

dJADE IS A MEME

LMAO IM ON MOBILE THIS IS NEAT

I CAN'T BELIEVE BRI IS BULLYING HER GRANDM a

Hana:

"Hi there-... Shigeru-san..." Hana let out a faint chuckle, her smile unwavering as she began to wipe her dark, bleary eyes with the sleeve of her sweater. "No, no...! It's fine... I had a lot of things to think about..."

Things. Things like the vast fragility of her existence and the inevitable end that awaited her. She thought about the human beings she'd oh-so foolishly called her friends; those she no longer had the heart to face. She thought about happiness and how it resembled a metronome. Whenever she felt it, sadness patiently stirred on the other side, waiting for her to swing back. It was always easier to give in to sadness. It was as if the metronome had been tilted in its favor.

Hana found that a lot of things were tilted in one's favor. People, places, concepts- even the earth *itself* tilted in the favor of gravity. Everyone and everything had an axis; this left the girl wondering which direction she had been tilted and in *whose* favor. Hana glanced towards Shigeru, silently questioning his direction and if he even had an axis at all. Maybe scorpions just had an entirely different standing from the rest of the world. She would never know.

The girl moved aside, leaving an empty spot on the floor next to her. She wasn't certain if he'd even sit, but she subtly motioned for the informant to come over anyway. It felt oddly ordinary, as if Hana hadn't been crying earlier, and she was merely asking him to sit next to her like most classmates often did during class or lunch- or simply whenever they chose. It was that sort of carefree attitude she envied.

"Ah, I hope this place isn't *too* weird-... I don't really know my way around that well..." The girl started, still toying with his note. "I thought it'd be a little better than meeting in... the supply closet or... my room..." She paused, bowing her head slightly. "Heh- I, uhm, didn't mean for it to come out that way... I just would hate to cause you any grief- or misunderstandings..."

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Shigeru:

Shigeru Natadama had learned long ago to pick up all the details within the span of a few seconds. The details of the scene were that the washers were going on in the background and that the astrologer's clothes were slightly stained with what seemed like a strange mixture of ink and water, similar, if not the same, to the splotches on her second note to him. The details of the scene were that Hana Uena had been crying and that she held his note in her hands, folded up nice and neat.

Almost without thinking, the informant lowered himself to the floor in front of her, gently dabbing at her cheeks with his sleeves, grateful that he'd changed before going to meet her. He looked completely neutral throughout the entire task, settling down next to her as he finished.

"You're not an inconvenience."

He tried to give her a smile, though he was sure that his lips never rose to more than a ghost of a grin (ha ha ghost...because he's dead...), peeking out on his features but never explicitly lighting up his face. He wasn't used to being this...not indifferent (to say that he was being nice would be a stretch, right?).

"You, uh...wanted to talk about something." His voice was soft, fingers picking at the ends of his sleeves which retracted as he coughed into his arm, a puff of warm air passing through the fabric. He paused for a moment, silent. No blood (this time). "Jeez..."

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## Hana:

Hana couldn't help but to flinch once the informant brought his hand to her cheek. She slowly blinked, averting her gaze as her smile began to falter. The girl didn't dare look Shigeru in the eye, fearing that he'd somehow read her thoughts. She was simple, an open book, meaning any trace of emotion on her face became blatantly obvious the second it touched her features. (I suppose you could say, one could see into her eyes like open doors... and they'd lead them down into her core where she'd become so numb.) Hana sniffled quietly, allowing the other to wipe the stray smudges from her face. As hard as she fought to avoid his gaze, she couldn't hide the tint of pink that had begun to paint her cheeks. (At least rosey was better than stained!)

Once he had finished, the corners of Hana's lips twitched upwards into a faint smile. She wiped her eyes once more as an extra measure, hoping to halt any future moisture in its tracks. Exhaling a shaky breath, she allowed her eyes to briefly flicker towards his face.

"Thank you." She murmured, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Was she thanking him for his words or actions? Hana wasn't completely sure.

She watched as he coughed, her eyes growing wide in concern. "Hh-..." Realizing that she'd begun to reach for the boy's shoulder, Hana stopped herself; she paused before lowering her arm to her side. What good could *that* possibly do? Wasn't she already overstepping her boundaries? Hana silently scolded herself for her actions as her chest tightened with guilt. "I don't have the right to touch anyone..." She swallowed nervously, beginning to toy with the note in her lap, twisting it into different shapes.

"Well, I-" She paused, her eyes seemingly searching the room for the right words. "Before I tell you, I-... ah, I just-..." Another pause; this one longer than the first. "You know the truth-... You know the truth about me... don't you, Shigeru-san?" Hana grew silent, lowering her head before speaking in a nearly inaudible whisper. "It's odd-... isn't it?"

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## Shigeru:

Though the informant was temporarily worried about the cough (he swore if he started coughing up a storm again he'd punch himself in the face which, incidentally, wasn't a very strange occurrence if you considered --), his attention was soon turned towards Hana Uena's being a not-human.

In all truthfulness, he hadn't thought much of it. Of course he had been surprised but that had been for a good few moments before his mind started wandering towards toku series like the goddamn nerd he tried to deny that he was.

"Uh-huh," he said with a small nod. "I guess it's weird. I've never really had a f...uh...f-friend..." Clearing his throat furiously. "...who happened to be an AI before, but to be honest I...don't...think I care much about that."

Now what exactly did he mean by *that*? In the few moments of contemplation that he took to consider whether or not the fact that the astrologer was a machine and not a human would hinder his opinion of her, he ultimately had decided that, robot or not, it didn't change his opinion of her. *And why should it?*

"So you're not human," he stated, turning his gaze towards her. "That doesn't mean you're invalid or anything. You're...more real than Malachi Seigi was, and you've done a better job of showcasing humanity than I have. You're kinder than I am. You're just like anyone else -- you're...valuable. Isn't that what they say about lives? That they're valuable? Christ, I dunno, I don't usually say stuff like that. But the point is...anyone who thinks of you as just a machine is...that's wrong, Uena-san. You're much more than just a piece of metal, but that's not...or, uh...probably...not...what you wanted to talk about."

He trailed off, wondering if it was alright for him to be this honest. well I'm already dead so why not, right?

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Hana:

Hana's face softened upon hearing his response, her lips parting ever-so slightly. The girl's eyes quickly fluttered opened and closed as she allowed his words to sink in, repeating themselves over and over again. If anything of what Shigeru said was true, maybe- just maybe, Hana wasn't as worthless as she'd come to think. Maybe. She wanted to believe in his words- that they were spoken purely out of fact and that he truly believed she was valid. She'd always wanted to hear that word. valid. It was something so small and simple in retrospect, but it meant everything to Hana.

She brought her hands to her face, covering her mouth beneath her fingers. It made her feel so glad. Hana looked as if she might burst into tears, but the sound of light, bubbly laughter left her lips instead. She slumped against the washer, her back beginning to slide downwards to the floor. If it were not for her legs propping her up, due to bumping into the informant's, she would have easily done so. Hana Uena was tickled to pieces.

"You almost sound like me, Shigeru-san... Thank you." She said in between chuckles, "well... I'm really glad that you're real... because I think I'm growing more fond of Shigeru Natadama than Malachi Seigi... yes, I think I like him better." **Gay.....**

She lowered her hands, revealing a small grin. So much for her tilted metronome theory. It was strange how easily happiness had planted itself inside her chest and begun to grow, spreading its warmth all over. (like one of those fluffy trees from the Iorax)

"If it's alright... then, I won't hold it back." She said with a nod. "Pretending to be human was... kind of tiring..."

She sat up, her back now leaning flat against the washer. Pulling her legs close, she carefully crossed them to the side. Okay, **now** they were getting somewhere.

"Uhm, alright..." Hana took a deep breath, "I, ah, read your note- several times actually... and I didn't quite understand why you wanted to apologize..." A pause. "-but I will forgive you for anything you may have done, and we can start over... but only under five, small conditions." She said, raising five fingers for reference. "Don't worry, they're really simple..."

