

BLESSED SINGULARITY

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Every man goes through this period of crisis. For the average man it is the point in his life when the demands of his own fate are most at odds with his environment, when the way ahead is most hardly won. For many it is the only time in their lives when they experience the dying and resurrection which is our lot, during the decay and slow collapse of childhood when we are abandoned by everything we love, and suddenly feel the loneliness and deathly cold of the world around us. And a great many people stay for ever hanging on to this cliff and cling desperately their whole life through to the irrevocable past, the dream of the lost paradise which is the worst and most ruthless of all dreams.

-- Demian, Herman Hesse

PROLOGUE

There is a harshness to it all, a gruesome fact about life no one seems to recognize. Or maybe they simply choose to ignore it. A darkness and loneliness permeating our reality, turned an invisible monster, lurking in the vast shadows of the world. A monster that is everywhere, enveloping who knows how many lost souls. Only a single pale blue light illuminating their way in the world. Comforting, fascinating, but above all, a false God. Megumi was one of them, all she had was that deceiving blue light to guide her. I tried to be something bigger and brighter for her to pull her up from the brooding darkness enveloping her! I failed, I failed in a most horrible and miserable way. The pale

blue light had consumed her wholly. I can only wonder, what will be *my* downfall. Its constant whispering temptation is not there for me, I can't really imagine it destroying me. So what will? Sometimes, the thoughts of the dangers in the darkness keep me awake at night. I ... I live in fear of the world around me. I try not to let it control me. But I am just one little girl, vulnerable and weak. Where will my journey end and how will it happen? Will I die young or will I finally find my stride in life. Find that same strange beauty as can be seen in the faces of so many old people. I fear the future. Does everyone, or am I all alone? Someone, anyone, please tell me ...

CHAPTER ONE

I am ...

The world was still icy cold. While all the snow had already melted, the cold was still biting my skin. Even so, the sweat was pouring down my face. I was nervous. No, I was afraid. Afraid of the people around me and the failure and humiliation which might follow. My

palms were sweaty, and the plectrum felt like it could fall from my fingers at any moment. How could this end well?

Slowly my right hand started to move in front of the strings, but the plectrum didn't touch them, not yet. It passed mere millimeters in front of the metal while my left hand was moving on the fretboard as it always had. I was basically playing air guitar on an actual guitar. The interest of the people watching faded quickly. After five minutes of trying to actually play, only two people were left watching me and they too seemed bored out of their skulls. All they had attention for were their phones. I had to break through to them, I had to nail them in the back of the head and make them take notice of me.

"Let's do this." I whispered.

My voice was trembling and several more drops of sweat came down my face. One of them made its way into my eyes. The stinging made me even more nervous. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and started playing. I was able to bring out only five straight notes before I started bungling.

"Ugh, she sucks," one of the two people watching grumbled.

Without looking up from his smartphone, he walked away. The other one left soon after. No one had interest in me, I was something useless to everyone around. But can I blame them, knowing how pathetic I am? This is me we're talking about after all. I might have found the courage and motivation to actually try to do some street performances. Emphasis on the word "try" cause that's the best I could do. Everything happens nice and smoothly, until I actually bring my plectrum to the strings. Then my brain goes empty, and I can't even play the simplest of tunes. This was my seventh attempt at playing

in front of strangers in the capital, those five straight notes were my best result. Honestly, I was starting to lose my drive. I wanted to do this, I wanted to give a great performance for the people, but I was still incapable of doing so.

My hands were trembling as I was packing my stuff. I had come so far, I had spent so much time setting my stuff up only to stop after a few minutes of trying to play. I was a failure, hell, I was the embodiment of failure itself, always have been, I guess.

The reason for my pathetic being wasn't just due to my failure to perform in front of people, but ... This part is hard to admit like this, but honesty forces me to state the truth. I truly am a failure. After everything I had gone through with Megumi and my failure in school, I had made a big decision, a decision that still haunts me to this day. I quit school. I was fifteen and had barely earned my middle-school degree. I hadn't made this decision overnight though; I had been thinking about this ever since Megumi's death. I was such a fool, thinking she was dumb. She was so damn smart. The truth was, she hadn't just earned her high-school degree, but also a university degree at a pretty good university over in the old capital. I feel so silly for having thought she had quit school at age fifteen. I guess this is my punishment. But why did I quit school myself? Because I learned nothing. I had barely been able to pass my final exams and that considering how easy everything was, how easy the questions were. If I can't give a cohesive and structured answer on those, how could I ever hope to properly take an exam in high-school, let alone at university? I don't really get it myself. Guess it doesn't matter now. Things in

