but just the same hair tone, and there was a definite resemblance in a number of places, though that was a tiger-print bikini top—she—she answered the door in nothing but a tiger-print bikini top, and how did you even describe that hair? It didn’t have a cowlick so much as it was itself a herd of cowlicks. She—

That was a tiger-print bikini top! And it was probably too small for those heaving tits of

hers, for one thing, and *definitely* insufficiently supported them! Why was she answering the door in that? Who was this woman? This couldn't seriously be Mio's mom, could it?

“Hey, Mom,” Mio said. Oh! Apparently it could! Apparently Mio's mom was... okay, not exactly to Chisa's tastes (what were her tastes, even, apparently not this woman,) but it was kind of hard to deny this woman was pretty hot. In her tiger-print bikini top. And sunglasses, for that matter. She lifted up her sunglasses to show her look of vague surprise.

“Who's this?” Mrs. Akaneno asked, gesturing at Chisa. “Do you have friends now?”

“Hello! My name is Chisa Inomiko! It's nice to meet you, ma'am! Please forgive me for the impertinence of dating your daughter!” Chisa screeched, bowing mechanically like she was some sort of clockwork toy, sweat lining her forehead as her eyes bugged out, staring at the ground but darting to look at different little points of gravel.

After only a moment's pause, Chisa was forcibly grabbed and yanked inside the house, Mio laughing a little as she followed inside. The door opened into a nice, seat-lined living room, with a wooden floor, high walls, and an open view into the kitchen, and Mrs. Akaneno apparently had decided Chisa deserved a seat. “Little bundle of nerves y'got here, huh, Mio?” Mrs. Akaneno laughed. “Chisa, you said?” She was already darting around. “You want a drink? I've got water, seventy-two varieties of tea, several unbranded sodas you can totally trust, coffee, fruit juices, vegetable juices—”

“Wa-water please, ma'am,” Chisa coughed.

Once Chisa obtained her glass of water, her unsteady hands brought it up to her lips, which proceeded to drain it—it was room temperature, which was just right for drinking quickly. Chisa let out a gasp of relief upon finishing her glass, which then appeared in front of her again, re-filled. Mrs. Akaneno was a fast woman.

“So,” she said, kicking up her legs in a seat just across from Chisa, “hi, I'm Homura Akaneno, you may have heard of me, I'm Japan's most beautiful genius. If I hear you call me 'Mrs. Akaneno' though? I'll flip. Like I will flip like a pancake. I'll actually detonate, and nobody wants that. I didn't know you were into women, Mio.”

Mio shrugged. “I didn't think I was either, but I've been reconsidering lately. At first I thought maybe I just had an exception, but no, I don't think so.”

“Well, y'know, any datefriend of my daughter's is welcome in my home any time!” Mrs. A—Homura, said. “Tell me about yourself, 'Chisa Inomiko'. I know your parents, if only a little.”

Chisa looked up, and an odd hesitance filled her heart. “You... you do?”

“Oh, sure, but it's not like I'd ever talk to them. I just met them a few times through work. I'm a big, important celebrity, y'see, being Japan's most beautiful genius and all.” Homura laughed, self-satisfied, to herself. Chisa hadn't been keeping up with national news lately—she

probably should be.

“Um...” Chisa blinked. “I’m fifteen years old, and I’m... um, a first-year at Hibikino, same school as Mio. I’m an artist, and I’m in the Archery Club, and... you know, some... other things?”

“She’s great with a sword,” Mio said, “and with farm animals, if you can believe it. She’s a bundle of nerves, but she comes through when it counts, and she’s a very kind girl.” She crossed her arms and nodded to herself. “She’s gotten better at taking jokes recently, but she’s still a bit bad at it.”

“Farm animals?” Homura asked, and Chisa nodded, sweating. “Like, moo cows and oink pigs?” Chisa nodded again. “Neat! How long you two been dating?”

“Uhhh...” Chisa started mumbling to herself. How long had they been dating before the whole flashing-lights other-world business? She wasn’t really sure—

“Since March, I think,” Mio said, and sure, that was about right.

“Cool, cool,” Homura said, closing her eyes, crossing her arms, and nodding to herself. Huh. Apparently that was a family habit.

“So, anyway, y’know that light novel I’ve been drafting?” Mio asked, and Homura nodded again. “Check *this* out.”

This began the agonizing process of having Mio’s mother see Chisa’s drawings. This was, of course, a nightmare given life, and as Homura scanned the pages, Chisa could only yearn for death to please take her and steal her away from this hell. “She drew this?” Homura asked, and Mio nodded and smiled. “Oh. Damn! It’s really good! I dig it! Y’all should make this a manga or something.”

“That’s what I said!” Mio said, and Chisa receded further into her seat as Mio continued, “But *someone* didn’t believe it was good enough to go to print.”

“That’s dumb, this is really good,” Homura said, and Chisa’s soul left her body as she wailed in agony.

—This stay could only last an hour or two, but Chisa learned a lot about Homura Akaneno in that time. She had apparently been quite a lonely person for much of her life, based on how few people appeared in old photos of her—just a friend she called ‘Nacchan’ for most of them—but she had achieved recent fame through being a brilliant, multi-fielded technological wizard. She only had one child, Mio, and she had somewhat recently divorced Mio’s father for reasons Chisa didn’t want to pry into, but that apparently meant that Mio’s father was largely absent from Mio’s life.

But something that struck Chisa about Homura—

“Hey, kiddo,” Homura said, handing Chisa a golden locket from somewhere. “Got a good feeling about you, so you're not allowed to refuse this.” It was an empty locket, but it had a photo frame—“Get a good picture of you two together, and put it in here, you hear?”

Chisa rubbed the engraving on the front. “What does the 'NG' mean?” Homura had already lost interest in the conversation, though.