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## Shigeru:

Though it seemed to have taken him a few seconds to turn towards the astrologer, the informant's turning away from the girl in order to hide his face (which had grown very warm very suddenly; he wasn't suffering from another fever was he?) appeared to have been instantaneous.

"Sh...s... ..th-that's really-..." His voice coming out muffled, the frantic edge muted somewhat as he buried his face in his arms. He hadn't even realized he was holding his breath until black dots started to invade his vision and he sat upright, hair disheveled and messy, face still faintly flushed like diluted watercolor paint on a canvas as he took a breath. "You don't...that isn't... M-Malachi was...much...preferable to me, I think..."

He sighed, resting his cheek up against the palm of his hand. Things had taken quite the embarrassing turn and he needed to recover, though there was nothing quite like a throwback to his unfortunate demise which functioned like a bucket of cold water to douse out the searing heat in his cheeks.

"Ah that...!...hadn't...been very kind to you...uena-san," he said softly. "I shouldn't have led you to believe that I was being sincere when I wasn't...well, I guess I technically owe this apology to all the other people I've deceived so far, but it's not like any of them caught a glimpse of what I was really like, so..."

Ignorance truly was bliss, wasn't it? If he could do it over again, he would have willingly died as the fry cook, leaving them all behind with his false identity, not because he wanted them to miss him, but because it would have been so much easier on both parties.

"And about you not...pretending to be human that's perfectly fine with me," he said with a small nod, though he still thought of her as human by default. He listened quietly as she spoke, raising his eyebrows slightly as she raised her fingers in front of her. *Seems like everyone's making a deal with me these days!* "...Alright, shoot."

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## Hana:

"We've both done a lot of pretending... haven't we?" Hana asked, the thought suddenly presenting itself to her. The girl leaned her head to the side, catching small glimpses of the informant's appearance; she couldn't help but to giggle a bit. "Heh, what an odd face to make, Shigeru-san... are you okay?"

Hana laughed again, seemingly amused by a disheveled Shigeru. Without thinking she reached for his hair and had begun to delicately brush through it with her fingers. Carefully, she smoothed it

back into place before offering him a small smile, then a puzzled blink in realization of what she had done, when it was over. What was she doing? As the astrologer withdrew her hand, she paused and raised one finger. Ah, alright, here we go... She did her best to disregard her own previous, impulsive actions.

"Condition number one," She started, conveniently holding her hand in front of her face. "This one is optional, I suppose-... but I'd like you to consider it..." Hana plucked his note from her lap and held it up for him to see. "I want to read more of your poems-... but, I don't think it's something you do very often... ah, which is why it's somewhat optional..." She paused. "-but, if by chance... you, uhm, decide to write more... you should show me-"

She bashfully lowered her gaze, feeling somewhat embarrassed by such a spiel. If only she were better with words! Conversational skills were far from her forte- and, goodness, it showed. Hana wasn't certain if it was due to a glitch in her programming or the constant isolation she'd endured. Perhaps both...

"Is-... is that alright?"

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## Shigeru:

She was...laughing at him. The informant's face went from pink to absolutely scarlet as he stiffened, allowing for her fingers to comb through his hair. If it weren't for the fact that he was certain that his core body temperature had been upped a few degrees (and also for the fact that he was -- and I'm not even going to pretend like there are better terms -- a Huge Fucking Baby) he would have probably found the physical contact somewhat soothing. Gay

"Um. Thanks. I'm just fine." Lips barely moving, his expression still one of complete neutrality despite the color in his cheeks which only seemed to deepen as she mentioned the poetry. Oh, right. That.

He'd burned all of his poems. Not the ones that he'd been writing recently (he didn't feel like having the stench of burnt paper permeating his room and also possibly burning down the entirety of Adunamentum), but all of the ones he'd written before. Thinking back on it now, he was certain that he would have inevitably destroyed them one way or another down the line; they were quite possibly even more embarrassing than anything he'd done since waking up in the mountain.

The truth was that he was actually very fond of writing poetry. It was probably another obscure trait, like his affinity for botany. How was it possible for someone who did such grizzly work and refused to shed even an ounce of human decency while on the job to possess a sincere interest in things like flowers and poesy? It was paradoxical, contrary, oxymoronical, contradictory -- it

didn't make sense, and he was aware of it, thus he refused to fully acknowledge the true extent of his fondness for those things.

"Um...okay," he stated, expression still deadpanned, voice even and steady. "I'll make sure to let you know when I write something then. Uh... ..oh, right, that's... that isn't all is it?"

She still had four more conditions to lay out and though he knew that the probability of him dying from embarrassment on the spot was very slim, he got the feeling that, when this was through, he'd feel as if he'd survived a very difficult battle.

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## Hana:

The girl gave Shigeru a gentle nod, another faint smile gracing her lips. Hana had always harbored a fondness of poetry. She loved how the words were always so brilliantly strung together and how pleasant they sounded rolling off the tongue. It was one of the many reasons why she admired humans just as much as she did; they were expressive and ingenious in ways she could never be. Hana knew countless languages, was a living dictionary, but she could never write poetry. It was like a whole, new dialect that she could understand but never speak; one too beautiful to be touched by Hana's crude, unnatural programming and the metallic structure that bore her mind. Artificial intelligence just couldn't hold a candle to humans in terms of elegance. It was strange. As stiff and aloof as Shigeru appeared, he had, had this advantage over Hana since birth.

She raised another finger, making bunny ears seemingly for her own amusement. "Two..." Oddly enough, Hana looked a little hesitant as if her next request was too daring to say aloud. Still, she quickly breathed in and out before closing her eyes in preparation. Furrowing her brows, she puffed out her cheeks in complete seriousness.

"Stop getting into fights-!" She said, opening her eyes. "A-ah, please-... Shigeru-san, I can see the bruises... I'm- I'm... not certain how you got them... so excuse me for making assumptions, but-... I want you to stay out of trouble..."

Hana wasn't sure how often an informant fought in their lifetime. She wasn't entirely sure what it even meant to be an informant either. As far as Hana was concerned, she could be telling an actual murderer to simply stop "fighting". But regardless of what Shigeru was, Hana would still ask the same thing of him... merely because he was undoubtedly Shigeru Natadama, the scorio, the boy she was destined to meet. Even if people met by pure coincidence, her thoughts would remain firm because- goodness, what were the chances? Coincidence was just a Realist's simplified version of fate.

"I'm not trying to change anything about you, Shigeru-san... I just-" She lowered her gaze. "We're both dead now and... there's no reason to keep fighting... it's over." The girl spoke softly as if the words hurt her to say. "I don't know what this... sort of existence is- or how long it will last, but... it shouldn't go wasted- not like that..."

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## Shigeru:

He nearly sighed with relief as he heard the second condition, tension lessening as he leaned back against the washer. A small smile made its way to his lips, parting to let loose a soft chuckle. He took extra care not to let himself experience the full laugh. We all know how *that* had ended up.

"Well...you're right, there isn't really any reason for me to be getting into fights anymore," he stated softly. "I don't usually, uh...cause any ruckus unless I have to. And besides none of these are from..."

Now wait a minute. Was he going to deny that these sick battle scars weren't from an actual battle? Well if it'll ease her worries. The brief fracas between him and Noriaki Kato had been like all of Shigeru Natadama's previous fights in that it was the informant who had walked away relatively unharmed while his opponent suffered an array of injuries. It had almost been just like his job minus a lot of suffering, psychological tomfoolery, and a good amount of blood which was usually present.

"I, uh...walked into a wall, Uena-san," the informant said, sounding uncharacteristically sheepish before his tone returned to normal. "The...other bruise is...I asked Kato-san to hit me, so it wasn't like a fight or anything. I didn't do it just because, if that's what you're thinking I...it was appropriate."

He nodded vaguely, fingers clenching the fabric of his sweater as his chest throbbed. There were a lot of bruises that Hana Uena didn't know about and he intended to keep them under wraps. Not like he would be removing any articles of clothing any time soon, though, jeez.

"But alright. I'll...stay out of trouble," he said with a small nod. "You should, uh...worry more about the other guy's bruises than mine, I...shouldn't have lost my temper like that."

