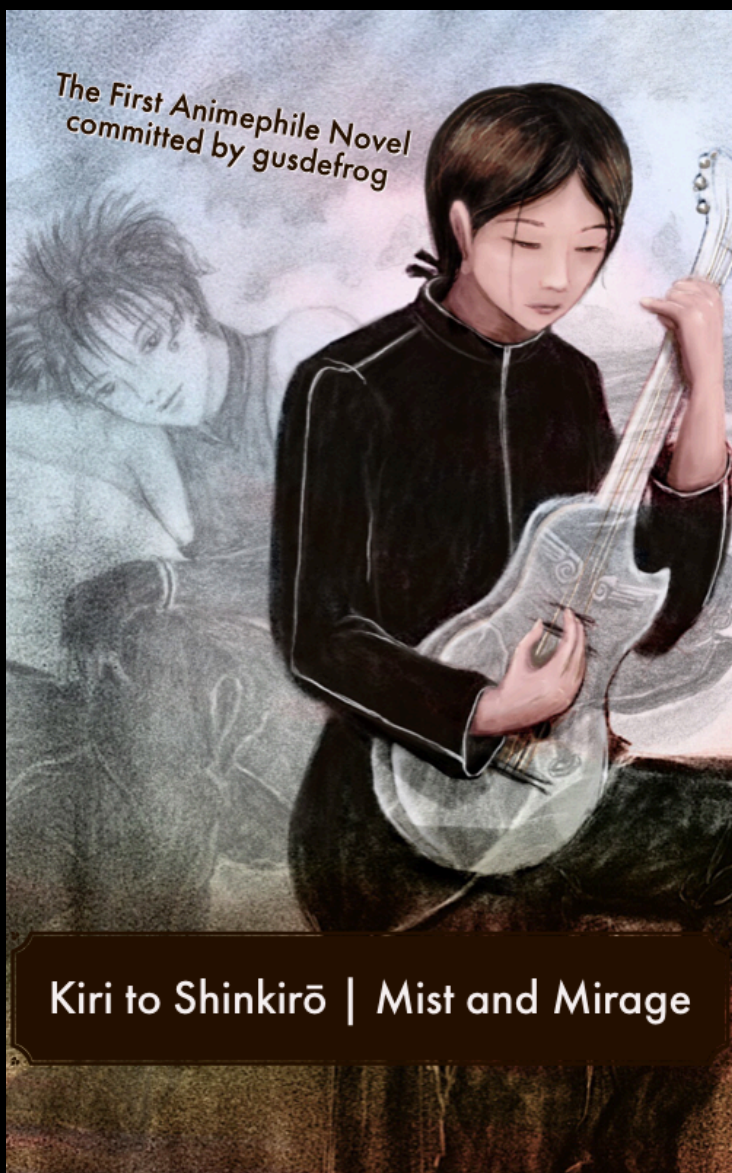


The First Animephile Novel
committed by gusdefrog



Kiri to Shinkirō | Mist and Mirage

KIRI

霧と蜃気楼

Kiri to Shinkirō / Mist and Mirage

by: GusDeFrog

Cover also by GusDeFrog

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Warning: Some Explicit Content.

Names are in oriental order, last first.

Japanese suffixes used here and there.

Animephile:

Kiri to Shinkirō | Mist and Mirage

Takumi no Eri

Mizuki's Sky

Data Dragon Danika

History of Love (Short)

Jade System (Short)

Regency Era:

Justine Time

Mark of London

Other Futures:

Lumi Kari (Short)

I don't write. And yet... This story is the light I dreamed for myself in the long dark. I told myself that someday I'd write it out so that perhaps it could lighten someone else's darkness, as so many stories have done for me.

I'm sorry if I don't write it very well.

In the beginning I always put myself in her place, but eventually I realized that she is more what I want to be, and he is closer to what I am.

And yet, I loved him in those dreams.

Pikachu belongs to The Pokémon Company. Any other resemblance to people and places is coincidental.

So, in a place and time that don't exist, with names and details borrowed from other times and places:

The pavement was moderately crowded at this time of day, in this part of town. People were out running errands, kids were out of school, morning shift workers had finished. He was sitting on the wide edge of the short wall that bordered a public flower bed, kicking his feet in boredom.

He was casually beautiful, and comfortably attired in many pocketed pants, and a clingy pullover with open shoulders. His soft hair moved a little in the light breeze where it was longer.

She stopped walking and simply stared. People would sometimes say they want to kiss or touch someone attractive or famous that they didn't know. She'd never really understood the sentiment, but suddenly there it was.

He caught her watching and leaned back on his hands, striking a model-style pose. He grinned at her boldly, and his smile was brilliantly warm to her eyes.

She was sure she was blushing. Her face felt like it was flaming. She felt that she should say something so she said rather awkwardly, "Um, hi."

He sat up and replied, "Hello." A slightly puzzled look crept across his face and he asked politely, "What can I do for you?"

"Can I kiss you?" somehow escaped from her mouth. Immediately she apologized in a breathless rush, "I'm sorry, forget I said that, sorry."

Overlapping her apology he exclaimed with mock shock, "How bold!" At the same time, he crossed his legs and held his hand in front of his mouth dramatically, and she froze. After a moment he dropped his pose and laughed openly. "Sure, why not?" he offered.

She just stared at him, because she felt too shocked to answer.

After a moment he shrugged and told her cheerfully, "One kiss won't hurt anything."

"Are you sure it's ok?" she asked.

He nodded and beckoned to her. He grinned at her as she approached him hesitantly. He smiled up at her from his seated position as she got closer, while clutching her school bag tightly in her hands, and leaned toward him. His clear eyes were steady, holding her gaze, and his mouth curved in an amused smile. She couldn't do it.

"Would you mind closing your eyes?" she asked nervously.

He closed his eyes and waited with his pretty face turned up toward her. She hovered over him hesitantly. After waiting for a minute, he opened one eye, and then the other.

He examined her expression, and then told her with amusement, "You don't have to force yourself."

"No, I do want to," she replied anxiously.

He closed his eyes again and waited. Nervously, she leaned forward and kissed his mouth quickly.

He opened one eye again and asked, "Was that it?"

She stepped back and nodded. He let his other eye open and gazed up at her while laughing openly.

She asked hesitantly, "Was it bad?"

"Not bad," he replied quickly. She felt like his gaze was measuring her, and then he continued with amusement, "But I'll show you, if I may?"

She nodded uncertainly.

He stood up and then told her, "You're surprisingly tall."

They were nearly the same height, and she apologized helplessly, "I'm sorry."

He laughed again and then said gently, "It's not a bad thing." He instructed her as he reached out to her and placed his hand on her arm, "Here. When you kiss someone, you should touch them I think. Put your hands on their waist," he said as he set his other hand against her waist, "or shoulders."

He slid his first hand up to her shoulder, and stepped forward so that there was barely a space between them, and she drew a deep breath.

"Relax your mouth, and don't tilt your head too much," he instructed as he leaned in. "Just enough to let your noses touch instead of bump," he added, letting his nose slide against hers. And so close that

she could feel his lips moving he said softly, "And let the kiss last long enough so they can tell they've been kissed."

His lips settled against hers, and he kissed her for a moment. Then he stepped back and smiled at her as he settled back into a sitting position on the border wall. "Want to try again?" he invited.

She nodded.

He grinned at her.

She stepped forward to him, then stopped, and set her bag at his feet. She nervously reached out a hand and placed it on his shoulder. Her fingers brushed bare skin where his shirt was cut away in deliberate curves at his shoulder, and she blushed and shifted her hand up to where the fabric covered the top of his shoulder.

He closed his eyes and tilted his face up to her again. He kept his mouth relaxed except for a bit of smile curling the corners. She leaned in and let her nose brush against his, and kissed him for a moment.

He opened his eyes and said, "Better," with a warm smile.

He leaned forward just enough to kiss her gently again. Then he rocked back a little, and waited invitingly.

Without thinking she settled her other hand against him. With the warm skin of his shoulder against her palm, she leaned in to kiss him again.

He nodded when she pulled back. He reached forward again and kissed her softly, letting her feel how his lips moved against hers. Then he waited for her to return the kiss.

They exchanged kisses for awhile. At some point he dropped one hand to her leg, and pulled her knee up along his thigh, so that the next time she shifted closer it was only natural that she straddle his lap. Sitting in his lap, her arms around his shoulders, and his warm against her waist, the slow exchange of kisses continued until he slipped his tongue between her lips, just a little.

She froze. He loosened his hold on her, releasing her and leaning back on his hands. He gazed at her steadily for a moment and then deliberately closed his eyes, tilted his face, and waited.

Hesitantly, she leaned in and kissed him, tentatively attempting to touch his lips with her tongue. His hands moved forward, and he slid one up her thigh and settled the other behind her head, gently drawing her into the kiss.

They kissed some more. Little by little the kisses deepened, until suddenly her arm was grabbed roughly from behind. She was quickly dragged backward off of his lap and unsteadily onto her feet.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" demanded the uniformed police officer who gripped her arm painfully and ignored the stunned protest from the man behind her.

She stared at her mother's new husband, unable to answer, before he began dragging her stumbling along the pavement. Struggling to look back at the man she'd been kissing, she caught only a glimpse of the stunned expression on his face, his arms still open toward her.

"Stop!" She protested desperately, but Mizuki Izumi reached out and opened the door of the police vehicle behind her, and practically threw her into the back. He slammed the door behind her and flung himself into the passenger seat. Then he turned and ordered his partner, "drive, now."

"No, wait, what are you doing?" She protested and then went white as the vehicle started to move. She reached for the non existent latch, and then scrabbled for the safety harness. "There's no seatbelt!" she exclaimed fearfully as they pulled out onto the road. Kisses and the man she'd been kissing were forgotten in a white fog of terror as the vehicle set off along the busy street.

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"Kiri? What are you doing?" Kazuha asked, looking at his friend oddly.

Kiri had been sitting on the decorative flower bed border, arms spread loosely with a blank unseeing look on his face. He hadn't noticed Kazuha's approach, or greeting, but he stirred at the question, and looked up. "Kissing a girl?" was his uncertain reply.

"An invisible girl?" Kazuha asked with amusement.

"She was kidnapped, I think," Kiri responded a little anxiously.

"By pirates?" his friend asked interestedly.

"By policemen," Kiri corrected with a frown as he stood up.

Kazuha raised an eyebrow and clapped his hand on Kiri's shoulder. "Are you sure you ought to be kissing a girl like that?" he asked dryly.

Kiri replied quickly, "She was a good girl, I'm certain she was." He shrugged the hand off and glanced down to where his toe had caught against something as he stood. He picked up the school bag and fished inside it. "A very organized girl," he added, displaying a neat stack of unfinished homework.

Kazuha's face froze in a neutral expression as he looked at the evidence presented. "You were kissing a high-school girl?" he asked.

Kiri simply nodded. His search of the bag finally met with success, and pleased, he withdrew and held up Hitoshi Hikaru's school ID.

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2: Things left unsaid.

A terrified haze of time later, the patrol car pulled up in front of her house. As soon as the door was

opened, Hikaru tumbled out of the vehicle onto the walk beside the small patch of grass that counted as a yard in this residential area.

Her body felt weak and clumsy with fear, but with her feet on the ground, fear abruptly transformed to anger. "You fucking bastard!" she turned and screamed at her mother's husband where he still stood beside her with his hand on the door.

He raised his hand and slapped her hard. They both froze in shock.

After a moment, in an ice cold voice, Hikaru said, "Don't you ever hit my mother. I don't care if she's standing over a dead body screaming, don't you ever hit her."

The breath gasped from him as though he'd been the one hit, and when he caught his breath again Izumi replied, "Never. I would never hit Miri."

Hikaru clenched her jaw and turned away, and he did not follow. She stalked up the walk, up the steps, and into the house. She shut the door and leaned back on it for a moment.

"What, no 'I'm home?'" , called her mother from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm home," Hikaru said shakily.

"Welcome home," said her mother, drying her hands on a small towel. She came forward into the living room and frowned up at Hikaru. "Oh Hikaru," she said with dismay, "another fight?"

Hikaru looked down into her mother's face uncomprehendingly. Miri raised a hand to Hikaru's cheek and said lightly, "we better put some ice on that." Hikaru winced at the touch, nodded, and let her mother pull her into the kitchen. Miri sat her down on the stool. "What happened?" She asked while she prepared a cold compress for Hikaru's cheek.

Hikaru shrugged. After a long moment she said, "It won't happen again."

Her mother laughed at her somewhat disconnected answer, and replied wryly, "Until someone else needs rescuing again." She looked at Hikaru knowingly, but Hikaru did not reply right away. "Do you want something to eat before supper?" Miri asked.

Holding the compress against her cheek, Hikaru shook her head and replied, "No, sorry, I'm going to my room. I don't want dinner, I'm not hungry." Her mother bit her lip, but made no protest as Hikaru walked back through the house and climbed the stairs.

She entered the first room, then stripped off her school uniform and changed into regular clothes. She pulled out her ponytail and let her dark hair loose, scrubbing her hands through it. Out of habit and a need for comfort, Hikaru reached for her guitar. The familiar curves of it in her hands soothed her a little, and she hooked it up to the amplifier out of long habit, instead of the headset she'd been using recently.

Miri gazed up the stairs as the first chords blazed out, and realized suddenly that she hadn't heard her daughter play at home in months.

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When Mizuki Izumi returned home after his shift finished, his pretty wife had dinner waiting, as she always did. The loud strains of an old pop song poured out of the room above and he snapped with irritation as he hung his jacket, "Can't she listen to music at a reasonable volume?"

Miri regarded her husband in surprise. "It's not a recording, Hikaru is playing," she said.

Izumi was taken aback, and replied uncertainly, "Well, she should stop and eat anyway." Without waiting for a reply, he marched up the stairs and knocked on Hikaru's door.

When she set down her guitar and opened the door, he grabbed her arm. Hikaru looked down at Izumi's hand on her arm and said, "Let go of me." He released her quickly, with an uncomfortable expression. She clarified, "Don't ever touch me."

He replied with quick anger, "It's dinner time, come down and eat."

"No," returned Hikaru bluntly.

Izumi glared and then turned away stiffly. "Did she tell you she was kissing a man today?" He asked, looking down the stairs at his wife.

Miri shook her head and asked with curiously sparkling eyes, "Who was he?"

"It doesn't matter!" Hikaru replied angrily. "I'll probably never see him again, gods only know what he thinks of me now." She stepped back and shut her door firmly.

"I hope he's not the one who hit her," Miri said worriedly. Izumi didn't reply immediately and she added, "Leave her alone and come eat."

Izumi came down and joined her at the table. His lips compressed in irritation when the music resumed a little more quietly, but he didn't say anything else about it.

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Eventually Hikaru calmed and drew the mournful angry song at her fingertips to a close. Belatedly she realized she'd been playing a very old song, Bon Jovi's 'Bed of Roses'. Recalling the lyrics, it seemed a little extreme of a sentiment, and she laughed ruefully.

As soon as she relaxed enough, she felt hungry. She unhooked the amplifier and put it and her guitar away carefully. She thought of taking her homework down to work on while she ate, and then remembered that her school bag had been left on the pavement at the feet of the man she'd been kissing.

Her cheeks heated at the remembrance. She would have to go to the office first thing in the morning and report it lost, and get a temporary ID card, she

realized. She thought about calling Risa and asking for help with tomorrow's assignments, but after looking at the time and imagining the requisite explanations, she didn't.

She descended the stairs quietly, and went into the kitchen. Her mother had put the leftovers away in her usual careful fashion. Hikaru dropped some on a plate, and filled a container that would work as a temporary lunch box with a selection of foods for her lunch tomorrow. She ate the food on the plate, and put the plate into the washer.

She returned to her room, set her alarm earlier than usual, and surprisingly calmly fell asleep.

3: Sweeter than the rain.

Approaching the school gate the next morning, Hikaru was startled when the neatly attired business man who'd been standing near it suddenly called out cheerfully, "Good morning sweetheart!"

She looked at his face and halted in shock. "You look older," she blurted. Feeling embarrassed, she quickly apologized, "I'm sorry, it's the suit I think."

He grinned at her, eyes sparkling with mirth, "I'm dressed for work," he said. He held out her school bag. "I was hoping I could catch you here, I was about to try turning this in at the gate," he explained.

"I washed your lunch box and packed you a lunch too," he added with a mix of pride and uncertainty.

She took the bag from him, aware of the warmth of his fingers where they brushed against hers during the transfer. Awkwardly holding her bag and the container she'd packed for lunch the night before, she wordlessly offered him the container in exchange.

He took it from her with a curious expression.

"I brought lunch. My mother made the food in it," she explained, a little embarrassed.

"Oh," he replied, and then quickly added with a mischievous grin, "then I'll decide if I hope she's teaching you to cook after eating it." Suddenly he stopped smiling and reached out. He lifted her chin, turning her face. "Who hit you?" he asked flatly.

Hikaru raised a hand to her cheek and stared at him, feeling startled by his sudden seriousness. "You can tell?" she asked. Her cheek hadn't shown more than traces of bruising to her eyes when getting ready that morning.

He moved his fingers to touch her hand, shrugged and reassured her, "It isn't obvious, most people won't notice." He dropped his gaze and added, with a bit of embarrassment, "I spent quite awhile looking at your face very closely yesterday." He looked up again. "What happened?" he asked.

"Izumi-san hit me," she paused briefly. "He was more surprised than I was," she said uncertainly and

then offered more reassuringly, "I don't think he'll ever do it again."

He had dropped his hand from hers and started to ask something, when someone else interrupted. It was the morning gate guard, who told them sternly, "No loitering in front of the gates."

He offered her a wry smile and said, "I don't want to get you in trouble. Please call me later." Then before she replied he turned and walked swiftly to a dark car parked nearby.

"Wait," Hikaru said anxiously. He looked back, but glanced at the guard and just waved farewell and got into the vehicle. The guard pressured Hikaru toward the entry.

The irritated gate guard asked irritably, "Do you like running laps? I can sign you up for them? Go on to your class."

Hikaru sighed. "How am I supposed to call you, when you haven't given me your number, or even told me your name?" Hikaru whispered almost silently after him, and turned away. "I guess he knows where to find me again if he wants to," she muttered as she traversed the halls.

She went to her classroom. Since she was early, she thought perhaps she could finish at least one assignment. She opened her bag and pulled out the stack of assignments. On top of the stack there was a note.

She unclipped it and read: "Hi, we met yesterday, and you left your bag with me. I asked a friend who is a high-school history teacher to help me, and tried to finish your assignments." At the bottom a contact number was listed, followed by "Call me!!!" The exclamation marks had little hearts on them. It was signed Takeshi Kiri.

She just sat there staring at the note for awhile, then carefully folded and pocketed it. She wondered what kind of guy lets a random stranger kiss him. Teaches her to kiss. Makes her lunch. Puts hearts on his exclamation marks. She sat there thinking while her classmates arrived and was startled when her teacher walked up and pulled the stack of assignments from her hands.

"Wait!" Hikaru protested.

Her teacher regarded her curiously, holding the assignments out of reach.

She blushed and explained, "I'm sorry, someone finished them for me, I'm not sure I should turn them in."

Her teacher dryly replied, "Then you should thank that person, accept their mistakes as your own, and do your own homework next time."

Hikaru's cheeks burned and she nodded.

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Hikaru usually ate lunch at school with two friends, though only Risa shared her class and was there

when Hikaru curiously opened her lunch box and then slammed the lid shut with a furious blush rising to her cheeks. Risa, a small but determined person, grabbed the edges of the box and wrestled it from Hikaru's grasp.

"What's going on?" asked Shizuoka curiously as she approached. She tapped an elegant nail against the table, and sat.

Risa opened the lunch box. A very pretty lunch was arranged inside. All the vegetables were cut into little heart shaped wafers, and another heart was drawn on the rice. Risa laughed and Shizuoka snatched a bite from the box.

"Wait," Hikaru said a little desperately, "I need to eat a bit of each thing in case I need to comment on it later."

Risa exclaimed cheerfully, "Your mom hasn't sent a lunch like that since grade school. Is she very bored being stuck at home?"

Hikaru hesitated, but didn't correct her friend's impression. Instead she answered the question about her mother, "I think she kind of likes being a housewife again."

The girls shared their lunches, but were careful to make sure Hikaru tried each food from her own box. Half a dozen times Hikaru almost spoke up about meeting the man who had prepared her lunch, but embarrassment over her own behavior and uncertainty silenced her.

Hikaru returned home after school, and avoided the phone by doing her homework. She sat at the short table that was the center of their house, and gnawed on her writing implement. Even so, she finished within an hour and a half.

Miri was reassured by her daughter's return to routine, and happily worked on her dinner preparations. Tonight Hikaru had a job, so food needed to be finished earlier than usual.

Hikaru stood at the side table that held the phone for awhile before picking it up. Finally she lifted it and entered Kiri's number. She waited for the call to go through.

He answered shortly, "I'm in a meeting right now, make it quick."

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Hikaru said.

"Don't hang up!" Kiri interrupted swiftly.

"OK", Hikaru agreed with some confusion.

"Please excuse me for a few minutes, I need to take this call," she heard him say away from the phone, and then there was a thump and he said, "Hikaru-chan, I was afraid you weren't going to call me."

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't be. I'm glad you called. I have so many questions. Can I see you tonight?" he replied quickly.

"I have a job tonight," she responded hesitantly.

"Oh. Tomorrow I won't be done until ten," he said and then asked, "what about Saturday?"

"Saturday I have practice and another job." Hikaru replied.

"Oh, I see," he said.

A little desperately she asked, hoping she was pronouncing his name correctly, "Takeshi-san, is ten too late?"

He hesitated before replying, "It's not too late for me, is it OK for you?"

"Yes. Tomorrow night isn't a school night," she explained.

"Is there anywhere you'd prefer to meet at such a late hour?" Kiri asked cautiously.

"Would a family restaurant be OK?" she asked.

"Sure," he replied cheerfully.

"Then the Pavilion, at the intersection of Cross and Seventh?" she suggested.

Kiri said, "Just a moment," paused and pulled up the address. "OK, I have it marked," he said. "At ten tomorrow then? I may be a little late."

"Yes, that's OK" Hikaru replied.

"Hikaru-chan, I need to get back to the meeting, is this number you're calling from your number?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"OK, I'll see you tomorrow sweetheart," he said and ended the call.

Hikaru stood staring at the phone until her mother peeked around the corner and asked, "You have a date?"

Hikaru nodded uncertainly.

Miri questioned, "Is it the guy you kissed? He's not the one who hit you is he?" She asked a bit anxiously.

Hikaru replied nervously, "It is. He didn't hit me."

Miri replied smugly, "I guess you'll see him again after all." Her daughter blushed and nodded and Miri asked a string of questions. "What's his name? What year is he in? Is he cute?"

Hikaru told her, "Takeshi Kiri, he's a little older and he's already working." She paused and blushed.

"I see," replied her mother cheerfully. "Food is ready."

Hikaru added without meeting her mother's eyes, "He's gorgeous."

Miri looked at her daughter and laughed.

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Hikaru ate and then dressed in her stage clothes. Tonight she was wearing black jeans with silver chains lapping the sides, and a shimmering metallic blue shirt that Risa had designed. Her hair was pulled back in its usual simple ponytail, but tied with a black ribbon. She picked up her guitar and left her room.

As she descended the stairs her mother commented a little sadly, "You look exactly like your father."

Hikaru regarded her mother ruefully. "Just what every girl wants to hear," she responded wryly.

Miri laughed a little and made a face at her daughter. "You're beautiful. I'm so lucky both my children are so good looking." She rubbed her belly and added, "this one will be really cute too!"

Hikaru rolled her eyes and laughed. She pulled on her coat and then left to catch the bus.

--

She played a two hour solo set as the warm up musician for Blue Thursday at 'Night Owls'. It was one of the few places that regularly offered her solo work. They liked to have what was essentially live background music before they had the night's band come on stage. Blue Thursday's theme was of course, the blues.

Hikaru had had to learn a number of songs to play on Blue Thursday's, because it wasn't a genre that

had been familiar when she started. She'd asked Ryu-sensei to teach her a few quickly. He had mourned her limited musical experience and suggested that at first she substitute some of the smoother pop songs she liked to fill out her repertoire while she learned more. It had worked well. There were a lot of blues songs she'd found that she didn't like, but there were also some good ones. She liked music that moved.

After she finished she raced to the bus stop, but missed the bus and had to wait for the next one. She groaned loudly, startling the other people waiting at the stop. Embarrassed, she indicated that it was nothing. She was sure Izumi-san would fuss when she got in.

--

Izumi did fuss when Hikaru got home. "You are late!" he said as soon as she opened the door.

"I had to wait for the bus," she replied calmly, but she felt annoyed.

"How hard is it to keep an eight o'clock curfew on school nights?" he demanded angrily. "It's almost nine," he added.

Hikaru looked at the clock, it was 8:35. She sighed and replied, "I don't finish until eight, I took the first bus back." Exasperated she asked, "What more do you want?"

Miri interrupted, "Nevermind, she's back well before bedtime."

"Miri," said Izumi, "you have no idea what your daughter has been doing lately. That man she was kissing yesterday had his hand up her skirt!"

"He did not!" Hikaru protested.

"I know what I saw!" he yelled back.

"It doesn't matter," her mother said weakly.

Hikaru glared at them both, Izumi-san for exaggerating, and her mother for not taking her side. She knew it was unfair, but she felt so irritated that she just stomped up to her room and slammed the door.

"Izumi, was that necessary?" Miri asked her husband quietly.

Mizuki Izumi frowned down at his wife and said, "She's going to get into trouble she can't handle if she keeps this up."

Miri looked up at her new husband and insisted stoutly, "She'll be fine."

4: Until we're done.

School the next day was depressingly normal for the most part. Hikaru received the graded homework from the day before. She was amused and grateful to

see that the history page had been given full marks, as had the math, though the chemistry and English both had a few errors.

Her lunch was made of leftovers as usual, and lunchtime passed peacefully. Hikaru was feeling too shy about it to mention her probable date, but Risa and Shizuoka talked a lot about other things. They didn't really seem to notice Hikaru's reticence, although Risa did cast a few concerned glances at her friend. She had noticed that Hikaru had been quiet recently.

When they shared their weekend calendars, they chided her for not letting them know in advance that she had a rare Friday afternoon free, but Risa and Shizuoka both had things going on that afternoon, so they didn't meet up after school. Hikaru returned home and worked on finishing her pile of weekend homework early instead.

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When Izumi finished his shift, the three current members of the household had dinner quietly together. Izumi was relatively cheerful and Miri often smiled contentedly. Hikaru had finished all but two assignments and was avoiding thinking about her date, if it was a date. It was probably a date. She was glad Izumi-san seemed to be in a good mood.

Izumi liked things quiet at home. He didn't like having background music playing. He only used his large entertainment center for occasional movies and games. When he'd moved in Hikaru had done her

best to learn to accommodate his habits. She knew it must be awkward for him. He had been so shocked when Miri had introduced her 19 year old son and 17 year old daughter.

Hikaru tried very hard to like him and get along with him, because he adored her mother and made her happy. Miri hadn't smiled so much in years as she had this year. So Hikaru always left the first coat hook free. She never left a towel on the bathroom floor anymore. She usually only played music through headphones.

Izumi made things difficult by doing his best to be a good parent to his new stepdaughter. Their usual conflicts were over the curfew he had created for her safety. He had statistics on teens and times of police incidents he'd quoted to Miri and Hikaru.

Hikaru tried to go along with it except for work, although she had mostly stopped accepting jobs after 8pm on school nights. She didn't understand why he had freaked out over finding her kissing a man. As far as she knew, he had no idea what her social life was like. But she had been too angry with him to ask at first, and didn't really want to bring it up again. She was relieved when he went up to bed early.

Hikaru finished her homework while her mother put the food away and did dishes. She peeked at her mother's face once in awhile to check that she wasn't overdoing it. She looked energetic enough though, and Hikaru was amused by watching her mother playing at being a new bride.

Miri had been advised by her doctors to quit working with this pregnancy, and had promptly taken over chores she'd been leaving to her children for years. Although she'd already taken over cooking dinner most of the time after Yuki left for college, out of self defense.

Hikaru stretched and sighed when she finally had the last assignment done. She hated school work, but it was rather nice having it all finished early. Usually she had a job on Fridays and her homework waited until Sunday afternoon.

"Hikaru?" Miri asked.

Hikaru looked up quizzically.

"You're not going to wear that on your date are you?" her mother asked anxiously.

Hikaru looked down at her clothes. When she'd gotten home from school she'd changed into grey jeans and a soft grey long sleeved shirt that was one of her favorites. It was also relatively new and she didn't see anything wrong with it, so she nodded to her mother.

"You can't!" Miri declared. She insisted that Hikaru change clothes. She complained sadly about the lack of feminine articles in her daughter's wardrobe after awhile of sorting through Hikaru's clothes looking for something more suitable. "I know you don't have anything with ruffles, but why is everything that's not for wearing on stage so... so practical?"

Hikaru shrugged.

"Wait here," Miri demanded.

Hikaru waited.

Her mother returned with one of her own stretchy white lace pullovers that was a bit short on Hikaru, and had her put it on under her only sleeveless shirt.

"That's a little better," Miri sighed. The approved ensemble retained the grey jeans, with the white lace pullover, and a grey tank top decorated with a shimmering pink and silver cityscape so striking that it. was the only reason Hikaru had bought a sleeveless shirt.

"I wonder if you shouldn't wear the white stage jeans with the cut outs down the sides?" Miri pondered.

"No." Hikaru said, and refused to change clothes again. She tugged uncomfortably at the soft lace sleeves.

"Alright," her mother gave in.

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Hikaru left to catch the bus downtown at 9:30pm. She arrived at the restaurant a little early, but not very much so. She informed the friendly and familiar waitress that she was waiting for someone, and ordered a hot chocolate to sip.

Hikaru settled back into the comfortable booth and gazed out the window. Ten o'clock passed, but she wasn't really worried, he had said he might be late.

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At 10:15 Kiri asked his phone to call the number Hikaru had called him from. He was just ready to leave the parking lot.

"Hello?" it was answered.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to be pretty late, do you want to cancel?" he asked.

"Is this Takeshi-kun?" asked the person who'd answered.

"Ah, yes?" he answered with surprise.

"This is Hikaru's mother. She left a while ago, but I'm sure she'll wait. If she comes home first I can have her call you?" offered Miri.

"Thank you," he replied politely.

"Do you think you could bring her home by midnight?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'll do my best," Kiri promised, feeling a little rattled.

"Thank you," said Hikaru's mother.

Kiri bid her goodbye and ended the call.

--

At 10:20 the waitress brought Hikaru a refill. She eyed it ruefully. The chocolate was more sugar and less chocolate than she preferred. She sipped at it once in awhile anyway, and watched the lights of the traffic outside.

--

Kiri entered the restaurant about 10:40, spotted Hikaru sitting in a booth, and went straight over. He slid into the seat next to her, and threw his arm over her shoulder while saying, "Sorry I'm late."

Hikaru jumped when he touched her and looked over, wild eyed. He withdrew immediately, but she caught ahold of his sleeve and drew him back into the seat beside her.

"Sorry," she said, "I was kind of dozing and you startled me."

"You looked scared." He replied, and suggested tentatively, "I can sit on the other side?"

"No, this is fine," she assured him.

He settled his arm gently back around her and she leaned against him. He kissed her cheek lightly and said, "I'm not sure I can keep dating a woman without a mobile device."

Hikaru looked at him. "Are we dating then?" she asked for verification because she hadn't felt entirely certain.

He grinned at her and replied, "We have kissed so much and I'm holding you like this now, what is this then? A fling?"

Her cheeks flushed and she said, "Dating is fine, I just wasn't sure, you didn't say it was a date, and you said you had a lot of questions."

He looked at her wryly.

"What do you mean about a mobile device? We can't date if I don't have a phone?" she asked.

"Well, I tried to call you to tell you I'd be late," he explained. "I spoke to your mother," he added ruefully.

Hikaru looked at him and asked, "Oh?"

Kiri gave her a squeeze and said, "She'd like me to have you home by midnight."

Hikaru stiffened. Kiri loosened his hold a little and looked at her uncertainly. "That's not fair!" she exclaimed. "That barely gives us more than half an hour."

"How far away do you live?" he inquired.

"I'm not sure of the distance," she replied, "a few miles I guess, but the last bus before midnight leaves at 11:30, so I'll have to leave to wait for it by 11:25."

"I brought my car?" he suggested. "If it's only a few miles, 11:50 should be plenty early, and we'll have an hour together?"

Hikaru looked at him a little doubtfully, but then agreed, "OK."

The waitress interrupted them, and asked what they'd like to order.

Kiri asked, "I presume you've had supper? I have."

Hikaru nodded and said, "Yes. I would have chosen a dessert, but I've already had two cups of chocolate."

Kiri said, "Chocolate sounds good. How about if I order a dessert and we get two spoons, then you can have as much or as little as you like?"

Hikaru nodded in agreement and Kiri ordered a rich chocolate dessert with ice cream.

After the waitress left he asked suddenly, "Will you let me buy you a phone?"

Hikaru looked at him dubiously and replied, "If I really need one, I can get it."

He hugged her against him and asked, "Why don't you already have one?"

She frowned, and replied, "I have other things I'm trying to pay for, and it's a luxury more than a necessity."

Kiri laughed and teased, "Barbarian." Then he said, "It's just that if I'm late, like this, or need to reschedule... even having to cancel entirely is not too uncommon with my job. I want to be able to communicate." He frowned a little and then said

persuasively, "But if you wouldn't get one if I weren't asking, why not let me buy it?"

She looked at him uncertainly.

Wryly he added, "If you don't like gifts, you could return it when we break up?"

Hikaru jerked away from him a little in shock. He looked at her in surprise. She asked stiffly, "What's the point of dating if you're planning to break up from the start?"

He stared at her, with open mouthed surprise. "I'm not planning to break up," he refuted her assumption.

She raised her eyebrows at him wordlessly expressing disbelief.

He reviewed his own words and tried to explain. "It's just that usually, the women I date break up with me within about six months. Usually by screaming something like 'it's me or your job!' or 'your job is more important to you than I am!'" He grimaced.

She considered for a moment and said, "I guess I can understand that a little."

It was his turn to stiffen. "Are we breaking up already then?" he asked coolly.

She looked at him with exasperation and deliberately put her arm around his waist. "Don't be like that," she said.

He looked at her uncertainly.

"I just mean," she tried to explain, "that if, well... I mean, there are other jobs." She blushed and continued. "I know there are other women too. But if we've been dating awhile, it would be nice to be loved enough by then to be chosen over your job, if you had to choose."

He stared at her. Embarrassed she looked back at him uncertainly and asked, "Don't you want to be loved that much?"

He swallowed and nodded, and returned her embrace. "I'll make a deal with you," he offered, "if we've been dating for six months and you can't stand my job, I'll change it, if you promise not to complain about how much money I make."

She blinked at him in surprise, then asked, "Why on earth would I complain about how much money you make? Especially if I asked you to change jobs?"

He laughed. "Then I'll never break up with you," he said lightly.

Uncertainly, wondering why women he dated would complain about his income she asked, "Takeshi-san are you,"

"Kiri," he interrupted firmly.

"Kiri-san?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes Hikaru-chan?" he returned with a smile.

"Um, Kiri-san," she blushed, "I mean there's nothing wrong with it I guess, some people even

prefer it, but are you the type who prefers that a woman not work?"

He cuddled her and replied reassuringly, "I don't mind you working."

"What about some day, when um, when it's your wife?" she asked.

Amused, he replied, "I don't mind if my wife works either."

"Then why would I ever care how much you make?" she asked.

He laughed and asked, "So if we marry, will you expect me to stay home and raise the children?" He arched an eyebrow at her, and added, "I don't mind, but," he warned, "you'll have to be prepared to help support my dear old mother in that case too." He grinned at her.

"Well, I couldn't do that anytime soon," she replied seriously, "but I could probably manage it in the future if I needed to."

He smiled at her affectionately and said, "I'd prefer if you didn't need to. But in any case, that is a ways into the future."

5: A recurring sweet refrain.

She nodded, and they sat cuddled together until the waitress returned with the dessert and two

spoons. Kiri started in on one corner with enthusiasm. Hikaru carefully scooped out a bite.

"You must have a really good job," she said speculatively.

"Oh?" he asked.

"Otherwise you'd have offered to give it up before," she replied.

"I have offered to give it up before," he said ruefully, licking his spoon.

She looked at him.

"Admittedly, it was in the middle of a screaming fight," he continued dryly. "My girlfriend at the time shouted back something along the lines of why should I have to give up nice things so that you will work reasonable hours."

Hikaru asked uncomfortably, "And then you broke up?"

"Not long after that," he confirmed. "I'm afraid that I've become rather conceited since then," he confessed. "I um, had sort of decided that if a woman didn't like me enough to put up with my job, then she didn't like me enough."

Hikaru looked at him soberly.

"But to be fair," he protested, "none of my girlfriends ever calmly asked me to change jobs, or offered to support me either?"

Hikaru laughed and he smiled back.

"It is," he said after a moment, "a good job."

"You like it then?" she asked.

"Sometimes I love it, days like today I hate it. But it still pays pretty well." Kiri replied, stretching his legs out under the table and taking another bite of the dessert.

Hikaru said, "If you have days where you can say you love it, it is a really good job."

He looked at her appreciatively.

She asked, "What is it you do? You look rather tired." He did look rather tired, and much more rumpled than the previous morning, though the business attire he wore looked similar.

"Um, it was a long day," he answered. "My job title is 'General Manager', but mostly I act like the company trouble shooter. If there's a problem a manager can't handle, I'm called in. As to what the company does, it's mostly advertising, some intercompany networking, and I guess recruiting of new talent? It's called Inline Productions," he said.

"Isn't that sort of what most general managers do?" she asked.

"I suppose so, very generally speaking of general management." He laughed again.

Hikaru gave him a wry smile.

Kiri stretched, then sighed and continued, "As to why today was bad, well, someone did something stupid and tried to deny it. And then someone else tried to cover it up instead of taking care of it. So by the time it came to my attention it was a bloody awful mess added onto an already busy day."

She hugged him.

He smiled and asked, "Do you want the last bite?" He held the spoonful of chocolate and cream up to her.

She shook her head and he ate it.

"What do you do at work?" he enquired.

"Music," she said simply.

He froze, and asked carefully, "You're a musician?"

She nodded and told him, "I play the piano at my uncle's restaurant on Sundays, and piano or guitar whenever a place has a job during the week. And I play with my band on Fridays and Saturdays, or occasionally Sunday afternoons."

He looked at her rather expressionlessly.

Puzzled, she said uncertainly, "It's OK if you don't like music, I won't make you listen."

He laughed and asked, "Who doesn't like music?"

She said thoughtfully, "I don't think Izumi-san likes music very much. And there are many people who don't like certain types of music."

"Who is Izumi-san?" he inquired quickly.

"My mother's new husband," she answered, "Mizuki Izumi, he's a police officer."

Kiri's expression went flat and he asked grimly, "The man who dragged you away from me hit you later?"

Hikaru winced and nodded.

After a long moment he enquired unhappily, "How long have they been married?"

"A little over three months." She explained a little, "He knocked my mother up, so they got married rather quickly. She's almost six months pregnant now." She smiled, then looked at Kiri's expression, and added quickly, "He's not really a bad guy."

Kiri gave her a skeptical expression and Hikaru continued, "He's not, I just don't know how to get along with him well yet. My mother is head over heels, and I'm sure he adores her. It's only, well, I think everything would be fine if I were a younger version of my mother. Small, cute, girly. If I liked to cook and sew and wear pretty clothes" she muttered.

"You look very pretty tonight," Kiri interrupted.

Hikaru replied with amusement, "Well, you can thank my mother for that, she made me change my clothes before coming." Then she realized how that sounded and blushed.

He said with amusement, "Then for our next date, please wear whatever you like."

She laughed, and nodded. Kiri raised his fingers to her cheek and said, "I think he acted like a bad guy."

Hikaru shrugged and said, "Kind of, but when I'm not angry with him, I think Izumi-san has just been trying very hard to be what he thinks is a good parent. I am just not the kind of child he was expecting. My mother had told him she had two children, but Izumi-san wasn't really expecting two nearly grown children I think. My brother is away at University, so it's fine for him." She stopped talking.

Kiri sighed. "I understand that you are trying to like him, for your mother's sake," he said, "but I don't know your mother, and I hate him." He slid his arm around her again, and pulled her close. "He shouldn't have hit you."

Hikaru couldn't argue. Kiri looked at his phone, "We have about ten minutes left," he said, and sighed again.

"Kiri-san?" she asked hesitantly.

"Hmm?" he said inquisitively, resting his nose against her hair.

"Um, would you mind if I kiss you again?" she asked.

He laughed quietly. "You don't have to ask," he teased, "you can just kiss me."

She kissed him. He kissed her back. His arm tightened around her, and he shifted so he could reach to cup her jaw with his other hand and kissed her more deeply.

He stopped, and she opened her eyes, his eyes returned her questioning gaze steadily.

"Hikaru-chan," he said a little breathlessly, "I haven't dated a high-school girl since I was in high school. I don't want to push you into anything, but I'll probably push you. So, if you feel like I'm pushing you, tell me to stop. Or tell me I'm being an idiot. I'll stop, OK?"

She nodded and said quietly, "OK." After a moment Hikaru asked, "How old are you?"

He replied ruefully, "Twenty-seven."

She looked at him with wide eyed surprise.

He let go of her and sat back a little. "Too old?" he suggested neutrally.

She blinked and laughed. "No," she told him, and leaned in to hug him.

"Are you sure?" Kiri asked, returning her hug.

"Yes, I was just surprised," she replied more seriously. "When I first saw you I guessed maybe twenty-one or twenty-three at most, then when I saw you dressed for work, I thought maybe twenty-five. It's only a couple more years."

Ruefully he replied, "But ten between us, I read your ID."

"I already like you too much to care," she replied honestly.

He kissed her again, and murmured, "Me too," against her hair. Then he released her. "We should probably go pay, and get moving," he said regretfully.

"OK," she replied.

"I'm paying by the way," he said.

Hikaru frowned.

"I made you wait," he winked at her, "let me get this one."

"I guess," she agreed dubiously.

He grinned at her. They stood up and went to pay. While they waited he commented, "Such a low key first date."

"What do you usually do on the first date?" she asked.

He blushed.

"Wow," she said.

Embarrassed but truthful, he answered her, "Um, usually dinner and a movie, or dancing, some combination like that, and then, well, usually to bed."

She looked at him consideringly. Just on looks alone she could believe that it was easy for him to

take women to bed on the first date. He was incredibly pretty, clean shaven, with classic features, long dark lashes, and clear steady eyes. Even rumpled and tired she found him gorgeous. "I see," she said dryly.

He glanced at her, still embarrassed. She smiled a little. After they'd finished at the register, he lead her out to his car. He opened the passenger door for her and waited for her to get in.

Hikaru took a deep breath and climbed in. She carefully buckled the seat belt while he got in, and sat gripping it nervously. He clipped his phone into the dock and looked at her. Her fingers were white where they gripped the belt. After a minute he asked, "So, where are we going?"

She jumped and said, "Oh," and gave the address. He entered it and the navigation popped up.

He drove carefully, but it wasn't far, and they soon arrived. She opened the door and exited the car before he could get around to let her out. He came around to her anyway.

"Shall we go buy a phone on Sunday?" he asked lightly.

"Oh, yes, sometime after 2pm?" Hikaru replied.

"Where would you like to meet?" he enquired.

"Um, would the spot I first met you be too weird?" she asked.

He shook his head and smiled at her, "No, that would be fine. At two then?"

"A few minutes after, I don't finish until two," she said.

"Alright," he agreed. "May I walk you to your door?"

She nodded, and he took her hand, and she lead him up to the house. On the steps he tugged her hand and she turned toward him. He leaned in and kissed her lightly. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and he kissed her harder.

"Goodnight Hikaru-chan," he said softly.

"Goodnight," she whispered.

He turned and walked back to his car.

She went into the house.

Hikaru jumped when her mother said from the couch, "He looks pretty." She was kneeling on the couch by the window. "Don't worry, I didn't see him kiss you," she added.

"Then how do you know he kissed me?" Hikaru asked dryly.

"I'm assuming it," her mother laughed. "I can't see the steps from here."

"He is incredibly pretty," Hikaru agreed. "Why are you waiting up, and why did I have to be home at midnight."

"I just happened to wake up," Miri said, "so I decided to wait a few minutes for you. Izumi was really worried when I told him you were on a date so late."

Hikaru sighed. She'd known it had something to do with Izumi-san. "Is it a new addendum to the curfew?" she asked.

Her mother hesitated.

Hikaru sighed again.

"I'm sorry, do you mind very much?" Miri asked.

"I mind," Hikaru replied honestly, "but I'll deal with it unless I'm working," she added.

They went up to bed.

6: Mirage.

On Saturday mornings, Mirage practiced. Sometimes Kobayashi Ryuske would have a new song written up for them to learn. This time he had a new challenge for them. "I've submitted a late entry for Mirage to the Underground Competition," he told them.

Rin whistled and asked, "Do you think we'll even get in?"

"I don't know," Ryuske replied. "But if we're going to try for an album release, we need more publicity."

And in the meantime, we need to start practicing like we're sure we'll get in, because if we don't, and we get in, it'll be a wasted opportunity."

Rin, Hikaru and Hatsuharu nodded their understanding.

"I think we should work on some real choreography," Ryuske said.

"Because we've only done fake choreography up 'till now?" Rin asked wryly, tucking his long hair back.

"I mean dancing," Ryuske clarified.

They argued about it for awhile, but eventually gave in to his plan. They would only have five minutes if they got a spot in the competition, enough for one long song or two short ones. Ryuske wanted them to do two short ones, and had selected four to practice. Two covers of old songs that the audience would find familiar and two of their own songs, they would play one of each.

"This way we can switch which song we play depending on whatever was played before us," Ryuske pointed out, his dark eyes intense.

Hatsuharu cheerfully agreed, "A flexible plan of attack, I like it."

If Hatsuharu also thought it was a good idea, Rin and Hikaru weren't even going to bother opposing it. Both of them had developed respect for Ryuske's understanding of performance and Hatsuharu's

experience in business over the two years Mirage had been together.

--

Mirage was an odd mix:

Saito Hatsuharu might look like a short balding salaryman (because he was), but he was Mirage's rock, steady and cheerful. He was the one who had done the math and paperwork to set up their group finances. He was also their drummer, despite having just turned 50. His wife was his biggest fan, as long as he didn't keep his drums at home.

Rin never used his surname. He was very tall and had a wicked sense of humor. Women flocked to him (for reasons unfathomable to Hikaru). He was 26, a semi-famous bass player, and a motorcycle mechanic. Rin had played with a number of famous bands, but until Mirage he'd never joined one for more than a few months.

Kobayashi Ryuske (Ryu-sensei) was a private music teacher. He wrote music and acted as their leader. He was also their lead singer, with a deep resonant singing voice that recorded well. He could play almost anything. He'd been in a professional band once before, in his teens. Now at 29, he was still striking, even beautiful in photographs (and a borderline recluse).

Hitoshi Hikaru, 17 year old high-school student, was Mirage's second lead. Her voice had a broad range, and some Mirage fans assumed she was a boy. Her father had started teaching her to play the piano

before he died, and she'd learned to play his old guitar after he was gone.

Mirage's only permanent staff member Nezumi (not his real name... probably), was Ryuske's co-conspirator in crafting unique stage equipment. He also designed Mirage's website and fanclub, and dealt with their digital privacy and security. He rarely ever met the other members (or anyone) in person.

--

After several hours of working through the four songs and blocking out sections of movement Ryuske told them doubtfully, "We might have to add extra practice days."

Rin and Hikaru who'd borne the brunt of the new maneuvers in their practice groaned in unison.

Hatsuharu who would be sitting behind the drums was exempted from dancing. He had been patient and steady with the repetitive snatches of rhythm required for hour after hour of practice.

Ryuske would be behind the keyboard during most of the songs selected for the competition and had minimal footwork. He wasn't as tired as Rin and Hikaru, but he was also ready to stop. "We'll see how next weekend's practice goes," he promised, or perhaps threatened them.

--

Mirage's performance notice had been posted on their website in plenty of time for a significant portion

of their fanclub to attend this Saturday evening's live, even though it was out in the suburbs. About 30 of the audience members posted in performance attendance on their site based fanclub.

Mirage was a relatively successful band locally. They currently played a mix of cover songs and originals. When they'd started out, they'd only had three original songs including their title song, which Ryuske had written the day they'd formed the band. Even though they now had over a dozen of their own, they still didn't have enough to fill four hours.

It was a pleasant night. The club that had hired them was pleased with their four hour performance, and the members of Mirage were pleased with the prompt payment and suggestion of future performances. Mirage's fans who were old enough to enter the club were pleased by the reasonable cover charge.

7: When someday comes.

Sunday morning Miri woke up early to do Hikaru's hair, as she had almost every Sunday since her younger brother had started his restaurant and asked his niece to play piano there. She was careful to leave her husband sleeping, for Sundays were currently his only days off.

Miri braided Hikaru's shoulder length hair up in a pretty weave. When her mother was finished, Hikaru

dressed quickly. She left in time to catch the bus downtown while Miri started cooking breakfast.

--

This particular Sunday was an unusually busy one for the restaurant. A wedding party that had reserved half the restaurant that morning kept adding song requests until Hikaru was afraid she'd never get to leave.

She complained about the situation to her uncle Kaoru, during one of the few moments she saw him that morning.

He closed the request book down and asked her laughingly, "Why are you worried, got a hot date?"

"Yes," she replied as he whisked away to deal with the next problem.

--

Thus at closer to 2:30 than 2:00, Hikaru dashed breathlessly down to the meeting spot.

Kiri was waiting, dressed in black jeans and a long sleeved dark grey shirt. In casual attire he really looked younger. He stood when he saw her and said, "Wow!" He ran his eyes up and down her and declared, "So sexy!"

Hikaru came to an abrupt halt and blushed.

Kiri exclaimed, "Your school uniform really doesn't suit you!"

She looked at him in confusion and replied, "What?"

Kiri answered her in a rush of words. "Sorry, I meant you seemed ordinary at first, but you were cute the other night, and today you look fantastic! I was going to start by teasing you about being the one who was late this time." He gazed at her admiringly and added wryly, "I feel underdressed."

"This isn't what I'm wearing!" Hikaru protested.

Kiri gave her a puzzled look.

"This is my Sunday uniform," she explained.

She was dressed in flowing skirt-like pants of gradated grey that blended into a white top which showed beneath a short charcoal bolero style jacket. She had on white gloves and dark sandals.

"Uniform?" he asked.

"It's what I wear to play the piano on Sundays, the jacket is the same as the waiters jackets," she explained. "I brought clothes to change into," she said lifting the small duffel bag she carried over one shoulder, "but I was already so late, I didn't want you to think I wasn't coming." She asked uncertainly, "If you don't mind waiting, I'll visit the restroom and change."

"Can I take a picture first?" he asked with a grin.

"I guess so," she agreed hesitantly.

He had her stand against the decorative flower bed with its small trees. She stood stiffly for the photo. He laughed and asked her, "What sort of phone would you like?"

She pondered it and while she was distracted by the question he took another photo. She answered, "Something inexpensive I guess, I'm not sure it needs to do anything apart from being able to talk or message?"

He replied, "If you have nothing particular in mind, how about one identical to mine? It would make it much easier for me to help you with it," he suggested, then grinned and added, "it's what I insisted on last time my mother got a new phone. It was driving me crazy having to stop and look up her model's information every time she had a question on the one she had before."

Hikaru nodded and replied, "That sounds reasonable. I'll go change then, so we can go?"

He nodded. Hikaru entered a nearby public restroom and changed. She emerged in grey jeans and a long sleeved black cotton top. Her hair was still braided up and she still wore the sandals. Kiri smiled at her and assured her, "This is also cute."

Hikaru laughed and said, "We sort of match."

He nodded agreeably, then took her duffel bag. She looked at him dubiously. He smiled at her and put his arm around her. "Shall we go shopping then?" he asked.

She nodded and they started up the long flight of stairs that lead to the next level of shops.

--

"Kiri-san?" she asked.

"Yes?" he replied.

She didn't continue right away and they climbed a few more steps before he stopped, turned to her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

She gazed at him in surprise.

He grinned at her and said, "If you call my name and don't say anything, I'll assume you want my attention."

She looked at him and said dryly, "If you're going to kiss me like that everytime I call your name and don't say anything, I might call your name a lot."

His eyes lit up and he kissed her again while running his hands down her back in a way that made her feel like melting. Then he stopped and said, "Sorry, I need to sit down a moment."

"Are you OK?" Hikaru asked in alarm. He was shaking.

He stepped to one edge of the stairs and sat. "I'm fine," he said, embarrassed.

Hikaru knelt on the step below him. "But you're shaking!" she protested.

Kiri gave her an odd look and asked carefully, "You haven't noticed why?" Hikaru stared into his face with a puzzled expression and Kiri blushed. He looked down at the problem and back up to meet her eyes and said, "It's a natural reaction."

Hikaru looked and blushed. She withdrew from him a little.

"Hikaru?" he asked worriedly. "Don't be afraid of me, I won't do anything to you, I don't know why I got so completely aroused all of a sudden, it just happened, but it's not a weird thing."

She hesitantly placed her hand on his knee.

He held open his arms to her, and she scooted up into his embrace.

"Won't this make it worse?" she asked.

"I can't get any more turned on than this," he said wryly. "Let's just rest here a few minutes, it will subside."

--

"Kiri, think of having babies," Hikaru said suddenly.

"What!?" he exclaimed and laughed.

"Shizuoka says the fastest way to get rid of an erection," Hikaru blushed again, "is to talk about having babies."

Kiri laughed. "I suspect that would be more effective if I didn't feel like I might love to have babies with you."

Hikaru looked up at him in surprise. "I don't want to have kids until I'm 25," she blurted.

"OK?" he agreed questioningly.

"Because of my mother," she explained.

"I don't understand," Kiri said.

"My mother had my brother when she was 16," Hikaru dove into a full explanation, "she got pregnant when she was 15 and her parents threw her out, my father married her as soon as he turned 18. But things must have been pretty rough for them at first," she said uncertainly.

Kiri nodded.

"I was planned though, so that there would be two years between Yuki-ni and I. And everything was OK until my father died. But then it was horrible for her. She had trouble finding a job she could keep, and people would say the most horrible things about what a young mother she was. Stuff no one ever said when my father was alive. And she cried all the time. She cried herself to sleep for almost three years."

Kiri hugged Hikaru tighter.

"I just think it wouldn't have been so hard on her if she'd been older," Hikaru said. "I mean, it doesn't have to be 25 exactly."

Kiri said lightly, "I don't think 35 would be too old to start a family."

Hikaru blushed and told him, "I'm sorry, talking about having children when we've barely even started dating." She shrugged helplessly.

Kiri reassured her, "I think it's good to talk about it early. I think it's sad when a couple that's spent years together suddenly discovers that one of them doesn't want children and the other wants a dozen." He grinned at her and asked, "How many children do you want?"

"A couple maybe, or four? One is too lonely, and three is difficult to divide many things evenly." she answered uncertainly.

"Four is too many, and I often wished I were an only child," he replied.

She looked at him curiously. "Why?"

"I have three much older sisters, opinionated, strong willed, domineering elder sisters," he explained.

Hikaru blinked in surprise.

He told her a little more. "My oldest sister had just had her first child when my mother got pregnant again. So my eldest nephew is a year older than I am," he laughed. "The one closest in age to me alternated between acting like a second mother and treating me as a convenient servant. My parents had thought they were done having children when I came

along." His expression grew more sober as he continued, "I felt like they were always a little bewildered by what to do with me growing up. Not that I felt unloved," he added hastily.

"Kiri, they probably were bewildered by having a boy after raising three girls?" Hikaru suggested.

He smiled at her and replied, "Anyway, four is too many, my middle sister has four as well, and it's crazy."

Hikaru laughed. "Two then?" she asked.

"Two would be good," he said, and kissed her. "We've talked for so long that I'm fine, shall we go?" he asked.

Hikaru nodded and they resumed their climb.

"What's your favorite color?" Kiri asked.

"Grey," Hikaru answered, looking at Kiri's grey shirt.

"That's very flattering," he said dryly, "but I meant really?"

Hikaru was a little offended. "Grey really is my favorite color, it's quiet. What is yours?" she asked challengingly.

"Sorry, I have no room to talk," he replied laughingly, "my favorite is black."

They both laughed then, and they walked hand in hand the rest of the way.

8: Communication.

At the mobile phone store, Hikaru looked around with interest while they waited. Kiri watched her and offered, "if you see something that especially appeals to you, you can still get that instead." Then he pointed at one of the most expensive models and said, "That's what my phone is."

"I can't let you buy me that!" protested Hikaru automatically.

Kiri frowned, "Why not? You said it would be fine."

"Kiri-san it's too expensive," she said uncomfortably.

His face stiffened.

Hikaru was distressed by his reaction and explained, "I didn't know your phone was such an expensive model."

Kiri replied coolly, "It's not that expensive, but go ahead and choose anything you wish then."

Hikaru looked at him doubtfully, uncertain what to do. He didn't say anything else, only watched her with a controlled expression. After a few moments she said fretfully, "I've heard that most couple's fights are over money, but this isn't how I imagined that was meant."

Behind her the shop girl who had finally gotten around to them laughed. "Couple's fights are really common in here, but usually it's the person paying who's saying it's too expensive."

Kiri's lips twitched.

Hikaru blushed.

Hikaru looked at him and asked hesitantly, "You really want to get that one if I have no other preference?"

He nodded.

She relented and said, "Nevermind then, it's fine, you can get that one."

Kiri looked at her and asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

She watched quietly, but winced occasionally as Kiri selected what he considered the minimum of accessories and added them.

He did ask her, "A headset? I use one, but I'm on the phone a lot for work."

She shook her head.

He nodded and said, "You can probably get by without it."

Then the plan was shown by the shop assistant, Kiri simply added her a line on his existing contract. The additional amount was about what Hikaru

thought that Risa was paying for her phone, but the full amount was about five times that.

The transaction finished, they left the shop. When Kiri held the door for her he said, "Hikaru, I don't understand either why it was such a big deal, or why you went ahead with it."

As they stepped out into the sunshine Hikaru replied, "I went ahead with it because I realized that to you it's not a big deal, but Kiri-san, why does it seem like you're still mad at me?"

"Kiri-san," Kiri repeated.

Hikaru only looked at him in confusion.

He stopped walking and turned to face her. "You didn't realize?" he asked.

"Realize what?" she returned.

He studied her ruefully and said, "Earlier you were simply saying Kiri, but when we started arguing, you went back to saying Kiri-san, I thought... I thought you were being formal on purpose to," he bit his lip and continued, "it felt like you wanted to force some distance because you disapproved of the amount."

Hikaru blushed. "I'm sorry Kiri," she apologized hesitantly, "I didn't realize."

He nodded, then sighed and said quietly, "It's really not that much. And I'm sorry, I was too quick to assume." He took her hand. "Let's go sit somewhere and I'll show you how to use it."

They found a picnic table free at the overlook area. Hikaru sat on the bench, and Kiri hopped up and sat on the table above her, so he could see over her shoulder easily. Hikaru found where to turn the phone on, and then looked up at him.

Kiri explained the menus a little, but then Hikaru interrupted him and asked, "More like a tablet than a regular phone?"

Kiri nodded, "It basically is a small tablet with a cellular wireless connection."

Hikaru had less trouble navigating it after that. Kiri took the phone from her when they got to adding contacts, and put in his own information. But under occupation he listed 'Hikaru's boyfriend'.

Hikaru laughed and then said more seriously, "Kiri?"

"Yes?" he replied.

"I've been thinking about how to explain why it seems like such a big deal to have a man buy me something so expensive," she said.

He frowned at her and replied, "Hikaru, I'm not expecting anything in return but simply being able to contact you."

She nodded. "I wasn't worried about that." She blushed and added, "Besides, I'm pretty sure you

could have whatever you wanted without anything like that."

He leaned down and bit her ear lightly. She jumped and he asked quietly, "Oh, really?"

She replied, "Yes, I mean, you said you don't want to push me, but I don't think it would be very difficult for you to."

He frowned again.

She added, "And can you not do that in public?"

"What?" he asked.

"Bite my ear," she said, still blushing.

He laughed and asked, "Is it OK if it's not in public?" She nodded and he raised an eyebrow. "How much is OK in public then?" he asked.

"Holding hands, or hugging sometimes, or kissing a little, I guess?" she answered.

"Only kissing a little?" he asked teasingly.

She shrugged and said, "When we were kissing so much, I wasn't really thinking about how many people saw us."

He hugged her and said agreeably, "OK."

"Anyway, about explaining, it's just that this phone," she held up the offending item, "costs almost as much as I can make in an entire month. And I realize that you are working full time and it's probably only a fraction of what you make in a month, so it

doesn't seem so expensive to you. But it is really expensive to me." She bit her lip.

Kiri slid down onto the bench next to her with a thump, and put his arm around her waist. "OK, I get it. I'm sorry Hikaru. It really isn't that much to me, and it's not like I'm expecting to pay that much every month, but I understand."

She nodded.

"But Hikaru?" he asked.

"Yes?" she replied.

"I want you to let me pay for all our dates." He looked at her and saw that she was going to object, and added quickly, "I'm not saying we must always do expensive things, but I don't want to have to stop and consider things like 'is this restaurant too expensive for a high-school girl?' And I don't want our dates to become a burden to you. Like you said, I am already working full time, so while you're still in school please let me pay."

Hikaru said uncomfortably, "Only if you don't expect to buy me things."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She tried to explain, "Um, things like paying for our food, or a movie, things we are doing together is OK, but not like going shopping?"

"Alright," he agreed and kissed her.

He showed her how to make a call, and send a text. And then he grinned and said, "Let's take a picture." He showed her the camera controls and they cuddled together and took a picture. Then he kissed her and took another picture.

"Delete that!" protested Hikaru.

"Never," he replied laughingly. "I'm going to send them to myself, here's how you make the message attachment." He demonstrated. "If you want to delete them from your phone now, you'll have to figure out how on your own later!" He laughed.

She took the phone back, and he cuddled her while she tried to navigate the menus.

"I'm surprised that you make as much as this phone costs in a month actually, your school has very relaxed work policies?" he asked.

She shrugged and explained, "Sort of. Students whose grades are in the top 60% can work up to 20 hours a week, but they give half off tuition to the top 20%."

"Nice incentives," he commented.

"Yes, but I kind of hate it," she replied.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm not that smart. I hate school. Staying in the top 20% is agony," Hikaru said.

"If you can stay in the top 20%, you are plenty smart," he replied laughingly.

"You don't understand," she protested tiredly, "it's pure drudging hard work for me. I'm not like my brother who can ace things with only a few minutes a day, I have to spend hours and hours on things that take other people minutes. And I've had so many people help tutor me to even manage it at all."

He frowned, "Even so, you are managing it? That's a big accomplishment. But why are you working so hard for it?"

She hesitated. "Can you promise not to tell anyone?" she asked finally.

Kiri regarded her warily, "As long as I don't think you're in danger?"

She relaxed and smiled which made him relax a little too. "I'm paying half my brother's college tuition," Hikaru said.

Kiri said, "OK, I don't understand how that means you must stay in the top 20% or why it's secret?"

"Even on half tuition, I can barely make enough to pay it. It's a secret because when he started university he was trying to do it all on his own. He nearly died. He was hospitalized for a while from working himself into exhaustion," Hikaru explained.

"My mother persuaded him to let her pay the tuition so he would only pay his living expenses and extras. We were doing OK, I was just helping some

with our household expenses. But then she got pregnant, and she started fainting at work, the doctor told her she had to stop working," she went on. "Izumi-san doesn't make enough to pay the tuition easily, especially with a baby to prepare for, and he didn't think my mother should have been paying it anyway."

"So to stop Yuki-ni from working himself to death again, I asked our uncle to pretend that he was paying half, if I could pay it. He agreed, except that he also gave up his apartment and took this tiny little room so that he can pay the other half, so that the full tuition is still paid," she finished.

"Wow," Kiri said.

Hikaru shrugged.

"So you are secretly conspiring with your uncle to pay your brother's tuition," he said laughingly.

Hikaru nodded.

He kissed her. "Thank you for trusting me with your secrets," he said.

Hikaru blushed.

Kiri's phone rang. He frowned at it. "Sorry, it's my boss, just a minute," he said.

Hikaru nodded.

"Hello, I'm in the middle of my date? The one I even went so far as to add to my work schedule so I

wouldn't be called in to work?" he said when he answered it.

He listened for a minute and then said, "You have got to be fucking kidding me." He ran his hand through his hair and listened a bit more and said, "Yes, I'll leave now, it'll still take me a couple hours to get there. Do your best."

"Hikaru, I'm sorry," he told her when he turned back to her.

She shrugged. Then she wiggled her new phone at him, and suggested, "You can call me later?"

He grinned and kissed her, "I will absolutely call you later."

He left quickly. Hikaru played with her new phone for awhile. She added everyone she had memorized to her contacts list, starting with her mother, brother and uncle Kaoru. Then added Risa and Shizuoka, Yukito-san and Taka-ji. Last she added Ryu-sensei and Rin, she had Hatsuharu and Nezumi's contact information at home, but couldn't remember them for sure. She figured out how to send a group text to all of them that said 'I got a mobile phone, this is my new number. Hikaru'.

From Taka-ji she received an immediate text back, 'Got it love. Miss you. Busy as hell.' Right after that Risa called her.

"Oh my god!" Risa replied to Hikaru's hello. "I've been asking you to get one for ages, why all of a sudden?"

Hikaru was glad Risa couldn't see her blush, and replied "Um, Kiri bought it for me."

"Who is Kiri?" Risa asked.

"Well, ah, he's my boyfriend," she replied.

"What!?" shrieked Risa. "Where are you?"

Hikaru told her.

"Don't move, we'll be right there," Risa instructed.

"He already left? We who?" Hikaru replied.

"Makoto and I are on a date, we're about five minutes from you, be right there," Risa said and ended the call.

Hikaru stared at her phone. A message had arrived while she was talking, she opened it. It was from Yukito-san, the friend of her father's who'd insisted on managing her solo music jobs. He owned the bar 'Blue Moon'. He'd been the first person to let Hikaru perform on stage and Mirage played there about once a month for half the cover fee. 'Glad to hear, it will be more convenient. Y.'

9: Do tell.

Risa and Makoto arrived. Makoto grinned at Hikaru as Risa went into attack mode. "Who is he? Where did you meet him? When did you start dating?"

Hikaru flinched under the flood of questions but did her best to answer. "Takeshi Kiri. Um, on the street? And 3 days?"

Risa stared at her. "You didn't say anything on Friday. And what do you mean on the street? He picked you up?"

"Sorry, I was too embarrassed to tell you I probably had a date on Friday, and I think probably I picked him up?" Hikaru said.

Risa couldn't imagine Hikaru picking someone up and demanded that she describe how she'd met Kiri.

"I was walking to the bus stop and I saw him sitting on the flower bed border," Hikaru said, and stopped and blushed.

"And he approached you?" Risa asked with a frown.

"No, um, he posed, when he saw me looking," Hikaru said, embarrassed.

"That's a little weird," commented Risa. "Then what?"

"Um," Hikaru said.

Makoto laughed and said, "Risa love, Hikaru is too embarrassed to tell you how she picked him up."

Hikaru, painfully embarrassed, nodded.

"What on earth?" inquired Risa.

"I asked if I could kiss him," Hikaru blurted out.

Makoto laughed until tears came out of his eyes while Risa stared at her like she'd admitted to dancing in the street naked.

Hikaru sat there blushing.

Finally Risa asked, "So he kissed you?"

Hikaru nodded.

"And then he asked you out?" Risa pressed, wondering what on earth this guy must think of Hikaru.

Hikaru said, "Yes, later."

"What do you mean later?" Risa asked.

Hikaru summarized how her new step father had dragged her off, and how Kiri had delivered her bag the next morning. She confessed that he'd made the lunchbox, and then said, "Oh, I never told him thank you, or that the food was good yet."

Risa was offended that Hikaru hadn't told her everything at the time. Makoto just laughed and pointed out that Hikaru had at least told her she'd

gotten a phone. That reminded Risa, who then demanded to see the phone.

"This looks really expensive," she said dubiously.

"It is," Hikaru agreed.

"How old is this guy?" Risa asked.

"27," Hikaru answered.

"Hikaru!" Risa protested.

"I didn't realize he was that old at first, he looks younger, and it's not that bad," Hikaru protested in return.