school itself didn't go any better. Sure, I had a friend in Yukiya, but we didn't spend much time together. He was a pretty popular guy after all. So even with this friendship, I was still alone. And then there were the teachers, I generally didn't get along with them. But I guess that's to be expected, why would they show care for someone like me? Hell, one of them had asked me genuinely if I was mentally handicapped. There was no intent to insult me in his voice, he was asking me a serious and focused question in a rare quest to understand me a little better.

"N ... no sir" I answered nervously.

I could feel the blood rush to my head while my heart was pounding in my chest. He had hit a sensitive nerve inside me. My insecurities about my own mind and my intellect and mental state only grew worse after that. I could feel my brain reach its limit. No more, no more. I had made the decision at Megumi's funeral. Standing there with only my parents and Yukiya and the guys, I know it had to end. While at the time I felt it the safer choice for my mental state, thinking back on it, it would make my insecurities worse in the long term.

Being reminded of Megumi's funeral pains me even now. If dying so miserably wasn't bad enough, the utter absence of people practically destroyed me. Besides my parents and Yukiya and the guys, only one other person had been present, her boss from Xtreme. This really scares me to be honest, it makes my very soul tremble with sorrow. The boss and I were the only people who had known her. Megumi had been such a lonely girl.

The news I would stop with school hit like a bomb with both my parents and Yukiya. Yukiya tried to convince me a thousand times over to keep going to school, but I had to refuse. Apparently, he had hoped we would go to the same high school. I guess it would have been nice, a fresh start in a new school with such a great friend. It would have driven us closer, made us even better friends. But the fear of school and failing yet another exam was far too great. The nice side effect of this was however that he would give me hugs at the most random of times. He did do it in class from time to time, though, in front of the other students. I got a lot of angry looks from the other girls. But at that point I didn't really care anymore. It was the end anyway, they had had three years to get closer to him, no reason to complain so shortly before graduation. I'm also not too proud to admit that I let a few tears go as I hugged him for the last time as classmates. It was the end, the end of an era. The halcyon days were no more.

My parents practically blew their tops when I told them. For a moment I thought they would either throw me out or drag me by my feet to school. But after we had a proper sit-down and I was able to explain my decision, they accepted it. In that talk, I showed them a side of myself they had never before witnessed. They were visibly shocked by some of the things I told them, especially the whole mental handicap thing. I could especially see it in mom's eyes, she was hurting.

That night I couldn't sleep, my body was still completely tense and my heart was racing. So I decided to stretch my legs and go to the downstairs toilet. I was about to open the door downstairs when I noticed some sounds coming from the

living room. My parents were still awake. Mom was crying, she was crying for me, she was crying because of me. Of all the things being said between the two of them, I understood only one thing.

"Why is she like this?"

These words were spoken by mom. I'm not sure what dad answered. My heart sunk to the pit of my stomach, I could once again feel tears well up. I pressed my forehead against the door.

"I'm sorry mom, I'm sorry I am like this." I whispered in a trembling voice.

I sat on the bench next to the little opening I had just tried to do my little street performance at. I was contemplating my next move. How in the hell could I move forward in reaching this impossible dream? I might have been going at it for only a short while, but I already felt like I was reaching the limit. You might think I am quick to give up, I am not, but don't forget, the fear of performing in front of other people, the incapability to even play, is strong. There aren't many options for people who can't even perform in front of other people.

I was walking with heavy feet through the streets of the capital. My whole life was going down the drain and I had to stand there and just accept it. In those moments right there, I was in one of the deepest darkest pits I had ever been in till that point of my life. I was in a dark place.

But that same day, right there in the capital, an unexpected door opened. It all happened when I passed by a small, more traditional shop. It had nice looking chopsticks, foldable fans and much more of the kind. But what truly drew my attention

were the masks. These were no Halloween masks or anything as silly as that, they were traditional masks. Tengu masks, Oni masks, Kitsune masks and much more. They were not cheap crap either, but sturdy high-quality stuff, probably hand crafted. Every line was perfect, every streak of paint was perfectly placed. I'm not sure what material they were made of, but they were thick and solid.