—was that Homura accepted Chisa as Mio's girlfriend really quickly. It was something that Chisa had almost forgotten what was possible, in the months and/or years since she'd left her otherworldly home—Homura *liked* Chisa, and seemed downright eager to include her in the home. Even in a visit that wasn't all that long, and even as eccentric and weird and scatterbrained as she was, Homura Akaneno was flatly *unlike* the Inomikos.

As Chisa's curfew approached, and she needed to leave, she hugged Mio in the doorway, and Homura cheered from a few feet behind Mio. “Oh, come on, Mom,” Mio griped, while still returning the embrace.

“Come back any time!” Homura said with a wave. “Seriously! Sooner or later, you'll be calling me Mom, too!”

“Sure thing, Homura,” Chisa laughed.

~IX. The Young Lady and Her Family~

It took a while longer, but on a day where Chisa was embroiled in an intense game of koi-koi with Taichi near the end of the year, her father made an odd comment. He looked up from his newspaper—still in print, no matter how out of touch that was—and said, “Manga, is it. Manga.”

That got Chisa's neck to rocket upward, and she looked, wide-eyed, at her father. “What?”

“Kids your age are into manga these days, aren't they?” Yuuya asked, tilting his head as though it really was just an odd bit of curiosity. “Do you read any?”

“Uh—” Yes, of course she did. She'd been doing her best to study, for one thing, but she'd been reading manga for years. “No, not really.”

“Good,” Yuuya said, and that was that.

—The next day at school, Chisa hadn't realized it herself, but her poise was more perfect than normal. Her diction didn't falter, and it looked to all the world like it was a day of the Chisa from middle school again. “Are you okay, Inomiko?” Tsubaki asked at Archery Club practice.

“Hm?” Chisa said, running her fingers through her hair. “I don't believe there's anything wrong. Was my aim off, Kujo-senpai?”

“No—come on, you're acting all weird, obviously.” Tsubaki grunted and took Chisa aside, away from all the watching eyes. “What's up? You're acting all... fancy.”

“Am I?” Chisa blinked. Then, a few things tumbled back into place in her mind, and she shook her head. “Oh. Oh! Oh, uh. Sorry. I just—”

What could she say about that? 'My father made an askew comment about manga, and it made some part of me paranoid he might've been spying on me somehow to learn about what I'd been doing out of the house for a while?' “I am feeling a little odd, yeah,” Chisa nodded.

She didn't see Mio that day. It started happening every few days now—her father would make some askew comment that sounded like nothing, but to Chisa—

“Have you heard about her records in the Archery Club?” Ikuko asked one night at dinner. “Evidently she's risen to the top of the club—just as we'd expect.”

“Right,” Yuuya said, “as an 'unflappable, never-fearing wunderkind', it's only natural.”

That was an odd choice of words. It was also something Chisa had said, exactly, months ago—when she'd first received Mio's drafts. That made Chisa's breath hitch for a moment, but she had to keep it together—if she flinched, she might...

...what was she even afraid of, anyway? What was this feeling of *dread*? Why was she afraid of her parents learning that she had started drawing manga, of all things? Or... was that what she was really afraid of? She wondered that sometimes, like when her mother insisted on doing her hair up for a social function the family was invited to.

It was on the first of February that something odd happened. Taichi asked a question at family dinner, when usually he was rather silent. “Hey,” he said, “so... one of my classmates says he has two dads and no moms.”

“...Did his mother perish after remarrying?” Ikuko asked, and Chisa inwardly sighed. Of course not. If that had happened, Taichi wouldn't be asking anything like that.

“No,” Taichi said, “apparently they live together. He says they can't get married, but they act like they are—”

“Ah, *those* sorts of people,” Ikuko said. Chisa could almost see Yuuya grinding his teeth inside his mouth, but he remained silent.

“Well—” Chisa stammered, and then turned her head to Taichi. “That happens sometimes. A lot of people can't help who they wind up loving, even if it's not what's the most common, and I imagine they're just like any other family, really—”

“Evading responsibility to their families,” Yuuya grumbled. “Cowards, all of them.”

“Huh?” Chisa blinked.

Always even-headed Ikuko was able to put the idea into better form. “I believe what he's trying to say is that homosexuals are shirking their responsibility to their families—it's impossible for two men or two women to reproduce by themselves, so the idea is running away from their duty to continue their family lines. It is rather cowardly, I would say—and demanding equal rights to those who don't abide by that lifestyle is frankly ridiculous to people who aren't contributing enough to justify it, as many of them are not. There's a way things are supposed to work, and people who can't handle it don't deserve to demand the same treatment as people who can.”

“Wha...” Chisa blinked. “That's—”

Oh, she thought. Oh. So that was what she'd been dreading. So that was why she'd been scared. So that was what she'd been hiding from. How... how much could they have seen, if he really was spying on her somehow? Had they... they hadn't, right? They didn't know, did they? They couldn't know. They didn't...

That night, Chisa stole into Taichi's room and sat down next to him on his bed, took a deep breath in, and said, “Taichi... you know they're not right, right?”

“I trust you more than them about things like this,” Taichi said. In the past year, he'd grown a fair amount, but he wasn't quite to puberty yet, only being near-to-ten years old. “It's normal, right?”

Chisa nodded. “Yes, it is. It's normal, but a lot of people don't think that, even if it is true. So... even if you *aren't* like that, you can be a friend to people who are, right? A lot of people don't like the fact that we exist—”

That. That wasn't meant to come out. Chisa threw up her hands over her mouth, and was really, really glad she'd been being quiet, so she pinned all her hopes on the thought that Taichi hadn't heard her. “We'?” Taichi asked.

Chisa's head slumped, and she curled up into a ball on Taichi's bed. “Please don't tell them,” she said into her own arms. “I am begging you not to tell them.”