If you could even call it losing his temper the way that the informant practically beat up the webcomic artist, the only traces of ire being in his fist and in his words which, even then didn't sound nearly as enraged as he actually felt back then. It was a small defeat for him; contrary to popular belief, he disliked getting angry.

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## Hana:

Hana blinked once, then twice, then *three times* before quietly staring up at the informant. *Uani?* Her head began to turn in a clockwise fashion as the girl tilted it with perplexity. She looked to be at a sudden loss of words as her lips parted then quickly closed again. The room was quiet aside for the washer that softly hummed behind her.

"You did what...?" Hana asked suddenly, her voice almost in a whisper. The corners of her mouth twisted in confusion, unsure of what expression to make as she furrowed her brows. Lowering her head, she promptly buried her face into her shoulder. "Pfft..." Hana erupted into laughter. "Shigeru-san-! You ran into a wall...? B-but how did you even manage-" The girl lightly kicked her legs in amusement. "And then-... *then*, you asked to be punched? I don't understand *why*- Gosh, that's so confounding!" She lifted her head, giggles still escaping her lips. "You're kind of odd, Shigeru-san..."

She moved closer, sliding in beside him and leaving a small gap between their shoulders. Hana peered up at Shigeru's bruised cheek, inspecting it for a while before lightly poking it with her index finger. Her touch was enough to fade it slightly, and she watched as the color returned. Oh, how she envied human skin.

"Well, at least you're truthful." Hana said with a chuckle. Raising three fingers, she averted her gaze slightly. "Ah, it's kind of strange... but my third condition was to be honest with me." She picked at her nails, focusing on them rather than making eye contact. "... I know that the truth hurts sometimes, but lies are only a temporary fix it seems and-... In the end, they hurt you far more than the truth ever could." She paused, letting out a brittle laugh. "I just don't want to be lied to anymore-..."

Hana looked a little forlorn as her mind traveled elsewhere- to other places, to other people. She thought of the faces of those who'd lied to her and those, to whom, she'd returned the favor. Hana had so often lied, herself, fooling people with the validity of her existence.

"I suppose in that case-... I'm not going to lie as well." She said softly. "I'm Hana- just Hana, and I'm a robot-... uhm, an Artificial Intelligence if that's what you'd prefer to call it..." She gave a small shrug despite *hating* going by the term 'Artificial'. "I apparently have some 'astrophobic' tendencies... but that's absurd and needlessly confusing-..." She let out a sigh. "At any rate, I never really stood a chance in society so-... here I am."

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## Shigeru:

The informant decided not to suppress his grin, wishing that the circumstances surrounding his asking the webcomic artist to punch him had been a little pleasanter than what they actually were. But that would be too idealistic. The real world was far from pretty most of the time.

"It's...a little complicated," he said, trying not to sound nervous, the sheepish edge in his tone a little more forced this time. His grin had remained frozen in place, dispelling any sense of discomfort he was feeling at the thought of the issue. "But don't..."

He stopped, listened to her as she continued to speak. Honesty. She was asking for honesty.

First she'd asked for his words. Then she'd asked for his safety. Both had been a little challenging for the informant to see himself doing, but both had been doable. But the fact was that the informant was an impulsive liar. He didn't lie because he liked being deceptive. Lying had become a defense mechanism, the lock which ensured that no one would be able to touch him.

"It's so stupid the way you just *give* yourselves to people and expect them not to hurt you."

He'd never seen his locking himself away as an act of cowardice. He'd always thought that being totally isolated, a one-way mirror -- that made him stronger than everyone else didn't it? If he could rely on himself, trust himself...

But where had that landed him? In the end he'd still gotten hurt, no matter how much he tried to deny it.

*If Troy wants to be a singer, then I'm coming clean.*

"That's fair," he said with a nod. "After all I...well, it wasn't necessary for me to lie to you for that long. And...while...we're being honest, uena-san, about asking to be punched I'm not...my head isn't as well put together as I'd like for it to be. I suffer from...something, we haven't gotten it diagnosed because I've never...told anyone...about it, but it's probably not normal for me to see...for me...to..."

God why was this so difficult to say? Because it was so far-fetched? Did speaking about this particular experience scare him? No, no it's not that. This was embarrassing. This embarrassed him more than anything else.

"It's probably just...guilt." The last word falling from his lips with difficulty. "...did something...that I shouldn't have and now the... ..sorry, I'm not well-practiced in this sort of thing."

He sighed, frustrated with himself, burying his head in his hands before looking at her one more time. Would she be able to believe that he'd be able to keep up with this condition? He'd done a poor job of demonstrating his worth thus far. *Maybe I need to do something else that'll prove that I'll take this seriously.*

He seemed to be staring at her calculatedly, as if trying to weigh two options in his mind before finally coming to a decision. *I'll be damned if this is easier to do than talk about **that**.*

"Uena-san, I'm sorry in advance, but I..." He trailed off, closing the gap between them momentarily as he gave her a small kiss, pulling away almost as quickly as he'd come, expression surprisingly devoid of any signs of embarrassment. It hadn't been particularly fancy or passionate; it had been fleeting brief, as if he simply wanted to execute the action...or perhaps do it before his mind was clouded with doubts. "If I'm...being honest with myself -- and with you -- ...I think I might have wanted to do that at one point."

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## Hana:

"Guilt..." Hana repeated quietly, peering up at the informant with inquisitive eyes. She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear before speaking her voice modulated but soft. "It's alright... babysteps, Shigeru-san. Don't push yourself to explain it all to me... things get really confusing that way... don't you think?" She lightly nudged him with her shoulder. "If you can't do it now... do it later. It's not the end just yet, right?"

She smiled faintly. Did Hana really believe in her own words? Sure, they were spoken in a thinly veiled tone of uncertainty, and the girl had questioned herself every so often- but Hana stood by what she said. The astrologer wasn't really known for her wisdom or advice, nor did she believe it was any good, but she felt confident in her lack of understanding. If Hana knew anything, she knew that explaining something you found incomprehensible was nearly impossible. She couldn't expect Shigeru to do the impossible.

"If the large truths are too difficult, start with the small ones-..."

Hana gave a small nod, seemingly agreeing with herself before glancing in Shigeru's direction. Oddly enough, she caught his gaze. Was he staring at her? The girl tilted her head questioningly, her eyes training on his face. *Eh?* Did she do something strange? Was something wrong? Did she say something bad?

"Uena-san, I'm sorry in advance, but I..."

The girl sat completely still upon feeling his lips briefly touch her own. Her eyes grew wide, blinking slowly as she tried to grasp what had just happened. A sensation of warmth prickled from her mouth to her skin as she felt the heat begin to spread over all her face. Despite the sudden, temperature increase, she stared up at the boy with a puzzled expression on her face rather than embarrassed.

Allowing herself a trembling breath, Hana quickly averted her gaze, leaning her back against the washer. She brought her hand to her mouth, touching her fingertips to her lips. The kiss was surprisingly subtle- subtle but also warm in a peculiar way.

"That was scary..." Hana murmured, gazing down at the floor. "-but good kind of scary I think... the quiet kind that still manages to make your heart race and your hands go clammy..." She paused, suddenly feeling embarrassed by her own words. "That's not... that's not what I'm supposed to say... is it? Ah, scary isn't the right word..."

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## Shigeru:

Scary...that wasn't entirely inaccurate. In fact the informant stayed silent for a few moments, gaze dropping to the floor, his thoughts melding into that one incoherent and tangled mess which refused him the ability to think properly. *It's smarter to think an action through before enacting it, right? or was it...doing the action and then analyzing the outcome, or...?*

He'd never kissed someone based on impulse before. To be sure he'd kissed a few people as part of the act, and all of those had been, for the most part, predetermined, and hadn't meant much. This was...certainly different somehow.

"No that was...I probably shouldn't have..." he hugged his legs closer to his chest, cheek resting on his knees as he turned his face away from her. "Ah...being impulsive isn't very rewarding..."

His gaze drifted to the wall, eyelids getting heavy. He wanted to relax a little more, the position he was in making it difficult for him to breathe. It'd be a shame if the --

wham!

