

The Surprise of Haruhi Suzumiya (First Part)

Chapter 5

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α-8

The next day, Tuesday.

It's all thanks to my eyes having decided to begin the day's work before my alarm clock that I was able to take a bit of a load off my heart by walking at a slow pace up the big hill to school. Despite the immutable scenery of commuters walking to school, the sight of a few first-years completely focused on the task of climbing the hill reminded me of myself from a year ago. It's only right now that I can walk to school so leisurely; next month, this task would only become the most troubling matter in my mind.

For no reason at all, I yawned and stood there staring blankly.

Why? It was another morning that wasn't exciting in the least, yet it brought strange feelings.

Ever since the suspicious-looking meeting with Sasaki, we haven't contacted each other. Despite this, we met again on Saturday, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about. But it was this fact in particular that was suspicious. Knowing clearly that they would set traps for me but not knowing when they were going to make their move really put me ill at ease. My impression of Kuyou Suou and the nameless guy from the future tells me that when that pair got started, they'll be even more vicious than that kidnapper Kyoko Tachibana-san, so I can't help but stay on guard. That future bastard's inclination not to reveal his face in front of everyone is also reason for concern. Even though I'm certain from Sasaki's tone that he's back in this time period, I don't know whether he'll make a move soon or not. It looks like the rationale of people from the future is quite convoluted, including that of Asahina-san (big). Last time he only watched Kyoko Tachibana perform a kidnapping. Will he get Kuyou to stab someone this time?

I sighed the way the Student Council president does. Continuing to think was pointless. It's better to go greet the brigade leader in the classroom first. Wait, when did that become a part of my daily school routine?

When I was about to take another step up the hill, someone patted me on the shoulder.

“Good morning.”

It turned out to be Koizumi.

I didn't know it was possible to run into him any time but after school. Wait a second. This couldn't be the first time, right?

“Yes.”

Koizumi and I—who echoed his greeting—walked on. He had a light smile as if he had successfully awoken someone from cryogenic sleep or he was a starship pilot who had the destination planet right in front of him.

“Your eyes look deep in thought. Did something happen?”

Regardless of whether something happened, since I'm always faced with the problem of climbing the hill day after day, I can't help but carry this expression. Why are you beaming? Aren't you the principal victim of Haruhi's emotional instability?

“That's correct.”

The handsome man straight out of a magazine said with overflowing elegance:

“The once frequent Closed Space occurrences have recently become sparse, making me much more at ease. Perhaps Suzumiya-san has been overly troubled by the recruitment of first-years and for a short while has unwittingly forgotten about the pressures facing her.”

I sighed and shook my head. Haruhi, you really are a simpleton.

“Even though simplicity also has its own set of intricacies, we have no way of controlling them. Not even Suzumiya-san at the helm can control them, so we passengers are even more powerless. It's just that I really find it hard to believe there are so many people who want to join the SOS Brigade.”

My apologies, eleven likable first-years. I know you didn't come to get ordered about by Haruhi; it's just that you're the best toys she can come up with.

“Even though I really wish the present circumstances would go on, it will only last a week at best. Let's see out of the people who came to the clubroom yesterday how many will dare come back today. Then we'll know how it turns out.”

Do you want to make a bet? I... Let's just assume six will come back, okay? As long as the number dwindles by half every day, by the end of the week no one will be left.

“Six really is a reasonable number. I will bet five and below then.”

Very well, the loser has to buy the drinks.

Passing through the school gate and arriving on the school grounds, I remembered the matter that had just been bothering me.

“Right, Koizumi. Is it okay to ignore them like this? Kuyou, Kyoko Tachibana and that nameless guy from the future—”

“And Sasaki-san too... Right?”

Koizumi's light smile was like a serene May sky after days of continuous rain.

“Right now, I'm not sure yet. Our people have considered that since they haven't taken actions yet and different communications with them are still in progress, it's not time yet to have them under constant surveillance.”

Having reached the shoe lockers, Koizumi pointed in my direction and said:

“It's very likely their key person is the guy from the future. Kyoko Tachibana is responsible for running her 'Organization'. If the alien came to Earth for a vacation, then I guess it's fine. However, once the rival is a time-traveler from the future, the matter becomes serious. His goals aren't as specific as Kyoko Tachibana's nor as blurred as that alien's. That means they're harder to predict. Maybe you'd be more effective at this job of finding things out.”

The wayside chat ended thus. I trust Koizumi with his perfect attendance record, as he left by saying “See you after school”. I hurried towards my indoor shoes.

I got to my shoe locker and opened it resolutely.

Inside were only a pair of dirty shoes; there was no message from the future.

Look how eagerly I'm willing to run towards any sign of unusualness. It really wasn't nice what Asahina-san (big) was doing. I trust her next greeting will again be “I haven't seen you in a long time”.

In class that day, Haruhi was excited to no end. It was as if she would simply drift away if she wasn't buttoned down. However, I should mention that she wasn't the only person whose mind wasn't in school work. Ultimately, how many first-years joining the brigade affected mine and Koizumi's wallets? After hearing her lay down the imperial edict yesterday, how many lunatics would dare return knocking on the door?

The one I cared a bit about was the female student dressed in a freshly washed uniform, as if it'd been sent out to be cleaned, which was so wide that it looked like it would almost slide down her shoulders. Seeing her reaction yesterday, she was the only one I thought would return. Despite not showing any distinctive mark other than a hairpin with an emblem of a faint smile, that girl, who was moe in a different manner than Mikuru, actually managed to remain calm as Mount Fuji in the monsters' den that was the SOS Brigade room. Maybe it's only because I remember her appearance that I've come to this conclusion. What did the other first-years look like? My mind drew a blank. But that only confirmed that out of the rest, none were particularly prominent.

Our school was lax on rules, but we didn't often see new students dressing out of uniform. At most, we'd see ugly red socks or someone altering the uniform into an unacceptable state right after school started. However once the discipline and clean-up squad working under the Student Council's orders got started, none lasted very long. Haruhi disdained students who would go to this degree of pretending to be strange and wouldn't at all consider imitating them. She'd be even more likely to sneer at people who pretend to be big and flaunt their power and prestige. She would tell them to go home.

Who Haruhi was looking for wasn't lightweights who only followed current memes to try to shock others, but people who were innately strange such that oddness was one of their

attributes. Even though Asahina-san was an exception, in the end she wasn't an airhead. From this, one can see that Haruhi may actually be a master at reading people. After the new semester began, Haruhi must have already run her eyes through all the first-year classrooms, but wasn't able to find half a student who piqued her fancy. That is to say, the victim list currently remains at zero, making me feel extremely at ease. Even if there was someone who could pass Haruhi's entrance exams, it would still mean that that someone must still be a normal person who couldn't be any more normal. Speaking of this, that type of person must be the most pitiful creature to let themselves get taken in by our brigade leader, brigade members, and myself, and to be forced to bear the heavy burden that had previously fallen on my doorstep.

In the end, these were only words; I still wasn't looking forward to it.

In passing, I should mention that it was thanks to Haruhi's pre-quiz math tutoring that I was able to perfectly work out today's math quiz. Even though I regret that showing my majesty on the testing stage for once was due to my reliance on knowledge the brigade leader shoved down my throat, it's too late to quibble about that now. I just hope that Haruhi is extra careful not to follow in the footsteps of how Prometheus spent his tragic final years when he showed humans how to wield fire.

But in the end no matter which god it turns out is running things, one shouldn't count on mere ropes to tie up Haruhi.

I don't know what the direction the wind is blowing, but Haruhi actually wasn't sprinting towards the clubroom at lightning speed. Instead, she remained obediently in the classroom. To prevent obstructing the daily clean up, she went over to the lectern and called me over.

What's happening? There shouldn't be a test tomorrow, right? Or did you hear from an inside source there would be a pop quiz?

"I'm waiting for first-years to gather in the clubroom first."

Haruhi happily showed a crooked-mouth smile.

"A good performance always shows up at the very end or doesn't show up at all. Waiting in the room for first-years to arrive is only mildly interesting. Wouldn't that be a waste of time? So instead I'm making a grand entrance at the very end in a display of splendor and majesty that befits a brigade leader. I can also conveniently eliminate those who arrive later than me."

Wasn't this your intention to begin with? With all due respect, how many minutes late do you intend to arrive? When that time comes, you can use "One of these Days" [*Note: by British band Pink Floyd*] as your entrance music, right?

"Looks like you can come up with a few good ideas on occasion too. But there's no need to draw particular attention to this. To show up at the clubroom with no particularly important matter and a boombox would be inexpedient."

It's good that I didn't bring this up during the morning break or otherwise. If I began imagining what it would be like holding a boombox following Haruhi, I'd get chills down my

spine. I'm not a wrestler playing the part of a villain going on stage to show-off, so don't order me around like a masked wrestler.

Haruhi, after giving an expression of polite refusal, looked up at the clock.

“Being half an hour late should be enough. Waiting is also a kind of test, but asking the brigade leader to wait would come at considerable cost. Kyon, are you listening? I'm talking about you!”

This is why I've repeatedly gotten fined and obediently paid. Over half of my allowance has been digested by the stomachs of Asahina-san and you.

“It's your own fault. Time is money. By spending only 5 minutes, you can conveniently look back through hundreds of years of history. Your minuscule amount of money isn't worth anything at all.”

Moved to action, Haruhi pulled out of her bag the textbook used for World History class.

“Which class are you choosing for Humanities? I've already decided on World History. You should pick this class too. World History is really good. The things we learn about are much more exquisite than in Japanese History class. Look, isn't the Treaty of Westphalia much more poetic than Buke shohatto (Various Points of Laws for Warrior Houses)?” *[Note: Treaty of Westphalia: a Holy Roman Empire internal dispute eventually drew in all of Europe into a 30 year long war. In the end, the treaty was used to settle the dispute. Buke shohatto: an edict laid down by Tokugawa specifying the number feudal lords to attend court and placed stringent restrictions on feudal lords listing their rights and obligations in a code of conduct]*

Picking at problems Japanese people had, Haruhi continued:

“For your sake, I'll start reviewing material from Grade 1 to pass the time. What? What kind of face is that? Seeing as how you're a brigade member, I'll even waive your tuition fees.”

My face was only the normal reaction to a strange person who wants to lecture people when they have nothing better to do. Willing to make some sacrifice just to keep her quiet is the proper expression here, so I unenthusiastically took out my textbook, opened it to the page Haruhi had and turned back the clock in my mind to Mesopotamia's time.

“To learn history all you have to do is rote memorization, so it's very easy. You also don't have to pay much attention to the precise year. As long as you memorize the sequence of events, what certain historical persons were thinking and what they did, you'll be completely fine. For example, the Pyramids. This type of indescribable building was constructed by Ancient Egyptians who were either bored to the point of spitting out blood or just wanted to show their grandsons their opulence.”

I don't think this matter was anything more than someone being respected to god status and this fellow being extremely capricious in wanting to build something, so it was only by ignoring the advice of the people closest to them and being stubborn to the end that the Pyramids were ultimately built. Speaking of modern history, this type of person is right in front of me.

“I wouldn't ever build something so obstructive. But now that you mention it, how about I raise an SOS Brigade monument on the school grounds before I graduate? We can decide on the appearance right now. What kind of stone should we use? Marble? Granite isn't bad either.”

Looks like she wants the SOS Brigade to be immortalized. Could it be that the Pyramids were also built for this reason? Was the ancient Egyptians' goal to leave some proof of existence for future generations that they used slabs of stone that took buckets of tears and sweat to move?

“Spot on, Kyon.”

Haruhi appeared as if she saw a student who'd understood what an analogy was for the first time.

“Studying history demands this kind of thinking and causes much more brain activity than when you're force-fed stuff. It's also one of the keys to memorization. Looks like you've finally begun to understand. My painstaking tutoring hasn't been in vain.”

Okay, okay, okay, I admit you're a good teacher who had also helped me a lot in the year-end exams. Having you as a private tutor, that young spectacled kid will definitely become a gifted youngster. He will actually become so outstanding as to invent a time machine.

I'm firmly convinced that even though the spectacled kid devoted all his attention to taking care of the Golden Coin turtle, he wouldn't bring up the matter to Haruhi. Despite my curiosity as to what he named the turtle, I couldn't ask Haruhi. Maybe someday I'll catch her talking about it.

I don't know if feelings in Haruhi's conscience for showing majesty and care for subordinates were aroused by pity for the workhorse of the SOS Brigade who was so used to being in the bottom of the class, but she became even more fervent than Okabe-sensei hoping to pave the way for advancement in my studies. It's a shame that no matter how passionate the lesson, it would just end up being as futile as the efforts of the current PE teacher.

Still in the classroom that was currently being cleaned up, I stood beside Haruhi near the lectern receiving a supplementary lesson in World History. Did I get caught up in a love for literature too? Right now, I was forced to enjoy Haruhi's instruction and could only circle keywords in the textbook with red ink without any deeper understanding. I had no choice but to accept everything she said as fact.

Faced with an offensive launched by a student at the top of the class, I could only woefully mumble “yes, yes” repeatedly and get swallowed by the shark along with some seawater, letting myself get slowly digested in Haruhi's stomach.

Since I didn't want to become some part that passes through her stomach, I was obliged to pull myself together. For my own sake, the work of cramming all that world history into my head ultimately served my own ends.

“The places and people that will appear on the exam are essentially fixed, so it's fine as long as you memorize these. Even if you are only half certain you can remember them, as long as you have some recollection of these names, the exam shouldn't be any problem. Even though the

easiest way would be to let yourself fall in love with history, you're completely naturally deficient at learning test-taking techniques, so I don't look forward to seeing your results. Maybe you should talk to Yuki about the exam next time? It's likely she'll recommend some interesting historical fiction for you.”

Does she have the historical fiction genre in her collection? Mythology, I do remember seeing.

“Those are fine to begin with, especially if you want to learn about how interesting human nature can be. As long as you puff up your chest and take the first step, knowledge that falls into the domain of the World History expert can wait. Are you listening carefully? Someone said long ago, 'This is the most important time of your life, because the knowledge you painstakingly learn will accompany you for the rest of your life.' The direction you take in life is also often determined during this time'. If you don't foster an interest in your teens when your brain cells are the most active, I bet you'll regret it later on.”

After Haruhi spoke with such fervor and assurance as if looking back at her youth ten years from now, she continued with World History. Even though it was mostly anecdotes that would fall into the category of trivia, it was far more intriguing than Economics class. Every sentence burned deeply into my brain, so maybe Haruhi really did have talent in implanting knowledge into blockheads.

This brigade leader definitely wasn't a flower vase. Her mental and physical faculties were impressive even compared to past prime ministers. She was just a bit too despotic.

“I think this should be enough.”

Haruhi put the textbook in her bag.

“First-years should have gathered in the clubroom by now. Kyon, let's go make our grand entrance. Pay close attention to the faces of the enthusiastic and energetic underclassmen who've decided to show up today too. My instinct tells me there are six who haven't been eliminated. Yesterday's test wasn't anything at all, so at most five would have been ruled out.”

If I didn't guess wrong, then Koizumi would have to cough up the money. Was it really this easy? If there were six students present at best, that would suggest five students and below meant there weren't many mysterious students among the first-years. However the way I see it, listening to a rude and unreasonable speech should have brought the number of first-years who were only curious about the brigade close to zero. It's better if they were immediately brought to zero, because this way, I would be liberated from these worrisome details and could go back to basking under the sun...

After being shoved out the classroom and then dragged to the clubroom, I immediately noticed book-loving Nagato reading silently, Asahina-san pouring tea into paper cups in costume, Koizumi playing cards by himself, and—

Having entered the tiger's lair were exactly six first-year students.

Three boys and three girls.

Now wasn't the time to celebrate winning the bet over Koizumi. Was this really happening? I didn't imagine there would be so many dauntless students wanting to join the SOS Brigade. This could be trouble.