With care I took one of the Kitsune masks. From the moment I had a finger on the mask, the shopkeeper was staring at me, making sure I wouldn't do anything wrong. I understood, many young people must have come in to mess with these things. Holding the mask, I was surprised at its weight, there was a certain heft to it. I momentarily held it in front of my face and looked at myself in the mirror. Could it really be that simple? With care I put it back and looked at the others. Besides the traditional masks, there were also several blank ones. Perfectly smooth and perfectly white. I picked it off the shelf and had a good long look at it. I figured I could always try; I had nothing else. I have to admit though, my heart skipped a few beats upon seeing the price tag, pretty serious for a simple blank mask. I have no clue how much the others cost, but it must have been a rather scary figure. Doesn't matter though, the one I was interested in might not have been cheap either, but it was within my new budget. Not to mention, I was getting desperate. Anything to assist me in getting past my issues.

But before I returned home, I went to one of the many small cafes to have a drink and think things over. While staring at the mask placed in front of me, I held my cup of coffee close

to my face, letting the steam warm my skin slightly. There was so much potential, so much I could do with it. What if this really allowed me to play in front of other people? Could it really be? So much could change, so much could happen. I felt deep down in my gut this was it, I had struck gold. But, if so ... what else could I add? Just a mask was just a mask. If I were to do this, might as well go even further. I might not have been the cute dress type, or even simple nice clothes, due to my shyness. But if I wore a mask, I could do it, no one to see my bright red cheeks of embarrassment. Hell, it wasn't even me, in a way. The person that would be performing was ... different. I took several big gulps from my coffee, placed the mug down and put on the mask. I kept it on for five minutes, I figured I should get used to it, I was going to wear it a lot after all. It was a strange feeling, knowing I was safe, knowing no one could see me. That mask really gave me comfort, I could actually feel my body relax.

"Might as well ... might as well give this other me a name."
I whispered inside the mask.

My voice reverberated in a strange way inside the mask, landing back in my own ears in a strange and hollow fashion.

That day I arrived home pretty late. Mom and dad were even about to turn in for the night. It was pretty strange not having them call me anymore when I was late. What a difference from only three months ago. They gave me only a quick glance at first, but then they noticed the bags I had brought with me from my little ... excursion to the capital.

"Damn it, Himeko, what did you buy this time?" Mom shook her head, "You should be saving money, not throw it away on silly little thing."

"Don't start mom, please. These are not silly trinkets." I grumbled and stomped my feet, not realizing I must have looked like a little kid.

"Hime, I already see a shoe box in there, that doesn't seem very important to me." Dad crossed his arms.

"Just ... please trust me, this is important."

They eventually gave up. What can I say, I wasn't planning on telling them any time soon. This was too strange in and of itself, adding the disapproval of my parents to this was a bit too much for me to handle in one go. Having them find out later on was a problem for ... later on.

I decided to wait for an hour before opening my packages. It was time to start dressing up. I took everything off and slowly started to put all the clothes on I had bought. The main piece of my ensemble was the dress. Obviously, this was no normal dress, let us be honest, I don't have the boobs, ass or hips to pull off a classic dress. No, I knew I had to go in a completely different direction, a little pipsqueak like me could never be beautiful. But, what about cute? The dress I had bought was a cute puffy one with frilly lace edges and embroidery on the skirt part and the chest area. The color was a virginal white with a rusty orange for the embroidery and the details. It was rather snug around my flat chest and the skirt was WAY shorter than what I was used to from my school uniform. I felt very exposed, almost as if my ass would show if I bent over even a little bit. Hell, maybe it did, who cares at this point.

I corrected the large bow at the top of my chest, it made me feel like a damn present to be opened. But it was a pretty damn cute bow. Next I put on the cute little socks with frilly edges and the small black lacquer shoes I had bought. Those shoes, so tiny and childish, but they are so damn cute, I can't help it. As for my hair, considering it is hard to do something to it myself, I decided to put it in a simple ponytail. Then there was the mask as finishing touch. I carefully put it on and placed my bangs properly over it.

As I was standing there in my freshly bought new get up, I could actively feel my heart racing. All the time I was spending dressing myself up, I hadn't seen myself for a second, I had purposefully put a bathrobe over the mirror in my room. I wanted to see the result, my new look, in a single go. When I finally pulled the bathrobe off my mirror and was faced with this new person, the one that would be the musician from that moment on. It was a strange but rather convincing image. The other me looked like many of the modern-day female rock and metal bands. Well, at least to a certain extent. To be honest, the last thing I wanted was to be seen as a copy of anyone else. All these bands were amazing, but I didn't want to be them, I wanted to be me.