The informant's head hit the back of the washer, a brief instance of recognizable terror shattering the inky, black surface of his eyes like a rock thrown onto the mirror-like surface of the lake, causing ripples which died out as it sunk to the bottom.

"Sorry, I thought I...saw..."

Breathing was getting more difficult as he bit down on his lower lip so as to prevent the coughs which crowded in his chest from breaking loose, teeth pressed so hard into the tissue that he felt the blood dribble down his chin as he buried his face in his arms once again, muffling the coughs which had torn through his efforts as if they'd been made out of tissue paper.

When he resurfaced, he looked exhausted, panting as his lungs finally seemed to be filling themselves with oxygen.

"You...still had...two more conditions, right?" Despite his obvious sickness, the informant refused to acknowledge what had just happened, instead choosing to change the subject, the light in his eyes somewhat dimmer than before.

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## Hana:

The girl sat quietly, giving him nervous glances as she toyed with the fabric of her skirt. Why did she have to say scary? of all things? She bit down on her lip, fearing that it may have begun to tremble. Things had gotten confusing- frustrating to the point where Hana could easily see herself bursting into tears. She silently sulked, every so often looking in Shigeru's direction. The astrologer couldn't help but to think that things would've been much easier if she was human- if she could understand it all. She hated the impenetrable barrier that stood tall between herself and others; it clouded her vision, muffled her hearing... made the simplest of things incomprehensible to her.

Hana continued to twist the fabric, silently bickering with herself over opportunities that had been lost. Did Hana still have that pitiful crush on Shigeru? It appeared so. Did that one, small slip-up cause Hana's view of herself to drop drastically. Absolutely. She squeezed her eyes shut, listening to the still-running washer that had been happily buzzing along in the background.

"Shigeru-san..." She whispered, her voice hardly audible. "That's not... that's not always true..." what did she know?

Her voice dissipated into silence, and Hana sat in such until she heard the informant's head suddenly collide with the machine behind them. The girl flinched, immediately turning to face him as her body began to slightly tremble. What was going on? She listened to his muffled coughs, her eyes growing wide in both alarm and concern. All at once, Hana felt herself begin to panic. She'd witnessed Shigeru's coughing at the trial; she saw the blood and what it had done to him. It wasn't necessarily something she could ignore nor was it something she wanted to.

Without a second thought, Hana leaned forward, resting her head against his arm. She sat there quietly, her hands limp at her sides. Surprise, surprise, the girl had, once again, been reduced to tears. At least now she could differentiate her previous, silly feelings from actual fear.

Hana didn't say a word... not until she weakly raised four fingers.

"The fourth condition..." She said, her voice slightly muffled. "Let me help you... don't try to endure this alone, Shigeru-san..."

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## Shigeru:

She was right about impulses. Though acting without thinking would be disastrous if done in large doses, it wasn't good to be too passive, to just let things happen and witness the results, only realizing later that you couldn't change a thing about them.

He swallowed, blinked back the stinging sensation in his eyes as he felt the girl's head rest on his arm. Even if she wasn't a human being, she still felt warm, comforting. Without realizing it, he'd begun to relax, moved a little closer to the astrologer.

*"Don't try to endure this alone, Shigeru-san..."*

He grit his teeth, remembered the first time it had happened. He remembered waking up, head pounding. He'd been dreaming, dreaming about Noriko, dreaming about how angry she'd been at him.

He'd stood, headed towards the bathroom. In his dream Noriko had punched him hard enough to make him bleed. When he looked in the mirror the boy staring back at him harbored a wound that matched the one the informant had received in the "dream" perfectly. There'd been a gasp, a door being flung open.

The storm from the night before had knocked over the morning glories whose petals inched forward silently on the ground, strengthened by the wind. He hardly noticed them, looking around for any signs of Noriko Yamauchi even though she didn't live in this city. Even though she was dead.

When his dad had asked, the informant said that he'd been in a fight. That worked the first few times, until his chronology stopped making sense by the tenth dream. Then he'd said that he'd fallen down the stairs, bumped into walls, anything but the truth. Because hallucinations weren't supposed to be able to hurt you, right?

"I can't stop you...from being concerned," the informant said closing his eyes tightly, causing the memories to disperse. "But I don't think that ...that helping me...I don't think I'm anyone worth helping Uena-san. I'm selfish, I only care about my own agenda, and I...I never give back as much as other people give to me. I just take things from people without even *trying* to repay them. You don't...want to support someone like that, do you?"

It was the first time he'd acknowledged these things aloud, and even then he still didn't feel as horrible as he should have. Using others for their own personal gain wasn't something that was exclusive to the informant, after all -- but the thought of Hana Uena offering to help him while he knew that he would likely never return her kind gestures almost made him wish he wasn't so selfish.

"I don't deserve companionship of any kind, uena-san," he said, the faintest, almost untraceable ounce of sorrow accenting his words. "You shouldn't waste your efforts on someone like me."

---

Hana:

"You don't...want to support someone like that, do you?"

Hana grasped the boy's sleeve, her fingers tightening around the fabric. *Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid...* She bit her lip, preventing herself from screaming the words aloud. She felt the front of his shirt, her fingers gently searching for the pin that she had worn on many occasions. Once her hand had brushed against something metallic, she felt for five corners. *one, two, three, four, five.* It was her star. Grasping the small pin beneath her fingertips, Hana gave it a light tug.

"Shigeru-san... do you remember when I gave you this?" Hana asked softly before hiding it beneath her thumb. "Back when we were both alive... you said you would support me and... I said I would support you too-..." She paused. "You may not have meant a word you said then, but... but I did...! I meant everything I said to you..."

She brought herself closer to him, still refusing to lift her head or expose her face. No doubt, her expression was not a pretty one. Hana felt completely helpless, unsure of what to say or do to get through to him. It was frustrating, *aggravating* to think that she wasn't allowed to even try to help the informant. If Hana couldn't even assist her own friend... what good was she?

"Life isn't about bargaining... It can't be..." She continued, slightly dropping her volume. "I don't care about getting even or... or anything like that, Shigeru-san... I never really wanted anything in return... I just... please give me the chance... I want to help you..."

The girl clenched her teeth before suddenly pulling away. She stared up at him, her eyes still streaming with tears. Her expression was both that of frustration and sadness as she felt an array of feelings stir inside her chest. Her eyes, large and dark, continued to leak the careless spills that had begun to flood her from the inside.

"Deserving or not... we can start over, alright?" Hana said, releasing his shirt. "I don't mind if you think I'm wasting my efforts-.... they're my efforts so-.... so I'll choose how I waste them... and I choose you-" Her voice cracked, causing the girl to hide her face into her hands. "-damn it... why do you have to be so difficult sometimes, Shigeru-san...?" Any other words she spoke were inaudible, small whimpers to herself as she lowered her head.

---

## Shigeru:

His joints felt stiff, frozen solid. He was vaguely aware that he'd been nodding, if only slightly, in assent when she asked about the star. He'd been holding his breath as she grasped onto the pin, half-expecting for her to undo the clasp and take it back. It didn't make sense to him why he was so fearful of her doing that.

He gently traced his hand down her cheek until he reached her chin, silently tilting her head upwards towards him before pulling the other into a hug. Though he hadn't shown even a trace of emotion throughout her entire spiel, the cold, indifferent mask had shattered as he held her close, preventing her from seeing the desperation that was not only present in his eyes, but his entire face.

GAY ???

"Uena-san..." He wasn't even trying to sound monotonous and cold anymore, the earnestness and pleading explicit; the richest display of emotion he'd allowed himself in years. "I can't do this again, I...I wouldn't be able to bear it because I'm not...strong, I'm..."

There it was again. That wretched pronoun. *I. Ego. Individual.* Even now he was still thinking in terms of just himself wasn't he? *That's not true.*

He'd begun to cough again, violently the sharp expulsion of blood causing his grip on the girl to tighten as he slumped against the washer, grip loosening, though he still hung feebly onto the fabric of her shirt, face now visible. There'd been traces of tears on his cheeks, mingling with the blood which dripped down from his chin. Whether they were a result of her words or the coughing was indiscernible.

"Uena...san..." His breathing was shallow, his eyelids felt weighted and heavy. "It isn't fair...for me to take anything from you..."