Be that as it may, our brigade leader who was whole-heartedly satisfied, took a big breath to fill up her lungs and said in a clear voice of a volume that would not lose out to a full orchestra at practice:

“Very good, it looks like I misjudged you. I thought for sure there'd only be one in ten remaining. This year's first-years are really quite something. Now then—!”

Haruhi tossed her bag at me and sped towards the brigade leader's seat with lightning speed.

“I officially announce that the 2nd phase of the SOS Brigade entrance exam has begun!”

Having said this, she immediately took from the drawer a “Main Examiner” armband.

“Right now is the written exam! Hey, you don't have to be so nervous. It only consists of a personality test and questionnaire type questions—that's all. Even though it won't directly affect your admission, it may be used as supplementary reference. Regarding personal information, I will be the one managing it, so you can rest assured that it definitely won't be divulged to any teachers, students or other brigade members.”

Haruhi's eyes were like an underwater volcano that couldn't be cooled. She really was a blazing young girl.

“So Kyon, Koizumi and Mikuru, you should all leave for a moment. Ah, with Yuki here it will be fine. Come first-years, seat yourselves far away from each other. Move quickly. Ah, there aren't enough seats. Kyon, hurry, go borrow some.”

I followed her orders without uttering a word. It's because a despot never gets questioned that they become a despot who has wreaked havoc in the Literature clubroom for over a year now to the point that they completely treat it as their own. I hope the Student Council president will put in more effort so she won't put up a sign claiming this as her property even after she has graduated.

Koizumi, Asahina-san and I stepped into the hallway and stared blankly at the closed door. Haruhi must consider Nagato to be an invisible person to let her remain in the room. She doesn't really think she was a piece of leftover furniture from the Literature Club, does she?

“I'll go get some water—”

The upperclassman held the teapot close to her. The tap-tap sounds of her indoor shoes disappeared near the stairs. Gazing after her maid costume until she was gone, I wanted to save some time, so I tossed my bag into the clubroom and did the same thing I did yesterday—I went to the nearest clubroom to borrow some steel pipe chairs. If I knew I'd be doing this again, I wouldn't have returned them.

Just when I'd decided I would ask the Computer Society first, Koizumi gracefully raised one of his hands and said:

"I've already borrowed the chairs. I thought you and Suzumiya-san wouldn't be arriving early, so I walked around here. I've placed them over there; it looks like you didn't notice."

I ignored the bad taste in my mouth and took a look around. Indeed, there were five neatly folded chairs lined up on the side of the hallway.

"Why didn't you say something sooner? That way I wouldn't have wasted so much time."

"Actually you can't say it was a waste."

Koizumi's face drew close to me.

"We waited for half an hour after school. How did you and Suzumiya-san spend this time? I'm really curious to know."

Even if you used your mysterious gaze on me—as if the orbits of Mars and Earth had overlapped for the first time in ten thousand years—it would still end in futility. Nothing happened. Haruhi would never do something so shallow.

I cleared my throat and said:

"She seems to regard making people wait as a special quality, so this time she intentionally waited until the first-years had all assembled before showing up. All I did was play along with her fancy."

"Compared to when we meet in front of the station where the likelihood of her arriving late is extremely low, you almost get the feeling that she puts a lot of effort on getting there before you. I can't help but think that she's fine with making anyone wait except you."

I think that's a matter of ego. The first time I got there first—that is, the time where all three of you were late—I still ended up footing the bill. I don't think she has any intention of spending money on me.

"I don't think you can put it that way. When Suzumiya-san goes out and it's just you two, I don't think she'll ask you to pay every time. At worst, you would each pay for yourselves. I don't know how she behaved before, but I'm certain she'll behave like this now. Want to give a shot?"

I do want to hear you explain how your hypothesis can be tested.

"It's very simple. Pick a lucky day and call Suzumiya-san up to say, 'Sunday's a boring day. Want to go somewhere and have some fun?' Of course, you can ignore Asahina-san, Nagato-san and myself. You two can go wherever you want. So how about it?"

I thought about it for a while.

"You aren't trying to get me to go on a date with Haruhi, are you? Are you serious?"

“Strange, I don't recall having used a word like 'date'. But seeing as how you're already thinking of that, I personally don't have anything against it. I'm curious as to what you're thinking. How about occasionally going to a movie with the brigade leader and getting to know her a little better? Or better yet, why not just stay far away as possible from the SOS Brigade, regard yourselves as normal high school students and do some normal holiday activities? Maybe you'll discover something new.”

The gaze Koizumi stared at me with resembled the look one gave a nestling just leaving its nest for the first time and it pissed me off, naturally drawing my retort.

“If I really did as you said, it would be too reckless. I'm afraid I would have to ask you immediately afterwards to fix the situation. Even if the Earth stopped rotating, I wouldn't go on a date with her. If I did go on a date, it would mean I had become ill without being aware that I was ill. If that happens, please do me a favor by stepping in and giving me a good slap to the face to wake me up.”

“As you wish. However, I must say this is completely the opposite of what I wish to see happen...”

Koizumi's merry expression appeared as if he wanted to add something, but—

“Kyon! How long are you going to take with the chairs?!”

Haruhi's loud voice burst from the room. Koizumi and I shrugged our shoulders simultaneously like mimes who also happened to be twins and turned towards the folded chairs in the hallway.

Before leaving the clubroom door, I could hear the “gashah-ko” sound of the printer. What the heck was she printing?

The answers should be easy to figure out.

Q1: “What was the aspiration behind the formation of the SOS Brigade?”

Q2: “What can you contribute to the SOS Brigade?”

Q3: “Out of aliens, time-travelers, sliders and espers, which do you like best?”

Q4: “Why do you like them the best?”

Q5: “Write down a personal encounter with something mysterious.”

Q6: “Write down your favorite idiom.”

Q7: “If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?”

Q8: “Last question. Please express your resolve in wanting to join the SOS Brigade.”

Remark: "If you brought an item you like very much, here's an opportunity to earn some bonus points. Please bring the item to me."

The words that the nearly-out-of-ink printer eked out while trying to linger on with its last breath of life looked like this. So this was the written examination.

After Koizumi and I had finished setting all the chairs and let the first-years sit down, Haruhi placed an exam paper in front of them.

"The exam time is limited to 30 minutes. There are no word count restrictions. You can write on the back if you want. People caught looking at another person's exam will be immediately disqualified. Use your own brain to do a bit of original thinking."

She then extended the pointer with a whoosh.

"Begin!"

Only Haruhi and Nagato had the right to watch over the first-years eager to follow her instructions, so Koizumi and I were once more driven into the hallway. I conveniently snatched an extra copy of the written exam that got printed.

"Stick this on the door."

In the end, with a tone of unwillingness to listen to any objections, Haruhi left me with a piece of paper with "KEEP OUT!" scrawled on it and shut the door.

With no choice but to put up the warning sign with thumbtacks, I closed the door and was once again left standing as if petrified in the hallway. I gave Koizumi the exam paper that I had difficulty getting my hands on.

"What kinds of questions are these?"

"That's true."

Koizumi skimmed over the paper once and said while rubbing his chin:

"This is relatively similar to a real exam. The questions themselves aren't too difficult, so the answers are naturally easy to come up with. Trying to get a high mark shouldn't take too much thought."

In an exuberant mood, he lightly flicked the exam paper.

"This is a type of reasoning test. What Suzumiya-san wants to know is how the applicant reasons and tends to answer questions. From the answers, she can determine the applicant's level of thought, so it's a test of one's ability to reason. Of course, it's very likely she's using this as the main test rather than as a supplementary reference."

It should be the main test since she didn't spend a considerable amount of time devising the questions.

I snatched the exam back from Koizumi.

“But how should the questions be answered to curry Haruhi's favor? I don't think I could figure it out. What can you tell from someone's favorite idiom?”

“I'm pretty interested in Q3. Out of the ones listed, which one do you like the most?”

—Out of aliens, time-travelers, sliders and espers, which do you like best...

“It's a bit too abstract, isn't it?”

I turned my back towards Koizumi's probing smile.

“What are we comparing? Each one is different. As long as you add the qualifier 'the most useful type', then the question becomes fairly easy to answer.”

“Huh? Be sure to explain your logic to me.”

You have to look at the problem closely here. Trying to answer it in one go won't work. Broadly speaking, it's got to be Nagato's type, but we don't have any idea of what Nagato and the rest of the aliens are thinking. Time-travelers from the future who can effortlessly shuttle back and forth between time periods are easily worth all the gold in the world. Unlike Koizumi's limits, they have precognition about locations and times, so it's very convenient for them to realize the essence of a matter in a split second. Let's just say they all have their weaknesses. I'm only certain that I don't prefer sliders, since I have a feeling they don't possess any advantages.

While I was examining the exam questions in detail to pass some time, the water nymph Asahina-san returned with a sloshing teapot.

“Ah, are we forbidden to enter?”

“It seems that way.”

I took the devastated upperclassman's jade teapot and leaned against the wall to avoid looking like a poor sap who got sent into the hallway as punishment.

“I don't know if there's enough time to boil water and make tea for everyone...?”

Asahina-san gazed at the clubroom door with a worried expression that really evoked tender feelings towards her. Despite wanting to keep the beautiful image of an upperclassman insistent on preparing the tea in my mind, staying like this for half an hour seemed a bit pointless. So I had to think of a good place to go.

“How about the cafeteria? Even though the cafeteria's already closed, we can get some coffee from the vending machine.”

Since Koizumi took out some beef jerky, neither Asahina-san nor I wanted to offend his hospitality. I was surprised he had such a practical plan. The last phrase was particularly persuasive.

Koizumi lightly winked at me and said:

“Besides, I still owe you from the bet.”

I'd have forgotten if you didn't bring it up.

We left the clubroom walking beside each other and patronized the vending machine outside the cafeteria with a visit. After everyone had a cup, we sat around a round table on the terrace.

Spring's cherry blossoms were less and less of a match for the flourishing greenery. During this time last year, I definitely would not have imagined I would be sitting together with these kinds of people.

With this, I let the sweet tang of hot café au lait make a swirl in my mouth—

“Kyon-kun, do you know what the entrance exam is testing first-years on?”

Listening to Asahina-san pose such a question while using her paper cup of black tea to warm her hands, I immediately passed her the exam paper in my pocket.

“So this is the exam? I really wouldn't be able to handle it since I have no idea what kind of talent she's looking for.”

“Huh?”

The upperclassman stared at the ground looking like a little girl in seventh grade battling the memorization of the 9x9 multiplication table. The sight was absolutely heart-warming.

“It's truly strange.”

Koizumi tilted his head elegantly. The paper cup in his hands forthwith appeared as if it were valuable Meissen porcelain from Germany.

“It's not too bad. It's only expressing your feelings and thoughts of the current circumstances. Having twenty minutes with the three of us gathered together without any distractions, isn't this a blessing hard to come by?”

Koizumi put on an elegant smile.

“Don't you think so?”

Of course I've thought about it. In tumultuous times, I've already spent I don't know how much time together with Nagato and Asahina-san. When trouble comes, Koizumi's appearance however becomes rarer than that of a supporting actor. Normally, occasions for an esper to shine are few and far between. At most, he can play the hero for a few seconds like that time with the giant cave cricket. Nevertheless, the entity called the 'Organization' really did put a lot of effort into the abduction case. I really can't thank them enough.

Originally, I thought I agreed with the time-traveler Asahina-san's views on two or three things about Haruhi. However, I changed my mind after listening to Koizumi's mindless chatter. The upperclassman's sip-sip sounds of drinking her black tea didn't seem to contend with his assertions.

Regarding Haruhi's supernatural powers, world transformations, and news about hostile forces, nothing was said. What was said fell entirely within the subject of school life with occasionally a joke one of us heard from a teacher or a student, interesting new board games to buy, etc. This must be so-called “cheerful talk”.

Asahina-san sometimes smiled and sometimes nodded her head as if deeply absorbed in thought. This was all that happened. If a passerby chanced upon this scene, they'd have seen nothing more than an upperclassman hanging out with a couple of underclassmen. Maybe one could even argue that for we who were trying to pass some time, this was the correct way to spend such time.

No matter if it was a time-traveler or an esper—



It's completely irrelevant. A couple of companions engaged in underground brigade activities—maybe this would be a better way to describe the scene.

Whether time is valuable or cheap, it's only during free time that I am liberated from having to consider various types of calamities. I don't have to worry about the appearance of a new kind of alien, time-travelers, or even being menaced by Haruhi's new ideas. Despite feeling

regretful Nagato couldn't be with us, I recalled that Haruhi couldn't be left by herself for thirty whole minutes.

Evidently, I still couldn't picture the SOS Brigade getting a sixth member. I also couldn't imagine the sight of losing Nagato, Koizumi, or Asahina-san.

Suddenly, I wanted to refute the person who first said “Lady Luck was a fickle mistress”. In the world, there are actually some things that have remained constant since ancient times. For example, my memory of that night. The memory of Haruhi and I with regards to what happened may not have been captured in a photo, but it was nevertheless something we would never forget.

As Asahina-san's smile was covering up treasured thoughts in the depths of her mind, I couldn't help but feel a sense of melancholy. In less than a year, we would be graduating from the third year of high school.

However, the present moment inscribed itself into our collective memories. One that could never be erased since it resided in the minds of my fellow students and myself.

It had to be this way. While in deep reflection, I downed the café au lait in one gulp, which had cooled by now. Despite it having been Koizumi's treat, I wasn't in the mood to particularly rejoice over the fact nor did the drink taste particularly toothsome.

Nevertheless, it was a source of pleasure.

The present me still had the energy to enjoy these small things.

Ten minutes after the allotted half hour for the exam, we returned to the clubroom only to see a satisfied brigade leader flipping through the returned exam papers like an emperor satisfied that her commands had been carried out. Aside from Nagato who was even more transparent than an invisible person, no one was left.

“Where are the first-years?”

To my inquiry, Haruhi replied:

“They all went home. After the written exam ended, I told them no matter whether they thought they passed or failed, they all had to come back tomorrow. I think I'll keep everyone for now except those who were only half interested.”

“How do you determine whether they passed or not?”

Haruhi neatly tapped the stack of returned exams on the table until it was flush.

“I definitely wouldn't use this type of exam to determine new brigade members. These questions don't even have proper answers, although I will give first consideration to those who answered in the most interesting manner.”

Looks like she only wanted to make them jump through a hoop. This actually gave an opportunity to the applicants who felt obliged to impress the brigade leader, while only adding a little trouble to the rest.

“Idiot. I obviously have my reasons. I'm telling you that attending the exam in itself was a test of motivation. The ones who got discouraged by this little trouble will automatically eliminate themselves by not showing up tomorrow, won't they?”

This is only one type of test. Wouldn't the applicant screening process be a bit too simple then?

“I wanted to make some tea for them.” Being of one mind to help first-years in some way, Asahina-san said, “Have they gone already? What a shame.”

I couldn't help but sympathize with the group of first-year applicants who had gone two days without being able to enjoy the upperclassman's handiwork.

As I was busy gazing at Asahina-san who was immediately boiling the water, Haruhi began once more.

“Kyon, I recruited you as a brigade member without you having to meet any preconditions, so you should feel grateful.”

Haruhi sat cross-legged on a chair.

“If you keep continuing to make trouble like this, be careful or you might get outpaced by a new member and get kicked right out the door. Because the only ones who can pass my final examination must certainly be super-gifted talents. However, I want to leave the verbal exam to the very end.”

Haruhi took out a red-ink pen, and said while she was marking the exams and occasionally writing something on them:

“Does anyone want to try my verbal exam right now? If you answer well, I'll consider giving you a promotion. It's also good practice for a job interview.”

No matter how you put it, it wouldn't have been close to a normal company's interview protocol. Even if Haruhi herself was interviewed by the boss, it's not like her answers would have met the hiring standard. Now if one got criticized in a mock interview by someone like that, wouldn't the impression left behind be too horrible?

“Pardon me for not wanting to take part.”

“Really?”