I took my guitar and hung it around my neck. I placed my fingers on the fretboard, placed my legs a bit wider open and bent one knee slightly. I started playing one of the more complex riffs I had written myself. There was no way in hell I could look at what my hands were doing. The good thing was, I didn't need to. I could easily play blindly. Everything else however was more than visible enough. Seeing myself going at

it on my guitar in that outfit, I saw it perfectly. It all fitted ideally. Something new was born, the new me had arrived.

"Hello, the name's Grace." I mumbled. "Pleasure to meet you all."

The day was far more pleasant than the day before. The temperature had jumped by about ten degrees and spring now truly was in the air, I could smell it. Under that nice blue spring sky, I stood once again ready to perform. But this time was different, this time there were more than two people waiting for me to start playing. It was more like forty people, if not more. They were watching me; they were waiting for me to start. Having so many people stare at me and what I was wearing, hoping to hear something impressive in the meantime, it was stressful and scary. But I felt fine, I knew I had it in me to do this. Before picking up my guitar, I made the decision to have a closer look at the crowd which was about to see me perform. I slowly paced in front of them, as if lining off my little territory. Seeing those intense faces staring at me so vehemently from up close was rather scary. The skin of my face must have looked like a freshly washed tomato, intensely red and dripping wet.

I realized as I was finished pacing, I couldn't let them wait for too long. I couldn't make that mistake, I had done this too many times before. So, I decided to get started immediately. I grabbed my guitar and made a loud and definitive statement.

"I am GRACE!" I said, "Please enjoy my music!"

I didn't wait for any reactions, I let my heart burst. I exploded. My fingers were instantly moving without reserve.

There wasn't a moment of doubt in them, they were dancing in a way they had never danced before. As I was playing fiercely, I closed my eyes. In those moments, I didn't care what was happening around me, who was listening to me or why. I quickly melted away in my music. I'm not sure how it happened, but I was truly feeling it that day. Maybe it was the whole situation, that pressure, the moment, everything. I could go all out; I was enjoying myself. This is what I wanted to do the rest of my life, this was truly my dream, I felt it in my heart. I realized, however, that from the moment I opened my eyes, there was the possibility people might have left. Sure, I was feeling the music, but were other people? Everyone is different and since I seem to be rather special, what if no one else felt it? But it didn't really matter, not actually. I knew I had found something, and I was able to play in front of others. The leap I had made that day, it had changed everything for me.

My eyes opened as the last note kept ringing. It was strange, what was happening? The world around me seemed to be completely quiet. Utterly painful silence. Even the sounds of the cars and the buzz of the people walking by were gone. But people were smiling, people were ... clapping. Then came the first sounds. My own heavy breathing echoing in my mask. Next came the cheers, then the clapping.

"Thank you."

My voice was trembling and I'm not sure anyone had actually heard me, but it didn't matter. I instantly jumped into a new song. This time I kept my eyes open. I then noticed countless people filming me. Talk about a weird feeling. I could

only hope there was nothing awkward about my physical appearance. No underwear showing, no embarrassing stains on my clothes from the sweat, no part of my face visible. I put it all out of my head and decided to start moving around my little space. I approached several people in the crowd, trying to be entertaining. No reason guitarists had to stand there in one place. As I was moving around, I noticed a big guy with a beard filming me with a grin on his face. I leaned over to him and between two notes, made the devil horns with my right hand. Hell, I even stuck out my tongue, not that anyone would notice from behind the mask, but that's a detail, I guess. It's the thought that counts.

God, I was so shocked by myself. I felt myself bloom. This was the person I wanted to become, just, in the open, without the mask. I wish I could have just taken it off right there. That would have been beautiful. But the mask was glued to my face. And even if I had taken it off, Grace would have fallen apart, she would have dropped to pieces only to fade away for all eternity. Grace would never have existed. No, I was hidden behind that mask and that would not change.