His vision going dark as his eyelids shut, like curtains being closed. The world was too blindingly bright for him to look at anymore.

"You deserve much better than me."

---

## Hana:

Hana squeezed her eyes shut as she felt the informant's arms tighten around her. Shigeru's chest seemed to shake violently with each, terrible cough, causing the girl to break into small sobs as she buried her face into his shirt. She was afraid. Hana didn't dare speak or move, fearing that she'd trigger another onslaught of coughs and indirectly hurt the boy further.



As he loosened his grip, Hana caught her breath, her body trembling with each gasp. Her eyes wandered from his chest to his face, blinking back tears as she took in his physical condition. Gently, she brought her hands to his face, her thumbs carefully wiping away the moisture beneath his eyes.

"What are we going to do, Shigeru-san...?" Hana asked, taking her sleeve and wiping the blood from his chin. "You can't go on like this... and I can't watch you suffer..." She forced a smile, her voice quiet and brittle. "Please let me do this... It's my act of kindness to you, Shigeru-san..."

The girl pulled herself to her knees. Slowly, she leaned closer to Shigeru, almost thankful that he had closed his eyes. Subconsciously, she held her breath, remaining completely still before allowing her lips to meet his. The astrologer made it simple and quick, pulling away as she'd begun to smell the faint scent of blood. She rested her head in the crook of his neck, feeling completely unsure of herself.

"Life is unfair..." Hana whispered, "The afterlife must abide by the same rules... right?" She paused, blinking her eyes slowly. "Consider Condition Four already in motion... I'm sorry... I seemed to have already made up my mind about this..."

---

## Shigeru:

He opened his eyes slowly, dizziness and nausea receding with the kiss. She may claim that she was artificial, but she'd been incredibly warm. *Human*, even.

He was silent for a few moments, catching his breath, waiting for his pulse to return to normal, his lungs to function properly, as his sentiments began to neatly fall into place. He could have been angry with her. Angry that she blatantly disregarded what he'd said, frustrated that she was imposing her care upon him. But that isn't what he felt. Instead...

"...Thank you."

It was quiet, almost inaudible. Had she been farther away it was doubtful that she would have heard his words.

"Uena-san...that's...fine...with me, I just...don't want you...to get disappointed..." His voice was still soft that same sadness vaguely detectable. "Still I'm...grateful... ..no one else has ever accepted the person that I've turned out to be..."

Not Noriko, not his father, certainly not Asano, and while Kato and Ahmed seemed to approve of him, while Nijisaki and Abe revered him, none had come close enough in order to catch a full view of the wreckage which practically defined him. *They'd all think I was pathetic if they did.*

He leaned against her, interlaced his fingers with hers. There was still one last condition, but at the moment he felt completely drained, struggling to keep his eyelids open as the rhythm of the washer practically lulled him to sleep.

---

## Hana:

Feeling Shigeru's fingers interlace with her own, Hana allowed the informant to lean against her. No more words. She fluttered her eyes shut, her lashes lightly brushing his skin. The Fifth Condition could wait. At that moment, he needed rest, and Hana didn't seem to mind one bit. The poor thing must have been exhausted and admittedly, Hana had grown tired herself. She sat very still, not quite asleep but in a daze. Time seemed to tick by quickly, and the astrologer had become unsure of how many seconds, minutes they'd been sitting there. Hana felt she could stay like she was for as long as he needed, even if that meant forever. However, there were still tasks to be done.

Hana's eyes opened as she heard the washer finally come to a stop. Carefully, she pulled away from Shigeru, separating her fingers from his own with reluctance. She gently adjusted his body, doing her best to nudge him aside without startling him.

"Shigeru-san..." Hana whispered softly. "Ah, I'm sorry... I need to go for a little while..." She moved to open the washer and promptly retrieved his jacket from inside. Inspecting it for a moment, she walked over to a nearby dryer. Ah yes, actual laundry... "I'll be just a second-..."

She toyed around with a few of the machine's buttons, seemingly guessing how to successfully function it. Back home, the girl didn't use a dryer or anything of the sort (though they had a pretty darn expensive one but). Hana had always preferred to leave her clothes to air-dry whenever the weather was nice- which was quite often. She'd give any excuse to go outside then. Now, however, was a different story. Hana wasn't sure she could even leave this new place at all. As far as she was concerned, she could never go outside again. The astrologer supposed it was safer that way... but did she really have anything to fear now that she was dead?

Once the dryer hummed to life, Hana returned to Mr. Lazybones and sat down in front of him. She smoothed out her skirt, feeling rather rumpled after the previous events. Resting her hands in her lap, she gave him a small smile.

"Are you feeling okay...?" She asked, watching him closely. "You don't have to stay here-... I can walk you back to your room if you want, Shigeru-san..."

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### Shigeru:

The sudden lack of warmth that followed the astrologer's absence made it difficult for him to keep his eyes closed and he dazedly straightened up his posture, sitting up against the washing machine and waiting for her to return.

As she worked on the laundry, the informant reflected on the things that had just happened, and wondered if there was a serious flaw in his ability to guard himself. He didn't feel much different aside from the lightness in his chest that told him that a burden had been somewhat elevated.

"...don't think you want to do that," the informant mumbled as the astrologer returned. "My room isn't in the best shape right now..."

which was true. The place was an absolute pigsty at the moment. Clothes, papers, ~~blood~~ strewn about everywhere. Not to mention the large hole in his wall with questionable origins.

"I can help you with your errands, uena-san," he said, slowly standing up and extending his hand down towards the girl. "I mean...assuming you have...other things to do. I've been taking up a lot of your time and you probably had other things to tend to..."

---

Hana:

"Ah- is it...?" Hana asked, tilting her head to the side. "Well, I don't really mind that, Shigeru-san... I could even help you clean someday if you want."

The girl decided against telling the informant that she'd already done some cleaning in his other room. She feared that her intentions would come off as unclear and that he'd scold her for tampering with his things. Hana just couldn't help it; she had always been prone to cleaning up after others. Oddly enough, the astrologer thought of it as more of a personality trait rather than another quirk in her programming.

She took Shigeru's hand and pulled herself to her feet. Hana took extra care not to pull too hard, wary that her companion may be weak or lacked balance from coughing earlier. She left her hand to linger on his, uncertain if she should let go. Hana's face couldn't help but to flush pink by her actions, the rosiness of her cheeks standing out blatantly against the paleness of the hand that had found itself there. Was it another personality trait to make common instances utterly embarrassing for herself?

"Errands-..." Hana repeated, her hand trailing to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. "Now, that you mention it-... I wouldn't quite call them errands... but when I was alive... I, ah, wrote a list of small things I wanted to do..." The girl stared downwards to her feet, rocking slightly on her toes. "I'm afraid that they're not very interesting so I don't imagine that you'd want to help with something like that..."

---

Shigeru:

Ah yes. Cleaning. Wasn't it Einstein that said that chaos was actually beneficial in helping one think? Maybe, but the informant couldn't be bothered to remember and the narrator can't be bothered to look it up but they're both pretty certain it was Einstein although both might actually have quantum chaos on the brain.

"Um."

His eyes trailed towards the astrologer's hand, confused at first by its presence. There was another feeling in his chest that he couldn't classify, although he could narrow it down to awkward and...pleasant? *what the fuck. what the fuck.*

He shook his head, causing his thoughts to scatter. The informant wasn't well-versed in the art of physical interaction. Words didn't require you to stick out your hand and touch people. Even if Malachi Seiji had been a touchy-feely kind of guy, it never really occurred to the informant that his act would be practically undetectable if he'd simply grabbed girls' hands or kissed them without meaning to. Pantomime to accompany his ventriloquy. In the grand scheme of things the sense of touch had ultimately been left out of his studies. It made sense. "Touch" was coupled with "feeling" and he knew that he couldn't do with a lot of feeling in his career.

"I wouldn't mind helping" he said, refusing to allow the temporary awkwardness pervade his voice. "I don't have a lot to do around here, really, and I...wouldn't mind...being around you, either."