Haruhi's mood wasn't affected in the slightest and she merrily returned to diligently going through the exam papers. To be honest, it did seem fairly interesting, so I asked:

“Haruhi, let me take a look too. I'm pretty interested to see the stuff those rascals wrote.”

“That's not possible.”

Without hesitation, Haruhi said:

“It would betray my responsibility of keeping their information a secret. They have personal information written on it, so of course I wouldn't casually let someone else see it. In the end, new members are determined by me, so there'd be no point in letting you see it anyways.”

Her big, sparkling eyes took a glance at me.

“I especially can't show it to curious people within our own brigade. Choosing new members is the brigade leader's job.”

I could only suppress the idea that had just come over me. Oh well, looks like the brigade leader was pulling rank on the matter of choosing new members and completely ignoring any opinions we may have given. Aside from recruiting Nagato and me essentially at first glance, Asahina-san and Koizumi entered the brigade through imperial appointment.

Back to the matter at hand, how many out of today's 6 applicants can keep up with what Haruhi referred to as “the final examination”?

“Huh?”

I was watching the upperclassman from behind pouring the hot water into the tea pot, when I suddenly realized something. Were all six of today's applicants also from yesterday's group of eleven? There shouldn't have been anyone showing up for the first time, right? Since those who wanted to join the brigade may not have wanted to appear on the scene at exactly the same time, doesn't that mean the dropout rate wasn't 50%?

I tried to connect recollections I dug up from memory.

That's right, did that female student come today? I mean the one from yesterday who looked like someone I knew and had drawn my gaze for a moment. If it weren't for having been forced out of the clubroom right away, I could've taken my time to more closely examine the six faces using the opportunity afforded me by the writing of the exam.

It was really something I took to heart.

Koizumi took out a pack of UNO and began to shuffle the deck. Even without thinking, I knew that watching him deal cards wouldn't make amenities for my loss. After Asahina-san placed the freshly brewed tea overflowing with a great aroma on the table, we three idle people began a round of cards. But my head felt like it carried some unexplained added weight. This type of test will end in thirty seconds. Is this how being unable to answer a super-simple question must feel like?

Quite subconsciously, I gazed at Nagato.

The Literature Club president who read books non-stop while sitting motionlessly in a chair that didn't depart even 1mm from the floor. It wasn't hard to imagine that during the exam, she also regarded herself as a bronze statue. However, since Nagato didn't move nor utter a sound, it meant that the world was still at peace. Or at least that out of the first-years wanting to

join the brigade, there weren't any who were from the Canopy Domain like Kuyou, the kind of being you were too afraid to even flatter.

“.....”

In the space of an eighth rest, Nagato stopped flipping through pages as if she found a typo. She raised her eyelids by a distance on the scale of millimeters.

With eyes looking like a stone tablet that had just had morning dew wiped off, she looked at me for a while. Then, as if nothing had happened at all, she let her eyes drop back to the pages of the book.

Nothing more was necessary to ease my anxiety. As long as Nagato was in the clubroom cracking through book spines, the world wouldn't be thrown into a plot as poisonous as mandrake extract. Haruhi was working hard at evaluating exam papers. Koizumi, Asahina-san and I with nothing better to do, played cards to pass the time.

Even though I felt a bit sorry for first-years who were going to join the brigade, regardless of whether they were truly interested in the brigade or not, it was good that you could take some burden off of me by having some fun playing with Haruhi.

If possible, I hoped three could return tomorrow. Despite the cruel admission process probably leading to high dropout rates, this number was still respectable. A huge drop in numbers however would only make Haruhi depressed sooner. Oh, first-years. All you have to do is to endure until this weekend.

β-8

The next day, Tuesday.

The anatomy of the human brain is truly marvelous. Despite rolling in bed for a good while to finally fall asleep, my body still wouldn't let me waste time under my blanket. It's all thanks to my eyelids automatically opening before the alarm clock went off that I was able to walk a slow pace to school up the big hill that really punished your heart. However, my mind wasn't in the same leisurely mood. Passing a first-year completely focused on the task of climbing the hill, I allowed myself to meld into the boring, unoriginal scene around me of students commuting to school. Walking at a pace slightly faster than normal, I passed through the school gate.

Going like this, my mood will only get more and more ponderous. The best thing to do would be a relief of my pressure. Therefore, my first step was to pour out my grievances to Haruhi.

Arriving at the classroom, I noticed Haruhi's seat was empty. It looked like I really arrived too early. Despite the number of things I wanted to say outnumbering the stars, what I actually could say seemed pitiful in comparison. This wasn't even a matter of having a limited vocabulary. I could now completely understand how Asahina-san feels being forced to explain

matters she couldn't explain through words. Should she use body language? Or how about pictures?

The answer to both questions is a resounding no. Let's just say it's all okay if I can't explain something like that. Simply said, as long as Nagato returns to a part of our normal everyday life, everything will be at peace. Of course, the sooner that day arrives the better, because the longer Nagato's fever lasts, the greater Haruhi's suspicion will become. To cure Nagato's illness, there's no telling what Haruhi would do.

As I said, even if everything went back to the day of the entrance ceremony in our first-year, I wouldn't have felt it was out of place. It's only that I didn't want to be sent back to the starting point at all, gasping for breath like an ox. I'm not sure I can enjoy a perfect first-year, so I conclude by saying that I enjoy the company I am currently with. It wasn't with few difficulties that we had made it this far, so how could we let such a year go to waste? I will definitely make it to the finish line hand-in-hand with everyone.

“Oh, so that's it.”

I sat down on a stiff, rattling school chair and immediately thought of the solution. Even though I subconsciously discovered that I was exceedingly restless with anxiety, having made this self-discovery made me proud of myself. To make a long story short, I was only terribly afraid that a person close to me would disappear. Thinking back, this wasn't the first time. When Haruhi disappeared, I was sent into a flurry of confusion. It was because the world had been remade in a completely topsy-turvy way, but I won't go into detail right now. Asahina-san was kidnapped right in front of my eyes, Nagato is unable to go to school...these matters really made me go through a lot of trouble. These events definitely happened, despite there not having been any evidence.

The same argument can be used. If time went back to a year ago and I again had to listen to Haruhi's self-introduction, made all the more shocking by the fact that she never uttered a word that didn't shock people, along with the fact that I consider my silly caprice to have been due to my youth and energy, I think the likelihood of my striking a conversation with Haruhi again would only be 50%. I would even go as far as say that my playing a supporting role in her brigade was the result of an accident. It seemed I could have just as easily spent my days with Haruhi Suzumiya leisurely in class 1-5 without having much to do with sidekicks like Taniguchi, and I wouldn't have been dragged by my collar to the Literature Club room. I wouldn't have met Nagato, wouldn't have seen Nagato without her glasses, wouldn't have seen Asahina-san's safe return from her kidnappers, Koizumi wouldn't have transferred to our school, and no one would have taken part in the Remote Island Mystery or made that foolish film. We would have spent our time leisurely, getting carried along by the stream. Indifferent, without any ups and downs, seeking tranquility and inaction, I would have become a normal high school 2nd year student.

Having said so much, in the end it was just a “possibility”. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, I realized how pointless it was to imagine such a scenario since the likelihood of it happening was zero. Reality was what it was and no matter how you looked at it, nothing would change.

Now please don't ask which scenario I would prefer. I don't really have the time to hesitate when the answer is obvious.

With this, I took up my share of responsibility. I vowed not to rely on a more capable person to do what I could not. Even though I didn't have the glib Koizumi, I could at least deliberate this much.

Last year, when Nagato fainted at Tsuruya's ski resort, Koizumi's mind played a big part in solving the problem. But this time it seemed a bit beyond his powers. If he had the capability to stop the peculiar alien life form Kuyou who'd suddenly appeared, he would have taken action already.

Regarding Nagato, it was also because she had to obey the Data Integration Thought Entity's orders that has landed Haruhi and myself in a situation neither of us could be too pleased about. Aside from Haruhi being among the people who could still repair the situation, there was just me.

I owe Nagato a lot for things that have happened until now. If I didn't take this opportunity and step up, where would the collective face of the human race be? No way would I lower my head in front of the knife-wielding Asakura or the mysteriously appearing and disappearing Kimidori. Furthermore, my middle school classmate Sasaki also falls into that category. Despite referring to herself as a "really close friend", Sasaki seemed a tad strange for both Haruhi and I. However, she was still much more normal compared to the other characters related with this matter. Sasaki and I have spent enough time together to have complete faith in each other, so I believe this type of slander wouldn't move her at all. Our relationship was completely platonic and I didn't pay any attention to the biological differences that existed between us. Sasaki regarded me this way too and it will remain like this forever.

Fortunately I mailed a Happy New Years card to her, so she was still looking forward to laughing and having fun with me at this year's student reunion. One could say that Sasaki simply has a talent to make all problems disappear and return to the socializing of our middle school days. Of this I was certain.

It was only now that I truly realized Sasaki was a really close friend. Even if we met ten years from now, Sasaki would still call "Hey, Kyon" and start chatting. She was a rare person like this and wouldn't get tricked by Kyoko Tachibana or Fujiwara. She was a normal human with both feet steady on the ground.

Even if Kyoko Tachibana, Fujiwara, and Kuyou began an all-out war against Koizumi, Asahina-san, and Nagato, Sasaki still wouldn't be my enemy. She was my old friend and middle school classmate, nothing more. Kyoko Tachibana, Fujiwara and Kuyou...you've really met your match. The Sasaki I know isn't just some plain, ordinary human and someone you can win over to your side with a few nice sounding words. Deep inside, she's someone harder to deal with than myself, even more stubborn than Haruhi, and a firm adherent to empiricism.

After having convinced myself, I recovered a peace of mind. Everything was set; the only part missing was Haruhi.

When the bell rang marking the prep period before the first class, Haruhi still hadn't appeared. I didn't imagine there would be an occasion where even she would be facing a time of crisis. I silently fixed my gaze on the blackboard letting my back experience the feelings brought on by the emptiness behind me.

Class was about to start. I proclaim that everything that's happened didn't actually start the moment when I first opened my eyes lying on my bed today, but when Haruhi was sitting beside me and I customarily turned my head. The passage of a whole year was like an unwritten provision, one that compressed 365 days into a single day.

Based on my biological clock, today was the longest day in history.

Hold on, Nagato. We'll definitely come up with a way to make you better. What about the Canopy Domain's damn robot Kuyou Suou? She was the only enemy we absolutely had to defeat. The guy from the future we could handle after that.

When I had laid down my determination on the difficult matter, the bell rang signifying the end of the class meeting period. It was only until the bell finished ringing that Haruhi finally appeared, entering the classroom almost at the same time as Okabe-sensei. What was different today was that she passed through the backdoor of the classroom slowly. Her expression also wasn't very brisk.

Once Haruhi sat down, she noticed my gaze right away and returned a meaningful glance. From the pocket of her uniform, she retrieved a key and returned it in a flash, but this had already told me enough.

“I dropped by to see Yuki on the way.”

In the brief time between the class meeting period and the first period, Haruhi was able to explain:

“I wanted to cook her some breakfast, so I let myself in.”

“Then what happened?”

“You mean with Yuki? She was sleeping. The moment when I opened the door to take a look at her, she got up and made some eye contact with me, then went back to a peaceful sleep. I didn't want to wake her up, so I left after cooking breakfast. Ah— Her fever seemed like it wasn't too serious, but getting more rest is still the best course of action.”

“That's true.”

Haruhi softly sighed.

“Seeing Yuki lying down like this, I really want to...”

She hesitated for a few seconds, then continued in a softer tone:

“I really want to hold her tightly in my arms. Don't misunderstand me. It's just a feeling that only if I hugged her would her illness be cured. But it's totally unreasonable. Why do you think I have this kind of feeling?”



Haruhi propped up her head and turned towards me. Her expression wasn't one of worry, but of sullenness. I don't know how, but I could almost see what Haruhi was feeling, which made me jittery as well. However, it must have been a case of mistaken perception on my part. Even if I had hit the 0.01% chance and gotten it right, don't even mention the thought of giving Haruhi a hug.

Regardless of what the main reason was, I'm certain that Haruhi and I were seeing eye to eye. Koizumi and Asahina-san as well.

A Nagato skipping and jumping about... This kind of description doesn't seem quite fitting. Anyways, my point is no one wanted to see Nagato sickly and bed-ridden for a moment longer. The Literature Club room was the place most suited to her. Even if she moved there to live full-time, it wouldn't have bothered me; there were plenty of facilities for her to use. Missing Nagato from the clubroom was like missing Jesus from the Last Supper—it would have been gloomy and dismal.

Returning to the matter at hand, there was something I absolutely had to report to Haruhi. I might even catch Haruhi having a stupid expression on her face. It was only the Biology teacher's arrival that made me unable to open my mouth.

Looks like the ten minutes before the next class began would provide me with long enough time. Since just a single sentence was able to worry me so, obviously the length of speech didn't have anything to do with its importance.

After a class where I couldn't absorb nor memorize anything had ended, I immediately turned my head to seek the advice of the brigade leader.

“I have something I want to talk to you about.”

“What?”

Haruhi lifted her eyebrows. She looked at me with two eyes which grew slightly bigger.

“Can you say it here? If it's a secret, we can talk about it on the roof or the emergency escape stairs.”

“It's not necessary. Are you going to see Nagato this afternoon too?”

“Of course.”

“I only want to say this. By chance, I have some matter to attend to today, so I can't go over to visit the patient even though I'm really worried about her condition...”

Just as I was searching for any signs of Haruhi becoming upset and uneasy, her eyes and eyebrows suddenly returned to their previous state.

“Oh, so that's it.”

She rubbed her jaw. I didn't know what she was sizing up.

“What's the matter? It's not Shamisen shedding hair, is it?”

I didn't have time to reply when Haruhi said:

“No, that's impossible. It must be something you have to do, something comparable to...”

I wasn't born with the ability to make up nonsense and improvise on the spot, so I stood there for a while like a wooden plank.

“Forget it, who cares. Whether you come or not, it's the same anyways. Always dragging everyone in tow even when no invitation had been made must be a bit embarrassing to Yuki. Anyways, Mikuru and I are enough to cook the meal. At the very least, I'll be there with her.”

Her train of thought again moved forward another few meters.

“That's right. Uh huh. Correct. If we did that, it probably wouldn't be good. Right, that's what we'll do.”

It was as if her brain had gotten rewired.

“Neither side can be neglected.”

Whispering, Haruhi seemed to have arrived at a decision, pressing her head close to my face.

“Today you don't have to come. Koizumi too. Mikuru and I going to Yuki's house is enough. She probably hasn't bathed in two days, so I want to help scrub her body. If there are any guys around, they would actually add to the hassle. It's no big matter, just a common cold is all. Having a good rest to recuperate is the most important thing.”

Haruhi sat down. Then she got an idea and stood up again.

“We have to let Koizumi in on this plan first. Even though it's not good to pass the responsibility to the vice brigade leader, he's definitely qualified. Looks like I still can't turn a blind eye to it.”

Having spouted a mouthful of riddles revealing she had horrible ideas in mind, with a big grin on her face, Haruhi stormed out of the classroom like a puff of smoke. The speed at which she changed her plans and carried out her resolve was comparable to the speed of atomic particles.

After having seen a bottlenose dolphin launch a raid on an unsuspecting school of sardines, Taniguchi's evil smile perfectly collided with my glance as it returned to its original direction.

“Hey, Kyon. What was it that you talked to Suzumiya so intently about? You don't intend to finally start paying taxes? *[Note: original Japanese has marriage as a connotation]* You traitor.”

I completely don't understand what you're talking about. Anyways up until now, the only tax I've had to pay is the consumption tax.

Even though Taniguchi wasn't so blind as to miss my hands shooing him away, he continued the “ku-ke-ke” laugh of some strange bird.

“The way I see it, even if someone went through everyone on Earth, the only person who could last a whole year beside Suzumiya would still be just you. Now that you can easily break the longest-lasting person record every day, why not just stay like this forever? Kyon, you have a gift for getting along with strange people. Of this, I'm certainly not mistaken.”