"What does he look like then?" Risa asked grimly.

"Bet he's hot," said Makoto laughingly. When Risa glared at him he said, "She asked him to kiss her." And he laughed again.

Hikaru said, "We took a picture."

Risa opened the photos on the phone in her hand. "Oh my god Hikaru!" she exclaimed.

Hikaru blushed and said, "He said if I want to delete it I have to figure out how on my own."

Makoto peered over Risa's shoulder, grinned and asked, "Why do you want to delete it, it's cute."

Hikaru replied, "It's embarrassing."

"He doesn't look that old?" Risa asked dubiously.

Hikaru nodded. "When I first saw him in casual clothes I guessed maybe 23 at most, when I saw him in a suit, I thought maybe 25, it's not that much more."

Risa frowned at her, "Even if you didn't know how old he was, he must have known you're only in high school if you were still in uniform."

Hikaru nodded. Looking at her friend's frown she said, "He's really nice. He worries that I might let him push me into things, but he doesn't, he's always waiting for me and if I'm not comfortable he stops."

Risa looked, if anything, more worried. "What has he done that made you uncomfortable?"

Hikaru blushed and said, "Well, he bit my ear."

Makoto laughed.

"He bought you such an expensive phone," Risa worried.

Hikaru told her that Kiri had asked if he could get her the same thing he had to make it easier to learn.

"That seems reasonable," Makoto said. "What's your data limit?" he asked.

Hikaru looked at him blankly.

Makoto took the phone from Risa and showed Hikaru how to check her plan allowances. He whistled, "Never mind how much the phone costs,

you have unlimited everything, that's freaking expensive."

"He uses his for work, and just added a line on his plan," Hikaru said, and told them the line amount.

"That's not bad," Risa said with surprise.

Makoto said, "Lucky." Then he showed Hikaru the web browser, and warned her, "Even though it's unlimited, there's usually some kind of restrictions if you stream a lot of stuff." Hikaru looked blank and he explained, "Like watching movies and stuff."

Hikaru said, "I don't think I need to do that."

Makoto said kindly, "You can some, just don't spend more than a few hours a month on that kind of stuff, you'll be fine."

Hikaru took her phone back gingerly. "Even though we already argued over how expensive it was, it makes me feel uncomfortable knowing it's even more expensive than I thought."

"It's not," Makoto reassured her. "The guy was already paying for all but the new line fee."

"OK," Hikaru said.

Risa asked, "You argued with him about buying the phone?"

Hikaru blushed. "I thought it was too expensive, but then I realized that he really didn't think it's expensive, so I gave in," she said.

Risa enquired, "Why was he buying you a phone in the first place?"

"Because he's really busy with his job, and often late, and like today, he got called in. He said he didn't think dating would work out if I didn't have a phone, and that if I was only getting it because he wanted it, that he should buy it," Hikaru explained.

Risa said reluctantly, "Well, that seems reasonable. But I want to meet him, because it all seems a little weird. And he looks too pretty."

"Too pretty?" Hikaru and Makoto asked together.

"Pretty guys are usually jerks," Risa said.

"Ryu-sensei isn't a jerk," Hikaru objected, giving the example of the prettiest man of her acquaintance.

"No, but he's freaking weird!" Risa replied.

Hikaru laughed and agreed, "OK, I'll ask him if he'll meet my friends."

10: Just breathing.

Hikaru's phone rang while she was sitting at the table eating dinner with her mother and Izumi-san. She managed to accept the call after a couple of tries and then dropped the phone when Kiri waved at her.

"Sorry," she apologized and picked it up again.

Kiri laughed at her.

"How do you make a video call?" she asked.

"I'll show you next time we're together," Kiri promised.

"A video call?" Miri asked, and stood up to trot around the table and stare over Hikaru's shoulder. "Wow cool!" she exclaimed and waved.

Kiri waved back. "Hi," he said.

"Hi Takeshi-kun!" replied Hikaru's mother happily.

"You shouldn't use your phone at the dinner table," Izumi scolded.

Kiri overheard and asked, "Should I call you back in awhile?"

Hikaru replied with a grimace, "I'll call you when I'm done?"

Kiri nodded and said, "OK sweetheart, talk to you soon."

Hikaru said, "Yeah, sorry Kiri."

He replied, "It's fine," gave her a smile, and ended the call.

Later in her room, Hikaru called Kiri.

"Hi," he answered. "Shall I call you back with another video call?"

"If you want, but you don't need to," replied Hikaru.

"We can just talk," he agreed.

"What should we talk about?" she asked.

"When our next date is?" Kiri suggested.

Hikaru laughed.

He suggested, "I think I'll be finished about 7:30 tomorrow?"

"On school nights my curfew is 8pm, though my mother did help convince Izumi-san to let me work until 8, so when I'm working I just return as quickly as I can," she said apologetically.

"Oh," he replied.

She said, "And I've got a job on Tuesday, so maybe Wednesday?"

"I'm off all day Wednesday, so what if I pick you up from school and we spend the whole afternoon?" Kiri said hopefully.

"I'd like that... but Kiri my friends want to meet you, if you wouldn't mind then maybe I'll introduce you first?" Hikaru asked hesitantly.

"I don't mind," he replied.

"OK, thank you," she said.

"Where are you playing Tuesday?" he asked.

"I'm playing the warm up set for 'Red Tuesday' from 6 to 8, at a bar called 'Night Owls', they do 'Red Tuesdays' with jazz and 'Blue Thursdays' with blues music every week," Hikaru told him.

"You play jazz?" he asked.

"I play a little bit of lots of things?" she answered.

"I'd like to hear you play on stage sometime," he told her.

"I don't mind, but you'd still have to pay the cover, I can't get you in there," Hikaru warned.

Amused he asked, "So there are other places you could get me in?"

"If I were playing at Yukito-san's bar, 'Blue Moon', or if you came to my uncle's restaurant," she answered seriously.

"I see," he said cheerfully. "Well, I don't know if I can make it to see you play this Tuesday, but I might try."

"OK," she said.

A silence fell between them.

After a few moments Hikaru said, "I don't know what to talk about, and it feels wasteful to sit quietly on the phone."

Kiri laughed, "Sweetheart, I don't mind sitting quietly on the phone with you. It's not wasting anything. I'm not sure what to talk about either

though, if it's making you uncomfortable, we can try talking again tomorrow?"

"Sure," she replied, "about 8pm then, so that you have a little time after you finish?"

"That sounds good," he said. Then added, "Hikaru you can call or message me anytime you want, if I'm working I'll just leave it until I have time, but when I have time I'll message or call you back?"

"OK," she agreed.

"Alright, we'll say goodnight now?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so, goodnight Kiri."

"Goodnight Hikaru," he replied and ended the call.

11: Unscheduled rebellion.

School on Monday was typical of school and Mondays, it sucked. Lunch was spent in a babble of conversation with Shizuoka and Risa. Shizuoka was thrilled that Hikaru had a phone now and confessed that she'd deleted the message from a strange contact without reading it.

Shizuoka liked older men, so didn't see a problem with Kiri's age, but she shared Risa's doubts over what kind of guy might be interested in Hikaru.

Hikaru was offended. "You've been complaining that I don't date for ages, and dragging me out with

you! Why aren't you thrilled? And what's wrong with him wanting to date me?"

"You're just, um, so quiet? And you insist on wearing such plain clothes, and it's odd that someone who hasn't seen you on stage yet is so interested?" Shizuoka told her while reaching out and tucking a strand of Hikaru's hair back with one neatly manicured hand.

Risa protested, "Hikaru is really pretty when she does let me dress her up!"

Hikaru rolled her eyes at her friends. She told them he'd agreed to meet her friends when he picked her up on Wednesday.

The three of them went out together after school, but only for an hour. Risa had babysitting duty for her five younger siblings that evening. It was a frequent occurrence and her friends were used to it.

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That evening Hikaru received another call during supper. Izumi glared at her when she left the table to answer it. It was a number she didn't recognize, so she answered it hesitantly.

It was the owner of Night Owls. He explained that he'd begged Yukito-san for her contact so he could make his request directly.

"Hikaru-san, the band we had scheduled tomorrow cancelled, and I haven't been able to find a

replacement. Could you play until 11pm? Could your band play?" he asked hopefully.

Night Owls had her play regularly, usually at least once a week, so she agreed without much hesitation. Hikaru said, "I'll ask the band members, but I can't promise anything." As a rule Mirage was strictly a weekend band, due to Hatsuharu's work schedule and Hikaru's school schedule.

The call was ended with profuse exclamations of gratitude from Night Owls owner. "Thank you again," he repeated as the call closed.

Hikaru verified Ryuske's contact information and called him before returning to the supper table. He answered with surprise, "Hi? Oh, Hikaru, I see your message now."

Hikaru laughed and replied, "Yes. Are you free tomorrow night?" She explained the situation.

Ryuske said, after checking his tutoring schedule, "I could come play starting at 8pm when your usual set ends. I'll call Rin and Hatsuharu and ask if they are available."

"That would be great," she replied with relief. "Everyone needs to wear something red," she added. She also warned him, "I forgot to ask how much we'd be paid, so it might be less than Mirage usually demands."

Ryuske reassured her that he didn't mind helping out a place that regularly employed her.

When the call ended, she sent a message to Yukito-san verifying that she'd taken the job. He acted as an unpaid agent, playing the middleman on all the solo performances she did. He'd arranged it with Hikaru and her mother after the first time she'd played on stage.

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Hikaru returned to the table and took a deep breath before announcing, "I agreed to work until 11pm tomorrow."

"What the hell?" protested Izumi questioningly.

"Night Owls has been really good to me and they're in a bind tomorrow over a cancellation, so I agreed to help," Hikaru explained reasonably.

Miri nodded and said, "Of course."

"It's not 'of course'," he replied to Miri. "You won't get to bed until midnight," Izumi fussed at Hikaru.

"One night won't hurt me Izumi-san," Hikaru replied with amusement, thinking of how often she'd worked the evening shift last year. She'd had a grocery stocking job before switching to music full time.

Izumi was not amused. "You think your curfew is a joke," he said bitingly. Miri laid a placating hand on his arm, but he shrugged it off. Hikaru tensed. Izumi continued angrily, "You only follow it when it's convenient!"

A rare burst of anger flared up in her. "If I'm only following it when it's convenient, then I'm going out tonight," she replied icily.

"Hikaru?" Miri asked in alarm.

"I would have gone on a date tonight, if I didn't have this stupid curfew!" Hikaru snapped. She sprang to her feet in agitation.

"Sit down," ordered Izumi demandingly.

Hikaru glared at him and said quietly but firmly, "No." She turned, went to the door, grabbed her jacket, and walked out.

She walked to the bus stop out of habit. There she sat down and looked at her phone. Her phone said it was only 7:15 but she called Kiri anyway.

"Hello, Hikaru sweetheart?" he answered immediately.

"Kiri, can I see you tonight after all?" Hikaru asked uncertainly.

There was a pause and then he replied, "Sure, where are you? I'm already on the road."

"Sitting at the bus stop near my house," she replied ruefully.

"Just stay there then and I'll pick you up shortly," he suggested.

"OK," she agreed. "Kiri, we shouldn't talk while you're driving."

"OK," he agreed and Hikaru ended the call.

A bus came by on its route, but Hikaru didn't take it. Within 15 minutes Kiri arrived, and Hikaru climbed into the passenger seat, carefully did up her seatbelt, and sat silently as he pulled away from the curb.

"Dinner?" he suggested after a few moments.

"Sure," she replied tensely. "I had barely started eating."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Something happened," he stated.

She shrugged.

He bit his lip, and asked, "Are you OK?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the road ahead of them. She flinched when a car pulled out right in front of them, but nothing happened.

Kiri asked hesitantly, "Do you mind telling me why I'm unexpectedly enjoying your company tonight? What happened?"

Hikaru looked at him and then quickly returned her gaze to the road. "I don't mind, but can I tell you after we've arrived?"

Kiri nodded, and the rest of the drive passed in silence.

At the restaurant, it was apparent that Kiri was obviously a frequent and well known customer. The host greeted them effusively and suggested slyly to Kiri, "This one is different, you will treat her well and keep her?"

Kiri gave an embarrassed nod and shrugged apologetically to Hikaru as they followed the man through the restaurant.

They were seated on cushions on either side of a low table in a secluded dining partition that could be entirely closed off. Hikaru fiddled nervously with the place setting in front of her. "You come here a lot?" she asked.

"Yes, several times a month," he replied. He watched her for a moment. "Hikaru?" he asked.

She looked up at him.

"Come sit next to me and tell me what's wrong?" he suggested.

She picked up her seat cushion and crawled over to his side. He helped settle her so that she was tucked up against him with his arm around her.

"I'm just behaving like a child," she confessed.

He looked at her oddly and hugged her against him. "What happened?" he asked again.

"I agreed to work until 11 tomorrow. The band that was supposed to play cancelled, and the owner was

desperate. He gives me work regularly, so I agreed," she explained.

"OK?" Kiri replied.

"Izumi-san got mad and said I'm only following the curfew when it's convenient," Hikaru said miserably, "so I am childishly proving him right."

Kiri raised an eyebrow.

"I yelled that if I'm only following it when it's convenient then I would leave, and left," she admitted. "I'm completely acting like a rebellious little kid," she said ruefully.

Kiri laughed quietly. "Hikaru," he dropped a kiss on her cheek, "anyone would be tempted to respond that way, not just a child," he said reassuringly.

"I'm so angry with him," Hikaru complained. "I know I'm being unreasonable, that of course he'd be upset that I agreed to work so much later than his curfew, but when he said that I just got so angry," she added unhappily.

Kiri held her and tried to think of something helpful to say. Finally he simply replied, "Well, I am very glad to be able to see you after all."

She looked at him and nodded, "Me too." She leaned against him. He ran his hand up and down her arm and held her.

Their host arrived with a stack of plates. Hikaru sat up to move and he waved her back. "No no, stay

there, I'll move the setting," he said quickly. "Will you share a plate?" he asked.

Kiri turned the question to Hikaru, "Do you mind sharing a plate with me?"

She shook her head.

Everything was quickly arranged and their host left them, pulling the folding doors shut as he went. Kiri dished up some food from each of the dishes.

Hikaru asked curiously, "He never asked what we wanted to eat?"

Kiri chuckled and said, "He never does anymore, he just brings whatever he thinks I ought to eat, I suspect. It's always good, and always includes several vegetable dishes." He picked up a tidbit in his chopsticks, dipped it lightly in one of the sauces and offered it to Hikaru.

She shyly accepted it, and Kiri watched her eat the bite with amusement. Hesitantly she chose something and offered it in return. Kiri leaned forward and took the offering in his mouth.

"Kiri?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Can we feed ourselves?" She was blushing fiercely with embarrassment.

"It's not as much fun, but we can if you like," he replied agreeably.

After a they'd been eating a few minutes he asked, "Why do you find it so embarrassing?"

"I could feel your mouth move, even through the chopsticks," Hikaru replied blushing all over again.

He laughed.

After a little bit Hikaru asked, "Is everything OK with your work, since you were called in on Sunday? I forgot to ask last night."

Kiri's amusement faded and he replied, "Overall, yes, everything is fine. But that was a mess." A bit grimly he explained, "It was a continuation of the mess before. We've had to terminate their contract. One of their guys showed up to the filming completely drunk, and caused an incident. Then he jumped off a balcony while trying to evade security. He's currently hospitalized with nothing worse than a broken arm and a concussion."

"Wow," said Hikaru.

Kiri said, "We have really strict policies on substance abuse, so the company doesn't take a direct loss, but it's such a waste."

"Why?" Hikaru asked.

"If his friends hadn't tried to cover for him, or if he'd cleaned himself up after the last incident, they could have continued with us. Apart from the one guy's problem, they're a good group that I think could have done well. And the company that was doing the filming will be more reluctant to work with us in the

future. Trying to smooth things over is a lot of what I was called in for."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said sympathetically.

"It's OK," he replied. Hikaru leaned close and he wrapped his arm back around her.

Kiri swapped their plate for the dessert plate. He picked up a piece of the dessert with his fingers and said, "You don't use chopsticks with this." He demonstrated how to dip it into the butter and then roll it in the powdered sugar.

Hikaru copied him, and then shyly offered her piece to him. He smiled at her and took it from her fingers, letting his tongue brush her fingertips and his lips close over her fingers.

She blushed, but didn't withdraw, and took the piece he fed her. He kissed her for awhile. They ate the dessert very slowly.

When they'd finished it Kiri ran his hand down her back and said regretfully, "I don't suppose I get to take you home with me now?"

Hikaru looked at him with wide eyes and said, "Um, no, I should go home. I usually try to go to bed about 10 on school nights."

Kiri leaned in and kissed her again. "OK," he agreed, "I'll take you home then."

Hikaru was silent on the drive back. Her grip on the belt was tight, and her back tense. "Are you going to be OK?" he asked, concerned.

She nodded, but didn't relax. When they arrived she got out immediately, but then waited as he came around the car.

"Hikaru?" Kiri asked hesitantly.

"Yes?" she replied.

"Are you afraid you'll be hit again?" he asked.

"No," she replied immediately and without hesitation. "I'm embarrassed about responding so childishly though," she added.

"OK" he replied, relieved. "But really, I don't think you behaved all that childishly," he said and reached out to touch her cheek lightly.

He took her hand and explained as they walked slowly to her door, "I think you responded responsibly to your work obligation. And that anyone who is told they aren't following some restriction when they have been working very hard to follow it, will be tempted to stop following it."

Hikaru grinned at him and leaned in to kiss him again. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Since you're working so much later tomorrow, I'll definitely be done in time to come see the end of it at least, can I bring you home tomorrow?" he asked.

She nodded.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her deeply for a minute, then released her. "You better go in before I decide to take you home with me after all," he whispered.

She went in.

Fortunately her mother and Izumi had already gone up to bed. Hikaru breathed a quiet word of thanks and quietly prepared her lunch box in the kitchen. Then she checked that her homework was ready, turned off the lights and went to bed herself.

13: Standing here before me.

Tuesday there was school, as always. At home, in the afternoon, Hikaru rushed through her homework. Rushed being a relative term, as it took all of the available time and she was still working on it as she ate.

Then she dressed. Black jeans with brass chains sewn like crossed laces down the sides that Risa had made for her. A decorated red silk top that had been made from a Chinese dress she'd had as a small child. At Hikaru's request, her mother had added black panels and long sleeves to it. Her ponytail was decorated with a red silk ribbon.

She grabbed her coat and she took her guitar. On Red Tuesdays she usually played the baby grand piano that was a permanent fixture at Night Owls, but

she thought she might switch instruments when Ryu-sensei arrived.

... K to K

Kazuha messaged Kiri.

Kazuha: This place isn't a bar, it's a classy dive.

Kiri: ?

Kazuha: You'll see when you get here, btw the cover was 25, but a table was 35, so I paid for the table and gave them your name. They said tell them you're at a table and show your ID when you get here.

Kiri: OK ty

Kazuha: Thought you said your girlfriend would be playing, there's just a guy playing piano?

Kiri: Does the guy look like this? *picture of Hikaru in Sunday uniform attached*

Kazuha: Holy fuck!

Kiri: >:3

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Hikaru played her usual solo piano jazz until eight. Then she took a short break. Ryuske hadn't arrived yet, but when she visited their website at the end of the set, it said "3/4 Mirage tonight at Night Owls, 8-11pm" on the events calendar. She had to admit that the phone was handy sometimes. She assumed

that Ryuske and one other member were planning to arrive soon. She downed a bottle of water and returned to the stage.

It wasn't really a jazz song, but it was one that could easily be extended or shortened, and one of her favorites, so she played 'Rush Rush' next. About a third of the way through, Ryuske's violin joined in. He stepped out and stood beside her. He was wearing black jeans and a glitteringly sequinned red shirt she'd never seen before that was either purposefully snug, or a size too small. Rin stepped out next, and slid her headset on as she played. His token bit of red was limited to a dragon that covered one half of his T-shirt.

He and Ryuske were already wearing their headsets and the violin's slightly amplified sound showed that they were already connected to the sound system. Rin set up the little portable projector that put up Mirage's shimmering Mirage banner against whatever background it was pointed at, before he picked up his bass and joined in.

At the next phrase break in the song, they started singing the lyrics. There were a few whistles and cheers from the audience. Hikaru, Ryuske and Rin smiled.

Ryuske had devised a set list of songs that they were familiar with, that were descendants of jazz if not strictly jazz, and told them the next song over the internal line on their headsets between songs. For many of the songs he played the piano while Hikaru

played her guitar. It was a little weird without their drummer, but they managed.

... K and K

Kiri showed up to find a line formed outside 'Night Owls'. The building was unprepossessing, and the entrance looked more like a utility entrance, except for the tuxedo wearing guard standing beside it.

There was no sign other than a small chalk board beside the entrance, that had Night Owls discretely emblazoned across the top of it's frame. The board said: Red Tuesday, Hikaru 6-8, Mirage 8-11.

Kiri asked someone from the line what the line was for and was told, "Dude, Mirage is playing an unscheduled 3/4 show here tonight!"

The person next to him said, "I don't know Mirage, but Red Tuesday's are often crowded."

Kiri approached the door guard rather than getting in line, recalling Kazuha's instructions. His ID was taken inside, and shortly he was invited in, to mutterings from those waiting.

It was indeed a classy dive. Though smoking was prohibited, wispy vapors trailed through the low lighting. Some sort of mist machine he deduced after a moment. Everything was decorated in polished wood and brass with imitation leather upholstery. There were three tiers of small tables and a long bar. Both tables and bar were fully occupied.

The stage was a raised platform above a small dance floor. The dance floor was crowded. Mirage was playing something that wailed in a minor key at the moment.

Hikaru was at the piano, while a bass and a violin were the other instruments.

He located Kazuha and made his way to the table. He raised an eyebrow at his friend when he got there. Kazuha had a small 3/4 full bottle and two shot glasses.

"A bit stiff for a teacher on a school night isn't it?" he asked.

Kazuha grimaced at him and replied, "Half is yours if you want it?"

Kiri said a little coolly, "I can't drink that, I'm driving tonight."

Kazuha nodded back, "OK."

"Why?" asked Kiri and listened to the explanation with one ear as he watched Hikaru.

Kazuha explained, "She left, with another guy, again."

Kiri replied with irritation, "I've told you to stop taking her back, she's not worth this."

Kazuha just grimaced at him again and poured another shot.

They watched Mirage performing in silence for a bit. Then Kazuha said, "The place really filled up after the rest of the band showed up. They are pretty good though."

Kiri nodded.

"Why a high-school girl?" Kazuha asked.

Kiri's mouth curved and he said, still gazing at Hikaru, "It was only supposed to be one kiss."

"Must've been a hell of a kiss?" Kazuha asked.

"It barely qualified as a kiss," Kiri answered and laughed quietly.

His friend stared at him in confusion.

"Nevermind," Kiri told him, still grinning.

"Thought you had a rule against dating musicians?" Kazuha asked curiously.

Kiri sobered and said, "Yeah, but I didn't think to ask if she were a musician before I started, and then I already liked her too much to quit."

They watched a bit more and then Kiri added, "I was hoping it was some teenage garage band."

Kazuha surveyed Mirage and offered, "They look like a small boy band, honestly. The leader with the eyeliner could belong to some visual kei group, and your girlfriend um..."

"Did you really take her for a guy?" Kiri asked.

"Yeah, she's completely flat." Kazuha said.

Kiri glanced at him with irritation, and replied, "There's more to women than big breasts."

Kazuha made no reply, but he gave Kiri a skeptical look.

After a few more songs Kiri said, "They have a pretty wide range for a cover band, and I've never heard this one."

Kazuha suggested, "Maybe they aren't just a cover band, earlier they played one that was pretty obviously their title song, 'Mirage'. Something about drowning in the sand, and not touching."

"Maybe," Kiri replied thoughtfully. "Does the one who keeps switching between piano and violin seem familiar? I recognize the bass player, Rin, I've worked with him before."

"No?" replied Kazuha.

"There's something about him..." Kiri trailed off.

They listened until Mirage finished, and then Kiri received a text.

"Can't come out into the bar due to age. Meet outside?" Hikaru sent.

"Let's go," said Kiri.

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14: Friends.

When they finished, the three members of Mirage were pleasantly surprised to be paid 200 each, on the spot, except for Hikaru who was assured by 'Night Owls' owner that she would receive the same plus the usual she got for playing the two hour warm up.

Ryuske asked "Why are we the only ones being paid immediately?"

Hikaru told him about the arrangement Yukito had set up, so that she was never carrying much cash when she worked alone.

"Well thought," complimented Rin. "Should we walk you to the bus, we came on my bike."

"I have a ride home," Hikaru replied with embarrassment.

Rin gave her a considering look and asked, "Boyfriend?"

Hikaru nodded.

"OK, see you Friday then," he replied.

Ryuske stood staring at Hikaru until Rin nudged him. Then he laughed and said, "Yeah. And it's the week for cancellations, our Saturday job cancelled too, so let's do an all day practice session."

Rin and Hikaru agreed, then Hikaru left by the side alley door and headed for the front of the bar.

Just outside the alley she spotted Kiri and ran up to him, but then, embarrassed, slid to a stop.

Kiri stepped forward, picked her up in a hug and spun around with her. "You were great," he said with a smile.

"Thanks," she replied, feeling shy.

They kissed for a moment.

Then Hikaru whispered, "Kiri, that guy is just standing there watching us."

Kiri turned and laughed, "Sorry, it's my friend Kazuha, the teacher who helped me with your homework. He invited me to go drinking tonight, I told him I was already planning to come here, so he met me here. He's a little drunk."

Hikaru looked surprised. "A teacher is drunk on a school night?"

Kiri grimaced. "There's a reason," he replied.

Hikaru darted forward and grabbed the man's arm, "Don't sit there Kazuha-sensei! People pee in this alley." She pulled him away from the wall.

"Gods," said Kazuha, "don't call me sensei, I'm not your teacher and having Kiri's girlfriend be high-school aged is creepy enough." He staggered a little and Kiri took his other arm.

They led him to Kiri's car, he started to climb into the front seat but Kiri said firmly, "Hikaru's in front with me."

"OK," Kazuha agreed. "You don't look like one of Kiri's girlfriends," he told Hikaru dubiously.

"Oh?" she asked.

"Nothing," Kazuha made a cupping gesture at his chest.

Kiri hit him lightly and pushed him into the backseat.

Hikaru blushed, and climbed carefully into the front seat with her guitar and buckled herself in.

Kiri got in and after checking that everyone was secure, started driving.

Kazuha asked from the back, "Have you told Chi-chan? I've got to tell Chi-chan you're dating a high-school aged musician." He fumbled for his phone.

"Kazu," Kiri scolded, "Don't drunk call other people's pregnant wives."

"Who's Chi-chan?" asked Hikaru

"Kiri dated her in college, for several years, they were engaged," Kazuha said helpfully.

Kiri grimaced and nodded when Hikaru looked at him. "We're still friends," he said. "We do much better

as friends than we ever did as lovers. We used to fight all the time."

"I find that kind of reassuring," Hikaru said.

Kiri looked at her in surprise, then turned his gaze back to the road. "Why?"

"You've had at least one relationship longer than six months," she explained.

Kiri blushed.

Kazuha apologized for meeting Hikaru while drunk.

Hikaru asked why he was drunk on a school night.

Kazuha explained that his girlfriend had run off with another guy again.

Kiri said bitterly, "Stop taking her back."

Hikaru looked at them both and then suggested tentatively, "If you love her as she is, it shouldn't make you this miserable? You sound like this is something she's done more than once. But if you only love how you think she should be, maybe Kiri is right?"

Kazuha nodded miserably and said, "Yeah, I know."

When they arrived at Hikaru's, Kiri got out and walked her to the door as usual.

"Sorry," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

He gestured back at Kazuha.

Hikaru squeezed his hand and said, "It's all right."

Kiri kissed her softly at the door. "See you tomorrow afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and kissed him again.

"Goodnight Hikaru," he said, smiling.

"Goodnight Kiri," she replied, and went in.

Kazuha had moved to the front seat when Kiri got back to the car.

"You are right," Kazuha said as they pulled away.

"Of course," Kiri said loftily.

"You're also a smug bastard and your own dating history isn't that great," his friend grumbled.

"Sorry," replied Kiri.

"Will you really be OK dating a high-school girl? If you get arrested, don't call me," Kazuha fretted.

"Some friend you are," Kiri laughed.

"I won't take her back again. And I will take all her stuff to her mother's and change the locks. But I do love her, and it hurts." Kazuha said.

Kiri looked at his friend in surprise. "I think it will hurt less in the end to stop repeating this," he offered.

"Yeah," Kazuha agreed.

... R to R

Rin said, "You may have waited too long." He unbuckled his helmet and pulled it off.

Ryuske fumbled with the helmet he wore and asked, "Waited too long for what?"

"To confess to Hikaru," Rin replied.

Ryuske stopped what he was doing and stared at Rin. "Why would I?" he asked after a moment.

"Because you love her," Rin replied matter of factly.

Ryuske frowned, pulled off the helmet, and though he didn't deny it he said, "Not enough. And I'm too old for her anyway."

"You'll lose her," warned Rin.

Ryuske gazed at Rin seriously. "When I think 'who do I love most', Hikaru is the second name I think of, she needs more than half a love. She deserves more." Ryuske said firmly and handed the spare helmet to Rin.

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15: Introductions.

Wednesday school passed quickly. Hikaru, Risa and Shizuoka exited the gate together. Kiri stood waiting

nearby and so, to Hikaru's surprise, was Makoto. She looked at Risa inquiringly.

Makoto answered the unasked question, he grabbed Hikaru, ruffled her hair and said, "Since you don't have a dad, someone's got to watch out for you, I'm here to interview your boyfriend too!" He laughed.

Hikaru shook him off and walked over to Kiri. "Hi," she said awkwardly.

"Hi," he grinned at her. "With this many should we squeeze into my car or should I move it into a long term parking spot?"

Hikaru looked at her friends dubiously.

They voted for squeezing into the car and chose an inexpensive fast food place as their destination.

Kiri was dressed in the same sort of outfit she'd met him in, with the cut outs that emphasised his shoulders, and when he turned she saw there were stylized wings cut into the back. She laughed.

He turned back inquisitively. Hikaru shook her head. They all squeezed into Kiri's car, Makoto, Risa and Shizuoka in the back.

"This is a freaking nice car," Makoto said admiringly.

Hikaru looked back at him curiously.

"It's a luxury car, by a sports car manufacturer, you didn't notice?" he asked incredulously.

Hikaru shrugged, "It's black, it looks a lot like other salarymen's cars, it's got four doors so it never occurred to me that it was some sort of sports car?"

Kiri laughed and she looked at him.

He patted the steering wheel and said, "This car is my baby. It's what I bought after I started making enough money to get something nicer than the bit of tinfoil I drove during college. It's a four door because I never wanted to be one of those guys who has to give up his sports car because he gets married and has kids. Plus it's handy if I need to use it for work."

"Oh," Hikaru replied.

"Hikaru, you're not going to wear your uniform on your date are you?" Shizuoka asked.

"You sound like my mom," Hikaru said wryly. "I brought a pair of pants to change into."

"There's worse things than sounding like your mom, I could sound like you," was Shizuoka's rejoinder.

Everyone laughed.

At the restaurant Kiri offered to order for Hikaru while she changed. She agreed, asked for a soda and a parfait, and left them. When she got back they were all standing at a pair of tables.

Kiri smiled at her, and started to wrap around her, but stopped.

"Kiri," Hikaru said.

"Yes?" he replied.

"You can hug me in front of my friends if you want to, they don't count as public so much?" she offered, blushing.

Kiri wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder. "I wasn't sure," he said.

Risa looked at them for a moment and then sat down first. Makoto sat beside her. Shizuoka sat on the other side of Risa.

Kiri looked at Hikaru's friends. "You two are dating?" he asked, indicating Makoto and Risa.

They nodded, and Hikaru belatedly made introductions. She and Kiri sat next to each other opposite the three friends. Kiri held her hand.

Hikaru sipped her soda, and wondered if she was supposed to be talking.

Shizuoka asked Kiri, "So, are you seriously dating Hikaru, or are you just playing around?"

"Shizuoka!" protested Hikaru.

Kiri grinned and squeezed her hand, "It's OK, I kind of expected this kind of question. I am seriously dating her," he answered.

"You really don't look 27." Risa said.

"I'm sorry?" Kiri offered.

"What do you plan to do on today's date?" Makoto asked.

"Whatever Hikaru wants?" said Kiri.

All three of Hikaru's friends rolled their eyes at him.

"What's wrong with that?" Kiri protested. "I have the whole afternoon free, there's hundreds of things we could do."

Wryly Risa asked Hikaru, "And what do you want to do?"

"Um, I should probably do my homework first, or some of it, and we should probably eat dinner before I go home, but we don't have to?" she replied.

Kiri laughed and she looked at him. "I see," he said, lifting their joined hands and dropping a kiss on her fingers.

Hikaru eyed him anxiously, "is that OK?" She asked.

"It's fine," he said and grinned.

He'd gotten a chocolate cookie and a coffee for himself, and took a large bite of the cookie. Then asked a question of his own, "How long are we all staying together?"

Hikaru's friends assured him, "We'll allow you to take Hikaru away soon." They asked Kiri a bit about his job, his friends, and if he had any hobbies.

Kiri told them a little about his job, though he avoided specifics.

Hikaru mentioned, "I met one of Kiri's friends. He seemed nice enough."

Kiri said, "My only real hobby is cooking."

The three girls then remembered to compliment the lunch box he'd given Hikaru. Kiri laughed when he heard about Hikaru opening the box from Risa and Shizuoka. After about an hour the group broke up.

As they settled into his car again, Kiri asked Hikaru, "So, where would you like to work on homework? Should I take you home and cook you dinner while you work on it?"

"Sure," she replied.

They drove a little ways before Kiri said, "Hikaru, let's go somewhere else."

Hikaru looked at him in surprise.

"If you're this tense just being alone together in the car, I don't think you're ready to come home with me," he said.

Hikaru stared and said, "Kiri, I'm not afraid to be alone with you."

Kiri frowned and argued, "Hikaru, it's fine if you're not comfortable yet, but don't lie to me."

"Kiri, stop the car," Hikaru said quietly.

He pulled over and turned to her unhappily. "Hikaru," he began.

She interrupted him by unbuckling her seatbelt and leaning over to kiss him. "Kiri, I'm not afraid of being alone with you. And I would kind of like to see where you live."

Kiri looked at her uncertainly. "Then why are you so tense?" he asked worriedly.

"It's the car," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm afraid of being in the car. I was in an accident when I was six and hospitalized for a long time. I'm OK on busses and stuff, even though they are technically less safe, but cars scare me, and I can't stand riding in the back at all." She stopped.

He stared at her, reviewing all the times they'd driven together and how tense she'd been. "Why didn't you say anything before this?" he demanded. "I thought you were afraid to be alone with me the first time, because I'd just told you I'd usually take my date to bed. Then on Monday I thought you were just upset."

She shrugged, "Every time I've ridden with you it's meant I could see you longer, or that I could see you at all on Tuesday."

He stared at her. "Your step father shoved you into the back of that police car," he said flatly after a minute.

"I think I called him a fucking bastard when I got out, I'm not completely certain, I screamed something like that, that's when he hit me," she replied.

Kiri's expression was thunderous. "Does he know?" he asked.

"He's been told a little about the accident, and that I don't like cars, but I don't think he understands," she replied.

Kiri took a deep breath, rubbed his face, and then changed the topic. "What do you want to do now? Do you want to take the bus home tonight?" Kiri asked.

"No, I'm OK. I know I seem tense, but you seem like a careful driver, and I don't mind riding with you when I can stay with you longer that way," Hikaru told him.

"OK," he said. He leaned over and kissed her gently, "Home then?"

She nodded and fastened her belt back up.

16: So deep your kisses run.

"I'm not sure what I imagined, but I don't think this is it," Hikaru said while looking at the small neat duplex that stood on the corner at the end of a block of identical duplexes.

Kiri laughed.

"Maybe a fancy apartment with a cityscape view?" she suggested.

Kiri laughed again and hugged her, "I used to have something like that, but buying is cheaper than renting if you can afford to, and I like this place."

He took her hand and led her up the small adjoined porch that sheltered the entrances. He unlocked the door and opened it, then stepped back and waited for her to enter.

She stepped in hesitantly. "Wow," she said, "it's beautiful." It was a mix of modern and traditional. The entry was sunken. Half of the big open front room was kitchen, a large refrigerator dominated that side next to a wide counter. An island counter containing sink and stove separated the halves.

The other half was set up cozily around the short traditional style table that was the center of Hikaru's own home. Polished wooden cabinets lined the wall under the row of windows. A larger, thinner, and delicately carved cabinet stood across the table

opposite the couch. The colors of the fabrics used on the couch and hangings were rich.

Kiri stepped in behind her. He closed the door and grinned at her. He saw her settled at the table with her homework gave her a kiss and stepped into the kitchen to start cooking. After a bit, Hikaru asked where the bathroom was, he showed her.

When she came out she said, "That's quite a tub."

"Want to take a bath?" he offered teasingly. "It's my one luxury here, I had it installed when I moved in."

"You really like baths?" she asked.

"And hot springs." he answered. He was busy making some sort of dough.

She returned to doing homework. She felt surprisingly comfortable sitting at Kiri's table while he cooked. But she hadn't finished by the time he was done cooking.

He sat next to her to eat. And laughingly offered her the first bite off his own chopsticks. She accepted it, but couldn't help being embarrassed. He let her eat on her own after the first bite, but scooted just close enough that their thighs touched.

"You like touching," she commented wryly.

"What?" he asked.

"You like to be touching, when we're together you're always in contact. Holding hands or sitting

close," she moved her leg against his, "just touching somehow."

He looked at her soberly and asked, "Sorry? Does it bother you?"

She shook her head and replied, "No, I'm just not used to it so I guess I notice it a lot?"

"OK," he replied.

They ate a bit more.

"Hikaru?" he asked.

"Yeah?" she enquired.

"How much homework do you have left, and what do you want to do after?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru sighed. "Too much, but I could finish the rest after I go home? And I don't know, is there something you'd like to do?"

Kiri looked at her. He stuck out his tongue and then laughed. "There's a lot of things I'd like to do? Are you stuck on anything I could help with?"

Hikaru stared at him for a moment, then answered the last question, "The worst of what's left is math, and I shouldn't have you do it because I need to know how to do it."

Kiri hugged her and said, "Then I'll bring some work out and sit with you."

He collected their dishes, and Hikaru complimented the food.

He grinned at her. "You shared the lunch I made," he commented after a moment.

"Yes, not that I was given a choice, but did you mind?" Hikaru asked.

"No, I was just surprised," he said. He stepped into the room that stood open to the living room and Hikaru stood up and peeked in. He looked back at her and motioned her in. "I use this room as an office, it's kind of a mess."

Hikaru looked around, it had mismatched filing cabinets and things were piled up, including a messy, overflowing old fashioned CD rack. "It's reassuring," she told him.

He laughed and asked, "In what way?"

"The rest of your house is so neat and pretty," she said. "I'm kind of messy I think, comparatively."

He gave her a wry look, "You don't think I just cleaned up because I knew you might come over?"

"Did you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I didn't think so," she said. She looked out the window and commented, "Your garden is beautiful."

"I think so too, but I can't take any credit," he said laughingly.

She raised her brows at him.

"When I moved in my elderly neighbors approached and told me that the last people had no interest in yard work, so they'd taken over. They offered to let me use the whole as my own yard if I'd let them continue to use it as their own garden. I'm totally getting the best of the deal," he explained with a laugh.

He took the selection of papers and the computer he'd collected from his desk out and set them on the table beside her homework. Then turned and asked with a wide grin, "Want to see my bedroom?"

"Sure," she replied.

He surprised her by scooping her into his arms and carrying her into the small hall in front of the bathroom, it was a little awkward.

"Aren't I heavy?" she asked.

"Heavier than I expected," he answered.

"I could just walk," she suggested when he struggled with trying to toe the door open without banging her against it.

"But having committed myself, I feel obliged to continue the gesture," he said a little breathlessly.

"OK," she said, but reached out and started the door open with her fingers.

He laughed and slid it the rest of the way with his foot, and carried her inside and up onto the bed

where he laid her down. He kissed her and whispered, "Now I have you where I want you?" And then kissed her again.

She looked at him and said, "Your room is kind of dark." It was dim, and the bedding was black. The wall hangings had black designs too, though they also had color worked into them.

"Oh," he replied, and got up on his knees and started to pull apart the blackout curtains that appeared to hide a row of windows like that in the office.

She put out a hand and said, "It's OK, you don't have to open the windows, I was just saying."

He dropped back beside her and kissed her again. "You're being surprisingly calm," he commented.

She shrugged and said, "Honestly, I feel like you're just teasing me, and I'm not sure how you want me to react."

He laughed and reached out to caress her cheek. "I guess I was teasing you a bit, since I expected more of a reaction." He kissed her again.

"Your room is pretty but smaller than I expected somehow, it feels a little crowded," she told him.

"It seemed bigger before I put in the closet system," he waved toward the connecting wall which was occupied by a floor to ceiling storage system. "If this house lacks anything it's closets," he explained.

"But this room is the same size as the office one, just wide instead of long."

"Ah," said Hikaru.

They kissed some more. Hikaru let him lay her back against the pillows as they kissed. His hands wandered her waist and hips, and his kisses began to wander as well. He kissed along her jaw and back to her ear.

He slid his hands under her shirt and caressed her. Then he claimed her mouth again and slid his hands behind her and undid her bra. She shivered as he ran his fingers over her breasts and he kissed her throat.

He drew one hand out and started undoing the top button on her shirt and she panicked and said, "No!"

He froze and took his hands away and sat up. "Sorry, I was teasing at first but I got serious," he said.

"I'm sorry," Hikaru said. "I didn't mean, I mean I..."

He interrupted her, "Hikaru, it's fine, we'll stop here, come out."

He got up and walked back into the living room. After a moment she followed him.

17: What you want.

He'd picked up his computer and papers and he sat on the couch.

She sat at the table and tried to resume working on her math. But after a few minutes she sighed and said, "I know I'm the one that said no, but I feel kind of rejected right now."

Kiri set down his things and looked at her and said, "Hikaru, I want to do a lot more than what I was doing, but I don't want to push you into it. I don't know what to do right now. Tell me what you want to do."

She looked back at him and said, "I want to keep kissing you. I liked what you were doing."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, "Then why did you say no?"

"You were going to take my shirt off," she said with embarrassment.

He looked at her wryly and asked, "So you just want to kiss and touch a little?"

She nodded.

He held his arms out to her and said, "OK, come here. We'll just make-out for awhile."

She crawled up into his arms and he kissed her again. Tentatively she laid her hand against the back of his head and ran her fingers through his hair. He kissed her harder. When he slid his hands down her

back he said between kisses, "You didn't fasten your bra."

"I just followed you out, and then it seemed like it'd be awkward to mess with it, and it's not doing a lot anyway," she explained.

He slid his hands under her shirt and fastened it without trouble.

"You're really good at that," she commented wryly.

He kissed her again and then asked, "Sorry, was I supposed to take my time fumbling around and touching you more?"

Hikaru laughed and he bit her ear. She shivered and he embraced her tightly and kissed her more. A little moan escaped her when he ran his hands down her back again and she jumped and clapped a hand over her mouth.

He laughed and gently removed her hand. "Hikaru, that's a good noise, I want to be able to make you make that kind of noise." He kissed her nose.

She relaxed against him, and he cupped her cheek and kissed her again. Then he ran a line of kisses down her neck but didn't stop at her collar. He continued down over her shirt and she felt the heat of his mouth through her shirt and bra. He put his mouth over her nipple and sucked hard through the fabric. She gasped and clutched at his head and he ran his hand down her back and along her hip and she arched into him.

And his phone went off. And he slid to the floor and buried his face in her lap and groaned.

"Is it your work again?" she asked a little breathlessly, and patted his shoulder.

"No," he mumbled into her lap, "it's the alarm I set so I could get you home in time."

Hikaru laughed. He looked up into her face with a pained expression. She bit her lip.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"It's OK," he said, and stood. "Let's go, I'll take you home."

She sighed and nodded.

--

In the car on the way back Kiri said, "For our next date, let's dress up and go out."

"So that we have to behave better in public?" Hikaru asked wryly.

Kiri laughed and said, "Maybe a little, but it's also something I want to do with you."

"OK," Hikaru agreed.

"When?" he asked. "I'll be gone tomorrow and Friday, are you busy all day Saturday again?"

Hikaru shook her head, and said, "No, this weekend we play for six hours Friday night, and we have an extra long rehearsal on Saturday because

we're going to try to enter a competition soon. But I have both Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon free."

"Then Saturday night?" he asked.

She nodded.

When they arrived he walked her up to the door, and kissed her as usual but then he said quietly, "Hikaru, I know it's too fast but I want to say it." He reached up and caressed her cheek, "I love you," he said and kissed her gently.

She wrapped her arms around him and returned his kiss. He pressed her into the door at her back. They kissed for awhile. Then the door swung open and they tumbled down and through it.

Izumi stood with his hand on the knob and angrily snapped, "You're late, and what the hell do you think you're doing."

From the floor Hikaru said "I'm not late," at the same time Kiri asked, "Hikaru are you OK?" Then he lifted himself off of her.

"I'm not hurt, I think," Hikaru reassured Kiri.

Miri pushed forward past her husband and said, "Hi Takeshi-kun!"

Kiri gaped at her from his awkward position.

"My mother, Mizuki Miri" said Hikaru, getting to her knees.

Miri was even smaller than the video chat had shown. She was cute and curvy and had light brown curly hair. She looked barely old enough to be Hikaru's older sister. And was very obviously pregnant. She grinned winsomely and added, "And this is my husband Izumi, I think you've met? May I call you Kiri-kun?"

Kiri said, "You may. Um, it's too weird, how would you prefer I address you?" He stood.

"Just Miri is fine," said Miri.

"Miri-chan?" he replied.

Hikaru's mother nodded and asked, "Would you have dinner with us on Sunday?" Izumi glowered but didn't protest his wife's invitation.

"Sure," Kiri replied and pulled Hikaru to her feet.

"Are you sure you're OK?" he asked again.

She nodded.

"You're 5 minutes late," Izumi said.

"I'm not," Hikaru replied a little bitterly, "I've been here, if the front steps weren't part of my home I'd never have to scrub them."

Izumi's expression tightened, but Miri interrupted him. "Nevermind that," she said, rolling her eyes in the same fashion Hikaru would.

Kiri gazed at Izumi and said a little grimly, "I'll head home now. Goodnight Hikaru."

"Goodnight, I'm sorry," Hikaru replied.

He stopped and hugged her. "It's OK," he said, then turned and walked back to his car.

Hikaru sighed and stepped inside and closed the door.

18: Shop, Play, Practice.

Thursday when Hikaru got home she told her mother, "I need to go shopping, for a dress."

Miri stared disbelievingly at first, hardly daring to believe her ears, and then practically bounced with glee. "Let's go," she agreed happily.

After several stops her enthusiasm for the expedition had waned. Hikaru refused all the fluffy, lacy, and ruffled dresses her mother had suggested. "What are we looking for?" Miri asked with surprising patience.

"I'm not sure," her daughter replied unhelpfully.

Finally in one store that sold only black and white clothes, Hikaru spotted a pair of skirt pants similar to her Sunday uniform, but in black and with a filmy over layer that drifted around over the slick inner lining when she tried them on.

Miri regarded them dubiously. "What will you wear with those?" she asked.

Hikaru pondered for a few moments. "What about my dark grey knit with the waves on it?"

Miri made a 'no way' gesture with her arms. "That will look weird! You need something delicate to match well." She suggested hopefully, "Something sheer, or lacy perhaps?"

Hikaru pursed her lips in thought, then asked if the store sold any black lace shirts. Miri watched with repressed excitement, lest Hikaru change her mind. They had some tops with black lace on them, but Hikaru didn't like any of the few offerings. Miri sighed when she put the last one back.

Hikaru looked at her mother's disappointed face and laughed. She purchased the skirt pants anyway.

When they left that store, Hikaru asked her mother, "Where else should we look for a lace top? Preferably not too expensive."

Miri couldn't think of anywhere they hadn't already been, and suggested, "We could go back to that second place maybe? Or the one that had that cute blue dress with the silver flowers? We were looking at dresses, not tops."

Hikaru paused and messaged Shizuoka. "Where to buy long sleeve black lace shirt?"

"Lingerie store," was the short reply.

"Want outer wear not under wear," Hikaru sent back.

"Wear it how you want, it's where I'd look for black lace anything!" was the longer reply.

They went to a lingerie store, which indeed had many lacy delicate things. Hikaru picked out a stretchy long sleeved black lace top.

"How are you planning to wear that?" her mother inquired. "Your bra will show."

"Um," Hikaru replied blankly. "What about over my $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve mock turtle? It's thin."

"All black?" Miri asked with dismay.

Hikaru spotted a red silky sleeveless pajama top and suggested, "I could try it with red?"

She tried everything on together, the filmy pant skirt with red top under the long black lace. "I think the sleeves show through too much," she said, frowning.

"It looks really good," Miri replied with surprise. "It barely shows, no one will notice the marks with the red drawing their attention," she assured her daughter.

"Does it look like I'm wearing underwear?" Hikaru worried.

"No," Miri replied laughingly.

The shop person who had opened the dressing room for them pointed out, "The line between underwear and formal wear is rather fuzzy."

Hikaru looked shocked, and Miri giggled.

Hikaru bought both tops, and frowned at the receipt. Between both sets of purchases she'd already spent what she allotted herself for two months worth of spending money. It wasn't that anything had been particularly expensive, but she didn't buy clothes often and it was adding up.

Miri said, "You'll need shoes."

"I shouldn't spend more than this," Hikaru replied. "I can wear my black sandals."

"I could buy the shoes," Miri offered.

Hikaru looked at her mother consideringly. She was a little tempted because her black sandals were a little old and worn, but Miri looked tired already. She tired easily with her pregnancy, and Hikaru didn't want to exhaust her. "No, I'm tired of shopping," Hikaru said.

Miri laughed and said agreeably, "Alright, let's go home and wash everything then."

--

That evening Hikaru and Kiri talked on the phone for a couple hours about nothing much, and everything important.

--

Friday Mirage played at 'The Candella', an old fashioned hotel, for a private event that was being held there. They dressed in their black and silver

stage clothes, which meant black pants and the matching silver edged silk shirts they'd purchased to give Mirage a group image.

Each member wore the button down shirts differently. Rin wore his open and with the sleeves rolled up over a black tank, Ryuske and Hikaru wore them buttoned but Ryuske tucked his in with sleeves turned back, and Hikaru wore hers loose. Hatsuharu wore his in a neat business formal style, including tie.

It was a profitable gig. They played three two-hour sets, and were paid at half again their usual rate. When Rin raised his brows in inquiry at Ryuske, Ryuske told them quietly, "I told them our new rate."

"New rate?" Hikaru asked.

Ryuske looked at her and shrugged. Then he looked away and said, "You said you'd give me six months to prove we can make enough money." He looked back. "I told you we can. I've also started submitting demos."

Rin asked skeptically, "Of what? We haven't done any recordings since Hatsuharu's song."

Ryuske replied, "Yes, I used that, 'Mirage', and 'Your Kiss'."

Hatsuharu asked, "Those are on the website, is there any point in submitting them?" Hikaru nodded in agreement.

Rin snorted and said dryly, "How good do you think we are? You think a producer is going to join our fan club so they can listen to our music?"

Hikaru blushed and said, "I forgot it was members only."

Ryuske laughed and told them, "Anyway, I raised our performance rate, and we've only gotten more invitations." He looked at Rin and suggested, "Maybe we are better than I think?"

Rin scoffed at the idea.

Hatsuharu said practically, "It's a proven business tactic. We are better known than when we started, raising our rate probably makes people think we're getting busier. If we're getting busier, they want to make sure they have us scheduled. The question is, can we maintain it?"

No one had an answer for that, but it felt like a nice profit. The payment would be divided by five, for they split their payments up as one share each performing member, and one share for the band.

The band account covered equipment besides instruments, strings and such, their website, and any other group incurred expenses. If they came up short in the band account they'd all pitch in, but that had only happened a few times in the beginning. Their fanclub membership fees also went straight to the band account.

Saturday's rehearsal was grueling even though they broke it down and took breaks. At one point, mid afternoon, Hikaru banged her head into Ryuske's ceiling after a complex maneuver they were trying, where Rin boosted her up over his shoulder. After a rest break to make sure she was OK, they moved the rehearsal to a nearby park. Interested passers by occasionally stopped to watch the practice.

When they finally quit Hikaru fell over in the grass and just laid there for a bit. Ryuske said ruefully, "Rin and Hikaru at least need to also do a Wednesday practice session. And we all need to walk at least three miles a day extra at least three other days a week for the duration."

Hatsuharu said, "I'll come to the Wednesday practice too if we can do it after 6pm."

Ryuske shook his head and said "5 to 7:30 I think, to keep Hikaru's schedule."

"I'll come for the last hour and a half then," Hatsuharu said.

After awhile they all summoned up enough energy to crawl to their respective homes.

19: Hot date.

Hikaru showered and dressed in her new outfit. Miri insisted on adding a wide filmy black scarf with red sakura flowers printed on it. This she draped over

Hikaru's elbows like a shawl. Hikaru had to agree that the effect was nice.

"But where did you get it?" Hikaru asked.

"Your father gave it to me, but I don't wear black very often," her mother replied.

Hikaru added silently, 'Or anything that makes you remember too much.'

"Keep it," her mother suggested.

Hikaru nodded.

She carried the pretty black-back, tapestry-fronted fan shaped clutch that she'd had for several years but had only used at a couple of summer festivals.

She felt a little embarrassed climbing onto the bus. She sat gingerly on the seat and rode to the downtown station. Kiri was waiting at the platform.

He was dressed in all black, a dressy suit with a black silk shirt, and no tie. Hikaru couldn't decide exactly how it was different from his business suits, but it was. He said "Wow," and took her hands as she stepped up onto the platform. He kissed her lightly.

She withdrew her hands and twirled for him, and grinned. He laughed and grabbed her and hugged her close.

"I should take you dancing," he said softly against her ear.

Hikaru hesitated and asked, "Where could we go dancing? We can't go to a bar while I'm still under age. I've never really danced," she added.

Kiri frowned and thought a bit. "Umm," he said.

"Does it matter what kind of music?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri shook his head and looked at her inquisitively.

"We could go to my uncle Kaoru's restaurant, it has a tiny dance floor that doesn't get used much, but Friday's and Saturday's there's usually live music. It's all instrumental though," Hikaru suggested.

"That works," he replied. "And I can teach you to dance," he added and grinned at her. She blushed and nodded.

Hikaru led him. They walked hand in hand downtown and up the stairs near where they'd bought the cell phone. When they arrived, Kiri said with surprise, "This is your uncle's place? I wouldn't have imagined the owner of this place would have to live so conservatively to pay half your brother's tuition. It seems really successful."

"It is being really successful. He's still paying it off though, one year left on a five year loan," Hikaru replied.

Kiri gave a soft whistle and nodded, then led Hikaru inside.

When they entered the restaurant the maître d' smiled at them but said, "I'm sorry Takeshi-san, but

we are full tonight, and I don't have a reservation for you."

Hikaru blinked in surprise, but stepped up beside Kiri and said, "We don't really need a table, we came to try dancing a little."

The maître d' dropped his pen and said with alarm, "I'll get the owner!" He made a hasty exit toward the kitchen.

"So," Hikaru said to Kiri, "you come here too?"

Kiri nodded and said, "I like it, I probably come here at least a couple times a month."

"Wow," Hikaru replied. "But you haven't been on Sundays?"

Kiri shook his head and said, "I don't think so, certainly not in the morning."

Hikaru's uncle Kaoru bustled toward them trailing the worried looking maître d'. He frowned as he approached, wiping his hands on a corner of the white apron he wore.

When he got close enough he said, "Kai said my niece is dressed to the nines and arrived here with an unsuitably older man."

"Kao-ji-chan!" Hikaru protested, and stepped in front of Kiri defensively.

Kiri looked at Hikaru's uncle uncertainly. Kaoru was a little taller than Hikaru, but had the same hair and eyes as Miri.

Kaoru looked Hikaru over and said, "Wow. Why don't I know about this date, or even that you're dating? How long have you been dating?"

"About a week and a half. You did know I'm dating, you didn't know we were coming here because we just decided it," Hikaru said.

Kaoru raised an eyebrow at her. "No I didn't," he denied.

Hikaru blushed and said, "Last Sunday you asked if I were in a hurry because I had a hot date, and I said yes."

Kiri laughed and Kaoru gaped at his niece. Then Kaoru looked at Kiri and said knowingly, "You aren't his usual type though, and isn't he a little old for you?"

Hikaru answered firmly, "He's not too old for me." She put her hands at her hips and added, "And I know I'm not. His dates are usually older, better dressed, shorter and more voluptuously beautiful."

"Hikaru!" Kiri protested in shock, "What the hell? Where did that come from? And you have no idea how good you look tonight!"

Kaoru looked at his niece.

Hikaru blushed and said, "Well, I'm guessing from things that were said."

"What things? Who said?" Kiri demanded.

"Kazuha-san indicated that they're more," Hikaru gestured, "and you said that you hadn't dated a high-school girl since you were in high school."

"OK," he acknowledged, "but when did I ever claim to date shorter women?" he asked.

"You said I was unusually tall when we met, so usually is shorter?" Hikaru replied.

Kiri sighed and nodded, but reached out and laid his hand against her cheek. "But none more beautiful or better dressed," he said firmly.

"More expensively dressed?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers and laughed. "Knowing you, that is probably true, but only means you are more stylish."

Kaoru who had watched this exchange in silence turned to his maître d', and said, "We can't be that full, show me."

The man did so, and Kaoru said, "Give this large party the banquet room when they arrive, and shuffle tables as needed." To his niece he said, "You ARE staying to dinner, and I will eat with you on my break, and we WILL talk. But as amusing as watching this is, I must get back to my kitchen."

Hikaru swallowed and nodded.

Kaoru left them.

They were told they'd need to wait a bit for a table. Hikaru asked if they could try dancing a bit while they waited. The maître d' collected Hikaru's things and Kiri's jacket and led them to the small floor before the quartet that was playing tonight.

Kiri led her into the small floor and grinned at her. He took her by the waist and said, "The thing to remember about nearly all dancing is that it's a form of flirtation. Keep eye contact as much as possible, and remember it's a chase."

Hikaru looked at him in puzzlement.

"When I step back, you chase," he explained and pulled her after him. "When I chase," he stepped forward against her and she stepped back, "you run," he said with a grin.

Hikaru laughed and nodded.

"Don't worry too much about where your feet are, just try to mirror the movement, to start with," he smiled at her.

"OK," she replied.

"We'll start out touching a little, to make it easier," he reassured her. He pulled her hand up onto his shoulder, took her other hand, and placed his other hand at her waist. He stood so that they were slightly

offset and their calves touched where they overlapped.

"OK," he said, and stepped back.

She followed belatedly and he smiled and stepped forward, pressing her back. Then he stepped back again, but she managed to step with him.

Like when they'd kissed, he led her slowly and soon they were moving in time to the music. When she'd kept up for a little bit he'd add a little more complexity, and wait until she was keeping up easily again.

20: The right time.

"Kiri," Hikaru questioned, "it seems unusual for a guy to be good at this kind of dancing these days?"

He grinned at her and said, "All dancing is similar. My grandmother taught me though, she demanded that I learn. She'd always say that a man should know how to dance with the woman he loves." He looked at Hikaru and said lightly, "She was right."

"She sounds cool," Hikaru commented.

"She is, would you like to meet her?" Kiri asked.

"She's still alive?" Hikaru asked. She was surprised because Kiri had told her during their phone conversation how much older his parents were, especially his father. Kiri's father had been 16 years older than his mother, and quite scandalously, her

high-school teacher. Although they hadn't married until she was 20, he'd explained.

"She's my mother's mother," he said. "She and grandpa are both 88 this year. But so far both are still in good health. I try to visit once or twice a year at least. I lived with them when I went to college."

"I'd like to meet her," Hikaru said.

Kiri laughed and quietly asked teasingly, "You don't want me to take your shirt off, but you're fine with a multi-day trip up north?"

Hikaru nodded.

"Really?" he asked a little incredulously. He flushed a little and cautioned, "I'm not sure I'd be able to resist doing more."

"Kiri, you won't hurt me," Hikaru replied.

"Why are you so sure, I'm not sure?" he asked.

Hikaru stopped dancing and he stopped with her. "You always wait for me," she explained.

He looked at her, confused.

"Ever since the first kiss," she said blushing, "you always wait for me to be ready. And if you think I'm scared or don't like something you always stop, or ask. And," she added, "even if you do do more than I'm really ready for, I'm pretty sure it will feel pretty good." She dropped her eyes.

Kiri drew her close and kissed her gently. "I love you Hikaru," he said quietly. They stood cheek to cheek for a moment and then he asked lightly, "Shall we continue dancing?"

Hikaru nodded.

An elderly couple joined them on the little dance floor.

"Kiri look," Hikaru exclaimed when the pair executed a twirl.

Kiri laughed and asked, "Do you want to try?"

Hikaru nodded.

"OK, when I step back, stand on one toe," he said. She did and he spun her under his arm in time to the music then caught her up again and they continued. Hikaru laughed happily.

"Want to try a dip?" he asked after a little bit.

"Sure," Hikaru replied with a smile.

Kiri tried dropping her, but she stiffened up too much.

He laughed and said, "Hikaru, you already know I can hold you up, do you think I'll let you fall? You have to fall in my arms." He grinned at her.

"OK," she said and nodded.

He tried again and she fell back into his arms, he kissed her before lifting her back into the dance. "Good," he said, grinning.

The elderly couple on the floor with them broke out into a complicated pattern of dance. And Hikaru laughed and said, "There's no way I could manage that."

"Not yet," agreed Kiri.

"Kiri?" Hikaru asked hesitantly after they'd danced a bit more.

"Yes?" he enquired.

Hikaru said, "I'm not saying it's fate or anything, that we met, but I'm glad, that there were always other chances for us to have met, by you coming here. It just seemed so random, meeting you on the street one day?"

Kiri laughed and said, "How can you claim that's not fate? What if I'd met you too early, I started coming here shortly after this place opened. What if you'd been barely 14? If I'd dated you then I'd have totally felt like a pedophile, and worse, what if I'd just thought you a cute child and ignored you?"

Hikaru looked at him. He leaned in and kissed her. "Fate is being able to meet at the right time, instead I met you when I wasn't dating anyone, and when you wanted me," he said. "It was fate."

Hikaru leaned into him, and he pulled her arm over his shoulder and wrapped his arms around her waist as they danced cheek to cheek for awhile.

When the music changed again a waiter dressed in charcoal grey with a bolero that matched Hikaru's Sunday uniform came to collect them, saying, "Your booth and your food are ready."

They left the little dance floor and followed him around to the booths in front of the kitchen. Hikaru surveyed the food ruefully. "I think Kao-ji-chan is mad."

"Is that what your food says? I think mine says 'I know who you are and your habits'," Kiri said laughingly.

"Why?" asked Hikaru.

"It's something I order fairly often," he replied. "What's yours?"

"Everything I don't like to eat," Hikaru answered. "Nothing that I won't eat," she added, "just things I don't enjoy."

Kiri frowned and said, "We should trade then."

"Why? If you order it a lot, then it's something you like?" Hikaru replied.

Kiri nodded and said, "But I don't dislike anything you have."

Hikaru frowned and offered, "Shall we share half of everything?"

Kiri nodded agreeably.

They shifted the food around and started eating.

Kaoru joined them, carrying a plate of food for himself a little while later. He slid into the other side of the booth and asked, "What are your intentions toward my niece?"

"I want to marry her of course," Kiri said seriously.

"Kiri!" Hikaru stared open mouthed and panicked. She kicked him in the shin. He winced and she apologized, "I'm sorry!" She reached out and put her hand on his arm. "But how can you say that, you, Kiri you idiot!" she said with alarm.

"I'm sorry, that was supposed to come out jokingly," he told her apologetically, turning toward her. "That sounds even worse, I'm sorry Hikaru, I mean it though," he added quickly.

Hikaru protested, "You can't say that to my uncle! You've never even asked me!"

Kiri opened his mouth and Hikaru clapped her hands over his mouth. "And you can't ask me until we've been dating for at least 6 months, given your dating history!" She said firmly.

He nodded and she removed her hands.

"OK Hikaru. There's nothing I can say to that. Six months," he agreed.

Hikaru stared at him and her uncle coughed and said, "Hikaru, go powder your nose or something for a few minutes."

Hikaru stared at her uncle, and Kiri slid out of the booth to let her out. Hikaru looked up at him, he held his hand out to her. "It's OK Hikaru, let us talk for a few minutes. I didn't mean to distress you, it just slipped out," he added.

Hikaru took his hand and climbed out of the booth. "OK," she said, and walked off to visit the restroom.

Kiri watched her go with a rueful expression, and then slid into the spot she'd left.

Kaoru looked at him consideringly. "You aren't much like I thought you were," he said after a moment.

Kiri blushed and asked, "Oh?"

"Isn't it a little fast? Did you really mean it?" Kaoru asked him.

Kiri nodded, "Yes, to both questions."

Kaoru lifted an eyebrow and asked, "Why?"

Kiri looked at him and said, "She's... she says everything I... I really... she's your niece, do I really have to tell you how amazing she is?"

Kaoru asked dryly, "And if it were your niece?"

Kiri winced and said, "Honestly, I can't believe that Hikaru is barely older than my niece, I can't imagine my niece dating a grown man."

Kaoru looked at him in surprise.

"My niece is a spoiled, childish brat. Hikaru is a talented, hardworking, freaking gorgeous young woman," Kiri said resolutely. Wryly he added, "And I doubt you'll believe me after I said I already want to marry her and I'm already head over heels, but I'm trying very hard not to push her into things."

"I believe you, which surprises me too," Kaoru replied with a short laugh. "Hikaru knows something of your dating history?" he asked.

Kiri nodded slowly and said, "I told her a little when we started dating, but from what she said earlier, she's probably picked up more." He blushed again and looked away. And saw Hikaru approaching.

Hikaru reached them and her uncle said, "That was fast."

Hikaru frowned at him and said, "I did everything it's possible to do during one visit to the restroom. I even checked my makeup."

21: A thousand little fingertip touches.

"You're wearing makeup?" Kaoru asked his niece in surprise.

"Just a little," Hikaru replied.

"And perfume," Kiri added. Hikaru looked at him uncertainly and he questioned, "Unless it's a soap fragrance?"

She shook her head and said, "No." She blushed, and continued, "It's perfume but I thought I barely used any."

Kiri laughed and said, "It's not much, I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't had my nose right against your ear. It's nice."

Hikaru slid back into the booth beside him and he slid his arm around her waist and hugged her for a moment. She looked at her uncle a little defiantly.

"Isn't he a little old for you?" he asked again.

"No," she said.

"How old?" Kaoru asked.

"27," Kiri answered ruefully.

"He's almost my age," Kaoru, who was 29, said while frowning at Hikaru.

"You're not that old, I can remember your middle school graduation," Hikaru protested.

"You mean you can remember stories about it," Kaoru replied.

"That too, with the button and everything, but I have my own memories too! After it, you carried me

on your shoulders, and I dropped my blue shaved ice on your head," she told him.

Kaoru looked at her in surprise. "But you were only three!"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter, " Hikaru said. "I know 10 years sounds like a lot now, when it's 17 and 27, but when it's 18 and 28 people will only raise an eyebrow, and when it's past that, no one will even care anymore."

Kaoru said wryly, "I wasn't worrying about what people think. Just, well, because of your age you probably want different things from dating?"

Hikaru stared at her uncle dubiously. "If you mean he acts like sex isn't all he's hoping for, unlike 90% of the guys at all those group dates Shizuoka and Risa have dragged me to, then yeah?"

Kaoru asked coolly, "And you don't think he wants sex?"

Hikaru blushed and replied without looking at Kiri, "I know he does, but he's waiting for me, and trying not to push me into it."

Kaoru nodded thoughtfully at this agreement with what her boyfriend had said earlier.

Kiri rubbed her waist reassuringly with the fingers of the hand he had settled above her hip. She looked at him. "You've dated a little before already?" he asked.

Hikaru nodded.

Kiri asked hesitantly, "And no one ever kissed you?"

Hikaru said, "I'd been kissed before," and hesitated before adding, "I didn't like it very much then."

Kiri hugged her and said, "I'm glad."