He cleared his throat, half-wondered what her list entailed. Natadama certainly had something akin to an agenda however his list was probably much shorter than hers. In fact, it only had two items on it, but what they were is hardly relevant anymore.

---

## Hana:

"Ah, really...?"

The girl's face immediately burned a bright scarlet, causing her gaze to drop to the floor. Her fingers nervously twitched and curled, Shigeru's hand suddenly feeling 50x warmer than before. What sort of atmosphere was *this*? Unable to think of an elegant response, she quickly nodded in agreement. Hana wasn't quite sure how to express this, but she thoroughly enjoyed the informant's presence- far more than she'd ever like to admit. It was strange how the astrologer still clung to her remaining scraps of dignity, while knowing she'd throw it all away if Shigeru were to simply ask. As a young, socially-inexperienced robot, Hana found herself to be far more embarrassing than the average human. Not a single day went by without the girl making a complete and utter fool of herself.

Still, her lips had unknowingly curled into a smile. Beneath her red face and trembling frame, Hana was *glad*. Surely, one had to be crazy to enjoy the company of a robot but... luckily, Shigeru had worded it in saner terms. Humans could easily tolerate robots, in fact, they did it to machines all the time. There was nothing odd about that. Nothing odd at all... which was just fine with Hana. Right? She certainly wouldn't mind being around him either.

"Hh- well, it's a bucket list..." She admitted, her eyes seemingly focusing on a random spec of dust on the floor. "I know that sounds silly since I'm, ah, already dead but... while writing it, I always sort of... knew that I'd never get to complete it..." Hana let out a soft but somewhat forced chuckle. "I guess the foolish dreamer in me wanted to write it... I had always imagined myself running away from home... and going to Tokyo or... Osaka... I'd see all of Japan just to do the little things that I

wanted..." She paused for a moment before glancing in his direction. "-but all of that seems pretty ridiculous to me now... I was really naïve back then... huh?"

The astrologer raised her chin, her gaze traveling to the ceiling as she let out a soft sigh. Hana appeared mildly displeased with her past self, pursing her lips slightly in thought. If she had run away would she still have met the same fate? well, obviously. But would she have followed the same strings of coincidence and ended up here?

"Hm... I suppose I could start calling it an errands list now... that does sound a lot more appropriate." She said quietly, merely thinking aloud. "Of course-... I don't have the list with me but... I can still remember..."

---

### Shigeru:

They were still...holding hands. To say that the informant didn't look even the tiniest bit bashful at this point would have been a lie -- he could feel his face flushing as he subconsciously gave her hand a tiny squeeze. *Things like this...usually people do them to let the other know that everything is going to be okay...*

As she spoke of her aspirations of travel, the informant felt the tiniest pang of guilt. He'd been all over the country, he'd been to the United States, and he'd taken all of those travels for granted, but then, he hardly appreciated anything past face value.

"I know it's not the same, but I could tell you about them...those places, I mean," he said, almost startling himself with the sound of his own voice. He blinked, cleared his throat, tentatively starting up again as if he were afraid that he'd lost control of his own mouth. "I've been...all over Japan, and even overseas a few times...I have souvenirs, too..."

Granted most of them were wristbands and hair accessories - junk, he'd thought to himself when he'd bought them, but he remembered each of them well. Some places gave him souvenirs that didn't require a trip to the gift shop on the way out. He supposed they'd had "sentimental value," although again he'd never stopped to admire their significance. It was inconsiderate of him -- no doubt he'd had an impact on the people that had given the memorabilia to him, though the impact was undoubtedly one-sided due to the informant's usual nature.

"Having a bucket list isn't something that's childish, uena-san," the informant continued after a short pause. "I suppose all of us have bucket lists in a way. I...sort of have one. Mine is shorter than yours, but I never got to complete it either. It's alright, though."

He gave her a small smile, less tired now, and more genuine -- he was getting better at it, finally.

"As long as you can remember we can still try to do a few of the things on the list."

---

### Hana:

The girl lowered her gaze from the ceiling, simply staring up at the informant with eyes wide and full of awe. She looked as if he had promised her the secrets of the universe, the answers of existence, the key to happiness... Hana blinked slowly, obviously taken back by Shigeru's words. If it were not for the fact that she still held his hand, the girl could have drifted away in utter joy. No one had ever made her such an offer before.

Hana beamed, her cheeks flushing ever-so slightly. By the looks of it, things were just peachy. She bit her lip, suppressing a grin and trying her best not to appear too eager. Without a second thought, Hana took both of Shigeru's hands in her own as she peered up at him from where she stood.

"Do you really mean it...?" She asked seriously before smiling once more. "-because, I'd really like that..." Hana gave him a small nod. "I want to hear all about your travels, Shigeru-san so... You'll have to tell me and... show me your souvenirs too...! That'd be okay, right...?"

She gave a moment for her words to settle before her hands suddenly caught her attention. She blinked in surprise, her face suddenly turning red in embarrassment. Slowly, she pulled her hands away from his, giving him a small, sheepish smile before mouthing "I'm sorry". It seemed she had gotten carried away... Taking a small step back, Hana brushed a strand of hair behind her ear; it had become a sort of habit since she'd cut her hair. The girl bashfully averted her gaze, her knees slightly trembling beneath her.

"Oh... the list..." She murmured, "It may be a bit easier if I just wrote it down again... I should still have stationary in my room..." Hana paused. She interlaced her fingers before bowing her head in Shigeru's direction. "I'll be just a minute... I promise..."

Without delay, Hana left the laundry room, carefully closing the door behind her. She had made a break for it before the informant even had a chance to speak. Frankly, the girl felt shy- too anxious to wait another second before leaving... so she took this time to reflect on the words they had shared. She wondered if they'd both come through in the end. Would things ever be okay? Hana wondered if Shigeru had any regrets, if he had taken her words as seriously as she had meant them. What if he changed his mind about being near her?

Hana lowered her head. She decided that it'd be alright. After all, the main thing that mattered was Condition Four. As long as she could continue to help him, she'd be satisfied. *Right?*

When Hana had finally made it to her room, her visit was brief. She quietly gathered her stationary and several pens. Who knew? Perhaps Shigeru would write his list as well. Of course, Hana knew that may require a gentle nudge and some pleading, but it was a possibility.

Overall, the astrologer wasn't gone long before returning to the Laundry Room, a small bag slung over her shoulder. If anything, she regretted not saying she'd take five minutes instead. Hana stepped inside, giving the other a small wave before walking over.

"I'm back-..." She announced softly as if her presence wasn't already obvious. "I started writing my list on the way back so-..." She let out a small chuckle. "It's practically finished."

With that, she timidly handed him a small piece of paper.

Errands List (In no particular order):

- ☆ Learn to ride a bike
- ☆ Have your first kiss
- ☆ Bake something for someone
- ☆ Eat a cheeseburger
- ☆ Ride the subway
- ☆ Build a snowman
- ☆ Learn to play an instrument
- ☆ Get a part-time job
- ☆ Go stargazing with someone
- ☆ Swim naked
- ☆ Learn how to swim
- ☆ Make a bento
- ☆ Go to the cinema
- ☆ Dance with someone
- ☆ Try cotton candy
- ☆ See fireworks up close

Wow, she really did remember.

---

Shigeru:



The way her eyes lit up as he brought up the proposition of travel made him feel somewhat bashful. He didn't think that she'd be nearly that enthusiastic about the task, didn't think he'd give those places justice. He may have written poetry, but he doubted he possessed a poet's way with words. How could he? He saw the world in black and white, didn't care to appreciate its beauty (unless, of course, the sight to behold happened to be a flower). He feared that he'd mess up, make those places out to be boring, jejune and this wouldn't have bothered him much if it wasn't for her eagerness.

And then, of course, there were the people that he vaguely remembered at all those venues. He hardly remembered them as whole individuals, instead he recalled only parts of them. Like Yukio Nanami's eyes when the two of them had gone to the arcade in Kyoto, the bright words of "GAME OVER!" reflecting in those dark pools as the two of them laughed; or Mina Itone's smile, that perfect half-moon which illuminated the crisp autumn evening of Roppongi; Asuna Ueyama's laugh, that pleasant sound which he refused to believe was pleasant, echoing as the sun rose above Shibuya Station; and then of course there was Noriko Yamauchi, whose name he could not remember without feeling as if his chest were filled with ice cold water. Guilt. That was the only thing he associated with her now in that quiet town that he'd shattered to pieces with his very presence.