The way I see, you've made hundreds of mistakes. Every single one of your exams shows this.

“Aren't you the same? Exams aren't the only means of demonstrating your talent.”

Only successful human talents can say these things. Furthermore, the results determine everything. When it comes out of the mouths of people like us who haven't achieved anything, all it does is serve as an excuse for avoiding reality.

“Maybe.”

As usual, Taniguchi affectionately hung on my shoulders.

“Nevertheless, I just need to examine these matters for a moment and it becomes crystal clear. You're really close with Suzumiya. With Asahina-san, it's something completely different. Doesn't it work well this way? Eh?”

Eh your sister.

I lifted Taniguchi's hand and said:

“What about you? Have you swindled any naive first-year girls?”

“Those things come later. There's still plenty of time before summer vacation. First comes Golden Week, where I have to hurry and do some short-term work to see if I can meet any good female students. What's really true is that 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'.”

Taniguchi kept his hand extended towards the roof the whole time. He was as foolish as they come.

“Are you an idiot?”

This was the most appropriate reply I could come up with. I don't think there exists a better word to describe him. Didn't he say the same thing last year and how did it turn out then? In my recollection, there was a long string of zeroes.

Forget it. Taniguchi, I'm very happy to be your classmate again. Even though my frame of mind was that of a front-line commander being besieged by mechanical foot soldiers and only having a shovel to dig entrenchments with, having a foolish conversation with Taniguchi took a lot of the stress out, even if it wasn't something mere words could completely get rid of.

Having a friend at the same level as you was definitely very important. Even if we both regarded the other to be the dumbest person on Earth, it didn't matter because we were the only ones who knew the truly stupid things we ourselves had done in the past.

If someone didn't know, it wouldn't have made them an unprecedented genius, but a vain, thick-faced person who was more like a turtle in a human form than a human.

During lunch break, what Haruhi wanted to talk to Koizumi about wasn't actually self-explanatory.

After finishing my lunch and wanting to go to the washroom, the SOS Brigade vice leader—who had been leaning against the wall waiting to ambush me for who knows how long—immediately said after seeing me:

“I have two things I want to tell you about.”

With his arms crossed, he stuck two thumbs up. His expression was cool and refreshing like a meteorologist who was firmly convinced there was a zero percent chance of rain.

“One piece of news is good. The other isn't good or bad.”

Then please start from the news that isn't good or bad.

“Suzumiya-san ordered me to remain in the brigade clubroom.”

I don't know why Haruhi would keep you locked up like that. You didn't chop someone down in some unknown castle, right?

Koizumi said while smoothly eluding me:

“Simply said, I think she's only being responsible. She wanted me to continue staying in the clubroom for a while after school, almost as if it was something that couldn't be neglected.”

Why? The original resident Nagato, brigade leader Haruhi, nor maid Asahina-san were going to be present. The utility value of the clubroom was even less than the shell shed by a cicada.

“Ah, did you forget? The advertisement for recruitment of new members is still snug in its original spot; it hasn't been taken down yet.”

“... I had already forgotten.”

“The first-years who have sharp observational skills towards mysterious occurrences may not necessarily want to join the SOS Brigade. This might be what Suzumiya-san is thinking. If you don't have the courage to show up, then don't show up at all. It would save us the hassle. That type of thing. However, it seems that she hasn't put much effort into recruiting new students with her attention being diverted elsewhere.”

Nagato was already like this. Haruhi was even so earnest as to call on her early in the morning to make breakfast. Looks like she really didn't have first-year students on her mind.

“Exactly. However, she doesn't consider the probability of recruiting a first-year to be zero. Doesn't this type of thinking resemble the demeanor a brigade leader should have? Compared to you, she's definitely much cooler-headed.”

You should use nastier words if you want your talk to affect me.

“I'm only stating my personal feelings. But what you say makes sense. You have your own sense of righteousness, so would it count as your righteousness having gone a bit too far if you took irrational and impulsive actions? I must regretfully point out the answer is in the affirmative. As long as someone disagrees with your beliefs, they would get labeled as an evil lackey or a spy. This happens because you're just that righteous.”

It must be because this sentence came out of the mouth of a silly kid who always had a gentle and soft smile that I felt I really wasn't being praised.

Koizumi ignored my gaze that resembled that of a hungry spectacled caiman crocodile and said in the gentle, kind voice of a cello:

“Next comes the good news. The Closed Spaces and Celestials made at night by Suzumiya-san have stopped appearing lately. The results of the statistical analysis of the occurrences tell us that the Celestials will almost certainly be calm for a considerable amount of time. Much of the burden on my body has finally been removed. Although this is only my personal opinion, examining the current state of affairs should make you greatly relieved. Furthermore, no amount of overtime pay could have made up for my lack of sleep.”

The renewed appearance of Closed Spaces should have begun after the meeting with Sasaki, right? Presumably their sharp decrease could be attributed to something on her mind that outweighed her concern of comparing herself with Sasaki.

“Of course.” In Haruhi's tone of speech Koizumi said: “The something on her mind must be Nagato not being able to come to school. Such an unusual situation focused all of Suzumiya-san's attention in one place.”

So it doesn't matter anymore if Celestials cause a lot of damage? No matter what, Haruhi wouldn't place Sasaki higher than Nagato in importance.

Koizumi agreed with rejoice:

“From Suzumiya-san's perspective, her concern for Nagato-san has increased, but she hasn't become restless with anxiety. As long as there aren't any more unnecessary meetings between you and Sasaki-san, all she would think of the matter is that you two used to be friends. In comparison, Nagato-san—regardless of the past, present and future—will always be a key SOS Brigade member. One couldn't even begin to compare their relative importance in Haruhi's mind.”

I already knew these things millennia ago. That Haruhi has a special spot for Nagato in her heart was already revealed on the winter vacation trip to the ski resort.

Summoning a memory from ages ago, I recalled the bizarre western-style house in the middle of a snowstorm. At that time, no one was more concerned for Nagato than Haruhi. Don't kid me, that was only the brigade leader's sense of responsibility. Haruhi is the type of person who would never see someone dying and not do something to help, much less when that person was a companion who she had experienced so much with—

As I woke from my reverie, I once again heard Koizumi speak with the voice of someone who had never had his feelings hurt before:

“Even though I didn't plan on telling you this, let me report to you a third thing. To put it bluntly, you've been regarding Nagato-san with too much affection. It's been especially noticeable since the matter during the winter vacation.”

Do you have anything against it? Huh?

“I don't. For Nagato-san—someone truly worthy of your trust—to have fallen into illness, you must be finding it hard to accept, right? However, if you attach too much importance to Nagato-san, you might not be able to see the whole situation clearly and instead might get an upside-down picture.”

You're not hinting at Nagato only being an inconsequential sidekick, are you?

“Certainly not. Please think about it. Nagato-san has entered the present situation and is just in the process of unknown interaction with an alien life form. The guy from the future and the esper don't have anything to do with it; they're just nearby and don't even have the opportunity to collude even if they so desired. However, such an antagonistic situation is exceedingly sensitive to influence from a third-party.”

This isn't the type of thing you chat about outside a washroom, but Koizumi went on as if nothing was wrong:

“Rationally speaking, people from the future should have complete knowledge of events that have happened in the past. But Asahina-san isn't an ordinary time-traveler. This is also one of her unique points. Even though I don't know what a response of 'I don't know' means, it's not hard to deduce. In the eyes of people in the future from a later time than the current Asahina-san, she's the ideal smokescreen to the past version of us.”

I don't think it's the first time you've mentioned something like this.

“You must realize that if it's true that Nagato-san has been uncontrollably shut down, then there actually exist people who knew of this beforehand. They are the ones who have the power to take action at any moment. She's the one in the SOS Brigade with the strongest combat ability and has succeeded in winning your trust. She also trusts you. What's more, now that you regard Asahina-san's enemy as your own enemy, Nagato-san does so as well. What a person from the future least likes to see is the Data Integration Though Entity's TFEI messing up their plans. Furthermore, that TFEI isn't anyone else other than our dearly loved companion Yuki Nagato-san.”

So you're saying that Nagato not being able to get up from her bed is the perfect opportunity for that future bastard Fujiwara?

Then what's he ultimately after?

“This we have no way of knowing.”

Koizumi gave a soft, doubtful smile.

“I was hoping you would replace me in finding out the ultimate truth in this case.”

Okay then. Looks like whether your hopes fall through all depends on my performance today. Koizumi, just stay obediently in the clubroom gazing with eager expectation. Haruhi and Asahina-san will exert all their efforts in taking care of Nagato.

As for me, I have something I need to do.

“There's another thing. This isn't something I'm reporting to you about; it's only a personal conjecture, with a low chance of it being true...”

Seeing signs of seriousness in Koizumi's expression as he was uncertain whether or not he should tell me, I rubbed my chin indicating to him to just hurry up and say it.

“I took some notice over the recent appearance and disappearance of the Celestials. Though it can be explained as Suzumiya-san temporarily being too busy to divert her attention, this explanation could also be a colossal mistake.”

So what do you want to say? The disappearance of the glowing blue giants was actually because they went somewhere to charge up their power?

“Something analogous to that. I suspect the purpose of the Celestials is to conceal the occurrence of something by diverting our efforts. This has been a hunch that's been bothering me all along. Maybe it's only unwarranted anxiety on my part, but it's also not impossible.”

So you're saying they're gathering their power right now? How can this be? I for one don't think those glowing blue giants have that sort of intelligence; it's not like they're in the training chapter of a shonen manga.

“Right, maybe I'm worrying too much. Either way, once Celestials start appearing, we'll be gathered together again and find out the truth behind the matter.”

Koizumi smiled in a manner overflowing with grace that was so customary of him.

Not wanting to stand and chat for so long outside the men's washroom, I got rid of Koizumi as fast as I could and returned to the classroom in a great mood.

However just as I stepped into the classroom, I remembered my original objective and walked once again towards the washroom. So what? If you want to consider me foolish, then feel free to by all means.

Even if I was beset by so many troubles, at least I had time to go to the washroom during lunch break.

Or at least it was like this until I met Sasaki and the others after school.

The PA system on the school grounds signaled an end the day's instruction with the ringing of the bells. Almost at the same time, Haruhi picked up her bag and stormed out of the classroom. I imagine her destination to be the 3rd year rooms, namely Asahina-san's classroom.

Actually, I could walk with Haruhi all the way to where Nagato lives before going separate ways; it was just that there wasn't an occasion for me to appear in the picture right now. Her mind was completely filled with images of a bedridden and sick Nagato.

Her cooking ability left one speechless. Furthermore, I've witnessed how much effort she puts into taking care of sick people. She can also form a comely pair of nurses with Asahina-san. I trust Nagato's daily living habits won't trouble our dependable brigade leader. At the least, Nagato won't go on an empty stomach worsening her condition. Since that matter won't become a problem, the burden falls upon me then to think of a way to solve it.

Who's the worthy fellow I have to take care of? Since the Data Integration Thought Entity and the Canopy Domain are hidden away in places I couldn't reach even if I tried, I have to rely on Pascal's Law now. As long as I put pressure on one area, it will definitely force that pressure towards another area.

Rinse and repeat.

I haven't gone down this hill by myself in a long time. All along the way, I had to keep my cool and focus my attention. The alien was completely different. The guy from the future would also avoid discussing the subject. That leaves just Kyoko Tachibana. Maybe I can follow up this thread through Sasaki.

Wading through a sea of students anxious to get home, my heart drifted towards the clubroom. Right now would be just when Koizumi has obediently sent someone in his stead to play the role of doorkeeper or was he chatting with a first-year who didn't hesitate in wanting to join the brigade despite having seen Haruhi's advertisements...?

It's a place where the brigade members, despite having gone separate ways, will eventually end up running into each other. You have to take good care of it, vice brigade leader. If there are any first-years who want to join, just cordially apologize to them and tell them not to join. Don't let any young people mistakenly go down the wrong path.

Walking down the hill with slow steps, the route didn't feel particularly long. After around the same amount of time had passed once more, I got on my beloved bicycle and set off for Kitaguchi station. Despite being early for the meeting with Sasaki, I was nervous of appearing in public, so I subconsciously picked up my pace. Why wasn't there a place where I could store extra time? If only I could have moved this block of time to this morning, I would have been much more awake during the day.

Back when I didn't pay so much attention to Haruhi, she was just someone who wanted to fill every day with fun memories—someone so eccentric that you would remember her forever. Aware I wasn't so unconventional, I arrived near my destination and biked around passing time aimlessly. Only ten minutes before the scheduled meeting time of 4:30pm did I get off in front of the station. Apologies, let me leave my bike here first for a while. Around this time, the city officials who enforce bicycle parking laws probably won't appear.

Having waited for a while, I saw a rarely seen student uniform through the window. Coming from the bus stop through a sea of people with a faint smile, the ease with which she walked made me feel thoroughly devoid of any worries. At first glance, her entire body was enveloped with the aura of someone easy to get along with and from my deep understanding of her, she really was like that.

Sasaki's moral character was superior to mine by a few million times. I really didn't deserve to be called a really close friend by her.

“Hey, Kyon. Did you wait a long time?”

Not that long. The minute hand still has several minutes to go before it reaches the bottom. Don't tell me there's a fine for arriving early too. One of those girls is enough for the world.

Sasaki smiled softly. Her eyes and mouth both bent into smooth curves.

“You actually waited for a long time, right? Though, the time you wasted here was actually equivalent to the length of time I experienced, let's just say call it even.”

What do you mean?

“Nothing. Actually by coincidence, I got out of school early and arrived here thirty minutes early. Although arriving a bit early is good, half an hour is a bit embarrassing. Without a place to pass the time, plain old waiting felt a little too boring. Just then, I saw your face full of suffering pass by on a bicycle as if you were considering some important matter. So I didn't call out to you and just watched from the side. I really admire you being able to do many laps without getting bored. Do you really love biking?”

How could I get bored by it? This iron horse is a valuable brother to me who has toiled by my side for many years. Also compared to standing like a wooden statue, exercising my body makes my mind work faster. My unfavorable exam results are probably at least partly due to by having to sit in front of a desk for so long.

“You really are an action man, but also suited to be a scholar. Correct, what you said is true. When showering or going on a walk, one will often think about things. The brain relaxes due to mechanical motions by the limbs and there's surplus capacity for thought about other things. Cleaning one's body and the like have always been tasks we're accustomed to doing. No particular thought needs to be performed, so the task is accomplished without need for conscious thought. Rather than cudgeling your brain thinking about something, it might actually be more effective and help you focus more attention to think while you're moving. Even though doing routine work isn't fun at all, man is a creature who realizes that it's only by building a subway toward some destination that he will have excess energy to appreciate the scenery outside the window. Even though many consider that only to be a waste of time, I think that the people who consider time to be money will never truly be happy.”

I'm not planning on reciting a lecture back to you, but what you said does sound reasonable.

“Based on reasoning similar to that, I'll always leave an escape route for myself. No matter how much pressure there is at the moment, as long as I can make a full retreat just in case, I can afford to take a few risks. Because everything has an end, like horror films or roller coasters. Regardless of whether a thing has a form or is formless, not many things exist forever.”

I didn't particularly want the recent past to last forever so I wasn't paying very close attention. If the talk went over my head, it may have been because the reason I came was the fear of losing Nagato forever.

I glanced around in all four directions and established that the trio to whom I didn't know how to refer would be “Sasaki's Minions”, a rather nasty-sounding name.

“Where are they?”

“They're already here. Half an hour ago, I contacted them and told them to wait in the coffee shop.” She took up what looked like a fairly light school bag and put it on her shoulder. She made a furtive glance at the expression on my face from diagonally below with head slanted. Her voice had a bright and clear tone like she was in the audience in the bleachers cheering for the home team of a high school baseball game.

“Let's go.”

No problem. This is why I came.