"Why?" Hikaru asked a little anxiously.

Kiri kissed her nose and told her, "Because even if it's only a little, I'm glad that you have had some previous experience to judge from. Sorry, it's selfish of me."

Hikaru stared at him with puzzlement. "OK?" she replied dubiously.

Kiri laughed. "Nevermind," he said.

Kaoru said, "I have to get back to the kitchen, stand up and I'll take a picture of the two of you."

They all scooted out of the booth. Kiri wrapped around Hikaru for the photo, so they were posed like an affectionate prom photo. He asked Hikaru's uncle, "Give me a copy?"

Kaoru said dryly, "Sure, just give me your contact number."

Kiri grinned and rattled it off for him.

Kaoru raised an eyebrow and entered it into his phone.

"Thank-you," Kiri said, smiling.

"You can order dessert if you like, I'll cover it," Kaoru told them.

"I have a reservation elsewhere," Kiri interrupted before Hikaru could respond. "Unless you'd rather stay here," he offered to her.

She shook her head.

They said goodbye and Kaoru returned to work and Kiri and Hikaru reclaimed their things and left the restaurant.

"Did you also have a dinner reservation somewhere?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri laughed and said lightly, "I didn't know what you'd like, but I wanted to make our first formal date memorable, so I made reservations at several places."

Hikaru said, "Oh, I'm sorry." Then she asked, "will there be fees?"

He caressed her and said, "It's fine, I sent cancellation messages to the earlier things when we turned our stuff over before dancing."

"Oh," she replied.

"Should we walk or take the car?" he asked.

"Where are we going?" she returned.

"To the tea gardens, I have a 3 hour reservation, we can have dessert first or walk the garden first, whichever you prefer," he answered.

"We can't walk the gardens, it's after sunset and they close," Hikaru reminded him.

He grinned at her and replied, "They're not closed to private reservations."

She stared at him, and then asked, "Isn't that really expensive?"

"Hikaru," he said, and she winced.

"Nevermind," she replied quickly.

"I don't mind, and I don't want you to mind, and it's not that expensive. No worse than going to a movie, really," he said.

She looked at him uncertainly, "Are you sure?"

He nodded. She smiled at him. He grinned back and gave her a squeeze.

"Walk or drive?" he asked again.

"Walk?" she suggested.

"How are your shoes and your feet so far?" he asked.

Hikaru said wryly holding her toes out to display her somewhat worn sandals, "I'm fine, this is a comfortable old pair."

Kiri laughed and said, "I'm glad. We'll walk then. Gardens or dessert first?"

"Gardens?" Hikaru replied, "Since we just ate a lot."

Kiri nodded.

They strolled across the downtown area in a leisurely fashion.

When they entered the gardens Hikaru was surprised to find that all the stone garden lanterns that she'd thought were purely decorative were lit. "Wow," she said, "this is beautiful.

Kiri nodded and asked, "Haven't you been here before?"

"Only once, a few years ago, during the day." She bit her lip and added, "I know it doesn't seem like much, but the usual entry fee seems like a lot when you're spending all your money on other things?"

Kiri nodded.

They came to a reflecting pool that was sending shimmering ripples of light up the plantings that leaned over it, and paused there.

"Shall we sit awhile?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru looked at the stone bench dubiously, "It looks wet," she said.

Kiri grinned and laid his jacket down and sat on it. He held his arms open to her. Hikaru gingerly perched

on his lap. Kiri laughed and cuddled her until she relaxed against him.

"This is nice," she said.

"Yes," he agreed.

After a little bit Kiri asked, "Can I buy you a ring?" Hikaru shifted uncomfortably. "Would you wear a couple's ring with me?" he asked quickly, before she replied.

Hikaru said, "Um."

Kiri said lightly, "If it's too soon, it's OK."

Hikaru turned away from the pond and wrapped her arm over his shoulder. "It's embarrassing to ask this," she said, and stopped.

"Ask anyway?" he suggested.

"I don't like to wear jewelry, it bugs me and I usually fiddle with it until I lose it. But I've always thought it would be kind of cool to share a pair of earrings instead of a ring, and you already have these piercings?" she said, shyly touching the three small earrings he wore in one ear.

"Hikaru, your ears aren't pierced though are they?" he asked.

She shook her head and said, "No." She swallowed and added, "Because I hate needles."

Kiri hugged her tightly and said softly, "I only selfishly wanted you to wear a marker, if you're

willing to make a permanent mark on your body to wear it, I'm thrilled. I'd love to share a pair of earrings with you instead."

She nodded. They kissed for awhile.

"Should we go shopping tomorrow after you get off work?" he asked. "And can I hope that this is exempted from your prohibition on me buying you things?"

Hikaru laughed. "Yes, and I guess so." She stuck her tongue out at him. He bit it lightly and teased her a little with his own tongue as they kissed.

After a while they continued through the gardens. Eventually they came to a bridge that arched over a wide waterway covered in what appeared to be dozens of candle lit paper flowers. "Wow," Hikaru breathed. "Even if those are plastic instead of paper, do they do this every night?"

"I think so," Kiri replied, "because this is the view from the teahouse." He gestured toward the row of large round windows across the water.

The windows only dimly showed the tables and diners behind them. Hikaru blushed and asked, "Then everyone can see us?"

Kiri laughed and pulled her close and whispered, "Why? Want to do something embarrassing?"

Hikaru wriggled in his grasp, and replied, "Not where people are watching."

He kissed her lightly and said, "I'm pretty sure we're only dim figures with all the lights between. "What did you want to do?"

"Just this," Hikaru replied while cuddling against him.

He held her for a little bit.

When they went inside they were seated at opposite sides of a small table.

A dessert cart full of dozens of types of miniature cakes and confections was rolled up to them. Hikaru waffled between the choices.

Kiri laughed and said, "Choose three."

Hikaru looked at him dubiously.

"Then we'll have four and we can share them all," he explained.

She chose two different types of strawberry desserts and asked Kiri to choose the last. Both of his choices were chocolate types. They were all delicious.

Kiri walked her back to the bus station and kissed her goodnight when her bus arrived.

Hikaru stayed up a little past midnight and did about half her homework.

Sunday, Hikaru's mother put up her hair as usual, and Hikaru asked her if she would recommend anywhere for getting a piercing.

Miri looked at her daughter in surprise.

Hikaru said, "If you don't I can ask Rin, I just thought you might know someone through your job before, at the beauty parlor."

Miri said she did know a few and asked, "Do you want me to make an appointment for you this afternoon?"

Hikaru nodded. Her mother said she'd leave a message when she had it scheduled and Hikaru went to work.

Hikaru played the soft elevator style piano music of Sunday mornings with a variety of cheerful tunes sneaking into the usually more classical line up. Since Kiri knew where she was working now, he simply picked her up to go shopping from the restaurant. He looked a little tired, and Hikaru asked about it.

"I've been up since six, trying to get enough work done to have the whole afternoon free," he explained.

Hikaru asked, "Are you still planning to have dinner with us?"

He nodded.

He took her to a jewelry store, and Hikaru asked, "Why a jewelry store for earrings?"

Kiri looked at her and said, "You said jewelry bothers you, if it's due to a metal sensitivity, pure gold or platinum is best. That's why starter earrings are always gold."

Hikaru looked at him in surprise and protested, "I've never had a rash from wearing anything."

He hugged her against him and said, "Better safe than sorry?"

They went into the store and Kiri asked about their selection. While the assistant was setting up a selection Hikaru wandered around a bit.

"These are cute!" she exclaimed leaning over a display case.

"Those are for children," protested the assistant.

Hikaru sighed and said, "Of course they are."

Kiri glared at the man and told Hikaru, "Show me what you think is cute, even if it won't work, it'll give me some idea of what you like." He cuddled up against her and looked into the case.

Hikaru smiled wryly and pointed, "See there are dozens of cute little animals. Those sea turtles, and dolphins, and those butterflies?"

Kiri looked at her and said seriously, "I could get behind a set of sea turtles."

Hikaru looked at him in surprise.

He leaned closer and whispered into her ear, "Symbols of longevity and mating for life."

Hikaru blushed.

"We could have a set made with permanent backs," he suggested.

"Permanent backs?" she asked.

"They have a smaller flatter backing, but they only clip together once, you have to get them cut off, which isn't too difficult, but then the earring has to be repaired or replaced," he said.

Hikaru looked at him for a few minutes and said at last, "Having a set made sounds expensive."

Kiri gave her a long look and said, "Hikaru, if that's your only objection, I want to do it, I'd happily buy you diamonds if I thought you'd be willing to wear them."

Hikaru was silent for a bit. "I don't want to be an expensive girlfriend," she said at last.

Kiri hugged her and told her, "There's a vast difference between you letting me get you something and you demanding I get you something?"

"OK," she agreed.

He grinned and gave her a quick kiss, then started negotiating the order with the shop assistant.

They were told it would take at least two weeks, and the shop assistant asked Kiri if he wanted to put it on his account.

Hikaru showed Kiri a really dubious expression at that, and he asked "Why are you giving me that look?"

"I'm just wondering how many women are wearing your ring," she answered.

"None," he replied simply.

She looked doubtful.

"I've only ever given two women rings. Chi-chan returned hers when she broke up with me. And the first one was a plastic toy that was the only thing my first girlfriend would accept, and when it broke, she said it was a sign and broke up with me." He paused and then added, "I'm pretty certain that was her plan all along, she was older than I was, and didn't think we should be dating."

"Why do you have an account here then?" she asked.

He sighed. "Because I've given a number of other things to women." He looked at her wryly and asked, "Should I have taken you somewhere else?"

She shook her head. "Presumably you have an account here because they've been reliable?" Hikaru asked.

He nodded.

"It's OK, it's not like I don't already know you've dated other women," she said. Then a pained expression crossed her face. "It's not like I ever even asked if you are exclusively dating me."

"I'm only dating you," he assured her. He gave her a long look and asked, "And you?"

She tucked her fingers into his hand and said, "Only you."

He squeezed her fingers, and leaned over to kiss her. "Hikaru I am serious," he said quietly.

She nodded.

"Is there anywhere you would prefer to get your ear pierced?" he asked in a lighter tone.

"My mother made an appointment for me about an hour from now," Hikaru confessed.

Kiri grinned at her and asked, "What would you like to do for a bit less than an hour?"

"Did you bring your car today?" Hikaru asked.

He nodded curiously.

"OK, then we have a little time," she said thoughtfully.

"Where will we be going?" he asked.

She gave him the shop name and directions her mother had left on her voicemail.

"OK," he said and smiled. He slid his arm around her waist and said, "So..."

Hikaru leaned on him and suggested, "Ice cream?"

Kiri grinned and they sought ice cream before going to the shop. "For fortifying before the trauma?" he asked laughingly.

Hikaru nodded seriously.

Kiri hugged her.

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When they entered the shop, the wiry person behind the counter dropped her pen and exclaimed, "Hikaru-sama?! Oh my god!"

Hikaru blushed and Kiri stared.

The woman rushed around the counter to shake Hikaru's hand excitedly. "I'm fan number 67! My name is Ami." Then she blushed and admitted shyly, "Although Rin is my favorite. I think he's drop dead gorgeous, I wish I were brave enough to ask him out."

Hikaru smiled and said shyly. "Thank you for supporting us." She added, "To date Rin, I think you need the confidence of a queen."

"Confidence of a queen?" Ami repeated in confusion.

Hikaru replied, "As far as I can tell, he will date almost anyone, but he says he'll never ask someone

to stay. They never stay long." Then she added, "I came to get an ear pierced?"

Ami's face fell and she said, "I'm sorry, I already have a piercing scheduled. If you can wait until after that appointment?"

Hikaru said, "My mother made me an appointment?"

Ami stared at her. "Miri said it was for her daughter?"

Hikaru nodded.

"Oh my God! You're a girl!?" Ami exclaimed.

Kiri put his hand on Hikaru's waist and asked, "With hips like this, how can you take her for a boy?"

Ami stared, and blushed and said, "Well, Hikaru-sama usually wears loose shirts on stage? I had no idea." She protested, "The website doesn't say she's a girl either!"

Hikaru said calmly, "That's on purpose, Nezumi-san suggested we put only trivial personal information, so it doesn't list our ages, where we live, or anything, just what foods we like and stuff. Because I'm still in school and everyone else still has another job."

Kiri and Ami stared at her.

Hikaru blushed and added, "And no one who mistakes me for a boy will ever look twice at me when I'm in my school uniform."

Ami promised, "I won't tell anyone."

Hikaru replied, "It's not a secret or anything, it's not like I'm pretending to be a boy, I just don't wear dresses on stage."

Ami nodded, but then added, "When I look at you thinking girl it's obvious, but you are safer if people mistake you like I did, so I still won't talk about it."

Hikaru shrugged and helplessly said, "Thanks."

Ami handed her a packet of small stickers and said, "Use that mirror and place a sticker where you want your piercing lined up?"

Hikaru and Kiri walked over to the mirror. "Which ear?" Kiri asked with his chin on her shoulder.

Hikaru pondered for a moment and then said, "If I do the opposite one, then the turtles will be beside each other or flanking us depending on which side of you I'm on?"

Kiri grinned and said, "That sounds cute."

Hikaru looked at his three piercings and suggested, "Perhaps lined up with your bottom piercing?"

Kiri took the stickers from her hand and applied one to her ear in that spot. "Like so?"

Hikaru nodded. "I think so, what do you think?"

Kiri smiled and said, "Yes." Then he turned to Ami and asked, "Do you have a large ball on your pure gold starters available today?"

Hikaru looked at him questioningly.

Ami answered, "I do, but you'd have to buy the pair, I only have the standard as singles."

"That's fine," Kiri said, removing his bottom earring, "I'll be wearing the second one." To Hikaru he indicated his own ear and added, "I think the larger ball will look more balanced."

Hikaru nodded.

Ami said, "That's so cute."

She got out a pair and Kiri put one into his ear and attached the one he'd been wearing to the card.

Ami had the tools prepared and rattled off a standard list of precautions while she washed Hikaru's ear with a disinfectant.

"Ready?" she asked.

Hikaru nodded and held her breath.

The piercing gun went pop loudly and Hikaru flinched and tears began to roll down her face.

Kiri hugged her.

"Kiri?" she asked tremulously.

He pushed back a little to look at her.

"You can never break up with me," she sniffled.

He laughed and hugged her again, "I'm not planning to, why all of a sudden?" he asked.

"I know I'm being a baby about it," she said, "but it hurts way too much, I never want to do it again." She clung to him.

"Why would you have to do it again if we broke up?" he asked, running a hand soothingly down her back.

"Because having both ears pierced is more normal," she replied muffled against his shoulder.

Kiri grinned and said, "You're stuck with me forever. You won't have to get the other ear pierced." He cuddled her.

"OK," she replied.

Ami stared at them but then looked away and said, "You must have really sensitive ears, I'll give you the numbing disinfectant wash that children get."

Kiri chuckled and said, "Yes she does, that would be good, thank you."

23: Dinner attempted.

They arrived at Hikaru's house just before six. "Sundays used to be our family day, so my mother insists we all have dinner together at least on Sundays," Hikaru said suddenly.

"Used to be?" Kiri enquired.

"Sundays are the only day Izumi-san has off currently, so I leave them alone except for dinner," she replied.

Kiri's mouth compressed into a flat line, but then he gave himself a little shake and relaxed. "OK," he said.

They walked up to the door together as usual, but then Hikaru opened it and led Kiri inside.

Her mother clapped her hands and bounced up to them. "You really did it! And you're already matching! So cute!" she exclaimed happily.

Kiri grinned at her and Hikaru blushed.

Izumi sat at the table, which was already set, though no food was out yet.

Miri told them to sit and dashed off to the kitchen. Hikaru hesitated and said, "I should help."

"OK," Kiri replied and they followed after Miri.

They helped carry the food out, and Hikaru said, "Wow, you cooked so much."

Miri laughed and told her daughter, "It's a special occasion! Maybe I should have made red bean rice?" She grinned up at her daughter.

Hikaru, embarrassed, shook her head violently in refusal. They all sat and began dishing up their plates.

After they'd had a few bites, Izumi frowned across the table at Hikaru then looked at Kiri and asked bluntly, "How old are you, what kind of job do you have, why are you playing around with Hikaru?"

"Izumi!" Miri protested.

Kiri answered the questions stiffly, but completely, and in reverse order, "I'm not playing, I love her. I'm the general manager at Inline Productions, I make enough to support a wife and children if I wish. My birthday is in March and I'm currently 27."

"27!?" exclaimed Izumi. "You're a freaking pedophile!"

"Izumi!" Miri protested again.

Kiri said firmly, "I'm not a pedophile, Hikaru is young, but she's not a child."

"She's only 17!" yelled Izumi.

"It's none of your business," Hikaru said coldly.

"Like hell it's not, it's my business if my 17 year old daughter is having sex with a 27 year old man," Izumi snapped.

Hikaru glared at him.

Miri asked faintly, "Hikaru, Izumi?"

Hikaru said coolly, "You are not my father. We haven't had sex yet. And it's none of your fucking business."

Izumi stared at her and replied, "There's no point in lying about it, he had his hand up your skirt."

Kiri interrupted, "She's telling the truth."

Hikaru said coldly, "He did not."

Miri tugged at Izumi's sleeve and insisted, "It doesn't matter!"

Izumi looked at his wife and said, "She's lying to you."

Kiri snapped, "She's not lying! Why would you even think that? Will you stop treating her like this?!"

"You had your hand up her skirt!" yelled Izumi.

Kiri leapt to his feet and yelled back, "It shouldn't have mattered if I was fucking her in the street! You had no right to hit her! She's not lying! You just don't respect her at all!!" Everyone stared for a moment. He turned away from the table, fists clenched, and said more quietly, "I'm sorry Hikaru, I didn't realize I was still so angry, I don't think I can do this."

"Izumi," Miri said very quietly.

Hikaru crawled over to Kiri and took his hand as she stood up.

Izumi looked at his wife and began, "Miri, I"

Miri interrupted him and said grimly, "Don't say anything right now if you want to remain married to me."

Izumi shut up.

"I'm sorry, I think I should go," Kiri said quietly.

"Yes, I think you should," Miri replied.

"Mom!" Hikaru protested.

"And you should take Hikaru with you," Miri continued.

Hikaru stared at her mother in shock.

"Miri!" Izumi protested.

Miri glared at him and he shut up.

"Take your things for school tomorrow," she told her daughter.

Hikaru looked at her uncertainly and started to protest.

"Apparently Izumi and I are going to have our first big fight, and you don't need to be here for it," Miri said grimly, "and Izumi doesn't need you to be here to witness it either."

"OK," Hikaru replied unhappily and climbed the stairs, threw her uniform and some underwear into her small duffle, and picked up her school bag. When she came down the stairs she said worriedly, "But mom, Izumi-san makes you happy, and I'll graduate in a couple months, and it won't matter if I can't get along with him."

Miri gave her daughter a sorrowful look and said, "It will be OK Hikaru, unless he says something really

stupid we're just going to fight, not divorce, just go and come back like normal after school tomorrow."

She looked at Kiri and added questioningly, "If you don't mind?"

Kiri grabbed Hikaru's hand and said, "I don't mind." He added apologetically, "I'm sorry."

Hikaru and Kiri left. Hikaru kept glancing back worriedly. Kiri held the door for her and she climbed into his car and buckled herself in. Kiri got in, but didn't start it immediately.

"Hikaru?" he asked uncertainly.

She looked at him.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"I don't think it's your fault," she replied.

"Do you want to come home with me, or should I take you to your uncle, or a friend's house?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru looked at him and said reluctantly, "I don't want to impose."

Kiri laughed wryly and said, "I want to take you home with me, but I don't want you to come if you don't want to."

"Then I want to go home with you," she replied.

Kiri started the car and pulled out onto the street. After they'd driven for awhile he asked, "Should we

go somewhere for dinner? Should I make something quick? We didn't eat much."

Hikaru said, "If you don't mind, I'd rather eat what you cook, but whatever you prefer."

Kiri offered her a wry grin and told her, "I love cooking for you."

24: Tearing me apart.

When they got to his house, Kiri led her inside then turned and asked lightly, "Dinner, a bath, or me?"

Hikaru laughed and answered, "All three, in that order?"

Kiri looked at her in surprise and said, "Hikaru, I was joking, I'm not planning to do anything to you tonight. It would be taking advantage."

Hikaru looked back at him and said steadily, "But I think we should do that, we should eat, then I should take a bath and you should scrub my back, and then, we'll see?"

Kiri bit his lip and nodded.

Hikaru set her things down by the table.

Kiri beckoned her into the bathroom and asked, "What temperature?" As he started the tub filling.

Hikaru looked blank and he laughed and set it on the default, which was a little cooler than he liked. He

showed her the controls. Then said, "It will shut itself off when it's full." He went into the kitchen and started pulling things out.

Hikaru watched for a moment and then asked, "Is there anything I can help with?"

Kiri grinned at her and said, "Sure, come stand here."

She came over to him, he turned away from her and drew her arms around his waist. Then he began chopping vegetables.

Hikaru hugged her and rested her chin on his shoulder. "I don't think this is helping," she said.

"It's greatly improving the morale of the cook," he replied cheerfully. They stood like that for awhile as he started the cooking. "Being held by a beautiful woman in my kitchen makes me feel very happy," he said lightly while he stirred the sauteing vegetables.

Hikaru shifted uncomfortably and said, "People easily mistake me for a boy, I'm not that beautiful."

Kiri stiffened and replied, "I don't understand how anyone ever takes you for a boy Hikaru. You are gorgeous."

He turned to her, she looked back dubiously. He put his arms around her waist and kissed her. She returned his kiss and clung to him. He backed her up against the wall beside the little hallway and pressed into her as he kissed her jaw and her cheek and her throat. She shivered as he slid his hands up under her

shirt and unfastened her bra. He cupped her breast in his hand and kissed her more deeply.

When he started to lift her shirt she put her hand over his and said, "Kiri."

He stopped. He turned away, still breathing heavily. "Sorry."

"Kiri," she said.

"I think we should skip the back scrubbing," he said.

"No," she said stubbornly.

"Hikaru," he said, "I am so close to losing control and I meant what I said about not wanting to take advantage of you tonight."

Hikaru wrapped her arms back around his waist and set her chin on his shoulder. "There's a reason," she told him quietly. "I want you to scrub my back, OK?"

He nodded.

"How can I persuade you that you are freaking gorgeous?" he asked.

Her breath huffed against his ear, "I believe you, or at least, I believe you really think so Kiri. I think you're biased though."

He laughed shakily and said, "I love you, and I think I've burned our dinner."

He stepped forward and rescued the vegetables. Hikaru looked them over and said, "It's not too bad, not like if I were cooking."

He laughed.

"I'm serious," she said. "I can bake OK, but I hate trying to cook anything that you can't start and then leave alone."

Kiri grinned at her and said, "It's fine, I like cooking, I'll always cook for you."

Hikaru blushed.

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They sat cuddled together as they ate the slightly singed food. "It's good," Hikaru told him. He gave her a wry look. "I mean it," she said. "Your food is as good as Kao-ji-chan's food, and he's a chef."

"Your mom's food is pretty good too," he replied.

"My brother's too," she said. "I'm the only one who doesn't enjoy cooking."

He hugged her.

"I don't mind doing dishes though?" she suggested.

"OK," he replied. Then added, "But there's a dishwasher under the counter, so it's not much trouble."

Hikaru laughed.

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She looked at him uncertainly as she entered the bathroom. "Will you wait until I say I'm ready?" she asked.

He nodded. "Do you want bubbles?" he asked with a grin.

She shook her head and said, "Not this time."

He waited outside the door while Hikaru climbed into the tub and knelt in the center, then called out, "OK."

Kiri came in and started washing her back. When he finished he traced some of her scars with his fingers and asked quietly, "Do you want me to wash your hair?"

Hikaru looked up at him with a startled expression. "OK?" she replied uncertainly.

He washed her hair, and she melted. He laughed and hugged her. "Don't stay in too long, the water won't get cold," he said quietly into her ear. He kissed the edge of her ear and left.

Outside the bathroom he turned to face the door, slid down the wall, and cried.

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When Hikaru came out, dried and dressed in her pajamas, he was still sitting there, and she stopped, startled.

He looked up at her and asked a little angrily, "Did you think I would care? Do you think I'm that shallow?"

Hikaru looked at him unhappily. "No," she replied.

"Then why?" he asked. He clambered to his feet and stood in front of her.

"Because the ones that hurt aren't the ones that say things like 'you're ugly' or 'I bet you did that to yourself to get attention', it's the ones that don't want to care but can't help being afraid or disgusted anyway." She gulped and looked at his set face and added, "And I didn't want you to see for the first time, while we were, when we were in the middle..."

He hugged her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"Hikaru I love you, and you're beautiful," he said.

She hugged him back.

He drew her back into the living room and down into his lap. They cuddled for awhile. After a bit, he drew a deep breath and asked, "Does this mean I can take your shirt off now?"

Hikaru laughed and nodded.

25: Until morning.

Kiri kissed Hikaru, and then he pulled her pajama shirt off and traced his fingers along her scars.

"They're so smooth, I never felt them," he commented.

"They're old, and they were mostly from glass, so they healed cleanly," she said.

He pushed her back so she was laying on the floor and bent and ran his mouth along one of the longer scars. Hikaru shivered.

"They're mostly on the left side?" he asked quietly.

"My father was on my right, he grabbed me as the car hit," Hikaru said shakily.

Kiri stopped caressing her and just held her.

Hikaru told him how her father had died. How they'd climbed into the taxi that had started pulling out before they were buckled in, how a car had slammed into them from a cross street, throwing Hikaru and her father through the left side window.

How he'd crawled to her and held her and made her promise that she'd live. How she'd woken up in the hospital and everyone but her brother had refused to tell her anything. Yuki had told her. Her mother had only cried until the doctors wouldn't let her visit anymore. Her father had died at the scene, massive internal injuries, he'd been on the impact side and sheltered her from the worst. But she'd still almost died of blood loss.

She told him of the weeks she'd spent in the hospital. How she'd barely talked because it seemed to take all her energy just to breathe. How Risa had

visited her and cried. And then talked her parents into allowing her to keep visiting, bringing her school work, going over each day's lessons even though they were only in grade school.

"Risa is the reason I didn't get held back a year," she explained.

Kiri wordlessly caressed her and cuddled her against him where they lay on the floor.

"Risa says it looks like I survived a fight with a dragon, and I should be proud," Hikaru added. "But even though I know I shouldn't let it matter, I hate showing my scars."

Kiri kissed her and laughed and ran his fingers along a scar to the cluster of marks beside her left breast. "More like lightning, I think, like you took a Pikachu to the heart."

Hikaru laughed and Kiri leaned over and kissed the the spot. Then he dropped more kisses along the slight rise of her breast, and took her nipple in his mouth and sucked. When she felt the warmth of his mouth, Hikaru gasped and her fingers bit into his shoulder. He released her and moved to the other one. She gave a little moan as his tongue moved. He stopped and wriggled back up to kiss her mouth. Then he pulled back and caressed her face.

"Hikaru, I.." he began.

Hikaru looked at him.

He sat up and said, "We have to stop here." He was shaking.

"Why?" she asked, confused.

"Because, I don't want to do it like this, I don't want to take advantage of this stressful day, and I don't want to do you and then leave you," he said shakily.

"What?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said. "It was wrong of me, but I didn't want to tell you and make you put this off." He touched the ear she'd just had pierced.

Hikaru looked at him with confusion. "Kiri?" she asked.

He ran his hands through his hair and handed her her pajama shirt. "I found out this morning, I'm going to China for a week or ten days. I leave Tuesday morning." He didn't look at her.

She sat up and pulled her pajama shirt on and hugged him. She leaned her cheek against his shoulder and asked, "Why all of a sudden?"

"Seiko broke an arm in a stupid drunken weekend stunt, and I have to go in her place," he said.

Hikaru hugged him tightly and asked, "Why does that mean we have to stop, I don't want to stop?"

Kiri laughed shakily and asked, "Will you have sex with me after I get back?"

Hikaru hesitated and then nodded.

Kiri pulled out of her arms and turned to her. He looked her in the eyes, his eyes bright and intense, and said, "I'm really serious about you, I love you, even though we've only been dating for such a short time." He cupped her jaw in one hand.

She looked back at him.

"I want it to be amazing, so that you never want to have anyone but me," he said quietly. "So I don't want to rush anymore, if you'd been willing the other day, I'd have just done you then," he admitted. "But I want more now."

Hikaru blushed and cuddled up to him. "I still don't understand why that means we have to stop now," she said.

He hugged her tightly, "Because I'll be gone almost as long as we've been together. And I'll be hoping the entire time that you don't change your mind," he whispered.

She kissed him. "I won't change my mind."

He kissed her. "Then we'll do it when I get back," he said quietly.

She sighed.

He cuddled her.

Hikaru said sadly, "I suppose I should finish my homework then."

Kiri laughed and kissed her nose. "Yes," he agreed, "and I have more work to finish too. When you're done, you can have my bed."

"I can sleep on the couch," she protested.

"I don't know how long I'll be up, and I have it on good authority that the office light is annoying to visitors," he replied with a grin.

"You could sleep with me?" Hikaru suggested boldly.

He stuck out his tongue at her and replied, "I wouldn't sleep, it would be torture."

He stroked his fingers through her hair when she sighed.

"I love you," he said.

"Kiri," she said.

He waited a minute then leaned in and kissed her.

She laughed. She kissed him again, then sighed and got out her homework.

When she finished he showed her how to wash her ear. Even though the solution was supposed to numb a little, it hurt so much she cried. He cuddled her a little, then led her to the bedroom, sat and tucked her into his bed and then stood. She grabbed his hand. "Hikaru," he said.

"Can you stay for a few minutes?" she asked.

He nodded and lay down beside her on top of the covers. She wriggled close. He wrapped around her and petted her through the blankets. "Do you want me to stay until you fall asleep?" he asked.

Hikaru said, "I don't want to make you stay up even later." They lay there for a minute and she added, "Besides, I'll never be able to sleep with you petting me like this."

He stopped his hands and hugged her instead. "If I just hold you like this?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. She fell asleep surprisingly quickly.

"Hikaru," Kiri said. He kissed her. She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Good morning sweetheart," he said. "I let you sleep as long as I could."

Hikaru got up reluctantly, then held her hand to her mouth and said sleepily, "I didn't bring a toothbrush."

Kiri smiled at her, he looked tired but was already dressed in his neat business clothes. "I think I've got an extra."

"Did you sleep at all?" she asked.

He nodded. "I grabbed a few hours."

He found her a new toothbrush. "Just leave it with mine," he said with a grin.

Hikaru looked at him thoughtfully.

"What?" he asked.

"How many women have lived with you?" she asked hesitantly.

He gave her a wry look and said, "None here."

She raised an eyebrow at him while brushing her teeth.

He grimaced at her. "Remember when I said I'd become conceited about dating?"

She nodded.

He looked away. "I'd also decided not to bring a woman home with me again until we'd been dating for over three months, or let one move in before half a year," he said a little ruefully.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

He kissed her cheek, reminded her to wash her ear, and went into the kitchen.

She cried again when she washed her ear. Then she dressed in her school uniform and carried her duffle out with her.

Kiri handed her an egg on a piece of toast, and picked up a briefcase. "Ready?" he asked.

Hikaru nodded, took her phone off the counter, pulled her duffle strap over her shoulder, bit the toast and picked up her school bag.

When they stepped out the door Kiri's neighbor, an elderly woman looked at them in surprise. "Good morning?" she greeted them cheerfully but curiously.

Hikaru swallowed the last bite quickly and replied shyly, "Good morning."

Kiri nodded. "Good morning Geda-san," he replied. "Do you think you could get my extra key since you're here, and I'll get another made to give you later?"

She nodded and disappeared into her house for a moment. She returned quickly and handed Kiri the key.

Kiri turned to Hikaru and gave it to her. She gave him an uncertain look as she accepted it.

Kiri said, "You can come anytime, whether I'm here or not."

Hikaru said, "OK."

They walked to Kiri's car. His neighbor called after them, "Kiri-bo-chan take good care of that little girl."

Kiri laughed and called back, "I intend to."

They climbed into the car, fastened themselves in, and then Kiri drove to Hikaru's school. He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss before she got out. "I'll miss you like crazy," he told her.

"Can't I see you tonight?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'll be crazy busy, trying to get ready and make sure the rest of the team is ready

and that I know everything I need to before we leave."

She kissed him again and said, "I'll miss you too," as she got out.

26: Yours and mine.

Hikaru didn't look at her phone until the first break. It was Kiri's. And there were half a dozen text messages waiting. She didn't expect it to unlock at her touch, but it did, and she messaged her own number anxiously.

... H to K

Hikaru: I have your phone.

Kiri: I know, don't worry, I already forwarded my work calls to this one for the day.

Hikaru: There are messages.

Kiri: Can you figure out how to forward them to me? Don't worry about answering calls, only my family would call I think, and they can leave a voicemail.

Hikaru: Ok

Hikaru worked her way through the menus and figured out how to forward the new messages.

Hikaru: That's all of them.

Kiri: Thank you <3

...

Risa laughed at Hikaru when she told her friends about the mix up of identical phones while they ate lunch. While they talked, Hikaru forwarded the three new messages to Kiri.

Shizuoka stared at Hikaru in shock.

Hikaru looked at her inquisitively.

"You spent the night with him already?" Shizuoka asked.

Hikaru blushed. She was a little surprised by Shizuoka's reaction. Her friend had a great deal of experience with men, though it wasn't all good.

They'd originally become close when Hikaru had rescued her classmate from a man she'd been dating who'd decided that the acceptance of a present had meant consent to anything he wanted. Hikaru had just finished a job with Mirage, and recognized her classmate struggling with the man. She'd stopped him, forcefully, and Shizuoka had thrown the gift at him as they backed away.

Rin had arrived too late to do more than look threatening as the guy ran. He had grumpily asked Hikaru how she managed to get into a fight when left alone for less than five minutes. When he'd pointed out that he couldn't take them both on his bike,

Hikaru had shrugged and taken Shizuoka home on the bus.

Shizuoka had protested that she didn't need to be taken home, and hadn't agreed to be accompanied until Hikaru had pointed out that such a creep might try to follow until she was alone.

At Shizuoka's home, Hikaru had nonchalantly invaded. She'd been polite to Shizuoka's drunken father, who had just lost his job, and after listening to his confused explanation had asked that he find his next job in the same area, so that her friend could stay in her class. She'd helped Shizuoka clean their kitchen before leaving.

They'd been friends ever since and Risa had welcomed Shizuoka into their circle warmly. Hikaru said, "Yes, I spent the night at his house."

Risa gasped. "Oh my god!" she exclaimed, having not realized that earlier.

Hikaru said, "I only slept there, we haven't had sex yet."

Then she had to explain the fight that had led to her mother sending her home with Kiri.

"He hit you!?" Risa freaked out.

Hikaru nodded.

"That bastard!" Shizuoka said angrily. As often as she'd been embarrassed by her own father, as often as she'd been dragged around the country because of his changing jobs, he'd never been violent, and she

couldn't stand the thought that Hikaru's new step father would hit her.

Hikaru winced. "It was just once, and I was screaming insults at him," she tried to excuse Izumi.

Her friends refused to excuse him.

"I knew you weren't very happy at home," Risa said to Hikaru, "but I had no idea things were so bad."

"I thought you were just annoyed by the stupid curfews," Shizuoka fumed.

Hikaru had a difficult time calming them down.

--

After school she went straight home. She entered the house anxiously. "I'm home?" she called out as she took off her shoes.

Miri called back from the kitchen as usual, "Welcome home!" She put away what she was working on and met her daughter in the living room before Hikaru made it to the kitchen. "I'm sorry," Miri said, looking up into her daughter's face.

Hikaru looked at her anxiously. She looked determined.

"There won't be any more curfews, I've told Izumi not to interfere with you anymore. I'm so sorry Hikaru, I just thought that if I left things alone you'd get used to each other," Miri said sadly.

Hikaru asked, "Is everything OK?"

Miri nodded. "Why didn't you tell me he was the one that hit you?" she asked her daughter.

Hikaru said, "You've been so happy. You have no idea how much Yuki-ni and I have wished for you to be happy."

Miri said sadly, "I feel guilty. I was so busy trying not to make you feel excluded, I didn't want you to feel like I'm starting a new family that you're not part of. Instead I made you put up with so much!"

Hikaru shook her head in denial.

"Hikaru, I don't want you to feel like you have to move out as soon as you graduate," Miri said anxiously.

Hikaru gave her mother a wry look. "You don't expect me to live at home forever do you?" she asked.

"No, but I always want you to feel like this is your home," Miri said.

Hikaru winced and said, "Sorry. I just don't seem to be able to get along with him. We're too different maybe. The only thing we have in common is that we both love you."

Miri sighed. She said, "You're so much like your father. And I think the reason I can really love Izumi is that he's nothing like your father. Nothing about

him reminds me of Akira, I think the only thing that's similar is how much he loved me too."

Hikaru patted her mother's shoulder.

Miri asked, "Was it OK? Sending you home with Kiri-kun?"

Hikaru nodded and blushed. "I, he keeps saying he loves me," she said and stopped.

Miri nodded and looked at Hikaru uncertainly. "And?" she asked.

Hikaru said, "I want to say it back to him, but I don't know. I know I really really really like him." She shrugged.

Miri looked amused and asked, "Does he seem to mind that you haven't said it?"

Hikaru shook her head.

Her mother said, "Don't worry about it, you don't have to rush."

"Yeah," Hikaru agreed without conviction.

She put on jeans and a long sleeved T-shirt and did her homework. A little before Izumi would usually get home, Kiri's phone rang. Hikaru looked at it, the number was labeled 'Chi-the-brat'.

Hikaru let it go to voicemail. It rang again.

"You're not going to answer?" Miri asked from the kitchen.

"I have Kiri's phone, by accident we switched, he said not to worry about answering," Hikaru explained.

A text arrived, also from 'Chi-the-brat'. "Uncle Kiri pick up, it's an emergency!" it said.

When the phone rang again Hikaru answered it.

"Who is this?!" demanded the girl on the other end.

"I'm Kiri's girlfriend," Hikaru answered, blushing, thankful that she couldn't be seen.

"I have to speak to my uncle!" the girl demanded.

"He's at work," Hikaru replied.

"Why do you have his phone," the girl asked suspiciously.

"They got mixed up this morning," Hikaru answered. "Your text said it's an emergency?"

The girl on the other end of the phone started crying.

"Are you OK? What's wrong?" asked Hikaru anxiously.

The girl explained that she was locked in the bathroom at the bar she'd accompanied her friends to. Hikaru managed to assemble most of a coherent story pretty quickly. Kiri's niece had gone out with friends on a date with an older guy, who'd put his hand up her skirt and touched her and shocked she'd run away and locked herself in the bathroom.

Hikaru asked, "Should I call the police for you?"

Miri who was listening to Hikaru's half of the conversation gave a worried gasp.

"No! They'll call my parents!" the girl protested. "I just need my uncle to come get me."

"He can't, he's working," Hikaru pointed out.

The girl started crying again.

Hikaru said, "If you are safe for awhile, I'll come get you, I'll have to take the bus though, what's the bar's name or address?"

The girl said she was safe in the bathroom and gave Hikaru the information.

Hikaru told her mother who had pressed close enough to hear more, "I'll go fetch her and probably take her home?"

Miri nodded.

27: My hero?

Hikaru arrived at the bar, which even from the outside looked seedy. She asked the bouncer at the door, "You slumming Alex?"

He laughed and said "No, but I've got another baby on the way, I'm taking all the work I can get."

Hikaru said, "Well, the problem is, there's a little girl locked in the bathroom here, and I need to get her out."

"She won't come out, the police are on their way," Alex replied.

Hikaru said, "I think she'll come out for me, but I'll have to go in."

He gave her a measuring look and said, "Five minutes." He stepped aside.

Hikaru entered the bar, located the restroom sign and headed over. She pounded on the door and said, "I'm here to pick you up!"

The door popped open and a shorter younger girl tumbled out into Hikaru's arms. The girl looked up at her with wide, startled eyes. "Akira-sama!" the girl cried.

Hikaru frowned at her and said, "I'm not Akira."

The girl clung to her while sobbing.

A man sitting at a table nearby said, "Hey, that girl is mine."

Hikaru looked at him and said, "No." She said to the girl, "We can't stay here, the police are coming, I'll get my permit removed." She tried to pull the girl along.

The girl went limp and sagged against her crying, "Akira-sama, you came to rescue me."

Hikaru grimaced and gave up, she simply scooped the girl up and carried her bodily out the door. The guy who'd claimed the girl stood up and said, "Hey!"

Hikaru said over her shoulder, "I don't have time for this, if you have to talk, step outside." She was barely out the door when the guy grabbed her from behind.

Hikaru stood on the steps holding the girl, face to face with a policeman. The guy grabbing her arm punched her in the back. Hikaru dropped the girl, spun and kicked his feet out from under him, hard. He dropped. Alex stepped in and kept him pinned to the ground.

"Sorry," Alex said. "I was too slow."

The guy on the ground shouted, "I'll have you fired!"

Alex looked at the little girl Hikaru had carried out and said, "Hikaru, I did not let her into the bar."

Hikaru looked at the girl who said sniffing, "You're really not Akira-sama?"

Hikaru said, "I'm Hitoshi Hikaru, Hitoshi Akira was my father, he's been dead for 11 years."

"I have his poster, you look exactly like him," she sniffled.

Hikaru looked at the policeman. "A lot of help you are, can we go?"

The policeman stared at her and recollected his duties. "After you both give name, address and phone number."

The guy on the ground said, "You can't do this, let me up, you are so fucking fired."

The girl said, "He brought us in through the back, but everyone else is already gone, I didn't see them! They left me!" she wailed the last bit.

Hikaru instructed her, "Give the policeman your name, number, and address, and let's go."

Alex said to the guy he was keeping pinned, "You can't get me fired, I'm going to quit as soon as I talk to your father." To Hikaru he added, "You were right, I guess I was slumming, but I had no idea."

Hikaru nodded.

The policeman took their information and they left.

The girl sobbed and sat on the first bench they came to. "I can't go home!" she cried.

Hikaru sighed and called Kiri. He picked up right away, and she explained the situation. He told her to give the phone to his niece. After they'd argued a bit, she gave the phone back to Hikaru.

Kiri said, "Chisaki-chan will let you take her home now, I'm sorry Hikaru, and thank you."

Hikaru said, "It's OK."

Kiri said, "I'll send the address."

Hikaru laughed and asked, "Do you know the bus route?"

Kiri said, "I'll look it up and send that too."

"Thanks," Hikaru replied a little tiredly.

--

She escorted Chisaki-chan to her home. The woman who answered the door looked angry. "Kiri called me," she said to her daughter.

Hikaru said uncertainly, "She's had a rough afternoon onee-sama."

The woman turned to Hikaru and slapped her. "How dare you!? It's probably your fault for taking her there! And you think if you say onee-sama I'll think it's cute and forgive you?"

Hikaru rubbed her cheek and replied coolly, "Even if I had, I think you'd still be better off thanking me for returning her home again."

A tired looking man carrying a small child stepped forward and said, "I'm sorry, my wife is just distraught." He grinned at her suddenly and said, "You can call me onii-sama if you want."

Hikaru laughed unexpectedly.

"Hikaru-chan rescued me!" Chisaki told her mother. "You have to see my poster!" Chisaki demanded, tugging on Hikaru's arm.

A boy a little younger than Chisaki said from the stairs, "You're a girl? You do look just like Chi-nee-chan's poster."

Hikaru was dragged up the stairs to view the poster. She stared at it. The name Akira was blazoned across the life size poster of Hikaru's father. The name of his band and other information was listed in smaller lettering down the side. He was sitting on a tall thin stool, one foot on the floor. His guitar dangled from one hand and the other was raised behind his head.

"Wow," Hikaru said. "My mother always says I look just like him, but I always thought she was exaggerating."

Chisaki and her brother gave Hikaru odd looks. "You don't have any pictures of your father?" Chisaki asked.

"Just a few small ones," Hikaru said, "and he's older than that in them."

She reached out hesitantly to touch the poster. She turned to see Chisaki guiltily lowering her phone. "Sorry, I just wanted to take a picture, it's like a weird mirror," she said.

Hikaru said, "Can you send it to me?"

Chisaki nodded.

Hikaru gave her own contact number. Then she said, "Thanks for letting me see it, I should go home now."

"Thank you Hikaru-chan," their father told her on her way out. She nodded.

--

On the bus home Kiri called her. "How'd it go? Did you get her home?" he asked. "She sent you a photo... of yourself," he added.

"Yeah," Hikaru replied. "Your sister slapped me."

"What the hell?" Kiri said with shock.

Hikaru wondered if she shouldn't have said anything. "It seemed like she mistook me for one of the friends who took your niece there," she explained.

"Hikaru are you OK?" Kiri asked.

"I'm OK, the place the guy at the bar punched me in the back hurts more," she said tiredly.

"Hikaru, go to the hospital," Kiri instructed worriedly.

"I'm fine, I'm sure it's just a bruise," she said.

"Hikaru," Kiri said anxiously.

"Kiri, I'm fine, if it still hurts tomorrow I'll go, OK?" she asked.

Kiri was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "OK, I love you, and I'll see you tonight, very late, if that's OK?"

Hikaru asked, "How late?"

"I don't know, maybe after midnight, but I really want to see that you're OK, and we can trade phones before I leave," he replied.

"Message me, I mean your phone, instead of knocking or ringing the bell?" she asked.

"OK," he said. "See you tonight."

"Yeah" she replied, and he ended the call.

... K to S

Kiri called his sister again.

When she answered he said, "I am so fucking angry with you right now."

"What are you on about?" she asked grumpily.

Kiri demanded, "How dare you hit my girlfriend? After she went in my place and pulled your idiot daughter out of a bad situation and took her home to you even."

"Your girlfriend?" was the stunned reply. "But she was so young?"

"She is my girlfriend," he said bitterly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not me you should be apologizing to. Did you even apologize to her?" Kiri demanded.

His sister was silent for too long. "No," she admitted.

Kiri hung up on her.

...

Kiri messaged Hikaru about midnight. "I'm here."

Hikaru came down the stairs quietly and opened the door. Kiri looked exhausted. They traded phones.

"Are you OK to drive?" Hikaru asked quietly.

Kiri gave her a wry smile and asked, "Can I sleep with you instead?"

Hikaru said, "My bed is small, it would probably be more comfortable for you to put you in my brother's room."

He replied, "If I can't sleep with you, I'm going home."

Hikaru reached out and pulled him inside. "OK," she agreed quietly.

28: Waiting in the rain.

Kiri and Hikaru went quietly up to her room at the top of the stairs. Kiri emptied his pockets pulled his shirt loose, took off his tie, and climbed into Hikaru's bed.

"You don't want to take off your clothes?" she asked.

"I fully expect to be thrown out as soon as your step father realizes I'm here," he replied. He held his arms open for her.

Hikaru climbed in and they squeezed together to fit.

"I thought you said you wouldn't be able to sleep next to me?" she asked.

He kissed her ear. "Sweetheart, I'm so tired, I could sleep through anything right now."

They slept.

--

As Kiri had predicted they were woken by Izumi shouting in Hikaru's doorway, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out!"

Miri was woken by the yelling and peered through the door beside Izumi as Hikaru and Kiri struggled free of the bed.

"Do you want breakfast Kiri-kun?" Miri asked.

Kiri laughed and collected his tie and the contents of his pockets. "No thanks, I need to run home and get some stuff and get on a plane."

Hikaru asked, "Did you check your phone?"

Kiri nodded and kissed her. He hugged her tightly.

"Miri you can't say he's not screwing her if he's even doing it in our house?!" Izumi demanded of his wife.

Miri looked at the rumpled but fully dressed boyfriend of her daughter and asked her husband, "Aren't you going to be late for work?"

Izumi cursed and left.

Kiri clung to Hikaru for another moment.

Hikaru asked, "Will you be able to call or message? Can you tell me if you've arrived safely?"

Kiri replied, "Yes, and I'll call you every day."

Hikaru asked worriedly, "From China?"

Kiri laughed and said, "It's not Antarctica, they have cell phone service there." He kissed her.

"Be safe," she said.

He looked at her wryly. "You too." He sighed. "OK, if I don't let go now, I'll never leave. See you in a week and a bit." He kissed her once more, released her and left.

--

Kiri sent a text message when they landed in China, as Hikaru would still be at school then. He herded film crew and band safely onto the train and through the various transfers. Finally they were all settled into the evening accommodations at the first of the dozen filming locations.

He called Hikaru at 8:30 her time, figuring even if she had a gig that night, she'd be home. When she answered hesitantly he said, "Don't hang up."

Hikaru said, "Kiri! OK, why are you calling from a strange number?"

He said, "There's no cell service in this valley, and I had to pay a ridiculous fee to make a call from the hotel phone. I can talk for an hour, but only get to dial the once, so don't hang up on me?"

"OK," she replied. "But Kiri, don't call again until you can use your phone? If even you think it's expensive, I probably don't want to know how much this call is costing."

He sighed. "OK," he agreed reluctantly. "We may be stuck here longer than the two days we were scheduled for, as it's been raining steadily since we arrived, and they say they expect it to continue."

"Instead you could take a few pictures each day and tell me about it when you get home?" she suggested.

Kiri laughed and said, "Alright, I will."

"What are you doing there?" Hikaru asked curiously.

Kiri hesitated and replied, "Shooting some video and a commercial."

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "That sounds fun, I think."

Kiri smiled at her excitement and said into the phone, "It can be. Though if we fall behind schedule due to the weather, it will be frustrating instead."

Hikaru said, "Oh, I suppose so, I hope it goes well and is fun though."

"Me too," he replied.

They talked about inconsequential things until the timer was about to go off, then Kiri said suddenly, "Hikaru I'm out of time. I ", the man at the hotel desk disconnected the call. "Love you." Kiri said too late and laid his head on the table. It was a small comfort when the man's wife smacked him with a magazine.

"Dude, I can't believe you paid a hundred to talk to your girlfriend for an hour," the tall long haired band member who was sitting nearby said with amazement.

"I'd pay that much to talk to my girlfriend if I had one," said the short haired Kei sitting on the back of the couch and staring out at the rain.

"Just make sure you guys are ready to take advantage of any break in the weather," Kiri responded irritably.

He stood and walked over to the window overlooking the mist and rain filled valley, pulled out his phone and snapped a photo. It was beautiful, but wet.

... Mirage

Hikaru lay on the grass and stared at the sky. "Are we really going to be able to do this in time for the competition?" she asked.

"Yes," Ryuske replied with confidence.

Hikaru looked at him and said, "I never realized before, but you've been in love, like really in love."

Ryuske stiffened and stared at her. "What?" he managed.

Rin looked at Hikaru curiously.

Hikaru said, "I just sang the words before, I thought I understood, but I didn't really." She added, "It's a little more embarrassing now."

Hatsuharu grinned at her and asked, "You have a boyfriend?"

Hikaru blushed. She gave a stiff nod.

He looked at Rin and Ryuske's lack of surprise and asked plaintively, "I'm the last to know?"

"Sorry," Hikaru said, "they found out the other weekday when you couldn't play with us."

Hatsuharu sighed.

...

Finally the video for the valley location was all shot and the group moved on three days later. The next section of filming was at the Great Wall.

They all had phone service again. Kiri messaged Hikaru as soon as he reconnected, but it was already Friday and Mirage was playing till 2am, so they arranged to talk on the phone Saturday evening.

Kiri told Hikaru, "I should have shown you how to share your schedule," and belatedly sent her phone the authorization to his own.

Hikaru replied, "If you look on Mirage's website, you can see our schedule."

29: Professional evaluation.

That night, after a long day of coaxing and herding the crew, Kiri visited Mirage's website. The band crowded around him because they were bored and curious. Kiri ignored them at first.

"Is this a new group Inline is taking on?" Shiori asked.

"No, it's my girlfriend's band," Kiri replied.

"Dude, I didn't know you swung that way," long haired Kuhasa laughed, looking at the photos of Mirage's members.

Kei elbowed him, and said, "They look hard to market with that much age range, especially if one of them is actually a girl."

Kiri cast a flat glare backward at the band members.

The quietest member, Ginta, said softly, "They have a good publicity handler though. Read their information again, it sounds like they're being open, but they aren't. They list only their first names, position in the band, and stuff like their favourite food, a hobby, their favourite color. All personal but insignificant."

Kiri looked over the profiles again. He nodded and repeated what Hikaru had said, "It's on purpose because one member is still in school and the others have regular jobs."

The fifth profile had only a silhouette and for name said Nezumi, under position it said wizard.

The site was easy to navigate, and after he'd browsed the public portion, which included the band's calendar of future and past performances, Kiri selected the fanclub area. It brought up a page that told him about the one time membership fee, the terms, and a brief overview of the posting rights of members and extra content the band would provide in this section.

He thought the fee of fifty seemed a little steep for a small band's membership, but paid it.

He was rewarded with a short animation of chibi versions of the band members performing and assigned fan number 347.

He was then given a short profile to complete. When he set his favorite band member to Hikaru, a chibi animation of her leaned out of the side of the form and waved happily.

"Damn, that's cute," Shiori said, "choose the others."

Kiri glared at him, but tried each one.

Ryuske's chibi played a few notes on a keyboard.

Rin's blew a heart shaped kiss.

Hatsuharu's winked while his bald head twinkled with the same animated star as his wink cast.

Nezumi's chibi silhouette reacted with shock, fell over and crawled back off the screen.

Kiri set his favorite back to Hikaru, opted in for phone notifications of Mirage performances, and submitted the form.

Inside the member section were demo recordings posted by the band, additional photos, and brief surveys on things like what song do you wish Mirage would cover, or which is your favorite Mirage song? All fairly standard.

But most of the fan member section seemed to revolve around member postings. There was a sightings timeline. Kiri opened it curiously. It turned

out any fan could post a sighting, with or without photo or video. And the band members could then confirm the sightings. Sightings could be sorted by confirmed or unconfirmed, location, date, or band member present.

The chibi animations of the four performing members made appearances now and then throughout the fan section. The member list of usernames and profile photos could be browsed, Miri was fan #1.

Kiri had mixed feelings. The site was excellently written and the portrayal of the band professional. It wasn't the kind of thing a small weekend band would usually maintain. Also, 347 fans, while it sounded like a small fan base, meant that more than 17k had been collected in member fees. And that was only the people willing to pay the fee.

The band he was working with were laughing and joking around. Shiori laughed and said, "Looks like they're no competition for us with less than 500 fans." His own band boasted over 20k membership in their fan club.

Ginta exchanged a look with Kiri.

Kiri reminded them, "Membership in your fanclub is only five, not fifty. Mirage only plays on weekends for the most part. I wouldn't slack off if I were you."

... K to H

"Hikaru, I miss you like crazy." Kiri said when they finally connected.

"Me too," Hikaru admitted.

They talked about random things. Kiri told her about some of the antics the film crew had gotten up to involving a basket of kittens and an irate grandmother. They'd decided the kittens would be cute to take pictures with. Not all of the kittens had agreed with the plan. The old lady had found them with a kitten ferociously attacking Shiori's ear and two more hanging off his sleeves.

Hikaru told Kiri they'd been accepted into the competition. "But Rin says we're guaranteed to lose," she added.

"Why?" Kiri asked.

"We've been assigned the first performance slot, so we're basically the warm up band," she explained.

"Ouch," he said sympathetically.

"Ryuske says it will still accomplish our purpose though," Hikaru said.

"What's the purpose?" he asked.

"To become a little better known. We're going to try to publish an album, but we'll be able to get a better contract if the companies we're applying to

have already heard of us, Ryuske says," she explained.

He was silent a moment, then asked, "An album?"

"It's my fault," Hikaru replied.

"Your fault?" Kiri asked with confusion.

"I got an offer for a summer job. To play all summer at a resort. If you break it down per hour, it's less than I'm making now, but it'd be consistent." She paused and then continued, "Ryuske said that if I left for a whole summer, the band would probably break up, I think we could just take a summer off, but anyway... He said if I was only considering taking it because I needed the money, we could make more money. He asked me to give him until graduation before I decided. We are already making more than we did last year, but getting the album published is part of a long term plan."

"I see," he replied.

"We're talking about doing our annual free concert in the park near the competition, right after we perform our entry," she added, "because the place where the competition is held has very limited capacity and Rin and Ryuske think we can pick up overflow from it as well as the usual audience, to sort of double our exposure."

"I see," Kiri said again. Silence fell for a moment and then suddenly he said, "It's selfish, but I'd rather you didn't go work at a resort somewhere all summer

either. Hikaru would you consider moving in with me after you graduate?"

Hikaru didn't answer right away, and Kiri almost withdrew the question, but then she said, "I'd like that, if it's really OK, you said you usually wait till you've been dating six months to live with someone."

Kiri said, "I know, but... I don't want to wait that long, if you're willing."

"OK," she replied shyly.

...

Kiri's boss added an unpleasant surprise to the next update from the home office. Kiri sighed and shuffled schedules around, consulted with the crew and managed to free up a couple hours to work on the problem.

Inline Productions was going to have to make some changes soon he realized.

30: Your fan.

Kiri and the crew he was shepherding made it through the rest of the filming at the other three locations without mishap, and only a few more delays. Both the footage for the music video and the commercial the band had signed up for was approved and they returned home on Thursday afternoon.

They took the train back from the airport. As they exited the train station, Shiori caught sight of a girl waving excitedly. "Oh god," groaned Shiori, "it's a fan." The tired band members tried to straighten up a little.

Kiri looked up and grinned. "Not your fan," he replied. He hurried up the steps and Hikaru met him at the top.

She reached out to him, but then stopped, feeling too shy.

Kiri stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her hair. "Hi," he murmured.

"Hi," she replied breathlessly.

"You look freaking gorgeous," he said.

Hikaru laughed wryly, "Thanks, you look tired."

Kiri pulled back and grinned at her. "I am," he said. He leaned in to kiss her. They kissed for a little bit.

"Want to go for ramen?" he asked when they came up for air.

"Sure?" Hikaru answered.

"I don't know why, but when I get back from international trips, I always feel like having ramen," he said laughingly.

She grinned at him, took his bag, and slung it over her shoulder.

"Hey," he protested.

Hikaru laughed and said, "Let me help a little, you really do seem tired."

He took her hand and nodded.

They found a ramen shop, and ate cheerfully.

When she was finished eating, Hikaru blushed and said, "I asked my mom, about spending the weekend with you. So um, tomorrow after school, Mirage is playing at Blue Moon, but um... when we're done?"

Kiri leaned over and kissed her. "I'm so glad, I didn't know how to ask if you still intended to..."

They kissed a little more, then walked to the bus station. Kiri's bus arrived first, and he was reluctant to board it.

Hikaru said, "Kiri it's silly for you to wait for the next one, go home and sleep. I take the bus everyday, I'll be fine." She handed him his bag.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her deeply, before reluctantly climbing aboard.

--

When Kiri climbed off the bus he saw that there was a police vehicle parked on his street, but gave it little thought. He was unlocking his door when they came for him.

The officer asked if he were Takeshi Kiri, and he nodded and admitted that he was.

The officer asked if he knew Hitoshi Hikaru?

Kiri went white. For a moment he was certain they were there to tell him something had happened to her, even though that would have been impossibly quick and the police would have gone to her parents and not him. "Is she OK?" he asked anxiously.

The policemen looked at each other, then they told him he was under arrest. Kiri finally realized what must actually be happening, although he wasn't certain it was official, or if this was just some prank Hikaru's step father had devised.

He asked, "Can I throw my bag inside?"

When they were going to argue he pointed out that they'd have his keys. They allowed it, took his keys and then cuffed him.

Once they had him in the back of the vehicle and were on the road, he told his phone to call his office's legal department. The officers protested, but since they hadn't taken his phone, they couldn't stop him.

When Kiri got a person on the phone, he told them, "Have one of the company lawyers meet me as soon as possible, I've been arrested." He gave as much detail about his current situation as he could.

The policemen were irate, and when they arrived at the station they took his phone. They treated it like a real arrest and started processing paperwork. They threw him into a holding cell and one of them said

snidely, "Don't imagine it's going to be a comfortable stay you pedo."

The other residents of the cell stared at Kiri. He straightened his jacket and said calmly, "I'm no pedophile. I'd show you a picture of my lovely girlfriend, but you took my phone."

The snide one laughed and exclaimed, "He's admitting he's got evidence on his phone!"

The more professional officer said calmly, "We'll see."

Kiri blinked and realized they were planning to take data off his phone and warned suddenly, "If you delete the photos of China I promised Hikaru, I'll sue you."

The officers ignored him and his new cell mates laughed. One said, "They'll probably run the whole thing past a magnet now."

They prevented the lawyer from Inline seeing him at first, but she knew what she was doing, and eventually spoke with Kiri.

She scolded him harshly when she found out his girlfriend was under 18. "You'd be pinning back the ears of any artist you worked with who turned up in such a situation, what do you have to say for yourself?" she asked incredulously.

Kiri laughed and agreed wryly, "I would." Then he said seriously, "But I'm going to marry her someday,

I'm not going to stop dating her because she's not 18."

The lawyer let him know that he was being charged with having had sex with an underage girl. He looked at her in surprise. He was a little shocked to find out there were real charges and replied uncertainly, "But she's already 17. And we haven't gone that far yet?"

"How far have you gone," demanded the lawyer.

Kiri blushed and told her, "Probably too far. Second base? And I've seen her naked."

The lawyer gave him a neutral look. She eventually told him that it was a borderline case, but since it was running through children's services and that apparently the charges originated with her parents, it might be messy.

Kiri blinked, then sneered and said, "Not her parents, her bastard of a step father."

The lawyer looked at him consideringly and suggested, "You should probably refrain from further descriptive adjectives for the duration."

"He's a policeman, and he hit her!" Kiri protested bitterly.

31: The bitter end.

Children's services came to speak with Hikaru in the middle of morning classes. She went white, and asked anxiously, "What happened?"

The administrative assistant who'd come to fetch her could only say she didn't know.

When Hikaru entered the room where the agents waited, she demanded, "What happened to my mother?"

The two children's services agents looked at her and each other blankly. Finally one asked, "Why do you think we're here about your mother, we haven't spoken with your mother yet?"

Hikaru gave them a blank look in return and said uncertainly, "My brother, he said that when my father died, children's services came to his school."

The agents apologized and assured her that as far as they knew, her mother was fine.

"You can't think of any other reason for our visit?" one of them asked.

Hikaru shook her head. Then paused and asked, "Because my mother's husband hit me once? Maybe? But I can't imagine you coming here just for that."

The agent who'd asked gave her a considering look.

The other agent snapped, "Takeshi Kiri has been arrested and is being held for having sexual relations with you. We're here to talk to you about it."

Hikaru stared open mouthed for a moment, and then she got angry. There was only one person who kept accusing her of having sex with Kiri. She ignored

the agents, pulled out her phone and dialed her mother.

"Hello?" Miri answered.

"I'm moving out!" Hikaru snapped.

"Hikaru, I'm on my way to the hospital right now, what's going on?" Miri asked.

Hikaru paled again and asked, "To the hospital, why?"

"It's just a checkup, what's going on?" her mother demanded.

"Your husband has had Kiri arrested," Hikaru replied icily. "I'm moving out, if I don't, I'll kill him eventually."

"Hikaru!" Miri protested.

"I'll probably need you to sign some paperwork later, right now I'm going to leave school and see what needs to be done to get Kiri cleared," she said, and ended the call.

"You can't do that," said the first agent.

The other nodded in agreement.

"Like hell I can't," Hikaru snapped.

"We need to talk to you about how he persuaded you to have sex with him, or if it was unwillingly, because rape has different penalties," the second

agent explained as though speaking to a very slow person.

The first agent gave her partner an exasperated look and said, "It's our job to find out what happened to you and protect you from future abuse."

Hikaru stared at them incredulously. "We haven't had sex yet," she replied angrily.

The agents looked at each other again. Then the first one said, "Lying to protect your lover will only hurt both of you in the long run."

Hikaru glared at them briefly, then ignored them as they tried to coax her into cooperating. She thought furiously for a few moments, then suddenly stood and left the room.

She went to the nurse's office. The agents had been slow to follow and lost her in the halls. Agitated, Hikaru explained to the nurse that she needed proof that she was still a virgin.

The school nurse said helplessly, "There's no way I can help with that, you'd need a full.. um, feminine exam."

Hikaru did a quick search on her phone and called the clinic she usually attended. "I need an emergency appointment," she said into the phone, "not a medical emergency, but a paperwork emergency, to deal with sexual assault charges." The office agreed to see her right away and Hikaru left the room.

She visited the restroom and changed into the light pair of pants she kept at school for emergencies. She'd considered putting on the stage clothes she'd brought instead, but had left them for later.

The agents were waiting at the gate though. "You can't leave like this," the agents protested.

Hikaru wished the guard would have told them not to loiter. "Watch me," Hikaru snapped. "It's not like you don't know where I'm headed, after I visit the clinic for the necessary documentation, I'll be heading to the police station."

"You don't even know which station," pointed out the first agent.

"I'm sure it's the one my mother's husband is at," Hikaru replied bitterly.

As she wasn't wrong, neither agent denied it. The second one tried to grab her arm as she exited the school grounds, but the first one stopped her partner thoughtfully.

--

Hikaru went straight to the clinic, and submitted to the unpleasant but apparently necessary examination.

The doctor performing the examination said "I don't see anything but the clean surgical incision from your implant."

Hikaru nodded and told the doctor, "We haven't had sex yet, but my mother's new husband keeps

insisting I'm lying, and had my boyfriend arrested." She added, "This is so humiliating."

When the doctor looked at her apologetically she said, "Not the exam, but having to have the exam to prove it."

The doctor wrote up her report right away and Hikaru asked the office staff to make her a couple of copies as well. Then she went to the police station Izumi was working at.

--

She checked in with the front desk, then walked up to Izumi's desk and slapped a copy of the report onto it. "You really are a fucking bastard," she said almost calmly. "You should just drop the charges now." she advised firmly.

Izumi stared at her and then rather smugly said, "I can't, I didn't file any charges. I just reported what I know to children's services."

Hikaru looked at him coldly and said, "You don't know anything, because you never listen to a thing I tell you." She pointed to the report and said, "That's proof that I was still a virgin at 10:45 this morning. Not that it should matter."

Izumi stared at the report uncertainly. Then he snapped, "I don't know how you got a doctor to support your claim, but you're lying!"

Hikaru lost her temper and yelled, "You have never even asked if I were still a virgin or how many guys

I've dated. I've never lied to you even once! I have bent over backward to accommodate you, to make you comfortable in my home, and I'm done! I'm so fucking through with you and your stupid ideas! I'm moving out, because if I try to live with you for another day, I think I may try to beat the crap out of you!"

Izumi glared at her. "Why aren't you in your school uniform? Where were you?" he demanded after a moment.

A couple of people walked up to the next desk over, but Hikaru just looked at Izumi as though he'd lost his mind. "Because I'm not an idiot," she practically growled at him, "and I didn't want to waste time being asked why I'm not in school! It's none of your business what I do or don't do!"

Izumi replied angrily, "It is my business to keep you safe, and you're going to get pregnant carrying on like this!"

Hikaru snapped, "Unlike you I'm not a moron who doesn't understand how to use birth control when the time comes." Hikaru added more quietly, and more viciously, "And keep your creepy dirty mind off of my sex life. It's none of your damn business."

Izumi stared at her open mouthed.

And during the pause a tiny woman who'd come up beside Hikaru said, "I'm Takeshi-san's lawyer, causing a scene at the station won't help him."

Hikaru stared at her and asked, "You're a lawyer?" But before the woman could reply, Hikaru blushed and apologized, "I'm so sorry, I should know better than to question based on appearances."

The lawyer waved her apology away and said wryly, "I'm used to it."

Hikaru handed her the copy of the doctor's report and asked, "Will this help?"

The lawyer flipped through it and nodded. "Yes, very much, though it may not clear everything."

Hikaru grimaced and asked, "What would clear everything?"

The two children's services agents arrived then, and Hikaru immediately handed them the other copy she carried. She was so angry with Izumi, but she also understood that these were people who had the power to get Kiri out of trouble. She hoped that she hadn't ruined anything by ditching them at the school.

The lawyer said consideringly, "Permission from your parents would help. But I understand the charges were initiated by your father."

Hikaru glared at Izumi and said stiffly, "He's not my father, he's my mother's new husband, they've only been married for four months. I already have my mother's approval. If she writes it out will it suffice?"

The first agent having flipped through the report looked up at this last and said, "What do you mean you have your mother's approval?"

Hikaru blushed and replied, "I already spoke with her about intending to, um, to have sex with Kiri soon."