“So you...” Taichi took a moment to connect the dots. “You're... a 'homosexual'?”

“Well, you know, in the case of women who like women, 'lesbian' is the preferred term, I'm a 'lesbian,’” Chisa said, and that happened to be the first time she'd admitted to herself that her staring at other women in the hallways, at their legs, at their bodies, was not a coincidence, and she did not only like one woman, but in fact was homosexual. “'Homosexual' is an adjective. I *am homosexual*, I *am a* lesbian.”

“Okay,” Taichi said with a nod that Chisa almost couldn't hear with the blocking of her

arms. He scooted in a little closer. “That's neat. I won't tell them.”

Chisa sprung over to hug Taichi as tight as she could, getting him to grunt a little from the escape of air. “Thank you, Taichi,” she said into his neck. “I love you. I really do.”

—Just before her sixteenth birthday, Chisa battled her father again. This time, it took her forty-seven seconds to defeat him—thirty-four seconds slower than the year before.

~X. The Young Lady and her Fan Club~

It wasn't that Chisa wanted to be part of the student council. Honestly, she deeply wanted not to be. However, with the idea that her parents might be spying on her lodged so firmly in her head, she knew what they would be expecting, and felt like she was going to need to do so. It added another item into her already-busy schedule, and so as her second year of high school began, it felt like things only got more chaotic.

Of course, it wasn't all bad. Visits to the Akaneno house, when she got the chance, were always freeing—and once Chisa finally got the hang of not only texting, but chatting online in general, it felt like Mio was never more than a second away. Her phone had never been allowed to use the internet, but knowing a technical genius like Homura Akaneno had its perks.

As she continued on through school, Chisa noticed something—people seemed to look at her more and more. Largely men, but not entirely—and she didn't truly understand why, not really. Even during her time as a supposed man, she'd never really understood things like that much. But, well, with so much else to worry about, it was hard to worry about those things.

She had had to excuse herself to deal with... her *unfortunately timed* period one day (and boy, wasn't that something she missed not having to deal with,) and was texting Mio while in the bathroom—which was technically against school rules, but people broke that rule all the time anyhow. *KyuuKare* finally had managed to get hosted on an online manga site, and while work had been sporadic, Chisa and Mio had managed to build up enough of a backlog that it was able to release pretty steadily.

Mio, as it turned out, already had something of an online presence, so Carmilla-*sensei* was a name that was already known to the nerd-o-sphere, but people were beginning to wonder who this artist she had gotten for herself could be. “So,” Mio texted, “what should your handle be?”

“I don't knowwww!” Chisa texted back. “I've never had to think about that before!”

“Well, just try and make it something that's a nice counterpoint to mine, y'know?” Mio sent back, with a winking emoji. “Something nicer-sounding, for them to pray to when I bathe in their blood, kihihihhi.”

Something nicer-sounding... Chisa felt like she had something on the tip of her tongue,

but it was interrupted when she heard some other voices. “You hear about those creeps over in the old building?” some girl Chisa didn't know said. “They're all slathering over that one chick. Like, ugh, gag me with a spoon.”

“Hey, she is cute,” someone else said. Apparently they'd just come in here to chat. “But yeah, that whole gaggle is totes creepy. How did they even get the key?”

...huh? Chisa's curiosity was piqued, probably because she would love anything else to focus on. “Hold on, I'll text you later, love you,” she shot to Mio before standing up and exiting the stall. The girls were about as made up and done up as she'd expected from their manner of speech—Chisa didn't get the whole 'gal' thing. “What're you talking about?”

“Those creeps in that 'fan club' that meet at the old building on Thursdays, duh,” one said, as Chisa washed her hands. “There's like twenty of 'em, and they all go over there and just ogle one girl? Major creep vibes.”

...As a member of the student council, Chisa found this idea rather disturbing. By itself, it was harmless, if extremely odd, but she wanted to nip the idea of anyone getting hurt by an overzealous 'fan' in the bud. “Thanks,” Chisa said, and hurried out of the restroom to get back to class. An odd squeak from the third girl missed her ears.

The old building—an old thing in the back corner of the campus, built before even the war had begun, where the floorboards creaked and the lights flickered, was locked to students most of the time, even student council members like Chisa... but that didn't mean she couldn't ask for help. Near the entrance, Chisa hid in a bush, until one Tsubaki Kujo walked up, whistling casually. She had a hand in a pocket in front of her school bag, which she walked up to the bush and casually dropped a small bag into, then walked away.

Chisa,

make sure you return this before 6 PM—that's when the janitor checks to make sure it's there. Good luck. Ring me if you need me—you know my number.

Tsubaki

Once the transfer was done, it was totally normal for a student council member to walk about campus, so Chisa, cool as a cucumber, walked around the side of Hibikino Academy, beside the great oak where she'd met Mio again, and headed back to the old building. There were definitely voices in there, but she couldn't make anything out without unlocking the door herself.

Floorboards squeaked under her feet in the dimly-lit hallway as she walked in through the front door, and to her ears, it seemed that the classroom being used for whatever this was was on the second level—so she walked to a small stairwell on the left side of the central hallway of the ground floor, and climbed it.

“—united here as we are today, gentlemen, in our devotion to our beloved angel! I hope I

need not remind any of you that you swore an oath of secrecy—if anyone were to divulge the location of our hideaway, none of us would ever live it down!”

Old classroom 2-C had been refurbished at some point, with replaced floorboards, and the desks moved aside for plain chairs in rows—they'd also moved a podium in front of a projector screen set up with obviously from-home pieces. Twenty men, and one woman disguised not *particularly* well as a man, but well enough that only Chisa—who had seen her before, the second girl in the bathroom earlier, the one who *hadn't* snitched—would likely recognize her for being a woman—sat in those rows, and a twenty-first man stood at the podium.