This is what I gambled on as being some kind of declaration of war. What I'm doing is all for the sake of world peace, to resolve Haruhi's subconscious stress, to get the Organization that's been disturbing Koizumi's sleep to do less work at night, to reduce the amount of Asahina-san's self-reproach, and to make Nagato healthy once more.

Everything was on the tip of my tongue. To work against the Organization and to meet the Sasaki-promoting brigade that's backing the wrong horse—the Super Inferior Ghost Domain called the King of E.T.'s—with their questionable morals and making Nagato fall ill. The guy from the future who's traveled from afar and has on a clown mask with a slight smile and who considers himself to be a descendant of the North Lineage of the Fujiwara Clan. That time-traveler with the crooked mouth. Your appearances have made me slightly more nervous.

Victory and defeat would be determined at this moment. Long before, I'd already made the mental preparation to fight the Battles of Mt. Tenno, Sekigahara and Red Cliffs. I also had the mistaken perception that I was wading through the current of history. If only I could separate myself into multiple people, I could have gone to ask for guerrilla fighters from the Sanada Clan. It's a shame I only had one copy of myself that I had to make ready for battle.

I couldn't place hope on anyone helping me. Koizumi was in the clubroom as doorkeeper, Haruhi was going straight to Nagato's house, and Asahina-san probably shouldn't make an appearance here. Since I haven't any secret messages from the future from Asahina-san (big) recently, it meant that this was a historical event not even the goddess Asahina could intervene in. Just in case Kimidori-san personally didn't come or Asakura didn't reincarnate once more, I would definitely still sum up my current sentiment with two words: “not necessary”. If required, I will repeat it as many times as needed.

This is Earth and Earth belongs to us humans.

Authority over the Earth doesn't belong to any single person. That would be farfetched even for Haruhi or the speaker of the most powerful council in the United Nations.

Haruhi's only title is being the SOS Brigade Leader at North High School. Any other titles—whether above or below in status—were non-existent.

That she hasn't changed any universal constants since the first year of high school is the strongest evidence. I think she would say:

—In these types of situations, whoever fires the first shot has the advantage!

Let me say that I've found a new appreciation for you, Haruhi. You really are a tough cookie, actually boasting you were going to start a brigade when you had no idea how to organize one and amazingly enough were able to accomplish that. Of course this also helped Koizumi win a few points in trying to spread the belief of Haruhi having godlike powers; it's not surprising that he was able to move me with his words.

Although embracing it was a completely different matter.

As far as whether I believe that or not, for someone like me who's never confessed or been baptized in a church, sometimes I also wanted to cling to some invisible god. Occasionally, I would also donate some money to a shrine close-by. During the Bon Festival, I would chant some scriptures. Not knowing which school or sect the monk came from didn't matter; they all demonstrated some form of belief.

If kowtowing and holding your palms together were all that was necessary to make everything turn out as one wished, then it couldn't get better than that. As it turned out, no matter how much I did those things, I still never noticed my sufferings after I joined the brigade even being slightly alleviated. Nevertheless, I held my belief that going to see Ksitigarbha in the mountain wasn't a bad choice. Since he didn't have a talent for resolving anything particularly important, he wasn't of much use to me. Seeing the high wall in front of me brought to mind the master from "More Worthy than Revenge" [*Note: Kan Kikuchi's novel "Onshu no Kanata ni" (More Worthy than Revenge) describes a murderer who, after repentance and becoming a monk, swears an oath to cut through a mountain making it easier to travel through for the common folk and in passing, tells the story of a man seeking revenge*] who relied on his own strength to cut through using a hoe.

Right now was the time to take the first step. After Nagato fell ill, it wasn't just Kuyou; even Asakura and Kimidori-san have come out to stir the pot. Everyone was treating the Earth as the main stage of a martial arts-themed short play for a non-existent audience. As it was, I had haplessly taken a seat in the audience and had been watching the play for so long already that of course I couldn't remain silent without uttering a sound.

Furthermore, the powder keg was Nagato's illness. The situation became serious now. Before Haruhi's outburst, I had to resolve this kind of cosmic question—that was where my duty lay.

Kyoko Tachibana said that the person who truly possessed power was actually Sasaki, not Haruhi.

Fujiwara said that it was fine whoever that person was.

Kuyou Suou said that she wasn't interested in Haruhi or me, but in setting up communication with the Data Integration Thought Entity.

It really was pile of muddle.

The only thing we needed was time. Maybe that group of SOS Brigade wannabes had plenty of time to spend in Echigo's crêpe shop. It's a shame this meeting didn't take place during the peaceful Edo period, but in the Information Age. How could they let the hollyhock emblem

block out the sun? [Note: The crêpe shop owner is the protagonist in the play "Mito Komon" in the disguise as Mitsuemon the crêpe merchant, but was actually Tokugawa Mitsukuni. The story described the adventures traveling through different nations punishing evil and promoting the good. The hollyhock was the family crest of the Tokugawa Clan]

In the situation right now, even if I don't see any allies around, Asakura has reincarnated with her knife, Kimidori-san's modus operandi is to only report to her boss without interfering even if the world was ending, Kuyou is a mechanical moppet who will keep doing research on things she considers valuable without regard for my life or death, and the guy from the future, Fujiwara, is always sneaking around to catch wind of this period's happenings, big and small. I feel that the only person with a sense of urgency is Kyoko Tachibana, but I sense that her influence was the smallest. Just avoiding being played around in the hands of the Organization already seems to put her short on breath.

Looks like the only person I can communicate with is her.

In Koizumi's eyes, a useless person. To Asahina-san (big), a contact in this time period. In Nagato's eyes, almost the lynchpin to the possibility of auto-evolution.

Superimposing the three views, you get a picture of yours truly. I haven't a clue why I still consider myself to be a saint above all others. I can only say that I'm living an unusual life for a high school student. I'm not descended from anyone particularly of note either. If it weren't for that day Haruhi grabbed my collar and banged my head on her desk, I could have passed off as the upstanding high school student drawing little attention anywhere I went.

What change caused me to develop this kind of morality? Where should I go and what should I do? How long should I keep accompanying Haruhi, or should I try to change the current objective of the brigade?

These questions were going to be settled in the coffee shop right in front of Sasaki and I.

Next, I'll pose a few questions to the spectators. When you've opened up a new route and decided at least temporarily that you were going to stride forward, if you happened to see a smoother path parallel to the first, how would you choose?

Would you attend to the original path suffuse with thistles and thorns, or would you choose the small path that's easier to travel on?

This is the decision I was forced to make.

In the coffee shop I was by now familiar with, seated beside the wall were three different expressions waiting for us.

Even if it was an act, only Kyoko Tachibana gave her regards by greeting us. Fujiwara still had that unkind, dirty look. I don't know whether Kuyou was too broad-minded or just didn't have a mind for that sort of thing. Yesterday, she clearly had a big fight with Asakura and Kimidori-san. Today, she sat as still on the chair as a rock in stop-motion animation. Her gaze and eyelashes haven't moved a bit.

“Humph.”

After a light snort, I put all my effort into looking around before sitting down. I glanced in all directions to make sure the apron-wearing upperclassman wasn't present in any corner of the shop. At the very least, it looked like she wasn't anywhere I could see. Either she's hiding or her part-time job just changed shifts. I think Emiri is definitely somewhere. This being another meeting where everyone has gathered for a clash, I imagine she definitely wouldn't miss out on it.

This way is good too. Having Kimidori-san's implausible smile as part of the decor of the room was definitely better than having Asakura make an appearance. Comparing the two was like comparing a flashbang grenade with an anti-tank missile. As long as Asakura doesn't reach the point of fishing out a life-threatening weapon and charging in my direction, since the depth of the upperclassman's calculations may be even deeper than that of my old schoolmate, I don't want to accidentally cause the coffee shop to turn into a battlefield for aliens.

“Over here, over here.”

Kyoko Tachibana waved her hand effortlessly, pointing me to the seat across from her.

“How about sitting there? Thank you for meeting with us.”

Towards Sasaki, she continued:

“Sasaki-san, thank you for bringing him here. We're very grateful.”

“No thanks necessary.”

While Sasaki was taking a seat somewhere behind me, she said:

“Rather than going through the civilities, I think I should rather reject your thanks flat-out. Even if I didn't make any phone calls, Kyon would still have met with us. Otherwise, we would be two parallel lines that never intersected, isn't that right?”

The last question was almost certainly directed at Fujiwara. But still that guy from the future would just—

“Humph.”

As if he was imitating the sneering sound I had just made with my nose, his mouth didn't move at all.

“Maybe. Although you two—”

His gaze swept across my face.

“It's best if you don't think too much of yourself. This isn't advice— Ha, it's a warning. To me, these meetings are ultimately vacuous. The gap in knowledge and power of understanding between me and you is too great.”

It was strange that surprise was a step faster than indignation in reaching my mind. Being able to rile up my fury with each sentence—what kind of talent was that? If you want to draw me over to your side, shouldn't you at least switch to a polite manner of speech? This guy Fujiwara was truly blunt and straight-forward to the core. This type of personality that doesn't differ between inner and outward thoughts is actually quite similar to that of Asahina-san. Could it be that everyone from the future was like this?

“Good, quickly let me hear what you're planning to do. So trouble has finally emerged from blindly following the alien's orders. How did you feel after losing such a strong supporter? Hurry up and tell me how you're planning to go about self-preservation. This is the extent of what I want to know. I actually really want to see how a harbor manages to withstand the power of the typhoon through the night with a damaged seawall.”

This stupid fellow's talk and his infuriating tone destroyed the last few bit of hesitation in me. Bastard, do you really want a beating? If you have a few buddies to help you then better call them out and let me pound your face into mush against the table. Just as I was rubbing my fists itching for a fight and getting ready to plant the non-existent boxing gloves on my hands in Fujiwara's face—

“Just let him go, Kyon. Sitting down now would be better. Though it's much like you to show a sense of justice, I can't just sit here peacefully and watch you beat someone up. Of course that doesn't apply just to you, but to everyone present. I think my temper is pretty good having only gotten angry once in the past two years. Although to tell you the truth, I get scared even thinking about that time. I still remember the last time I got angry was about two years ago and I'm still trying to extend that record. So I beseech everyone present to not let it go down to zero today.”

Sasaki's tone was gentle as usual and got me to listen obediently.

Whether it was Sasaki losing her temper, shedding tears or being sad, I haven't seen it before and don't wish to see it in the future. The person most appropriate to have a smile on their countenance isn't limited to Haruhi or Asahina-san. Although I wish Koizumi would restrain himself a bit, it's just the opposite with Nagato, who I think should have a less serious expression. Even though I wish to see Nagato get better, it wasn't something that could be solved by fighting with Fujiwara here. If I really wanted to fight, my opponent should be the alien.

I was thinking this, so I gave a stare to the alien.

“.....”

But Kuyou stared unblinkingly with a vacant gaze at empty air five meters behind me. I couldn't believe my eyes, but her gaze had no life at all. Kuyou Suou definitely meant harm to the SOS Brigade. I've established the state of affairs!

She was the initiator of the bad things that have happened.

I kept staring at Kuyou who seemed very much like a specter. She has the excessive firepower to level huge areas, but was dressed tonight at the coffee shop in a rather eye-catching

girls' school uniform—I should say that this kind of person would probably draw glances wherever they went.

But it would seem as if sitting here was a soulless 3D hologram that felt like late-night static from a TV commercial that made you so absolutely terrified your hair would stand on end. Nagato was confined to bed by illness, yet this one was actually outside, totally free and unfettered. Aside from the four words “I can't accept this”, I couldn't think of anything else. Indeed, it's only the unknown alien who would do something like this without understanding the consequences. Though I didn't understand what the Data Integration Thought Entity's Humanoid Interface was, at least Nagato, Asakura and Kimidori-san seemed like people.

About Nagato, I don't need to add anything. Aside from fooling around with carrying a knife, Asakura seemed more suited than a normal high school student in all aspects to be class president. Even though I don't know Kimidori-san very well, at the very least I know she's capable of integrating into daily school life. Those two seem to at least have put some effort into acting the role of human beings faithfully.

But Kuyou didn't share the least bit of such a mentality. I also don't think she understands the living being known as *Homo sapiens*. Even an invisible person would understand more of their own existence than her. I felt that she was just a head, arms and legs extending out from a girls' school uniform—that there was nothing underneath but air. The only person who would think like this was me. No one else cared at all.

Simply put, she made me feel completely uneasy. If her actions fell within the scope of human behavior, I wouldn't have reacted like this. However, the opponent was a super-intelligent being who was more of a puppet than human and someone not even Nagato could communicate with. Furthermore, there was hardly a person whose actions were as hard to guess and who would be this hard to deal with. She finally uttered a sentence. She was harder to see through than even Haruhi.

“.....”

Maybe because she sensed the aura of hostility I was putting all my effort into generating, Kuyou's eyes were like those of a dwarf elephant being unfrozen for the first time [*Note: ancient Japanese elephant*] and slowly became focused on me. A small gap formed between her fossilized lips.

“——yesterday——thank you——”

Her voice resembled the sound of wriggling made by a beetle pupa.

“——this is.....a word of thanks.....”

At the end, she actually appended another sentence.

I was so shocked she would thank me that I was temporarily at a loss for words. Fujiwara gave an expression indicating the matter didn't concern him. Kyoko Tachibana's face showed a slightly noticeable expression of surprise. Sasaki's expression showed a slightly teasing smile. None of the three uttered a word. Remaining uncommunicative, we congealed into a block in our

corner with the only sounds being the classical music played and other customers clearing their throats at other tables...

What should I do now?

“That...”

I didn't have to rack my brain; Kyoko Tachibana also felt that there wouldn't be much progress if the current situation continued and took the lead in opening up the meeting.

“Kuyou-san, what happened to you yesterday? Um... Never mind, let's skip it for now. I'll ask you about it later.”

Kyoko Tachibana pressed her body forward. Like an honored daughter from a wealthy family hosting a tea ceremony, she was neither humble nor haughty, and said while facing me:

“Thank you for coming today. I really hate to trouble you so many times, but it's necessary. This meeting is very important and can't be ignored.”

No need for thanks, I scheduled the meeting myself.

“That's true.” Kyoko Tachibana made no secret of the solemn tone in her words: “Regardless of whether it's sooner or later, it's definitely something that will happen. Maybe I should say that from our side, we would rather it not happen very late and that we originally desired for it to happen sooner. It's only that we had no power supporting us or any means to oppose Koizumi-san's organization.”

While speaking, the girl looked at Kuyou and Fujiwara and nodded as if she'd discovered precious treasure.

“I've finally acquired the magnificent power to move the entire world. Though you might not regard us as partners, we can still aim for the same objective and fight side-by-side, right? That's true... Right?”

Fujiwara didn't respond. Kuyou was still deep diving in a serene sea. Kyoko Tachibana however, sighed. It just happened that the waitress delivered ice water to Sasaki and I at that moment rendering her silent.

“Two coffee blends, hot.”

Sasaki ordered quickly without having asked me. I sized up the waitress who was another student, establishing that she wasn't Kimidori-san. She probably thought she ran into weird people. Her steps on her way back to the counter were noticeably hurried. I suddenly thought of something and stared at the air in front of the three people across from me. Kyoko Tachibana and Kuyou actually ordered sundaes. Two cups of sundae seemed very ordinary and it seemed to give the impression that I was constantly looking for extraordinary things by comparing two pictures like in that game for children. The ice cream—over half of which Kyoko Tachibana had gobbled down—seemed like it was about to melt into milk, while Kuyou's sundae remained intact without having melted. Regarding what kind of a pointless alien trick this was, it was the

same as Fujiwara continuously playing with an empty cup that had originally contained something...the similarity being my not wanting to guess in either case.

Kyoko Tachibana began the discussion once more and said:

“About that, first let me straighten it out a bit. The reason for our meeting here today—”

She winked at me.

“It’s because Sasaki-san said you wanted to meet with us. You must have something you want to tell us, right? Then please go ahead.”

She passed the microphone towards my outstretched hands, but there was nothing in her hands. I also didn't pretend to receive something non-existent.