The lawyer said firmly, "It would be better for him if you don't until you're 18, or if you at least have a legal contract in place first."

Hikaru stared at her and asked, "There are legal contracts for that?"

The lawyer laughed and replied, "Of course. The most common is marriage. There are also some prenuptial agreements."

"I thought those just said how things get divided if you get divorced?"

The lawyer replied, "Typically, but they can also be written up as trial marriages, basically."

"Could you write one up like that for us?" Hikaru asked with surprise.

"Hey," protested the second children's services agent and Izumi in unison.

The lawyer nodded to Hikaru and replied seriously, "Yes, but I'm not certain it would fall under approved company time expenditure."

Hikaru thought for a moment and asked, "You just mean I might have to pay for it?"

The lawyer nodded.

Hikaru said resolutely, "Please do then."

Kiri's lawyer smiled at her, agreed, and withdrew.

32: Concentrate.

Izumi recovered from his shock and exclaimed, "You can't do that, it's ridiculous!"

"Not that I completely disagree, but I don't think you have any right to protest Izumi-san," said Hikaru's uncle Kaoru from where he sat on the edge of the next desk over.

"Kao-ji-chan!" Hikaru was startled to see him.

"You don't have any idea what kind of guy she's dating! He's 27 and she's just a child!" Izumi declared angrily.

"Takeshi Kiri," Kaoru replied calmly, "I've met him, and I've been listening for a little while, and I think Hikaru is right, her sex life is none of your business."

The second agent piped up, "Even if you haven't had intercourse yet, it doesn't mean he hasn't done anything sexual to you. Or seen you naked."

Hikaru stared at the agent scornfully, "He's my boyfriend, of course we've done sexual things, we've

kissed hundreds of times. And I made sure he saw me naked, there's no way I can build a long term relationship with a man who can't handle my scars."

"What scars?" demanded Izumi.

Kaoru stared at him in disbelief. "You've been living with my niece for four months and don't know what scars? That sure says a lot about which guy she trusts." He stood and hugged Hikaru.

"Why are you here? Hikaru asked him.

"Your mother called, in tears." He frowned at her. "She said you declared you are moving out and that you'd decided to skip school to try and get Takeshi-san released from whatever Izumi-san had done," Kaoru explained.

She nodded.

"You can't just move out, you're under age, you have to have a guardian," pointed out the first agent.

"I can," Hikaru replied. "Either by having my mother sign on an apartment with me, or by staying with my uncle, I don't have to stay in the same house."

Kaoru gazed at her in surprise, but didn't refute her assumption directly. "Well, we'll have to have a family meeting," he said calmly. He wondered how long she'd been thinking about how to move out.

"Hikaru?" Kiri said from behind them. He stood next to the small lawyer, looking completely exhausted.

Hikaru ran to him. Kiri caught her.

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

"Hikaru," Kiri said.

"I didn't think about protecting you at all," she continued.

"Hikaru," Kiri repeated.

"I didn't find out until this morning," she explained.

"Hikaru," Kiri asked a little exasperatedly, "do you trust me?"

Hikaru nodded.

"Then believe me when I say this is not your fault. I know exactly who's fault this is," he told her, hugging her tightly.

Hikaru protested, "But I never even considered."

Kiri said quietly, "Hikaru I love you like crazy, but if you have a fault, I think it's taking too much responsibility for things."

Hikaru stared at him doubtfully.

"It's not your responsibility to protect me, if anything, it's mine to protect you because I am older," he said hugging her against him again.

He saw that she was going to protest, and he added, "Me being older is simple fact Hikaru."

She nodded reluctantly.

"And we both know who caused this," he said firmly.

Hikaru sighed. "You look exhausted?" she asked worriedly.

Kiri said, "I'm so freaking tired." He laid his head against her shoulder and leaned on her a little. "The police informed the people sharing holding space with me that I was a pedophile, and then made sure to check on us frequently, and made plenty of noise doing it. I haven't really slept since about 4am yesterday, between the travel and everything."

Hikaru hugged him tightly. "I'm sorry," she said.

Kiri laughed and gave her a wry look. "Not your fault," he repeated.

Hikaru asked Kiri, "Even though you're so tired, will you come to my family meeting?"

"Yes, of course," he replied. Though he looked at his lawyer and then asked, "When?"

Hikaru looked at her uncle.

"Tonight?" Kaoru asked.

Hikaru said, "We're doing the opening at Yukito-san's place tonight, we play until 9pm. Is that too late?"

Kaoru shook his head. "9:30 then," he said. "These folks," he indicated the children's services people with a wave, "agree to let the rest of the charges drop, contingent on your mother verifying our words," he added.

Hikaru sighed again and said, "Thank you." After a moment she added, "I better go back and do my afternoon classes."

Kiri and Kaoru nodded in unison.

Hikaru asked the lawyer, "Do you think you could have it written up by tonight?"

The lawyer nodded, "A basic version at least, I'll send it with Takeshi-san, we have a bit more paperwork here too."

Kiri looked at Hikaru curiously, but she didn't enlighten him. Instead she kissed him and said, "Tonight then? You and Kao-ji-chan decide where?"

Kiri nodded. After glancing at her uncle for confirmation, Hikaru went back to school.

--

During the break, she gave a short, quickly whispered explanation of her absence to Risa and Shizuoka. They were as incredulous as Hikaru felt. She had no idea how things had gotten so crazy.

After school she pulled her guitar case out of her locker, and her stage clothes from Risa's, since the lockers were too small to keep it all in her own. Then

she headed for Ryuske's place, where they were to meet up.

She got dressed in his bathroom. And when she came out, asked if he had anything she could eat.

Ryuske gave her a long look and said, "Sure." He found her a candy bar, a piece of cheese and some crackers.

Rin and Hatsuharu showed up shortly after. They all helped load Hatsuharu's drums and Ryuske's keyboard, they carried the smaller instruments in their arms, as they climbed into Hatsuharu's mini-van.

At Blue Moon, Yukito's bar, the bouncer Alex was on duty. Hikaru stopped to talk to him a little.

He told her, "Things are tight, but I resigned from the other door job," he shrugged and added, "apparently the police got enough corroboration from other employees of the owner's son bringing kids in through the back that I wasn't brought up on charges or fined for letting minors into the bar."

Hikaru told him, "I'm glad, I'm relieved that they've never contacted me about my part in the incident either, and my performing license seems safe. Does it have to be bouncer work?"

Alex said, "No, but my ugly face and my size put people off."

Hikaru bit her lip thoughtfully. "Give me your contact info, I'll pass it on to a guy I used to work for," she offered.

He did, then she went around to the back entrance and joined her band onstage.

Before they began, Ryuske surprised her by stepping up to her and placing a hand on either side of her face. Hikaru stared at him, so close she could see the texture of his eyeliner.

She'd only ever seen him without his eyeliner once, and when she'd asked, he'd told her he always wore it because someone he loved had told him he was beautiful in it. Hikaru thought he was beautiful either way, though the makeup certainly created emphasis.

Ryuske said, "I don't know what's going on with you today, but for the next three hours, it doesn't exist. Focus on the music Hikaru."

Hikaru opened her mouth to deny being distracted, but thought the better of it and simply nodded.

Ryuske released her and went to check the equipment connections.

They played the three hour warm up and then turned the stage over to a touring band, 'The Corbins'.

Hikaru pulled out her phone to ask where she should be heading, and found there were already messages from both her uncle and Kiri waiting. She

said goodnight to her band, and took the bus downtown.

33: Family meeting.

When Hikaru entered her uncle's restaurant, she was directed to the banquet room. Upon entering she caught sight of her brother and ran up to him. He caught her up in a hug, and she asked, muffled, "What are you doing here?!"

He squeezed her tightly and said, "Mom called me in a tearful panic and said something about you having a boyfriend who'd been arrested for assaulting you and that you're moving out, so I skipped the rest of my classes and hopped on the first train. Are you OK?"

Hikaru said, "Kiri never assaulted me, that's Izumi-san's stupid story."

Yuki looked his little sister over and said, "I didn't even know you were dating anyone, last thing I heard was you'd just gotten your own phone finally."

Hikaru blushed. "Sorry," she apologized, "I just didn't think about telling you, I wasn't hiding it."

Her mother and Izumi arrived next, Miri still seemed to be angry with her husband. But rather than acting repentant, Izumi seemed defiant. Kaoru joined them shortly after.

Kiri was the last to arrive. He was freshly bathed and dressed in clean clothes, but looked tired. He also carried a thick packet that he handed to Hikaru. "The lawyer sent this for you?" he asked curiously. "I didn't look at it," he added. He didn't add that the lawyer had mentioned she might charge him for it if it wasn't approved by her supervisor.

Everyone else had already seated themselves at one of the large tables in the banquet room, but Hikaru held the packet and hesitated, looking at Kiri. "Can I talk to you about this first before we talk to everyone else?" she asked.

He nodded curiously.

Hikaru told everyone they'd be right back, and pulled him out of the room and into the back of the restaurant to the employee break room. There she pushed him to sit on the couch and knelt in front of him hugging the packet.

"What is it?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru said uncertainly, "I know I told you that you couldn't even ask me to marry you until we've dated for over six months."

Kiri nodded, acknowledging it.

"So maybe I don't have the right to suggest we do this," she continued uncertainly.

Kiri reached out and pulled her up onto the couch with him. He touched her ear at the piercing and said, "Since we're talking about it, I do want to marry you

Hikaru. What is it that you've arranged? You can suggest anything you want."

Hikaru looked down at the packet and said, "This should contain a prenuptial arrangement that would allow us to, um, have sex, I think. But protect you from being arrested even if Izumi is acting like a creep."

Kiri stared at her. Then he held his hand out for the packet, Hikaru gave it to him, and he opened it and looked at the contents.

"There are three different arrangements here," he told her after a moment. "One where you live with me, one where I live with your family, and one the lawyer has noted as being less protection, where we continue our current residences."

Hikaru shook her head and said, "Even if I don't live with you, I'm still moving out."

Kiri grinned at her and said with amusement, "I'd prefer you live with me." He put the other two back in the envelope.

Hikaru told him nervously, "I have a condition."

Kiri pulled her close and asked quietly, "What?"

"If I live with you, I don't want to do it like I'm a kid you're taking care of, I want us to live like, um, like lovers," she explained while looking into his eyes, which were framed by long dark lashes and regarding her steadily.

"I think I understand what you are asking for, for us to be partners," he said after a moment, "and I'll try, but I have a condition too."

Hikaru looked at him questioningly.

"I cover all the living expenses, and if needed, your tuition, until you're done with school. And I don't mean just until you're done with high school, but until you are entirely done with school."

Hikaru stared, and then protested, "But I don't want you to have to take care of me like that. If you're paying for everything, how are we partners?"

Kiri hugged her and asked, "Hikaru, if our positions were reversed, and you were older, with a good job, and I was still studying, would you insist on supporting me?"

Hikaru nodded reluctantly.

Kiri kissed her and said, "It's not because of your age. If you were 30 and going back to school, I'd insist on the same thing."

"I don't want to go to college," she said unhappily. Kiri frowned, and she added miserably, "I understand that I ought to, that music isn't a good long term career choice and that musicians often struggle and have to have other jobs. But I hate school."

Kiri opened his mouth and then closed it. After a moment he told her, "I think you should go, especially after what you told me about the independence you'd like to have before having children. And there are

music colleges. But this is a separate issue, and we can talk it over other times."

Hikaru nodded. "We should go back," she said reluctantly.

He hugged her again and countered, "We should also read through this carefully, together."

"It won't matter if my mother doesn't agree though, so we have to talk to her first," Hikaru pointed out.

Kiri nodded, and they returned.

Everyone had obviously been arguing. Izumi asked bitterly over folded arms, "Why am I the bad guy?"

Hikaru looked at him and said flatly, "I want to say I don't know why you're acting like the bad guy, but I think I actually have a pretty good idea why."

Everyone stared at her.

"I've only been trying to protect you!" protested Izumi.

Hikaru shook her head and said, "No, you've been trying, very hard, to protect some imaginary little girl who doesn't exist. You don't know anything about me and you don't like me enough to learn."

"I know a lot about you," Izumi declared.

"Name one thing you like about me?" she challenged him.

Izumi looked taken aback and said after a moment, "You don't wear too much makeup."

Hikaru laughed bitterly.

"Makeup?" Kiri protested, "You don't even choose the fact that she's in the top 20% in her school?"

"Or that she's a great musician?" her brother added. "What the hell are these curfews he said you broke anyway, you didn't have any curfews when I came for Christmas? You haven't even had a bedtime since you were eight?" demanded Yuki.

When Hikaru had turned eight her mother had given up on trying to convince Hikaru that age had anything to do with getting enough sleep and had simply warned her daughter that if her grades dropped because she was not getting enough rest, she'd be in charge of preparing her own lunch box. Since Yuki had been the one preparing their lunches most days that year, he remembered it clearly.

"He'd already made the weekday curfews then, he just didn't complain if you were with me," Hikaru replied.

"You weren't protecting her when you hit her," Kaoru told Izumi sharply, for Miri had told him about it.

Izumi flushed and protested, "I didn't mean to."

Miri said unhappily, "But you did mean to have Kiri-kun arrested. Even after you agreed to leave Hikaru alone."

Hikaru pointed out bitterly, "He'd agreed to leave me alone, but not Kiri."

Izumi stood up and angrily demanded, "Why are you all fine with her having a relationship with a man a decade older than she is?!"

Everyone stared at him.

Kaoru said quietly, "Because we trust Hikaru."

Her brother nodded and agreed, "I don't know anything about him yet, but I trust Hikaru's judgment."

34: Everything in writing.

Miri sniffled and said, "I do trust Hikaru, but I don't want her to live alone." She looked at her daughter who lifted her chin at this statement. "Can't you at least live with Takeshi-kun?" Miri asked her.

Hikaru covered her face and laughed.

Miri said, "I'm serious."

Kiri replied, "That's just what we were discussing."

Miri looked up at him hopefully. Hikaru and Kiri sat down at the table. Hikaru blushed.

Kiri continued, "It turns out that a legal contract for such a situation is what Hikaru requested from my lawyer. But we'd need your approval. And we need to go over it together."

"A legal contract?" Kaoru asked dubiously.

"A certain type of prenuptial agreement," Hikaru explained.

Yuki frowned. "Isn't it a little early to get married?" he asked his little sister.

Hikaru looked at Kiri uncertainly and said, "It doesn't mean we have to get married, only that we're considering it?"

Kiri looked at her expressionlessly for a moment and then said, "Let's read through it then."

Hikaru cuddled up against him, and Miri came around the table and sat beside her daughter. Kiri placed the "Hitoshi lives with Takeshi" marked contract in front of Hikaru.

Within the first few paragraphs Hikaru exclaimed, "That's ridiculous!"

Kiri hugged her and said, "I don't mind it, but finish reading the whole thing before we argue about it?"

On the next page Hikaru commented, "I don't like that."

This time Kiri wasn't sure what she was talking about, when he asked, Hikaru pointed to the section dealing with children. "What don't you like about it?" he asked.

She replied, "I think that it's just selfishness. Splitting custody, it's like the parents are afraid of not having an even share, it's not helpful to the kid. I

know lots of kids whose parents aren't together anymore and too many of the ones with shared custody act like they don't really have a home."

Kiri looked at her soberly, then said, "This says in the event that we can't agree, if you take that out, what do you want to put in its place?"

Hikaru looked at him for a minute and then replied, "I think if we can't agree, you should probably have custody."

Kiri looked at her in surprise. "Why? Isn't it more traditional for the mother?"

Hikaru said unhappily, "But you are already financially able to provide for a child, and you cook, and... I just think that you might do better. But I don't plan to have kids so soon anyway."

Kiri hesitated, then nodded. "OK," he agreed.

They read the last bit.

Miri asked, "What was wrong on the first page?"

Hikaru replied, "It's ridiculous that Kiri should have to pay me if he decides not to marry me before the contract ends. It doesn't say I'd have to pay him. And that's a ridiculous amount!"

"It's not ridiculous, I have no problem with it," Kiri said tiredly.

Hikaru looked at him and opened her mouth to argue.

"Hikaru I am older. It can matter." He put a finger against her lips. "If you look at history, older men do take advantage of young women. That's why it's not equal. This clause is for your protection. It's not that much, enough to live on for 2 or 3 years, not that long if you're in college," Kiri said.

"What if you wound up having to pay it?" Hikaru protested. "If it goes into an escrow thingy you do have to pay it."

Kiri laughed and hugged her against him. "Then my savings account will look a little thin," he replied with a grin.

Hikaru gaped at him.

"Hikaru, I don't mind it, though honestly I don't intend to pay it in the end, because I do want to marry you," he told her wryly. "And if you decide you don't want to marry me, there's no penalty," he added quietly.

Hikaru nodded reluctantly.

"I doubt that figure is random either," Kiri told her. "I think it's probably a year of my income, averaged over the last few?"

Kaoru asked to see the contract, he read it and whistled. "How much do you make?" he asked, passing the contract on to Yuki.

Kiri said wryly, "60k base, plus extra contract bonuses. And the last few years I've barely had time to take any vacation, and been working 60 hour plus

weeks regularly. The owner and I have been discussing it a lot lately, we've reached a point where we need to either expand or cut back."

Izumi stared at him.

Kiri said to him, "I told you I could afford a wife if I wanted to."

Izumi sneered and said, "So money makes it all OK?"

Hikaru glared at him and said, "I don't care how much Kiri makes."

Kiri said quietly, "Hikaru doesn't actually need me to take care of her, even though I want to." To Hikaru he added, "I've been thinking, that part of the problem is the secrets you're keeping. He can't understand you, because he has no idea Hikaru."

Hikaru looked at Kiri. Kaoru looked at them both with surprise.

Kiri said uncomfortably, "I don't think it's fair to your brother either, I don't think you should keep it secret anymore."

Yuki asked, "Keep what secret?"

Hikaru looked at her uncle, who nodded and said, "I think we should confess."

Hikaru said reluctantly, "I've been paying half of Yuki-ni's tuition."

Kaoru said, "And I've been paying the other half."

Izumi, Miri and Yuki stared at them disbelievingly.

"With what?" demanded Izumi.

Hikaru stared at him, then said, "With the money I make from my jobs?"

Yuki asked, "For how long? I thought mom was paying it and then Kao-ji-chan took it over at Christmas?"

Miri said reluctantly, "Even when I was paying it, Hikaru was paying most of our household expenses."

Yuki and Izumi stared at her.

Hikaru explained, "Mom didn't make enough to pay everything alone. And Kao-ji-chan is still paying off his restaurant."

Yuki nodded. "I'll start paying it again myself," he said.

"No!" Hikaru protested. "You're doing great like this, your grades are good and you're already paying your own living expenses."

Yuki told her, "I can't let my little sister put me through college."

"Why not? If you were younger wouldn't you still want to help put me through college?" Hikaru demanded.

Yuki hesitated, but asked, "What about your own tuition, how will you go to college?"

Hikaru said, "I don't want to go to college," and before everyone could protest added, "and even if I do go anyway, I'm not as stubborn as you are. Taka-ji and Yukito-san both offered to give or lend you enough for college and medical school. And they both would do the same for me."

Kiri added, "And so would I."

Izumi interrupted, "How are you making enough money to even have this argument? You're limited to 20 hours a week!"

Hikaru glared at him and said, "I usually average about 50 an hour. And even before I switched to only music, I had that night stocking job, at 25 an hour."

Izumi stared at her.

Kaoru asked, "What did you think she was doing with her money anyway? Even if you didn't realize she wasn't working at minimum wage?"

Izumi said dubiously, "Well, I know that clothes and makeup and stuff for girls are expensive..."

Everyone rolled their eyes at him.

In the end, Yuki agreed to let the current arrangement with his tuition stand, though reluctantly.

The contract for Hikaru to live with Kiri was agreed to, with the changes about children's custody. Kiri felt that Miri was actually more enthusiastic about signing it than Hikaru was, but he still signed it without

hesitation and promised to get the contract registered in the morning.

35: I want to.

Hikaru told her mother, "I want to go home with Kiri tonight."

Miri's automatic protest was overridden by Izumi's angry, "No way!"

Miri sighed and looked between her angry husband and daughter and said, "Hikaru, it's not that I don't want you to spend the night with Kiri, but do you really have to move out tonight?"

Hikaru looked at her mother and replied quietly, "No. I don't have to. I want to."

Miri closed her eyes for a moment, and then said, "Alright."

"Miri!" Izumi protested.

Miri put her hand on his arm and said, "I promised myself when I gave birth to Yuki, I'll never kick my own children out." She looked at Hikaru and added, "I won't make them stay when they're ready to go either."

Kiri asked, with his chin on Hikaru's shoulder, "Do I get a vote?"

Hikaru froze and replied, "Of course, if you don't want..."

He interrupted her, "Come home with me tonight. Move in with me after I've had more than six hours of sleep in 48. I'm too tired."

--

Yuki insisted he go with them, to see where his little sister would be living. Kaoru decided he was going along too.

Miri wanted to go, but looked at Izumi and decided not to. Hikaru pointed out, "You can visit there anytime, and I'll come to get most of my stuff on Sunday."

--

Yuki, Kaoru and Hikaru piled into Kiri's car. After Hikaru had fastened herself in, Kiri asked, "Do we need to go to your house first for clothes and such?"

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I only have practice tomorrow morning, I can survive without clean clothes until after that."

Kiri yawned and replied, "I can lend you some." He shook himself awake and drove carefully.

--

At Kiri's house Yuki said, "This isn't what I was expecting."

Kiri and Hikaru laughed.

Kiri said, "You two are so obviously siblings."

"Why?" asked Yuki.

Kiri replied, "Not only do you look like a taller, masculine version of Hikaru, but she said exactly the same thing." He chuckled and caught Hikaru's hand as they made their way to the door.

Inside, he let go of her and stepped into the kitchen side to start tea water.

"Nice," Kaoru said looking at the expansive kitchen.

Yuki nodded, but asked, "Isn't the house a little small?"

Hikaru asked, "What do you mean? You live in one room."

Yuki looked around the living area and questioned, "It's full already, where will your stuff go?"

Hikaru looked around and replied, "I don't have any furniture, so what's the problem?"

Kiri said, "Hikaru is welcome to change anything, except maybe my desk? I had a hard time finding one that felt comfortable to me."

Hikaru looked at Kiri dubiously.

He brought the tea things to the table and then wrapped his arms around her. "What?" he asked quietly.

She said, "I like how you have your house, it's pretty."

Kiri looked at her and replied, "But I want it to be your house too. Like you told me, I don't want to live like you're just staying with me for awhile?"

She hugged him, but didn't reply.

Yuki and Kaoru poked around a little and then sat at the little table where Hikaru and Kiri had curled up with their tea cups.

"I'll have to figure out the bus route for school," Hikaru commented.

Kiri said, "I suppose so, for when I'm away at least. I didn't think of that, will there be any difficulties with your school?"

Kaoru added, "And will Takeshi-san count as your guardian?"

"I don't think he will, but maybe? And um, unless something comes up, I think it'll be easier to just not tell the school. There's less than one quarter left," Hikaru pointed out.

Kiri yawned and made a note on his phone. "I'll add that to the list of things to ask the lawyer," he said tiredly.

Hikaru looked at Kiri and then at her uncle and brother. "You've seen the place, and Kiri's barely had any sleep for a couple days, is there anything else?" she asked.

Kaoru and Yuki looked at each other, then shook their heads in negation.

"I just wanted to take a look, since I need to catch the last train back, because I work the weekends you know," Yuki said.

Hikaru nodded.

Kaoru told him, "Then I'll head to the station with you and see you off, since I'm already skipping work most of today."

Hikaru said guiltily, "Sorry, and thank you."

Kaoru said, "On the one hand, I want to say that insisting on moving out all of a sudden is childish, but I didn't realize things had gotten so bad for you at home. Still, I'm not sure it's a good reason to move in together. You could have come to my place." He hesitated and then added, "I could get rid of some things to make enough room for a futon."

Hikaru looked at her uncle dubiously. She'd seen the little place he'd crammed himself and all his furniture into. His couch was standing in the corner on end because he didn't want to get rid of it.

Yuki nodded and complained, "I had no idea things were so bad, I can't believe Izumi-san hit you!"

Hikaru replied, "Actually, I kind of feel like maybe I'm taking advantage of the situation as an excuse to do what I want."

Kiri looked at her in surprise. "I have been thinking the same thing, that I'm taking advantage to have you move in sooner," he said.

Yuki asked, "Sooner? Were you planning on moving in together already?"

Hikaru blushed and Kiri nodded. "After I finished high school in a few months," she answered.

Kiri slid his arm around her waist and leaned his head against her shoulder. "I asked," he said, "when she told me she was thinking of taking a job all summer at some resort."

Kaoru looked at Hikaru in surprise. "Yukito-san told me about that offer, he thought you'd take it right away and was surprised that you said to tell them you'd decide month after next." He asked, "Did you delay the decision for Takeshi-san?"

Hikaru shook her head. "No, for Mirage. We're trying to see if Mirage can make enough so that I can do without taking the whole summer off. I might still need a part time job though."

Yuki frowned, but before he could interrupt, Hikaru rushed on with, "Ryuske thinks Mirage would break up if I do, and this is the longest Rin has been in a band."

Kiri looked at her oddly, but didn't say anything.

After a few more questions, and affectionate farewells, Hikaru's brother and uncle left, hopefully early enough to catch Yuki's return train.

...Y to K

Yuki was silent as he and his uncle rode the bus back into the town center where the train station was.

Kaoru asked, "Are you worrying about Hikaru or your tuition?"

Yuki blinked at the question and then looked away. "Those are the things I should be worried about."

Kaoru pondered for a moment and then asked, "So?"

Yuki hesitated and then asked, "Did you really used to date that guy, your friend that makes all those jokes about being your lover."

It was Kaoru's turn to be silent. After a moment he replied with a question, "Isn't it OK either way?"

...

Hikaru turned to Kiri and asked, "Bed?"

Kiri hesitated. "Hikaru," he said.

When he didn't continue Hikaru leaned over and kissed him. "I love you," she said quietly.

He hugged her tightly. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Hikaru looked at him and replied seriously, "I wasn't sure for awhile, I just knew I really really liked you. But while you were gone, I realized all those times I just said your name but didn't know what to

say after, that's what I wanted to say. It just took me awhile."

He blinked at her, then grinned. "I meant, are you sure about sleeping together?" he asked.

36: That night.

Hikaru suggested reluctantly, "I suppose if we sleep together, it will still put you at risk until all the paperwork is finalized."

Kiri laughed softly. She looked at him uncertainly.

"I don't care about that," he said.

"Then I want to," she replied.

"OK," he agreed.

He stood first and offered her a hand up, then walked into the bedroom. Hikaru followed.

Kiri simply stripped off his clothes and climbed into the bed while she shyly undressed. She crawled under the covers with him without looking at his face.

He reached out and pulled her up against him. "I have you where I want you now," he whispered teasingly, and followed up with a question.

Their bodies touching skin to skin for the first time distracted her and she didn't hear what he asked at first. "What?" she asked with embarrassment. "I wasn't listening."

Kiri laughed. He laid his hand against her cheek and asked again, "Do you want me to turn out the light now, or later?"

She looked into his face, and examined his expression. He looked amused and excited and still tired despite that. His fingers were warm against her face and his body felt almost hot against hers. She kissed him. He returned her kiss with several long slow kisses.

She remembered the question and said, "Later. I think."

He nodded, and explored her body with his hands.

Shyly, she began to do the same. He waited while she touched him. Though he distracted her once in a while with warm kisses.

When she let her fingers wander to there, she said, surprised, "It's so soft."

Kiri laughed and murmured, "It isn't, it's very hard, I promise." He tilted his hips and pushed into her hands.

Hikaru giggled and explained, "No I mean, it is, but to touch, I didn't expect it to feel like this."

Kiri grinned at her and slid his hand between her thighs. She gasped and froze as he explored. His grin faded and he stopped and kissed her again and asked, "Do you want to stop here?"

Hikaru shook her head, "No," she pulled him closer, "Kiri, don't stop."

He lowered his head to her breasts and sucked while he fondled her. She arched into him and her legs spread as the sensations intensified and she began to ache.

He stopped again and Hikaru protested, "Kiri!"

He grinned at her and kissed her deeply while getting to his knees. He rummaged in the drawer of his nightstand for a moment and came up with a condom.

"Are you certain?" he whispered as he put it on. He bit her ear lightly, then sucked on her piercing, spinning it with his tongue.

Hikaru gasped and nodded and said, "Yes."

He spread her legs wider with his hands and lowered himself into her.

She looked at him with puzzlement and asked, "Are you sure", something gave and he slid all the way into her, "Oh," she gasped. "You're in."

He laughed and gazed into her eyes. "I'm in," he agreed grinning. Then he sobered a little and asked, "Does it hurt?"

She shook her head, denying it. "It feels so good," she whispered with surprise.

He began to move then, in a far more intimate variation on their dancing. Withdrawing his warmth

and then penetrating her again, while continuing to caress her and catch her mouth with interspersed kisses, until she came. And then he let himself come, and clung to her tightly.

Hikaru said, looking into his face, "You're so beautiful." She ran her fingers through his damp hair.

Kiri laughed and kissed her again and murmured against her skin, "That's my line."

He let his eyes close for a long moment, then crawled to his knees reluctantly and grabbed a few tissues to deal with the damp between her thighs and the mess of removing the condom. When he'd finished he collapsed beside her and pulled her up tight against him.

She cuddled into him happily.

"I love you," he said quietly.

"I love you too," she replied, and sighed contentedly.

He caressed her for a few moments and then slid into sleep. Hikaru lay cuddled in his arms, watching his face and listening to him breathe for a while before she moved to turn out the light. She soon fell asleep as well.

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They were woken by Hikaru's phone. When she reluctantly extricated herself from their warm tangle

and stood up to go answer it, she fell back into the bed with a gasp.

Kiri was holding her an instant later. "What's wrong?" he asked worriedly.

Hikaru pulled away from him and stood more slowly. She winced, but remained standing. "It didn't hurt last night," she said reluctantly, "but today it feels kind of like a skinned knee, only inside. Which makes sense I guess?"

Kiri placed his hand against her belly and asked, "Would a bath help?"

Hikaru's phone had stopped ringing, but it rang again and she shrugged and stepped away from him to pick it up. "I'm late," she said unhappily.

Kiri looked at her blankly and she answered the phone.

Ryuske demanded, "Where are you? Is everything alright."

Hikaru blinked and told him, "I'm fine, but I'll be a bit longer. Sorry I'm late."

Ryuske said, "Rin wants to know if he should come pick you up?"

Hikaru replied, "No. I decided to move out and I'm," she hesitated. "I'm not at my mother's house."

When Ryuske tried to ask more, she told him that she would explain the rest when she got there.

Kiri had gotten up and started pulling out clean clothes while she talked. When she hung up he asked, "Rehearsal?"

She nodded.

"Hikaru," he asked uncertainly, "are you up to it? I'm sorry, I didn't think ahead to today, or think that it might cause pain after the fact."

"I'll manage," she said. Kiri was still naked and she looked away with embarrassment.

He winced. "I'll start a shower, faster than a bath?"

Hikaru nodded and he handed her a T-shirt and a pair of stretchy exercise pants.

"Will these work?" He asked, and when she nodded again he added, "And I'll drive you."

"OK," she agreed.

They showered and dressed quickly. Kiri offered her an anti inflammatory with the quick breakfast he assembled for her to eat on the way.

When she asked what about his breakfast, he said, "I'll eat after I've dropped you off. I've got a lot of work to catch up on, but call me if you need me, or when you're ready to be picked up?"

She gave him the address and they drove to it without mishap. She clung to him for a minute before getting out. He kissed her, and kissed her again.

"Are you sure you'll be OK?" he asked.

Hikaru nodded and said, "Yeah, it doesn't hurt if I'm not moving, so if it gets too bad, I can just sit awhile."

Kiri sighed and reluctantly let her go.

37: It has to be you.

"What do you mean you moved out?" Ryuske demanded as soon as he let her in.

Hikaru replied with a quick confusing summary, "Izumi had Kiri arrested. It was the last straw, I was so freaking angry with him this time. I moved out, but my mom didn't want me to live alone, so she allowed me to move in with Kiri, after we set up a prenuptial agreement."

"Kiri?" echoed Rin.

Hikaru couldn't remember if she'd told them her boyfriend's name. She opened her mouth and Ryuske grabbed her shoulders and said, "You can't!"

"What?" Hikaru asked, confused.

Rin said calmly, "I warned you."

"Shut up!" Ryuske told him, "This has nothing to do with that."

Hikaru looked at both of them in confusion.

"You can't get married, after putting so much work into Mirage!" Ryuske protested.

She gazed at him with shock. "Ryuske, even if I get married, I don't have to quit Mirage," she protested.

Rin added, "There's plenty of bands that last longer than marriages."

Ryuske said unhappily, "There're plenty of marriages that last longer than bands too."

Hatsuharu said practically, "If you want Mirage to last more than 20 years, you need a younger drummer."

Hikaru laughed and asked Hatsuharu, "What? You're not planning to live to a hundred and keep playing?"

Hatsuharu grinned back at her and replied, "Maybe."

Ryuske drew a deep shuddering breath and said, "It has to be you, Mirage doesn't work, I can't be in a band unless it's you guys." He sank onto one of the stools.

They stared at him uncertainly.

Ryuske said, looking at Hikaru, "You know I was in a band before?"

She nodded.

"My... friend... died," he said.

Rin and Hatsuharu nodded. Hikaru said, "I knew something bad happened, but I didn't try to find out, because I thought you'd tell me someday if you

wanted to?" Uncertainly she asked, "Was it your lover?"

Ryuske shook his head and tried to explain. "He wasn't, he liked women, but I loved him anyway. He tried kissing me once though, because he knew, but it was no good. He told me he couldn't love me like I loved him, but that he loved my music more than anything."

He stopped speaking and sat with his hand over his mouth for a minute. No one spoke.

Eventually he continued, "It was so stupid, he got into drugs with this guy the company insisted on adding. That jerk was already into them. I couldn't stop Aisha from doing it, I didn't know how, didn't say the right things, I don't know. And then, this kid, a barely teenage girl, said he'd knocked her up. And he said he couldn't remember. He thought maybe he had done it. I told him he didn't, but he didn't believe me."

Ryuske stopped again for a bit, then said bitterly, "The company published an apology on his behalf and there was this huge scandal. Aisha committed suicide. He couldn't handle it, the drugs tipped him over the edge, I don't know. When the paternity tests came back, proving it was never him, the company tried to apologize to Edge. Tried to get us to take a new guitarist. But I just screamed at them. It was because they made us add that stupid addict who got Aisha into drugs that the whole mess started. I made them promise not to publish the results of the paternity test. Aisha wouldn't have wanted a kid who was so

desperate to be humiliated like that. And I swore I'd never have another band."

He looked at Hikaru and she reached out and took his hand. "But you needed a band," he said, clinging to her hand. Hikaru looked at him in confusion, but Rin nodded.

"When we chose the name I called Kirin, our drummer, and told him. Told him I was making a new band even though I'd sworn I never would." He swallowed painfully and said, "He laughed and told me I was the only person who ever thought I shouldn't. He reminded me that Aisha loved my music best, and said it was about time, but that he couldn't join me because he's already got a band. But I told him we've already got a drummer."

Ryuske looked at Hatsuharu who nodded back at him. "It has to be you," Ryuske said looking at Hikaru again.

She nodded and said reassuringly, "Even if I do marry Kiri, I won't quit playing. But we have to have the contract to protect him from Izumi-san," she added bitterly.

Everyone stared at her and she explained the situation in more detail.

"Christ," said Rin, "I knew you'd stopped inviting us for dinner, but I thought it was because you were embarrassed about Miri-chan being all love-love with her new husband."

Ryuske said quietly, "Sorry, I knew you were unhappy, and I've tried to accommodate all the new rules you had without complaint."

Hikaru assured him he had.

--

When they actually started the practice, Ryuske stopped them immediately. "What's wrong?" he asked Hikaru anxiously.

She blushed.

Rin looked at her and started laughing.

Ryuske stared at him.

Rin said, "She moved in with her boyfriend."

Ryuske gave him a blank uncomprehending look.

Hikaru explained, painfully embarrassed, "It was our first time."

Hatsuharu laughed and said cheerfully, "She'll be fine in a couple days." Everyone stared at him in surprise. Hatsuharu shrugged and said, "I've got three grown daughters." He grinned.

Ryuske ran his hands through his hair and said, "Fine, today we'll just run through the music. Sit," he ordered, pushing a stool at her.

--

When they finished, Hikaru called Kiri, but he was too busy to answer right away. Rin asked, "Should I take you home?"

Hikaru said, "I don't know, I was thinking maybe I'd work on packing if we're done this early."

Rin said, "I've got a couple hours to kill, let's go, I'll give you a hand for a few and visit with your mom."

She agreed and sent a message to Kiri. She received an immediate, "OK," message in return.

Ryuske asked hesitantly, "Will you need a seat tonight?"

Hikaru looked at him blankly.

Rin elbowed her and Hatsuharu snickered as he pulled on his jacket.

"Can you stand comfortably for four hours tonight, do you think?" Ryuske asked.

She nodded. "I'll manage," she said and then she followed Rin out.

--

When they entered the house, Miri greeted them with surprise. "I thought you said Sunday?" she asked Hikaru. "Rin!" she exclaimed.

Rin said, "Miri! You're as cute as ever," and swooped her up to spin around.

Miri giggled happily, though she protested, "No, I'm getting fat!"

Rin laughed. "Pregnant isn't fat," he scolded as he set her gently on her feet again. "How are you Miri-chan?" he asked. "I haven't seen you since your wedding.

Miri grinned up at him and said, "I'm well. But it's not my fault you haven't seen me, you haven't visited in ages!"

He nodded and said cautiously, "Hikaru hasn't invited us since you got married. She said she's moving in with her boyfriend?"

Miri nodded and sighed. "I didn't realize," she explained unhappily, "I was so busy being happy, I didn't realize she'd stopped inviting anyone home and hadn't been playing at home. And I let Izumi make rules for her because I thought he'd realize they weren't needed when they got to know each other better."

Hikaru opened her mouth but closed it again without saying anything.

Rin looked down at Miri and patted her head softly. "If you've been that happy, I'm glad," he said gently.

Hikaru nodded.

Miri looked at her daughter and said, "But I didn't want you to be unhappy so that I could be happy."

Hikaru hugged her and said, "I know."

Miri asked them, "Why are the two of you here?"

Rin grinned down at her and said, "We finished practice early and when Hikaru said she was thinking of coming to work on packing, I decided I wanted to see you."

Hikaru said, "Kiri is working, so I thought I might as well start while Izumi isn't here."

Miri sighed and nodded.

Rin helped for about an hour, though Hikaru thought he spent most of the time teasing her mother.

38: Pandas and butterflies.

After Rin headed home, Miri went downstairs to work on something in the kitchen, and Kiri called while Hikaru was packing her closet.

They talked for a little while, and Kiri asked how much stuff she had. Hikaru told him she didn't think they'd need more than one or two trips.

Kiri asked, "I'll come get you in a couple hours, if that's alright?"

She asked, "Do you have time to stay and help for awhile?"

He agreed that he could, and Hikaru waited happily.

--

When Kiri arrived he came up to her room and Hikaru shut the door behind him.

He raised an eyebrow at her and scooped her up and carried her to her bed.

After they'd kissed a little Kiri nuzzled her and said quietly, "I'm not carrying a condom, I'll fix that in the future."

Hikaru confessed, "I didn't shut the door so we could do that."

"Oh?" he asked curiously.

"But I like kissing you so much I got distracted," she admitted.

He grinned and kissed her again.

She laughed and hugged him tightly. "I want you to help me assemble some things," she explained.

He sighed and said sadly, "I suppose that means you want me to get off you." He bit her ear lightly.

She shivered and said, "No, but I do want to have it done."

"OK," he agreed and stood up, pulling her to her feet. He hugged her again and asked, "How are you feeling by the way?"

She shrugged, "Maybe a little better, but pretty much the same."

He winced. "OK, show me what you want to do, I'll try to do most of it so you don't have to move much?" he said.

Hikaru pulled a large box out of her closet, it had been taking up most of the space.

Kiri examined it curiously.

"It's supposed to give an ordinary bed a crib side, for babies and elderly people," she explained.

When Kiri looked at her and arched a brow she said, "When he came home for Christmas, Yuki-ni helped me paint my room in preparation for turning it into a nursery. Because it's at the top of the stairs, and you can hear kids in this room from downstairs if the door is open."

"Ah," he said.

Over an hour later they had it mostly assembled and were fighting with getting all the attachments lined up at once. Finally it clicked in. They tested it, and the bed which was built into a nook below the small window, now had a functional crib style edge. It could be raised or lowered, or the center 3/4 of it could fold down, giving a long shallow step about halfway up to the bed. Luckily, in the raised position, it didn't even interfere with the drawers below the bed.

"That's pretty cool, once it's assembled," Kiri said laughingly.

Hikaru hugged him. "Thank you," she said, leaning on his shoulder.

He hugged her against him and asked, "Is there more?"

She cupped his jaw in her fingers and kissed him gently. She said quietly, "Being willing to ask that after assembling that torture device, feels like you're saying I love you."

"I do love you," Kiri replied.

They kissed awhile more and then he laughed and asked, "So, there is more isn't there?"

Hikaru sighed and nodded. "But only small things?"

She pulled out a mobile, which they mounted over the bed, and a light switch cover, which Kiri put on while she affixed large wall stickers of pandas and butterflies to the walls and closet.

She gave Kiri the fish to attach to the stylized blue waves that ran around the bottom of the room so that she didn't have to bend so far.

When those were done she said, "That's it."

Kiri grinned and stretched and said, "OK then, give me stuff to carry down the stairs and out to the car."

Hikaru suggested, "If you stand below the rail, I can hand stuff down and you can stack it by the door, then we can both carry stuff out after?"

He agreed and she handed all the boxes and bags she'd assembled in her room down to him.

"Is that all you have?" he asked when she brought out the last one.

"No, I've got some more boxes still packed in Yuki-ni's room, from when we painted," she said, and brought those out too. "That's everything now." She asked, "Do you think it will all fit?"

Kiri looked at her in surprise and said, "Yeah, you don't have much."

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I got rid of everything that was too old or didn't fit when we moved everything out to paint."

Miri said sadly from the couch, "It's a shame you're moving out right after painting your room."

Hikaru grinned at her. "When Izumi-san gets home, I'll show you something," she told her mother.

"OK?" Miri agreed uncertainly.

Kiri told Hikaru to sit and rest with her mother while he loaded the car. She tried to protest, but he asked quietly, "Walking hurts you still doesn't it?"

She nodded reluctantly.

While he was outside, Miri asked, "Are you injured?"

Hikaru blushed deeply and shook her head.

Miri laughed and patted her daughter's shoulder. "He's right, take it easy for a couple days," she advised.

Kiri had finished loading the car before Izumi got home, but they waited the few remaining minutes. Miri fed them tea and cookies while they waited, since they refused to stay for dinner.

When Izumi finally arrived, Hikaru led them all up to her room. "Yuki-ni helped me with it and Kiri helped me finish setting it up," she said before leading them in.

"Oh Hikaru!" exclaimed Miri when she entered.

"Wow," Izumi commented.

"You were planning to leave since Christmas?" Miri asked sadly, looking at the way the new paint combined with the animal stickers to create scenes.

Hikaru shrugged and said, "Or to move into Yuki-ni's room at least, but yeah, when I graduated, I'd figured."

"It's lovely, thank you," her mother sniffled.

Hikaru grinned and said, "I'll hold a blanket over the window, you turn off the light and close the door."

The ceiling lit up with hundreds of glow in the dark stars painted onto it.

Miri squealed with delight.

Hikaru dropped the blanket and grinned at her mother.

She demonstrated how the bed edge worked. Then she said, "I'll go with Kiri now."

Miri nodded reluctantly.

Izumi frowned but didn't say anything.

Kiri hugged her when they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Ready to go home?" he asked.

Hikaru nodded.

--

When they reached Kiri's, Kazuha was waiting on the porch. Kiri had messaged him for assistance. Hikaru looked at Kiri in surprise. He grinned at her.

Kazuha came out to the car, said, "Hey," and took the box Kiri handed him.

"Go open the door for us?" Kiri asked Hikaru.

Hikaru used her key for the first time, and had the door open before the two men came up the porch.

Kiri stood in the entry for a moment and then asked, "Hikaru, where do you think we should put things?"

Hikaru shrugged and suggested, "Maybe just set the boxes in your office for now?"

Kiri nodded and he and Kazuha carried everything in. Hikaru started tea, also for the first time, but it

wasn't too awkward as she'd watched Kiri do it several times. Then she went into the office and tried to separate the incoming boxes into clothes and other stuff.

When they were done they sat at Kiri's table with a collective sigh.

"Thanks," Hikaru said.

"No problem," Kazuha replied.

Kiri scooted closer and hugged her.

Kazuha looked at the two of them and shook his head.

Hikaru blushed.

Kiri asked, "Should we order food or should I cook? If I'm cooking we need to go to the store."

"Pizza?" suggested Kazuha.

Hikaru shrugged and looked at the time. "I've still got over an hour."

"I'd rather get noodles than pizza?" Kiri said.

"Sure," Kazuha agreed.

Hikaru nodded when Kiri looked at her and said, "I'm kind of hungry so everything sounds good?"

"OK," he agreed and placed an order. It arrived quickly, so Hikaru assumed it was from somewhere close.

After they'd eaten Kazuha went home and Hikaru checked the time. She still had a little while before Mirage's performance.

39: Down a wishing well.

Kiri sighed, stretched and asked, "Want to take a bath before you go?"

"Together?" Hikaru questioned.

He laughed and hugged her tightly. "Hikaru if I take a bath with you, you'll get pregnant," he said wryly.

"That's a myth," she replied.

"Not if I'm coming inside you," he told her as he nibbled her ear, making her shiver.

"It's OK, we can take a bath together," she said breathlessly as his hands slid under her shirt and he unfastened her bra.

"Hikaru," he scolded as he cupped her breasts, "I intend to be careful with you."

His fingers rubbed in small circles and she moaned and kissed him hard. He sucked on her tongue and she shuddered. Then he stopped, and she protested and clung to him. But he stood and scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom.

They didn't stop kissing. He removed her clothing a little at a time. She unfastened his shirt and shivered

as he pressed against her. She ran her hands down his back and he groaned and bit her shoulder before pulling away to discard his pants and grab a condom. He entered her and she winced.

He pulled out and she protested, "No Kiri."

He apologized, "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

Hikaru protested, "It didn't hurt while you were inside, only when you entered and pulled out."

He bit his lip and said, "That's most of the time?"

She pulled him back into her and wrapped her legs around his hips.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now move, just don't pull out all the way?" she asked.

He moved slowly, first pressing deeper, "Does this hurt?" he asked.

She shook her head in denial.

He pulled back slowly until he saw her wince. "That hurts you," he said.

She nodded. "But not until then," she replied.

He essayed another stroke and asked, "There to there is OK?"

She nodded. He started moving in rhythm, and soon their breath matched the rhythm. She moaned

again when his fingers found her breasts, and she came shortly after.

He sped up and came quickly, but Hikaru tightened her legs around his hips and held him inside her as they clung to each other for a bit. Finally Kiri stirred and said, "Need to clean up." He kissed her.

She reluctantly released him, and he dried them both and disposed of the condom.

"I think there's not enough time for a bath now," she told him laughingly.

Kiri stuck his tongue out at her. She took a quick shower alone and then he took her to Mirage's job.

--

Hikaru didn't move around much on the stage that night, but it wasn't too bad. When they finished their last song at 1am, Kiri was waiting in his car.

"Did you go somewhere?" Hikaru asked as she buckled into the passenger seat.

"I went back to work for a couple hours." He looked at her expression and said lightly, "I wasn't avoiding your performance, I even joined your fan club while I was in China."

Hikaru laughed and asked, "What number?"

"347," he replied promptly.

--

When they got home she asked, "Do you still want to take a bath?"

He kissed her. "Hikaru," he said in a cautious tone.

"We can," she insisted quickly, "I um, I've got an implant," she said while avoiding his eyes.

"What?" he asked in surprise.

"I've got a birth control implant, though it's only supposed to be for backup, so using condoms is still good," she explained with embarrassment. She looked at him again and said, "I wasn't trying to hide it, I just couldn't figure out how to tell you. And I didn't want to tell you before we started, because it seemed like I'd be inviting you to..."

Kiri cuddled her. "I see," he said gently. "You want to take a bath together?"

She nodded.

He kissed her again. "OK," he agreed.

He scooped her up in his arms again and she laughed and said, "I can walk."

He grinned at her and replied, "And I can carry you, I might as well enjoy it until you get too heavy or I get too old." He kissed her cheek and finished carrying her to the tub. He undressed her, and then himself while it filled.

She was still embarrassed about being naked together and asked hesitantly, "How do you get used

to this?" He looked up at her and she shook her head quickly and said, "Nevermind."

Kiri pursed his lips at her thoughtfully. He hugged her against him and after a moment he said quietly, "You don't have to try to get used to things. If we're going too fast, you can just tell me Hikaru. We can slow down, even if we're living together."

"It's not too fast!" She protested quickly, and he looked at her dubiously. "It's not, I love it, it's just embarrassing," she insisted.

He arched an eyebrow at her and scooped her into his arms. "OK," he agreed. They kissed again as he lowered her into the tub.

He slid over the edge in a smooth practiced motion and they sat in the water, knees overlapping, neither speaking, just soaking.

"I need to decide if I want to take a promotion or a demotion soon," Kiri said after a while.

She looked at him curiously and asked, "Why?"

He ran his hands through his hair and explained, "We've decided to expand instead of cut back. My job will be separated into two jobs. One for the administrative stuff, making sure that every contract is being covered and that people are where they should be, when they should be. The general manager title will become the company coordinator basically."

She nodded her understanding. "And the other position?" she asked.

"It will be the rest of what I do, troubleshooting situations, covering for other managers, it will be titled field manager," he explained.

"I don't understand what makes one a promotion and the other a demotion?" she asked.

Kiri picked up the soap and began rubbing her down. She wriggled and caught his hands. He kissed her. She took the soap from him and rubbed him down with it. He didn't wriggle, he basked under her hands.

"The general manager position will have a regular schedule, and 75k a year, but will be purely a fixed salary. The field manager position won't have a regular schedule, and will still involve traveling sometimes, like I do now," he explained a little more. "The field manager will have a 50k base but still have contract bonuses," he added.

He caught her head in his hands and kissed her deeply, then released her and began washing her hair. He grinned as she went limp against him. "Does it really feel that good to have me wash your hair?"

"God yes," she replied faintly.

He smirked and continued.

"So the general manager position is a promotion because it gets paid more?" she asked after he finished.

He looked at her curiously and said, "It's difficult to say which position will pay more, but usually people think of the administrative position as being a promotion?"

She washed his hair while she thought. He distracted her with his fingers tracing lines along her back.

"It sounds more like the general manager will act as your secretary if you take the field position to me?" she said uncertainly.

Kiri laughed. He hopped out of the tub and held a towel out to her.

She looked at him feeling a little disappointed that they hadn't done more, but she slid out of the tub and into his towel covered embrace.

He bit her ear lightly and she shivere. "You said it was backup," he whispered.

She nodded.

He hugged her tightly and continued softly, "Then I'll do my best to keep our methods doubled up, at least until you're done with school."

Hikaru kissed him and they continued trading kisses as they dried off.

--

Cuddled up in bed together, Kiri commented, "I should clear closet space for you tomorrow."

"OK?" she agreed.

He laid back and tucked one arm behind his head, and said reluctantly, "The general manager position's schedule might let me spend more time with you."

Hikaru snuggled up against him and told him, "There's no guarantee of that, I have unpredictable schedules now, and who knows what the summer will be like."

He slid his free arm under and around her and pulled her tight against his side.

"Kiri, I think you should take the one that still lets you say you love your job sometimes," she said seriously.

"What if I would love the fact that I could see you more often and sleep with you every night?" he asked and kissed her.

"If that's enough that you can say I love my job because it lets me do this?" she agreed. "What things have you loved about your job so far?" she asked.

He thought for a bit and answered, "I've loved the traveling, I've loved working with most of the people, though not all, and I like that I'm helping things be created, even when it's just a 30 second commercial or something." He looked at her and added, "But I missed you like crazy while I was gone. And I have to go for a couple weeks again soon."

She hugged him tightly and nodded, "I saw in your schedule. You leave a few days after we do the competition."

He nodded.

She kissed him. They kissed for awhile and then he thrust himself against her and asked, "Do you feel well enough to?"

When she hesitated he said, "If you're doubtful, let's not, I don't want to hurt you."

Hikaru kissed him and then ran a trail of kisses down his chest and across his belly.

He sucked in a deep breath as she worked her way lower.

She looked up at him and told him, "You'll have to tell me what you want me to be doing, I'm not sure?"

"OK," he agreed.

She tried licking him and he moaned and tangled his fingers in her hair.

After a little bit, he made a suggestion. "Take the tip in your mouth and suck?" She attempted it and he winced and asked, "Can you try not to let your teeth rub?" She tried to flatten her tongue out against him. and he moaned.

After a few more adjustments, he groaned, "Yes," and pulled her into him as he thrust. She reached

up and grabbed his wrist. He released her. "What's wrong?" He begged, "Don't stop now?"

"You're suffocating me when you push my head down," she gasped breathlessly.

"Sorry," he said and shifted his hands to her shoulders.

She continued what she'd been doing before the interruption, and he came.

"God, so good," he murmured and ran his hands over her.

She wriggled up his body and laid her head against his shoulder.

She traced her fingers over his face and said quietly, "You're so pretty it makes me wonder if I'm really shallow."

He stared at her.

"I love your face, and I wanted to kiss you the first time I saw you," she said uncomfortably. "Seeing your face when you've come makes me want to do it again," she almost whispered and blushed and hid her face against his shoulder.

"Hikaru," he said uncertainly.

"Sorry," she replied, not looking at him.

"Hikaru," he said more firmly.

She pulled her face back far enough to look at him again.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm glad you find me attractive," he said seriously. "I think you are beautiful too," he ran his fingers lightly down her cheek. "But I like much more than just your face and body, and I like to think you like more than that about me too."

She nodded. He kissed her.

"Or do you think when I start to lose my hair and am getting wrinkles you'll be done with me?" he asked teasingly.

Hikaru gazed at him thoughtfully for long enough to make him nervous and then said, "I think you'll be a really cute old man. I'm looking forward to seeing you when we're old."

He hugged her against him. Then he trailed kisses down her body, stopping at each breast for awhile. When she was moaning from that treatment he moved lower.

When he spread her legs and stroked her with his tongue she gasped and said, "Kiri that feels too weird."

"Is it bad?" he stopped and asked.

"I don't know, it's too weird," she said and tried to pull him up.

He followed the pressure of her hands up and kissed her gently. "What do you want then?" he asked.

"I want you to just do me?" she replied with embarrassment.

"OK," he agreed, and pulled out a condom.

But when he entered her she winced. And when he moved a little she winced again.

"This is no good," he said.

Reluctantly she agreed.

He pulled out and removed the condom.

Hikaru looked at him unhappily.

He kissed her and stroked her with his fingers. "Is this too weird?" he asked.

She shook her head and asked, "Can you use your mouth on my breasts too?" He lowered his head and sucked and she arched into him and tangled her fingers in his hair. "Kiri, kiss me?" she begged as his fingers made her ache for him. He kissed her hard and and she came at last, shuddering beneath him.

"How do people manage on their honeymoons?" she asked after her pulse had slowed.

"Hmm?" he murmured the inquiry against her skin.

"If the first time makes you this sore for a few days?" she expanded the question.

Kiri kissed her and replied, "I don't think most people are virgins on their wedding night, and I'm not sure." He looked at her and added with embarrassment, "You're the first virgin I've had sex with."

Hikaru stared at him.

He shrugged.

"Oh," she said.

He kissed her again and they cuddled together. She noted that he was still aroused and stroked him with her fingers.

"You don't have to do something just because I'm hard," he said quietly.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked.

"God no," he said, and reached down to adjust her fingers and show her how he wanted her to move her hand. Then he kissed her and kept kissing her until he came again.

"You really are so beautiful," Hikaru whispered. He laughed helplessly. She got the tissues to dry them off this time. When they were comfortable again he turned out the light.

Hikaru's alarm went off too early. She struggled reluctantly out of bed. The alarm hadn't lied and it was time to get ready for Sunday.

Hikaru fought with her hair in front of the mirror until Kiri looked in and asked if he could help. She looked at him dubiously. "My mother has always put it up for me on Sundays," she said.

Kiri surprised her by taking her comb and doing her hair in a french braid. "I can do simple braids," he said, "and I'm sure I can learn more."

When she expressed her surprise he grinned at her and reminded her, "Mostly raised by women." He stuck his tongue out at her. She kissed him.

He held her for a moment and asked, "When do you think we might be able to take a few days off and travel?" He suggested, "Spring break?"

Hikaru sighed. "I don't know, maybe, we usually have more jobs then but I could ask." She looked at Kiri uncertainly and said, "See, I told you my schedule is as much a problem as yours."

He hugged her and replied, "Speaking of schedules, I have next Tuesday off but since things got messed up, there's something on my schedule every evening until then. Can I have that whole afternoon with you?"

She nodded. "You're working again today?" she asked.

He nodded. "Probably until about six."

--

Kiri delivered her downtown to play at Kaoru's restaurant and went to work. When Hikaru finished at two, her mother and uncle were waiting for her with lunch. When they inquired of Kiri's absence she explained that he was working.

"Why are we having lunch together?" Hikaru asked.

Kaoru held his hand to his heart in mock agony and said to his older sister, "Family is no good to her any more."

Hikaru thumped her uncle's arm while her mother giggled.

"I decided that even if you've moved out, we should eat together at least once a week. And Izumi can either spare me for a couple hours or come along. So I'll come have lunch with you and Kao-chan every Sunday, Kiri-kun too, when he has time," Miri declared.

"OK," Hikaru agreed.

They had a leisurely lunch, and Hikaru returned to her new home at about 4pm. The bus route from downtown was about the same length as the one that ran to her mother's home, just out to a different section of the city.

She tackled her abandoned homework reluctantly and was still struggling with it when Kiri finally got home. She'd already called Risa and Shizuoka a dozen times for help.

Kiri hugged her and asked, "Do you want to stay and work on it, or will you come out grocery shopping with me? I'll try to help later?"

"I'll come," she replied.

He grinned at her and pulled her up.

"Is it far, will we be walking or driving?" she asked.

He hesitated.

"You usually drive?" she guessed.

He nodded. "There is a small store that we could walk to, but there is a market I prefer farther away."

"OK," she said, "we can drive, though I'd like to visit the closer one sometime just so I know where it is if I need it."

"OK," he agreed.

--

While they were picking out vegetables Hikaru grinned at him suddenly. Kiri raised an eyebrow at her. "We're grocery shopping together," she explained.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Yes," he agreed.

They did the rest of the shopping hand in hand.

--

Kiri cooked while Hikaru wrestled the rest of her homework into submission. Occasionally she asked him things.

He laughed after one question and said, "I never thought I'd ever need to know this stuff again, it's like the pop quiz I always dreaded. I have no idea on that one."

Hikaru sighed and did an internet search. She looked up at Kiri after she'd finished with that section and said, "I don't think I've ever said thank you."

Kiri looked at her curiously, "For what?"

"For the phone, it's probably paid for itself with how useful it's been just in using it for homework," she explained.

Kiri grinned at her and said, "I'm glad."

--

After supper and homework were finished, Kiri tackled his closets.

"Wow," Hikaru exclaimed in amazement, "you have so many clothes."

Kiri looked at her a little embarrassed. "I like shopping, I like having nice clothes and then I have favorites that are too worn but I'm reluctant to get rid

of. This section is all for work though," he added, indicating one side.

He pulled out things he thought should be discarded or that he never wore. When he pulled out a formal kimono, Hikaru stopped him. "You can't get rid of that!" she protested.

"I never wear it," he replied.

"I'd love to see you wear it," she insisted.

He laughed. "But I need to make room for your things."

Hikaru looked at the closet storage system and asked, "What's in the drawers? I only have a few things I've kept on hangers, I'm used to keeping my clothes in drawers."

Kiri opened the drawers below the closets. Only about half were full. The only clothes Kiri kept in drawers were socks, underwear and T-shirts, and even most of his T-shirts were hanging in the closets above.

"Are you sure?" He asked when Hikaru had claimed six of the drawers and about six inches of closet space.

She laughed as she emptied the last box that held clothing. "This is all of my clothes," she said, grinning at him.

Kiri frowned at her.

"What?" she asked.

"I wish you hadn't made me agree not to take you shopping," he said.

Wryly she asked, "My clothes seem that insufficient to you?"

He hesitated before answering, "I'd like it if you had a few more dressy things." He looked at her uncertainly, but she wasn't offended. "I'm planning to take you out to dinner on Tuesday," he added.

Hikaru cuddled up to him and said, "I didn't say that we can't go shopping, if that's what you want to do, only that I don't want you to buy me things."

He laughed and asked, "Window shopping?"

Hikaru shrugged and replied, "I can buy something every couple months or so?"

Kiri winced.

She ran her fingers through his hair and said, "I already agreed to let you pay for so much."

He nodded and hugged her tightly.

She looked at the open closets and laughed.

"Hmm?" he enquired.

"Even though I just got something dressy, I still don't own a dress," she said.

He kissed her earring and nodded.

"I guess if you want I could get one sooner than a couple months," she offered.

"I'd like that, but if you don't like dresses, I don't mind if you don't have any," he said quietly.

"It's not that," she replied with embarrassment.

"What then?" he asked.

"It's really hard to find a dress that doesn't show my scars," she confessed. "At least that doesn't also look too old fashioned."

Kiri looked at her speculatively. "Are you sure I can't buy you one?" he asked.

Hikaru raised an eyebrow at him. "Why should you buy it?"

He grinned at her and ran his hands down her back. "Because I want to see you in it?" he suggested.

When she frowned at him he added, "And the kind of thing I am imagining I'm pretty certain would strain your budget."

Hikaru looked at him unhappily. "Nevermind," he said, and slid his hands under her shirt. "I don't care what you're wearing, I like it all."

Eventually they fell asleep in a contented tangle.

... H, R and S

After school Hikaru consulted Risa and Shizuoka about the problem of dresses. They'd spent their breaks quizzing her about what all had happened over the weekend.

Risa excitedly proposed that she make Hikaru a dress, saying that if Hikaru let her use her as a model, they wouldn't even need to buy the material.

Risa liked sewing, Hikaru's mother had taught her some when they were younger and she'd worked on learning more. She was enrolled in a crafting class that was going to hold a fashion show for the last school festival that they'd be participating in.

Hikaru was dubious about being a model.

"You spend half your time on stage anyway," Shizuoka pointed out.

"Hardly half," Hikaru said laughingly.

Risa begged, "Let me design for you anyway."

Hikaru gave in.

Shizuoka commented, "I don't see what you've got against letting him buy you a dress or two anyway, when you're already living with him."

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I don't want him to have to pay for everything."

Risa told her, "It's like you don't quite trust him, or you're afraid to owe him."

Hikaru stared at her in shock.

Risa said defensively, "I'm not saying you should be that dependant on him or anything."

Hikaru protested, "I trust him and I'm not afraid, I just..." She couldn't explain her reluctance.

"You just don't want to be a burden," Shizuoka replied practically. "But are you being less of a burden by refusing to let him dress you up?"

Hikaru had no answer for that.

...

When she got home Kiri was just stepping out of the bathroom. He was wrapped in a cotton yukata and Hikaru said in a low voice, "Oh wow."

He grinned at her, surprised by her reaction.

She approached him tentatively as he settled beside the table.

"You look so good," she said as she slid to the floor beside him.

He leaned over and kissed her.

"I mean, you always look good," she continued, "but you look like something out of a painting, or a dream," she babbled nervously.

Kiri laughed and grabbed her and pulled her into his lap to kiss. "If I get this kind of reaction, maybe I should start wearing traditional clothes at home?" He suggested between kisses.

"Yes, please," Hikaru murmured.

She opened the robe and he shivered beneath her touch. Abruptly she stood up and pulled him to his feet and into the bedroom.

A bit later she told him with surprise, "It doesn't hurt."

"Good," he whispered.

When they finished she looked ruefully at her hastily discarded uniform. "It needs washed anyway," she said.

Kiri laughed, pulled the yukata back on and collected the laundry.

"I feel like I should be doing more chores," Hikaru fretted as she rummaged through the drawers she'd just filled.

Kiri returned and kissed her lightly. "The bath is still ready," he suggested, and eyed the clothes she'd pulled out.

--

"This is a cute outfit," he said, looking at her when she came out of the bathroom.

She shrugged and replied, "The pants are stage clothes." She was wearing white jeans with diamond cutouts sporting little white bows between them, running down the outside seams. Her top was the comfortable grey one that her mother had declared unsuitable for her first date with Kiri.

"Stage clothes?" he asked.

"Risa modified them, and I usually only wear them for performing," she explained.

Kiri cooked and Hikaru did homework and this became their usual pattern. After they'd eaten he kissed her and sighed and reluctantly returned to work for a late meeting.

--

Tuesday and Thursday Hikaru had jobs. Wednesday she'd had practice, which had been shifted later to accommodate Hatsuharu's attendance since Hikaru didn't have to keep a curfew anymore.

As she cuddled against Kiri late Thursday night, Hikaru mentioned, "I spoke to my old employer, where I was doing night stocking. He agreed to talk to Alex, he's a bouncer I know, that works at Yukito's place. Tonight he said I'd been instrumental in finding him a shift there that worked with his other jobs."

Kiri hugged her and replied, "Well done."

A little later she also told him, "It is so amazing."

"What?" he asked a little sleepily.

"How much less stressful it is to be able to come home to you when I'm done, rather than at a specific time, even if it winds up being the same time."

Kiri grinned at her and let her know with both words and body that he found both coming home to her and waiting for her to come home to him to be delightful.

41: Time only rushes faster.

Friday Mirage played. Saturday morning Kiri worked and Mirage practiced. Ryuske complemented Rin and Hikaru on their improvement and said he was pleased by everyone's extended stamina. Since they knew they were opening the competition, they'd chosen two songs to concentrate on and their performance had at last achieved a smooth flow.

--

Saturday afternoon Kiri was off and they started out with a delightful hour in bed. Afterward Hikaru lay beside him and looked at Kiri uncertainly.

"What?" he asked and ran his fingers over her hip making her shiver.

"Kiri," she said, "I've been thinking about it all week. I don't want to be a burden, and I don't want to be expensive," she hesitated and he watched her calmly. "But I don't really care how I'm dressed as

long as it doesn't show anything embarrassing, "she finished.

He looked at her with surprise. "OK?" he said uncertainly, not sure what she was trying to communicate.

"Risa is designing me a dress, but it won't be done for weeks. How do you want me to dress for our date on Tuesday? Do you still want to dress me up?" she asked.

Wryly he said, "I do. I want to dress you in something long, silky and shimmering."

She looked at him and pointed out, "I don't have anything like that."

He shrugged and said, "That's why I wish I could take you shopping."

"OK," she replied.

He stared at her for a moment. "Really?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. She looked at him uncertainly.

He looked at her expression and said, "I don't want to make you uncomfortable or make you feel like you're being expensive, but I would love to dress you up."

"OK," she replied, and headed for the bath.

Kiri looked after her uncertainly then followed.

--

They took the bus downtown. "I have all afternoon," Kiri said when Hikaru asked, "And you're more comfortable this way."

They walked hip to hip, Kiri's arm around her waist. He led her to a very expensive shop and Hikaru looked at him dubiously.

He grinned at her and said, "Only if you're really willing?"

She shrugged, and he guided her inside.

The assistants asked what they were looking for, Hikaru expected Kiri to answer and so a few moments passed in silence. Kiri looked at her and raised his brows.

Hikaru blushed and said, "Um, something with long sleeves and a high neckline that covers at least to the knees?"

The assistants gazed at her dubiously but the shorter one rallied and guided her around to a few possibilities. She also ducked into the back and brought out a few more options. "Most of these will need alterations to fit you well," she cautioned.

Just as they were entering the fitting room, a long silky shimmer of color caught her eye, and Hikaru scooped up the dress and carried it in with them.

The assistant looked at it askance and said, "That one doesn't meet all your requirements?"

Hikaru replied uncomfortably, "I guess I should show you, I think it will cover most of them."

The assistant regarded her with confusion until Hikaru removed her top. "Oh," she said faintly, looking at the scars. She had Hikaru try on the one that had caught her eye first.