Chisa actually knew this man—he was treasurer of the student council, Yohei Isana, a long-haired, tall, somewhat pallid young man with rather defined features. If a member of the student council was the leader of this club, this did explain how it had avoided detection, Chisa thought, hiding in the shadows outside the door to the room. There were wide enough holes in the walls that she was easily able to see through.

“Now, at our last meeting,” Yohei said, “I believe that Taketo-*kun* desired the floor. Please, speak, my friend.”

“Right, right!” 'Taketo', a rather plain-looking, short boy Chisa wasn't familiar with, came up to the front. “Now, you all know I take photos, right? Well, I've been working on something, and last week I finally managed it! I got my photos developed—old-style, but clear as can be! Gym shorts shots of our angel—from front *and* behind!”

There was a howl of praise for him as a rough boy from the front came up. “Lemme see!” Chisa didn't know this one, either. “Oh—oh my god, they're real. You actually got these? How?!”

“I hid in a bush,” Taketo said. He winked. “Being short has its privileges sometimes, y'know!”

“Hey, don't believe everything you see!” A guy from the back row—tall, awfully thin, looking kind of underfed—stood up to challenge this assertion. “You still haven't given us any proof you saw her with that otaku Akaneno!”

—Wait... what? 'That otaku Akaneno'? Mio was... the only student with that surname at the school at the moment.

“What?” Taketo sputtered. “Plenty of people have seen it!”

“There's just *no way* our angel would... would kiss *her!*” The tall guy said. “She's a well-bred, beautiful, perfect daughter of an upper-crust family—she's not *like that!*”

“I think it'd be cute,” a glasses-wearing poindexter sitting beside him said. “They might make a good pair—”

“Please calm down,” Yohei said, and everyone sat back down. “The issue of the

Inomiko-Akaneno connection is one we've discussed ad nauseum, as you know. We're well aware they're friends, and it's very possible that they're more than that, but as of yet we have no definitive proof—but that gives you no right to dismiss Taketo's photos out of hand. Being in the student council with her, as you well know, I know what our angel's *backside* looks like—this is the genuine article.”

“It would be cute, though,” the poindexter said.

“Yeah!” The poorly-disguised gal said. “Yuri is justice!”

“Still,” said a guy on the leftmost side of the middle row, a messy-haired, loose-shirted young man Chisa recognized from her own middle school, who used to wear glasses and be rather plain like the poindexter in the room, but had reinvented himself into something of a playboy, “Akaneno's beside the point. What I'm interested in is Chisa, man! Is my late bloomer theory correct?”

Yohei studied the picture closely, and then nodded. “Without doubt—they're larger. She's grown again. The angle of her figure has changed slightly—I'm sure you'll agree, gentlemen, that as our angel grows, her body only becomes more gorgeous!”

“Quick, someone get my family into talks with the Inomikos—I'm still single!” Someone said—at that point, Chisa wasn't looking through the hole. She was curled up on the floor. “They can't marry her off to some guy who doesn't know her! One of us has to protect our angel!”

“I want her to protect me, though...” Someone else said. “She's so strong, too! She could even beat Ryusei in a fight!”

“What?!” That was the rough guy's name. “You're probably not wrong, but come on, man, don't say that!”

“Just the perfect woman—”

“—a flawless example of everything feminine—”

“—only becoming more beautiful as she grows—”

“—blossoming into a beautiful flower—”

“—married off by her parents—”

“—needs a man who understands her, dude!—”

“—our angel—”

“—our angel—”

either

I love you

I love you and I love you and I love you and I love you

*“I love you too. Just calm down. Take a breath. **What happened, Chisa?**”*

“Chisa?”

“Chisa!”

*“**Raven!**”*

“Wha—?” Chisa—Raven—Chisa—she sputtered back into sanity, after a moment where her mind had fallen into some distant, hazy fog. She looked down at her message history, noticing that she'd sent Mio several messages she didn't really remember sending... no, she could think about that later. She was here for one reason and one reason alone.

Some logical part of her brain told her that this was a bad idea—but she opened the door, and stepped into the room. Yohei, still at the podium, went wide-eyed, freezing in fear. “I-I-Inomiko-san!”

Twenty-one other pairs of eyes turned to see Chisa, her face screwed up in rage, her fists balled, as she stood in the doorway. “So, Isana-kun, you think this is a good way to spend your after-school days—leading a bunch of your friends in perving over a classmate?” Her teeth were gritted, and she slammed her fist into the wall. “That *camera*—you. Hand me that camera.”

The boy named Taketo obediently handed her the camera, and Chisa proceeded to hurl it on the ground, shattering it to pieces. The boy wailed, but Chisa decided that that was insufficient, so she drove it into the ground with her feet. “The *pictures*,” Chisa hissed, and in short order she tore them to pieces, as well, pocketing them so that she could burn them later.

“—So! Do any of the rest of you have any material for this little obsession of yours that you're hiding, or is this little creep the only one who took shit like this?!” Chisa roared, slamming the wall with her fist again. Based on the position of the door, she was closest to that little fucker she'd known in middle school, so she grabbed him by his slimy, gel-laden hair and said, “Well?!”

“I-Inomiko-san—!” Yohei exclaimed, as Chisa grabbed the smarmy little bastard whose name she didn't remember and held him up, as he wailed in pain from having his hair yanked. “Please, I think you're over-reacting!”