By the time I arrived back home, I felt empty and tired. But at the same time, my body still hadn't calmed down yet. I was still reeling from the surreal experience I had just gone through. Entering the house, I was surprised to see my parents had already gone to bed. It was for the better I guess; I was in no mood to really talk with them. I just wanted to process everything by myself. With a loud moan I dropped myself in my bed while still clinging on to my bags. I lay there in the

utter silence of my room. It was then that everything truly started to sink in. I had actually performed in front of other people, and it had gone great, far better than I had expected. This meant that there really was some hope for me. But I couldn't let me get ahead of myself, I still had to think step by step. First, I had to perform a few more times in the capital in the streets like I had just done. Who knows, maybe this had been a fluke. I wasn't a fool though, I knew all too well it was impossible for me to try it again without the mask. I was physically incapable of taking it off while I was performing and once again trying without a mask would be a massive step backwards. I couldn't go backwards, not again. Guess I had no choice but to embrace that thing.

After my mind had calmed down and I had almost fallen asleep on my bed still holding on to all my bags, I got back up and placed my bags aside and undressed. As I stood there naked in my room, seeing my own reflection in the mirror, an idea suddenly came to me. How about a picture to commemorate the big day? I unzipped the bag and took out my dress. With care I dressed myself, the whole outfit, safe for the mask. I stared at myself in the mirror, holding the mask in front of my face, a bit to the side. This way half my face was showing from behind the mask. But there was something wrong with it, with my face. I couldn't smile, the face that looked from behind the mask looked sad. Why? I was happy, I had taken a first important step, why did I look so damn miserable?

I rummaged through all the crap in my closet and took out my camera. My ... camera. Megumi's camera. Yeah, I had

inherited Megumi's camera. Well, not just that, but everything else too. I now had her computer, her books, her cameras, everything. I was the only one there to take everything over. I did try to get in contact with her parents, but they refused to have anything to do with Megumi, even after hearing about her death. And so, since her grandparents had passed away several years earlier, all of Megumi's possessions went to me, including all of the money she had saved, which was a surprisingly large amount. I wouldn't use it of course, at least not for frivolous things. I know she would have wanted me to use it to achieve my musical dreams, so I had decided to use it for such occasions. That was also how I had been able to pay for a mask and an outfit that was quite frankly too expensive for me. It was thanks to Megumi I had been able to become Grace. She had given me the opportunity.

I took the camera and put it on its stand. After looking a bit for the timer and how it worked in general, I took my pose, it was the same pose as I had taken in front of the mirror. My legs slightly open, shoulders back, my one hand clenched into a fist with my other holding on to the mask, holding it as I had held it before. Guess this was the proof I needed if anyone ever asked, I am Grace.

After taking about five pictures, each time the same pose as the other, I figured it was a good opportunity to do a little test without having to embarrass myself in front of other people. I was curious, how much could people see of ... me, while I was taking certain poses, so to speak. I know this might sound silly, but I didn't want my ass showing while performing on stage. The horror.

So, I put the timer at a continuous five seconds, giving me enough time to change my pose. I have to admit, I did some embarrassing things, but one can't be careful enough. What if I lost myself momentarily in a performance and did strange things. I spent several minutes taking pictures at different levels, keeping the height difference of different kinds of stages in mind. Thinking back at what I was doing, it feels a little silly right now, but I had no one to ask these things. I had no clue what I was doing.

Looking at the pictures afterwards, there were some who showed far too much of me. Staring at the most revealing of the pictures, however, a strange feeling came over me. Was this really me? Was this perverted little angle really taken of me? I could scarcely believe it. This masked person in the pictures seemed so much bigger than me. My butt showing from behind the frills, it didn't feel like mine, instead it felt like an actually attractive person. It felt abstract and surreal.

As the flow of thoughts kept coming, I decided to actively put it out of my mind, I realized I had been going in the wrong direction. It was me in those pictures damn it! And I knew now what not to do if I ever got on stage, if I ever did. I am such a silly girl, really. I have done so many embarrassing things in my life and they would just keep coming, I know myself all too well.