From the front room they heard the bell and then a woman's voice, "Kiri! Darling, I haven't seen you in ages!"

Kiri replied more quietly, "Siena." And after a pause he said, "Don't."

The woman said, "Ah, I get it, you're here with a new woman. Of course you would be." She sighed audibly.

Kiri must have made some acknowledgement, because she confessed, "That's too bad, sometimes I miss dating you."

Kiri said firmly, "Don't Siena."

Hikaru stood frozen but the assistant fussed around her with pins and whispered, "Don't worry, you'll look fantastic when you go out."

Kiri continued quietly and a little coolly, "I'm not interested in dating you again."

Hikaru blinked and looked in the mirror. She did look rather fantastic. The dress was long, but slit almost all the way up the right side. The silky fabric shimmered a little in the light, and the color had been what made Hikaru pick it up. It ran from teal to

peacock blue to black in a smooth wave marked with a black petal design. The top had long sleeves, but sections of it were cut away along the design pattern and filled with black gauze. She frowned at the places where her scars showed through a little.

The attendant commented, "You're so lucky to have small breasts." Since she was currently pinning up loose material in that area, Hikaru regarded her dubiously. "You don't even need a bra to wear this," the attendant explained enviously.

Hikaru supposed that was fortunate, as any of her bras would show through the gauze sections even more than her scars. She was hesitant about following the attendant out, but did so after taking a deep breath.

Kiri stood when she came out and said, "Wow, we are getting that one."

Hikaru laughed and replied, "I haven't even tried on any of the others."

Kiri said agreeably, "You can get more than one if you like."

"Kiri!" she protested, and he grinned at her.

The small voluptuous woman who was looking at a dress the second assistant was showing her looked at Hikaru and said caustically, "You may look beautiful while he's playing with you, but when he's done you'll have to go back to being yourself."

Hikaru glanced down at the dress and said, "I guess it really suits me then."

Kiri gaped at the woman in surprise. "I didn't just play with you Siena, and you broke up with me and it hasn't changed your appearance at all," he protested after a moment. He looked at Hikaru apologetically, stepped over to her and hugged her. Then he introduced them to each other. "Kotaro Siena, we dated about two years ago. Hitoshi Hikaru, my fiancé."

Hikaru glanced at him.

Siena exclaimed, "No way!" She looked down at Hikaru's hands and said, "You're lying, there's no ring."

Kiri laughed and replied, "You're just looking in the wrong place."

Siena stared at him blankly.

Kiri looked at Hikaru and blushed when he met her gaze.

Hikaru said quietly, "It's OK Kiri." Then she added, "This dress looks pretty good, I guess, but it shows through a little around the top."

He gave her a look. "No one will ever notice, and you are freaking gorgeous," he told her softly.

Then he asked the assistant how long until it could be ready. They were told about half an hour to have the adjustments finished.

Siena said, "Good, you can help me choose something while you wait. I've missed having your advice."

Kiri frowned at her. She dimpled back at him. Hikaru watched uncertainly.

Kiri looked at Hikaru and asked, "What do you want to do? I won't help her if you don't want to. Should we go somewhere while it's done?"

Hikaru reached out and touched his earring. "We can wait if you want," she said.

Kiri caught her hand and kissed it. "OK," he said with a relieved grin.

Hikaru followed the assistant back into the dressing room and pulled on her own clothes. The assistant didn't fuss about having her try on the others. She did ask, "Should we add a touch of padding?"

When Hikaru looked at her dubiously, she explained, "Just a little, it will reduce the amount we'll have to take out and give a smoother outline since you're not wearing a bra with it?"

"OK," Hikaru agreed.

The dress was carried into the back for alterations and Hikaru rejoined Kiri. "Only the one then?" he teased.

She nodded.

They sat on the chairs and held hands while they waited. Kiri's ex, Siena was apparently serious about

having Kiri pick something for her and tried on a half dozen things, modeling each one to them.

Hikaru ventured, looking at the latest choice, "Do you have to try so hard? You're really beautiful, so do you have to avoid everything more conservative?"

Siena frowned at her and said, "I don't want to look conservative."

Kiri said dryly, "But you don't need to look like you're about to fall out of your clothes. You didn't used to choose things quite so, um, so dramatic?"

Siena frowned at them and the next outfit she showed them was less flamboyant.

Kiri nodded appreciatively and Hikaru shot him a glance. He shrugged at her. She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

Siena looked at them and said, "I guess it was true, ha. Congratulations."

Hikaru looked from her to Kiri who grinned at her and she blushed.

Finally Siena found an outfit that made Kiri say, "Get that one." Hikaru silently agreed and gave Kiri another look.

The alterations on Hikaru's new dress were finished and she put it on to make sure of the fit. She showed Kiri and he said, "Keep it on, please."

She put on her shoes, collected her things and looked down at her grey sandals ruefully.

Kiri simply paid for it and led her down the street into a shoe store.

After Hikaru tried on several styles she tried on a pair of simple black, barely there, sandals. "These are surprisingly comfortable," she said, and then looked at their price tag and added, "Of course."

Kiri glanced at her and grinned. "We'll get those then," he told her.

"Kiri," she protested.

He picked up the box and her grey sandals and said, "You have no idea how many fun dates are ruined by uncomfortable shoes."

Hikaru looked down at her feet and sighed. "OK," she gave in.

He looked at her and raised his brows questioningly at her easy submission.

She shrugged, "They barely show, they'll go with practically anything."

He grinned and leaned in to kiss her.

Then they took the bus home and Kiri cooked while Hikaru worked on her weekend homework. She somehow finished it all and Kiri dropped her off at Ryuske's for Mirage's Saturday night gig, on his way to an evening recording session he was overseeing.

Sunday Kiri made time to have brunch with Hikaru's family, but then was away overnight. Hikaru tossed restlessly that night, surprised at how used to sleeping in his arms or cuddled against his warmth she'd become.

42: Turtles for life.

On Tuesday they took the bus again. When they arrived at the restaurant Kiri had made his reservation at, Hikaru said quietly, "I may be dressed up enough to fit in here, but I really want to run over and press my nose against the glass."

Kiri laughed and said, "You can if you wish, I'm sure it won't be the first nose print they've had to wash off."

Hikaru frowned at him.

Kiri just grinned at her and requested a table near the windows.

Hikaru stared down at the surprising number of rooftop parks and gardens.

When the menu arrived, she looked at it for a bit and then asked, "I am guessing you'll let me order anything on here without complaint tonight?"

Kiri looked at her and grinned again. "Of course," he replied.

He laughed when Hikaru ordered the pasta, one of the least expensive things on the menu. "That was a trick," he accused after their server had left.

Hikaru looked at him steadily, "I did ask first," she pointed out.

He nodded. "But it seems a bit of a waste of opportunity," he said.

"I like pasta," she said a little defensively, "I hardly ever get to eat it."

Kiri asked, "Would you like me to make it occasionally at home then?"

Hikaru nodded and told him, "Please, if you don't mind."

Kiri got up and then knelt by her seat. Hikaru looked down at him in surprise.

He put his hand on her thigh and said, "Hikaru, I'm sorry I referred to you as my fiancé without asking first the other day."

Hikaru blushed and felt distinctly aware of each of his fingers against her thigh through the thin material of the dress. "It's OK," she replied. "I am, we even have paperwork that says so."

He smiled up at her and pulled out a jewelry box, and then snapped it open one handed and showed her the little platinum sea turtles inside. "I picked up our order this morning," he said quietly.

Hikaru laughed nervously and said, "Kiri, I bet it looks like you're proposing with you kneeling and holding a jewelry box."

He looked at her a little unhappily and she leaned forward and hugged him. "Nevermind," she told him. He sighed and set the little box on the table and hugged her tightly. "Sorry," she apologized, "I just get embarrassed sometimes."

He nodded and turned his face to kiss her. She kissed him and forgot about anyone who might be watching. After they'd kissed for a minute, Kiri looked at the box with the earrings. "These sea turtles," Kiri asked seriously, "are you ready, do you want to wait?"

"I'm ready," she said firmly.

Kiri picked up the box and withdrew one of the earrings, he pulled an alcohol wipe from his pocket and carefully washed it. Then he reached up and his fingers were warm against her ear, but she shivered as he slipped out the gold starter and snapped the permanent platinum turtle into place.

Hikaru withdrew the other one and he cautioned her to keep it separate until it was in. She washed it with the wipe and then nervously removed the gold earring from his ear. She dropped it and he caught her as she bent and told her, "I'll find it in a minute." She picked up the little turtle and inserted it, it snapped into place, and Kiri grinned up at her. She kissed him again.

He touched her ear and whispered, "I love you Hikaru."

She blushed again and said, "Me too, I love you too." She hugged him tightly.

He caressed her through the thin material of her dress, but after a few minutes of warm kisses and caresses, he sat back. Hikaru released him reluctantly and he searched the floor until he found the gold starter, which he dropped into the case with the other one and then snapped it shut.

They kissed again until their food arrived, then Kiri returned to his seat. Hikaru sighed as she ate.

Kiri looked at her and asked, "Is it bad?"

"No, it's delicious," she said.

He looked at her curiously.

"I just wish this were the kind of place we could cuddle while we eat," she confessed.

Kiri grinned at her, and laid his arm across the table. Hikaru took his offered hand and he squeezed her fingers lightly.

They declined dessert when it was offered. Kiri wrapped around her, holding her against him as they rode the elevator back down the tall building.

When they reached the bottom he wrapped one arm around her waist so they were walking hip to hip again. Without speaking, but occasionally stopping to kiss for a moment, they walked to the bus station and

boarded their bus. Kiri pulled her into his lap when they sat, and she cuddled into him as they rode home.

When they finally reached their door Kiri unlocked it and resumed kissing her. His fingers traced the slit in her skirt and then slid underneath as he guided her into the house without pausing in his kisses.

He slid the skirt upward and his fingers had just caught hold of the band of her underwear when a woman's voice snapped, "Send your girl home Kiri and pay some attention to your guest."

Kiri froze and Hikaru shifted to look over his shoulder incredulously.

"Oka-san, what the hell are you doing here?!" Kiri exclaimed breathlessly.

"Kiri," gasped Hikaru, "that," she pointed, "is your 'old mother'? She's beautiful!"

Kiri's mother glared at her and Kiri flushed. "It is," he replied.

His mother stared at them with compressed lips.

"Um, hi," Hikaru said uncertainly.

"Go home!" snapped Kiri's mother.

"Oka-san!" Kiri protested.

"Uh, hi, I'm home?" Hikaru ventured.

His mother stared at them.

Kiri said, "This is Hitoshi Hikaru, my fiancé. She's living with me." Kiri gave his mother a long look. "Now tell me why you're here when I just bought you a new roof so you could be comfortable at home?"

His mother replied wryly, "You just bought me a new roof, that's why I'm here, no one could be comfortable in that noise. I left Toshi to oversee things and came to visit you."

Kiri sighed and leaned his face into Hikaru's shoulder and muttered, "I'm sorry."

Hikaru said, "Um then, I guess I'll change and work on homework until bedtime."

Kiri said, "I'll come with you," and hugged her against him as they slid out of their shoes and crossed the room. At the little hall he stopped and slid the door they'd never used closed across the entrance. When he followed Hikaru into the bedroom he slid that door closed too. Then he pulled her tighter against him and asked plaintively, "Can we finish before we change?"

Hikaru laughed nervously and Kiri sighed. "I suppose the mood is completely dead," he said reluctantly.

"Not completely," Hikaru said while blushing and she rocked her hips against him. She'd felt him pressing against her as they'd walked.

Kiri moaned a little and kissed her hard. His hands sought the fastenings on her dress, but he quickly gave up and simply slid her skirt up and her

underwear down as he backed her into the bed. He pulled a condom out of his pocket as he slid his slacks off.

He entered her as he pushed her down and they landed with him buried in her. Hikaru clung to him and he kissed her as he moved inside her. She shivered beneath him. They finished quickly.

"Wow," she said breathlessly.

Kiri nuzzled her and kissed her again. She quivered as an aftershock passed through her and groaned a little when he withdrew.

Kiri grinned at her and said quietly, "I love you like crazy and you are so freaking sexy right now." He kissed her again as he dried them off.

Hikaru caressed his cheek and said, "I think the sexy one is you." And she kissed him once more.

Kiri hugged her against him kissed her nose and said quietly, "If we don't get up now, I'm going to just keep you in bed all night, my mother be damned."

Hikaru sighed and said reluctantly, "I guess we better get up then, because I really do need to do my homework."

Kiri winced and sighed. "Sorry," he said. He reluctantly released her and ran his hands down her back. "I don't see how it opens," he complained.

Hikaru grinned at him and lifted her arm. He ran his hand down her side and she wriggled as his hand

sliding along her ribs tickled her. He found the tail of the zipper at her hip and ran it up her side.

"That's different," he said.

Hikaru laughed and agreed. She pulled the dress off and Kiri asked "Quick shower?"

She nodded. He bent and ran his tongue over her skin. She quivered and he stood and grabbed another condom and her hand and pulled her into the bathroom. He started the shower head over the tub with one hand.

Their shower took a little longer than they'd managed while getting ready in a hurry in the morning.

43: Mother.

Hikaru followed Kiri back into the living area shyly. Kiri was in his yukata and Hikaru was in what she thought of as one of her sets of guest pajamas. She hadn't wanted him to stop, but was embarrassed that his mother had probably heard them.

Kiri's mother had gotten out extra cups and made more tea. She surveyed them with a bland expression. Hikaru grabbed her school bag and pulled out her homework before she sat.

"No ring," she observed. Hikaru looked up uncertainly. But Kiri simply tapped his own ear and then Hikaru's.

"I see," said his mother.

Hikaru looked at her and asked shyly, recalling how Kiri's sister had reacted to onee-sama, "How would you like me to call you?"

"I expect you'd should call me oka-sama, if you're serious about my son," she replied.

"OK," agreed Hikaru.

Kiri kissed Hikaru's cheek and suggested, "Feel like dessert if I make something?"

Hikaru nodded. He hugged her and then stood and went into the kitchen. "Oka-san?" he inquired when she didn't volunteer an opinion.

"Sure, why not," she replied. "How long has this been going on?"

Hikaru blushed again as Kiri replied, "A bit over a month."

"Fast," she commented dryly.

Kiri looked at her and belatedly told Hikaru, "My mother's name is Tokiko." To his mother he said, "Why are you staying with me instead of onee-chan? And why didn't you warn me? And how long are you staying?"

Tokiko looked at her son and asked, "Who could sleep comfortably in that mob?" And then she answered, "I didn't warn you because if I warn you

you take off on a business trip shortly after I arrive, and I plan to stay a week."

Hikaru looked up at that and said, "He's leaving again in less than a week." Kiri's mother looked at her and sighed and she quickly added, "But you can still stay for the whole week if you like."

Kiri asked from his position at the stove, "Are you sure? You don't have to agree to it if you're uncomfortable, this is your house too."

Hikaru stared at him. "Kiri, she's your mother," she protested.

He nodded and replied calmly, "And she has three other children she could go bother if she felt like."

Hikaru said uncomfortably, "It's fine, even if we don't wind up getting along well, we can manage for a few days."

"OK," he agreed.

Tokiko observed Hikaru quietly.

Hikaru worked her way through the assignment with grim determination. At one point she stopped and asked Kiri a question on the math formula.

He answered easily and added, "I wish all your assignments were math, math makes sense at least. I can help with it."

Hikaru laughed and said, "I'm just as glad it's not all math."

Kiri presented them with small warm chocolate cakes filled with a light fruit jelly and topped with melting cream. They were exquisite and delicious.

Tokiko quizzed her son and occasionally Hikaru while they enjoyed the dessert.

Eventually Hikaru finished her homework, then she asked, "Do you need anything before we go to bed oka-sama?"

Tokiko said she had everything she needed and had already prepared her bed. She indicated the couch which had been folded down into a bed.

Hikaru shyly bid her goodnight. Then she told Kiri, "I need to sleep, but if you want to stay up and visit, that's fine?"

Kiri kissed her and said, "I'll come to bed in a few minutes. I have to work too."

--

In the morning Hikaru dressed while Kiri laid in bed after mumbling, "Just a few more minutes."

She opened the hall door quietly and stared at the table. Then she ran back into the bedroom and said, "Kiri, you have to get up! Your mother made breakfast and it's amazing!"

Kiri sat up and stared blankly at her. "OK," he said at last.

Hikaru ventured back into the main room where Tokiko was just settling at the table.

Kiri's mother stared at her with a somewhat shocked look before resuming a neutral expression.

Hikaru complimented the meal and asked if it were OK to begin eating. After receiving approval she filled her bowl and ate enthusiastically.

After a few minutes Kiri joined them. He sat and began eating without a word. Hikaru elbowed him and he grinned at her.

"This is a normal breakfast," he told her.

"You are so spoiled," she replied. Then she asked his mother, "Oka-sama did you sleep enough? You must have gotten up so early?"

Tokiko replied, "Not so early, only about an hour ago. I slept well."

They ate in silence for a few minutes and then Tokiko looked at her son and asked, "A high-school girl?"

Kiri stopped eating for a moment and looked at his mother. He shrugged.

Hikaru said, "Only for another couple months."

Tokiko said, "Oh," and asked her, "are you already eighteen then?"

Hikaru shook her head and finished her mouthful before saying, "Seventeen until July."

Kiri's mother frowned at him darkly.

They dashed out the door together a few minutes later and Kiri delivered Hikaru to school and then somewhat reluctantly went home again, the first thing on his work schedule wasn't until 10:15 this morning.

When he returned his mother was almost finished doing dishes and ordered him to sit at the table. He sighed and sat.

She joined him a few minutes later and asked, "What do you think you're doing to that child?"

Kiri grinned at her and replied, "Everything she enjoys."

Tokiko snapped and said, "I'm serious you idiot. If you love her, you should be waiting for her."

Kiri regarded his mother soberly and replied, "No, the right time for me to be there for her is now. I hope that I'll always be right for her, and I hope to marry her, but only time will tell."

"How can this situation be right? What led to this?" she asked skeptically.

Kiri sighed. He said, "She's not a child, about some things she's smarter than I am. And stuff happened." His mother regarded him skeptically and he explained about how Hikaru had come to live with him before, instead of after graduation. He told his mother most of what he knew about Hikaru before it was time for him to leave for work.

She stubbornly refused to approve the situation.

Kiri told his mother bluntly, "I don't give a damn if you approve or not. I think you'll either love each other or hate each other, and I don't know which scares me more, but if you're staying with us, you won't bully her," he said firmly.

Tokiko asked her son, "When have I ever bullied one of your girlfriends?"

Kiri laughed and asked, "When have you ever not?"

She sniffed at him and said, "I won't pretend that everything is lovely and that I approve of the situation, but I'm holding you responsible, not that child."

Kiri laughed as he went out the door and called back, "That's fine. She'll surprise you."

Hikaru returned between school and Mirage's practice. She was shocked to see Kiri's mother curled up on the couch with a cup of tea and a book and belatedly said, "I'm home."

"Welcome home," Tokiko replied.

Hikaru grinned at her and confessed, "I forgot you were here." She asked politely, "Are you having a good day Oka-sama?" while she set up her homework at the little table.

Tokiko allowed that she was, and eyed the girl evaluatingly. Hikaru looked even younger and somewhat gawky in her school uniform.

Hikaru changed into loose jeans and a pullover for practice later, and started some rice in Kiri's fancy cooker. She politely asked, "Should I put in any for you? Do you want anything before I work on my homework?"

Tokiko suggested that she put in enough for supper since she was starting rice this late in the day.

Hikaru complied easily. She answered Kiri's mother's inquiry about her schedule a little apologetically. "Today I've only got a couple hours, then several hours practice, tomorrow I've got a job from four to seven, and Friday my band is entering a competition and we're holding a two hour concert in the park after."

Then she gave Kiri's mother an odd look. Tokiko raised an eyebrow at her. "I have this Saturday completely off, and there is nothing on Kiri's schedule yet," she said uncertainly.

"And you were planning a date?" Tokiko suggested.

Hikaru nodded and said wistfully, "It will be the first day we've ever gotten to spend together from morning 'til night."

Tokiko looked at her with surprise.

Hikaru explained, "We've only been dating for awhile, and I just moved in with Kiri a week and a half ago."

Tokiko said briskly, "Well, you may continue with whatever you had planned, you needn't cancel your plans to spend the day with me."

Hikaru sighed and offered, "I don't mind what we do as long as we're together all day, and Kiri leaves on Sunday morning while I'm at work, you won't have much opportunity to visit before he goes."

Tokiko shrugged and replied, "I'm used to hardly seeing my son these days."

After she finished her homework and ate a quick bowl of rice, Hikaru grabbed her guitar and prepared to leave. She laughed as a thought struck her and said in reply to Tokiko's curious look, "Everyone else has started out by saying I'm not Kiri's usual type, but you've never said anything like that."

Tokiko raised an eyebrow and said, "I find you to be exactly his type." Hikaru looked at her with surprise and she explained, "He seems drawn to strong personalities. Just as well, because while it makes for some stormy relationships, he'd probably overwhelm a meek and compliant woman." She took a quiet sip of her tea.

Hikaru grinned at her and asked boldly, "Like his mother?"

Tokiko grinned back and Hikaru went to her final pre-competition practice.

Ryuske was pleased with them, but demanding at this final opportunity to tweak their moves. He had Hikaru and Rin go over some sections over and over, but then he had a surprise for them. Hatsuharu grinned broadly as they saw his wife and eldest daughter setting up speakers in the little park where they'd been practicing the more energetic moves in the last few weeks. A few people had gathered to watch.

Hatsuharu's plump wife grinned back at them as they approached and said, "Practice for us all. I never realized how much work goes into setting up, but we'll be able to handle the concert setup, no problem. The instructions Ryuske-kun wrote were very comprehensive."

They carried Hatsuharu's drums over and set them in place. Ryuske had them take their places and perform their competition entry from start to finish.

"Four minutes and fifty-five seconds," he announced with a pleased grin when they finished.

Their small audience applauded and they packed up the equipment and went to dinner.

The familiar staff at The Pavilion welcomed them and their usual wide corner booth was free. Mirage and Hatsuharu's family chatted happily about their upcoming entry.

"I'm still kind of surprised we got in, even with the starter slot," Rin observed.

Ryuske glanced up at him and said quietly, "It may be conceit, but I think we may be in on the strength of my name. And yours."

Hikaru looked at them curiously and Rin laughed and said, "Kobayashi Ryuske still holds a bit of fame in some circles."

Ryuske elbowed him and said to Hikaru, "Rin's holds more in more circles."

Hatsuharu grinned and said cheerfully, "Mirage will soon outshine both of you!"

Everyone laughed and agreed.

Hikaru asked, "I don't quite understand how this will help us, only the winner usually gets a recording deal don't they?"

Rin pursed his lips and said, "Untrue, and even the winner doesn't always get a good offer, but some years bands who made a good impression get offers even if they don't place in the actual competition."

"Besides which, the companies we're approaching with demo tracks are our targets, we're not waiting for them to approach us. We just need people to recognize our name enough that we don't fall to the bottom of the slush pile." Ryuske said.

Hikaru and Hatsuharu grinned while Rin nodded soberly.

Hatsuharu's daughter asked, "Why now? Why do you need to put out an album and why not just self publish?"

Ryuske said quietly and reluctantly, "Because Mirage needs to grow," he glanced at Hikaru, "and is good enough to be produced by a real production company." He looked at his band unhappily and said, "We've already received one good offer."

Rin stated the obvious for them, "You don't look very happy about it."

Ryuske replied, "It's from the company that had Edge."

Rin whistled and said, "Somebody's got balls."

Hatsuharu said optimistically, "We're not that desperate, we can wait for a company we want to work with."

Everyone nodded, except Ryuske.

"What is it?" asked Rin.

"The person who sent the offer simply said that he'd caught one of our performances and liked us, but, I'm worried that they've been keeping an eye on me," Ryuske confessed.

Rin laughed and exclaimed with a wide grin, "Now you're being conceited!"

Ryuske laughed and agreed.

They finished their supper cheerfully and then Ryuske crowded into the Saito mini-van between the instruments and passed out Rin's bass and Hikaru's guitar. He rode home with Hatsuharu and his family and Hikaru got a ride with Rin.

She told him where Kiri lived while she buckled on the helmet. Then she took up the instruments and mounted behind Rin with practiced ease. Before her mother had married Izumi, Rin had taken her home after almost every practice or performance and caged food from Miri. It was only the last few months that she'd been taking the bus home so regularly from Mirage's performances.

She'd had to point the correct turn out at a few intersections, but they arrived at Kiri's, or rather, she reminded herself, her new home, easily enough.

Uncertainly she asked if Rin wanted to come in, but he laughed and said easily, "Next time." She handed over his bass, which he slung casually over his shoulder, and he left.

Kiri's car was outside, so Hikaru entered the house cheerfully, immediately calling out, "I'm home."

Kiri called back from the office room, "Welcome home."

His mother echoed the phrase from the couch where she was making up her bed for the night.

Hikaru hung her jacket and guitar on the coat rack and slipped off her shoes, then hopped over to assist in folding the bed out.

Tokiko shooed her off as soon as that was done, and Hikaru entered the office just as Kiri was approaching the door of it. He swept her into his embrace and kissed her.

"How was practice," he asked when they paused.

Hikaru grinned and said, "Almost perfect."

Kiri laughed and replied, "Not completely perfect?"

Hikaru shrugged and said, "Ryuske still made us practice the spin exchange at least five times."

Kiri smiled warmly at her and kissed her again.

Hikaru cuddled against him and asked, "Do you have much left?"

He shook his head and said, "The rest can all wait for tomorrow." He ran his hand down her back and asked, "Want to take a bath next?"

Hikaru grinned and kissed him. She asked, "A hint that I'm fragrant after my exercise?"

Kiri leaned closer and inhaled deeply. "Clean sweat can be an attractive fragrance," he said suggestively.

Hikaru laughed and replied, "I'd better wash before it becomes stale sweat then."

He grinned at her and led her into the bathroom. Hikaru blushed fiercely as they crossed the living area

in front of Tokiko and called out, "Goodnight," as they passed onto the hall.

Kiri closed the little connecting door again and grinned at Hikaru. She laughed and kissed him. He kissed her hard and pulled her out of the bathroom doorway and into the bedroom instead.

After they finished they took a long bath. Then they cuddled into the wide bed and slept.

--

Thursday was so ordinary that the thread of anticipation for Friday's competition and concert seemed surreal and distant.

School was ordinary. Kiri's mother was spending the afternoon with her middle daughter's family, and Kiri finished work in time to pick Hikaru up when she finished her three hour set. They went grocery shopping and had dinner.

Kiri cuddled with her while she worked on her homework. It went slowly with the distraction, and finally he leapt to his feet and ran his hands through his hair.

Hikaru looked up at him in surprise.

Kiri glanced around his house and said with frustration, "I wish you'd change something."

"What?" she asked blankly.

"I don't know," he replied uncertainly, "something." He sighed and walked into the kitchen to start a fresh pot of tea.

"What's wrong?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri looked at her unhappily and said, "Nothing is wrong."

Hikaru stared at him skeptically.

He shrugged and said, "Everything is wonderful, I love it, it's so ordinary. I love living with you, making dinner, and distracting you while you do your homework."

Hikaru laughed and said, "Me too, but you don't look happy?"

Kiri sighed and replied, "It doesn't seem quite real." He looked around the house again. "Every woman wants to change things. Even women who haven't moved in yet want to make little adjustments. You haven't changed anything. You haven't even unpacked," he said unhappily.

Hikaru replied reasonably, "All my clothes are unpacked. And I love your house."

Kiri brought the tea back to the table and asked, "Want to go buy dishes?"

Hikaru laughed and said, "But I love your pretty dishes."

Kiri cuddled up to her and protested, "But it's a traditional thing that couples buy together, and we'd

see them every day. And you keep saying your house and your dishes." He sighed unhappily.

Hikaru set down her homework and turned to him. "Sorry Kiri," she said seriously, "I'll try to change my phrasing, it's my first time living anywhere but home since I've been old enough to remember. My old home," she added.

He nodded and kissed her gently.

Hikaru grinned at him and said, "I love our pretty dishes, and our pretty house." They kissed again and Kiri smiled a little and she added, "And I'm not sure what to do with the rest of my stuff, I think I need some sort of extra cabinets or shelves to unpack into."

Kiri bit his lip and asked, "Should I buy something?"

Hikaru shook her head and said, "It sounds like I should buy something," she stopped his protest with her fingers against his lips and continued, "if I have furniture here, maybe you'll feel reassured?"

Kiri nodded. They kissed for a while and then Hikaru reluctantly resumed doing her homework. Eventually it was finished and they went to bed.

45: Blazing Mirage.

Friday school passed in an interminable blur. Risa and Shizuoka laughed about Hikaru's inability to

concentrate and promised to share notes later. Then it was time to get ready for the competition. Mirage dressed in their black and silver, assembled, and showed up together in the Saito mini-van. Hatsuharu's wife dropped them off.

They wouldn't have their own drum set, so they only had the smaller instruments to carry. Hatsuharu still carried his own sticks though.

--

Kiri frowned as he saw the enormous line for the competition. He might not get in, he realized. But then someone waved and called out to him near the front of the line.

When he walked up, his boss, the owner of Inline Productions, said, "You didn't put this on your schedule."

Kiri replied, "I only intended to stay for the first act, but it looks like I won't get in."

Emri Enrico laughed and said, "You'll get in." He waved a business pass and added, "As long as you've got your company ID on you."

"Hey," protested the next person in line.

Kiri's boss gave the man a cool look and said, "If you didn't purchase your admission ahead of time like I did, it's not my problem." Then he asked Kiri, "What's so good about the first act? And why not stay for the rest?"

"It's my girlfriend's band, and they're doing another show right after, so I'm going along," Kiri answered uncomfortably.

"Are we expecting to sign your girlfriend?" his boss asked curiously.

"God, I hope not," said Kiri, then guiltily added, "not that they aren't good enough."

There was a brief silence while his boss looked at him consideringly. "I see, well we'll talk about that curious statement in a more private location later."

Kiri winced.

--

Mirage checked in with the various necessary people, starting with the verification of their ID at the entry.

A lot of the bands backstage knew Rin and one guy belligerently said, "Entering a competition like this with temporary bandmembers is cheating."

Hikaru stared at the man blankly but Ryuske looked at Rin, curious as to his answer.

Rin said coolly, "Guess you should drop out then. My band hasn't changed members in over two years."

Ryuske grinned.

Everyone who knew Rin turned and stared, except for one guy who just muttered, "Anyone who's heard

of Mirage knows that, stupid." That guy turned to Rin and asked, "What number?"

Ryuske replied before Rin got a chance, "Number one, of course."

Hatsuharu, Hikaru, and Rin laughed.

"I mean in the line up!" was the annoyed reply.

Rin grinned and repeated the information, "We're first, so you better not lose to us, or you'll just look sad." He shook his head in mock despair.

Several people winced and said things like, "ouch," and, "rough draw."

Mirage headed for the stage.

--

Kiri sat down beside his boss and looked up at the stage when the lights dimmed and the song began.

On the dim, unlit stage, Ryuske set up his keyboard while singing the opening lines. The drums joined in as Hatsuharu took his place. Then the bass and guitar slid in as Rin and Hikaru took positions on either side of Ryuske.

When the lyrics hit the words 'somebody turn on the lights', the stage lights snapped on. Rin and Hikaru snapped into motion, perfectly in tandem. When the chorus rose, the keyboard carried it and they froze except for the motion of their instruments

as they played and their mouths as they sang their parts.

The timing was perfect, and as the next verse began the harmony ended, they twirled away through their practiced moves, and exchanged sides in one slick motion. Ryuske's voice soared over the audience. He made a gesture with his hand as he beseeched the audience to dance with the lyrics and Kiri sat up straight in shock.

"Holy crap!" he exclaimed. His boss flicked his gaze to him for a moment. "Mirage's Ryuske is Kobayashi Ryuske from Edge!"

Kiri's boss studied the singer for a moment and said, "You're right, I didn't recognize him between the short hair and how much he's filled out." He frowned and sighed with disappointment.

Kiri looked at him inquiringly.

"They're good, they've already grabbed the audience," he said by way of explanation.

Kiri nodded and asked quietly, "Why does that make you look disappointed?"

"He'll never work with us again after that scandal when Edge lost their guitarist and broke up," he said sorrowfully.

Kiri briefly ignored Mirage's performance and asked with shock, "Edge was part of Inline?"

His boss nodded.

Kiri said, "Wow," and went back to watching Mirage.

--

Mirage played their two songs perfectly, and they knew it. Not only that, their plan of grabbing the audience with a cover of a familiar song and then revving things up with one of their own best songs seemed successful and the audience cheered as they stood at the edge of the stage and took their bow.

They grinned like mad as they swapped places with the next band and worked their way out of the backstage area and then the building.

Someone called out, "You're leaving?"

Rin grinned and said, "You know the openers never win, and we've got other plans, but have fun making a better impression!"

Mirage exited the building, all four members bubbling with excitement.

--

Kiri had left as soon as they finished and was waiting for them. He still had his company ID clipped to his jacket.

Ryuske took one look at him and asked sharply, "What do you want?"

Hikaru rushed forward to hug Kiri and said, "He's with me!"

Kiri hugged her and eyed Ryuske cautiously.

"Hikaru, get away from that man," Ryuske said.

She turned and stared at him, but didn't release Kiri.

"Hikaru!" Ryuske snapped.

"What's wrong with you?" Hikaru asked.

"How did he approach you?" Ryuske asked her and demanded of Kiri, "How dare you?"

Hikaru gasped and replied quickly, shocked by his reaction, "I approached him!"

Rin stepped between them and said calmly, "Hikaru, Ryuske is over reacting because your lover works for Inline."

Hikaru stared and asked, "So?"

But Kiri answered Ryuske's earlier question, "I didn't even know she was a musician before we started dating, and I've no intention of trying to work with you. Though I was a fan of Edge."

Hikaru turned to him and stared, several things seemed to click into place.

Ryuske said bitterly to Hikaru, "Inline is the company that produced Edge."

Kiri shrugged at her and said calmly, "I didn't know that either, until very recently. I was still in high school then."

Hikaru didn't say anything and he added a little desperately, "I haven't lied about my job, but after I found out you're a musician, I didn't want to say too much either."

Hikaru nodded slowly, but asked, "Why don't you want to work with us? Are we that bad?"

Kiri groaned, covered his face with his hands and leaned against the wall he stood beside. "No. You're great. I just, it never works, relationships between managers and artists. The few times it seems to work, the couples are like business partners who find it convenient to sleep together." He dropped his hands and gazed at her desperately, "I don't want that! And I want it to work..."

"OK," she said and took his hand.

"It's not OK!" yelled Ryuske.

Hikaru looked at him and said calmly, "Yes it is, you don't want to work with Inline, Kiri doesn't want to mix work and our relationship, it's fine. And he's telling the truth about his job, he told me enough I could have guessed, it just never occurred to me."

Hatsuharu interrupted as Ryuske gazed at Hikaru with an agonized expression and Kiri clung to her, "We're going to be late to our own concert."

"Let's run," Rin suggested with a grin, and offered his hands to Ryuske and Hatsuharu.

Mirage ran hand in hand, Kiri still clinging to Hikaru, the four blocks to the large park nearby. They arrived a little out of breath, but ready to play again.

46: A new song.

Nezumi and Hatsuharu's wife and children had prepared the park pavilion for the concert. It was an exceedingly rare occurrence for Nezumi to venture out.

Despite the fact that he designed the electronic setup Mirage used, and maintained their website, Hikaru had only met him three times before. Rin liked to joke that he was a vampire. Ryuske refuted that on the basis that vampires had to touch other people in order to feed, and Nezumi hated touching other people.

Hikaru also had no idea what Nezumi's real name might be. Though she suspected Ryuske must know in order to pay him, she never asked. She felt that his obvious wish for privacy ought to be respected.

Ryuske exchanged his keyboard for the violin, slid his headset on and jumped up on the impromptu stage as Hikaru, Rin, and Hatsuharu finished connecting to Nezumi's setup.

He called out to the surprisingly large crowd already gathered, "Welcome to the third annual Mirage in the park!"

The crowd cheered and Ryuske began to play. Hikaru was the lead in this song, so she released Kiri's hand and joined Ryuske on the stage, leaving Rin to carry up the keyboard and his bass.

Miri waved Kiri over to sit beside her in a small picketed section off to one side. Risa and Shizuoka were seated with her and scooted over to make room. She bounced excitedly when Hikaru began to sing. Kiri grinned at her and leaned close to ask, "Fan number 1, you came alone?" Miri laughed and answered, "I came really early, but Izumi said he'd come after work."

Kiri caught sight of fan number 67 in the growing crowd before the pavilion Mirage was using as a stage and wondered how many of the audience were part of the online fanclub.

Nezumi had a new trick for this concert, part of why he'd agreed to come out. He'd rigged a tracking setup between the portable stage lights and their headsets. One stage light followed each of them about as they moved whenever they were onstage.

After a few songs, Ryuske asked quietly over the internal line if the lights could be modified to return to neutral positions between songs.

Nezumi replied, "Yes, but not immediately," he explained that he'd have to modify the programming to detect idle time on the instrument outputs or they'd have to manually switch tracking on and off somehow.

They usually rotated lead singers and instruments used so that they needed less breaks, but an hour into the performance, they took ten. The people they'd hired to cover security were concerned by the growing crowd. When they'd purchased the park performance permits they'd had to estimate their expected audience size and the crowd was already nearly double that. However the audience were polite and for the most part were following the aisle guidelines marked in chalk on the grass.

When they regrouped on stage after a brief consultation, Ryuske asked the growing crowd to remember to keep the imaginary aisles free. People laughed and shuffled around cooperatively. Then he asked, "Would you all rather see Mirage's competition entry next or hear something new?"

There were so many calls for both that the members of Mirage laughed and Ryuske said, "OK, you want it all, we get it, so, we'll do both. We'll start with a song so new, not even the other three members of Mirage have heard it!"

Hikaru asked over the internal line, "What? How can we play a song we haven't heard?"

Rin laughed and answered over the boosted mic, "Now we improvise?"

Ryuske nodded and said over the internal, "Hatsuharu, when I signal the end of the chorus, just give me a steady 4/4 for the rest of the song. Hikaru and Rin, I'll sing the chorus then a verse, so you can join in when you're ready. I'll wave like this when the

chorus ends and when it kicks in again." At their nods he turned and began the song.

He sang the first round of the chorus unaccompanied and though he stood poised at the keyboard, didn't play the instrument, "I'll give you half of my heart, I'll give you half of my soul, so don't go!"

He signaled the end of the chorus and Hatsuharu picked up the beat as Ryuske began to play on the keyboard and sang the first verse. "Whenever you are standing here beside me, that is when the music flows. I was frozen in time until I found you, just standing breathless in one place."

When he began the chorus again Hikaru joined in on vocals and Rin on his bass. Together they sang, "I'll give you half of my heart, I'll give you half of my soul, so don't go!"

Ryuske grinned at them and repeated the chorus before going on to the next verse, but instead he modified the lines and cried, "Oh god I love you so!"

When he finished that verse and repeated the first version of the chorus, Hikaru and Rin echoed the don't go quietly as he began the next verse. "Sometimes I want to wrap my arms around you, and just hold you in one place, but if I'm keeping you held captive, how can I look you in the face?"

They were all ready for the final chorus when it came, and all of Mirage sang once more, "I'll give you

half of my heart, I'll give you half of my soul, so don't go!"

When they fell silent, the silence echoed across the crowd for a moment before excited cheering burst out. Without giving it a chance to die off, Mirage duplicated their competition entry performance and then they followed that up with the other two songs they'd practiced before learning they'd pulled the opening slot.

Then they ran through one of their usual sets, a comfortable line up where they swapped leads every other song.

They finished their third annual concert in the park with their title song Mirage.

They led in turns and joined in on harmonies, "The bright light lies, but it always tells the truth. It leaves me drowning in the desert, chasing islands across the sea."

They cried, "The bright light lies, it's always shining in my eyes! It shows you standing here before me, laughing into my eyes."

And softer again, "And if I never try to touch you, if I don't reach out my hand, you'll keep walking here beside me, across the burning sand!"

They cried, "The bright light lies! It leaves me drowning in the sand, chasing islands across the ocean, and never reaching land!"

Then they sang the last part gently, "The bright light lies, but it only shows the truth. The best mirage, is you."

Mirage called out in chorus, "Thank you all for coming!" Then Rin gently chided their audience to carry out their trash and disperse in a polite orderly fashion. He also reminded them of Mirage's website and online fanclub.

Mirage's third annual concert in the park, the first of which had started their public performances together, ended with nearly two thousand attendees, and was remarkably incident free.

When Hikaru stepped down from the pavilion into Kiri's embrace, she was surprised to see Izumi standing with her mother. She wasn't surprised at the string of grumbles that emitted from him.

Ryuske and Rin both hugged Miri, then Ryuske told Izumi sharply, "Yes, we did get proper permits, yes we did hire people for security," he waved toward the small handful of people walking around in "staff" T-shirts and finished, "and yes, there were three times as many attendees as we expected, but everyone behaved excellently."

Alex called over the internal line, "We've got a line up here who want autographs and after concert greetings."

Mirage quickly assembled at the head of the organized queue. Fan number 67 was one of them

and she shook with nervousness but boldly asked Rin on a date. Rin laughed and accepted easily.

The unexpected signing session took about forty-five minutes and when they finished, they found that Hatsuharu's family, with Risa and Shizuoka, had them all packed up already. Nezumi had made his escape from the dread outdoors filled with people, and their small security staff, with Kiri, Miri, and most surprisingly Izumi, had doubled as clean up crew, so Mirage was ready to go.

Kiri picked Hikaru up and spun with her for a moment. "You were amazing," he said with a grin. She kissed him and grinned back, then looked around.

Hatsuharu was the one who asked, "Should we go out for food to celebrate our success?"

So they did. Hatsuharu's family and Hikaru's friends and family joined them, and Kiri never let go of Hikaru. Ryuske watched them, but said nothing. In the middle of eating, Rin got a call from a friend who'd also been in the competition. Mirage had placed second.

Stunned disbelief held them immobile for a few minutes. And then they celebrated.

Ryuske said ruefully, "I miscalculated, we missed a chance to take another bow."

Rin laughed and ruffled his hair. "The great leader has failed us, we missed five seconds of stage time!"

Ryuske grinned.

47: Kitten in the rain.

When they got home, Hikaru and Kiri crept in quietly, and tried not to wake Tokiko. They took a long bath together, and kissed a lot.

"How did you meet Kobayashi Ryuske? How did Mirage form?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru stared at him for a minute, and saw that his pretty face was pensive. His expression reminded her a little of a kitten left out in the rain. "It was my first time playing on stage," she said after a moment.

Kiri just watched her face and waited for her to continue.

She told him, "This guy jumped up on to the stage all of a sudden and grabbed my shoulders. He shook me a little and said, 'you're not a bad musician kid, but you need to loosen up. And let the crowd loosen up. Play something sexy that embarrasses them, and make them laugh, then play the other stuff.' Then he released me and apologized, he said, 'sorry, I'm a little drunk, but I know what I'm talking about. I'm a music teacher.' And he stuffed a business card into my shirt pocket. Then, before the bouncers could reach him, he jumped down and walked calmly to the bar."

She looked at Kiri and saw that his expression had lightened a little, so she smiled. He looked back at her and asked, "And then?"

"I tried it, I played an embarrassingly explicit song, and then I played normally. The audience really did relax," she told him. "And I tried it a few other times, and it doesn't matter if you sing the words if the audience already knows the words it's the same." She paused for a moment, then said, "So I went to the address on his business card. I figured if one bit of advice could have that much effect, I could probably learn more."

Kiri nodded.

Hikaru continued, "He answered the door, and said, 'oh, it's you. Sit here and wait, I'm with a student.' He finished the child's lesson, and just assumed that I'd obey. Which I guess I did," she said with a grin. "Afterward he asked why I'd come so long after our encounter, and I told him that I'd tried his advice and it had worked. He ordered me to play a bit, then we played together for awhile. Then the next visit he told me that we needed to try working with a drummer."

She laughed and said, "And he said there was a good one in his building and dragged me off with him to knock on doors until we found Hatsuharu's apartment. He told Hatsuharu he'd heard him practicing and asked if he could bring his drums down and practice with this kid?"

Hikaru looked at Kiri wryly, and said, "I didn't realize, but he thought I was a boy then. Anyway,

Hatsuharu's wife said 'yes, take him and his drums, but don't bring the drums back!' I felt like Hatsuharu didn't really get a choice. But Ryu-sensei told him it was fine to keep his drums at his place, and he could come practice anytime Ryuske wasn't giving lessons. So we moved the drums, and Hatsuharu and I started practicing with Ryuske on a regular basis."

"So you took lessons for awhile?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru shook her head. "No, he never charged me for lessons, it was more like I was his project for some reason. After we'd been practicing together for a few weeks, he said, 'we need a bass player, I know a guy, I'll ask.' And he arranged for Rin to come play with us. That's when he found out I'm a girl. We set up to play right after school that day, Hatsuharu was off work early for some reason."

Kiri raised an eyebrow at her. "Oh?" he asked. "Showed up in your uniform?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I thought Ryu-sensei was going to die of shock. And then he panicked and had me put on a pair of pants. He said Rin wouldn't play with girls."

Kiri nodded. "Yes, he didn't before except in a very few recording sessions."

Hikaru gave him an odd look but continued, "But when Rin showed up, he knew I was a girl with one glance, and he tried to leave. But I got mad and asked why it mattered if I was a girl or a guy. That idiot told me it was because girls always decided to sleep with him and then there would inevitably be

drama." She frowned in memory. "I yelled at him that I'd never sleep with such a jerk, and that the only thing that mattered was if he could even play." She looked up at Kiri, a little embarrassed, and continued, "Then I picked him up and sat him on one of the stools and handed him the amp plug."

Kiri laughed and looked at her with surprise, "You picked Rin up?"

Hikaru nodded and explained, "I was working as a night stocking clerk then, I was in pretty good shape and used to lifting heavy stuff. But Rin was still ridiculously heavy. And he's treated me like a kid and called me 'brat' ever since."

Kiri grinned at her.

She finished the story, "Anyway, after we'd all been practicing together for a few weeks, Rin said that Hatsuharu and I wouldn't learn to perform any better unless we performed for real. So Ryuske set up our first concert in the park and told us all to stop calling him Ryu-sensei all the time, though I still do sometimes. And when he told us the details, we were going to go out for food, but Hatsuharu said, 'if we're giving a concert, we need a name.' He suggested 'Moonlighting' because everyone had other jobs, but Rin said no way would he be in a group with such a sap name. And eventually 'Mirage' got suggested, and Ryuske suddenly had a song idea and ran back to his apartment instead of eating with us. When we heard it later, we all agreed on Mirage. Then a couple days later, we held our first concert. And a few weeks after,

we met Ryuske's tech friend Nezumi-san and he set up our website, and our light banner."

Kiri hugged her. "Wow," he said.

Hikaru held up her water wrinkled fingers. Kiri laughed and kissed her fingertips, then climbed out. When Hikaru followed, he turned and caught her up in a towel.

They kissed a little more. But when they cuddled into bed, instead of continuing, Hikaru asked, "You've worked with Rin?"

Kiri nodded and bit his lip, but didn't add anything.

Hikaru ran her finger across his brow and down his nose to his lips. "What kind of tour will you be doing when you go to Korea?" she asked.

"Concert tour," he said quietly and he bit her finger lightly. She didn't say anything else and he said, "I'm sorry."

Hikaru hugged him tightly and asked, "Why?"

Kiri laughed unhappily and asked, "Why am I sorry? Or why didn't I tell you?"

She kissed him and they kissed for a few minutes. "I think I understand why you didn't tell me," she said after awhile.

Kiri sighed and pulled her tight against him. "It's the same reason. I'm sorry, and I didn't tell you,

because I could be helping you, and I don't want to," he told her miserably. His eyes were sad again.

"It's OK," Hikaru replied reassuringly.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and pushed him over. He laughed when she held up the condom, and gasped a moment later when she mounted him.

It was awkward at first, but she discovered his hands were telling her how he wanted her to move and it got better. When he came she grinned at him and said quietly, "You really like this."

"Yes," he admitted, and pulled her head down to his to kiss again. "But you didn't like it as much," he pointed out quietly.

Hikaru shrugged. "It's still nice," she replied.

He pulled her hips tight against him and rolled over, coming out on top of her. They kissed some more, and then she gasped and shuddered as he stiffened again inside of her. Kiri grinned at her and began to move.

They fell asleep in a sweaty tangle, still tingling with pleasant aftershocks, some time before dawn.

They woke later than usual Saturday morning and Hikaru was reluctant to leave the bed.

Kiri grinned at her and whispered, "Are we going to spend all day in bed?"

She reached out and caressed his face lightly, then leaned in to kiss him again. "It's tempting," she replied quietly.

"Mmm, kind of," he agreed and pulled her closer.

"What do you want to do?" she asked curiously.

He grinned and said, "Spending the whole day like this could be fun, but since it's our first whole day together, I thought we could go do something?"

"I don't care what we do, if there's anything you want to do, let's. I just want to spend the whole day together?" Hikaru confessed.

Kiri buried his face against her shoulder and said, "I don't want to leave tomorrow."

Hikaru didn't answer right away and he pulled back to look at her. She shrugged.

"You're fine with me going?" he asked quietly.

"I'll miss you, every minute I think," she said unhappily, "but I don't want to tell you I don't want you to go."

"Why?" he asked uncertainly.

"You said that traveling is part of what you've liked about your job. I want you to be happy with your job," she said anxiously. "But I also want you to miss me, and I don't want you to cheat on me when you're away," she added unhappily.

"I won't cheat, and I'll miss you like crazy," he said fervently.

Hikaru sighed and cuddled into him. "But have fun too?" she said hopefully. "When do you have to choose by?"

"When I get back from this trip," he answered. He clung to her for a few minutes, then kissed her again.

This time they didn't stop to talk any more.

But when they finished he asked, "Want to go to the amusement park?"

Hikaru looked at him uncertainly. "It's not too childish?"

Kiri grinned at her and kissed the tip of her nose. "Not for me?" he said.

She wriggled and told him, "It sounds fun to go with you."

"Hmm," he replied, and picked up her hand. He kissed her fingertips one at a time. "You've been with someone else," he said thoughtfully.

Hikaru blushed and nodded. "It was kind of awful," she said.

"It's OK, I've gone there with other people too," he offered.

Hikaru gave him a wry look.

"Shouldn't have said that?" he asked unhappily.

"It's OK, not even surprising," she hesitated before finishing with, "I'm just kind of jealous, sorry."

Kiri looked at her and said, "You're not the only one."

She stared at him in surprise.

"I am jealous too, I don't want you to ever cheat on me either, and I really want to keep you Hikaru," he said seriously, and reached up to touch her earring.

She clung to his hand and kissed him again.

"There's nothing worth being jealous for about the last time I went to the amusement park," she assured him a little bitterly.

He cuddled her and asked, "What happened?"

"We went to this group date, well actually, we'd been going to them for awhile, Risa and Shizuoka insisted. But the first one we met Makoto at, Risa was already sort of concentrating on someone else before he showed up." Hikaru said, "Um, this might be a long story?"

Kiri grinned at her and told her, "We've got all day."

She continued, "He was nice though, anyway, he asked if we went to another one, could we invite him. So next time, he was there early, and he coaxed Risa into agreeing to go on a date with him to the amusement park. But this other guy spoke up and said we should make it a double date. I didn't realize at first he meant with me," Hikaru paused and frowned.

Kiri squeezed her fingers.

"Anyway, I protested that Makoto and Risa should be allowed to go on their own, but Risa immediately encouraged me to go along with the idea. I thought maybe she was nervous about going alone, and I figured why not try a date, I didn't know anything about the guy." Hikaru shrugged.

"So all four of you went?" Kiri prompted.

"Yes, and it immediately became clear that he had only come to try to get Risa. He kept suggesting we swap seats around on the rides and stuff. Some of it was Risa's fault, she wouldn't say no." She shrugged. "And some of the things she suggested doing, Makoto didn't like or wasn't good at. The really crazy ride that twirls you the whole time while it rolls, Risa wanted to go on that, and that guy went with her. Then there was the shooting gallery, that guy won Risa several stuffed animals there. Makoto and I waited for them quite a while that time." Hikaru sighed.

Kiri said, "It sounds awkward."

"It was. I tried to reassure Makoto, I kinda told him things I shouldn't have maybe. If Risa hadn't turned out to like him so much, it would have been bad."

Kiri raised an eyebrow.

"Like, I told him not to worry about the stuffed animals, that Risa loves stuffed animals, but every year she donates all but two or three favorites. She says that way the kids get basically new toys, and she gets to enjoy having them on her shelf for awhile." Hikaru smiled fondly.

"That doesn't sound so bad?" Kiri protested.

Hikaru blushed and said, "But she never tells anyone."

"Ah," he replied with understanding.

"After we had lunch, I demanded that we split into couples," Hikaru said, and shrugged again. "I wanted them to have some part of the date alone together, and Risa seemed comfortable with Makoto."

"And how was your time alone with the other guy?" Kiri asked when she didn't continue.

Hikaru shuddered, "He decided that since I asked to be alone with him, I must be attracted to him. He nobly decided to sacrifice his prejudices against flat chested women and tried to kiss me." She stopped for a minute.

Kiri cuddled her. "Did he actually say that? Was the kiss that bad?" he asked with amusement.

"He did, pretty much, and the kiss was slimy," Hikaru replied with a horrified expression. "It wasn't anything like your kisses."

Kiri laughed, and said, "I'm glad?"

Hikaru frowned at him.

"Not that you had to suffer slimy kisses, but that you like mine," he said with a grin.

She laughed, and kissed him. "I do like yours," she agreed.

They kissed for awhile more.

Hikaru confessed, "I couldn't convince him that I wasn't interested after he'd decided I was. Finally I called and asked Rin to pick me up at the entrance." She was silent again for a minute. "Rin was angry at me for weeks after, but it was effective, I've never seen or heard from that guy again."

"Rin didn't want to come to your rescue?" Kiri asked.

Hikaru shrugged. "He didn't want to be used that way, if I'd been in real danger he said he wouldn't have minded. But he said it was just a cruel and lazy and woman-like thing to do."

She looked at Kiri and said anxiously, "But I'd told that guy over and over that I didn't like his kiss and I wasn't interested, and I didn't know what else to do. He kept insisting I was just being shy. And the only other thing I could think of would have been to hit him." She paused and admitted with embarrassment,

"And I'd just been in trouble recently for getting in a fight."

Kiri hugged her again. "I'm sorry, it sounds like an awful date. Do you want to avoid the amusement park?"

Hikaru shook her head. "No, if you'd like to go, I think it would be fun."

Kiri grinned at her. They got up and got dressed. Hikaru looked at Kiri and said quietly, "You're so beautiful."

He hugged her and told her, "If you go on like that, we're not going anywhere." Then he bit her ear lightly.

Hikaru laughed. They kissed again and went out. In the living area Kiri's mother looked up and asked, "Finally going on your date?"

Kiri raised an eyebrow.

Hikaru blushed and explained, "I told her we both have the whole day off and that I'd like to go out with you." She looked at Tokiko and asked, "Should we have lunch with you before we go Oka-sama?"

Kiri answered before his mother could, "Actually, that's a good idea, it's not too late to get dinner reservations, but eating here would be nicer for lunch?"

"Isn't it breakfast for the two of you?" Tokiko asked laughing.

Kiri and Hikaru both blushed.

Kiri made lunch and Hikaru worked on her homework for a bit. "Do you need more time for that?" he asked when she put it away.

"No," she said and leaned over to kiss him. "I'll do the rest tomorrow when you're gone. It'll distract me."

Kiri offered her an uncertain smile. Hikaru cuddled against him while they ate, despite his mother's presence.

49: Amusement.

"Should we drive or take the bus?" Kiri asked as they left the house.

Hikaru asked, "Which is more convenient?"

Kiri shrugged, "If we take the bus, we don't have to mess with parking, but it takes longer."

"I don't mind spending time on the bus with you, or if you want to drive," Hikaru answered.

Kiri frowned at her a little. "Hikaru, I wish you would tell me things you want more often," he said.

She looked at him curiously as he led her to the bus stop. "Why? What else do you want me to tell you I want?"

"What do you tell me you want already?" he asked in reply.

"I," she started and then blushed and said, "I guess I don't ask for that, because you're always willing."

Kiri laughed and hugged her.

"I have asked you for some really difficult things though," she protested.

"Like what? I can't think of anything you've asked me for," he said a little unhappily.

She replied in a jumble, "I asked you to sign that contract, and to not do too many embarrassing things in public, and to wear an earring with me, and to look at my scars, so many things Kiri."

Their first bus arrived and they boarded. When they were settled in the seat, Kiri whispered into her ear, "Those are all things for both of us, or between us, not something you want. I want you to be able to ask for something just for you or to have things the way you like best sometimes?"

Hikaru grinned at him wryly. "OK, but Kiri, I already have what I want most," she whispered back, and kissed his ear where the mate to her earring rode.

"I love you," he replied.

Taking the bus did take awhile, and several route changes, but eventually they arrived. Kiri bought their tickets and asked, "What should we go on first?"

Hikaru looked around and said, "I'm not sure what we should do first, but before we leave can we ride the ferris wheel?"

Kiri laughed. When she looked at him he grinned and pulled their tickets out and fanned them out to show the extra tab.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"The ferris wheel during the fireworks," he replied with a grin.

She bumped him with her hip and said, "This kind of thing is why I don't ask for much, you're already giving it to me?"

He tucked his arm around her and said, "OK. But I still want you to choose our first ride."

She smiled and nodded. "Let's walk past things then?" she suggested.

He agreed. They went on one of the smaller roller coasters first. Then one that tossed them upside down and dropped them. After that one Hikaru had Kiri sit for a minute.

"You didn't like that one," she said.

"Not really," he admitted, "but I don't mind going with you?"

Hikaru shrugged. "Risa is the one who really loves the wilder rides, so say something next time?" she asked.

Kiri said quietly, "I really don't mind, but OK, I'll try. What kind do you really love? I like the ones where I get to cuddle with you best," he said with a grin.

Hikaru cuddled against him on the bench, and he stuck his tongue out at her. "Maybe the ones that trick you?" she said thoughtfully.

"Trick you? Like the haunted house?" he asked.

"I was thinking more like the adventure coaster for kids, where it suddenly turns and takes you through the mushroom instead of where it looks like it's going. Or when it drops you down the hole later and the ball chases you but then you swoop up just before it catches you," she said uncomfortably.

Kiri grinned and said, "OK, I know what to try next then."

He led her to a water ride, that warned that riders might get wet. Hikaru looked at him curiously.

Kiri grinned and said, "Better to do this kind of thing early while it's still warmer anyway."

He laughed and cuddled her when she gasped as water arched barely over their heads in one area. In another, he watched amused as she joined the little kids in leaning over the side to watch the huge real live koi who swam contentedly around them. They all

jumped and shrieked when a giant shape moved through the smaller fish. The fish were used to this and scattered only briefly.

Hikaru snuggled into Kiri's lap. "You like it?" he asked. She nodded, and kissed him.

--

Awhile later they climbed off another ride and Kiri led a white faced Hikaru to a bench where he pulled her onto his lap and asked, "Are you OK? I'm sorry, it seemed like just the sort of thing?"

"I think so too," she replied shakily. "I don't know why it was so scary, after the first corner I knew that we wouldn't go over the edge, but every corner scared me."

He cuddled her awhile and asked, "Should we quit?"

She shook her head.

Kiri offered, "It's OK to be scared, that's the ride's intent after all?"

Hikaru laughed and said, "I think it's only supposed to be startling."

Kiri kissed her and replied, "It's only a matter of degree."

She kissed him back and suggested, "You should be thrilled right? This is the reaction every guy wants to get so he can comfort his date?"

Kiri hugged her tightly and said, "It's not that I'm not happy to hold and comfort you, but I'm not happy when you're really scared."

Hikaru smiled and asked, "Think you can endure a little more?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. She pointed at the ride behind him and said, "If we can go in the same car, I kind of want to try that, but I might freak out."

Kiri turned and looked at the little race track. "Sure if you really want to, but don't do it just to push yourself?"

"I've never been brave enough to try rides that look like cars since then," she confessed.

"Why now?" he asked.

"Because if I can be so scared of a ride that shouldn't have been scary, maybe the ride I think will be scary won't be," she replied. "And you're with me," she added.

He grinned and kissed her again.

--

They barely fit into the little car together, but the attendant allowed it. Hikaru asked Kiri, "Am I squishing you too much?"

He replied quietly into her ear, "It's very snug, but I'm fine as long as you don't wriggle too much."

She tried to glance back at him over her shoulder. He laughed and bounced her with his hips a little. She blushed.

They started out with uncomfortable lurches and starts as Hikaru had no idea how the controls worked. Kiri coaxed her a little and she got the hang of it finally. He grinned as they drove the first of their three laps very sedately around the little track.

Another car zoomed past in a wobbling fashion and the driver called out, "Stupid slow woman driver!"

Hikaru frowned and asked, "Kiri, if you take over, can we do better than that?"

"Probably," he agreed, "but does it matter?"

"It shouldn't, but it does?" she replied.

He raised his arms up under hers to the wheel and wriggled his feet to the pedals, while she tried to tuck herself out of his way, and then they took off.

They curved smoothly around the little track at the vehicle's top speed and soon passed the other car. They continued to zip around the little track and passed it a second time on their last lap. Kiri pulled them up neatly at the exit point.

Hikaru grinned at him happily.

He laughed as they exited and said, "I'm not sure what that gained though?"

Hikaru shrugged. "I don't know, nothing I suppose, since he probably figured it proved his point."

"As long as you're happy," Kiri said and kissed her.

"I'm happy," she replied. "And I really liked it, driving it, it wasn't anything like riding in a real car."

He laughed and pulled her closer.

"I wonder if maybe I could learn to ride a motorcycle like Rin," she said speculatively.

Kiri looked at her in surprise.

"Would you ride with me if I learned to drive one well?" she asked hopefully.

"I don't know if I'd find it fun, but of course I would," he said.

She grinned at him.

50: Parting so soon.

After a few more rides Kiri said, "Our dinner reservation is soon, do you want to try to squeeze in one more or go a little early?"

"Where is it? I thought we were staying for the ferris wheel?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri grinned and leaned in to kiss her. "It's here in the park."

They went to their dinner reservation which turned out to be on a paddle boat that went round and round the castle moat. Hikaru giggled when she saw it. Because it wasn't on a real river, they had it set up so that the shallow water passed just inches below them, right beside their table. The moat was scattered with colored lights and fountains.

"It's beautiful, but noisy," she commented after awhile.

Kiri grinned and replied, "I don't think talking is supposed to be a highlight, given the ads they presented with the dessert menu."

"What ads?" Hikaru asked curiously.

He held it up so she could see the hotels near the park listed and smirked suggestively.

She blushed and said, "Isn't that only because after all day out and then eating, people will feel tired? They look like ordinary hotels."

Kiri replied, "Sure." He grinned at her. "But it's kind of tempting, if we stayed out all night, maybe you wouldn't try to be so quiet."

Hikaru gasped and looked away. Embarrassed, she asked, "Has it bothered you so much that I find it embarrassing to have your mother staying with us?"

Kiri caught her hand and kissed her fingertips. "No, Hikaru, it's fine, I was afraid it would be worse. Sorry she decided to visit suddenly."

"It's fine," she said, and looked at him hesitantly.

"What?" He asked, and caressed her captive fingers.

"Do you really want to stay out all night?" she asked. "We'd have to get up really early so I could get back in time to dress for work and you could get ready to leave." She clutched his hand tightly.

He looked at her and released her hand. She let go reluctantly, but he stood and came over to kneel beside her.

"Kiri?" she asked a little breathlessly.

He kissed her gently. They kissed for a little while. "However you want to spend the night, is how I want to spend it with you," he said.

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in the crook of his neck. He hugged her.

"Normally," she mumbled against him.

"Normally?" he asked.

"I want to spend tonight normally, like we're going to spend hundreds more, not like this is the last one," she tried to explain.

He was silent a minute, but his hands petted her reassuringly. "We will spend hundreds and thousands more," he said finally.

Hikaru pulled back and kissed him again. "Then it's OK that this is the last night for a couple weeks," she said when she pulled back.

He cupped her face in his hand and asked, "Was it wrong to come out today?"

She shook her head and replied, "No, I've loved it. Our first whole day together has been wonderful."

"Yes," he agreed, and kissed her again.

Then one of the staff came and asked him to return to his seat, citing the limited amount of space on the floating restaurant.

Hikaru snickered a little as he sighed and reluctantly relocated.

When they were asked if they wanted dessert, she said, "I'd rather get icecream or something later, if you don't mind Kiri?"

"Sure," he agreed with a grin for her.

--

Later when they were strolling hand in hand, Kiri said quietly, "Thank you."

Hikaru looked at him inquiringly. "For what?" she asked when he didn't explain.

"For telling me what you want, for being with me, for everything," he said, and blushed.

Hikaru said, "You are so amazingly cute when you blush." And then she blushed.

Kiri grinned and pulled her into his arms and kissed her for several minutes in the middle of the path.

"Kiri," she protested when he showed no sign of resuming their progress.

"OK," he agreed and released her, except for an arm about her waist.

She leaned into him a little. "I want to thank you for those things too, you know. For being with me and everything."

"I love you," he said quietly into her ear.

"I love you too," she replied. And a moment later said, "I'm sorry I don't say it first very often."

Kiri squeezed her and said, "I don't care about that."

They rode the ferris wheel and watched the fireworks. And then they stopped watching the fireworks and kissed for awhile.

Hikaru asked, "How long do we have up here?"

Kiri replied regretfully, "Not long enough I think."

Hikaru stared at him for a moment and then blushed. "Not like that!" she protested. "I mean, anyone could see us."

Kiri laughed and groped her breasts. "I don't think anyone could see us with the fireworks," he said reassuringly.

She wriggled and grabbed his hands. "Kiri, don't," she protested.

"Sorry," he said contritely.

"It's OK," she replied quickly, "I like it, just not now please?"

"Yeah," he agreed, and hugged her.

She kissed him.

He asked after a moment, "Why did you want to know how long?"

"I just thought we've been going around longer than usual," she said a little breathlessly.

"Oh, yes, it's for the full fifteen minutes or so of the display," he replied and kissed her a little more.

Hikaru giggled.

"What?" Kiri murmured.

"If we had been doing that, that would have been long enough?" she suggested with embarrassment.

Kiri grinned and said, "Yes, if I'd pounced on you right away. But you don't even want me to fondle you." He sighed regretfully.

Hikaru wriggled with embarrassment. "Well, I don't really want to do it somewhere like this, but that's not why I asked you to stop touching me."

Kiri went still and asked uncertainly, "Why then?"

Hikaru hugged him reassuringly and almost whispered, "Because when you do that it makes me want you to do more."

He laughed. "Hikaru," he said helplessly.

When he didn't continue she kissed him. And then they kissed until they were forced to disembark.

"We missed a lot of the fireworks," she said as they made their way out of the park.

"Sorry," he replied.

"I'm not sorry," she returned.

"Oh?" he asked curiously.

"It was lovely," she said and leaned in to kiss him again.

"Yes," he agreed.

--

In the morning Hikaru's alarm went off early. Kiri kissed her and apologized. "I changed it but if you'd rather sleep, you can snooze it for half an hour."

Hikaru grinned sleepily at him and pulled his arm over her hip. They started with kissing, and when they were finished, Kiri put her hair up for her.

They had breakfast with Tokiko. Hikaru shyly invited her, "Oka-sama I'll be having lunch with part of my family after I play, if you'd like to come and meet my mother and my uncle you'd be welcome to join us?"

Kiri's mother accepted the invitation politely. Hikaru and Kiri told her the easiest way to get to the restaurant. Then Hikaru and Tokiko exchanged contact numbers, just in case.

Hikaru took the bus downtown. Kiri offered to drive her but he had to get ready to fly out still, so she said, "I'd rather you not rush so hard and travel safely."

He sighed and agreed, "Alright. I'll miss you." He hugged her tightly.

"I love you," she replied, "so I hope it's fun, and one of those times you can say you love your job."

Kiri grinned at her and whispered, "Marry me?"

Hikaru smiled and touched his earring. Reluctantly she said, "I need to go."

He nodded, but they stood in the doorway and clung to each other so long that Hikaru had to run to catch the bus.