“*Over-reacting?* To a bunch of slime deciding they can banter about every bit of my private life and ogle me and catalogue every bit of my *body*, all to themselves, without ever once

considering how disgusting that is?!” Chisa tossed the whatever to the side, and he yelled in pain as he fell to the floor. She stomped up toward the podium to Yohei. “Even besides the fact that you're being disgusting, you're a member of the student council, aren't you?! You have a responsibility to lead the student body in being good students, in learning how to be good people! *Don't you?! Or is that just different for men?! Is the only way you can handle the fact that you don't know how to deal with me to obsess over my ASS?!*”

There was a window behind him as Yohei backed away in terror. Several other people had run in fear, though a few more were transfixed by the sight in front of them. That window—it was unlocked, and it opened by latch. As Chisa walked toward Yohei, her eyes beady with fury, it seemed to open just slightly—

and in that moment,

a very real part of Chisa, a very real, small part of her,

thought how absolutely wonderful it would be

if she could hurl this piece of shit out of the window

and watch him *splatter on the ground*

in a pool of blood

and *die*

but that part of her wasn't the largest part, and this roiling, bubbling fury inside Chisa died down before it could reach its peak

and her shoulders slumped, and she let out a defeated, pained sigh

and said, “You're pathetic. All of you are pathetic. I'm reporting this roster,” and she grabbed a roster off of the table, “to the authorities. I hope every last one of you gets expelled. You're all a disgrace. Every last one of you.”

And with her legs slump, slump, slumping forward, clomp, clomp, clomp, she walked out of the room, and down the stairs, and out of the room, and back to the school building, and left the roster and a written note on the principal's desk, and the key on the janitor's key board.

It was cloudy—not raining yet, but cloudy—as she left school, and as she dragged herself along the street, vaguely in the direction of home, she ran into someone holding an umbrella, who'd apparently been waiting for her. “Hey,” Mio said, “c'mon. Come here.”

The Akaneno house was where Chisa ended up that night. She ran inside, and gave Homura a hug, sobbing into the tall older woman's chest. Before she could even say anything, she just cried, and cried, and cried.

Homura Akaneno was a loud woman—loud, and painful, and obnoxious, and annoying, and just downright odd. But that night, she—along with Mio, of course—quietly listened to Chisa's story, all the feelings she held inside, all the terror and fear and disgust and rage, all these feelings that, honestly, she'd hardly ever felt before.

Even as a baby—the girl named Chisa Inomiko had never shed a tear. But tonight, she cried—she cried, and cried. She let out sixteen years' worth of tears in that single night, crying and crying and crying in the arms of her lover... and her mother. Everything spilled out of Chisa's heart then—the paranoia, the fear of rejection, the uncertainty about her own sexuality and gender, the horror of objectification, and even if Homura couldn't understand all of it, she sat quietly and listened.

“I wish,” Chisa hiccuped and coughed, “I wish I wasn't a woman. I wish I wasn't like this. I wish this had never happened to me.”

“Hey,” Homura said, coming in close and hugging Chisa, “you know, shit happens. We all deal with it in different ways. Being a woman's hard. I know. And parents don't make it easy. I mean, I'm not the best parent, y'know? I fucked up with Mio in plenty of ways.”

“Mmhm,” said Mio, who was hugging Chisa from the other side. “She sure did.”

“Even if you never get all the way used to it—I mean, if you've got people who care about you, you can get through anything, right?” Homura laughed. “I mean, me, Mio, that little brother of yours—sympathy is in community, or something.”

That—was something that Raven's mother had told her once, too. “No matter what happens, as long as you have people who care about you, you can get through anything, honey. That's the family motto—'Sympathy is in community'. No matter where you go, remember that.”

The Hillshead family motto—'sympathy is in community'. For a long time, Chisa had forgotten those words—but ripped away from her old life, that motto was all she had left, aside from her hair, to prove that she was a Hillshead.

There were two things that Chisa decided, right then and there. The first—was her handle. 'Gracia'. People often asked where it came from—perhaps that it was a reference to Hosokawa Gracia, or maybe that one character from Pokemon? No, nothing so referential—it was just her mother's name. Gracia Hillshead. Nothing else.

The second—

“Thank you...” Chisa sniffled. “Mio... Mom... please don't leave me...”

—was that she was happy to be part of this small family, here. And that she could be herself, so long as she had this family, just as much so as she could be herself with Taichi. Her 'self' with the Akanenos, and her 'self' with Taichi—those were both her, and she was Chisa.

~XI. The Young Lady and The Precipice~

That incident got Chisa to start considering her own physicality again, after having tabled the issue for some time. It... was true, actually. She had definitely developed since the last time she'd thought about it. She had a figure that flowed like a smooth wave, tough, but not bulky. And...

...she'd outgrown this bra, hadn't she. These... felt a little large for her frame, though perhaps she was just feeling nervous about it. She preferred being more lithe—if this was the way of things, she really wished puberty would just end already so she could be done with it.

That morning—was the first day of school that Chisa had ever missed.

“Where were you?” When she returned to the Inomikos' home, that was the first question out of her mother's mouth.

“Did they tell you what happened yesterday?” Chisa said, trying to remain placid and straight-faced. “It was—”

“Yes,” Ikuko said, holding a folding fan and sitting on a reclining chair, “I was informed. You broke up some manner of 'fan club' to yourself at school, and then went somewhere.”

“I was at a friend's house,” Chisa said. “The experience was very emotionally trying for me, and by the time I had fully recovered, it was too late to return home... and neither of you have ever given me your phone numbers. I don't know them.”

As Chisa went to head to her own room, her mother said, “You had to *recover* at a *friend's house*? From something as small as that? That's unlike you. You've been slipping lately—are you sick, or simply not trying?”

“I think,” Chisa said, trying her best not to turn around, “that you underestimate how trying of a situation it was, Mother.”

“What friend was this?” Ikuko asked. “I'm not aware of any friends you have aside from that girl in the Archery Club.”