“It's for Nagato's sake that I came.”

Looking at Kuyou, I said:

“I don't know what kind of design you have and you're not obliged to tell me. I only wish that you'll stop whatever evil scheme right away and stop your foolish attack on Nagato. Did you hear me clearly? I don't plan on repeating it too many times. If aliens want to fight, then go do so at the end of the Milky Way.”

“——end——”

Kuyou's mouth began moving like an ancient insect trapped in fossilized amber that had finally broken free.

“——of the——Milky Way.....that is——here——this planet's location——very remote.....”

The coldness in her voice sounded like the white haze that drifted out when you opened a freezer. Was she playing around with me? If you're disgusted by this season that Shamisen loves so much it makes his winter fur stand on end, then just go drill into the sun's core.

“——also possible——after the matter is finished.”

The, hurry up and finish it right now.

“.....”

Kuyou's head slightly tilted and her two eyes blinked.

Like some kind of signal—

“Fuu.”

Out of Fujiwara's mouth spilled a most infuriating laugh and he looked at me with no good intentions.

“Then let's do that. Nothing else, just what you proposed. No, listening to the manner in which you spoke to Kuyou, it sounded more like an order. Since you're courageous enough get in an argument with an alien intelligence, even if it was foolhardy I ought to praise you with a few words. Humph, actually I really want to study your brain to see where the illness lies. Only then would I help Yuki Nagato, such an organic expeditionary machine, although I will hold back my personal curiosity for now.”

Seeing that Sasaki and I hadn't uttered a sound, Fujiwara continued:

“In any case, it seems like you won't allow that doll of a girl to malfunction; this way, the matter becomes much simpler. Listen clearly, I have the capability to stop the Canopy Domain from continuing to disable the Data Integration Thought Entity.”



If a one-way mirror was placed in front of me, I would see someone wanted for fraud in front of my eyes.

“You don't believe me? It's a shame that it's the truth and something I knew I had the capability to do even before. The Canopy Domain is easier to control than the Data Integration Thought Entity and accepted our proposal in a straightforward manner. While we're at it, I might tell you another thing. This was a plan that Kyoko Tachibana agreed to as well. That is to say, all

three of us knew of this plan. To make a long story short, I'll express in words what I'm ordering you to do.”

Fujiwara looked at Kuyou for half a second. From his half-crooked mouth, he spat out the following:

“Transfer all of Haruhi Suzumiya's powers to Sasaki. Just obediently accept. You don't have any alternative aside from choosing 'yes'.”

Only Kyoko Tachibana agreed and nodded. Stone-gazed Kuyou stared fixedly at the wafer stuck in the matcha tea sundae. Sasaki and I sat side-by-side staring at Fujiwara's hateful face.

“Uh huh—”

Sasaki used her index finger to poke her face.

“Fujiwara-san, that was the idea Kyoko Tachibana-san proposed a few days ago, right? Didn't you say at the time that you didn't care who possessed the powers? What made you change your mind in this regard?”

“I still don't care who possesses the powers.”

Fujiwara squinted his eyes and turned away.

“The situation before is the same as the situation now. Only the appraisal of worth for each person has changed with a new interpretation of the situation, which has led to the path to the final outcome being changed. Only the path has changed, so even if the final outcome was the same it would develop differently. 1×1 and $1 \div 1$ both evaluate to 1, but the calculation methods are completely opposite.”

“But this is only sophistry.”

Sasaki spoke with firm determination:

“From what I've heard that's completely wrong, or if you're aware of that, then you're play-acting. Suzumiya-san's powers are actually an obstacle for you, right? Uh huh, that's right... Saying you don't care is actually a lie.”

Her slender fingers drifted to her chin and she said while thinking:

“So that way, it's fine even if I don't possess the powers. You don't care either way, but only so long that Suzumiya doesn't possess the powers. Fujiwara-san, you really want Suzumiya-san to lose her mystical powers, right? The reason you can't afford to let her continue like this definitely has a reason somewhere. Even though it was by coincidence that I ended up here...”

With eyes shining and lucid, Sasaki said:

“Although some things can't be the result of mere coincidence. For example, the time in the past when I was good friends with Kyon. Time-Traveler-san from the Future, can you say how much of this matter is actually set in stone?”

The speed at which her brain worked left one speechless. She's facing a guy from the future and she can still speak in an aggressive tone. Flipping through my address book of friends, only Sasaki could pull that off. Furthermore, she didn't belong to any organization like Koizumi.

Fujiwara's expression at this instant looked like a stiff mask, but soon reverted to a cold smile.

“Do you think you can move me with just those words? No matter how glib your tongue, it will still be futile. I wasn't lying, but only wanted to make smooth progress on this matter. Isn't that right, Kyoko Tachibana?”

“Err... right.”

The girl who was named said as if thrown into confusion:

“That's right, it would be my request. It's because I deemed it good to first agree to a relationship of cooperation that I implored them to do this.”

Sitting in between and working alongside the taciturn alien and the sinister guy from the future was the esper. Despite everything she said being respectable, none of her actions were helpful to our cause. So I once again turned towards Fujiwara.

“Just a minute. Is Kuyou the reason why Nagato fell ill? You're saying that she would do that kind of thing because you led her to do it?”

Fujiwara revealed the glance of a villain in a traditional play.

“That's something completely irrelevant in this case. Whether it was the result of my machinations or an opportunity that presented itself, in either case the final outcome ends up being the same. Even if it was an opportunity that simply appeared and had nothing to do with me, it still remains the reality of the situation. If it was like that, I could have had nothing to do with it. If it wasn't, I could have personally stirred it up. There's nothing constant about the past from the future's perspective aside from making appraisals of worth.”

What the hell was this guy saying? Who in the end was the villain working behind the scenes? Was it Asahina-san's antagonist, this guy from the future, the Canopy Domain, or was Kyoko Tachibana the puppeteer pulling all the strings?

I was beginning to realize that no one could be believed. Even though I needed some time to consider, Fujiwara wouldn't let me have my wish.

“Your brain is really quite dull. You said Yuki Nagato had hope of recovering to normal and I said I could accomplish that. I can order Kuyou to stop disabling your treasured doll.”

Once the discussion returned to the main question, it really cut very deep. Then I will officially represent the SOS Brigade to form bridges with you. First was something that Koizumi also wanted to find out:

“Why should you have the upper hand in this matter? Aren't they unknown life forms with whom there's no way of communication?”

Fujiwara used “Let's not use that to derail the matter at hand” to skip over my question.

“What are you joking on about?”

“You can treat it as a joke if you want, but it was out of goodwill that I mentioned it.”

Listen to your own bullshit.

At this moment, Kuyou's crystal-like lips quivered.

“——I will carry it out.”

She was exemplary at speaking all of a sudden.

“——result harmful, search for other means.....also a possible choice.”

With eyes of a dark crystal-like substance, she stared me between the eyebrows.

“——unable to communicate directly. Set indirect sound at terminal contacts as noise. Mutual concept transmission overload. Waste of energy. No instant result leading to perpetual waiting.”

Hey, hey, hey. Can I get a Good Samaritan to come translate that for me?

“That is to say—”

Sasaki's fingertip ended beside the corner of my eye.

“Nagato-san's illness is caused by Kuyou-san, but Kuyou-san doesn't consider this type of action as very productive. With one word from Fujiwara, she will immediately stop. The condition is transferring Suzumiya-san's powers to me. Furthermore, Tachibana-san's opinion is in agreement with Fujiwara's, right?”

“Right.” Kyoko Tachibana let her shoulders fall: “Even though the views of Fujiwara-san and I are not quite the same, we have noted the same change in appraisal value—”

“Shut your mouth.”

Fujiwara cold words froze Kyoko Tachibana's half-opened mouth.

“It's as she said.” Fujiwara stole the opportunity to say: “We wish to see changes in the present situation benefiting all parties present. Only Kyoko Tachibana wants Sasaki— Wants you elevated to a godlike status.”

“That's not true. It's not actually like that. We're only—”

Fujiwara completely ignored Kyoko Tachibana's refutation.

“Kuyou's real self wants to analyze Haruhi Suzumiya. But as long as the Data Integration Thought Entity is present, she has no way of doing that. Despite there being two, three layers of defensive mechanisms, we still have a way getting in. Now that what's at stake are the

mysterious powers, as long as you transfer those powers to a third-party, the matter will be settled.”

Who can do that?

“Kuyou can do it.”

Fujiwara answered offhand and continued lamentably:

“Hey, c'mon, you didn't forget everything, did you? We can do anything we want to such a person as Haruhi Suzumiya. Weren't her powers used before by a third-party? Don't tell me you can't remember Haruhi Suzumiya's powers being taken away causing the whole world to be changed? Clearly, you should be the last person to forget these events when you were sent there by someone so fascinated with you.”

Nagato—

I remembered Haruhi's disappearance from class 1-5, Koizumi and class 9 evaporating from the school building, getting my wrist twisted by Tsuruya-san, and the pain of getting punched in the face by Asahina-san. In the end, it was in the completely changed clubroom guarded solely by Yuki Nagato wearing glasses and a pallid face, where I ran into the girl who tugged at my sleeve with her fingertips.

During last year's sonorous festive season, I ran into a big hitherto unknown problem. In the process, I found out many things that I didn't want to miss out on and gained a deeper appreciation for some things that I didn't want to blunder away even once.

This group of bastards.

I glared at Fujiwara and Kuyou in turn.

No mistake that it was caused by Nagato. A mere mortal like me of course had no way to say with certainty what those Data Life Forms who ere virtually the same were capable of. Whether Data Integration Thought Entity or Canopy Domain, both were undoubtedly far more intelligent and capable of more tricks than the human race. My intuition told me that despite not being too similar to Nagato, Kuyou didn't know how to lie either.

“Are you intending to use Nagato as a hostage?”

My voice burst forth at 120% of my normal voice with a furious tone as real as they come.

“You're saying if we want to save Nagato, we will have to give up Haruhi's powers?”

How could we let you have your way? You're actually trying to bully me with crappy logic like that and by being stubborn to the end? Don't think that just by using Nagato as a pretext that we'll obediently wag our tails and tongues and do as you say. Humph, of course I'd want Nagato to be healthy and perfectly well, but these are two distinct matters.

Furthermore, Sasaki is a true friend—

“It's true.”

She couldn't help but nod her head twice.

“I also don't want that kind of power. I hope you guys will listen to a bit of my opinion as a key person in this matter.”

This was covering fire that I welcomed with two outstretched hands. But I couldn't help but let my fury-filled head develop some sense of distrust. Actually no, I couldn't say it was so much as distrust, but only as far as labeling it with a small question mark.

I turned to the slightly flustered Sasaki, getting a side view of her face, and said:

“But that's a world-changing superpower. Aren't you even slightly moved by that?”

Sasaki's bright eyes fully faced me and she said with a faint smile:

“Kyon, changing the world doesn't hold much interest to me. If the power isn't very user-friendly, it's very likely that I'll even accidentally end up changing myself without being aware. Did you know that I am a part of the world and one of its key elements? If I wanted to change the whole world, I wouldn't have a choice but to end up changing as well. For example at this time, even if I relied on my will to change the world, the me in the new world wouldn't be aware that I was the one who changed the world. All recollection would have disappeared, because I myself changed along with the rest of the world. This is a real dilemma. Despite possessing amazing powers, one wouldn't know one had used the powers—this is the dilemma.”

Seems a little hard to understand.

“When people run into uncertainty, they have two possible reactions: denial or making an attempt to understand—neither is right or wrong. No one is obligated to twist their value system they've set up to try to understand something. But it's impossible that their value system will remain unchanged their whole life. People just need to ask themselves why something cannot be understood. Then coming up with an answer they accept is good enough. If you could have a world just the way you want it, then there wouldn't be any weird reasons or explanations.”

Sasaki turned towards the three people in front of her.

“I have no way of understanding what you guys are thinking and there's no way for you to explain it to me. Since I've had an answer in mind for a long time, there's no need to say too much. With too much talk, there'll definitely be a misunderstanding. When the time comes, it will only make things embarrassing for oneself.”

“I actually don't care what you think.” Fujiwara said with chagrin: “All is well as long as you silently do what we tell you to do.”

“In the end.” But Sasaki didn't stop talking there: “People still can't do what's beyond their powers. Even if you try to act the part, it's nothing but an illusion.”

She carried the momentum of a three-stage rocket after the second engine had been set alight, letting me move the decimal point one digit to the left for the weight of my burden.

“Now that even Sasaki has said so much, I of course won't obediently accept such an unfair condition either.”

I was about to say “You should have come two days earlier” when I realized that Fujiwara had indeed shown up two days ago, so I swallowed my sentence. Trying to talk your way around someone from the future was really difficult.

Sasaki patted me softly on the shoulder.

“If you try to use this kind of leverage, it will only work on small things like someone having forgotten to bring spare change for the vending machine. I don't have any objections to the world worth remonstrating about, or I should say that I've long ceased taking them to heart. This world full of contradictions was made by the accumulation of illustrious eras since the appearance of humankind. I don't think that the paltry amount of individual thinking can do anything to change that. Even if I had that kind of power, I wouldn't be able to guarantee anything or even have two-folds worth of confidence that I'd be able to create a better world. This isn't me being humble; I don't believe there exists a person who could do that. The consciousness of the human race has not evolved to so advanced a state yet. The Earth is like a ship carrying us all in a great voyage through the cosmos. If this ship somehow came to be aware of itself, it would probably eject the unknown, ingenious race of primates into space entirely. That might even simply matters. Since mankind is what it is, no matter how you beat about it, we won't become gods. Furthermore, a god is a concept we've created. According to history, a god hasn't appeared on some corner of this planet even in the beginning. I don't have any interest in becoming an image of a formless concept. God has never died and it has never been born. This is the reason that no one has ever found where god has been buried. Maybe an intrinsic quality of god is that it can't be explained by any concept.”

At the same time Sasaki finished her super-long speech—

“——ha——ha ha——ha ha ha——aha.....”

Without missing a beat, Kuyou burst out laughing without any warning. Her tone was both high and low making it sound both joyous and sad. Hearing it made me suspect I had hearing problems with my ear.

“——too funny.....ha ha——”

What do you mean? It's fine if you have a go at me, but laughing at Sasaki will only fill my spleen with anger.

“I will take pity on you by explaining it then.”

Following Kuyou's laughter-filled words, Fujiwara continued sneeringly:

“Why do you think the right to choose belongs to you? We will listen to you express your view like this, but we aren't here to receive your teachings. Please don't misunderstand us, inhabitant of the past.”

The leisure and comfort that had just been sprouting in my mind was broken this instant.

“Let's not talk about Kuyou; you make me want to laugh too. Aren't you thinking too much of yourself? Do you think you have the right to decide everything? That you have the right to decide the direction of the world? Ha! Who cares what you think, you being the mastermind behind some pointless game? Ha ha, you're a joke. Making people laugh so loud exemplifies how pathetic you are. Listen clearly. You can't decide anything and you're just a puppet. I admit that when you carry things out, you're different from other people. You can get things done quickly and easily, but that's all—you're still a puppet. Your actions and your perception of yourself are completely different.”

When I understood his meaning, I felt something cold on the back of my neck.

Kuyou was still laughing non-stop.

I again realized when Haruhi disappeared how human Nagato seemed.

These people—

Don't you dare look down on us like humans.

Not only Kuyou, but Asakura and Kimidori-san as well.

As such, they all wanted to hear me speak. No matter what opinion I held, they would be able to smash through it with ease, without paying me any mind; this is how highly they rated themselves. Kuyou's unsuppressed laughter was that of a child who'd just gotten a new toy. We were able to see what we saw only because it carried the dazzling sincerity of a child crushing an ant to death that crawled beside their foot...

My dependable friend Sasaki—the shadow over her features gradually grew.

“Since the talk has already reached this point, do you still expect me to cooperate? Saying these things has the complete opposite effect. My relationship with Kyon is far greater than the one with you.”