He wouldn't tell Hana about that place.

The informant waited patiently for her return, pinching the list in between his fingers as his eyes scanned the page. There seemed to be the beginnings of a smile on his features, a slow inhale as if he were about to burst out laughing, but then...

"Ah...uena-san...." He sounded troubled, the same way someone would be troubled about a splotch of ink obscuring a letter or two, making a word illegible. He stopped staring at the paper, slowly bringing his gaze back onto the girl. "...when I...kissed...you...that wasn't your first, was it...?"

As he said it, he felt that heat in his cheeks rising once again, however his expression didn't waver. Instead he back tracked, cleared his throat and tried again.

"I mean....reading your list I could definitely...help out...with a few of these." A short nod, his eyes back on the paper, looking more earnest now, as if looking for some sort of hidden message stares at her. "Making you a cheeseburger shouldn't be too difficult. I am a fry cook, after all, even if I'm not a Super High-School Level one... ..I could also teach you how to swim although...maybe not...naked... ..I can dance, too, although not that well, and...oh...baking...I always try but I'm not very good at it..."

Mumbling, hoping to avoid an awkward conversation that he might have accidentally began by his first inquiry. *why does that matter anyway?*

---

## Hana:

The girl timidly stood in front of Shigeru as he read her list, toying with the hem of her sweater. Hana was oddly bashful, feeling as if she had given the informant her diary rather than a silly, little list of absurd tasks. She gave him small glances, curious but almost afraid of his reaction. She had never shared anything *that* personal, so the girl couldn't help but to feel a little jittery. Some of the activities on the list were certainly more daring than others squints at jade, but overall, they were pretty unextraordinary. For a bucket list, it didn't seem very accomplishing at all. (Well, to be fair, Hana wasn't allowed to be more than a hundred feet from her house sooo...)

"Hm...?" She gave him a puzzled head tilt in response to his question. It took only a moment, but Hana felt her face grow incredibly warm before averting her gaze. Oh. She stood there quietly, practically fidgeting in embarrassment. Without looking in Shigeru's direction, Hana gave him a small nod. "It was-..." Hana murmured as she fiddled with her hair, nervously tangling her fingers in the strands. "I suppose... we should cross that one out... huh?"

Hana grew silent again but not without giving him a faint smile. Quietly, she retrieved a pen from her bag before leaning closer and crossing "Have your first kiss" off of the list. Done. Hana wrapped a lock of hair around her finger, her gaze subtly wandering elsewhere. Frankly, never in a billion years did the girl believe that she'd ever cross anything from the list, let alone *that* particular thing. But, of course, she had no complaints. Girls like herself went their whole lives without being kissed.

"Do you mind if we try baking first...?" Hana suddenly asked before turning towards Shigeru, her eyes shyly peering up at him. "I'm a rather decent baker so... maybe it'll be the easiest? Besides, sweets are good for the spirit... I think..."

---

## Shigeru:

Immediately his expression darkened and he bit the inside of his cheek, holding his breath as she neared him and crossed the item off the list. His entire body seemed to have gone rigid and it seemed to take a decade for him to draw in a breath, his expression solemn, serious.

"I'm sorry," he stated. "If...I had known I wouldn't have... It...It shouldn't have been me that...I'm...really sorry."

For once he actually looked ashamed of himself, and it was almost comical to think that he'd been unapologetic for the majority of the crimes and atrocities he'd committed in the past, only to feel pure remorse over something as small as a kiss. He looked slightly uncomfortable, biting his lower lip as he listened to her speak, eyes now cast on the floor.

"Hm?"

His gaze snapping back up to meet hers in an attempt to shake off the queasiness which had invaded his system. He recalled numerous baking attempts in the past, most ending up with a piping hot tray of what resembled the lava rocks that he used to see as a kid, never removing any from the rocky beaches out of superstition. He could never quite figure out what he'd been doing wrong. *Love isn't actually part of the process, is it?*

"Ah, sure thing Uena-san," the informant said with a slight nod. "Should we head to the kitchen now then, or...no wait, I...need an apron, so we -- or, uh, I could stop by my room and grab one, and...then I'll be set...I've got extras, though. Aprons, I mean. If you want one. I know I said I wouldn't advise a trip to my room, but I don't know...if you want to pick your own, or... ..this doesn't have a lot to do with actual baking I apologize..."

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Hana:

Sorry? Hana's smile began to falter, her eyes widening slightly. Why was he... apologizing? She inched closer to Shigeru as her fingers loosened their grip on the pen she had been holding, allowing it to carelessly clatter to the floor. She didn't even bother to pick it up. Instead, she stood there, her eyes seemingly searching his expression, reflecting his face like dark glass.

"Shigeru-san..." Hana said softly, her gaze trailing downwards. "Do you regret it?" The girl allowed herself a thin, fragile smile as she peered down at her feet. "Of course... I suppose... no one would really want to kiss something like me... heh..."

She gave a small nod, still sporting her ever-so weak smile. Though the words were spoken in a small voice, they certainly sounded and *looked* like they had stung. How many times had Hana told herself this? Two times? Ten? *Twenty?* She ran a hand through her hair, stopping to brush a single strand behind her ear. Hana had said the words herself but felt somewhat crushed by the thought of him agreeing. That would surely be worse... but wasn't it all true?

Hana let out a forced chuckle, her chest slightly tightening. She reached downwards, suddenly, to retrieve her pen after realizing that she may need it later. What would happen if she ran out them so quickly? Would they provide her with more? Would she be penless for the rest of her existence? It was a risk she didn't wish to take.

Hearing mention of his room again, certainly piqued Hana's interest, but she didn't want to cross anymore boundaries. The astrologer felt as though she had caused enough unnecessary tension for one day. She let out a small sigh, slumping her shoulders. What if her bucket list started

to get in the way of the Conditions they'd shared? Hana would have to tear the list to pieces, wouldn't she? After all, keeping Shigeru safety was her top priority, far more important than her silly list.

"Ah, why don't we... meet each other in the kitchen?" Hana asked finally, interlacing her fingers. "I'm sure you could pick out an apron that suits me, Shigeru-san..." She paused, silently reminding herself to smile. "I just need to change first..." well, the girl couldn't bake with blood on her sleeve...

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## Shigeru:

"Ah, that...isn't what I meant, Uena-san," the informant said, taking a step towards her, placing his hands on her waist and gently pulling her towards him, allowing their lips to meet again, this time allowing himself to linger for a few more moments. When he pulled away he looked somewhat more embarrassed than he had the first time around, clearing his throat and glancing off towards the side. "I just...didn't think that I gave you a very proper first kiss."

That was partly true, but of course he omitted the fact that he simply didn't feel like he was allowed the privilege of being anyone's first kiss! It took a considerable amount of restraint to keep himself from asking, "wouldn't you have rather it been someone else?" He was a crook after all. Scum. wasn't the fact that he'd stolen her first kiss embarrassing to admit?

"Ah, that sounds alright," he said with a small nod, returning her smile with a small one of his own. "I'll see you there..."

He took a step past her, stopping to ruffle her hair before heading down the hallway, entering his room and goodness gracious he got the aprons in sorry bri in being a bum but he grabbed the aprons though i just dont want to outline the entire process of him rifling through his shitty t-shirts and grandpa clothes to find them, finally exiting and heading towards the dining area.

He stood there awkwardly for a moment, counting out the tiles on the floor before realizing that he ought to wash his hands, and put on an apron. Admittedly, he wasn't too used to collaborating with others, and he was a very difficult individual to teach. He only hoped that he'd actually end up helping the astrologer rather than sitting and lazing around, watching her work, which had become the case with him during most situations. It explained why he wasn't fantastic at driving and also explained why...

"Ugh..."

Fingers clumsily attempting to tie his apron, though he refused to tie it in the front first in order to see what he was doing for whatever silly reason he had. He'd never actually been good at

tying knots. Just like ties, the process seemed extremely complex for him and he'd never mastered the technique.