“I—”

Chisa stopped herself. ...Her mother... neither of her parents had ever visited the Archery Club, and she had never mentioned Tsubaki to them. That—was what got Chisa to turn around, her eyes wide. “What? How—how do you know about Tsubaki?”

“So the girl's name is Tsubaki,” Ikuko said, nodding ever-so-slightly to herself. “I see.”

“What? No. No, Tsubaki isn't who I was staying with last night—I was staying with...” Chisa trailed off. Something inside of her began to war with herself. If she said Mio's name, then she would admit that Mio was someone worth their looking into—and no, now she was certain of it, they were *definitely* spying on her somehow, weren't they? But if she said nothing, then she risked wrath being put upon her.

“...Homura Akaneno's daughter,” Chisa said. She had, by now, come to understand Homura's importance—and knew that her mother would recognize the name. “I met Dr. Akaneno once at a social gathering, and her daughter and I became pen pals. As it turned out, Dr. Akaneno's house was nearby.”

Ikuko's face scrunched up a bit, and her teeth were gritted. “Akaneno... You stay away from that woman, do you hear me?” She spat. “Women like that are no good—they'll only lead you astray. You would do well to avoid her *and* this daughter of hers, before you get any ridiculous thoughts.”

—From then on, the *remarks* increased. Yuuya making an askew remark that seemed almost to directly quote something Chisa had said at school, or Ikuko chiding Chisa for returning home any later than the earliest possible. It was said that teenage years were a time of independence, relatively speaking, but for Chisa it was the opposite—it felt as though she was becoming more restricted. But... but there was still a chance they didn't know. If they knew about Mio, they would've confronted her directly.

So, day after day, week after week, Chisa rigidly walked through her second year. She met Mio when she could, having moments of pure, blissful happiness, and spending time at the Akaneno home when she could excuse herself. But...

“Hey, Chisa,” said Tsubaki one day, as the two sat by themselves during practice—a competition had just concluded, and Hibikino had taken home the prize, thanks primarily to the two of them. They were outdoors that day, so the two of them sat under the legendary tree. “Once I'm gone, I need you to take care of these kids, you know that?”

“...Mm. Right,” Chisa said with a nod. “I'll try my best.”

There was a moment's pause, and then Tsubaki said, “Y'know, I want you to know something.” She paused for a moment. “...There've been... people following me lately. Since that time with your, uh, 'fan club'.”

Chisa's breath hitched. “What?” Her eyes went wide.

“I figured it was probably related. They think I don't know—sometimes, it's different people, but they always follow me at this same distance.” Tsubaki laughed. “I thought ninja were a thing of the past, but I guess if any family had them, it'd be yours, right?”

Chisa looked down into her own hands, and then put them over her face. “I'm—I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I... I didn't want this to happen, I tried to—”

“Hey.” Tsubaki put her hand on Chisa's shoulder. “Listen. I'm used to being scrutinized. But things are about over for me—and you've been a good friend the past two years. My little sister, she thinks you're the coolest—wants to be just like you, and my parents are always saying how glad they are that I have a friend at all. So I want you to know—I don't blame you, and knowing you I'm sure you've been trying to keep me out of this.”

Tsubaki pounded her fist on her chest, and then said, “My family never forgets a debt, y'know. Remember this—you've got a favor from the Kujo family, no matter who it winds up being.” Then she chuckled. “But seriously—you've got that katana you use sometimes, so now Touko's started swinging around her own sword. Kids are starting to misread her name and call her Katanako.”

Despite the circumstances, that got Chisa to laugh.

Then—winter came. Chisa drew, and drew, and continued working on *KyuuKare*. The story had taken a bit of an odd turn a while back, since Chisa started being on the duo, but the newly-formed doujin circle Sororirity continued work even busy as they were.

And time moved on, and on, and on. And then—

“Ahhh,” Mio said, running her fingers through her hair, “just one more week and then I'm clear of high school! Done! God, what a nightmare.”

The two of them had managed to find time for a date, and Chisa smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that's great. Congratulations.” The two of them were looking out at snow falling upon a river from a bridge, all bundled up.

“And you've just got one more year,” Mio said. She huffed, and then said, “You know, if you ever need to move, seriously, just tell me. You don't need to stay there, y'know. If your parents don't love you, then you can leave.”

Chisa shook her head, and said, “No, I... I can't. Not—” She held up her hands to stop Mio. “Not because of any family responsibility or anything, but... it's Taichi. I don't want to leave him alone while he's still so young, and...”

That gave Mio pause, and she sighed and said, “Yeah. It just... It really, really stinks to see you hurting so much, Chisa.”

“Mhmm,” Chisa said with a nod. “But it's just one more year. I can make it. I've done harder. And then...”

And then, what? She trailed off without finishing that thought. It would be nice if they could live together, for one thing—spending so much time apart from Mio was getting really tiresome. Maybe then, she could get Taichi out, somehow, too. And then—they could finally figure out how *KyuuKare* was going to end. That part had still evaded them in the drafts.

Mio, by this point, had switched from pigtails to a ponytail. Chisa thought it was a cute look on her. “Still,” Mio said, “I don't think high school was that bad... for me, anyway. I mean...” She sidled a little closer, and hooked her arm around Chisa's. “It brought me you.”

“...Yeah,” Chisa said, coming in close to nuzzle Mio's cheek. “It brought me you, too. I...”

It had been hard existing without Mio. It felt a little silly to say, but it was true—Mio often gave Chisa the strength to continue, the strength to live. So, these moments, when the two could simply be quietly together, these were what Chisa lived for... and Chisa hoped that some day soon, her family, the *three* members of her family—her lover, her mother, and her brother—could all be happy with her somewhere where they didn't have to worry about being split apart.

She defeated her father in twenty-three seconds.

~XII. The Young Lady and Decline~

One more year.

That was all it was.