Tokiko smiled at him when he sighed and shut the door. Kiri looked at his mother and asked somewhat suspiciously, "What?"

"You seem very much in love," she commented with a grin.

"I am," he answered. "I told you so," he pointed out with a sigh.

"But?" she asked watching his face.

He looked like he was going to deny it but instead answered reluctantly, "I'm afraid she'll outgrow me. Right now I'm the one who makes more money, who knows more about things, and I can still take care of her. But she's probably going to catch up and surpass me all too soon."

Tokiko regarded her son with disappointment. "And then you won't love her so much?" she asked flatly.

"No, I'm pretty sure I'll still freaking adore her. But what if I'm not enough for her then, or the age difference starts to matter?" he asked.

His mother raised an elegant eyebrow at him and replied, "If you really think that she's that kind of woman, you shouldn't marry her."

Kiri grinned sardonically at his mother and said lightly, "I knew that you'd see that she's already a woman and not a child pretty soon." He sighed and added, "And I don't care, I'm going to cling to her as tightly and for as long as she lets me."

"I see," said his mother.

He shrugged and then packed and left in time to take his flight.

51: Mother in law.

Hikaru was positioned so she could see Kiri's mother as she was escorted to the booth where her own mother waited alone. She looked so beautifully poised that Hikaru wondered if that were a style she might achieve someday. She'd never be tiny and cute like her own mother, but Kiri's mother looked composed and beautiful even at breakfasts.

Belatedly she wondered if she ought to have warned Tokiko of her own mother's youth as she watched them greet each other. Surprise wrote itself across both of their faces. Then they sat so that Hikaru could only see Miri's face. She looked overjoyed, but that was common for her lately and Hikaru smiled fondly as she played.

By the time she finished Kaoru had joined the two women with plates of food. Hikaru had sent her mother and uncle each a brief message saying that she'd invited Kiri's mother to eat with them on her way to the restaurant.

She greeted them all and slid into the booth next to Kiri's mother. Kaoru handed her a plate and she dished up while wondering what she ought to say.

"Kiri's mother tells me that he's gone on a business trip for two weeks," Miri said accusingly.

Hikaru looked at her mother and replied quizzically, "Yes?"

Kaoru eyed his sister and then looked at his niece and asked, "Is that going to be usual?"

"I don't know, it depends on which job Kiri takes when he gets back. It might be, it has been," Hikaru explained. "Why?"

Miri said worriedly, "You'll be alone while he's gone."

Hikaru smiled wryly and acknowledged, "After his mother goes home." She nodded to Tokiko. "Why is that a problem?"

"Won't you be lonely? Will you be OK?" Miri asked.

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I'll miss him, but I'll be OK. It's not like I'll starve if he's not there to feed me."

Tokiko asked curiously, "Do you cook?"

Hikaru shrugged again and her uncle and mother spoke in unison, "She's terrible at it." Then they glanced at each other and laughed.

Hikaru grimaced and said a little defensively, "I can cook quick things, or bake simple things just fine. I don't do well with complex things that have to be watched over carefully."

Her family members looked at her so dubiously that she protested, "I've never poisoned anyone!"

"Her omelettes are OK?" Miri said doubtfully.

Kaoru laughed.

Hikaru blushed and told Tokiko, "I just don't like to cook as much as the rest of my family, or Kiri."

Tokiko smiled at her and replied, "Then it's fortunate that my son enjoys cooking."

"Yes," Hikaru agreed happily, "Kiri's cooking is amazing."

Kaoru teased her, "Now we see why you're really with him."

Hikaru blushed and shook her head.

"Oh? Then why?" he asked with a grin.

"I'm curious about that too," Kiri's mother said.

"Don't tease her too much!" protested Miri.

Hikaru looked at her uncle and Kiri's mother's curious faces and down at her plate. After a moment she began, "Um, he's really, I mean he's very," she paused not wanting to start with sexy, then said with more determination, "He's very warm, and he laughs, and he's so cute when..." she trailed off and then looked up. "I can't explain it well, but I love Kiri when he's laughing and when he's serious and when he's angry and when he's happy, and I just want to be there for it all."

"Wow," Kaoru said after a moment. "You've progressed a ways."

Hikaru shrugged and said, "Well, I guess."

Miri grinned at her daughter and told her, "I'm glad."

Tokiko merely smiled a little. "Your mother barely looks older than you are," she commented with a change of subject.

"Sorry, I thought when I saw you come in that I should have warned you since my mother had kids early and you had Kiri late," Hikaru said apologetically.

"Kids?" enquired Tokiko.

"My son Yuki is away at university, he's studying to be a doctor!" Miri exclaimed proudly.

Hikaru and Kaoru nodded.

"Kiri told me the other morning that you're paying part of your brother's tuition, but I'd forgotten," Tokiko admitted.

Hikaru shrugged. "It's OK, Kiri has told me bits about his family too, it sounds like it's really extensive with lots of cousins, besides all his nieces and nephews. I'm sure I haven't remembered everything."

"How many children do you have?" Miri asked Tokiko curiously.

"Four, three daughters, then Kiri after I'd thought we were done," Kiri's mother replied.

"I thought I'd only have the two, but I think I'll wind up with four in the end," Miri said patting her belly.

Hikaru gasped and asked, "Is it twins?"

Miri blushed and said, "No, but Izumi and I have talked about having another after." She looked at Hikaru uncertainly.

"Oh," Hikaru said thoughtfully.

"Do you mind?" Miri asked anxiously.

Hikaru stared at her blankly. "Why would I mind?" she asked after a moment.

"I mind a bit," Kaoru announced. Everyone looked at him in surprise. "You've had a lot of trouble with your health with this pregnancy," he told his sister worriedly.

Miri patted his arm comfortingly and replied, "Not really, I've been fine since I stopped working. They've been watching me carefully, and every pregnancy is different."

Tokiko agreed and she and Miri talked about pregnancy experiences for a little while while Kaoru and Hikaru ate.

"What are your plans this afternoon?" Miri asked Hikaru.

"I thought I'd go look at cabinets or shelves before I go home to work on homework," Hikaru said. "I thought maybe office stores would have that kind of furniture?"

"Why?" Miri asked.

"Kiri's house," she paused and blushed, and then corrected herself, "I mean, our house doesn't have the kind of built in drawers and closets that I had in my room. And Kiri feels worried that I'm not really moved in with things still in boxes."

"Oh, you haven't finished unpacking?" Miri asked with surprise.

Hikaru shrugged uncomfortably. "Things have been busy," she explained. "It should be a little better since the competition is over and we won't have extra practices," she added hopefully.

"How did you do?" Kaoru asked.

Hikaru grinned and said triumphantly, "We came in second!"

Everyone exclaimed over it and they all drank a toast.

When they got ready to leave, Tokiko asked Hikaru a little hesitantly, "Would you enjoy it if I went along while you look for shelves? You needn't do it to be polite."

Hikaru looked at her in surprise and replied, "I don't mind, if you'd like to?"

Tokiko looked at her thoughtfully and said, "My son has told me that I'll either love you or hate you, and that he intends to marry you. I'd like to get to know you a little better."

Hikaru blushed, and touched her earring without thinking about it. When she realized what she was doing she dropped her hand.

52: Marking territory.

In one of the office furniture stores Hikaru saw a set of filing cabinets that she thought might go with Kiri's desk. She tried to capture their finish on her phone.

After the third store Hikaru sighed and suggested they stop somewhere for tea. Kiri's mother agreed as politely as she'd followed through the stores. Hikaru looked at the shelf in the tea shop thoughtfully and then regarded Tokiko over her tea cup.

"You don't seem to be finding what you're looking for?" Tokiko ventured.

"I don't know exactly what I'm looking for," Hikaru replied uncomfortably. "I could get sets that match the closet storage system Kiri put in the bedroom. But I'd like to find something pretty, that fits in more, like that shelf would," she said indicating the display.

Tokiko turned and surveyed the elaborate round shelf. "I think it's for sale," she suggested.

Hikaru looked at her with surprise. When there was an opportunity she asked the server about the shelf.

The woman said, "That one isn't for sale, but it was made by a local craftsman with a shop around the corner." She gave Hikaru and Tokiko the name and directions.

Hikaru sighed. Kiri's mother raised an eyebrow at her and she explained ruefully, "Custom shelves are probably very expensive."

"Very likely," Tokiko agreed. "Though if it's something you'll enjoy looking at for years, I think it's probably worth it."

Hikaru considered it for awhile and then nodded.

Tokiko suggested a little speculatively, "I wouldn't think the expense would be much of a problem for Kiri?"

Hikaru grinned ruefully and said, "I'm sure it wouldn't."

"You don't want to ask him for it?" Kiri's mother suggested.

Hikaru laughed and replied, "He already offered Oka-sama, but it's not just having somewhere to put things away. He feels like I'm not, um, marking my territory? I think."

Tokiko regarded her with surprise and asked, "And if you buy it yourself it makes a difference?"

Hikaru said, "It does, I think. It may not seem to make sense, but I want to reassure him and surprise him at the same time."

Kiri's mother just smiled.

They went around to the little furniture store, which had a variety of shelves and benches on display. Hikaru winced at the price tag on a particularly beautiful round set that was a little taller than she was.

She pulled out her phone to take a photo of it and looked at the phone consideringly. They were similar in price. And she could imagine this shelf in Kiri's pretty house, with her Pikachu sitting there, and so on.

She asked the shopkeeper, "Can I put something down on this shelf and pay the rest at the end of the week, and do you have a delivery service?"

"You can, and we do, but it is an extra fee," he said politely.

She asked how much and though it seemed expensive it seemed reasonable. Tokiko also said reassuringly that it sounded like a reasonable amount.

Before they finished Hikaru pointed at another small round styled shelf in the same finish and asked, "And how much is that one, and what was it originally designed for?"

The shopkeeper eyed her uncertainly and said, "It's for jewelry. What did you have in mind to use it for?" he asked curiously.

Hikaru explained with some embarrassment, "Paper fans, I have a collection, and it looks like I could put some open between these pegs and lay the others folded on the little shelves."

He looked at the shelf thoughtfully and said, "Wait a moment." He disappeared into the back of the shop and returned with a narrow round framework in the same finish, but this one was carved with little birds and more pegs and peg holes. "I made this for necklaces, but hadn't finished creating the posts, so they aren't glued in. You could move them around to suit different sizes of fans," he suggested.

Hikaru loved it, but cautiously asked, "How much?"

He smiled at her and offered, "I will sell it to you for the same amount you have offered as deposit on the other, and you may take it with you now. I will add the amount to what you will pay before delivery on the large shelf?"

"That is very generous!" exclaimed Tokiko.

Hikaru nodded and agreed, "It is, I will take it then, thank you."

After they left, and while they waited on their bus, Tokiko asked, "Will you be OK with paying the rest? It seems like a lot for a high-school girl."

Hikaru smiled and replied, "I think I could have bought it outright, because this quarter's tuitions have already been paid, but I want to go over things and make sure."

"I see," Tokiko replied with some surprise.

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When they returned home, Kiri's mother offered to make dinner while Hikaru did her homework. After making sure that she didn't mind, Hikaru took her up on it. She set the small round shelf down in the bedroom to think on its placement later and started on her homework.

At a particularly frustrating problem, Kiri called to say that he'd safely arrived that evening.

"Did you only arrive now?" Hikaru asked.

"We only just finished obtaining rooms," Kiri replied with some irritation, "someone messed up somewhere and our first reservations were entered into the hotel system for next week, but at first they thought it was just that we had been sent to the wrong location, as there are a couple of this chain in the city, so we were shuttled back and forth across the city for a couple hours before it was all sorted out."

"That seems careless, couldn't they see that in their system without moving everyone?" Hikaru asked with a frown.

"You would think so," he replied, but added wryly, "though this is my fault."

"How is it your fault?" Hikaru protested.

"It's part of my job to verify arrangements like this, this time I left it to someone. I'll be checking the rest of the schedule over again," he replied ruefully.

"Oh," she said.

"I miss you already," he said quietly.

Hikaru reached up and wiped at the tears that sprang up and replied, "You too."

They sat in silence for a minute. Then Hikaru laughed a little and asked, "Kiri, I have a job after school tomorrow, when do you think we can talk again?"

"Just call me when you're done," he said.

"What if you're busy or sleeping?" she asked.

"If I can't answer, I'll call you back when I can, and as for sleeping, I'd rather talk to you than sleep," he replied.

"Oh," she replied and blushed.

"When are you planning to sleep tonight?" he asked.

"When I finish my homework," she replied unhappily.

"Is it not going well?" he asked. "Should I be letting you go to finish it?"

"I got a bit stuck," she told him reluctantly, "and maybe I should say you should, but I don't want to."

Kiri was silent for a minute.

"Kiri?" she asked.

"I don't want to be bad for you," he said quietly.

"You're not, and I feel the same way, I don't want to make it so you don't sleep," she protested.

He laughed and said, "OK, I'll set it on silent when I'm sleeping if it will make it so you don't ever hesitate to call?"

"OK," she agreed.

"I love you, I'll end the call now, so call me when you're finished, or when you're stuck on something I can help with," he said.

"OK, I love you too!" she said quickly in case he ended it before she got the chance.

"Talk to you in awhile," he replied and disconnected.

Hikaru sighed and looked at her phone, then she looked up and realized that Kiri's mother was watching her and had heard the whole thing. She writhed a little with embarrassment.

Tokiko smiled and said lightly, "Supper should be ready in about half an hour."

"Oh, OK, thank you," Hikaru replied and focused on the problem that had been frustrating her again.

53: Cold night.

Hikaru called Kiri while getting ready for bed.

"Hello sweetheart," he answered.

"Hi, I finished finally, and I'm getting ready for bed," Hikaru told him.

Kiri chuckled softly and said, "Well, that's suggestive."

Hikaru froze and stared at her phone, her cheeks burning.

"Hikaru?" Kiri asked after a moment.

"Yes," she replied.

"I was just teasing," he said lightly.

"Only you weren't really were you?" she asked.

There was a pause before he answered, "Yes and no, it does sound suggestive to me, but I didn't think you meant it to, so I was teasing."

She replied, "Sorry."

"You're blushing like crazy aren't you?" he asked and she could picture his grin.

"Is video on one way?" she asked.

He laughed and replied, "No, but want to switch to it?"

Hikaru said uncomfortably, "But it's more expensive with you overseas isn't it?"

"I don't care," he told her.

"I feel like I've spent enough today," she said reluctantly. "But if you really want to?" He was silent and after a minute she asked, "Kiri?"

"Sorry, I should have thought. I should have added you to my accounts before I left," he said in a worried tone.

"What, why?" she asked, startled.

"How are you managing, what about grocery shopping and such?" he asked.

She protested, "I'm fine, none of that is a problem, this quarter's tuitions have already been paid. I just arranged to spend more than I expected on shelves, but I should have all summer to save up for fall. I'm just a little worried that if my grades drop I'll have to pay the other half on my own tuition."

"I want to switch to a video call," he said.

"OK," she agreed.

He ended the call and called her back. When she answered it took a moment to establish the connection and then he smiled at her. She grinned back at him.

"Um," she said after a few moments.

Kiri told her, "You look a little tired."

Hikaru laughed. "You look like you're in bed, didn't you tell me you'd turn off your phone when you were sleeping?"

Kiri smiled again and replied, "I am in bed, but I wasn't asleep yet, I've been going over the schedule."

"OK." She hesitated and then said, "I kind of want to show you the little shelf that I carried home, but I kind of want to surprise you when you get home too."

He smiled and suggested, "Surprise me then."

Hikaru smiled back and agreed, "Alright."

"Don't worry about your tuition, I'll pay that if your grades drop," he said a little stubbornly.

"Kiri," she protested.

"You promised to let me," he reminded her.

She opened her mouth to protest and then stopped and nodded.

He looked at her face and asked quietly, "Do you hate the idea of letting me take care of you so much?"

"It's not that," Hikaru protested.

"What is it then?" he asked.

She hesitated and tried to think of how to explain.

He sighed. "It's OK, don't worry about it."

Her mouth curved and she said quietly, "Kiri, I love you."

"I love you too," he replied.

"It's like what you said before, that I was asking to be partners, I think," she tried to explain.

"So can't partners help each other?" he asked.

"Yes, of course, but we're not equal. We don't have the same resources," she told him.

"I know, at least for now," he agreed. "But do we have to be equal for you to be happy?" he asked a little unhappily.

"No," she answered quickly. He looked at her skeptically and she asked, "What about you, did you really mean it when you said you'd be willing to stay at home with the kids someday?"

"Yes," he said after a minute.

Hikaru grinned at him.

He suddenly sat up and asked with alarm, "Are you..."

"No!" she interrupted. "Not now, not soon."

He fell back and laughed and then told her, "It would be OK anyway."

Hikaru watched him affectionately and said, "I love you so much."

Kiri blushed.

"And you are so freaking cute." She sighed.

"I love you like crazy," he said, and then added, "maybe video wasn't such a good idea, I wanted to see you, but now I want to hold you so much."

"Yes," she agreed.

They sighed in unison and then laughed together.

"We should try to sleep, I guess," Hikaru said reluctantly.

"Yes," Kiri agreed without enthusiasm.

"Would you be too busy to message in the morning when I'm on the bus?" she asked.

"No telling," he answered. "Message me anyway," he suggested.

"OK," she agreed.

"Goodnight Hikaru," he said quietly.

"Goodnight," she replied reluctantly.

He ended the call. And they both sighed in unison again.

Hikaru found that the sheets felt cold and had difficulty getting to sleep, but she was really tired and after some tossing and turning did manage to fall asleep.

... H to K

In the morning she messaged on her way to school.

Hikaru: Hi. Would you mind if I get new sheets?

Kiri: Good morning <3. Of course not?

Hikaru: Your silk sheets feel cold when you're not here. I'm used to linen in the summer and knit in the winter.

Kiri: We can use whatever kind of sheet you prefer.

Hikaru: Yours are fine when you're here, I'm never cold with you next to me. I'll try to go shopping tomorrow.

Kiri: Sorry. I could order some and have them delivered instead?

Hikaru: Do you have time?

Kiri: Yes. Grey knit?

Hikaru: Please.

Kiri: OK, have a good day, love you, gtg.

Hikaru: You too, love you too.

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After school Hikaru rushed home and called out, "I'm home," as she opened the door, but the house was empty. Belatedly she recalled that Kiri's mother had said something about spending the afternoon with her grandchildren.

Indeed, Tokiko had left her a note and a meal already prepared in the steamer. It suddenly occurred to Hikaru that Chisaki was one of those grandchildren, and she thought she must appear terribly young to her future mother in law.

Hikaru called Kiri, but he was too busy to pick up, so she sent a message reminding him of her schedule for the evening and that she hoped today was more fun. He sent back a quick, "Love you," which made her hug her phone in a silly fashion for a moment.

She changed, did her homework, ate the food and glanced through the refrigerator for what she ought to buy on the way home. Then she went to play the piano for three hours at an Astro Lounge.

54: Pirates of Mirage.

When she finished, she checked her messages on the way to the grocery store. There was another note from Kiri that said, "Today is going well, but I may miss the opportunity to talk to you. Try, but don't worry if you can't get through, and I'll sleep as soon as we finish tonight, likely about 3am."

She also had six missed calls and a message from Ryuske that said, "Call me as soon as you get this, or just come to my place." That was weird enough that she abandoned the grocery shopping, got off downtown and hopped on the route that went to the apartment building he and Hatsuharu lived in.

She called on the way. Ryuske answered immediately and said without even a greeting, "We're in trouble, Rin and Hatsuharu are already here, can you come?"

"I'm on my way," Hikaru replied. "Trouble how?"

"I'll show you when you get here," he said.

"OK," she replied anxiously.

They ended the call and Hikaru thought up and discarded a hundred possible troubles.

She called Kiri, who picked up, but said, "Hi, love you, but only have a minute, literally."

"I love you too. In that case, I'll just wish you goodnight now," Hikaru said unhappily.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"It's OK," she replied.

"Got to go, message if you want, I'll reply before bed," he said quickly and ended the call.

When she got to Ryuske's place he pulled her in and over to where Rin and Hatsuharu were sitting in front of his computer.

"We're being shanghaied by pirates!" Rin announced.

Hatsuharu leaned forward and restarted the video on the screen. In it, Mirage played the second song they'd played at the competition. Footage from other performances had been mixed in.

Hikaru said doubtfully, "It's not a great music video, but it's not terrible. I don't understand what's wrong?"

"That!" declared Ryuske reaching forward to pause the video on the production company credit.

Rin explained, "This company published a music video and put out a single of this song for sale, off of the live recording from the competition."

Hatsuharu added, "Without a contract with us."

And Ryuske continued angrily, "And they sent me an apology saying that there'd been a misunderstanding in the publication department and asking that we please sign the contract as soon as possible!"

"What contract?" Hikaru asked.

Ryuske ran his hands through his hair and replied, "A rep from the company brought a fairly decent offer yesterday, and I said we'd talk about it and get back to them next week."

"How could they accidentally publish a video and an album so fast, without us?" Hikaru asked with confusion. "It's only been three days."

"They couldn't do it accidentally," Rin told her a little grimly. "And I bet they somehow bought out the footage and sound feed from the competition in advance, it's not usually recorded with this quality."

Ryuske slammed his hand against the table, making Hikaru and Hatsuharu jump. "They mixed the competition recording with the demo recording off our fanclub site to smooth the quality. You can hear the spot where Rin kicked the stool accidentally. They took footage from fan submissions too. They're trying to force us into signing with them," he said grimly.

"But we haven't signed with them, so they have no right to sell our song," Hikaru protested.

Hatsuharu said calmly, "That's true, but the fact is that they are. And we only really have three options: sign with them, sue them, or ignore them."

"The problem is that if we sue them, we'd likely win eventually, but it would probably cost more than we'd win and it would almost guarantee that no one else would sign us on," Ryuske said despairingly.

Hatsuharu looked at Hikaru's offended expression and said, "Exactly, and that's why they've done this."

Rin said regretfully, "If the offer is any good, maybe we should take it."

Ryuske said bitterly, "No, I don't want to take any offer without full veto rights on what gets published. And a company that pulls this kind of stunt, even if they put it in the contract, I wouldn't trust them."

"We've been going around and around on this," Hatsuharu explained.

"What happens if we just ignore them?" Hikaru asked.

"They make free money off us," Rin said.

"But it's publicity, and we could make a better video than that easily enough, and better recordings?" Hikaru pointed out.

"We could, if we had a company to back us," Ryuske said unhappily.

"I thought we were going to submit to companies anyway?" she asked.

Rin said, "It'll be harder with it looking like we already sold one song to a rival."

"What about self publishing after all," Hatsuharu asked.

"I don't think we have the resources to make music videos, despite the fanclub increase," Ryuske said with a sigh.

"Fanclub increase?" Hikaru asked.

Rin thumped her shoulder, and said with a grin, "Slacker, aren't you supposed to log in every couple days?"

Hatsuharu and Ryuske grinned at her suddenly as well.

"I've been a little busy," Hikaru said defensively.

Ryuske brought up their website, and showed her the fanclub total, it had jumped from less than 400 to over 1000. "We've been successful in that at least," he said wryly.

Hikaru stared in shock. After a moment she said, "But that means Mirage's account gained over thirty thousand!?"

Everyone nodded.

"And we can't afford to make music videos?" she asked dubiously.

Ryuske shrugged and said, "Not professional quality."

"I know a guy who might be able to film them, I'm not sure, his still pictures are good enough," Hikaru said uncertainly.

Rin shrugged and said, "That's beside the point right now."

"I don't like the idea of letting them get away with it, but it seems like our best course is to ignore them," Hatsuharu said reluctantly.

Rin nodded unhappily.

Hikaru looked at Ryuske.

"Probably," he agreed with angry frustration.

Hikaru asked hesitantly and with qualifiers, "You don't have to answer or consider it, but what was the contract Inline offered like? And who offered it, because it wasn't Kiri."

Ryuske looked at her with such a hurt expression that she said, "Nevermind, sorry."

He covered his face and said, "No, I'm sorry, it's a reasonable question. It wasn't a contract, just the offer to talk about one. And it was given by a man named Takeda Hoshimaru."

"Did you work with him before?" Hikaru asked.

"No," Ryuske looked up at her and added bitterly, "you want me to consider it?"

Hikaru shrugged.

"You trust your boyfriend so much?" he asked.

Hikaru looked at him, startled, and replied, "Kiri? Yes." She hesitated and said, "But he doesn't want to work with us, and you don't want to work with his company, so nevermind, I just wondered."

Ryuske said, "If I didn't consider anything but Mirage, I should be considering it. If we had a contract with Inline, they could fight out the legal battle easily."

Hikaru frowned at him and said, "You are part of Mirage."

"Yes, leader, you can't consider Mirage without considering yourself," Rin agreed.

Hatsuharu nodded as well and Ryuske laughed painfully. "I shouldn't have asked," Hikaru said unhappily.

"Yes, you should have," Ryuske said. He said nothing and stared at the wall for awhile. "What does your boyfriend have to say about Takeda-san?" he asked after a bit.

"I don't know," Hikaru replied and messaged Kiri, 'What do you know about Takeda Hoshimaru?' She added, "Kiri is busy and might not be able to reply right away."

"Why do you want to know, Ryuske?" Rin asked, flicking his long hair back. "If we won't work with them, it doesn't matter."

"I always thought Inline screwed us over. But they never resorted to crap like this, and they never lied about the crap they were pulling," Ryuske said bitterly.

Kiri messaged, 'Why? Is he bothering you somehow? He's one of our best managers, older, said he's going to retire this year.'

Hikaru read it aloud and replied quickly to the message, 'He's not bothering us, he's the one that

approached Ryuske. Mirage is being shanghaied by another company, we're talking about what to do.'

'I don't understand, and I don't have time, if you need advice, Takeda-san has more experience than I do,' Kiri sent. Ryuske read it out over Hikaru's shoulder.

"Why would a guy who's retiring approach a new group?" Rin asked.

Ryuske ran his hands through his hair and said, "let's ask him." He picked up his own phone under their surprised stares.

Hikaru, Rin and Hatsuharu watched him anxiously as he placed the call.

"This is Kobayashi Ryuske, you contacted me about a possible contract with Inline." Ryuske said.

55: Fan 219

Takeda was surprised but willing to talk to Mirage immediately despite the late hour. They arranged to meet him at The Pavilion.

Mirage arrived first and were settled into the large corner booth before Takeda arrived. They watched him approach, an older man, neatly dressed in a business suit. After greetings were exchanged, he sat comfortably next to Hatsuharu as though he met bands in family restaurants every day.

Ryuske, after arranging the meeting, seemed unable to speak, he just sat stiffly and stared at Takeda.

Hikaru whispered, "Do you know him after all?"

Ryuske shook his head. "I don't think so," he replied.

Takeda watched them curiously and Hikaru frowned and said, "I'm sorry, Ryuske had some bad history with Inline, but we're kind of stuck and Kiri said you have experience if we need advice."

Takeda was taken by surprise and offered hesitantly, "I know of Kobayashi Ryuske's history with Inline, and I greatly regret how the incident was handled at the time. Unfortunately I wasn't on the team dealing with Edge."

"I won't sign another contract without full veto rights," Ryuske said stiffly.

"Then we're wasting our time here," Takeda said calmly and moved to stand.

Hikaru interrupted before he rose from his seat. "Wait please, you'll have to be willing to explain everything for us to get anywhere. Why is a contract with full veto rights impossible?"

Takeda settled back into his seat, but instead of answering, asked, "If Kiri, by which I'm assuming you meant Takeshi-san, told you I've got enough experience to give advice, why aren't you asking him

directly, he's got enough experience to offer the same advice and he's my boss?"

Hikaru answered honestly, "Because he's very busy tonight and because he doesn't want to work with us."

Takeda looked at her thoughtfully and said, "He's in Korea tonight so far as I know."

Hikaru nodded and said, "And he'll be busy until 3am, and then he needs to sleep."

Takeda raised his brows at her and asked, "And why doesn't he want to work with you?"

Hikaru blushed and replied, "Because he's my fiancé."

Ryuske clenched his hands and said, "It doesn't matter, I won't sign without veto, if we can't have that, we are wasting our time."

Rin thumped Ryuske on the shoulder and said, "Hush, even if we only get advice without a contract, it will benefit us."

Takeda surveyed Mirage's members slowly and then answered the earlier question, "A contract with full veto is impossible because the company needs to make a profit off of the deal. We can't put ourselves in the position of having to pay for the production of things that a group then refuses to release."

Even Ryuske nodded at this explanation, though reluctantly.

Takeda asked cautiously, "What kind of situation are you in that you suddenly need a manager's advice?"

Hikaru said when Ryuske stayed silent, "Our song is being pirated by another company, they're trying to force us into signing their contract."

"Hikaru!" Ryuske protested.

Hatsuharu said quietly, "If we want useful advice, we have to tell him the entire situation."

Ryuske said bitterly, "And put ourselves at his mercy too?"

Takeda started to reply but Hikaru interrupted, "Yes, if necessary. You already made the call."

Ryuske looked at her for a moment and then looked away and nodded.

"And as for the full veto, then if Mirage paid the production costs up until the album was ready to release, it would be possible?" Hikaru asked Takeda.

He shrugged and said, "I suppose it would, but there would be no signing bonus, no guarantee of any profit."

"As long as it's not impossible, that's enough for now," Hikaru said firmly. Then she explained the situation Mirage was caught in, with help from Rin and Hatsuharu. Ryuske was silent.

Hatsuharu added, "There's another problem with the releases that company has made. They are using our full names."

Ryuske spoke at last, "I tried to put in a complaint. I even asked Nezumi if he could hack it and edit the information, he said he can't."

Takeda asked, "Why is having your full names published a problem?"

Hatsuharu said, "Because I could get fired or Hikaru could get expelled."

Takeda looked at Hikaru and asked cautiously, "Are you still a minor?"

Hikaru blushed and nodded, but instead of reacting with shock or mentioning Kiri, Takeda smiled with pleasure.

"In that case, having the information corrected should be easy. If we decide to work together," Takeda said.

Rin said coolly, "If we decide to work together, I'm sure there are all sorts of things you can do to help, and if we don't decide to work together? What does a man who's been planning his retirement want with Mirage?"

Takeda laughed openly. When he finished laughing, he said weakly, "I feel you have me at a disadvantage, if we don't work together I'll tell you my idea before I go."

Hikaru pointed out, "We feel the same way."

Takeda sobered and nodded. "Alright then, I'll lay my own situation out for you as well. I have been thinking of retiring soon, but I saw Mirage play and looked into you. You're good, but you seem like a part time band."

The members of Mirage nodded.

Takeda continued, "But I thought there was potential for an album perhaps anyway, a part time job with a part time band for an old man."

Ryuske twitched but didn't comment.

Takeda eyed him and said cautiously, "I didn't realize at first that Mirage had Kobayashi Ryuske, I found that out while I was researching you, but in your situation that could be used to great advantage, if you were willing. Even more so if Mirage takes a contract with Inline."

Ryuske nodded once.

Hikaru asked, "What fan number are you?"

Everyone looked at her in surprise, but Takeda grinned at her and said, "219".

Ryuske returned his gaze to Takeda with shock.

Takeda smiled gently and said, "I think Mirage is great." To Ryuske directly he added, "And you've improved vastly. In your song composition, in the many instruments you've learned. Musically, the

Kobayashi Ryuske of Mirage is incomparable to the Kobayashi Ryuske of Edge."

"Just Ryuske, Mirage's Ryuske," corrected Ryuske stiffly.

Takeda nodded and accepted the correction. "So, we need to figure out if we can work together, then, regardless of the outcome, I'll tell you the things I've thought that could be done for your situation," he told the members of Mirage.

"How much does it cost to get an album ready for production?" Hikaru asked.

Takeda looked at her and said, "The recording is the smallest part. If you were willing to record hours when no one else is scheduled to use a studio, we could even cut a deal for you to do the recording at Inline even if Mirage pays the production costs. It's the other stuff that I doubt your ability to cover."

56: Deal

Takeda explained in more detail, "Video crews are expensive, photographers, sound crews, it's the dozens or hundreds of other people who become involved in the project that make it expensive. That's what production companies do."

"Give us an idea of the minimum we'd need?" Hikaru asked.

He frowned at her and said, "Three good music videos, an album cover, publicity shots, the album recording itself, ten songs minimum. Preferably originals rather than the covers you use to pad your stage performances at the moment."

Hikaru nodded thoughtfully and Rin pulled his hair back and asked, "Assuming we say we can cover all that, using our own people, then what?"

Takeda looked taken aback and asked, "Seriously?"

Hatsuharu replied for them, "Yes, what would our contract look like in that case?"

Takeda thought for a few moments and then replied, "Basically just a publishing contract. You provide us with ready to publish work, if it passes our approval, it gets published and you receive a percent, if not, nothing happens."

"What percent?" asked Hikaru.

Takeda looked at her and said, "Usually we give the artist 10%."

Hikaru stared at him, appalled. Hatsuharu frowned too, only Rin and Ryuske looked unsurprised.

Takeda offered, "But if you really can produce high enough quality work without using Inline's staff, or by paying for the use directly, then we could probably offer 25%."

This time Rin and Ryuske looked surprised.

Hikaru asked, "How much would a good music video through Inline cost?"

Takeda replied thoughtfully, "Anywhere from 5k to 25k, if it's kept domestic."

"Oh, that's not as bad as I thought," Hikaru said more cheerfully. Rin, Ryuske and Hatsuharu nodded.

Takeda stared at them. "What kind of resources does Mirage have to put into this project?" he asked.

Everyone turned to Ryuske and he grinned wryly, "Well, we just paid for that concert, so the account was a little flat before the new memberships, but it's sitting at around 40k at the moment."

"We might be able to do it for less than that too, we have Nezumi for special effects if nothing else," Hikaru pointed out.

Takeda regarded Mirage in shocked silence.

Rin asked Hikaru, "Who's the guy you thought might do video?"

Hikaru blushed. "He's the photographer who did the sunset girls calendar on your wall."

Rin stared at her and questioned, "Oh?"

Hikaru said defensively, "He's amazingly good at capturing people at their best look."

"I'm not arguing, I'm just incredibly curious," Rin said with a grin.

Ryuske and Hatsuharu were looking at Hikaru incredulously as well. She muttered, "He offered Shizuoka a job last year, and Risa and I went with her, because we thought it was suspicious."

Rin said calmly, "He must have really impressed you."

She nodded.

Takeda said, "Mirage has more resources than I thought, so you want me to try to draw up a contract?"

Hikaru nodded then turned to Ryuske and asked, "Does it need to be full veto for you, or for Mirage, do we vote on it?"

Ryuske looked at her in shock. Rin laughed and said, "Yes, do you trust us enough that if the rest of us vote for something, will you go along?"

Ryuske said angrily, "Of course I do!"

"It makes a difference," Hikaru said quietly.

"Quite a large difference actually," offered Takeda. When everyone looked at him he said, "There's more precedence for writing contracts that depend on a majority agreement of members than for a full veto right. If you'll agree to that, I can include more services that Inline usually offers its artists."

"But Ryuske is still our leader," Hikaru said firmly.

Rin and Hatsuharu agreed immediately. Ryuske looked at them all in surprise. "Why?" he asked.

Rin put his arm across Ryuske's shoulders and said with a grin, "Because you lead us leader."

Hikaru told him, "You do, you've already been doing most of what I think a manager would do for us. Are you sure about this?"

Ryuske looked at her and asked, "What about you?"

Hikaru told him, "I think it's a lot better than the other options we came up with. Though I'm afraid Kiri isn't going to be happy."

Ryuske frowned but said, "I'm willing, if the rest of you are for it."

They were.

Together they worked out a contract with Takeda. Hikaru pointed out that she'd need to have her mother sign it, when they got to that phase.

Takeda asked, "Are you fairly confident that she will?"

Hikaru nodded.

Takeda said, "Then we'll move as though it's done. Also, with my understanding of how Ryuske's contract was ended, if we need to, I think we can argue that he's been under contract with Inline the entire time."

Everyone stared at him. He looked at Ryuske and said, "The contract was just released, you didn't finish it, nor were you penalized, correct?"

Ryuske nodded.

Takeda grinned and said, "Then if the legal department has to, I suspect they can claim that it was merely on hold, until it was supplanted by this new agreement, and that Inline already owned the song they've illegally published."

Ryuske shifted uncomfortably and said bitterly, "For all I know, that's true."

Hikaru looked worried and Takeda said reassuringly, "It was released, but no one but you and Inline know that for sure. It's just a backup plan. For now, let's take care of that information leak."

Takeda made some calls, finally he reached someone with authority in the support department for the company that had published the stolen video and song single. He told the person that they were endangering a minor who was under contract with his company and must immediately change the description. He didn't ask to have the video edited or removed, just the text changed and it was to be effected immediately.

Mirage watched in silence as he did the same thing with the sites selling the song online, although with that those he also dictated that it should indicate that it was a live version of the song. When he finished he looked at them and smiled.

"In the morning, I'll have the legal department start working on getting the video and packaging edited to match the way Mirage prefers to publicize," he said.

Ryuske asked for them, "You're not just going to have it stopped?"

Takeda grinned and said, "Why waste free publicity? Instead, if you would kindly thank their company for this publication after your placement in the underground competition, as though it were a prize offered, that will be much more effective. How soon can Mirage get it's album recorded do you think? The first video?"

"Damn, that's sneaky," commented Rin.

The other three members of Mirage agreed.

Ryuske said, "We have enough songs, though I'd hoped to have a couple more, a couple days perhaps for recording time. We'll have to find out about the video. But Mirage still only works on weekends."

"Nights OK?" asked Takeda.

"Friday and Saturday night," replied Ryuske. "And you can use my name if you have to, I'll do interviews or whatever, but the rest of Mirage doesn't do that stuff until after Hikaru graduates."

"Not even me?" Rin asked.

"No, if we only leave Hikaru and Hatsuharu out, it makes it obvious," Ryuske replied.

Hikaru said, "I'll ask about the video." She did a brief search then made a phone call, and everyone watched.

"Hi, can you do videos as well as still pictures?" Hikaru asked. After a moment she protested, "Not that kind of video! A music video." After a few yes, no, maybe replies she asked, "How much do you think?" She frowned and said, "I see, yes, OK, yes. How long would it take? I see. We'll send you an email and you can decide. Thank you."

"So?" Ryuske asked.

"He'll think about it, he wants to hear the songs and see pictures of us. If he decides to do it, a minimum of five hours, likely several days and he thinks a minimum of 3k," she replied.

Rin said, "That's not much less than the minimum from Inline."

Takeda commented, "That's actually a reassuring sign." He smiled when the members of Mirage looked at him and said, "It's less, but a similar bid so quickly offered means a better chance he has some idea of what the project actually involves."

They departed for their respective homes shortly after. Takeda had a fancy portable printer, so they each took paper copies of their new contract away. Hikaru promised to go over it with her mother after school the next day.

Hikaru tried to enter quietly, but Tokiko spoke up with a, "Welcome home?" from the couch turned bed.

"Yes, I'm home," Hikaru replied. "Sorry if I woke you."

"You're fine," Tokiko told her. "There is a package for you on the counter."

"Thank you," Hikaru said, and scooped it up as she passed. She closed the hall door and started the bath running before opening it. It was the new sheets. She put them in to wash.

Then she messaged Kiri. 'Mirage is signing with Inline. I hope you won't be mad, but it's OK if you are.'

There was no reply immediately, and she sighed and prepared her clothes for morning. She checked her phone again. She brushed her teeth and when the washer finished she put the sheets on dry and took a bath. A message came in finally and she hopped out to check it, but all it said was, 'I see.'

She dried off anyway, and when the sheets were finished, made the bed and crawled into it. It was warmer, but she couldn't sleep. She sent another message, 'Thank you for the sheets, they are warmer.'

Kiri replied, 'Since you're still awake, I'll call you in a few minutes. <3'

Hikaru waited nervously.

He called finally, and her voice shook as she answered it.

"Hi sweetheart, I've only got a few minutes again, but I'm really curious about what happened? Takeda sent me an unusual contract to look over," he said.

"Are you mad?" Hikaru asked.

"Hikaru," Kiri said quietly, "I'm not mad, why would I be mad?"

"Because you don't want to work with us," she said uncertainly.

"There are several really simple solutions to that," Kiri replied.

"What?" Hikaru asked.

"I've been thinking about it, actually, I've been thinking about it for awhile now. But tonight it seemed more obvious," he said.

"What has?" Hikaru asked uncertainly.

"I should have been helping you more," he replied.

"No Kiri," she protested.

But he continued, "When I asked you about my job, you thought about it, asked questions, supported me. You told me to choose what will make me happiest. But I've just been trying to avoid your job,

I've been ignoring it, I haven't tried to support you at all."

"Kiri, it's been fine," Hikaru interrupted.

"It's not fine," he replied. "I love you, I want to spend my life with you, I should be supporting what you want to do."

Hikaru hesitantly asked, "What are you planning to do?"

"Nothing right away," he answered. "But I've been thinking about what I could do, even without working with you directly. I could quit, get some other job if it got to be too much. I could simply take the Field Manager position, I've already felt tempted. It would mean my schedule is irregular and I still travel away from you, but it would make it so I'm not your boss. Although reading this contract, I'm not sure it would be anything like normal anyway. What's with this?" he asked.

Hikaru summarized how Mirage was being pressured by the other company, the solutions Takeda had come up with, Ryuske's refusal to sign anything without veto rights, their compromise.

"God," Kiri said when she finished. "I don't know if I'd have been able to react so quickly and cleverly. You are lucky to have caught Takeda-san's interest. But it's a risky set up Hikaru. When the company pays to produce an album or a video, the money spent adds to the pressure to publish the result.

Mirage could wind up sinking a lot into producing things that get rejected with this set up."

Hikaru asked reluctantly, "Do you think we shouldn't have agreed to it?"

Kiri hesitated before replying, "I think it's probably the best compromise you could get with Ryuske-san refusing to sign a contract with more standard provisions. I want to go over it more, not that I don't trust Takeda, but he's working for Inline not for you."

"Which is why you don't want to work with us," Hikaru said unhappily.

"Yes, because it makes it difficult to balance, but Hikaru, don't worry about it, OK?" he replied.

"Kiri," Hikaru began.

"No," he interrupted, "I mean it. Will you really be OK with it if I take the field position?"

"Yes, if you aren't just taking it because of Mirage," Hikaru replied.

Kiri laughed and said, "I won't, and I won't decide until I get back." Then he paused and resumed with, "Damn, I have to go again. Hikaru, I love you, please don't worry about interfering in my job right now, let me figure that out. Go to sleep, and I'll look your contract over tomorrow. Do you want me to sign it or are you taking it to Miri-chan?"

"I planned on having my mother sign, so it's less, so it's not..." Hikaru replied.

"OK, Kiri interrupted quickly, I'll message my thoughts and suggestions. Love you, goodnight."

"Goodnight," she replied, and he disconnected.

She lay there for a few minutes, but fell asleep surprisingly quickly in the end. When she woke up there were a couple of messages from Kiri, and one from Ryuske.

'Before I slept, I messaged Takeda about putting in a clause, if Ryuske-san will agree to it, that Inline be limited to three rejections before it must cover the production cost for replacements, and Mirage be limited to three rejections of materials that Inline wants to put out before being required to provide replacements. That should limit the amount of money put into changes as well as increasing the pressure to actually put them into production,' was the first one.

The second was a question, 'Can I buy you clothes if they count as souvenirs?'

Hikaru laughed. She replied, 'Kiri, I love you, buy whatever you want.'

Then she read Ryuske's message, "Takeda called with a suggested change to the contract first thing this morning, I'll go with you to talk with Miri if you haven't yet."

She called her mother first and asked about visiting that afternoon to talk about signing a contract with a production company.

Miri protested, "I'll want to show it to Taka-chan at least, not rush into it!"

Hikaru had been so sure that her mother would be pleased and support the idea that she felt shocked. "If I ask Ryuske to email it to you, can you try to rush? We're kind of dealing with a situation," she replied.

"I suppose so, what kind of situation?" Miri asked uncertainly.

"Another company released one of our songs and a music video under their name," Hikaru replied.

"Without a contract?" Miri asked skeptically.

"Yes," Hikaru replied, "they thought we'd be pressured into taking their offer."

She started pulling on her uniform.

"I don't know Hikaru," Miri said reluctantly.

Hikaru said, "I'll come talk to you this afternoon, I need to get ready and go to school."

"OK," Miri agreed and they ended the call.

Hikaru messaged Ryuske, 'Can you email the contract to my mom, she's reluctant and wants to show Takahashi before she agrees. And I said I'd go over after school.'

'OK, I'll take care of it,' Ryuske replied.

Hikaru blinked in surprise at the breakfast Tokiko had laid out when she came out into the living area.

Kiri's mother smiled at her and said, "I'm planning to go home today."

"Oh," Hikaru said. "I'm sorry, I don't have time to enjoy breakfast properly, would you mind if I packed it for lunch?"

"No, that's fine," replied Tokiko calmly.

Hikaru impulsively went over and kissed her cheek as she would have her own mother. "Thank you for your care, I'm glad you visited," she said.

Kiri's mother smiled up at her and said, "So am I."

Hikaru quickly packed a lunch box, and ate a bit as she did. Then collected her bag and prepared to head out.

"Have a safe trip home Oka-sama, see you," Hikaru said as she left.

Tokiko grinned with Kiri's pretty smile, and said, "I will, have a good day at school."

58: Permission

Hikaru tried to explain how Mirage had almost been shanghaied by a pirating publishing company and how they were signing with Inline to Risa and Shizuoka during lunch.

"I don't understand," Risa said doubtfully while kicking her feet. "All this time you're saying

Takeshi-san has been a celebrity manager and now you're signing with his company?"

Shizuoka asked before Hikaru could reply again, "Why didn't he tell you?"

Hikaru said uncomfortably, "He didn't not tell me, and he's not one particular celebrity's manager, he's the general manager of the company, just like he said."

Her friends were doubtful about the whole situation and Hikaru got a little angry and said finally, "Kiri is willing to quit and find some other job if things get too difficult or if I ask him to! If he's willing to go so far, I don't see why you won't trust him. Why do you think this was some plot?"

Risa replied anxiously, "We're just worried about you. Did he really say he'd quit?"

Hikaru told them reluctantly, "He promised me on our first date, that if I couldn't stand his job after six months, he'd change it. And last night he was talking about taking the new Field Manager position or taking a different job entirely if it was too much of a conflict."

"Wow," Shizuoka said.

Hikaru said unhappily, "I don't want Kiri to have to change his job. He loves his job sometimes, and not everyone is that lucky."

Risa hugged her and said quietly, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize he was that serious about you. I just

worried that he was playing around or that maybe he pushed this contract without you knowing."

Hikaru sighed and laid her head on the table. "Why does it have to be so complicated?"

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After school she called Ryuske. He picked up immediately and told her, "Come home, I mean, to your mom's place. I came over early after talking to her on the phone a while."

"Oh," Hikaru replied. "OK, I'll be there soon."

"See you," he said.

When she got there, she found Miri and Ryuske sitting across the little table arguing over the paperwork between them.

"Hi?" she greeted them uncertainly.

Ryuske ran his hands through his hair and said, "Hey." He summoned up a smile for her.

Hikaru looked at him sitting there, and suddenly she realized who 'Don't Go' was for. But she couldn't say anything in front of her mother.

Miri stood up and ran to hug her daughter. Hikaru hugged her gently and told her, "You look more pregnant everyday."

Miri grumped, "Don't try to change the subject!"

Hikaru laughed and said, "Sorry, I guess you better tell me what the subject is."

Miri glared at her daughter and declared, "Your contract!"

Hikaru smiled a little sadly and said, "I thought you'd be glad. I never imagined you wouldn't be willing to sign for me."

Miri replied fretfully, "You have no idea how tough things were at the beginning for Akira, or how many demands the production company made on the guys."

Hikaru said quietly, "No, but I know he loved it. He always told us how lucky he was to be able to support us while doing what he loved."

Miri sighed and Ryuske said, "I've tried to reassure her that I'll do my best to protect you from the worst of it."

Hikaru looked at him and told him, "You don't have to. I want to do this. I'm not as good a musician as my father was," Ryuske and Miri both interrupted with protests.

"You are," they insisted.

Hikaru grinned wryly at them and said, "I'm not saying I'm a bad musician, but Ryuske, you're closer to being like him. He wrote music, I just play it. And I love playing it, I'm fine with that."

Ryuske looked at her and said seriously, "You will write it, when you're ready."

Hikaru opened her mouth to protest, but then changed what she was going to say, "It doesn't matter. What is wrong with the contract mom? Takeda-san has already helped us out, but he can't get the legal teams to work for us until we're official."

"Why won't Kiri be your manager?" Miri asked fretfully.

"He knows that relationships rarely survive the entertainment industry as well as your marriage did Miri," Ryuske answered before Hikaru. "As reluctant as I am to trust him, I think he meant it," he said while looking at Hikaru.

Hikaru nodded.

Ryuske closed his eyes and took a deep breath before smiling at her and then asking Miri, "Would it help if you meet Takeda-san personally?"

"Kiri said we're lucky to have caught his interest," Hikaru offered.

They both looked up at her with surprise.

Hikaru settled at the table and picked up the contract. The clause Kiri had suggested had been added. "What did Taka-ji have to say about it?" she asked her mother.

Miri sighed and sat at the table again. She took a sip of her tea and poured a cup for Hikaru before answering. "He said it was an amazing contract for a new band," she said reluctantly.

Hikaru smiled. But Ryuske clenched his fists and said unhappily, "But with me in it, it's not exactly a new band to Inline. They already know they can sell my work."

Hikaru leaned over and put her arm around him. "Are you really going to be OK with it?" she asked.

"As long as you're with me," he replied quietly.

She nodded.

Miri stared at them. "You're both sure about this?"

They nodded.

"What about college?" Miri asked Hikaru.

Hikaru winced and told her, "If my agreeing to go to college is the cost of your approval, I will."

Miri stared at her. After a moment she asked, "What does Kiri think?"

Hikaru hesitated. "I'm not sure, before he said he definitely thought I should go, but last night he said he's been thinking about my job, that he'd been trying to ignore it before, but will try to support me in it. I don't know. I don't want him to have to quit his job though," she said unhappily.

Ryuske stared at her in surprise. "Why would he quit?" he asked.

Hikaru explained. When she finished, they talked about the contract, the video projects and proposed recording schedules.

Eventually Miri sighed and said, "Alright, I'll sign for you."

Hikaru smiled and scooted around to hug her. "Thank you."

Miri looked at Ryuske and asked, "You promise to take care of my daughter?"

"Mom!" protested Hikaru. "Don't make it sound like you're marrying me off."

Ryuske laughed and promised Miri, "Always."

Miri looked at Hikaru and said seriously, "Your father was as married to the band as he was to me. You'll have to remember to show Kiri-kun that you love and think of him everyday, because it's not easy feeling like you might be in second place to the music."

Hikaru looked at her mother with something like shock. She'd thought her parents had been the happiest and most loving couple in the world. "Did you worry?" she asked after a moment.

"Not really," her mother said with a gentle, wistful smile. "Akira always made sure I knew how much he loved me. And I knew how much music meant to him, so I was jealous of it sometimes, but I never wanted him to give it up. But I listened to the heartaches of many people who weren't so lucky."

Miri insisted they stay to dinner after the contract was signed. At dinner Izumi asked if Ryuske was Hikaru's new boyfriend.

Hikaru stiffened but before she could reply angrily, Ryuske said in a tone of mock suffering, "I'm hurt that you have forgotten me so easily."

Izumi stared at him and asked, "What?"

Ryuske smiled at Izumi and said, "We played at your wedding. Miri-chan is very dear to all of us, I hope you're taking good care of her."

"Of course I am!" Izumi snapped.

Ryuske smiled calmly and said, "I'm glad."

Miri grinned at him, and dinner finished peacefully. Miri hugged and kissed them both when they left. "I'm really looking forward to the first music video!" she said.

59: Acceptance

Hikaru laughed as they walked to the bus stop. Ryuske smiled at her. Hikaru took a deep breath and asked suddenly, "Do you love me?"

"Yes," he answered without looking at her.

"I mean love, love?" Hikaru asked, watching him.

"Yes," he said again. But he looked away from her.

"I'm sorry," Hikaru said unhappily.

"Don't be," he said and took her hand.

"But," she started to say.

"Hikaru," he interrupted, "I love you, but I love Aisha more. That's why I never said anything."

"He's dead," Hikaru replied. Ryuske swallowed and she apologized, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I know," Ryuske told her and squeezed her hand.

"I don't love you like I love Kiri," Hikaru said.

"I know," he replied again. "And this will sound really stupid and cliché, but if you're happy, I'm happy," he told her while looking into her eyes.

"Really?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes," he answered calmly, and raised a hand to touch her cheek.

"I'm really happy with Kiri," she told him.

He smiled at her and said, "Then you can have him. I'm sorry I got so upset. I was just afraid he'd been using you. Or that I'd lose you."

"He wouldn't do that! And I love you, just not like that, you won't lose me." Hikaru protested.

Ryuske nodded and said, "That's enough for me."

Hikaru sighed and he squeezed her hand again and told her firmly, "I mean it."

"I don't want you to be lonely, you never date like Rin," Hikaru complained.

"I've tried dating," he said uncomfortably. "I didn't really like it. Maybe I'm a little broken. Both of my loves have been unrequited," he pointed out with a wry smile.

Hikaru looked at him unhappily and said, "Sorry."

Ryuske sighed and told her, "Don't be, I'm not unhappy this way. I don't have that need for it that everyone else seems to. I need music like that. Even when I said I wasn't going to play again, I was learning and teaching music."

Hikaru clung to his hand and said, "Rin told me everyone needs something different from love."

Ryuske looked at her in surprise and nodded. "Yes."

"OK," she said.

Ryuske smiled at her and she smiled back.

They rode the bus downtown and Ryuske hugged her before walking off. "Thank you," he told her.

"Why?" Hikaru asked.

"Do you remember how we met?" he asked.

"Yes of course?" she replied.

He grinned and asked, "And the first line of the song you played for me?"

"I'm just a bachelor, looking for a partner," she sang lightly.

He nodded. "That's when I knew," he said quietly. "Thanks for being my partner. Making music together is all I need."

"OK," she replied.

"See you," he said with a grin.

"See you," she returned, and he walked off. She waited for the bus home and wondered if she should tell Kiri.

--

When she got home, the house felt empty. Tokiko was gone, but she'd left instructions on how to finish the dinner she'd prepared. Hikaru smiled in amusement at the thought that Kiri got not only his pretty looks but his enjoyment in feeding her from his mother.

She sighed. She missed him like crazy, but if he liked to travel, she didn't want him to quit doing it for her. But she really wished she could hug him and sleep beside him.

'Are you busy?' she messaged.

'Yeah, but if you're free, I'll call in awhile,' he replied almost instantly.

'Just homework left tonight. Please call, I miss you,' she sent back.

'I will, love you,' he sent.

'Love you too,' she finished.

She stored the food for tomorrow and worked on her homework. When Kiri called it was a video call. Hikaru almost dropped the phone in surprise.

Kiri laughed, and said with a grin, "So cute."

Hikaru blushed and replied, "I wasn't expecting a video call."

Kiri grinned and suggested teasingly, "Too bad I caught you with all your clothes on?"

Hikaru stared at him in shock.

"Joking?" he suggested lightly.

"I guess I could take off clothes if you really wanted," she said, looking away from her phone.

"I love you, and someday when you think that would be fun, hell yes, but right now, no Hikaru," he told her firmly.

She looked back and he smiled at her. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "How is everything going?"

"Ryuske loves me," she blurted out.

Kiri's smile vanished and he replied, "I know."

Hikaru gaped at him and asked, "How did you know? I didn't know until today."

Kiri raised an eyebrow at her and told her, "It seemed kind of obvious, especially with the new song."

"Oh," she replied.

"And?" he enquired.

"And?" she repeated blankly.

"Do you love him?" Kiri asked neutrally.

"Of course I do," she replied and Kiri froze. She rushed on, "But not like that, not like I love you!"

Kiri opened his mouth and then shut it again.

Hikaru asked anxiously, "Should I have not told you? I didn't know if I should tell you, but I thought it might be worse not to tell you."

"I don't know," he said after a minute. "It doesn't make me happy, but I already guessed it. How did it come up?" he asked a little plaintively.

Hikaru blushed and said with embarrassment, "I asked. All of a sudden, when I went to talk to mom about the contract and he was sitting at the table where they'd been arguing, he smiled at me and I realized 'Don't Go' was to me. So after we left, I asked."

Kiri smiled tremulously at her.

Hikaru told him anxiously, "He said it's fine like this, that music is enough." Kiri didn't say anything and she said unhappily, "I don't know how to reassure

you. I love you, I wish I could hold you. I guess I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's OK," Kiri said.

"You don't look like it's OK," she worried.

He smiled a little and replied, "I have only been gone a couple days, and so much is happening to you, and I can't even touch you. It makes me feel anxious."

Hikaru told him, "When you get home we'll touch a lot."

"Yes," he agreed.

"Kiri?" she asked.

"What?" he asked in return.

"Will you please tell me whenever I'm making you feel anxious, and if there's anything I can do to make you feel reassured?" Hikaru begged.

He looked at her a little ruefully. "Sorry," he said quietly, "I feel a little anxious, but I don't know what you can do about it, and I didn't mean to make you worry more."

"I really love you Kiri," she told him seriously.

He smiled and replied, "I love you too."

"Mom said that musicians make people wonder if they're coming second if they're not careful," Hikaru said anxiously.

Kiri grinned at her and said lightly, "I know very well that music comes first, it's why I had a rule against dating musicians."

Hikaru stared at him. "You don't come second," she protested.

Wryly he asked, "Would you give up music for me?"

Hikaru gazed at him unhappily, then she looked at her guitar. She swallowed.

"You don't have to answer that," he told her gently.

"I could give up being in the band, if you really needed me to," she said miserably, "but I don't think I could give up playing entirely."

Kiri stared at her with shock written all over his face. After a moment he closed his open mouth and swallowed. "Hikaru," he said uncertainly.

She looked at him and told him, "I hope you won't ask me to. I think I'd feel miserable. But I don't want to give you up either."

"I won't ask you to, I'm, god, I love you so freaking much Hikaru," he replied with a crack in his voice.

"Me too," she told him quickly.

"I know that music is like air to you," Kiri said anxiously, "you might stop breathing if I asked, but it would kill you and I'd be miserable for the rest of my life! I'll never ask you to give it up."

Hikaru smiled shakily and asked, "Why did you ask then?"

Kiri blushed and looked away. "I really didn't think you loved me enough that you'd even consider it," he said almost too quietly for her to hear.

"I do," she replied.

He looked back and said a little breathlessly, "Yeah. Me too."

Then they talked about anything, nothing, and everything, both reluctant to end the call. Eventually they said goodnight.

60: Rainy nights.

Seoshi Toma loved Mirage's songs. He had video ideas for three of them. Mirage was reluctant to commit to making three videos before seeing the first one, so Seoshi proposed that they do Mirage's title song first. They'd travel to the beach, they'd all need white outfits, they'd need a girl, he said.

When they met with him Thursday afternoon, Ryuske asked, "Why do we need a girl, when we already have a girl?"

Seoshi surveyed Hikaru critically and agreed that Hikaru would work if she'd be willing to wear a padded bra and a sleeveless dress that he would provide.

Hikaru protested violently against the dress.

Rin laughed and asked, "You're willing to wear fake breasts but not a dress?"

"My scars will show," she replied unhappily.

Ryuske said, "Sorry, I forgot. You don't have to."

Seoshi asked, "What scars?"

Hikaru grimaced and pulled up her sleeve enough that a few of them showed and said reluctantly, "They're all over most of my body."

Seoshi shrugged. "So what? We'll just cover them with makeup."

Hatsuharu asked for Hikaru when she just sat and stared, "On her arms and chest?"

Seoshi replied, "Sure, it's easy, we do it in photos all the time."

Rin said, "Ow, man, you are shattering my illusions."

Seoshi grinned and told him, "The illusion is what people see everyday in the mirror, I've been showing how beautiful they really are."

They planned the trip for Friday night, since Seoshi wanted to try and get video at dawn.

Hikaru asked, "But we haven't recorded the song in the studio yet, how will we match the timing?"

Ryuske replied calmly, "The timing in videos is always tweaked after, don't worry."

Seoshi protested, "But it would be easier if we had recordings to play for some scenes."

"Takeda has arranged for us to start recording Saturday night," Ryuske told them.

"Saturday is going to be really long," Rin commented.

Ryuske said, "I arranged for evening checkout at the hotel, so we can go back to our rooms and sleep until about 6pm before we head back and go to the studio."

When they exited into the rain, Rin said, "I hope that it's clear when we go to the beach."

Everyone except Seoshi nodded. He held his hands out to the rain and said unhappily, "Man, this would be perfect, are you sure we can't record 'Hotter than the Sun' tonight?"

Everyone stared at him.

Hikaru offered tentatively, "I have my homework done, but I should still sleep by midnight."

"Give me two hours?" Seoshi begged them. "Go get your instruments, dress in your black and silver and I'll get a hotel room!"

Ryuske asked, "Hatsuharu?"

Hatsuharu grinned and answered, "Why not?"

They broke up in a rush. Seoshi to get his equipment and get the location he wanted, everyone else to dress and grab instruments.

Seoshi texted the hotel and room number to them, and within an hour they were all there.

"Wow," Hikaru said. "How'd you get the piano?"

Rin and Ryuske were helping move a baby grand into the position Seoshi wanted.

Seoshi grinned and replied, "It comes with the penthouse."

Hatsuharu said, "No wonder making videos is so expensive. What I want to know is why we're recording a video about the sun in the rain?"

Seoshi grinned and looked at the dark windows with rain pouring and said, "Record first while it lasts."

He had them set up the drum set beside the piano.

For the first play through, Ryuske put Hikaru at the piano, Rin with his bass between her and Hatsuharu, and took up his violin.

"This isn't our usual arrangement," Hikaru said nervelessly.

"Time is passing," Seoshi reminded them fretfully.

"I've got it set up to record through our outputs," Ryuske said calmly. "Let's do this."

Mirage played. Ryuske sang, "Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun, so deep your kisses run."

Rin and Hikaru joined in, "Deep deep deep, deep within my brain, a recurring sweet refrain."

Ryuske cried, "Slam slam slam, the slamming of my heart, is tearing me apart..."

And then the violin wailed to the rhythm of Rin's bass and Hatsuharu's drums.

And Ryuske sang, "Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun, so deep your kisses run, don't stop until we're done."

And the piano carried them through the shimmer left by the cymbals, and they sang, "Sweet sweet sweet, sweeter than the rain, a warm and tender pain, that I just can't explain."

They wound their way through the verses and finished softly, as Ryuske sang with tears in his eyes, "Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun... you were hotter than the sun."

Silence fell, and after a moment Seoshi grinned and said, "You guys are amazing! I thought we'd have to record a dozen times with amateurs at recording, thank god I set up all the cameras on the first run."

He had them stand and sit in various poses and took still pictures. Most of them on the balcony in the rain. For these Hikaru and Hatsuharu came in for a lot of poking and prodding.

Seoshi complained, "You were doing so well earlier, what happened?"

Hikaru and Hatsuharu shrugged helplessly. Ryuske and Rin laughed.

Ryuske explained, "We were playing, not posing before. Rin and I have both worked on other publications, Hikaru and Hatsuharu are new to it."

Seoshi frowned and said, "OK." He had them sing or play lines from their songs as he moved them around after that. He had them do jumping jacks and then sprawl lazily. Finally he had enough stills that he was satisfied.

He looked at the time and asked, "Want to play the anniversary song through once? We could use some shots from here in that one too."

They agreed and played through that one, then they packed up to go home.

Hikaru said, "It seems like a waste."

"What does?" asked Rin.

"Renting a room that nobody's using," she replied.

Seoshi said, "I only paid for three hours, since you all said you have to sleep early."

"Wow," Hikaru commented incredulously, "I had no idea you could rent this kind of room by the hour."

Seoshi grinned and told her, "I have an arrangement for photo shoots."

Rin took Hikaru home after they finished loading Hatsuharu's drums into his mini-van, and Seoshi's lights and equipment into his cab.

"Got any food?" he asked when they arrived.

"Sure," she replied.

"Hello Geda-san," she greeted when her neighbor peeked out.

"Who's this? Your lover?" the elderly lady asked inquisitively.

Hikaru laughed and Rin thumped her shoulder. "No, I'm her bass player," he said with a grin.

"Oh my," Geda said faintly, "I always wanted to have a bass player."

"Do you play?" he asked with an interested smile.

She put her hand to her cheek and said, "I used to play a flute some."

"We should hang out some afternoon," he suggested flirtatiously.

"Rin," Hikaru protested.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't flirt with my neighbour, and she's married!" Hikaru scolded.

Rin bopped her on the head and said, "Brat, get your mind out of the gutter."

Geda laughed and asked, "Would you like some cake?"

"Hell yeah," Rin agreed.

She brought out half a cake on a plate and insisted they take the whole thing.

Hikaru made ramen and muttered at the refrigerator.

Rin leaned over her shoulder and pointed out, "It's a little empty?"

Hikaru nodded and replied, "Yeah, so much has happened, I didn't do the shopping I meant to. But since we're leaving tomorrow night, I think I'll just wait 'til we get back and shop after work on Sunday."

Rin poked around the house a little, much as Yuki and Kaoru had before he left. "No plants," he commented.

"What?" she asked.

"Your boyfriend doesn't have any houseplants," he said.

"So? Neither do I?" she replied.

"It makes the house feel dead," he complained.

"Well, Kiri travels for work quite a bit, I suppose that makes it difficult to keep plants alive?" she suggested.

"I should bring you a plant as a housewarming present," he told her.

Hikaru looked at him warily and said, "I don't know how good I'll be at keeping a plant? I had no idea you were into houseplants."

Rin grinned and informed her, "If the two of you can't keep a plant alive, you better not have kids."

Hikaru blushed.

"Thanks for the food, see you tomorrow," he said with another grin and headed out.

"See you," she replied.

She called Kiri after she climbed into bed.

"Hey," he said. "It's pretty late for a school night?"

"We stayed out and recorded some video, because it was raining tonight," she replied.

He smiled tiredly and told her, "It rained here all day too."

"You sound tired," she said.

"I am, but there's another couple hours to go with the post concert signing. Everything's going pretty well considering the delays we had due to weather," he explained.

"Was today's concert outside?" she asked.

"No, but there was a power outage during the afternoon, it made some delays that carried over," he explained.

"Tomorrow we're going to the beach, to record video for 'Mirage' at dawn on Saturday," Hikaru said.

"I know, I saw the schedule update," he replied.

"Oh," she said.

"Hikaru, I love you, go to sleep," he said softly.

"I love you too." She sighed. "I guess, goodnight?"

"Goodnight Hikaru," he said, and ended the call.

She plugged her phone in and fell asleep within a few minutes.

61: This grade is final.

Friday Hikaru had tests, and school was stressful. Fortunately they had very little weekend homework, although Hikaru still worried about her final grade. Risa and Shizuoka were both free that afternoon, so they went with her to pay for the shelf.

"Are you going to be OK? Mirage has hardly been playing," Risa asked anxiously.

"Yeah, we've been really busy, we play Sunday afternoon though, at a hotel," Hikaru said.

"I haven't seen a notification," Shizuoka protested.

"Really?" Hikaru asked and stopped to message Ryuske.

Ryuske replied a few minutes later, "It's done now."

Shizuoka said at the same time, "Oh, it just arrived. Woah, I can't afford to go though."

Hikaru looked at her own copy of the notification and said, "Oh, want me to ask if I can get two extra tickets?"

Risa and Shizuoka refused. "I'm really impressed that you guys can play at an event that charges a couple hundred to get into though," Shizuoka said.

"Well, that's not just to see us," Hikaru pointed out.

Risa grinned and asked, "Can you try on the dress I'm working on before the event? Maybe you could wear it!"

Hikaru frowned and told her, "I'll try to make time to try it on, but I don't want to wear a dress onstage until after I've graduated."

"Oh," Risa said with disappointment.

Shizuoka said, "You don't want to let people see it until the fashion show anyway, we don't want anyone to copy it."

Risa sighed and said, "I don't think my designs are good enough that people will copy them."

Hikaru smirked and suggested, "Even after they appear on Mirage's album cover?"

"What?" Risa asked.

"We're wearing white for the Mirage video, and I'm going to wear the bowed jeans you made the cutouts in for me. I need to choose a white shirt though. I thought maybe just my school uniform shirt," Hikaru said.

"No way!" Risa and Shizuoka protested in unison.