“I think I've said it more than once already. I don't care at all what you think.”

Fujiwara let out another derisive laugh.

“Ah...”

Kyoko Tachibana's form shrunk even smaller.

“Heavens, everything is ruined.”

Kyoko Tachibana sighed, but her expression didn't yet show signs of discouragement. Perhaps this deserves admiration. In the end, she put on the facial expression of a missionary and preached to me.

“How about this? Please think about it some more. I know you value Suzumiya-san and the SOS Brigade very much, but maybe you can look at it from another perspective? As long as Suzumiya-san has her powers, Nagato-san's condition won't change and you'll eventually be sucked into the strange matter.”

What are you trying to say?

“Even if Haruhi Suzumiya lost her powers and became a normal person, the SOS Brigade wouldn't disband, right? The existing circumstances won't change for this reason. Koizumi-san will still be the representative for the Organization, Nagato-san will still be an alien, Asahina-san will still be from the future, and that's all there is. They won't have any misgivings about Suzumiya-san's actions. Everyone will behave like before accompanying the brigade leader to play happily together.”

Now that would really be a group that not even fan clubs could aspire to be.

“True, that's just what I want to say. Don't you think that would be pretty good? If you still wanted to experience supernatural events you have hitherto, we're still available. Kuyou-san is an alien and Fujiwara-san is from the future. Even though I don't want to tell you I'm an esper, I guess I am one after all. As long as you treated it as being extracurricular activities with Sasaki-san, it definitely wouldn't be boring.”

Too stunned for words describes my situation right now. She was inviting me to organize the second SOS Brigade, to cause the Haruhi-led SOS Brigade to lose its essence, and nominating Sasaki as the new SOS Brigade Leader... What should I do?

“Furthermore—” Kyoko Tachibana overtook my train of thought: “I also want Koizumi-san to get rid of some of the burden on his shoulders.”

“Huh?”

Why are you so worried about Koizumi's frozen shoulder?

“He will definitely thank me very much, because—”

Kyoko Tachibana went on pronouncing things that went without saying, much like a young girl full of daydreams about pies in the sky and cloud-castles.

“Don't you know? The Organization was founded single-handedly by Koizumi-san and he has always been the director during its operation. He is also the most capable person there. Even though he doesn't understand my way of thinking, I have some respect for him nonetheless.”

“.....”

This part of the conversation planted itself heavily into my brain marrow, but I still resembled a piece of rock unchanged in my countenance. I don't know how it was, but at that instant I didn't want to say anything at all. How much of what this person said can be taken as truth? Or was she only saying what she took to be true? By this time, after hearing Koizumi explain to me so much that I didn't know to be true or false, I found it similar to listening to Kyoko Tachibana. Asking me to choose sides to stand on was rather laughable, but Kyoko Tachibana shouldn't need to make up this sort of lie— No, maybe she does. If she wants to throw my thoughts into confusion, this trick is definitely very effective. Only her face really was filled with most heartfelt admiration.

.....

Oh well, now I have to pull the emergency brakes on my train of thought. Now wasn't the time to think about how Koizumi's Organization is organized...

That bastard Fujiwara began his weird “kukku” laugh again.

“Let me first reveal an important piece of information. Treat it like I'm giving you preferential treatment. In this time period, it's actually something you'll be able to hear only at this present location. You must be really eager to find out what I'm about to tell you, so here it is. Simply put, I'm going to give a little explanation of something that you haven't seen until now and that's the TPDD (Time Plane Destruction Device).”

Without anyone asking, he began behaving according to really strange guidelines of behavior. I definitely wouldn't recommend his personality to anyone. I can guarantee that Fujiwara was the textbook case of a weirdo.

“The way Mikuru Asahina and I travel through time actually has some problems. Due to the principle behind it, when the time machine is used for travel, it is required to penetrate the time plane, so it needs to form a hole in order to travel to the past. Don't worry, a small hole doesn't influence much and fixing it is easy too. Basically the further you travel to the past, the more damaged the time plane becomes. Furthermore, the more times a time period is traveled to or from, the number of holes formed will also naturally increase. Do you follow me up to this point?”

I really wanted to pour wax into my ears. If you wanted to tell me, it was fine. But letting Sasaki hear this outlandish classified information wasn't necessary. Doomed to be torn apart by five horses by troubling matters, just one person (myself) was sufficient.

“The main point is that the use of TPDD is accompanied by the risk of destroying the already existing time period. The chiseled open holes have to be filled—much like if a dripping roof is left alone, the house will be ruined too—or they will set off effects that cascade into the future. The main thing time-travelers to the past must do is repair errors caused by the TPDD. But Mikuru Asahina is an exception. She's actually responsible for a special mission, but she herself isn't aware what it is. Humph, the entire matter is of the highest level of secrecy, so she doesn't know anything about it; it must really be toilsome for her.”

Fujiwara seemed like he was done reciting what he'd planned to say, finally retracting something he was going to say.

“For example—”

He withdrew the previous statement and began his story again.

“What I just told you was actually something you weren't supposed to know, but so what? The answer is that you yourself have changed as a result of what I've told you. Humph, do you want to make it more interesting?”

No. If it gets any more interesting, I'm afraid I'm going to die laughing.

“Since you heard what I just told you, it's inevitable that you've been influenced by me. This demonstrates the advantage I hold over you group of past inhabitants.”

Fujiwara's tone finally became honest.

“You just mull over that slowly. Whether your antiquated brain actually discovers any answers, I will use your actions to decide. If you manage to derail matters already established, I'll have a good show to watch.”

Just when I thought he really finished talking this time, he followed up immediately with this attack.

“I will silently await your response and hope that you will commit the words I said today into your memory. At the same time, there's no harm in forgetting. Regardless of what you decide to do, I'll still have a way to complete my mission. Whether you choose the route of accompanying Haruhi Suzumiya toward certain destruction or let her become an extinct volcano, you're free to do as you please.”

I really wanted to ask him whether or not he knew the exact time when I'd give him my answer. For someone from the future, this was probably something certain. Fujiwara and Asahina-san were different. He should be someone who follows the script no matter what. Could it be that there really wasn't an opportunity to test him? The image of the beautiful Asahina-san flashed through my mind. Her in maid costume compared to her in teacher costume was like the pedestrian street light signaling on as opposed to off.

“Why are you giving me time to consider?”

This seemed like a very direct question out of the questions I asked.

“Because the matter is already fixed. If I had instead put it that way, would you have accepted it? If you couldn't, it also doesn't matter. Okay, my happy hour is over.”

Fujiwara nimbly released himself from his long crossed legs and stood up.

“Though it's incredibly stupid to be bound by time, given that the direction in which things are flowing is already set, nothing can be done but to quietly accept it. Nevertheless, like the ancient deep sea fish who didn't manage to catch a ride on the evolution bus, there's still the possibility of going against the stream.”

After these two complementary sentences, Fujiwara turned and left the meeting.

I watched his tall shadow walk out the door without having left a cent. My nose was still filled by the miasma he'd left behind. At this moment, Kyoko Tachibana picked up the bill as if it went without saying:

“Pardon me, but I should get going too. You probably need some time to consider. It's only that what you must consider is really too much...”

I don't know whether it was due to Fujiwara's toxic influence, but Kyoko Tachibana's thin shadow showed some signs of exhaustion. It was no wonder that you became utterly fatigued in mind and body interacting with that kind of person; I couldn't help but sympathize with her a bit.

“I'll just discuss a bit with Sasaki-san if that's okay. Sasaki-san, let's stay in touch even without having anything to do with this matter—a relationship purely based on friendship.”

“It would be best if that were possible.”

Sasaki looked up at Kyoko Tachibana and raised a corner of her mouth.

“I hope that the only thing that will ever exist between us is friendship.”

Kyoko Tachibana didn't answer, only taking an uneasy glance at Kuyou who was sitting like a piece of furniture before sighing. She went to the cash register to pay the bill, then waved goodbye before leaving the coffee shop. As such, the crystallized Kuyou showed sign of dissolving.

With my spirits sagging into a bundle, it was only after I chugged down the glass of ice water that I realized Sasaki's two cups of hot coffee never made it to our table even by the very end.

Even after having said this much, matters haven't made much headway.

After I got the waitress (thankfully it wasn't Kimidori-san) to finally send over the hot coffee and to add copious amounts of sugar and milk powder—I still thought the bitter taste was a bit too much—I finished drinking the last drop before noticing that the strange Kuyou was sitting at the position of the highest seniority, staying more still than an old-fashioned ichimatsu doll found in the attic of a countryside house. *[Note: Japanese doll whose hair will grow longer, often seen in horror stories]* My brain began to work.

Why wasn't this person moving, as if she hasn't even thought about leaving? Fujiwara and Kyoko Tachibana had already gone, and she was still staring blankly at us. Was it actually some kind of alien form of communication? Was she indicating to us that there was something more she wanted to tell us about?

I don't have the capability to decode strange non-verbal alien appeals, so don't depend on me for that.

When I was looking at Kuyou, Sasaki put down her empty cup and a faint smile formed on her lips.

“Kyon, let's get going too. I don't want to repeat what Fujiwara-san said, but we do have to think about the future. Even though it was a boring and disorderly meeting, I do think there is some sense to be made out of it. From Fujiwara's tone of speech, he seems to have some hesitation.”

It's good if it's like that, although what we should think about is also a question.

“That's true. We don't seem to have a right to choose, but also completely no idea how to make them have no more illusions about the matter. However, we should be able to do something at least.”

Getting yourself bogged down in a situation like this really doesn't let you loosen up at all. They want to transfer Haruhi's god status to Sasaki? Is this a choice between a domineering, completely self-unaware god and a reasonable god aware of her temperance? If I was forced to answer, I'd have to admit Sasaki was rather more suited to be god.

Nevertheless—

I honestly didn't want to see it happen.

I'll use the following to elucidate my meaning. I don't want Sasaki to have any transcendent and abnormal powers. It was best for my normal friend to continue being normal. Now since Haruhi was like that to begin with, she can just keep being herself. In ancient mythology, all the gods were all cosmic troublemakers even more unreasonable than humans. From this point alone, I think it was always pretty good that we could even communicate with our god. Shrines also wouldn't just up and switch to a different god to worship. Huh? Wait a minute, what am I thinking? Just having Koizumi speak in defense of Haruhi was already enough. Looks like I'm much more muddle-headed than I'd imagined.

This could hardly be blamed on me. Reincarnated Asakura, the looker-on Kimidori-san, the guy from the future who found some god-forbidden way to get in touch with Kuyou and was now flaunting his might—I've been continuously perturbed since last night. Unless I was Buddha incarnate, it was impossible for my mood to be as tranquil as water. Looks like there was still a long road ahead to achieve enlightenment.

“Right, Kyon. Aside from myself, there should be someone else you can have heart-to-heart talks with, right? Honestly, I really don't know what to do. If there's someone who can produce an answer immediately, I'd welcome it anytime.”

The first person who came to mind was Koizumi and his knowledgeable-looking face. Aside from him, the bed-stricken Nagato also deserved consideration. Even though the most dependable was Asahina-san (big), there was no way to contact her unless she made an appearance. It couldn't be that this matter didn't fall under her jurisdiction, could it? If so, it was very likely that what would happen next would proceed exactly like the Tanabata event as a re-enactment of something previously established. If that was the case, the only thing we could do would be to raise our arms in surrender.

“Kuyou-san, do you want to leave with us or do you want to finish your sundae before leaving? Tachibana-san has already paid the bill, so you can take your time eating.”

The shadow of the rival alien lackey didn't move in the slightest. Her half-open eyes remained on empty air. There was no reply.

“Are you still awake, Kuyou-san?”

Sasaki waved her hands in front of her.

“——I didn't fall asleep.”

She replied with a volume bound to smite down the sandman. The surprising volume made hair stand up on end and I asked:

“Were you listening all the way to the end?”

“——understanding complete, execution has finished.”

What did this mean? If she got rid of the burden on Nagato, then this really helped me out a great deal.”

I hastened my departure from the table before Sasaki. I was a bit worried about leaving behind solely this member of the ominous group of vagrants...worried that I would lose her. All of a sudden, Kuyou stood up and followed us for some unknown reason. I thought she would quickly disappear without a trace, but I didn't actually imagine she'd be like a sentry following us not too closely and not too far.

When Sasaki and I left the coffee shop, she was still following us, so I felt some uneasiness at this. Furthermore, it was gradually becoming dark.

“Is there something else you want to say?”

Sasaki turned and said in my stead what I'd kept locked up in my mind. The alien who hadn't taken any etiquette courses still maintained her silence. Her soulless eyes stared towards some unknown location. I can see that she has not managed to hit it off with the human race since she was born. It was good that her personality was mysterious, but I was afraid whether her personality even existed was up in the air. Yesterday, when Kuyou was attacked by Asakura, she still had a faint smile. But her from back then hardly resembled her right now. It couldn't be that she had multiple personalities, could it?

I only noted that turning around would be unwise.

“Hey, Kyon!”

When the familiar voice hit squarely on my eardrum, I was almost tripped by the flat asphalt road.

Together with Sasaki, I stopped walking. Kuyou did the same.

“It's really rare to run into you here.”

It was only my high school classmate Kunikida who'd be dressed in his school uniform and bag outside of school time.

But who Kunikida was looking at wasn't myself, but the old classmate beside me.

“Long time no see, Sasaki-san.”

“Is that so?”

Sasaki had a soft smile while stretching. She looked at Kunikida and said:

“I saw you at the national practice exams. It shouldn't have been someone who merely resembled you, right?”

Kunikida smiled back softly. I think this was the first time I've seen him smiling like this.

“I know that you eventually realized. You would know from my looking back at you, right?”

“That's right. I was looking at the other person very observantly.” Sasaki said in a bureaucratic tone: “I don't normally get much attention. If I received a look like that, the pain sensors on my face would get stimulated.”

“You're still your old self.”

Kunikida nodded his head with relief. At this moment, a hand extended from the side planting itself on his shoulder. A wily face that made people want to loudly exclaim “Why did I run into you of all people?” emerged.

“Hey Kyon. I really can't underestimate you, or I should rather say that I'm seeing you in a whole new light. Wow— Is this Kyon's old girlfriend?”

... Taniguchi, even though I completely don't want to know why you would be loitering around with Kunikida in front of the station, there's something I'd like to request from you—that you immediately go home. If possible, please use three rocket boosters strapped to your back to speedily return home. Lift on! If you can, you might as well use this method to send yourself into orbit. I might be able to ask an observatory to calculate your orbit.

“Why be like this, Kyon? We don't often run into each other, so let's chat a little more.”

Taniguchi displayed a smile revealing of a lack of self-restraint. His boorish glance lashed out at Sasaki and I alternately.

“How could you be like this? You already have so many girls around you and it still isn't enough, eh?”

I was abundantly clear what he wanted to say, so I expressed my contempt. Just when I was considering assuming a crouching position like a sprinter's starting position to get away as fast as possible, Taniguchi finally became a bit more serious:

“Introduce me, Kyon. I'm your fellow classmate, so if you have something to say just go ahead and say it.”

“Her surname is Sasaki and we attend the same high school.”

Even though what I said seemed satisfactory, Kunikida nevertheless took the baton from my hand.

“Sasaki-san, this is Taniguchi. He's been in our classmate since our first year of high school.”

It was truly a fine example of a concise introduction.

“Nice to meet you.” Sasaki bowed gently: “The affection you show each other is very nice. Kyon shouldn't have caused you much worry, right?”

Taniguchi's blunt initial reaction returned as he showed his mouthful of white teeth and plan to follow up.

“But your good taste really has no limits and your appreciation is really good. It's really something I wouldn't have thought of even if I'd racked my brain to pieces. What grievances could someone like you have towards life? How do you get me so ticked off, Kyon... Kyon... Kyon!?”



How are you behaving now? Why are you now imitating the strange call of a wild tropical bird from Southeast Asia or is it in fashion to stifle people like this nowadays?