CHAPTER TWO

A Working Girl

By the time I got out of bed again the next morning, I felt refreshed, and my mind had calmed down again. I was dead tired however, having rested for only four hours. It was five in the morning when I had to wake up. I really didn't want to, but I didn't really have a choice, I had duties to perform. Now you might ask yourself what in the

hell kind of duties I could have. Well, I was a working girl. And by that, I mean, I had a job, obviously. Considering my school situation and my lack of a degree, you might find it surprising I had been able to attain a job in such a short time. I am just that awesome. Okay, I ain't, I was just ... well, I wanted to say lucky, but that would be a horrible use of words. The old lady I used to help on the rice fields had had a bad heart attack, putting her completely out of commission. According to the doctors, she was lucky to have survived. It had happened not long after Megumi had passed away. I was in a very dark place in my mind at the time. While my parents feared the old lady's heart attack might push me over the edge, in fact it had the opposite effect. I went to visit her several times a week. During one of those visits, I made her a proposition. I would work for her for an honest wage. I would put in my effort to take care of as much of the fields as I could. Sure, my limited experience was no match for her sixty years of field work, but it was better than the rest of her family. She agreed wholeheartedly, she was so happy with my proposition she often claimed she counted me as one of her own grandchildren. My guess is she was a bit emotional at the time, maybe fearing she would still pass away. I was often there when her actual grandchildren were also there. They rarely spoke with her; they were always absorbed by their smartphones. I guess they couldn't really help themselves, those little screens and that blue light, it is a harsh addiction after all. Having said that, I was generally quiet too, I didn't really talk much either. What do you say to old people? There was no way she would be interested in my music and since she had never known Megumi, my talks about

her were also pretty limited. So I mainly listened to her and her small and simple life stories. Those small experiences as a farmer, but also those far away memories from the war. There was a certain sense of elegance to her as she talked, a certain sparkle. She talked about it all with a happy face. I remember once asking her in one of my braver moments if she was afraid of death, that lurking end, that inevitability. She would give me the most beautiful smile.

"Sure, there is always that slight worry. But am I afraid to leave this world? No, I am a lucky woman. I had a man that loved me unconditionally for over fifty years, I have four wonderful children and ten gorgeous grand-children. Not to mention some wonderful friends," she said and placed a hand on my cheek, "If God decides it is my time, I have nothing left to complain about."

I gave her a said smile.

"But, little princess, that doesn't mean I will just accept my old ticker's decisions, I ain't shuffling off to whatever comes next easily, I would never do that to all of you."

I couldn't help but cry a little at the old lady's words. How could she be so happy and optimistic facing the darkness like that? I am so young and foolish.

So, the deal was made, I would work for her and take care of the fields. We even set up a contract, she was officially my boss. Of course, I wouldn't exactly be earning a lot, but I wouldn't want to earn too much either, she already had enough costs to worry about because of her medical problems. I didn't really need much money; I was still young after all. I didn't need much money yet, definitely not since I was still

living at home, no big costs yet to pay. I figured we could talk about pay when she was healthy again. And if you think I was being too optimistic, she was a stubborn old lady, she was well on her way to healing. She hadn't been lying to me when she had said she wasn't going to take it lying down. But in the meantime, I was the lone worker on the farm. If you think this meant I would simply drag my feet, then you're dead wrong. While many people are like that, I am NOT. It might not have been a very spectacular job, but I did take some pride in it. In a way, I felt my honor was at stake. Not to mention, I really liked the old lady. I did know a few people from school who would have probably laughed in my face if they had known I was now working on a farm. But that was one thing that wouldn't bother me, anyone looking down on or laughing with farmers are not worth the air that they breathe, let alone my patience and respect. They can go fuck themselves, to put it poetically.

By the time I arrived at the farm, the darkness shrouding the world slowly started to be broken by the impending daylight. It was a strange feeling, being there so early on in the day, so early in the morning. The location wasn't just strange in this completely different lighting, but just the fact I was up. I used to be so bad at waking up in the morning, but now that I was able to wake up at five in the morning without any trouble. It didn't even matter when I got in bed, even after three mere hours of sleep I would be able to wake up in a single go. I can't really explain it myself. But I assume it is that feeling, this urge to help the old lady as much as possible. The responsibility weighed heavily upon my shoulders, and I think

I kind of liked it. I felt useful, I felt, for the first time in my life, that someone needed me and I was more than a waste of space. I ... I guess this is what it means to become a grownup. I have to say, something did click in my brain during those months after Megumi had passed away. My treatment of music and those first steps towards performing in front of other people was only part of it. I felt a sense of responsibility in my work. It was a strange feeling, knowing there would be an impact if I decided not to do something, no one has ever needed me before, until then. I kind of liked not being that useless little twerp anymore. Well, I was still pretty useless, but there was a little change. There was one person who needed me, it was rather nice.

The day started rather slowly. I entered the house and made some tea. It would be a long day to come and probably a hot one, I had to force myself to drink enough. Knowing this, I had decided to drink tea instead of water. Those first days I stuck to water, only later on did I switch to tea after getting sick of it. Water is just ... water.