After a few more minutes of struggling, the informant sighed. *How can I expect to help Uena-san if I can't even do **this**...?*

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## Hana:

*A proper first kiss?* Hana's eyes trailed downcast, every once and a while, flickering to his face. She felt a sensation of warmth brush her skin, causing the astrologer's cheeks to grow a rosy pink. Her lips curled into a faint, timid smile as she looked away, feeling oddly bashful... even more so than usual. Hana wasn't quite certain she understood kisses or the intimacy behind them, but they were nice. Kisses definitely couldn't stop time or heal wounds, but they were warm.

Hana stood there in a quiet daze as she allowed the informant to step past her, letting out a soft chuckle as he ruffled her hair. She watched as he left the laundry room, bringing her fingertips slowly to her mouth in awe. Both times he had kissed her, she had been surprised; both times, she had been speechless. *Ah-... How embarrassing.* She would never get used to humans, would she?

After a moment of bashful silence, Hana left the laundry room and headed to her own. She mentally began to time herself, deciding not to idle around as usual. Goodness knows she had a tendency to be late. Once inside, the girl practically threw off her clothes before promptly changing into something just as nerdy probably. Letting out a sigh, she ran her fingers through her hair. *Gosh, it's not really sanitary to bake with my hair like this... is it?* Hana couldn't help but to frown. This could potentially take longer than she thought.

Hana came, she saw, she conquered. When she had successfully managed to put up her hair, the astrologer left her room, quickly closing the door behind her. *Gotta go fast, Hana.* She didn't like keeping others waiting; while waiting, people thought all sorts of things, primarily bad things. Hana didn't want Shigeru to think bad things about her, not one bit!

When she entered the kitchen, Hana paused, greeted by the sight of Shigeru fiddling with his apron. She brought a hand to her mouth, seemingly confused by his actions before stepping inside.

"Ah, Shigeru-san-... I'm really sorry I took so long..." Hana gave him a small wave before lowering her arms to her sides. "Uhm, are you-... are you having trouble?" She asked, raising her brows as she watched him in concern. "Here-... let me help."

The girl stepped behind him, carefully taking the ends of his apron in both hands. with delicate fingers, Hana made a knot, tying the back into a small bow. How cute. She gently adjusted it, giving it a light tug before taking a step back.

"There...!"

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## Shigeru:

He supposed mothers were supposed to do that kind of thing. Help you tie your shoelaces and straighten your clothing, sew on the extra buttons on your suits when you lost them. He vaguely remembered watching his mother helping his father adjust his tie before his first day of work in the area, shaking her head, a rueful expression to counter his dad's bashful one. He remembered her saying that she'd make sure that he, their son, wouldn't grow up to be as helpless as his father was at the simplest of tasks, yet here he was, his father's son, unable to tie a simple knot.

As soon as he was aware that he was thinking of a time where his mother was actually around the informant shook his head, staying still as he allowed for the astrologer to finish up.

"A-ah thank...thank you," he muttered, face flushed, grabbing an extra apron and unfolding it, holding it in front of his face to hide the absolutely flustered expression which currently graced his features. "u-uhm...h-here. I...uh...if you want...to wear the other one, er...the one I'm wearing, I'll...we can...switch..."

He glanced off to the side, willing his heart rate to slow, lowering his arms slowly as the color left his cheeks.

"what did you...have in mind for us to bake, uena-san?"

He'd never admit it, but he'd trade a cigarette for a lollipop any day. The informant was fond of sweet things, hence why he kept attempting to bake despite his obvious lack of talent for it. His father wasn't any better than him. In fact, their joint efforts had ended even worse than when the informant worked solo.

"Ah, and I, uh...I almost forgot because I...uhm...but the fifth...condition..."

Shigeru didn't like to think that her requests were particularly *difficult*. The first two certainly shouldn't have been, the third might have been a *tad* more challenging, but the fourth...he was still having difficulties accepting the fourth, though he knew that at its core the issue was just a matter of his pride. *Am I even ready to hear the fifth condition...?*



[Enrique voice] hola senorita. solo quiero estar contigo, vivir contigo, tener contigo una noche looooooca. dale a tu cuerpo alegria macarena. suavemente besame que quiero sentir tus labios besandome (?) otra vez. damelo! los suspiros son aire y van al aire, las lagrimas son agua y van al mar, dime mujer cuando el amor se olvida sabes tu adonde va?

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JADE,, I FORGOT ABOUT ENRIQUE GODDAMN IT-



## Hana:

The astrologer smiled, giving him a small nod in response. *I never imagined I'd have to do something like that... is Shigeru-san not very good at tying knots...?* Regardless, Hana was happy to help. It was, after all, one of the few things she was good for. Baking and tying knots- talk about *ideal*. When it came to useless skills, Hana had plenty. One might be amazed to see the sort of things she had learned while living in solitude.

*Useless, pointless, little things...*

She inspected the apron for a moment, seemingly admiring it before gently taking it from the informant's grasp. *Ah... how cute...* Hana pulled the apron closer, holding it against her frame with a small chuckle.

"No, no... I like it." She said softly, wrapping the ends around her waist. With ease, the girl quickly tied it, just as she had done with Shigeru's. "Hmn-..." Hana tapped a finger to her lips, her gaze traveling around the kitchen. "Well... I suppose we should start with something simple. Maybe... maybe we should try cupcakes or cookies...? Ah, you choose, Shigeru-san..."

When in doubt, make the other guy decide. Hana gave him a somewhat cheeky grin, lightly swaying side by side. The astrologer couldn't help but to come off as giddy. There was just something so *exciting* about the thought of completing her bucket list. After all, she had been waiting all this time.

*The Fifth Condition?* Hana gave him a rather questioning head tilt, wondering why he had decided to bring it up so suddenly. If only she had known Shigeru liked the conditions so much... Hana would have given him ten instead! Her expression suddenly going serious, she slumped her shoulders and sighed softly.

"The Fifth Condition is-... to *not* fall in love with me..." The girl paused to watch his reaction before cracking a small smile. "I'm kidding of course-... I actually don't have a Fifth Condition... honestly, I wasn't sure if you'd agree to the others-..." Hana lowered her gaze, her expression growing timid. "I'll think of one though-... a Fifth Condition... It's good to have options, right...?"

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## Shigeru:

The informant had never been particularly indecisive. He'd glance down at his interrogees and be able to pick out *juuuust* the right sequence of questions (and "persuasion" methods) that would



get him his answers in good time. It was a wonder, then, that he was having difficulty pinpointing exactly what he wanted to bake (or rather, help bake. You're not old enough to do this alone yet, hijo).

"Uh..." The sound of intelligent thought processes at work.

The closest he'd ever gotten to baking was making funnel cake. You put the batter into a funnel or squeeze bottle. Let the batter flow, watch it loop and circle around in the oil, preheated to 190 degrees celsius. You could make funnel cake with pancake batter. His dad hadn't been very good at it. He had faded burn scars on his arm.

"Um...cookies? I guess...yeah...that doesn't sound too difficult," he said despite his history of burning cookies, not baking them long enough; there was always something.

As she laid out the "fifth condition," the informant's expression shifted ever so slightly. His face became like a statue's just then, made of marble, lifeless. *Why would she even need to say anything like that?* As if his heart had the capacity to show affection. As if he'd discard enough pride to use the word love. Sure he'd kissed her, but that hadn't been love, had it? *Ah, how scary...*

But then she smiled, revealed there was no fifth condition, and his shoulders relaxed. He didn't want to admit that that would have been the easiest of the five, mostly because he wasn't sure if that was true anymore.

"Tch." With a small frown the informant ruffled her hair, his face now resembling that of a parent giving their child a scolding. "Uena-san. That isn't fair. You can't make me fall in love with you and then tell me not to do it, even if you're joking."

It was as if he was Malachi Seigi again, the way his tone echoed that of a child's when they'd been cheated or betrayed; a whine, but not quite, that distinctive edge in his voice making it clear that he was joking. He even stuck out his tongue at her, a grin lurking just beneath his skin.

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