I was rather impatient and wanted to stare Taniguchi to death with my glare, except— Huh? It was strange that who Taniguchi was looking at wasn't actually me or Sasaki.

“... Wha!?”

Taniguchi leapt back a step and raised his arms in surrender before stopping himself halfway through such an unnatural movement. He became flabbergasted as if he'd become petrified upon seeing a ghost. I didn't have time yet to guess what holy fool was even more foolish than Taniguchi, who already held pole position in the category, when I realized that my dear classmate's glance passed right through Sasaki and I landing on Kuyou Suou's black cat face.

If I even sometimes forgot about her existence, why would Taniguchi have noticed her?

“_____”

What shocked me even more was that Kuyou actually produced some response upon seeing Taniguchi. The girl clad in a girls' school uniform slowly lifted her left hand, unfolding her palm. From her sleeve, she revealed a pure white wrist with a fashionable wristwatch on it that had gone previously unnoticed by me. Not in a million years did I imagine she would be wearing such a cute trinket and a mechanical watch to boot.

“——thank you. I'm not planning to.....return it to you.”

Huh?

“No problem, it's not like it's anything valuable. If you don't like it, you can even throw it out if that makes you happy. No, I hope you will do as you please. I beseech you to do so.”

Taniguchi and Kuyou were having a conversation. The season had clearly not arrived yet, but Taniguchi still didn't miss an opportunity for his face to sweat profusely and wave his limbs around aimlessly. Even if his suspicious actions would immediately have prompted the police making their rounds to thoroughly examine him had they been present, this scene was truly a miracle that defied normal explanations.

“I heard that was a Christmas present from Taniguchi.”

Kunikida's explanation didn't dispel my astonishment, but instead redoubled it. A watch? Kuyou expressing thanks? Christmas? Who was connected to what now? Was I dreaming?

After Kunikida had tossed me along with my jaw that had dropped to the ground into a sea of questions, without the least hesitation he changed the topic back towards Sasaki.

“Can I ask you how you ran into Kyon again now—”

What “again now”? That has too many undertones attached... No, no, no. What's surprising at the present moment should be Taniguchi and Kuyou, not Sasaki and I, right?

However, Sasaki still regarded her conversation with Kunikida to be of slightly more relevance.

“A lot of things happened. I don't have the intention to make a long story short. If possible, you can find a time and ask Kyon about it, okay?”

“That won't be necessary. I'm not really that interested to find out. Speaking of which, to be able to run into Sasaki-san and Suou-san here, the world must be really small.”

“Do you know her too? I really didn't imagine, Kunikida-san. I trust my surprise is much greater than yours. Where did you come to know Kuyou-san?”

I wanted to know too.

“Kuyou... Do you mean Suou-san? I met her during winter vacation because of this guy... Huh? Where did he go?”

Taniguchi? He seemed to have long ago performed something akin to the Woodpecker strategy in the Battle of Kawanakajima that executed a surprise attack, but ended up failing and the Takeda forces routed. The pace he fled at was an impressive sight. *[Note: During the 4th Battle of Kawanakajima, Takeda Shingen's army with numerical superiority was defeated by Uesugi Kenshin's army arrayed on Mt. Saijo despite Shingen having executed the Woodpecker strategy, which involved leaving 8000 men in the main army and sending the rest out in a night raid against the Uesugi army. The goal was to force them down Mt. Saijo inflicting upon them a pincer attack. However, the Uesugi army was a step ahead of them by creeping down the mountain and meeting the main Takeda army head-on. Despite losing considerable men to a surprise attack, the Takeda army in the end managed to use their numerical superiority to force back the Uesugi army]*

“Taniguchi who was just introduced to me said that you were his girlfriend. This is true, right, Suou-san?”

“—yes.”

Kuyou answered as if it were just like breathing.

“—my memory identifies itself with your statement ensuring its validity.”

“How many months did you spend with him before breaking up?”

“—undoubtedly.”

Hey, what was this?

Was the girlfriend Taniguchi mentioned last Christmas Kuyou? Then she was the girl he broke up with before Valentine's Day too? Wait a second.

I was greatly astonished, but asked:

“According to this, you did something before Naga... No, before that guy stirred up that thing, he was already... No, already here!?”

“—right. I didn't find any problems executing this matter.”

Was what I was feeling at the moment a feeling of dissatisfaction or uncertainty?

“... How did you end up spending time with Taniguchi?”

The response was extremely clear-cut.

“—because I made a misunderstanding.”

“What?”

“Taniguchi also said that to me. He said that was her reason for breaking up.”

Kunikida also asked in a concise manner:

“When did you meet Suou-san, Kyon? Did you know her before?”

No, it happened recently.

Sasaki took a sidelong glance at my mouth which often produced clumsy sentences, then said with a jesting smile:

“I met Kuyou-san recently. By a little bit of fate and coincidence, Kyon got a chance to meet her too.”

“And she's also Taniguchi's ex-girlfriend; it's truly too coincidental. If you converted it to a percentage, what would it be...?”

Sasaki said to Kunikida who was wrying his neck pondering:

“Are you talking about probability? If something strange might happen at any moment, you can use just one word—probability—to describe any coincidence that's hard to believe like the one right now—”

Sasaki smiled merrily, slightly turning her hand.

“It must be planned by an all-knowing, all-powerful god, right?”

“That doesn't really sound like something Sasaki-san would say.”

I agree. Didn't god go somewhere on vacation?

Kunikida abruptly shrugged his shoulders.

“Kyon, Sasaki-san is only saying something in a roundabout way. She's saying that our meeting was just a coincidence, so there's nothing more to think about.”

How can you tell me not to think? One or two can be explained as coincidence. Three or four will make the urge to begin questioning whether you were being led along by someone irresistible for you. Even though I was well aware that being serious in something like this was a plain waste of energy, this must be something that only vexed me after being hit repeatedly by violent storms and waves.

I don't know how Kunikida saw me as I was spinning silently in a whirlpool. In the end, he continued:

“After school, I came to the book store in front of the station to pick up a book I'd ordered. By chance, Taniguchi was free so he accompanied me here. Then we spoke about whether we should sit down and have a cup of tea...”

Kunikida turned and searched for the deserter Taniguchi's trail and shook his head.

“Since that guy's gone, I guess all I can do is improvise.”

Should this play be called “The Cowardly Taniguchi's Amazing Escape Before the Battle”?

“I'll be embarrassed if I keep interrupting your plans, so I'll go home now.”

Kunikida turned, so Sasaki continued by saying:

“Kunikida-san, no matter where you are, as long as you see me feel free to say hi. Chatting a bit about shared recollections and always looking warmly towards sunny things is a great joyous activity in life.”

“This sentence fits more with Sasaki-san's style.”

When smart people talk, each planning three moves further ahead, an ordinary person like myself am no longer able to keep up.

“Okay, so long.”

Kunikida seemed satisfied with the series of words with Sasaki. He didn't ask any further questions about Kuyou as if he didn't think too much about it and left like this.

I watched Kunikida's gradually shrinking shadow and didn't plan on worrying any more about Taniguchi's two-man group. Kuyou seemed to have done some formless trauma to Taniguchi's heart. Kunikida's also a clever person, so he probably wouldn't report it to Haruhi, I think.

“Kuyou.”

I met glances with the person who was half a nestling whose nest was here and half a rigid head of a mop.

“You already arrived on Earth last December, right? Then you got close to Taniguchi.”

What I wanted to ask had accumulated into a mountain, but I thought it was good to sort things through by starting here.

“Did you take a fancy to Taniguchi in order to come in contact with Haruhi or me?”

“It was a misunderstanding——”

She replied with a voice like a talking deck brush.

“What did you misunderstand?”

“——mistook him for you.”

“You...”

Did Kuyou begin a relationship with Taniguchi because she mistook him for me? He he he he he, why did it have to be him? It just made it harder and harder for me to decide what to do.

“Almost as if some information source had become muddled, exposing the situation to the possibility of his interference...”

Kuyou said word-by-word:

“The probability isn't low.....”

At least Nagato didn't have to expend energy to take care of you then.

“Were you affected when Nagato remade the world?”

“I wasn't changed.”

Kuyou lifted her chin, her bloodless lips continued bit-by-bit saying things that would have made other people tongue-tied had they attempted to say them.

“Your concept of the universe is a passing mirage, but we've also begun to sense a surprise never before seen. A world of the past overlapping with the present world. Exclusive actions. Some areas altered. Interesting.”

“What the heck? And why did your tone change again? It really looks like your personality changed, which reminds me of yesterday's faint smile.”

“——there is no tomorrow's today——there is no today's yesterday——there is no yesterday's tomorrow——here.”

I heard, but didn't understand.

Sasaki raised an eyebrow after listening and murmured:

“Compared to a lunatic, she seems more like a fanatic. I really hope we didn't have to stand here—that we could talk slowly in the coffee shop and I could even jot some notes down.”

Sasaki took aim at Kuyou's wrist and said teasingly:

“Although, since you're still wearing a watch that was a gift from him, it means you're still a bit reluctant to part with that interesting guy who was just here, right?”

Kuyou's glance fell on her watch (it should be a fairly inexpensive model) like droplets of ink.

“——it's something.....I said I wanted to have.”

... Today, I've heard it all.

“——time isn't actually a one-way flow one can't run counter to. To engage in personal activity on this planet, it is necessary to keep track of the fixed, objective time.”

Are you talking about the watch? It's just a some handicraft composed of springs and gears. What determines time isn't actually the watch. What the watch does is provide a convenient way of keeping track in a continuous stretch of human activity.

“——time is mostly randomly generated; it's hardly continuous.”

I almost cried. What was this alien trying to say?

Only it happened to stimulate Sasaki's natural curiosity.

“Kuyou-san, but then how would you explain the past and the future? Presumably not by claiming Akashic records [*Note: “Akashic” means everything under the sky or aether in Sanskrit. Akashic records are a compendium of information encoded formlessly existing in a non-physical plane of existence*] really exist, right?”

“——time is limited.”

“What do you mean now? Based on the method of infinite descent, [*Note: a method of mathematical proof used to show that no solutions exist*] how much time exists between 1 second and 2 seconds?”

“No time. However, there's no danger even if you say some time does exist.”

It would seem as if Sasaki has fallen for the bait.

“Okay— Let me put it this way. Suppose parallel worlds existed. Then according to Everett, they can't be infinite in number?” [*Note: Hugh Everett III proposed the many-worlds interpretation in 1957 that the universe will upon observation split into many universes each with different outcomes*]

“——objects that cannot be observed do not exist.”

“Really?”

Sasaki's expression was like that of a young scientist who'd just discovered a new phenomenon.

“——already in the records——doubt.....completely non-existent.”

“So it's like this.”

Sasaki's face full of understanding was supported at the chin by her fingers. Kuyou's words really needed someone to show up their ridiculousness.

“What's like this? Hurry up chewing and digesting what you just heard so you can tell me what you've worked out. It has to be so well digested that even an idiot can understand.”

“This... Uhh, Kyon, I can't do that. I understand, but it's just that Kuyou's designer and all life forms made by her designer are fundamentally different from our human race so that their thought processes are completely unlike ours. It's also to say that I've understood that there's completely no way for me to understand them.”

So there's no way no matter what we try?

“Not exactly. I've discovered that our language isn't actually suitable for communicating with them. This is a huge step forward. Speaking of the current situation, her words are almost like meaningless noise. But what if it's possible to develop a high performance translator device? Based on the present knowledge of the human race, maybe it will be possible one day. Truthfully, the human race has already broken through countless barriers deemed impossible by pessimists, bringing about inventions one by one.”

It will be possible one day—in the distant future. If we were in Fujiwara's time, in a future where ships can use forces other than buoyancy to float on—

“Hey, Kuyou—”

My voice wasn't actually transmitted into the listener's ear, but disappeared pitifully mid-air.

Kuyou Suou's strange shadow disappeared like thin air, as if it had entered some form of invisibility.

Nagato, Asakura and Kimidori-san can all accomplish something like this, so I didn't think much of it. However, Sasaki didn't seem surprised either that Kuyou's disappeared with a soft, calm smile.

With a glance used to look at aircraft contrails, she added “Truly an act worthy of an alien”—

Hey, is this all you want to say?

“Then I guess I'll add another sentence.”

Sasaki changed her glance.

“I'm really interested in what actions she'll take in the future.”

My old classmate's beautiful face was filled with calm. Never having seen this expression on her before, I couldn't help but feel more at ease.

“Kyon, you actually don't need to overestimate Kuyou. Just like we don't understand her, she doesn't necessarily have an accurate understanding of us either. Even though we're pitiable, backwards life forms and comparatively bound in chains with regards to what we're capable of, we nevertheless carry enough value that she traveled all the way to Earth. Furthermore, whether the spirit of the human race and the evolution of the physical body has reached its pinnacle, it's hard to say. My words... Right, the amount of hope I've placed on the blind watchmaker [*Note: the author Richard Dawkins's investigation into whether evolution was the result of a series of chance occurrences or the work of a designer working with his hands behind his back*] isn't small.”

Despite not fully comprehending, I thought she meant it as some form of encouragement.

“See you next time.”

Amidst a boisterous plaza in front of the station, Sasaki's radiant eyes shined upon by the streetlight faced me and she said:

“I'll think about it too. Maybe a solution appeared in front of us long ago, only to have been missed. Even though I don't want you to put too much hope on me, we won't be able to avoid the criticism by others regardless of whether we take action or not. Fear itself feels scarier than meeting danger head on. See you later, Kyon.”

I saw her wave her hands softly and elegantly as a new feeling welled up in my heart.

Compared to being lost in a logjam of thought, being forcibly dragged to the land of pure bliss by the caprice of Haruhi, the Queen of Melancholy, felt relatively relaxing, like a light ray having completed a round-trip back to the centre of the Milky Way.

Without a doubt, Haruhi would definitely return. Her homing instinct counts as one of her positive qualities.

Of course, it isn't an ability exclusive only to Haruhi. In the SOS Brigade from vice-brigade leader down to the rank and file members, everyone has confirmed their affiliation was as permanent as the continental plates on Earth would be if the Moon somehow flew away. And that affiliation was to the 1st SOS Brigade headquarters that Nagato quietly stayed in, Haruhi forcibly occupied, and Asahina-san and Koizumi were forcibly dragged into.

My cerebral cortex was sending out bursts of nerve impulses that deepened my desire to gather everyone into the same room to play intellectually unfruitful games to pass the time.

Just like this, Sasaki. It looks like this was where I still belonged; there was no way for me to monkey around with you guys. A new SOS Brigade? Stop dreaming. Is it something you can pirate by just thinking about it? It's not just that the SOS Brigade has us as the members, but that it is the SOS Brigade *because* it has us as the members. This group of permanent personnel will conquer all the corners of the world! What used to only be Haruhi's desire didn't take much time to become a cherished desire that Asahina-san, Nagato, Koizumi, and I all shared. We were like the accretion disc in orbit around the black hole that was the brigade leader, *[Note: A type of phenomenon caused by dispersion material in orbit around a star, black hole or another celestial body. Commonly observed to possess a disc-shaped structure]* not getting sucked in or drifting away—only existing—until the mysterious force responsible for the pull on us disappears, right?

Afterwards, I returned home absent-mindedly; I really had to hand it to myself for not forgetting to ride my bike home. The present me, lethargic from having absorbed too much information in my brain heard every rattle and every clank as clear as day. I had to mobilize all of my concentration to maintain consciousness. When was the last time something like this happened?

Therefore after dinner when I was barely able to move my chopsticks, I lost my last bar of stamina, which I would have used to play with my sister and Shamisen. Like a dead person, I

climbed into bed and went to sleep without even turning off the light. At that moment, my mental state was like a torn rag that was also full of holes.

I still remember before falling asleep, a thought flashed through my mind that things would be bad if I went to sleep like this. I didn't dream that night. But then again, unless it was a great dream, any other dream would have been cleanly forgotten the moment I opened my eyes.