And yet, a year at high school alone... was a monumental task.

Without her close friend there, or her lover, Chisa had to continue in silence. Her foibles had no space at Hibikino to be hidden—they had to be hidden all day, or else she would break, and risk scrutiny by her parents again. She had to study furiously, to ensure her grades would keep up, even as the subjects in question became far more complicated than she felt the limits of her mental acuity could withstand.

Day after day, Chisa stayed up hours after her regular bedtime, studying, taking any moment she could to text Mio—but only in short bursts, because she needed to be dutiful. She needed to be perfect, or else they would destroy her—and—

Taichi had turned eleven by the time he really, truly noticed that his sister was in so much pain. He was starting to get taller, and his voice was starting to crack. “Hey, Chisa?” He cracked open her door one evening to find her writing things down at her desk, finishing homework and studying at the same time. “Do you have a second?”

“Oh—” Chisa turned around and smiled. It was a placid, small smile. “Yes, Taichi? What is it?”

Taichi walked in, closed the door, locked it, and then took a deep breath in and said, “What's wrong?”

“Wrong?” Chisa asked, tilting her head. “What do you mean?”

“You're...” Taichi averted his eyes. “You're—”

She stood stone still, her hands folded politely in her lap. She tilted her head, just a little. Her posture was so straight, one could be fooled into thinking she was as well.

“...It's like before your, uh, amnesia thing,” Taichi said. He frowned. “You're acting like you were when you were younger again. You're... you only act like that when you're not happy.”

“Please,” Chisa said, “it's fine. You don't need to worry about me, Taichi.”

If I don't, then they'll do something to you. I know it. They know how much I love you. They can hurt you, too. They're your parents. I'm doing this to protect you, Taichi. Please believe me. Please trust me.

“But—!” Taichi angrily grunted, shaking his head. His hair had only gotten frizzier in the last few years. “But if you're miserable, you shouldn't be, right? Is this just what high school is like? I don't—”

“You won't lose me,” Chisa said, interrupting him, holding up her hand. “And you haven't. This... will pass, Taichi.” She turned back to her schoolwork. “This will pass. When we get another chance—let's go see a movie. Something you like. It's been too long since we were out together.”

This will pass. This will pass. This will pass. This will pass.

That one absence continued sitting on Chisa's record like a gaping wound—it was a hole for them to try and stab into. But, if she didn't give them any new material, they couldn't attack her. If she continued to be strong, if she continued to be quiet, if she just got *through* this, she could make it.

Meeting Mio was harder all the time. She had little time—she'd been signed up for only the highest levels of classes, so the amount of work she was assigned was astronomical. The amount she had to do to remain satisfactory, to ensure nobody she loved was harmed—it dragged her spirit out and smashed it again and again, under their gazes at the dinner table. Chisa knew they were looking for something to attack her with, but they didn't have anything to do it with.

This will pass. This will pass. This will pass. This will pass.

Even as Chisa's body became more orderly, as she started assuming the 'proper' posture without even considering it, it felt like her hair, her eyes, her face, only became wilder and wilder—it took more and more work in the morning to keep herself from completely cracking, but she had to—she was ineffable. She didn't cry or scream or raise her voice or anything like that, and she had to stay that way until this year was over. She had to keep quiet.

Students fell further in line behind their student council president. The ace of the Archery Club excelled even higher. She was perfect—the perfect student in every regard. Teachers claimed she was one of the best students Hibikino had ever seen—brilliant, kind, athletic, an absolutely gorgeous young woman.

The thing about geniuses is that they are 'other'. This perfect young woman—she was an 'other'. Chisa came to understand that during her third year at high school—the reason people like the ones who'd formed that 'fan club' thought it was okay was because to them, she wasn't *human*. She was something beyond human—call it a 'genius', an 'angel', or whatever you may. People did not befriend an other, and so even as Chisa became more and more admired at her high school, she became lonelier and lonelier.

She would go weeks going from only high school to only home, and that was it. She didn't leave—with Taichi, to see Mio, or otherwise. Day in, day out, was the exact same thing. There was no change. She would look in the mirror and see someone she didn't recognize. She would speak, but someone else's voice would come out.

By the time third term in winter came about, Chisa was beginning to crack. Sometimes, she wasn't even sure why she was doing this anymore—but when Taichi came into her room to see her and comfort her, even though she shed no tears, she remembered that she was doing it for him. If she could just get through here, if she could just get through this, if she could just get through today—!

Then—

on the day before her eighteenth birthday, just before the end of high school—

something unusual happened.

Chisa Inomiko *lost* to her father.

She was on the ground before she'd fully understood what had happened. Their yearly duel had ended with her looking at the ceiling. Her father, Yuuya Inomiko, looked down at her, wide-eyed and stunned. Ikuko and Taichi were silent, as well.

This—this wasn't possible. After all, Chisa was perfect. She was being perfect in every way. She'd practiced every day in preparation. She was strong. She could do this. And yet she'd gone down—in *ten seconds flat*. It was a humiliating defeat—worse than any she had ever given her father. So why? Why had she lost?

Why, when she looked at him coming at her, had she frozen in terror? Why had she been incapable of fighting back? Why had she simply stood there and took it? Why didn't she remember how to fight back? What was going on? Was... was any of this really real?

“Oh,” she said. “Congratulations, Father. Aha, it seems I've been slipping.”

~XIII. The Young Lady and Destruction~

On the day that high school finally ended, Chisa found herself unable to move. She wasn't sure where to begin—what to do first. She found herself without the ability to do anything. There were ten missed calls from Mio, along with eighty-one missed text messages, all sent in the last two weeks. Chisa had forgotten to check her phone—or perhaps forgotten how to check her phone.