I carefully filled my bottle and went to start with the work I had to do that day. It wasn't anything special. I only had to transplant the small seedling from the seedbed into the wet fields. Easy work, just tedious. So after changing into the large rubber pants and putting on a shirt with long sleeves to protect my skin from the sun, I took the straw hat and placed it with my tea bottle alongside the field. There was the real possibility for a nice and sunny day, a straw hat was then a must, I felt.

By the time I started planting the seedlings, the sun had already broken through the horizon and was well on its daily

race to the top of the sky. My long day had started. But it wasn't a single long stretch, since relatively shortly after I had started planting the seedlings, I noticed something in the corner of my eye. People started to walk past the fields. When I looked over to them, I noticed it were high-school students. Among them I noticed ...

"Yukiya" I mumbled.

It took me a few moments to grasp my own realization.

"YUKIYA!" I suddenly yelled out loud.

I ran as fast as my short legs would allow me, through the water. After yelling his name several more times, his head popped up and turned towards me. It was clear he was confused at first, at first not realizing where his name came from and then why someone he didn't know was calling for him. It was only when I got closer that he actually recognized me and stopped, waving at me with a smile.

"Himeko, good morning."

He walked up to the edge of the field, watching his feet with every step he took, the last thing he wanted was to fall in the water of the fields. I know how crappy that feels.

Only when I stood two meters from him, I noticed what he looked like. For the first time I saw him in his new high-school uniform. He looked so proper and handsome. Especially with that new cool hairdo of his. He had changed so much since the last time I had seen him. There really was a massive difference in talking with him over the phone or through messages versus meeting him face to face. I really liked being face to face with him. I have to admit that in the first moments I had seen him again, I was still acting in that more active and open way you

do when you talk to someone from a distance over a phone or through the computer. Now standing there face to face with him, I locked down again, I was my shy little self again.

"H ... hey Yukiya." I mumbled, "You look great in your uniform. First time I see you wearing it."

"Ooh, thanks." He gave me a quick nod, "It's been a while since we've seen each other, hasn't it?"

"I know, I'm sorry." I let my head hang low.

"Can't be helped, you are a working woman now, time won't be as plentiful as back in middle-school."

I realized all too well what the coming months and years would look like for us, in that moment I saw it all in full color before me. We would occasionally hang out, but not as much. He still had to practice with his bandmates and I couldn't really join them anymore, at least rarely. In those seldom moments I was free, I obviously would. But eventually we would meet less and less. We would make promises but would both be forced to break them on a consistent basis. And it would eventually end with only talking long distance with our phones and once you reach that stage, that terminal stage of human contact where technology is the only link left, it's all over with. Many people have lots of friends in such a way, internet friends, technology friends, fake and forgotten friends. And then there was that boasting of the number of those fake and forgotten friends they had. But did their relationship have any real meaning? What did you have when you had those few bits showing that number? Would those few bits come to your rescue when you called them, crying your eyes out? How many people had friends the way I had Megumi? Someone to run to

you in your time of need. And how many would simply answer "Not now, I'm busy" and you wouldn't hear from them again for over a year. If those are the kinds of friends you want to boast about, go ahead, I'll gladly give you the victory. And Yukiya? I knew if I were to call him in a panic and ask him to come, he would still do it, but for how long? I wasn't sure, but I guessed a few months at the most. It would all depend on the new friends he would be making in his new school. The more friends he made, the smaller my part in his life would become. In those moments I stood there in that muddy water of the fields, I was faced with all of this truth in one massive flood. So I decided to take those few last happy moments with him and imprint them in my memories the way I had imprinted that weekend of camping with Megumi. I didn't blame Yukiya for that inevitability, it is the rule of nature for the small and weak people to be forgotten and left behind. He wasn't doing it consciously. I was staring at every little detail of him. His posture, his clothes, his body, his face, his hair, his school bag, one by one I saved it all on the crappy little hard drive in my head. I knew it would help me later, it would motivate me knowing I had once had a friend like that. In a few simple months I would have been a full-blown farmer and he a true high-school student. There would be not a single reason for the two of us to remain connected. I knew it was inevitable, but I had a lot of trouble accepting it. I could feel my hands tremble, I could feel the wave of emotions well up inside my gut.

"Hime, you okay?" Yukiya suddenly asked.