After the shelf was paid for and the delivery arranged for a couple hours later, they dragged Hikaru off shirt shopping. Risa chose a slick turtleneck and took them to a fabric store for some silky corded edging and embroidered white on white silk.

Hikaru protested, "I have to leave this evening."

Risa promised, "I'll have it done in time."

She went home after receiving Hikaru's promise to stand for fittings in a couple hours.

Hikaru messaged Ryuske, 'I might have to take a later train.'

Ryuske sent back, 'I'll just switch all our tickets to the last train, Rin said the same thing.'

Shizuoka exclaimed over Kiri's pretty house when they arrived. "It's so warm and cozy," she said bouncing a little where she'd sat on the couch.

"Rin said it seems dead because we have no houseplants," Hikaru told her.

Shizuoka stared at her and asked dubiously, "Mirage's Rin? Long haired, bass playing, motorcycle riding, womanizer Rin?"

"Yeah," Hikaru agreed and grinned.

Fortunately they'd gotten home before the shelf, which was delivered 15 minutes after they got in. Shizuoka helped Hikaru position it in the office room. When they were moving things, Hikaru found a roll of old posters.

"Wow," she said, looking at one.

Shizuoka peeked over her shoulder and told her, "Don't worry about it, all guys have stuff like that."

Hikaru laughed and asked, "Think he'd mind if I hung it up?"

Shizuoka stared at her.

Hikaru pulled it gently from the stack and unveiled it completely. It had Night Dreams emblazoned across the bottom and the band members leaning casually against a wall that had been replaced by the woman's hip and thigh. "It's my dad's band. He's got a couple from Edge too." She grinned.

"Oh, wow!" Shizuoka gasped when Hikaru showed her Edge's posters. "They are so hot! Is that really Ryuske-san?"

"Yeah," Hikaru laughed.

"He should grow his hair out again!" Shizuoka exclaimed.

Hikaru frowned and said, "No, I don't think he will. I think he probably cut it when Aisha died."

"Oh," Shizuoka said, somewhat subdued.

Hikaru shrugged and gently replaced the posters.

Shizuoka helped her unpack. Hikaru placed her Pikachu on the section where she'd pictured him, and he gazed back with his empty black eyes.

"Do you think it's too childish?" she asked a little ruefully.

Shizuoka put her hands on her hips and said firmly, "If it's too childish for him, then you are too. Don't change for him, isn't that what you've taught me, that it's OK to be how I am?"

Hikaru stared at her. "I taught you?" she asked uncertainly.

Shizuoka nodded and blushed. "Ever since you and Risa became friends with me, you've both always just accepted me, no matter how I dressed or who I dated," she explained. "And whenever I asked if I should tone down to match you, or if I should try to change for one of my boyfriends, you always said no."

"Well, of course not," Hikaru said.

"Keeping your stuffed animal is the same," Shizuoka insisted.

"I don't know," Hikaru replied dubiously.

"It is!" Shizuoka exclaimed.

Someone knocked, and Hikaru ran to answer the door. It was Risa, with her arms full.

"Tell Hikaru that she should keep her stuffed animal out!" Shizuoka demanded, taking part of Risa's burdens.

Risa laughed and asked, "Creepy Pikachu?"

"He's not creepy!" Hikaru protested.

Risa grinned and replied, "He's the only Pikachu I've ever seen that wasn't smiling."

Hikaru tried on the modified turtleneck. "Wow," she said after looking in the mirror. They had her put on the jeans and her sandals.

Risa had put matching triangular cutouts into the top, but then filled them with the embroidered silk. She frowned at the jeans and demanded, "Take them off, I need to replace the bows."

"Why?" Hikaru asked as she complied.

"Because those are getting tattered and that way they'll match better," Risa explained patiently.

While she worked they ordered food and showed her the posters. Risa thought Hikaru should definitely put them up.

"But they're Kiri's," Hikaru protested.

"Didn't he ask you to change things?" Risa pointed out.

Hikaru nodded. "But before that, come sit on the bed and sew, and Shizuoka can help me hang the shelf I got to hold my fans."

The three girls retired to the bedroom and Hikaru showed them the decorative frame. Eventually they decided to move Kiri's hangings to the side wall, though that was a little crowded and place the fans at the foot of the bed.

"If you put it a little higher you won't brush things off it with your shoulders when you pass," Risa recommended from where she sat carefully edging ribbons she'd trimmed out of the silk.

They raised it a bit.

Hikaru looked at Kiri's hangings thoughtfully and asked, "Should we move the short wide one over here under the shelf?"

They tried that and agreed that it felt more balanced.

Hikaru laid her fans out on the pegs and then joined Shizuoka and Risa on the bed. "I like it," she said hopefully.

"Yeah, it's good," agreed Shizuoka.

Risa nodded and said, "That frame is perfect for your fans." Then she asked, "But since it matches the shelf, why didn't you put them in the same room?"

Hikaru shrugged.

"Nevermind," Shizuoka laughed and ruffled her hair.

Even when the food arrived Risa didn't stop sewing. Hikaru and Shizuoka laughed and fed her bites when she refused to pause saying, "Since I took it apart, I need to have it finished before Hikaru leaves."

Hikaru got everything else ready, and cleaned up after their food. Shizuoka went home first.

"Thanks," Hikaru said after awhile of sitting and watching Risa sew.

Risa grinned and said, "When you're famous and you're doing interviews, you have to tell them I worked on your stage outfits."

"Of course!" Hikaru agreed. "I can brag about how the famous designer I went to school with launched my career by making me look presentable," she said and grinned back.

Risa laughed.

Kiri only had time for messages, but promised to call Saturday afternoon.

62: Colder than the sun.

Mirage and their videographer and Nezumi boarded the last train together. People grumbled about the

amount of stuff they carried. Every member was heavily laden, they had Hatsuharu's drum set split up between them as well as various lighting equipment that Seoshi needed. Even Nezumi struggled with half a dozen cases and bags of electronics.

They apologized profusely and crowded as closely together as they could. When they reached the coast, a van from the hotel picked them up at the station. Somehow they managed to cram themselves and everything aboard.

"I'm really surprised you came," Hikaru said to Nezumi as he cringed beside her and tried not to let their arms touch.

"Had to," he replied.

Ryuske explained from his seat in the front, "Nezumi is going to put in all the heat shimmers and stuff. So he had to come to make sure he has enough base footage to work with."

Seoshi said grumpily, "I would have gotten enough. I'm planning to keep one camera on the horizon the whole time."

Nezumi shrugged and said, "You'll see."

"OK," Hikaru replied agreeably.

Seoshi told her, "You're going to have to strip from one outfit to the other in under a minute."

Hikaru stared at him.

"The sun will be moving, a minute is really too long, but do your best," he told her.

Rin said, "Maybe you better give us the outline of your plan."

And so until they arrived, Seoshi described how he envisioned the filming in the morning.

"We'll get up and head to the beach at 4am," he told them as they checked in.

"Why so early?" Hikaru asked.

"We have to get the drums set up before the light comes up for one thing," Hatsuharu said.

But there was a problem with their check in. "We only have two rooms," explained the clerk nervously. "And one is a queen, not a double as you say you requested."

Ryuske frowned and said, "I asked for three doubles."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry, but it seems to have been put in as a reservation for three, with one room as a double, and we're full," explained the clerk.

Ryuske looked at them all and asked, "What should we do?"

Rin said calmly, "We're only grabbing a few hours of sleep on either side of the filming, let's just cram in."

"I can't cram in," Nezumi said anxiously.

Ryuske looked at him and asked, "If we put you and Seoshi-san in the double, can you manage?"

Nezumi nodded reluctantly.

Seoshi blinked and asked, "Shouldn't Hikaru have the other?"

Ryuske shrugged and said, "You'll need room to prep your equipment won't you?"

He nodded.

"We'll need extra pillows," Rin told the clerk.

Mirage crowded into the single queen room. It had a couch. They played rock paper scissors to determine who slept where. Ryuske and Hikaru on the bed, Hatsuharu on the couch, and Rin on the floor squeezed in beside the drum set.

They all felt like they'd barely laid down when someone knocked on the door. But it was Seoshi, it was already 3:45am and he was there with the makeup for Hikaru's arms and torso.

He had her put on the dress first and marked lines on her skin. Then he had her take it off and applied the makeup. He powdered her thoroughly, but warned that the makeup was going to rub on her clothes so not to move around too much outside of the actual shooting.

They all staggered out to the beach with their piles of equipment. Seoshi picked out one dune for them to climb and warned everyone away from making

footprints on it early. He chose another to set up the drums and instruments on.

Hikaru was to climb the dune alone in the dress, then turn back and sing the last line, then change clothes quickly. Each of the other Mirage members would make the same climb on a slightly different trail in their black and silver. Seoshi would use a laser pointer to guide them so that they all reached certain key spots in time to the song. Then Hikaru would make the climb again in her black outfit.

Then they would all change to their white outfits and rush to the other dune where the instruments waited and play through the song, hopefully before the sunrise ended.

Nezumi and Seoshi had a dozen cameras set up between them. Nezumi said, "Don't stop, whatever you do, just keep going."

Seoshi glared at him, but then turned to the band and agreed, "We're racing the sun here, so yeah, what he said."

Hikaru shivered in the white dress as it fluttered around her. She couldn't rub her arms though because they were covered in makeup.

"Try to look like you're hot?" Seoshi asked plaintively.

Hikaru messaged Kiri while they waited for the sun, 'How am I supposed to look hot when I'm freezing?'

She didn't expect a reply since she figured he'd be sleeping, but he messaged back immediately. 'If you're so scantily dressed that you're freezing, I bet you look really hot. Good morning Hikaru. I love you, send me a picture later!'

Hikaru blushed and the sun glimmered over the horizon.

"Now!" yelled Seoshi.

"Go, go, go," Nezumi murmured nearly inaudibly.

Hikaru climbed the dune, turned and sang the last line as the wind whipped her loose hair around her face, then she turned and ran down the back side of the dune.

They'd set up a flimsy enclosure to change in, and she pulled off the dress and padded bra, pulled on her stage black and silver and tied her hair. When she ran out, Ryuske was coming off the dune.

"Your headset!" he yelled.

Hikaru shrugged helplessly.

He pulled his off and put it on her, and cried, "Go!"

She made it around to the front of the dune just in time to follow after Hatsuharu. She started to follow the same path but Seoshi's cry stopped her and she followed the pointer.

Everyone turned to run towards the changing room when she made it to the top, but Seoshi yelled, "No,

Mirage, line up along the top of the dune and jump! Fast!" He beckoned demandingly.

They turned back and climbed quickly to the ridge.

"Jump, all together now, jump!" he yelled.

They jumped, and jumped again, and then Nezumi said quietly over the internal line, "Change to white and get to the instruments now, run."

Seoshi jumped as he heard the voice, they'd explained the system, but hadn't practiced with it. Hikaru looked at Ryuske as they ran towards the makeshift changing room and saw that he'd found her headset.

They stripped down and pulled on their white clothes as fast as they could. Then they ran for the second dune. They played through the song, somewhat breathlessly. By the time they finished, the sun was fully up.

Seoshi wasn't done with them though, he had them play parts of the song solo, standing on a rock above the waves. He was thrilled when one wave swept up and over Ryuske as he played. Ryuske wasn't thrilled and cradled his violin apologetically.

Hatsuharu provided a bottle of purified water and a towel. They cleansed it gently, totally ignoring Ryuske's soaked state, while Seoshi looked on in confusion.

Nezumi looked at him. "Imagine it was your favorite camera."

Comprehension finally dawned.

They straggled back to their rooms completely exhausted. Boxes of hot take out foods awaited them at the front desk.

"Wow," Hikaru said, and grabbed one.

"Thank you," Rin said and grabbed another.

"Who ordered this?" Hatsuharu asked, seeing Ryuske looked as surprised as everyone else.

Everyone denied it, but they carried the food away to the larger of their rooms.

Nezumi asked uncertainly, a partly devoured shrimp held in his chopsticks, "Do you think it's safe to eat it if we don't know where it came from?"

"As safe as take out food ever is," mumbled Hikaru.

Ryuske checked his phone and looked at her thoughtfully and asked, "Have you checked your phone recently?"

She shook her head, and searched for it. Finally she had them call it. Pulling it out from under a tangle of discarded clothes, she turned to Ryuske and asked, "How did you know?"

"It seemed obvious when none of us did it, and I thought about who else knew our filming schedule," he replied.

Hikaru had several messages from Kiri, the latest of which read, 'I figured you'd all be starving.'

Hikaru sent back, 'We were, thank you, a million times.'

Ryuske said quietly, "This is the kind of thing a good manager thinks of."

Rin asked, "Then wouldn't it have been better if our manager had thought of it?"

Ryuske said, "I didn't give him that detailed of a schedule, but he did think of it." He held up his own phone to display the message from Takeda that recommended they eat before they slept, and again before they showed up to record.

When they finished, the band took turns showering, while the waiting members helped get Nezumi and Seoshi settled in their room with all their equipment packed. They stuffed all their stage clothes into bags, before they stretched out to sleep in the other room.

Hikaru's phone rang sometime during the afternoon. When it rang again Ryuske sat up and answered it. "She's sleeping," he said sleepily.

"With you?" Kiri asked.

Ryuske came more awake and replied, "Yes, but not like that, we're all crammed into one room."

"I see," Kiri replied. After a moment of silence he asked, "Why did you answer her phone?"

"Because you kept calling," Ryuske replied.

"Sorry," Kiri said after a moment.

"I'll have her call you on our way to the studio," Ryuske suggested.

"I'll be at the next concert by then," Kiri said.

"Oh." Ryuske asked, "Do you want me to wake her up?"

"It's OK, let her sleep," Kiri replied.

"Thank you for the food," Ryuske said after a moment.

"No problem, see you," Kiri responded.

"See you," Ryuske agreed.

He fell back into the pillows and turned his head to watch Hikaru sleeping. He sighed.

Rin said from the floor, "Go back to sleep you idiot."

Ryuske laughed quietly. "Yeah, sorry." He shut his eyes.

63: Recorded Dead

Mirage rose like a wave of zombies from a very small graveyard, complete with authentic creaks and groans. They collected their tech crew, loaded their gear, and begged the shuttle van to take them

through a drive thru. At the station they crawled onto their train with a chorus of caffeine laced sighs.

Saturday afternoon travelers were only slightly friendlier than Friday night travelers had been about the amount of gear they were carrying. Ryuske confessed that he'd answered Hikaru's phone after they were as settled into the journey as they could get.

Hikaru tried calling Kiri, but it went directly to message. "Sorry I slept through your call, love you," she said to the recorder. She sighed when she hung up.

"What's wrong?" asked Nezumi.

Hikaru stared at him blankly and then blushed. "I just wondered if I should have tried to explain more," she said uncertainly.

"There's no point," Rin said.

"Explain what?" Nezumi asked.

Ryuske said, "Why we were all sleeping in the same room, I expect."

Hikaru looked away from everyone for a moment, then turned back. "Kiri asked if I could send a picture later, when can we have pictures from the filming?" she asked.

"I'll email shots and the rough draft of the video to you in the morning, or when I wake up," Seoshi promised.

Mirage showed up at the studio on time, somewhat to their own amazement. Takeda had been waiting at the station with a van. He guided them in but then they had to stop at security. Nezumi had come along and Takeda hadn't had an ID made for him.

Nezumi was extremely upset when the security team refused to put Nezumi down as his ID. Takeda talked them into it finally, pointing out that it was no different than an actor going by their stage name.

They made it to the recording room with only a couple minutes lost. The sound crew were reluctant to let Nezumi mess with their set up. Finally, exasperated, he said, "Then give me the raw feed, but stop wasting our time."

Mirage was ready and waiting and their zombie facade had disappeared completely when the sound crew finally signaled them to start. Ryuske had them begin with their competition entries, since they'd put the most practice into those songs recently.

"Who the hell are these people?" one of the technicians asked after the first three songs were finished.

Takeda grinned and said, "Mirage."

"Why?" demanded Nezumi grumpily.

"No one does that!" exclaimed the tech.

"Does what?" asked Nezumi, surveying Mirage.

"Records a song in one go, let alone three songs in a row," answered the tech incredulously.

"Is there a technical problem?" Ryuske asked as Mirage waited for the light.

Mirage recorded two more without a redo, but they stopped and reworked part of the Anniversary song. Hatsuharu had written the words for his wife and Ryuske had put it to music.

Ryuske frowned after they played it through and said, "Since there's a real piano here, let's try it again with that." He had Hikaru move. "And Hatsuharu, sing out a little more, on the stars lines?"

Hatsuharu nodded. Mirage played it again. And Ryuske sang, "Do you remember when we were young?"

Hikaru and Hatsuharu joined in, "And we danced across the stars?"

Ryuske sang, "Now we're getting older, but we're not old."

And together they continued, "Sometimes out in the park, we still go dancing in the dark."

The song went on, until they traded leads. Then Hikaru sang, "I can see us when we're old, wrapped in wrinkles, casting smiles."

And they chorused, "Winks at lovers, that's our style!"

Hikaru almost whispered, "And when we reach the bitter end, we'll go dancing once again."

Together they finished, "Then we'll dance across the stars, on and on and one more time, until we do it all again."

Ryuske nodded in satisfaction and they recorded the rest of their songs smoothly, until they reached the last, and newest.

They tried four different arrangements and several more runs through before Ryuske was satisfied with 'Don't Go'.

They were finished by midnight even though Ryuske insisted on listening to the recordings and had the techs tweak the balance here and there a little. He overrode the techs without hesitation. He also checked that Nezumi had what he needed for the music videos.

Hikaru watched in awe. Rin laughed at her expression and poked her. "Hey," she protested.

"Why do you look so interested at the most boring step?" he teased.

"Is this the most boring step?" she asked curiously.

He thought about it and replied, "No, I suppose not. I guess the wait between production and publication is the most boring. But since I'm usually just a backup musician, I don't stick around for that part very often."

"I'm glad you're sticking with Mirage," she replied seriously.

"Was there a question about it?" asked Ryuske, throwing an arm across each of their shoulders.

"Nope," replied Rin.

Hatsuharu asked a little plaintively, "Can I go home to be scolded by my wife and sleep all day now?"

"Not all day," reminded Hikaru. "We play at that hotel tomorrow."

"You mean later today," groaned Ryuske, burying his face in Rin's shoulder.

Rin laughed and pushed him off.

"Go home and sleep," advised Takeda. "I'll wrap things up here."

The Mirage zombie hoard creaked and groaned its way to their respective homes. Hatsuharu had gotten the keys to the company van from Takeda and drove them. Hikaru was the first to be dropped off. She stuffed her black and silver clothes into the wash. The whites she left for later since the makeup showed more on them.

She messaged Kiri before she slept. But when she woke and crawled into the shower barely more than six hours later, there was nothing in reply.

She moved the clothes, put her hair up in a simple fashion and got dressed. She looked in the fridge

before she left and sighed, she shut it again and went to work.

64: Unreachable.

After her shift at the restaurant Hikaru had messages waiting, but none were from Kiri. She forwarded the email with the photos and the rough music video to him, while she ate lunch with Miri, Izumi and Kaoru.

"You look tired," Izumi commented grumpily.

"I am tired," Hikaru replied and leaned on her uncle.

Kaoru laughed and hugged her. "Kiri keeping you awake at night?" he teased.

"He's in Korea," Hikaru replied.

"Oh, right, I forgot," Kaoru said. "What's up then?"

"We recorded for our music video and our album, want to watch the rough of the video?" she asked.

Miri bounced in her seat and exclaimed, "I do!"

Hikaru opened the email and played the video, propping her phone at the head of the table so they could all watch. It cried out about low battery and went dark just as the video finished. She frowned and picked it up.

"I guess I forgot to charge it," she said and sighed.

"That was great though," Kaoru said and hugged her. Miri nodded enthusiastically and agreed.

Even Izumi grudgingly offered, "It looked professional."

Hikaru bit back her reply.

Kaoru said with amusement, "It was professional."

"Do you get to rest for the rest of today?" asked Miri hopefully. "I thought we could come visit."

Hikaru shook her head and said, "We've got a show this afternoon."

Miri sighed with disappointment.

Hikaru offered, "You could come over while I get ready, but I need to go soon."

Miri shook her head. "It's OK, she said. I'll visit when there's more time to visit."

Kaoru let her out of the booth saying, "I need to get back to work too."

Hikaru hugged him and then hugged her mother. "Thanks for the food. See you next weekend if not before," she said.

When she got home, she plugged her phone in first. Then she pulled her black and silver clothes out of the dryer and dressed. Her phone was only at five percent charge, so she left it home, after messaging Kiri again.

'Accidentally let my phone run out, leaving it home to charge,' she sent. And then after a moment sent a question, 'are you OK?'

Mirage gathered once more and played for four hours. Rin drove Hikaru home and dropped her off. She still hadn't gone grocery shopping, but she swore to herself that she'd do it tomorrow for sure.

She made herself ramen, slapped a token effort at her small amount of homework, and crawled into bed. She woke up at midnight and realized she hadn't checked her phone.

She sighed as she looked at it. There was a message from Yukito asking if she'd work Tuesday. She replied that she would. There were two words from Kiri, 'Fine, tired'. She tried calling, but it sent her straight to messaging, so she disconnected and crawled back into bed.

She woke up groggily to the sound of her phone ringing. She had brought it onto the bed with her and it was lost in the blankets. By the time she found it, it had stopped ringing.

The call had been from Kiri, frantically she called him back.

"Good morning sweetheart," he answered cheerfully. "Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, but I don't care," Hikaru replied anxiously. "I was worried when I didn't hear from you."

Kiri didn't reply immediately, and then he said, "I know, I could tell from the messages you left. I'm sorry."

"Did I leave too many?" Hikaru asked unhappily.

Kiri sighed and said, "No, let's switch to video?"

"OK," Hikaru agreed.

He disconnected and then called back.

Hikaru looked at him anxiously. He looked rumpled and tired, but cheerful. She relaxed a little.

"Hikaru," he said with a wry grin, "I'll still love you even if you cheat on me."

Hikaru stared at him aghast. "I won't cheat on you!" she protested.

His grin widened and he replied, "I'm just telling you in case you worry that that's why you can't get ahold of me in the future."

"OK," she replied dubiously. "But Kiri, I think if you cheat on me I'll get really mad at you."

He laughed and said, "OK."

Hikaru looked at him uncertainly.

"You still look really tired, I shouldn't have woken you up early," he said reluctantly.

"You look pretty tired too," she replied, "what happened yesterday?"

Kiri grinned at her and asked, "You didn't look at my schedule?"

Hikaru said, "Um, not since Friday, I guess."

Kiri said wryly, "I guess that was useless then. Sorry. Yesterday we finished up the last of Saturday's concert stuff at about 5am, then I had to have them up and presentable again by noon for a TV interview, and then they did a live at a shopping mall. Then we got everyone onto the train and transferred to this little village, where the venue for tonight is a field that the villagers seem to be trying to coax every goat in the area into mowing before the band plays tonight."

"Wow," Hikaru said.

"I suspected a booking error, except when I inquired my boss guiltily admitted that he arranged this stop," Kiri said with a quirk to his lips.

"Why?" she asked.

"He wouldn't say, but I suspect that this is where a particular song writer retired to," Kiri replied.

Hikaru looked confused.

Kiri smiled gently and said, "I think seeing a live performance is supposed to coax him into wanting to write again, or at any rate, that's my working theory, since it's kinder than assuming we're here to rub his nose in the fact that his old songs are still being used whether he wishes it or not."

Hikaru gasped and asked worriedly, "Why are they being used if he doesn't want them to be?"

Kiri replied, "Because Inline owns them. They were submitted to fulfill a contract, along with a depressed letter about how they were useless crap and we were welcome to use them if we wanted to produce crap."

Hikaru stared and then asked hesitantly, "They can't be that bad if you're using them?"

Kiri shrugged and said, "They're mediocre, but sometimes mediocre is better than nothing new, so they've slowly gotten used. This group in particular is pretty bad about intermittent productivity, so they've used a half a dozen of them."

"Oh," she replied.

He frowned at her and asked, "What are you planning to eat for breakfast?"

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I don't know, I meant to go shopping last night, but I was too tired and just had Rin bring me straight home."

"What did you eat for dinner?" Kiri asked worriedly.

"Ramen," Hikaru replied.

"Hikaru!" he protested.

"You can't claim you never eat it, with so many packets in the cupboard," she replied defensively.

"Hardly ever plain!" he said. "Did you even add an egg?" he asked.

"No, out of eggs," she replied.

"Hikaru," Kiri started.

"I'm fine," she interrupted. "Kao-ji-chan put lots of vegetables in our lunch. I'll buy lunch today, and I'll go shopping tonight."

"What about breakfast?" he asked.

Hikaru sighed.

"Sorry," he said and ran a hand through his hair.

"I guess I should end this call and get dressed so I can get something on the way," she said regretfully. "But I'd rather talk to you than eat."

He smiled wryly and said, "I'm sorry, I should have taken time out to message you yesterday."

Hikaru told him a little anxiously, "It would have been reassuring."

Kiri replied, "I would have found it reassuring if you hadn't been sleeping in the same bed as Ryuske-san."

Hikaru opened her mouth and shut it again. After a moment she said, "You were mad."

He shrugged.

"We arranged ourselves with rock paper scissors," she explained.

He laughed, and said, "I see." He watched her for a minute and added, "I think I was only mad for about

five minutes. Then common sense clicked in and I realized you were both sleeping in your clothes."

"Ryuske didn't tell me he video chatted with you," she said questioningly.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't realize, he held the phone against his face most of the time," he replied.

"Why didn't you message?" Hikaru asked.

Kiri shrugged and said, "I wasn't trying to make you worry. I called as early as I dared." He smiled. "Go check my schedule from yesterday, then go out and find breakfast. And call me when you get out of school."

"OK," she agreed.

"I love you, have a good day," he said quietly.

"You too Kiri," she replied quickly.

He smiled and closed the connection. She sighed and brought up the calendar. Sunday Kiri's schedule had an all day event marked, in addition to the things he'd listed, as well as a few extras. It was labeled, "5 weeks sharing rings." Under notes it said, "Hikaru love you like crazy, busy as hell, not enough sleep, call you in the morning."

... H to K

She messaged him after she got on the bus:

Hikaru: Sorry I didn't read it yesterday.

Kiri: It's OK. Go eat.

Hikaru: I'm on the bus. Is five weeks special for a reason that should be obvious to me?

Kiri: ;) That's my secret I guess.

Hikaru: I thought usually it was one month, 3 months, 1 year?

Kiri: Do you want to mark those? You didn't say anything at one month.

Hikaru: Neither did you? I'd like to do something at six months?

Kiri: From when we met or when you got your ear pierced?

Hikaru: Which would you prefer? I assumed from when we met. I don't know, I've never done this.

Kiri: That doesn't matter, what matters is what makes you feel happy.

Hikaru: I don't want to feel like I'm missing something important by not understanding.

Kiri: We should talk about this after you're done with school.

Hikaru: OK, sorry.

Kiri: Don't be sorry. I wish I could cuddle you.

Hikaru: Six more days.

Kiri: Yes :)

Kiri: Although I plan to do a lot more than cuddle.

Hikaru: OK

Kiri: Just OK?

...

Hikaru had to exit the bus. And she replied late, 'I want to do everything with you.'

'Me too,' he agreed a while later.

65: Counting the days.

Hikaru bought a crepe and ate it on her way to the school. She winced at the thought of the state of her bank account. But it was delicious anyway.

Hikaru showed Risa and Shizuoka the rough video during lunch, and asked if they knew what special significance five weeks had. Neither of them could think of anything.

"You didn't do anything at one month?" Shizuoka asked incredulously.

Hikaru shrugged.

Risa asked, "You went to the amusement park didn't you?"

Hikaru said, "A day early if you're counting from when I got my ear pierced, or at five and a half weeks if you count from when we met I think?" She

sighed and said, "I can't believe I've known Kiri less than a couple months."

"Why?" Shizuoka asked.

"I can't quite remember how I lived without him," Hikaru replied ruefully.

Risa nodded. "I know what you mean. I still feel that way about Makoto."

"Did you celebrate at one month?" Hikaru asked curiously.

Risa blushed and said shyly, "We have celebrated each month."

Shizuoka questioned a little incredulously, "But you've been dating for like nine months now?"

Risa shrugged and said, "At six months we agreed to continue doing it for at least our first year."

Hikaru sighed. "I wonder if I'm an awful girlfriend."

Her friends insisted that she wasn't.

After school she stared dismally at the pile of homework. Then she tucked it into her bag and went grocery shopping. Kiri messaged while she was trying to decide between cucumbers or carrots.

'Are you avoiding calling me or did something come up?' he sent.

'I'm still buying groceries? Should I stop and call before I'm home?' she replied.

'No, I forgot, buy food first!' he demanded.

She laughed and the people near her stared. She shrugged and added both vegetables to her basket. She hurried through the rest of her shopping.

As soon as she got home she called and put the phone on speaker while she put food away.

Kiri answered after a little delay. "Hey, I'm sort of supervising the stage layout, so we may get interrupted some."

"Should I call back later?" Hikaru asked.

"No." Kiri replied, then said to someone else, "More to the right, farther, yes, like that."

Hikaru said after a moment, "I feel like maybe I'm not a very considerate girlfriend after talking to Risa and Shizuoka."

"What? Why?" Kiri asked.

She told him, "They were shocked that I didn't do anything at one month and Risa said she and Makoto are celebrating every month for the first year."

Kiri replied, "Isn't it the guy's job to initiate that?"

"That doesn't seem fair," Hikaru argued.

Kiri laughed. "I love you," he said. "I did think about it, and if you want to do that kind of thing from now on, we can."

Hikaru was silent for a bit. Kiri gave a few more instructions to whoever was working on the stage

area. She finished putting things in the refrigerator and then picked up the phone and carried it to the table.

"Hikaru?" Kiri asked.

"Yeah," she answered.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I don't care which things we celebrate as long as we celebrate the ones you want to, but I'm afraid of missing the ones you want," she said finally.

Kiri paused before answering. "I'd like to celebrate our wedding anniversaries."

Hikaru blushed. She knew she was blushing because her face was on fire. She put her hands against her cheeks to cool them.

"Yeah," she agreed faintly.

He sighed.

"What about the five weeks?" she asked, but then added quickly, "If it's something you want to keep secret it's OK."

"It's worrying you?" he asked.

She hesitated, but replied, "If you'll tell me it's not something I'm already supposed to understand, I think I'll be able to stop worrying about it."

Kiri replied, "The only thing significant about it is that I'm marking time until something else. It's not

something you need to guess, I kind of want to surprise you."

"OK," Hikaru replied with some relief.

Kiri asked teasingly, "Did you even realize it had been five weeks?"

"Not really," she replied, "I feel like it must be much longer, like how was I living without you?" Kiri inhaled deeply enough that she could hear it, and she added a little plaintively, "And how did I become so clingy that one day without contact made me feel so anxious?"

Kiri asked uncertainly, "Are you unhappy about it? I feel really happy about it."

Hikaru was silent for a bit.

Kiri said, "You don't have to answer."

"Sorry, I was thinking. I'm really happy about being with you. I'm not so happy about being too clingy," she replied.

"You're not very clingy," he assured her.

"I feel like I am," she said anxiously.

Kiri laughed and replied, "I suspect I'm the really clingy one in our relationship."

"What have you done that's clingy?" Hikaru asked curiously.

"If you're not aware yet, I don't want to tell you?" he said lightly.

Hikaru went silent again and Kiri said, "But if it's going to worry you, I can list a few things."

"I don't exactly feel worried, I just can't think of anything," she replied.

"I asked you to wear my ring, I feel anxious when I can't touch you, I demanded to sleep with you," he listed. Then he paused to give another set of instructions to the people working.

"Why are you counting from when I got my ear pierced instead of from when we met?" Hikaru asked when he seemed to be finished.

Kiri replied quietly, "Ah, this is going to sound kind of," he sighed and said, "possessive. I'm kind of possessive. I never really thought so before. But, well, I feel like that's when you agreed to belong to me. Because that's when you said I could never leave you."

Hikaru blushed again.

"Hikaru?" he asked anxiously.

"What?" she asked.

"You didn't say anything, does it bother you?" he asked.

"What? No," she replied quickly.

"Why did you go silent again?" he asked.

"It's a little embarrassing, but I'm really happy," she assured him.

"Oh," he said. "OK," he said and his voice seemed a little weird.

"Kiri?" Hikaru asked.

"I'm so glad I met you," he said in almost a whisper.

"Yeah," she agreed.

After awhile he said, "The video is good. I've never heard of your filmographer."

Embarrassed, Hikaru replied, "He usually does girly calendars and that kind of thing."

"What?" Kiri asked anxiously, "Does Takeda know?"

"I don't know, why, does it matter?" Hikaru asked.

"It may not..." Kiri trailed off. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Hikaru, I'll talk to you later about seven maybe?"

"OK," she agreed.

66: Surprise baby.

Hikaru changed her clothes and worked on homework for awhile before making food. She ate the result a little ruefully, glad in a way that no one else was there to taste it.

Outside it had begun to rain and she turned up the lights and made tea. She was fighting a particularly tangled chapter of history when someone pounded on the door.

Before she made it to the door she heard a woman cry, "Damnit Kiri, open up and take responsibility! This is all your fault!"

Hikaru took a deep breath and opened the door.

A pretty, small, very pregnant woman threw herself into Hikaru's arms before looking up and saying with shock, "You're not Kiri!" She shoved Hikaru away from her. Tears ran down her face and she was soaking wet.

Hikaru looked at her for a moment and then asked, "Do you want to come in?"

"Where is Kiri?!" the pregnant woman demanded.

"Korea," Hikaru replied, sounding strangely calm to her own ears. "Come in and warm up, getting soaked and chilled can't be good for your baby."

The woman reluctantly entered the house and Hikaru grabbed another tea cup from the kitchen and a couple of towels from the bathroom. She set the cup on the table and wrapped the towels around the woman. Then she pulled a folded blanket off the couch and offered it.

The woman stared up at her while she dried her hair and asked, "Who are you?"

Hikaru blushed but replied steadily, "Kiri's fiancé."

"You're lying," she said flatly.

Hikaru raised an eyebrow at her. "Kiri will call about seven, you can ask him," she said.

"I will!" she replied.

Hesitantly Hikaru asked the thing that was bothering her most, "Is it Kiri's baby?"

"It's none of your business!" she snapped.

"Yes, it is," Hikaru protested gently. "If it's Kiri's, then I'll be it's step-mother."

"You're not even wearing an engagement ring," she protested. "Kiri would definitely have given you a ring!" she insisted stubbornly.

Hikaru tapped her earring and replied wryly, "You're just not looking for the right kind of ring."

The woman gave her a disbelieving stare.

Hikaru watched her, a little concerned and poured the last of the tea for her then got up again to heat more water. "Do you want anything to eat?" she asked.

"Chocolate," was the reply.

"I don't know if we have any," Hikaru said a little helplessly. "There's some ice cream, but I'm not sure I should give you something cold yet."

"Kiri always has chocolate," the woman declared, and she clambered to her feet and walked into the kitchen. She opened the pantry cupboard and rummaged behind several bottles of vinegar, to produce a handful of different chocolate bars.

"I wouldn't have looked behind vinegar for it," Hikaru offered ruefully.

The woman stalked back to the table with her spoils and opened a candy bar. Hikaru filled the teapot again and falsely casually asked, "Chi-chan, do you want sugar or lemon or anything?"

"No, who are you really? One of his cousins?" Chi-chan asked. "Does Kiri know you're here?"

Hikaru offered her a wry smile and said, "Hitoshi Hikaru, I'm living here, despite not knowing of Kiri's chocolate stash. I'm really his fiancé."

"Why did you let me in then?" Chi-chan demanded.

"If that," Hikaru pointed at her belly, "was really Kiri's fault, I could hardly leave you out in the rain could I? What would I say to the kid later, 'yes, I did leave your other mother crying alone in the rain'?"

Chi-chan teared up again and she wailed, "It is Kiri's fault!"

Hikaru froze, and asked very quietly, "Oh?"

Chi-chan sniffled and said between sobs, "My husband is cheating on me!"

"How is that Kiri's fault?" Hikaru asked cautiously.

"He introduced us," Chi-chan explained.

"Oh," Hikaru said with relief. She leaned over and tucked the blanket up around Chi-chan.

"You're not wearing a ring and you don't look like someone Kiri would date," Chi-chan said defiantly. "I don't see any of your stuff either."

Hikaru laughed and Chi-chan stared at her. Hikaru grinned and said, "Kiri's mother is the only person who hasn't said I don't look like Kiri's type. And my things are in the bedroom and the office."

Chi-chan leapt to her feet and ran over to the office. She stared at the new shelves and asked with some shock, "You've met Kiri's mother?"

Hikaru nodded.

Chi-chan returned to the table and pulled the blanket back up around her shoulders as she sat. Then she asked, "Isn't she dreadfully scary?"

Hikaru blinked and replied, "I thought she was really elegant."

"She is," agreed Chi-chan, "and scary. Did you only meet briefly?"

"She stayed with us for a week," Hikaru replied. "What is your name actually, I've only heard Kiri and Kazuha-san say Chi-chan?"

"How did you guess that that was me?" Chi-chan countered.

"Kiri said no other woman has lived in this house with him, but you still knew right where he had his chocolate stored. Kazuha-san said you were together for years. Kiri also mentioned that you were pregnant and still friends. He said you make better friends than you did lovers," Hikaru added the last with a blush.

Chi-chan dropped the piece of chocolate she'd been holding and stared at Hikaru for a little bit. "Yes," she agreed faintly.

Hikaru smiled at her a little.

"You're really Kiri's fiancé?" she asked.

"Yes," Hikaru agreed.

Kiri called, and Hikaru let him talk to Chi-chan, whose name was Chiharu. Chiharu explained to Kiri that her husband had been working late more and more often, and finally this evening he'd come home reeking of perfume and alcohol and she'd run away.

Kiri was reluctant to believe his friend would do such a thing and wanted to call and talk to him, but Chiharu made him promise not to. "If you call he'll know where I am," she sniffled.

Kiri refrained from saying that he'd probably know where she'd gone anyway. He asked to talk to Hikaru again and Chiharu returned her phone. "Are you OK with Chi-chan staying over?" he asked.

"Yeah," Hikaru replied.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK," she replied.

"Really?" He asked wryly.

"Yeah." She hesitated but then added honestly, "I was kind of freaked out when a strange pregnant woman showed up yelling that you should take responsibility."

"Sorry," Chiharu said.

Kiri sighed and said again, "Sorry. I can't even claim that it would be completely impossible, but it's really really unlikely Hikaru."

"I know," she replied.

"I have to go," he said regretfully.

"OK," she said quietly. "Love you." She blushed.

"Love you too," he replied and disconnected.

Hikaru sighed.

Chiharu said, "Kiri's job sucks."

Hikaru laughed and said, "No, it's OK. He's happy doing it, so it's a really good job. But he has to choose which half he's going to keep when he gets back."

"But his schedule is awful," Chiharu protested.

"Mine is nearly as bad," Hikaru replied.

"What do you do?" Chiharu asked.

"Music, and I'm in a band that just started recording, so our schedule is even crazier than normal," Hikaru explained.

Chiharu stared. Hikaru raised an eyebrow at her incredulous expression.

"Kiri always says he won't date musicians," Chiharu said dubiously.

Hikaru shrugged and pulled her discarded homework onto the table and Chiharu stared open mouthed.

After a minute she asked, "Are you still in high school?"

Hikaru nodded.

"What the hell?!" Chiharu gasped.

"Sorry?" Hikaru offered without much sincerity.

Chiharu asked, "Can I borrow your phone?"

Hikaru nodded and Chiharu put in a number. When the person on the other end answered, she demanded, "Kazu, did you know Kiri is living with a high-school girl who's a musician?!"

She was disappointed at his affirmative reply. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

They talked for a little while and Hikaru finished her history homework. When Chiharu finished, Hikaru looked at her wryly.

"Sorry," Chiharu said with some embarrassment.

"It's OK," Hikaru replied.

"So do you have any recordings of your band finished that I could listen to?" Chiharu asked after a bit.

"The rough of our first music video is on my phone and there's demo songs on our website but only for fanclub members. Fans have posted videos from lives other places sometimes," Hikaru told her.

Chiharu insisted on watching the rough. When it finished she looked at Hikaru and said, "Wow, your band is really good."

"Thanks," Hikaru said with a grin.

"Did you meet Kiri through his job?" Chiharu asked.

Hikaru shook her head. "No, he didn't realize I was a musician until we'd started dating, and he didn't explain what his company produced right away either."

"That's too weird, it's too big of a coincidence!" Chiharu declared.

Hikaru shrugged. She finished the rest of her homework slowly, and they talked a little more. Then she helped set up the couch as a bed.

"Sorry, if there are more blankets, I don't know where yet," Hikaru said with some embarrassment.

Chiharu suggested a little diffidently, "He used to keep all the bedding under his bed."

Hikaru nodded and replied, "That's where the sheets are, I'll go look in the other drawers."

She located another blanket, as well as a drawer with several sex toys that she slammed shut with a great deal of embarrassment. She carried the blanket and a set of her own pajamas out to Chiharu, feeling certain that her face was scarlet.

Chiharu eyed the pajamas and her expanding belly dubiously.

"That set is pretty stretchy," Hikaru offered hopefully.

Chiharu had to ask for Hikaru's help in turning on the shower. Hikaru showed her how the controls worked.

"You look smug," Chiharu commented.

"Sorry," Hikaru replied a little shyly. "I feel a little happy that you've never taken a bath here."

Ruefully Chiharu replied, "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I've made you worry a lot this evening."

"It's OK," Hikaru replied and left her to bathe. When Chiharu was finished and settled, Hikaru took a quick shower as well and crawled into bed.

She was almost asleep when Chiharu knocked on the bedroom door.

Chiharu asked hesitantly if they could sleep together. "It seems like I've forgotten how to sleep alone," she explained.

Hikaru was feeling very tired and agreed, though when Chiharu curled up beside her and immediately began snoring lightly, she regretted it.

Eventually she managed to fall back to sleep, only to be woken what felt like moments later by someone pounding on the door. Chiharu was still snoring and Hikaru reluctantly rose and answered the door.

A tired looking man holding an umbrella stood in the porch light and asked with shock, "Who are you?"

Hikaru sighed and replied, "Hitoshi Hikaru, Kiri's fiancé." She looked him over and asked, "Why did you cheat on your wife?"

"I've never cheated on her!" he protested.

Hikaru just looked at him and he asked miserably, "Is that why she left?" He looked at her defiantly and

said again, "I would never cheat on Chiharu." Then he asked anxiously, "She's here, isn't she?"

"She's sleeping," Hikaru replied. She felt too tired to keep up with another stranger's changing emotions.

He sagged with relief. "I was so worried. She left without her phone. I should have guessed that she'd come here, but I wasted time looking other places."

Hikaru sighed tiredly and invited him in. He looked at the empty couch and then toward the bedroom and asked frantically, "She's sleeping with Kiri?"

"Kiri's in Korea, she said she couldn't sleep alone and asked if she could sleep with me," Hikaru replied.

Chiharu's husband flushed and apologized. He explained that he'd been working late trying to get a promotion and that when his boss had invited some of them out drinking that afternoon, he hadn't felt like he could refuse.

Hikaru listened to him rattle on and then said bluntly, "It seems like you should have talked to your wife more, and you should be telling all this to her. Do you really need that promotion? Right now it seems like she needs you."

He apologized again but added defensively, "With the baby coming, I really do."

She waved it away and asked, "Do you want me to wake her up?"

He hesitated and then refused. "No. She gets so tired lately."

Hikaru sighed and said, "Let me get my clothes for tomorrow and I'll sleep on the couch and you can stay with your wife. Apologize and explain properly though?"

"I will!" he insisted. He thanked her again a few minutes later as she closed the hall door between them.

67: Going on.

Hikaru was still feeling very tired when she left for school Tuesday morning. She tried to leave quietly, and left rice in the steamer and a note asking the couple to lock up when they left.

School was school.

When she got home she found a note from Chiharu. "It's OK now, he explained everything. Thank you so much. Let's be friends!" She felt relieved that putting them together last night seemed to have been the right decision.

The afternoon was filled by homework and a Red Tuesday intro.

It was late before she got to talk to Kiri again. They were both tired and didn't speak long.

--

Wednesday was much the same, apart from Miri finally making an afternoon visit. She brought food, which made Hikaru laugh.

Hikaru awkwardly offered her mother tea, and Miri poked around inquisitively during her visit. She exclaimed over the garden outside Kiri's office window, and they went out to explore it. Even though it was still early in the year, there were quite a few things in bloom.

--

Thursday dragged on forever until she got home after school. Kazuha was seated at the table with several bottles of alcohol. He looked up at her as she entered the house and his face fell.

"Hi?" she said awkwardly.

"Hi, sorry, I'm waiting for Kiri," he replied. His words slurred a little, showing he'd already been drinking for awhile.

"Kiri's still in Korea," Hikaru said worriedly.

"Fuck, sorry, I forgot. I'll go," he said, and rose unsteadily to his feet.

Hikaru dropped her bag and hurried over to him and took his arm. "You're not driving are you?" she asked anxiously.

He wavered and replied shakily, "No, I guess I'm already kind of drunk." A tear ran down his cheek.

"Why?" Hikaru asked, still holding his arm.

His face crumpled when he looked down at her and he shook his head mutely. Hikaru looked at the collection of bottles on the table, half of them were already empty.

"Are you sure you should leave? Maybe you should just stay and let me make you some tea and food?" she asked.

"That's not right, Kiri's not here," he protested, but he listed to one side when he tried to step away from the table. "I need to pee first though," he said, and then flushed and pulled his arm away from her. He staggered a little but made it to the bathroom.

Hikaru stepped into the kitchen and quickly started a the hot water. She prepared a couple bowls for ramen, poking through the refrigerator for anything that looked easy to add to it. By the time Kazuha got out of the bathroom she had a pot of tea and the noodles started soaking.

He dropped down beside the table and took another drink. Then he remembered and looked up at her. "Sorry, I'll leave," he told her, and stood again and began gathering his bottles.

"No, sit, it's OK. If you're this drunk, it's probably better not to go wandering around," she said anxiously and carried the tea to the table. She gently coaxed him into sitting down again, and collected the bottles.

"Hey," he protested.

Reluctantly she left the one he'd grabbed first. "Don't you think you've had enough for now?" she asked.

"There isn't enough in the world," he responded bitterly.

She took the rest into the kitchen anyway and carried back the ramen bowls. He just stared at the bowl blankly when she set one in front of him. "Try to eat a little?" she suggested. "They say drinking on an empty stomach is bad."

"I can't eat," he said, and took another drink from the bottle in his hand.

She bit her lip and watched him helplessly. "What happened?" she asked after a few moments.

"She's dead," he said flatly, without looking at her.

Hikaru stared, uncertain if she should ask more, or leave him alone.

He avoided her gaze, so she stared down at her ramen and stirred it instead. After a few minutes, the rest of it poured out of him in painful bursts.

"The guy she ran off with, drove off a cliff. They both died," once begun, he continued for a while, ending with, "I know I shouldn't care so much, I already decided it was over." He buried his face in his hands.

Hikaru reached out and awkwardly patted his shoulder. "Why shouldn't you care? Just because you weren't together, doesn't mean you stopped caring if she lived or not?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yeah," he agreed, and cried for a while with silent shuddering sobs.

Hikaru moved the bottle away and poured a cup of tea.

After awhile he took the cup and sipped. "This is so embarrassing," he said eventually, and glanced at her.

Hikaru shrugged. She looked around for another topic. "How did you get in?" she asked.

"Kiri's neighbor let me in this morning, she knows me," he said uncomfortably. "I forgot Kiri was gone. I shouldn't have come here."

"It's OK," Hikaru said again. "You're safe here, and I'm sure Kiri wouldn't mind."

"But you shouldn't have to deal with his drunk friend," Kazuha protested.

Hikaru pushed the cooling bowl of ramen toward him and said, with some embarrassment, "But I don't want to be the kind of wife that pushes away her husband's friends."

Kazuha gazed at her with shock and asked, "You got married?"

Hikaru blushed and shook her head. "Not yet, but we're engaged." She hesitated a moment then asked, "Kiri didn't tell you that?"

"I don't know, maybe, everything's kind of fuzzy." Kazuha shook his head again and began eating the ramen.

Hikaru finished her own bowl and then stood and carried it into the kitchen. She picked up her school bag and carried it back to the table. She laid out her homework.

Kazuha watched with an uncomfortable expression. When she raised her brows at him he muttered, "I can't even get used to the idea that Kiri's dating a high-school girl, aren't you too young to get married?"

Hikaru leaned back on her hands and pondered a little bit before answering. "Yes and no? I don't think I'm ready to get married right now, and when I asked Kiri to sign stuff so we could stay together, I wasn't sure if I'd want to marry him." Kazuha frowned at her and she continued, "But now I'm sure I do want to marry him eventually. I guess I'm a little slow."

Kazuha choked and had to recover a little before he could reply, "Slow? I think it's way too fast."

Hikaru shrugged and replied shyly, "But Kazuha-san, Kiri seemed sure when we'd been dating less than a couple weeks."

"I didn't mean that you're the only one who's moving too fast," Kazuha replied wryly.

Hikaru shrugged and said, "Well, I definitely don't want to get married before I'm old enough to do it without my mother's permission."

"She objects?" Kazuha asked.

Hikaru shook her head in negation. "No, she'd probably be thrilled. But, I just want it to be something I do completely by myself. I mean, with Kiri, but..." she trailed off, uncertain how to explain.

Kazuha nodded in the carefully sober fashion of the very drunk and said, "I think waiting at least that long is a good idea." He finished the over soaked ramen while she started her homework.

Afterward he lay back and covered his eyes with one arm. A little while later his open mouthed breathing revealed he'd fallen asleep. Hikaru paused and fetched a blanket and laid it over him before continuing her homework.

When Kiri called, she retreated to the bedroom. She laid out the story a little anxiously. "Gods," he replied and was silent for a bit. "Thank you Hikaru."

"Why?" she asked, confused.

"For taking care of my idiot friends this week," he replied wryly. "First Chi-chan, then Kazu, and you've had the situation with Mirage. How are you doing? How can I help?"

Hikaru laid back on the bed where she'd sat, and said, "I'm OK, a little tired maybe. You don't need to do anything but come home soon?"

Kiri didn't reply right away and she asked anxiously, "Has the tour been extended or something?"

"No. No, I'll be home Sunday night," he reassured her. "Sorry, I was just thinking."

"OK," Hikaru replied.

"I love you," Kiri said quietly.

"Me too, I really love you too," Hikaru said with a jumble of feelings.

She could almost hear his grin when he replied, "I can't wait to get home."

"How is it going, is it bad?" she asked anxiously.

"No, it's been good, almost surprisingly trouble free the last few days. I just want to sleep with you," he replied warmly.

Hikaru blushed and replied shyly, "I'm glad, me too."

They talked awhile longer. Kiri asked her to wake Kazuha in a couple hours and get him to drink more water and move to the couch for the night. Hikaru managed it, though she had to call Kiri again and have him talk Kazuha into sleeping on the couch

instead of leaving, because he was embarrassed all over again when he woke up.

68: Video dreams.

Hikaru woke up early, to make sure Kazuha got up in time to go home and change. His hangover was so bad though that she wondered if it mightn't have been better for him to call in sick. Her own school day passed in a tired haze. Somehow the long week was getting to her all of a sudden. She even napped during the lunch break instead of talking with Risa and Shizuoka.

--

After school Hikaru joined the rest of Mirage in a deserted parking lot, where Seoshi wanted to record them driving in a convertible he'd acquired for the evening somehow. Rin showed up on his bike and Seoshi had him ride around the lot with and without the car, and sometimes with Hikaru or Ryuske riding pillion.

Seoshi was disappointed when Rin and the rest of Mirage agreed that footage without helmets on would give a poor safety message, and refused to go helmetless even at walking speeds.

Hikaru asked what they were going to do with a lot of footage of them driving around and around a parking lot.

Ryuske grinned and explained, "Nezumi agreed to do more effects work, and Seoshi has recordings from vehicles driving through town and on the freeway that will be compiled with these to make the actual videos."

They continued until well after dark. And although Hikaru didn't really understand what was being collected, Seoshi obviously had very specific plans, as he had them go around again and again until they were moving in and out of the overhead lights to the count he wanted.

When they finally finished, they went home after arranging where to meet in the morning. Hikaru called Kiri from the bus, since it was already quite late. He answered right away, but they didn't talk long.

"Only two more days," Kiri said.

"In some ways it feels like you've been gone for ages, but in other ways I feel like I've been so busy I would hardly have seen you if you'd been here," Hikaru replied with a sigh.

"Yeah," Kiri agreed and reluctantly added, "and now I have to say goodnight early. Talk to you again tomorrow."

"Love you," Hikaru said quickly.

"Love you too," Kiri replied and ended the call.

--

Saturday they recorded on a roof top instead of rehearsing. Seoshi had them filming in front of the local airport flight path. They took still photos as well and Hikaru had to admit it was kind of impressive when a plane would pass so close overhead. Saturday night they played a six hour session at a party.

--

Sunday Hikaru played the piano at her uncle Kaoru's restaurant. When she sat down to lunch with her mother and uncle afterward, they both commented on the exhausted sigh that escaped her.

Hikaru laid her chin on her hands and admitted, "I am feeling tired. And I really want to see Kiri."

"Isn't he supposed to be home today?" Miri inquired with concern.

Hikaru smiled and agreed, "Yes, but not until late." She added a little unhappily, "He told me not to try to meet him this time, in case there are delays."

Her mother frowned at her and asked worriedly, "Are you pregnant?"

Hikaru gasped with shock and sat up quickly. "Of course not!" she protested vigorously.

"But you've been tired all week, every time I've talked to you," Miri said anxiously.

Hikaru waved her hands and said vaguely, "There've just been various things going on every day, and I've been a little short on sleep."

Kaoru smirked at her and said, "I bet you'll be even shorter on sleep tomorrow."

Miri thumped her little brother's shoulder and asked Hikaru a little disapprovingly, "Is it because Mirage signed that contract?"

Hikaru shrugged and replied honestly, "The weekend stuff is. We've been really busy with recording stuff for videos. Tonight we're meeting to go over what we've got so far."

They talked awhile more, and then Hikaru went to meet with the rest of Mirage.

--

When she entered Ryuske's place, she was a little surprised to see Nezumi there, chatting with Hatsuharu and Rin. Ryuske was glaring at his computer and taking notes of some sort.

Rin looked up and waved. "You have got to see what Nezumi-san did with the video we took the other night to use with 'Hotter Than The Sun'."

Ryuske looked up and laughed at that. He stretched and beckoned her over to view the screen. He minimized the rooftop footage he'd been viewing and pulled up the other video.

Everyone except Nezumi crowded around to watch it again over her shoulder. Nezumi smirked with satisfaction. The video played, and she saw that only a single camera view of the band playing had been used. Rain lashed the windows behind them, and

slowly the focus changed so that the reflections in the windows were more visible than the rain.

The reflections weren't of Mirage performing. Instead, the sun shimmered over the dunes. A heat mirage glistened into existence, and even though Hikaru knew those shots had been taken on a cold beach, the impression of a blazing hot desert was perfect.

Mirage reappeared, like a mirage, then vanished again and the camera focus drew out until the shimmering red sunrise washed out of the reflections in the windows and lit the band in the hotel room, even though no such light had poured over them at the time. It faded and left only the dark rain behind them as the song ended.

It was amazing work. Miles beyond the pirated video that had already been published. Hikaru thought Nezumi was justified in his smug satisfaction, and that maybe Seoshi really was as good at video as he was portraits.

That video was judged to be ready by all of the band members. The other three still needed work, although enough of the one using vehicle footage had been combined to give some idea of what it was going to be like when set to the music. Ryuske said he'd deliver the finished one to Takeda in the morning, to undergo the company's evaluation before publication.

Rin asked, "Are we really putting that video out already?"

Ryuske looked startled and replied, "I thought that was our plan?"

Hatsuharu and Hikaru gazed over at the pair of them curiously.

Rin scratched his head and then folded his arms and nodded. "Yes," he agreed, "I just can't believe things are really moving this fast. I thought we were waiting for Hikaru to graduate before we actually put out our first album and that we'd just been laying ground work."

Nezumi spoke up suddenly, "I'm not a member of the band, should I leave?" Everyone turned to stare at him and he fidgeted under their gazes.

"Aren't you?" Hikaru asked. When he looked at her with a shocked expression, she added, "You've even got your own chibi on the website."

Hatsuharu chuckled and Ryuske replied to both Rin and Nezumi, "Actually, I've been discussing it with Takeda, and we should talk about both our publishing schedule plans and Nezumi's status with the band."

Everyone focused on Ryuske and he stood up and began to pace back and forth. After a moment he stopped and looked at Nezumi and asked, "What do you think, are you willing to be a permanent member of the band and earn a percentage with the rest of us

or do you want to continue being employed by contract?"

Nezumi answered with shock, "I am not performing on stage! Ever!"

Ryuske laughed and replied, "Staff member, not performing member."

Nezumi frowned and scrunched up his thin face in thought. Ryuske resumed pacing. After a minute Nezumi asked, "An equal percentage?"

Ryuske looked at the other members of Mirage and Hatsuharu answered first, "I think that's reasonable at this point. As busy as we've been this week, and as much as our fan club has expanded, if things are going to continue like this, we'll need full time support on our website soon not even counting these special effects projects and our stage equipment."

Nezumi answered, "I'm already screening applications for more moderators on the fan club, don't worry about that."

Rin laughed and said, "I'm for giving Nezumi an equal share."

Nezumi frowned and said, "But you guys are the ones creating the music."

Hikaru laughed and asked, "Why does it sound like you're the only one voting against being a full member. Will you make more money on your current contract position?"

Ryuske grinned at her and Nezumi blinked and replied thoughtfully, "Only if you don't sell at least," he paused and calculated, "about thirty five thousand copies of your album in the first two years."

Hikaru stared. Rin whistled and said for them both, "That's a lot," he continued, "I didn't realize we were paying you that well."

Hatsuharu said practically, "We haven't had any trouble paying his current rates."

Ryuske laughed and said, "We make our money now off of live performances, you weren't expecting to stop playing live as soon as we publish were you?"

Everyone looked at Ryuske and shook their heads and Nezumi said quietly, "I'll join. What will it change?"

Ryuske answered, "Not much, only you'll have a vote on our contracts and you won't get paid extra for 18 hour projects, he replied pointing at the video screen."

"OK," Nezumi agreed.

Then Ryuske sat back down in front of his computer and hooked his phone to it. He gestured everyone over and placed a video call to Takeda.

Takeda answered promptly and looked at them all in surprise. Ryuske said, "Nezumi agreed to become official, and we're ready to talk about the publishing schedule."

Takeda smiled and said, "Good. I'll email you a contract Nezumi-san." Then he talked to them about the plan he'd formulated for taking advantage of the pirated publication.

He outlined a release schedule of one official music video every two weeks, until Hikaru's graduation. Each song would become available digitally as it's video was released, and Inline would add it to their radio broadcast contracts. After Hikaru graduated, their full album would be published. He admitted that this wasn't a usual marketing strategy, but said, "If the songs do well, then people who heard them will want an album that has both those songs plus 6 more."

Rysuke frowned and said, "I wanted to publish Mirage's Mirage first."

Takeda shook his head in negation. "Your other song is already out there. I think it will be more effective if Mirage is the last video before the album release, since we can't make it the first one published."

Takeda also told them a little about the legal actions that were in progress regarding that song. A little hesitantly he told Ryusuke, "What I suggested, about you treating it as a competition prize, that's official now. And I've got a couple of places that already really want an interview."

Ryusuke nodded calmly. "OK, set it up," he replied. Rin looked at him in surprise but didn't ask anything until the call was finished.

Takeda covered a few more details, and then suggested, "I'd like to have you do a real concert about the same time your album comes out. If we can't do one of just you, maybe as the warm up for a..."

Ryuske held up his hand and replied, "We're already scheduled as the supporting band for a concert during spring break."

"That's not on your public schedule," Takeda replied frowning.

Ryuske laughed and replied, to the curious stares of his band mates, "That's because it was supposed to be a surprise for Hikaru. Um, surprise!" He declared, turning to look at her.

She looked back at him in confusion. "What?" she asked.

He said, "Takahashi is going to thump me on the head again," and Hikaru's mouth formed an O, while Rin laughed outright.

"Night Dreams is performing here during spring break?!" Hikaru asked excitedly.

Ryuske nodded and replied, "And we're their warm up and intermission band."

Hikaru was too excited to reply coherently and Ryuske laughed and told Takeda that he'd send the details, then closed the call.

...H to T

When she calmed down a little, Hikaru messaged Taka-ji.

Hikaru: You're coming for spring break?

Takahashi: Surprise! Ryu-chan told?

Hikaru: Our manager was going over our schedule, so he had to.

Takahashi: *sigh* D: I wanted to surprise you in person love.

Hikaru: I'm so happy!

Takahashi: I'm glad. Love you, got to go. Don't tell your mom and brother until I get there unless you have to?

Hikaru: OK

...

Rin cornered Ryuske and asked seriously, "Are you really going to be OK doing an interview alone?"

Ryuske looked at him in surprise.

Rin said quietly, "They are going to ask things about Edge. As far as I know you haven't appeared in public outside of Mirage's performances since I met you Ryu. They are going to ask."

Hikaru and Hatsuharu looked at them with concern.

Ryuske swallowed and nodded. "I know," he replied.

Rin pulled his hair back and thought, then said seriously, "Talk about it with Takeda, maybe he can get them to submit their questions to Inline in advance?"

Ryuske shrugged and replied, "I will, but I think I'll be OK. Don't worry."

Nezumi spoke up suddenly, "Do you want to pre-release the fact that you were with Edge before that to the fan club?"

Everyone looked at him and he flinched.

Ryuske considered the question seriously. "I don't know, why?"

Nezumi said, "If the rumors start with Mirage, it's less," he hesitated.

Hatsuharu said thoughtfully, "Then Ryuske will have support from our fans if anyone tries to attack him claiming he was hiding it."

Nezumi added, "That and you can control what gets leaked to your interviewer before you go, somewhat."

Ryuske looked at Nezumi and asked a little shocked, "By our fans?"

Nezumi shrugged and replied, "People stole sound and video files from the fan club to create that

release, you don't have to love Mirage to join, you just have to pay the fee."

70: Familiar strangers.

It was getting late when Hikaru finally headed home to wait for Kiri. She felt oddly nervous about his return. She adjusted things in the new shelves and had rice waiting in the cooker.

She sat at the little table and tried to work on the last of her weekend homework, but it was difficult to concentrate on. Finally, the door opened.

Kiri grinned at her tiredly, set down his luggage and declared, "I'm home."

For a moment his face seemed strange and unfamiliar. He was so beautiful, and she felt shy.

"Hikaru?" he asked.

Instead of replying, Hikaru suddenly leapt to her feet and ran the few paces to him.

Kiri laughed with surprise and opened his arms to catch her. His familiar warmth and the sound of his voice as he said quietly against her ear, "I love you, I missed you like crazy," melted the brief strangeness away.

She hugged him tightly, and replied tremulously, "Me too. Kiri, me too!"

He nuzzled against her cheek and then pulled back enough to kiss her.

...

"Should I take the desk job after all?" he asked softly some time later.

Hikaru stopped tracing wandering patterns across his shoulder with her fingertips. "After all? You had decided to take the Field Manager half?" she asked.

Kiri tucked his hand behind his head and said, "I was leaning that way. Not that I didn't miss you like crazy, but apart from being apart, I still like the traveling."

Hikaru looked at him soberly and answered, "Then you shouldn't take the desk job."

"I don't know, I feel like I was gone so long you seemed almost like a stranger until we kissed," Kiri complained.

A giggle escaped her. She confessed to his inquiring eyebrow, "I thought you seemed strange to me too, for a moment when you were at the door." She blushed and continued, "I'm a little glad it wasn't just me."

Kiri hugged her tightly.

Hikaru smiled contentedly and he touched her earring, then caressed her cheek.

"Tell me everything?" he asked.

Hikaru sighed and tried to sort the last couple of weeks into a coherent story in her head.

"You don't have to," he said after watching her for a moment.

"I will, there's just a lot, even though we talked while you were gone. I had to think where to start. She sat up and pointed to the new shelf on the wall at the end of the bed. "Do you like it? Is it OK? I had to move your hangings."

"I love it," he replied. He looked at her collection of paper fans and said, "If I'd known you liked them I'd have gotten you one as a souvenir." He turned back to her and asked, "What else have you done with the house? I feel like we only talked about Mirage."

Hikaru laughed and said wryly, "Mostly I guess." She climbed off the bed and pulled on her clothes. Kiri pouted at her. She stuck out her tongue at him and said, "Come to your office." She walked out of the bedroom and Kiri leapt out of bed behind her and pulled a yukata out of the closet.

She was standing at his desk and he didn't see anything different immediately. Then he looked up at the poster above it and his expression went a little strange. Hikaru asked hesitantly, "Do you not like having it up?"

"Hitoshi Hikaru," Kiri said.

Hikaru replied, "Yes?"

Kiri was silent for a minute and then asked, "Akira of Night Dreams was your father?"

"Yes," Hikaru answered again a little nervously.

Kiri covered his face for a moment and then he looked at her and asked, "Why aren't you rich?"

"What?" asked Hikaru with surprise.

Kiri said, "I don't understand, if Akira was your father, his songs are still making money now. Why are you and your family struggling with things like tuition?"

Hikaru looked at him blankly and said hesitantly, "I don't know. We're not poor. I know we own our house, I mean, my mother does." When Kiri didn't reply immediately she asked, "Do you want me to ask my mom?"

He shook his head and smiled at her. "No, I can ask her myself sometime."

Hikaru looked at him uncertainly and he grinned at her and said cheerfully, "I don't mind having posters of half naked women up in my office if you are the one putting them up." He walked over and hugged her when she blushed and added, "I was just surprised, but at the same time, it's really so obvious. I don't know why it never occurred to me."

Hikaru shrugged and said, "I found a roll of old posters and put up two."

Kiri looked around and saw the new round shelf with it's sturdy cabinet base against the living room

wall behind him. "Wow," he said. He looked at the poster beside it and laughed. "Of course you'd pick that one. Now we just need one of Mirage!"

Hikaru looked at the poster of Edge and asked suddenly, "Do you have Edge's music too?"

Kiri nodded and said, "All of it, why?"

"I don't know if I've ever heard it," she replied.

He looked at her in surprise.

Hikaru shrugged.

He turned and looked at the shelves. "What is with that Pikachu's expression?" he asked.

She laughed and asked teasingly, "You don't like my Pikachu?"

He looked at its little yellow face seriously and replied, "It's the most expressionless Pikachu I've ever seen."

Hikaru grinned at him and said cheerfully, "I like it, it's never happy when I'm sad, it's never sad when I'm happy. It's not so much expressionless, it just reflects."

Kiri hugged her against him and said quietly, "I won't be happy when you're sad or sad when you're happy either Hikaru. I hope you'll always tell me when you're happy and when you're sad."

She leaned into him and replied, "I'm really happy your home Kiri." They kissed for a little while.

Then she told him more about the past weeks. After she mentioned Kazuha, Kiri suddenly bit his lip and asked, "Would you mind if I go spend the afternoon with him tomorrow?"

Hikaru looked at him with surprise and asked, "Why would I mind?"

Kiri said hesitantly, "I told you I'd spend my first day off at home with you. And you don't have work tomorrow."

She kissed him and said reassuringly, "Kiri, I know he probably needs you, he was a mess." She added honestly, "I do want to spend more time with you, but I don't expect you to abandon your friends or family."

--

The next morning while getting dressed for school Hikaru told Kiri seriously, "I have to ask you about this, if I don't, I'm going to think about it all the time and I can't stand it. It makes me feel embarrassed and jealous."

He looked at her with alarm and asked, "What does?"

She pointed at the drawer she'd opened the other day when looking for blankets. "That," she said, with her cheeks heating up.

He gave her a blank look and then leaned over and pulled the drawer open. Kiri stared into the drawer of sex toys, and blushed. Then he pulled the drawer out and emptied it into the garbage.

Hikaru said quietly, "I didn't mean you had to throw them out."

Kiri replied, without meeting her eyes, "I'm not sure it's sanitary to share them between partners. I'd forgotten about them, they were put in that drawer in my old apartment. I was dating a woman far less sensitive than you then, she needed more to um," he shrugged helplessly before looking up at her.

Hikaru just looked back at him wordlessly.

He offered her a smile and said, "If you want to play with toys, we can get new ones."