She had stumbled into her parents' car after graduation, but once they'd arrived home—without a word in the car—she was taken to the dining room table, where her mother spread out a binder in front of Chisa. It was full of dossiers—descriptions and details of... men, all about Chisa's age, from other families. “What... is this?” Chisa asked.

“In two hours,” Ikuko said, “we'll be heading to a function where you, along with a few other girls of your status, will find matches in husbands from other families. More than likely, one of the men in this dossier will be your husband, so I urge you to study them carefully before you get dressed.”

—*W h a t ?*

“...What?” Chisa said with a blink, staring down at the table. In that instant, a sort of feeling returned to her brain that had been absent for what felt like months. “What—could you repeat that?”

“...In two hours,” Ikuko said, “we'll be heading to a function where you will find a husband.”

“You're—” Chisa sputtered. “You're... you're marrying me off?”

Ikuko sighed and rolled her eyes. “Don't be unreasonable. It's your duty to the family—you're clearly no longer suitable to be the head, so you might as well make a more proper heir for us in case that—”

“What,” Chisa said, her voice shaking, “are you talking about?”

The door slammed open, and Yuuya appeared, with a grimace that almost reached a sick grin on his face as he started scattering photos across the table. They—these were—*three years' worth of photos*, showing Chisa in all manner of situations—out of the house, roughhousing with Taichi, spending time out of school on frivolities, kissing Mio—

—Chisa's eyes went wide. That... that there... that was the first kiss she had ever shared with Mio—that was back when she was a first year. These—there were so many, and they all—

“We've given you three years' worth of time to give up on all of these ridiculous ideas,”

Yuuya said—it felt like that was almost the most words her father had said to her in all that time. “This idea of drawing manga—this unladylike behavior—missing school, disrespecting us behind our backs—talking about how you'd love to leave us—and this *girl*.”

That even got Ikuko to breathe through her nose in barely-contained rage. “I believe I warned you not to associate yourself with that girl,” Ikuko said, “before you got any ridiculous ideas. But you've continued communicating with her all this time—always intending to shirk your duty to this family and leave, when you know you were meant to be its head. Ever since high school, you've become unendingly disappointing—”

“Wait,” Chisa said. “Wait.”

She *recognized* that photo. That one, right there. She recognized it. She had seen that photo, so she flipped through the dossier—and there he was. A short young man by the name of Taketo—the *same boy who had taken those damn photos in the first place*.

“He...” Chisa looked up at them. “That guy... was taking those photos... and giving them to *you*?”

—Of course. Why else would he not have proof of the most important thing—Chisa and Mio's relationship? It was because the people he was giving them to were keeping those ones. Why would he be using old-fashioned pictures like that? Because it meant that the Inomikos could develop them themselves, to reduce visibility from the outside. Of course they needed to have a student on their side—it only made sense.

“You...” Chisa's hands began to shake and shudder on the table. “You knew all this time... this whole time... and you didn't say anything? You just let me think I was okay, huh...? You just... let me think that...”

“Don't mistake me,” Ikuko said. “At the end of the day, I sympathize with you—you are my daughter, after all. I've spent many nights wondering what could have possibly happened, and I've come to the conclusion—three years ago, just before you entered high school, you went mad, didn't you?”

“—What?” Chisa's gums flapped like a fish's.

“These strange, unrealistic ideas began to fill your mind—clearly false memories, and ideas about something that never occurred. And a madwoman went along with them and manipulated you. That was when you began acting unlike yourself, as well. I wondered to myself—What's happened to the daughter I raised? You cry, you shout—had the daughter I brought into this world died?” Ikuko shot a cold glare right into Chisa's eyes—one that made her shiver. “My daughter could contain herself. You don't resemble my daughter in the slightest.”

That... honestly made Chisa chuckle a little, under her breath. “You... you think I've gone *mad*? That the reason I'm like this is because I'm *insane*?”

“Let me make one thing clear here, young woman,” Ikuko said, steepling her hands upon the table. Yuuya stood there, emanating an aura of some manner of negativity Chisa couldn't read, even after all this time. “You have no choice in the matter. Performing your duty to the family is not optional—and I imagine it will do you some good to have a dose of reality after all this fantasy you've had—”

Then, Chisa did something she didn't expect.

She reached down, and grabbed the folder,

and flung it directly in Ikuko's face.

“Fuck you,” Chisa said, her eyes beady with rage, her hair beginning to fall over her eyes. “Wow. *Fuck you*. I can't *believe* you. I thought I'd heard it all, but wow! You—you think I'm *insane*! That I'm *sick*, when that period where I started acting less like you liked—you know, it's the only time I've ever really been happy, you know that?!” She threw her arms wide and the pitch of her voice increased—no, she was really just yelling now. “And you think I'm *insane*! You think you can cure me by sitting me in front of some mediocre men and a guy who snapped creep shots of me for you!? You seriously think that?! You're delusional! You're both delusional, insane *bigots*!”

Chisa made to stomp out of the room, but when she did—“N-*Nee-san*?”

“...Taichi?” Chisa blinked. He was there. Taichi... was there, in the doorway? “I... why are you here?”

“I asked him to come over here,” Yuuya said, “so I can predicate this point. See, *I* had a different idea. I don't think that whatever's wrong with you can be cured just by a husband. So let me be clear here—if you disobey anything I say from here on, it'll be your brother who pays, you hear me? You'll be stripped of the prospective headship, and it'll be put on *his* shoulders.”

“Huh?” Taichi's eyes were wide and fearful, as he stood frozen in the doorway. “What? I don't under—”

That—was when, for a time, Chisa's body went *limp*, and her consciousness faded. It would turn out later that Ikuko had packed a simple knockout drug on a rag—a classic, simple trick, something Chisa would've expected.

—She was a fool.

After all,

you were only an adult when you were twenty.