She shook her head quickly and blushed harder.

He laughed.

71: Mirage's light and shadow.

Since Kiri was spending his first afternoon back with Kazuha, Hikaru offered to spend it with Risa, working on the outfit for the school festival display.

Risa was thrilled, since coincidentally she also had Monday afternoon free from her siblings. The two of them stayed after school and Hikaru learned that Risa hadn't told her everything about the show.

"Please, you have to," Risa insisted.

"No, how can I possibly?" Hikaru replied with distress.

"I promise, I'll design one that won't show any of your scars," Risa replied.

Hikaru covered her face and asked, "Why didn't you tell me when I agreed to model that I'd have to wear a swim suit too? How can you make one that won't show?"

Risa said practically, "I didn't tell you because I didn't know. Our teacher only showed us the design contest rules he wants us to submit our final project display photos to today. Everyone doesn't have to, it's only if we're serious about becoming designers."

Hikaru uncovered her face and asked, "Contest?"

Risa nodded, and blushed a little as she said, "Everyone said I should do it, and I really do like sewing."

Hikaru said despairingly, "Of course you should do it, but how did it turn into me having to wear a swimsuit?"

Risa explained, "The contest is for a full range of outfits, it must include one for a sport, one for formal wear, one for casual wear, and one for sleep wear. And since the contest is being combined with the festival for my grade, they all need to be for my chosen model."

She looked at Hikaru's expression and said with determination, "And I picked swimming for you, because you never go swimming, I don't think you have a suit, and we agreed to go to the hot springs together after we graduate." She looked at Hikaru

and declared, "And I just know you're going to refuse to go in naked."

Hikaru blushed.

Risa continued reassuringly, "It will be OK, I watched this show about swimming in Australia, and how they're trying to preserve the coral reefs by encouraging people to wear body suits, and no sunscreen. There are some really stylish ones, and they gave me ideas on how to make one for you." Hikaru looked at her doubtfully, and she promised, "You'll look really cool."

Hikaru gave in and Risa spent the evening having her change in and out of the dress she was working on, and the pajamas, which Hikaru admitted were very cute.

--

Nezumi created a new hidden section of their site for the band members and their manager only. Hikaru was surprised when she received the alert announcing this from Mirage's website.

When she navigated to it, she saw that dozens of variations of publicity shots had been selected from the photos that had been taken when they were filming. Nezumi had arranged them as polls, so that each member could vote on their favorite from each set.

She saw that Ryuske and Rin had put comments already on two of the shots, suggesting them as covers.

The videos were also there. The one for Mirage's title song was finished early and had come out very well according to Nezumi's somewhat grudging description. Apparently a little rivalry was developing between Seoshi Toma and Nezumi despite the fact that they did excellent work together. Hikaru hoped it would be a friendly rivalry.

She watched the video and was... amazed. She barely even recognized herself. The first lines of the video had only an empty dune in the wind as the sun shimmered at the edge of the horizon. It must have been an empty dune that Nezumi's cameras were covering while Seoshi filmed them that was then overlapped, because the girl in the white dress with loose hair drifting on the wind searched for Mirage with her footsteps vanishing behind her. The band members faded in and out, in their black, but their footsteps stayed in the sand. Scenes of them playing in white on top of the next dune were included, as well as the wave sweeping over Ryuske and his violin. At the very end Mirage in their black and silver jumped above the edge of the sunrise, and the video froze with the sunrise shimmering beneath their feet.

"Wow," she said aloud.

The other passengers on the bus ignored her.

--

Thursday while Hikaru was playing a solo at a hotel bar that had booked her through Yukito, Ryuske did Mirage's first interview.

When Kiri picked her up afterward he said, "It went surprisingly well."

"Were you there?" she asked with surprise.

He nodded and said, "Yeah, they agreed to come and film it at Inline, they were so excited to have the first interview with Kobayashi Ryuske in years." He chuckled and said, "Takeda let me lurk in the background with him. Ryuske-san floored them. I wish I could show you the unedited recording."

--

When Mirage met on Friday, Ryuske showed them the video.

The interviewer had opened with, "When Edge broke up, you swore that you'd never have another band, and now Kobayashi Ryuske has a new band. Was it a lie?"

Ryuske looked the interviewer in the eye and said calmly, "Yes and no. When I screamed that at the cameras that day, I meant every word. But that was a decade ago, I was still a teenager, and I'd like to think that I've grown up a little since then."

They both chuckled and before the next question was asked, Ryuske added, "I must admit though, that even at the time, when I told myself I was never

going to sing again, I started learning more instruments."

"Mirage's Ryuske is more than just a singer and song writer then?" The interviewer suggested with surprise, although the phrasing indicated that this was a prearranged suggestion.

"Yes," Ryuske agreed, and he listed his instruments and some of what he liked about them.

They talked a little about Mirage and then, at the end, the interviewer asked, "Why now, why over ten years later?"

Ryuske smiled and looked at the cameras and said, "It wasn't even ten years, a little over two years ago, I met someone who sang the song I was thinking. And I haven't been able to stop writing new songs since."

Hikaru looked at Ryuske soberly while Rin said, "Well done!"

Hatsuharu complained, "Not that I really want to be too famous, because I'd really like to finish earning my pension, but you didn't even mention us by name?"

Ryuske shrugged and replied, "I did, those parts were cut. They also only showed the one photo of us all together."

Hikaru changed the subject and asked, "Why does it say $\frac{3}{4}$ Mirage performance tonight, when we're all here."

Ryuske smiled gently at her and said, "Because you're not here."

Rin smirked broadly and Hikaru asked, "What?"

With perfect timing, someone knocked and Rysuke stood up and opened his door. He leaned on it casually and said, "Hey beautiful."

Hikaru watched as Kiri arched an eyebrow at Ryuske and asked, "Are you done?"

Ryuske grinned and nodded. "She's all yours." More seriously he added, "Take good care of her, travel safely."

"I will," Kiri promised simply.

72: To grandmother's house.

They took the train so that Hikaru didn't have to endure hours in a car. Hikaru had immediately protested that she had to be back by Sunday morning when Kiri had presented the tickets. He'd explained that he'd already arranged her absence with her uncle.

Hikaru knelt on the seat beside Kiri so she could stare out the window as they rode further north past farmland. "Look," she said excitedly again, "more cows!"

Kiri snickered, and when she looked at him a little unhappily, he coaxed her into his lap. "Here, sit like

this and you can watch the exotic animals pass until it's too dark and I can cuddle with you."

"Sorry," she apologized.

He kissed her cheek and replied, "Nothing to be sorry for. But haven't you ever done any traveling?"

She shrugged. "Kao-ji-chan used to take us all camping once a summer after he moved in with us. Well, not camping really, because we rented a cabin-like building. And I've been to the ocean a few times too."

Kiri pursed his lips and started to say something, but stopped.

"What?" she asked.

"Is it so little because you don't like it, or having to ride in cars, or because of financial reasons?" he asked.

"I've liked everywhere I've been. I think when I was small it might have been financial and my father's schedules? Later maybe some of both? I do have a week long trip scheduled with Risa and Shizuoka right after graduation though," she replied.

"Oh," he said.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly.

He kissed her. "Nothing, I was just hoping to spend the week after you graduate with you."

"Oh," she said unhappily.

"It's OK," he said.

"But I want to spend a whole week with you too," she told him.

He kissed her again. "We can. Any time after that I should be able to schedule a week off, though probably not more than a week at a time. But I've got four weeks of vacation and with the new job division, I should get to take it," he said hopefully.

Hikaru asked doubtfully, "Did you already schedule that week?"

He smiled and replied, "I put in for it, but I don't have confirmation. Where are you planning to go?"

"A few places, some famous castles and temples, nothing over seas, but then the last three nights at Southwind Hot Springs," she explained.

"Hmm," he replied.

She looked at him curiously.

"Will it be your first hot spring visit?" he asked.

She nodded. "The first for all three of us, why?"

"You'll probably like it then," he said.

"You've been there?" she asked.

He grinned and replied, "I've been to almost every hot spring I know of in the country and several overseas. That one is rather touristy and bland, but

it's OK, and should be fun since you'll probably want to do more than just soak?"

She laughed and grinned back at him, "I see."

--

The station was small, but a rather elderly and hard used vehicle awaited them. Kiri obviously recognized it, as he didn't hesitate before leading Hikaru toward it. The driver was an older man who resembled Kiri and his mother a little.

Kiri greeted him cheerfully, "Hey uncle Mitsui, long time."

Mitsui laughed and replied, while Kiri deposited their bag into the back of the vehicle. "Yeah, but papa's getting on, and I was between jobs, so since our youngest is out of school, we moved back. Your aunt has our car today."

Kiri introduced Hikaru then asked his uncle, "Are you going to take over the place then?"

Mitsui shrugged and answered, "I might just be filling in the gap. Ren is finishing his business degree and says he plans to return when he's finished."

Kiri grinned and said with amusement, "We'll see."

Mitsui nodded in agreement.

They squeezed into the cab with Hikaru pressed tightly against Kiri's side when they were belted in place. Then they drove for at least a half an hour, though Hikaru couldn't guess the distance as much of

the rest of the journey was spent winding through countryside with fields that alternated between crops and grazing animals. She watched everything that passed through the headlights avidly. Kiri grinned at her and chatted with his uncle.

When they pulled into the drive, Hikaru saw that the place was laid out a bit like a fortress in an anime. Two houses, a large barn, and several smaller buildings surrounded an open square that the drive spilled into.

Mitsui waved them off after they disembarked from the elderly vehicle, so Kiri led Hikaru to the more old fashioned house. He didn't stop to knock, simply entered and called out, "We're here!"

An elderly but spry woman practically bounced out of the kitchen, and exclaimed, "Welcome back!"

Kiri hugged her and then turned to introduce Hikaru.

--

Hikaru was introduced to too many people to remember that night. The only ones she was sure of identifying were Kiri's grandparents, Tae and Sora. There were numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins in and out of the pretty old house all evening. Amazing quantities of food poured out of the old fashioned kitchen.

When it was getting quite late everything finally settled down, and it was revealed that only Kiri's grandparents were actually living in the house.

Kiri's grandmother Tae assured them, "I prepared a futon before you arrived, in the room you've always used Kiri."

Gratefully he replied, "Thank you."

"What are your plans?" she asked.

Kiri replied, "I don't know, do you need anything done while I'm here?"

His grandfather suggested, "You could split some wood for me in the morning."

Tae scolded, "You can have the children work on that any time, we hardly ever see Kiri."

The two of them argued good naturedly for a few minutes and then Kiri's grandmother asked, "Don't you want to take Hikaru-chan out to see the end of the ocean while you're here?"

Kiri shrugged and asked Hikaru, "Do you want to go?"

Hikaru looked at him wide eyed and asked, "The end of the ocean?"

He laughed and replied, "I assumed it was such a famous feature of the area that you'd know about it. It's just where two oceans meet, it looks like more ocean." He shrugged.

Hikaru replied thoughtfully, "I'd like to go look at the ocean, also..."

He pulled her against his side and asked, "Also?"

"You said you lived here when you went to college, can we go see your college?" she asked.

He agreed easily, "Sure. Though," he warned, "it won't be very exciting."

Hikaru shrugged.

Kiri told his grandparents, "Then I'll help out in the morning and we can go around in the afternoon when it's warmer anyway."

Tae asked, "Would you like to take a bath with me before bed Hikaru-chan?"

Hikaru looked at Kiri uncertainly and he grinned at her and replied, "The tub is huge, you'll be fine."

"OK," she replied dubiously. Kiri's grandmother smiled and reluctantly Hikaru followed her to the bath.

When she stepped in the door she stopped and said, "Wow, I guess Kiri inherited his love of soaking!"

His grandmother laughed and told her, "I think maybe he picked up that trait here at least. I used to have to chase him out because he'd stay in for hours."

Hikaru smiled at her. And then her smile faded as Tae stripped out of her clothes and started to rinse off

without hesitation. She turned to Hikaru and asked kindly, "Are you shy?"

Hikaru shrugged and replied, "Sort of."

Kiri's grandmother turned away from her and declared stoutly, "Alright, don't worry, I won't stare."

Hikaru undressed and rinsed off as his grandmother climbed into the tub. When she climbed into the tub Tae looked a little shocked and then looked away.

Hikaru said uncomfortably, "I don't mind if you look at me, it's just..."

Tae smiled and replied, "I understand." She stopped avoiding looking at Hikaru and when Hikaru looked back at her dubiously she asked cheerfully, "Do small breasts run in your family?"

Hikaru blushed like fire. "My mother is curvy and small," she replied. Then after a moment she said, "I don't have any idea what my grandmothers were like."

Tae asked, a little startled, "Neither of them?"

Hikaru shook her head and explained, "My mother's parents disowned her," she paused and added, "but I'm pretty sure they're both still alive from eavesdropping on some of my uncle's conversations." Hastily she added, "It wasn't on purpose, he was yelling."

"Oh," Tae replied faintly.

Hikaru nervously added, "And my father was an orphan, a ward of the state. He said the name they gave him didn't mean anything and took my mother's when they married."

"Goodness," Tae replied. Then briskly she added, "I'll admit I was hoping to get to quiz you alone a little, but I didn't mean to bring up painful family memories. Instead, why don't you tell me about yourself a little."

Hikaru looked at her blankly and said, "Um..."

Kiri's grandmother laughed and said cheerfully, "Alright then, I'll tell you something about Kiri instead." She soon had Hikaru giggling over a story about one of Kiri's summer break visits as a child. "That boy is incredibly lucky, and dreadfully determined sometimes," she finished, shaking her head.

After they'd gotten dressed in the pretty flowered yukatas that Tae had set out beforehand, Hikaru impulsively leaned over and hugged her. "Thank you," she said quietly, "I'm feeling much more comfortable here now."

Tae hugged her back, patted her cheek and replied, "I'm so glad. Now we'll let the boys have a turn." She winked and Hikaru laughed.

The next morning they had breakfast, and Hikaru recognized the style of several dishes from those Kiri and his mother would make.

Sora said, "Kiri mentioned you're a musician."

Hikaru nodded.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tae. "Would you mind playing a little?"

Hikaru hesitated and replied, "I didn't bring an instrument."

Kiri showed her the little piano hidden away behind a screen in one corner.

Hikaru played several songs for them. A couple keys were out of tune, but she was able to work around it. She grinned as she watched Tae coax Sora into dancing with her. The elderly couple danced with the ease of long familiarity and looked into each other's eyes as they moved.

Mitsui stuck his head in the side door of the house and said, with surprise, "I thought I heard mama playing."

Tae shook her head, laughed cheerfully, and thanked Hikaru for playing for them.

--

When they finished, Kiri asked, "Shall we tackle the chores now?"

Tae suggested, "Perhaps Hikaru would enjoy preparing things for lunch with me while you two work on the wood pile?"

Hikaru blinked and replied uncertainly, "I think we'd be better off trading chores then?"

Kiri's grandfather Sora arched an eyebrow at her and asked, "You'd rather chop wood than vegetables?"

Hikaru shrugged and replied, to Kiri's amusement, "I'd rather eat Kiri's food, and I've chopped wood before."

"Alright then, let's go," Sora replied.

Kiri laughed and grabbed her hand as she stood, when she looked back at him he asked, "Are you sure? It's hard work."

Hikaru shrugged and he let her go.

Mystified, Tae asked her grandson, "She doesn't cook?"

Kiri replied cheerfully, "Not much." He looked at his grandmother a little defiantly and added, "Not that it matters, you know I like to cook."

--

At the woodpile, Hikaru took in the situation and told Kiri's grandfather, "I may have been too

confident. It seems that in the interest of safety, now would be a good time to admit I've only used a hatchet."

Sora laughed at her and explained how to properly use an axe. She tried splitting her first piece and he reminded her, "Let gravity do the work for you. Lift the axe, and then guide it, don't push it."

She was awkward at first, but she got used to it pretty quickly. Kiri had been right, it was hard work. When Sora called halt, she stretched and looked at the stack ruefully. "Are you sure I should quit?" she asked. "I've only finished about a third."

Sora laughed and replied, "I'm sure, and I'm going to laugh at Kiri when I tell him you already finished a third of the stack."

Hikaru frowned and Sora gazed at her knowingly. "What's wrong, afraid he won't be able to take a little teasing?" he asked.

She blushed and shrugged and replied, "Which one of us are you really teasing?"

He laughed, and they went inside.

Kiri and Tae were seated at the table drinking lemonade. Kiri looked up at Hikaru and teased, "That twig sets off your hair perfectly."

She blushed and Kiri's grandfather snorted and asked, "Before you tease the girl, don't you want to know how much she got done?"

Kiri arched an eyebrow at him and replied confidently, "A lot more than you expected." He stood and pulled the twig out of Hikaru's hair, then whispered, "Want to take a bath together before lunch?"

Hikaru blushed and nodded.

Sora informed his grandson before they left the room, "A third of the woodpile in one morning."

Kiri just laughed and drew Hikaru along the hall.

They could hear his grandparents still discussing them as they entered the bath.

Kiri kissed her and said with a grin, "Well done, you must be exhausted. Last time I barely finished a quarter at most."

Hikaru asked curiously, "Do you chop wood every time you come?"

Kiri replied cheerfully, "Not always, but I always try to do whatever chores Ojii-chan has saved up."

--

After the bath they ate lunch with Kiri's grandparents and then Kiri borrowed the elderly vehicle they'd driven in the night before and took Hikaru off to town.

They visited the college first. Kiri watched Hikaru explore the campus curiously and then asked lightly, "Are you thinking of enrolling?"

Hikaru shook her head and replied, "No, sorry, I was just curious." She looked down and bit her lip.

Kiri asked, "Why sorry?"

Hikaru looked up at him and replied, "Because I still don't want to go to college."

Kiri looked like he wanted to argue, but refrained from discussing it further and took her out to the lighthouse and the viewpoint at the end of the ocean next.

Hikaru loved it, and he laughed and said, "If you love this cold grey sea so much, I have got to take you somewhere tropical."

Hikaru looked at him with amazement and said, a little anxiously, "Don't try to make a surprise trip like this, I don't even have a passport."

Kiri hugged her and suggested, "We could work on that problem."

Hikaru looked at him seriously and replied, "Not yet."

He was a little taken aback, but simply replied, "OK."

When they went back into town, Hikaru stopped while they were walking and stared. She gazed at the embroidered kimonos in the window of the shop until Kiri nudged her.

"What is it?" he asked. "You want one?"

She blushed. "Um, it's..." she faltered.

He started to pull her towards the shop and she resisted. He stopped.

"Kiri?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"How do you want to dress when we get married?" she asked shyly.

He froze and stared at her expressionlessly.

She watched him uncertainly.

Suddenly he pulled her into his arms and embraced her tightly.

"Kiri?" she asked.

Slightly muffled against her he said, "You've never actually said you want to marry me."

Shocked, she pushed him away. He looked really hurt and she exclaimed, "Yes I have!"

"When?" he asked simply.

She stared at him. He looked back. Uncertainly she told him, "When you clipped this into my ear," she touched her turtle, "you asked if I was ready." His expression changed. "I thought you were asking if I, I mean, you said it was a symbol," she blushed and dropped to a whisper, "of mating for life, so I thought you were asking if I was ready to spend my life with you..."

He swallowed and pulled her to him again. "I was," he whispered. He continued, "I was, I just didn't realize you understood me then. I didn't realize you'd really said yes."

He clung to her until she asked again, "So, what kind of wedding do you want?"

"Whatever you want," he replied quickly. "When?"

She laughed and asked, "Are you certain?"

He pulled back enough to look into her face and nodded.

"Even if I think it would be cool to dress like Gintama, modern clothes and historical kimono?" she asked wryly.

"Yes," he replied simply. Then he added, "I love those old Gintama anime episodes." He leaned in and kissed her. "When can I marry you?" He asked again.

Hikaru replied seriously, "Not until I'm at least 18."

Kiri looked at her and teased, "So on your birthday?"

Hikaru blushed and looked away. Kiri gazed at her with shock when she replied, "Maybe." She looked back at him and said shyly, "I'm sorry Kiri, when I moved in with you, I wasn't sure if I wanted to marry you."

He hugged her and said quietly, "Hikaru, I knew that." Then he asked, "Does that make me a bad

guy? I just wanted you with me however I could get you."

She shook her head and replied, "I just wanted to be with you too. It just changed somehow to wanting to always be with you."

He kissed her deeply.

This time when he pulled her toward the shop, she didn't resist.

74: Sputtering firework.

When they entered the shop it took a few minutes for someone to come out and see what they wanted. Hikaru indicated the grey kimono in the window with cranes on a silver lake shore.

The shopkeeper replied hesitantly, "That one would be far too short for you."

Kiri asked, "Can you make one like it in her size?"

The shopkeeper nodded in surprise but then warned, "It's all done by hand, it won't be exactly the same."

Hikaru said suddenly, "If it won't be exactly the same anyway, could we add things to the design?"

The shopkeeper nodded warily.

Kiri asked, "What are you thinking?"

Hikaru looked at him and blushed, then said, pointing to another display, "What if we did something like that, using the pattern off the window display. If we get a pair, only with yours in black and white and mine in grey and silver, with red flower petals like those flowing from one kimono to the next?"

Kiri said quietly, "I'd love it." He kissed her and asked the shopkeeper, "Can you do it?"

The man nodded and then gave them a shockingly high estimate. Kiri didn't bat an eye, but Hikaru gasped.

Kiri glanced at her amused and murmured, "It's fine Hikaru, I'm only going to marry you once you know."

Hikaru frowned and replied, "I know Kiri, but I kind of wanted to be able to do half on this, and it's too much for me right now."

Kiri hesitantly asked, "Can't I just do it?"

Hikaru didn't reply immediately but then she nodded. Relieved, he finished the order.

--

Outside the shop, she squeezed his hand and asked, "Kiri, are you ever going to let me pay for things?"

He stopped walking and asked seriously, "Hikaru, are we going to have to keep separate bank accounts even after we're married?" He looked her in the eye

and said, "I'll live that way if you want to, but I'd rather just have everything be ours."

She didn't move and he looked at her unhappily. Finally she answered, "I don't know Kiri, there are things I'm paying for that I don't feel like should be your problem."

"Like what?" he challenged.

"Like my brother's tuition," she replied promptly.

"How is that different from my mother's roof, and things like that," he countered.

She stared at him open mouthed and then laughed. "I guess it's not," she admitted.

He hugged her tightly and after a moment she whispered into his ear, "OK, we can share it all."

He picked her up and twirled her happily and she asked with a grin, "So when are we combining our bank accounts?"

He laughed and replied, "On Monday."

"Kiri!" She protested, he looked at her and she laughed and said, "You idiot."

He squeezed her hand and asked, "I'm going too fast again?"

She nodded and whispered, "Just a little."

He took a deep breath and then said, "OK Hikaru. Then please tell me when you're ready."

"OK," she agreed.

--

They returned to Kiri's grandparents' place late into the afternoon.

Hikaru liked how Tae and Sora would silently hand each other things sometimes without needing words, though they weren't a silent pair. They teased each other and shared little stories of the day or happenings in their large family. Tae was rarely still, and she and Sora both smiled often.

Tae suggested Kiri take Hikaru out onto the porch to watch the sunset, after they had summarized their day in town. Kiri agreeably led her out onto a traditional porch, that overlooked a small garden. Beyond the fence, the fields sloped away, and houses dotted the edges of the road that passed in the distance.

Hikaru said as she knelt and cuddled against him, "I want this."

Kiri looked at her.

"Not this place, or this view," she explained, waving an encompassing hand, "what they have," she gestured back toward the house where Kiri's grandparents were. "A comfortable old love stuffed full of memories."

Kiri reached for her hand, and said, "I'm ten years older, I'll likely be gone by the time you're 88 Hikaru."

My mother has never said she regrets it, but the age dif..."

She withdrew her hand, rose to her knees, put her hands on his shoulders and said a little angrily, "You could die tomorrow! Or I could!"

He looked up into her face, shocked by her sudden vehemence, and she continued, "I know Kiri, I know better than anyone that there may not be enough time. But if you are so worried about being older, then just take care of yourself, eat well, exercise, live as long as you can..."

He nodded but she continued after a deep breath, "Because Kiri, I want to have it all! Every year, every day, every minute that I can have with you!"

"Yes," he replied. Unsteadily, in almost a whisper he added, "I'm already yours."

He pulled her closer, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and they kissed. A while later, when he laid her down and slid his fingers under her shirt, she said, "People can see us here."

He said while caressing her, "Only if they're looking, and I don't care. Do you want me to stop?"

"No," Hikaru replied.

His lips burned against her skin when he kissed her neck, her ears, and her jaw. And when he kissed her mouth it felt like he wanted to devour her and she moaned.

The sunset stained her scars red when he pulled her shirt off, and he wasn't wearing a condom when he came inside her.

--

Later in their futon, after a dinner that Hikaru had blushed through like a sputtering firework, he whispered apologies.

Finally Hikaru laughed and put her hands against either side of his face. "Kiri," she said firmly, "I told you I didn't want you to stop. It will probably be fine, please stop trying to hog all of the responsibility."

He buried his face on the crook of her shoulder and whispered, "But I said I'd be careful with you."

Hikaru asked wryly, "Didn't you tell me before it would be OK if I was already pregnant?"

He pushed himself up and looked down at her and replied seriously, "Yes, but Hikaru, you just told me this afternoon that I'm pushing you too fast."

She nodded seriously and said, "Kiri, if it will make you stop feeling like you have to apologize, we can combine our bank accounts on Monday."

She laughed again as his face lit up and he kissed her enthusiastically. "I love you," he said again.

"I love you too, you idiot," she replied still laughing.

He froze and she put on a serious expression and said, "Kiri, you really are acting like an idiot, do we need to set a new safe phrase?"

He laughed and relaxed against her. "No," he mumbled against her skin, "I don't want you to make calling me an idiot a habit."

"OK," she agreed, and then she reached over him and pulled out a condom. "Want to go faster?" she asked.

75: Everything changed when nothing changed.

Kiri opened his eyes and whispered, "Good morning," when he saw Hikaru watching him. She grinned and kissed him. When they came up for air he asked, "Did you sleep?"

Hikaru laughed and kissed the tip of his nose. "Do I look tired?" she asked.

He shook his head and replied, "No, you look absolutely gorgeous."

Hikaru blushed and he hugged her against him. She laughed and wriggled. "What time do you think it is?" she asked, grinning.

He blinked and sat up, he reached for his phone and said, "Oh." Then he looked over at her and asked, "Why didn't you wake me up?"

She reached out and touched his face and replied seriously, "Because I think this is only the second

time I've seen you try to sleep in, and I woke you up last time."

--

Tae had left some breakfast things out for them, but when she heard them opening doors she called out from the garden, "Do you want to just wait until we all have lunch in an hour or so?"

Kiri stuck his head out the side door and replied, "Sure, who is we all?"

It turned out that lunch was another round of many cousins, aunts and uncles. This time because one of Kiri's cousins had just given birth a few days before their arrival. She and the new baby had had to stay at the hospital for a few days, but had just been released. Although Hikaru wasn't sure she'd want to attend a party in those circumstances, she admitted that Kiri's cousin looked really happy.

Kiri got a turn to hold the new baby and Hikaru stared as he cuddled it with practiced ease. "Do you want to hold her?" he offered.

She shook her head.

He watched her watching him for a moment and then asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded. Then she grinned at him and replied, "But when my new sibling is born, I may ask you to help me, you look really comfortable with her."

Kiri laughed and replied, "When I moved to the same town my middle sister lived in, she assumed I

came as a free baby sitter. I had children with me many Saturday nights." He shrugged and added, "Now that they're all in school, I don't see them as often."

He looked at Hikaru's expression and passed his tiny cousin on to her grandmother. Then he pulled Hikaru close and whispered, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head.

He frowned at her and she smiled and kissed him. "Nothing's wrong Kiri. I was just thinking about a song," she assured him.

Someone was dragged away from the party to drive them to the train station, Hikaru couldn't remember that cousin's name. She wasn't sure Kiri could either, since he didn't helpfully address the cousin by name.

--

When they entered their home that night, Hikaru looked around with a funny expression on her face.

Kiri walked over and kissed her deeply. "What are you thinking?" he asked when he released her.

She blinked and looked at him and replied, "You kiss me like that and think there's still room in my head for thinking?"

He laughed and kissed her again lightly. "Then what were you thinking when we came in?"

She looked around again and replied simply, "I was thinking, I'm home." Then she looked at him and asked quietly, "Shouldn't it still feel stranger?"

It was his turn to blink at her and after a moment he asked, "Why?"

She shrugged and replied, "I don't know, because nothing has changed?"

He looked after her in confusion as she headed toward the bathroom.

--

Monday after school they combined their bank accounts.

Hikaru said, "I feel a little shocked by the amount you have saved."

Kiri laughed and replied, "I could say the same thing."

Hikaru slapped his shoulder and he laughed again.

"I have to go back to work," he said a little mournfully a few minutes later.

Hikaru started to laugh and then looked at his face again and asked instead, "What's wrong?"

Kiri shrugged and replied, "When we got back my boss dropped one of our recurring trouble cases in my lap. The next few days are probably going to be long ones."

She hugged him and he held her tightly and then murmured against her ear, "I love you so much. We're starting interviews for the general manager position." He pulled back and brushed a strand of hair back from her face, "Are you still certain these kinds of schedules and me as the field manager are OK?"

Hikaru nodded without hesitation.

He kissed her again.

--

Tuesday Hikaru went to Ryuske's place after school to meet up with Mirage and make their final decisions on their album before it was submitted to the publishing queue.

"Would you write a song for me?" Hikaru asked Ryuske suddenly while they were waiting for Rin and Hatsuharu.

He didn't reply right away, but looked at her a little oddly. Finally he asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean like how you wrote the song for Hatsuharu when he wrote the lyrics for his wife," Hikaru explained.

Ryuske grinned at her suddenly and replied, "Try writing it yourself first."

Hikaru covered her face with her hands and said, "It's too awful if I try. Anyone would hate it. My brain keeps repeating," she blushed and sang, 'Everything changed, when nothing changed, I'm so happy, I'm so happy, I'm so happy! Nothing happened when

everything happened..' The fragments of the song poured out, then she continued, "People would throw things."

Ryuske laughed openly. When he had his breath back, he grinned and said, "So leave the parts that would be annoying when said out loud instrumental." He turned to the keyboard and played it back to her, modified.

Hikaru stared at him, as he sang, "We're holding hands like yesterday, but with a thousand little fingertip touches, everything inside of me rushes!" Then played a section that danced off his fingertips and continued, "Something happened, when nothing happened. Nothing changed, when something changed."

Hikaru applauded and then sat on the bench beside him and slung an arm over his shoulder. "That's amazing!"

Ryuske grinned, but it faded and he looked at her hesitantly.

Hikaru raised her brows at him, squeezed his shoulders and said, "What? I bring you fragments of a song and you turn it into a real song within minutes. You're really amazing Ryuske."

He shook his head and said, "I just rearranged it. It's your song." He added after a moment, with a real smile, "I'm really glad that you're so happy, and this is a good song, we should add it to the album."

Hikaru released him and argued, "You turned it into a real song. And isn't it too late for that?"

"Too late for what?" Rin asked. Hikaru and Ryuske jumped a little and he laughed as he let the door close.

"To add Hikaru's song to the album. We'd have one from each of us that way," Ryuske explained. He turned to Hikaru and asked, "You do have more lines for verses don't you?"

She blushed and nodded.

--

When Hatsuharu arrived they spent five minutes on choosing cover photos and agreed that the second video released would be the one that Nezumi had just finished editing. In it the borrowed convertible and Rin's bike apparently cruised through the city at night, with Mirage singing out like a migratory flock as they passed through the districts in patterns of light and shadow.

Then they started to work on the new song. Ryuske didn't usually let them watch as he wrote, but he just laughed and said again, "I'm not writing it, I'm just writing an arrangement down."

They were still playing when Hatsuharu's plump wife came down to fetch him. Rin laughed when he closed the door behind the couple and said, "I almost expected her to throw Hatsuharu over her shoulder and carry him off."

Ryuske laughed and turned to Hikaru and asked, "So where's yours? I didn't realize it was so late."

Hikaru blinked, looked at the time and replied uncertainly, "I don't know."

Rin snorted and pulled Hikaru's ponytail. When she looked at him questioningly, he replied, "You don't even deny that you have a spouse."

She blushed. Then she messaged Kiri, 'What are you doing?'

A somewhat confusing reply came back after a couple of minutes. 'If you watched 'Evening Stars', I'm sorry, it will be OK, I'll find something. I'll be home soon.'

She stared at the phone with such a befuddled look that Ryuske came and peeked at the message over her shoulder.

"Shall we watch?" he asked.

She hesitated and then replied, "I don't know."

Rin pulled her phone out of her fingers and said a moment later, "I want to watch it."

Ryuske pulled up the most recent episode on his computer. "This aired about two hours ago," he commented.

After a few minutes of listening to the inane chatter of the show's host and the list of celebrities who were

appearing in the episode, Ryuske winced and put it on fast forward. Rin, watching him, laughed and asked, "Isn't this show on your interview schedule? How are you going to manage if you can't stand to watch it?"

Ryuske laughed and replied, "Easy, I told Takeda I won't do a live broadcast session until our album is published."

Rin raised an eyebrow and asked lightly, "Aren't you limiting our advertising a little oh leader?"

Ryuske replied seriously, "A little, but I don't want to mess up and say something stupid and," he reached out and froze the video, the frame showed Kiri standing in front of the host and his current star, shocked expressions plastered on their faces.

Rin murmured, "Looks like someone else did?"

Ryuske hastily rewound and hit play.

"ationship with Taiske Jun?" asked the host.

"Oh, that's just a rumor," giggled the pretty young actress. She leaned forward and said in a stage whisper, "I'm not supposed to admit this, but actually I'm dating my manager, Takeshi Kiri."

"What?" the host asked quickly glancing off screen.

The actress smiled coyly and replied quickly, "I just haven't publicised it, because the company advised against it, but really, I'm so tired of all these rumors." She pouted cutely.

Kiri stepped onto the stage in front of the cameras, fists clenched at his side and demanded, "Retract it!"

The two on stage looked up at him in shock, and the host panicked and froze. The actress recovered quickly and stood and wrapped her arms around Kiri affectionately. "Darling, it will be fine, that's a silly rule anyway," she declared.

He didn't even bother shaking her off, he just looked into her face and demanded, "Apologize to my wife right now!"

"Your wife?" she asked in a faint voice.

Someone switched the feed to a recorded interview section, where she and the show's host stood on a historic stone bridge, and the host was asking her questions about the movie she was working on.

Ryuske left it playing and turned to Hikaru and asked, almost as faintly as the actress had, "You got married while you were gone?"

Hikaru shook her head and then blushed deeply and admitted, "We bought outfits for the wedding."

Rin laughed and Ryuske just swallowed hard and asked, "When?"

"Not until my birthday at least," Hikaru assured him.

"OK," he replied, and behind him the video switched back to the live stage.

The host was sitting with different people, and said cheerfully, "As you can see, things are never boring around Keito Kirari, who is as passionate in her film making as she is in her personal relationships!" Then he turned and introduced his next guests.

Ryuske closed the video.

Rin said thoughtfully, "So do you think he's cheating on you?"

Hikaru shook her head and replied worriedly, "I think maybe he just got fired or quit his job."

--

Rin took her home. Kiri wasn't there yet and Hikaru waited anxiously.

When Kiri opened the door she rushed over to him, wordlessly he pulled her into his embrace and buried his face in her shoulder. "You saw," he said quietly.

She nodded, her chin rubbing against his hair.

He pushed away from her and looked into her face searchingly. She smiled and reached out and touched his sea turtle earring. "Your wife?" she asked lightly.

He blushed.

Hikaru grinned and caressed his cheek and said, "You're so cute when you blush."

He caught her hand against his cheek and kissed it. "I love you like crazy Hikaru. I wasn't," he hesitated. "I didn't plan to say 'my wife'," he finished.

She nodded. Then she asked seriously, "In your message when you said you'll find something, did you mean another job?"

Kiri ran his hands through his hair and laughed a little shakily. He drew her over to sit on the couch and answered, "Yes, I tried to resign."

"Tried?" she prompted.

Kiri laughed and then replied with exasperation, "My boss refused to let me."

Hikaru asked uncertainly, "Isn't that a good thing?"

He groaned and laid his head on her shoulder. "I guess," he replied after a minute, "but I was so angry, I really don't want to deal with this mess."

Hikaru coaxed him into explaining.

He told her about what a problem client Keito Kirari was with Inline. How she'd already gone through more than a dozen managers, mostly because she was spoiled, demanding, and rude, not because of publicity incidents. When they'd gotten back from visiting Kiri's grandparents, his boss had dumped her on him, saying they were completely out of people who would work with her and that he'd have to take over as her personal manager until they could find someone.

Wryly Kiri admitted to Hikaru, "I didn't explain more about the situation last night, because I didn't want you to feel jealous or uncomfortable." He laughed a little painfully, "The irony."

Hikaru leaned over and kissed him, "I'm OK," she assured him.

He raised an eyebrow at her and asked, "It doesn't bother you?"

Hikaru thought about it before replying and said, "I'm bothered that you're upset and have to work with that kind of person." She looked into his eyes and said boldly, "I don't think you're doing her."

Kiri laughed and replied with embarrassment, "Of course not." He added, "Although I ought to have gone along with it. Making a scene during a live broadcast is one of the stupidest things I've done in years."

Hikaru replied seriously, "I'm sorry if that makes your job worse, but honestly, I was really glad you did." They kissed again and she added, "I'd kind of like to tell her off myself." Kiri laughed and kissed her again.

His phone went off. They ignored it.

It went off again and Kiri sighed and pulled it out. He sat there staring at it until it stopped and Hikaru took it from his hands and looked at it curiously.

She laughed and asked, "Oh my god Kiri, how have you not been fired already?"

He looked at her quizzically.

"That-demon-boss?" She asked laughingly, reading the contact ID.

Kiri laughed and replied, "I've called him that to his face before, having it on my phone isn't going to make it any worse."

The phone went off a third time and reluctantly Kiri answered it. He didn't say much, mostly listened, until he pulled the phone away from his ear and asked Hikaru, "Were you serious about wanting to tell her off yourself?"

Hikaru nodded.

Kiri put the phone back to his ear and said, "She will." The conversation continued for a bit longer, and then Kiri said, "Enough, you demon-boss," he winked at Hikaru, "since you won't let me resign, we can do this in the morning." Hikaru could hear the laugh on the other end and then Kiri ended the call.

He leaned back against the couch and sighed.

"I will what?" Hikaru asked.

"Meet with her if she keeps demanding to see this rumored fiancé," he replied, then arched an eyebrow at her.

Hikaru nodded, then scooted up to him and he pulled her up against his chest. After awhile they moved into the bedroom.

77: Mermaid scales.

Hikaru woke Kiri up early and when he reached for her she grabbed his hands and stopped him. He

looked at her in surprise and she complained, "I'm starving. We didn't eat supper."

He laughed and got up quickly. He cooked them a lavish breakfast and prepared Hikaru's lunch. He dropped her off at school on his way to work.

--

During their lunch break while Hikaru was despairing over her most recent grades, Risa begged, "Can you please spend this afternoon with me? I think I fixed the dress and I'm ready to have you try the suit on, although it's only lightly basted, but I want to see if it's going to be anything like I thought."

Hikaru looked at her glum face in surprise, usually Risa was one of the most cheerful and energetic people she knew. "OK. What's wrong?" she agreed and asked with concern.

Shizuoka chuckled and said, "You're just a master of subtlety aren't you?"

Hikaru and Risa looked at her with identical blank expressions and she went off into a fit of giggles.

Hikaru looked at Risa questioningly. Risa said, while pointedly ignoring Shizuoka, "Nothing's wrong, I'm just a little tired and it's just not coming out quite like I hoped." She looked at Hikaru and promised, "If it's too awful, I'll stop trying to make a swimsuit and choose some other sport."

Shizuoka sobered up and said thoughtfully, "Hmm. I didn't know you were trying to get Hikaru into a swimsuit, can I come see it?"

Risa looked at Hikaru hesitantly. Hikaru couldn't guess what Risa wanted her to answer, so she just said, "I don't mind, but it's not my design."

Risa brightened a little and told Shizuoka, "Sure, you can come too."

Shizuoka smiled.

--

Hikaru messaged Kiri that she was staying late and they met in the crafting room after their classes finished. There were other people working on things too and Hikaru hesitated before entering.

Risa looked around and said, "Everyone is trying to finish things because we've only got a week left."

Hikaru stared. Shizuoka poked her and asked, "Don't tell me you forgot about the festival?"

Mutely she shook her head.

Anxiously Risa asked, "You're not going to change your mind are you?"

Hikaru reassured her, "No, of course not! I just hadn't realized spring break is so close! And the concert." Doubtfully she added, "But won't we need to practice walking?"

Risa gave her a funny look and asked, "You need to practice walking?"

Shizuoka laughed and said confidently, "Leave that part to me, I'll teach Hikaru how to walk in your outfits." They both looked at her in surprise and she said, "Hey, what's with those looks, which one of us has actually done a little modeling?"

Risa and Hikaru both laughed and acknowledged her superiority.

When Hikaru was dubious about trying on the outfits in the craft room, Shizuoka pointed out, "You're going to have to do outfit changes behind a sheet for the actual show. These people don't even care what we're doing, they're all busy with their own stuff."

She tried on the dress first and looked in the mirror and said, "Wow!"

Risa grinned at her and said contentedly, "This one is finished."

Shizuoka was also impressed. "That dress would cost at least a couple hundred, wow, Risa why didn't you make me one?"

Risa laughed and said, "I'll make you one after we graduate, if you buy the materials, just let me get through this safely."

Shizuoka hugged her, and then made Hikaru walk back and forth across the room. Hikaru walked stiffly

back and forth. Risa started to speak and Shizuoka stopped her.

To Hikaru she said, "Now walk back and forth across the room like you're going to play your guitar at the other end."

Hikaru blinked at her and walked back and forth more normally. Her friends laughed at her and instructed her firmly that she needed to imagine playing her music instead of thinking about walking when it was time to do the presentation.

Hikaru laughed and jokingly threatened to sing the catwalk song out loud during it.

Risa made a mock horrified expression and exclaimed, "Don't you dare!"

--

Hikaru was surprised by the swimsuit. It was asymmetrical and nothing like she'd imagined. On her left side it had a $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeve and leg, on the right it had $\frac{1}{4}$ lengths. It made a sort of sideways triangle across her body in a shimmer of color like a mermaid's tail.

The suit was a little rough feeling in places where the fabric was pieced together in small diamonds of slightly varying shades. Even though it wasn't very comfortable, it gave the effect of scales running a spiral up her body and the pattern wrapped around her torso and ended at her shoulder.

She turned to Risa and said, "It's beautiful, even if it's not very comfortable."

Risa looked at her anxiously and asked, "Where is it uncomfortable?"

Hikaru explained about the seams and Shizuoka suggested, "Why not just give it a lining? Lots of suits have two layers."

Hikaru's phone went off, and she picked it up and answered.

Kiri asked, "Will you be free soon, can you come to Inline's main office and speak with Keito Kirari?"

Hikaru replied, "Just a minute," she looked at Risa and Shizuoka and asked, "how much longer do you think?"

Risa replied doubtfully, "We can quit now if you need to?"

Hikaru replied to Kiri, "I can do it now if you need me to."

Relieved he said, "Please."

After they ended the call, Risa and Shizuoka demanded to know what was going on. After she'd explained the situation with Kiri and the actress, Risa made her call Kiri back and tell him she needed another hour.

--

Then they rushed Hikaru to her place and dressed her up. The bed was quickly buried under discarded clothes and they settled on one of Hikaru's stage outfits. When she protested, Risa declared, "You work

for Inline Productions, and this is one of your work outfits."

Baffled, Hikaru said, "I could have worn my uniform."

Kiri messaged her again and Hikaru read it and laughed. It said, 'I forgot you're probably still in your school uniform, it would be better to wear casual clothes, someone may take your picture.'

Risa snorted and said, "At least if you are going to fall for an older man, he's not a stupid one." She looked at Hikaru and said, "Wake up Hikaru."

Hikaru looked back at her with confusion.

Risa sighed and said, "I'm glad we switched middle schools and went to this highschool, you've gotten really comfortable. Have you forgotten what reporters can be like?"

Hikaru stiffened and Shizuoka accidentally pulled her hair when she moved. Shizuoka asked, "Reporters?"

Risa said, "I'll tell you after Hikaru is ready," she hesitated and looked at Hikaru, "If that's OK."

Hikaru nodded seriously and said, "Of course it is, I trust Shizuoka."

Shizuoka blushed and finished Hikaru's hair.

Hikaru looked in the mirror when they were done and said with surprise, "I look elegant, even though I'm just wearing my black and silver."

Risa laughed and said, "Just remember you look elegant and keep your temper. Now go scold that stupid actress girl properly," she sniffed.

Hikaru and Shizuoka laughed.

78: Star crossed.

Hikaru walked to Inline from the nearest bus station. She clenched her hands nervously, then took a deep breath and straightened. She climbed the steps and looked up at the tall building where Kiri worked. She laughed at herself and reminded herself that Takeda also worked here, and Ryuske had probably been here many times. It made the building seem less intimidating.

Inside she told the receptionist, "Takeshi Kiri called me for a meeting?"

The receptionist checked something on a computer and then made a quick call. When he hung up he politely directed Hikaru to a conference room on the third floor and said, "He's still in another consultation, but will be there soon."

Hikaru entered the room to find the actress she'd seen on the video the previous evening sitting on one of the low couches arranged around a wide oval table. No one else was present and Hikaru looked around curiously.

The little actress looked up and snapped, "Go away, this room is occupied."

Hikaru looked back at her and raised her brows. "I'm aware," she replied.

The actress looked at her as though she were stupid and said, "I'm busy, you can't have an autograph, and if a kid like you is here about being my next manager, you can just scram!" Her lip trembled and she looked away.

Hikaru looked at her calmly, surprised at herself, and thought Keito Kirari looked younger and smaller in person than she'd expected. Almost gently she said, "Takeshi Kiri asked me to come here and speak to you."

The girl's head whipped back to stare at Hikaru. Doubtfully she asked, "Are you Hitoshi-san?" Hikaru nodded.

The girl stared at her open mouthed.

Then she stood suddenly and declared angrily, "I knew he was lying! It was obvious after he gave in and admitted it was his fiancé instead of his wife."

Hikaru laughed, surprising herself again. When the little actress glared at her she asked with low voiced amusement, "So why do you think I'm here then?"

The actress stared at her and then blushed and turned away. Hikaru wondered what kind of answer she'd thought of until she said contritely, "I'm sorry, I

don't have anything against that kind of relationship, you can call yourself his wife if you want to."

Hikaru gasped with laughter and Keito spun around and declared, "And that's the only apology you get from me! Takeshi-san behaved horribly, any real manager would have just gone with it!"

Hikaru sobered and replied firmly, "No, you went too far."

Keito said bitinglly, "What would you know about it. Just because your lover is a manager in the industry, doesn't mean you have any idea what things are like!"

Hikaru looked at her seriously and replied, "True, I have absolutely no idea why you would claim someone you're supposed to have a professional relationship with is your lover, when they aren't."

Keito snapped, "What makes you so sure I'm not his lover?"

Hikaru replied crossly, "He's not your lover, and I never imagined such a famous actress would be so childish."

Keito burst into tears and Hikaru stared at her appalled. When she didn't stop crying Hikaru reluctantly walked over and patted her shoulder.

The little actress, between sobs, told Hikaru "You'll never understand how impossible dating is for people in the spotlight."

Hikaru replied wryly after a moment, "I don't know whether to hope you're wrong or not."

Keito just stared at her miserably and said, "My boyfriend cheated on me and then told me calmly that he was only meeting expectations and I should understand." And despite declaring that she wouldn't apologize again, she did apologize and said, "I just wanted to prevent him from using me to boost his career by making the rumors look false."

Hikaru said dryly, "If you'd trusted your manager, and talked to him before the interview, Kiri might have been able to come up with a plan that wouldn't have looked like a scandal."

"Funny you should say that Hikaru of Mirage, with this unscheduled private meeting," said Takeda from the doorway. Behind him were Kiri and an attractive middle aged man that Hikaru didn't recognize.

Hikaru gasped and apologized to Takeda, "Sorry, it never occurred to me that I should notify you of this?"

"I wouldn't have known if I hadn't bumped into these two in the hall," he replied a little grumpily.

The middle aged man chuckled and said cheerfully, "This meeting was my suggestion Hoshimaru."

Kiri went directly to Hikaru and said, "Sorry I didn't meet you at the entry, we were still busy when you arrived." He hugged her.

Keito snapped with annoyance, "Aren't you apologizing to the wrong person?"

Kiri's shoulders tightened, although his face was carefully bland when he turned around and asked quietly, "Sorry Keito-san, did you require anything during the twenty minutes you were left alone?"

The other man laughed and said, before Keito could reply, "Takeshi, enough." He walked over to Hikaru, shook her hand, and told her, "I've really wanted to meet you, Hikaru-kun."

Hikaru gave him a blank look and replied, "Hello?"

Kiri said, "This is my boss, Emri Enrico, Inline Productions owner."

Hikaru's mouth formed an o of surprise.

Emri grinned and said, "I thought that since Kirari-chan wouldn't believe that you existed, it would be the perfect opportunity to meet you."

Kiri leaned in and whispered, "I thought you were going to scold her."

Apparently Keito had really good ears because she stomped her little foot and exclaimed, "Scold me? You were going to let your lover scold me? I want a new manager!"

Kiri looked back at her with exasperation.

Takeda said calmly, "I see what this is about now."

Hikaru looked at him curiously and Kiri looked embarrassed.

Takeda suggested, "Why don't you just alter her contract and make her provide her own manager?"

Emri looked at him with surprise and said speculatively, "Maybe I should have come to you with this sooner."

Keito gasped and said angrily, "You can't be serious!"

Hikaru asked her, "Wouldn't that be really cool for you? Kiri said you haven't gotten along with any of the managers Inline provided."

Keito stared at her and said in a tone that implied Hikaru was even more stupid than she'd previously assumed, "That's what they're getting paid for, providing me with a manager."

"Really?" asked Hikaru dubiously, ignoring the little actresses tone. "Because Inline is mostly providing us with publication and legal work, although," she added a little guiltily glancing at Takeda, "I admit having the advice of an experienced manager has been comforting."

Takeda gave her a small smile.

Keito gaped at her disbelievingly. "Do you have any idea how busy my schedule is? I don't have the resources to deal with all that and remember all my lines and focus on work!"

Hikaru realized everyone was looking at her and replied with some embarrassment, "I don't, but our band leader does most of our scheduling, my father's childhood friend acts as my agent for solo work, and I know there are other people with the organizational capacity to do that kind of work who don't already work as managers. Don't you just need someone you can get along with who can learn to do that kind of thing?"

Kiri's boss stepped in and said smoothly, "Exactly, I think you need to take the time and participate in hiring your own manager. Kirari-chan, we can either keep your contract the same or you can pay them yourself and we can discuss giving you a higher percent. Takeshi can add interviews to your schedule, and if you know anyone you want to work with, we can start with them."

The little actress didn't give in right away, but eventually she was persuaded. Watching her interactions gave Hikaru an idea. But she didn't want to say anything in front of Keito-san.

Eventually they left the building in a group, Takeda and Emri bid them farewell at the doors. Hikaru looked at Kiri and asked quietly, "Do you need to see her home first?"

Kiri turned to her and grinned. "Does Takeda take you home after things?" he asked with amusement.

Hikaru shook her head, but then added, "When we were all so exhausted, he did pick us up and then lent us a van."

Keito snapped, "I've already got a cab."

One pulled up in front of her before Hikaru had time to ask. She yanked the door open and threw herself into the seat, and yelled back at them, "Takeshi you'd better not slack off because you think you're going to be able to get rid of me soon!"

Kiri pursed his lips and said hopefully, "Maybe I'll get lucky."

Hikaru poked him and he laughed.

--

On their way home, she said thoughtfully, "Look for older applicants if you can. She listened to Takeda the most, but I wouldn't wish her on him."

Kiri grinned and replied, "He'd retire so fast you'd be needing a new manager."

--

When they got home Kiri came out of the hall and asked, "What happened to the bed?"

Puzzled, Hikaru walked into the bedroom. She laughed. Almost all of the clothes she owned were still scattered across it. "Risa and Shizuoka helped me get dressed for the battle."

"Was there a battle?" he asked curiously, leaning in and kissing her neck lightly.

Hikaru thought about it and replied, "Just a skirmish."

They put away her clothes first.

79: High notes.

Friday Mirage played at Blue Moon and Yukito's bar reached maximum capacity.

Ryuske had a rather vacant look on his face when they finished and Yukito informed the band that he'd had to close the doors within the first hour.

Hikaru looked at Ryuske and asked quietly, "Why are you so shocked? Our fan club is already above 1500 since our music videos started releasing, and this place only has a 500 person maximum capacity."

Rin leaned his elbow on Ryuske's shoulder and said, "Because he doesn't believe in himself."

Hatsuharu chuckled and replied, "Either that or we've been playing the long shot and he can't believe it's paying off."

Ryuske waved them both off with irritation, and told Hikaru, "I'm just worried that things are moving too fast, it's not only the fans increasing. Takeda keeps bringing me offers of projects to work on, and you're not done with school."

Hikaru glanced at Hatsuharu and told Ryuske seriously, "I've only got a couple months left, Hatsuharu has five more years, shouldn't you be more worried about him?"

Ryuske glanced at Hatsuharu and replied, "No."

Hatsuharu told her almost shyly, "It turns out my boss saw our first video, and loved it. Instead of worrying about being fired, it looks like I may just be pressured into some sort of company sponsorship."

"Is that a good thing?" she asked worriedly.

All three of them shrugged back. Ryuske said, "There's worse things than wearing the logo of a company Hatsuharu has worked at for decades. And nothing is set."

Rin reached out and patted her head and said, "Just focus on school, let us worry about the rest until you're done."

--

The school festival was set for the last Friday before spring break, and so they were buried in tests Monday through Wednesday, while Thursday was set aside for preparations.

Kiri was busy and worked late so much that Hikaru actually felt kind of sorry for Keito-san, until she found out that the actresses schedule was only about half of Kiri's current workload.

Wednesday night Hikaru cooked their dinner because Kiri was only home for half an hour, and after looking at Kiri's face she said, "If this happens again, I'll just make Ramen."

Kiri shrugged and said, "It's not as bad as you think, wait 'till you try Kazuha's cooking." He paused

and added, "On second thought, don't if you can help it."

Hikaru laughed and leaned over to kiss him.

--

Risa and Shizuoka were both scandalized to discover on Thursday that Hikaru had signed up for the clean up crew. She shrugged and pointed out, "I'll need the participation points. I've been way too busy with Mirage and then we had tests, I had no time to join any of the big class projects like Risa."

Shizuoka complained, "You could have joined one of the cafés like I did."

Hikaru laughed and replied humorously, "As one of the cooks or one of the cute waitresses?"

"You'd have made a cool waitress at least?" Shizuoka replied.

"Won't you get points for being my model?" Risa asked.

Hikaru nodded, and said "But only a few, because it's only for an hour."

--

In the morning Kiri drove her to school. When she reached for the door, he said, "Hikaru."

She stopped and looked at him, he looked frustrated and unhappy. Instead of moving toward the

door she scooted closer to him and leaned in for a kiss.

He raised his hand, caressed her and pulled her closer. They kissed for long enough that Hikaru murmured, "Kiri, I'm going to be late."

He sighed and released her and then he grinned and reached up to tidy her hair. While he was busy doing that she told him, "It's fine. I'm not a child and you're not my parent, you're not required to come to my school events. And my mother and my brother are both coming, so it's not like I'll be left alone." She smiled.

He bit his lip and said, "I want to though."

She laughed and said, "Take me on a couple of dates during spring break instead?"

"Absolutely," he promised. "I think I'll have all day on Thursday."

"Me too," Hikaru replied happily.

"I know," he replied dryly, "that's why I am trying to arrange it, I'll find out for sure soon."

--

When she got out of the car and walked to the gate, a girl from her class that she didn't know well sneered at her and said, "Slut."

Hikaru just stared at her blankly for a moment, belatedly she asked, "What?"

They passed through the gates and the girl said, "I saw you kissing him, you can't pretend he's your uncle or cousin."

"Of course not," Hikaru replied immediately, "he's my fiancé."

The girl stopped walking and asked, "Really?"

Hikaru turned and nodded.

"When's the wedding then?" she asked derisively.

"Probably in July," Hikaru answered promptly and she continued on to the classroom without looking back.

They all waited together until roll call was finished, and then they were dismissed to their various activities. Risa and Hikaru went and helped Shizuoka and the other students who were working on that classroom café for a little while, since they didn't do the fashion display until afternoon.

Hikaru had three one-hour shifts with the clean up crew: one late morning, one early afternoon right after she modeled for Risa, and one at the end of the day.

After the first shift she met her mother at the gates. Miri looked cheerful and somehow visibly rounder than even when they'd had lunch on Sunday. Hikaru hugged her and then looked around and asked, "Yuki-ni isn't with you?"

Miri pouted and said, "He had to cancel, he didn't message you?"

Surprised, Hikaru pulled out her phone and checked, and said, "Oh, it's still on the mute for classroom hours. He did."

Miri complained, "He's hardly been home this semester."

Hikaru laughed and replied, "Between his classes and his job, that's not surprising."

Miri nodded, then brightened and asked, "Should we go visit him one of the days during break?"

Hikaru hesitated, then silently apologized to Kiri and nodded, "If Thursday is OK."

"Yes," agreed Miri enthusiastically.

Hikaru smiled and messaged Kiri, 'Sorry, going to visit Yuki Thursday, he couldn't come today.'

Kiri replied a few minutes later, 'I just confirmed I'd gotten it off, can I come with you?'

Hikaru grinned and replied, 'Of course!'

Miri asked, "Messaging Kiri-kun? What did he say?"

Hikaru blushed and asked, "Is it written on my face?"

Miri laughed and replied, "Sort of." Wistfully she added, "You've looked a lot happier since you moved in together I think."

Hikaru raised her eyebrows at her mother and questioned, "If I didn't you'd be worrying at me, so why aren't you content?"

Miri laughed and replied cheerfully, "Because I'm a greedy mother who wants to see her children more often."

Hikaru shook her head and said mock-sadly, "How terrible, and soon there will be another victim of your wicked desires."

Miri giggled.

Hikaru told her, "He'll come with us to visit Yuki-ni."

Miri greeted the news enthusiastically, to Hikaru's relief.

--

They wandered around a little, then visited Shizuoka at the café room, and then it was time for the fashion modeling.

Hikaru's heart felt like it was pounding and she tripped once at the beginning, but she recovered and didn't fall. While she was changing from the cute pajamas into the swimsuit, she muttered, "This is embarrassing."

Risa asked incredulously, "How can this be more embarrassing than standing on stage singing about sex?"

Hikaru shrugged helplessly, but she thought, as she yielded the sheet draped space to the next

person, that it was probably a good thing that there weren't any mirrors.

She was thinking that walking out in a swimsuit was the most embarrassing thing, until she saw the tennis outfit one of Risa's classmates had created. She decided she'd gotten off easy and walked out with confidence in Risa's skills.

The dress was so good that people actually applauded when she took her turn again later. Hikaru wasn't actually surprised and didn't falter.

Risa was bursting with pride. She told Hikaru as she pulled on the comfortable jeans with flower cutouts embroidered around in a curve up the right leg, "You can wear this set the rest of the day."

Hikaru laughed and teased, "Sure, I can advertise your work all afternoon."

Risa blushed as she passed over the matching long sleeved shirt dyed with an echoing curve of color, and said, "I just meant these are your clothes now."

Hikaru leaned over and hugged her. "Thank you," she said seriously, "they're all amazing, you're going to be a great designer."

Risa grinned and laughed up at Hikaru, declaring boldly, "I already am! You're welcome!"

Hikaru laughed and strode out to take her position in the last lap of the event.

Afterward she did her next shift on the clean up crew. She marveled a little at the amount of garbage being produced. Most of the cans she emptied were already full.

Miri had taken video of the whole thing she discovered later. When she rejoined her mother, she found her showing it to Makoto and giving a full description of the whole display.

Makoto grinned when he looked up and saw her face. "Your mother and I are hiding from the mob while Risa takes all five of her siblings and her parents to catch goldfish."

"You didn't go along?" Hikaru asked with surprise.

Makoto grimaced and replied, "You know I love Risa to death, but seriously, what were her parents thinking with six kids?"

Miri elbowed him and answered his question, to his surprise. "They were going to stop at four they said, and then they had twins, so they had one more to make it an even number."

Makoto had a faintly horrified look on his face when he commented, "Dear gods, what if the last had been another set of twins?"

Hikaru asked a little diffidently, "Have you and Risa ever talked about having kids after you get married?"

He looked at her with surprise and said, "We haven't even talked about getting married." He looked embarrassed and added, "I kind of plan to ask

her on our one year anniversary." He followed up quickly with, "Have you and Kiri-san?"

Hikaru nodded.

He regarded her with a serious expression and asked, "Oh? Am I invited to the wedding? When am I expecting my first god-child?"

Hikaru hit him, though not hard and laughed and replied, "Of course you are, and not for a few years yet."

Miri asked, eyes sparkling, "You decided? Do you know when you'll get married then?"

Hikaru blushed and replied, far more shyly than she'd declared it that morning, "Probably in July, on or just after my birthday."

80: Heart stopped.

After the festival, at home, Kiri poked through the refrigerator before starting supper, and declared, "Sorry, I need to go shopping first."

Hikaru looked up from where she'd sprawled on the couch and replied, "OK?"

He looked at her and asked, "Do you want to wait here? You look tired."

"I am a little tired, but I want to go with you," she replied and stood.

He walked over and kissed her. "Walk or drive?" he questioned.

"Walk?" she suggested.

They walked hand in hand to the little store nearby.

--

At the store, they looked over the small selection of fresh vegetables and Hikaru laughed at Kiri's disappointed face. She bumped him with her hip and asked, "Do we need to go back for the car so you can go to the market?"

He blinked and laughed and picked up a bundle of onions and some celery and replied, "No, I'll just make you pasta tonight instead."

Hikaru brightened and he grinned at her.

They made their purchases and exited the store. They had barely gone a dozen paces away from the door, when Kiri stopped.

She looked at him in surprise and he kissed her. She smiled and returned the kiss, then gasped when he dropped the bags he was holding and pulled her close and kissed her harder. "Kiri!" she protested breathlessly. Her heart was pounding and dizzily, she repeated, "Kiri?"

As if from a distance she heard him ask, "Hikaru?"

--

She woke up in a hospital bed. Confused, she tried to sit up and look around. Kiri grabbed her shoulders and said worriedly, "Don't get up." He eased her back down and she stared at him.

"What happened?" she asked.

He groaned and pressed his face into her shoulder. "I think my heart stopped," he answered.

"What?" she asked again.

He pulled back and answered more coherently, "You went white and passed out in my arms. I think my heart stopped," he repeated. Then guiltily confessed, "I couldn't think clearly. I panicked, you wouldn't wake up, and one of the clerks called the ambulance."

He took a deep breath and just looked at her. "OK?" she asked uncertainly, thinking hard, "Am I pregnant?"

Kiri laughed helplessly and Hikaru stared at him in confusion. He looked into her face and replied, with tears in his eyes, "No, you almost died."

He started to cry silently, and Hikaru hugged him tightly against her. "What are you talking about?" she asked worriedly. "I feel OK, I think, just really thirsty."

He sat up suddenly and grabbed an all too familiar cup with a straw from the table beside the bed, and said, "Here, drink," he handed it to her and

continued, "I need to tell them you're awake, I'll be right back."

He stood up and exited the room.

He came back a few minutes later with her mother and a nurse in tow. The nurse glared at them and reminded, "Only one visitor at a time."

Kiri bit his lip and his face was completely conflicted. Miri looked up at him and laughed and said kindly, "Kiri-kun, you can stay, I just wanted to see her face." She waved to Hikaru, who waved back with a puzzled look, and backed into the hall.

The nurse took her vitals and Hikaru asked, again, "What happened? Why am I hospitalized?"

The nurse looked up at her in surprise and answered briskly, "You had a problem with your implant, they had to do an emergency surgery."

Hikaru blinked. The nurse left and Kiri explained more when he saw her obvious confusion. Quietly he said, "Apparently you were bleeding internally." He came back to the side of the bed and clung to her hand. "You wouldn't wake up, but nothing was obviously wrong with you. At first, they ran pregnancy tests and stuff, then suddenly they rushed you into surgery."

He halted and swallowed, unable to continue for a moment. Hikaru pulled him closer and he leaned in, she shifted her hips over and patted the narrow space

beside her. Hesitantly he slid onto the bed with her and she wrapped around him.

"Idiot," she whispered and kissed him.

He just stared at her and gripped her tightly.

"It's not your fault," she told him.

"What if," he began.

She laid her finger against his lips and said, "Kiri, I got my implant when I turned 15, because my mother always said she got pregnant when she and my father started kissing and then couldn't stop themselves. She always said it like it was one of her happiest memories, but it scared me. It had nothing to do with you."

He cried again and she held him. Tears welled up and she whispered, "I love you. I'm sorry I scared you."

A small laugh shook his shoulders though his tears hadn't stopped yet, and he told her, "I feel so useless right now, I shouldn't be making you comfort me."

She leaned into him and tasted his tears. He blinked at her. She touched his cheek then took his hand and sang quietly, "Even when I'm eighty, I'll want to eat ice cream, scream come out and play with me, and hold your hand." Then she kissed him and asked, "Marry me?"

"Yes," he replied, and kissed her harder.

They made her stay overnight. Kiri stayed with her, even though she worried that he wouldn't get enough sleep. "If I leave you here, I won't sleep at all," he insisted.

After the doctor talked to her first thing in the morning, she was quiet for a long time. They'd asked Kiri to leave while the doctor spoke to her, and then they'd agreed that she could go home, as long as someone would be with her and she didn't move around much for at least another 48 hours.

Kiri notified his boss, Ryuske, Kaoru, and Miri. When he finished on the phone he asked, "Hikaru, do you want to go home to your mother for the day?"

"What?" she asked blankly.

He repeated the question.

"You need to go to work?" she guessed.

He shrugged and said, "I should, but I don't want to. I just wondered if you would rather."

"No," she replied firmly. "It's selfish, but I want to go home and lay in bed with you." She blushed and added hesitantly, "But the doctor said we can't have sex for at least a week. Until after my follow up appointment."

"I don't care," he replied and kissed her lightly.

"I care," she muttered.

He grinned and teased her, "Patience sweetheart." He bit her ear and promised, "I'll make it up to you when you're allowed again."

They kissed until the nurse brought her release paperwork. Then they discovered they had to wait for Miri to come sign it. Finally Hikaru was allowed to go home.

--

Kiri carried her into the house like a new bride.

81: Promise forgotten.

Even comfortably laying in their bed, cuddled up against him, Hikaru was unusually quiet. After a while Kiri asked, "Are you in pain?"

Surprised, she answered promptly, "Not really, not even as much as after I got the implant."

"You've been very quiet," he told her.

She hesitated, and then sat up.

"Hikaru," he said in a mildly scolding tone.

She sighed and laid down again.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What if we can't have kids?" she blurted.

He took her hand and asked quietly, "Is that what the doctor told you when he spoke to you alone?"

She looked at him and then turned her face away.

"If we can't, we can't, it will be OK," he told her firmly.

She replied, without looking at him, "The doctor said the implant probably wasn't working, for months, maybe even years."

"OK?" he replied, puzzled.

"I wasn't pregnant," she said quietly.

He surprised her by laughing and she turned to look at him. He leaned in and kissed her and ran his fingers through her hair. When he let her go he smiled at her and asked softly, "Were you disappointed? Do you want to make a baby after we're allowed to have sex again?"

She shook her head and replied worriedly, "No, I just, what if," he stopped her with another kiss.

Then he replied seriously, "I meant what I said, if we can't, we can't, and it will be OK. But it will probably be fine. Don't worry about it."

He distracted her thoroughly for a few minutes, but then asked with some embarrassment, "Want to lay on the couch and watch a movie? I don't know how much of this I can take."

"OK, sorry," she replied.

He scooped her up and told her, "Don't apologize because I want to ravish you."

She laughed and asked, "Ravish?"

"Absolutely," he replied as he settled her on the couch. "From head to toe," he promised. Then he walked over and opened the thin, delicately carved cabinet on the opposite side of the room and Hikaru gasped.

"You have a TV?" she asked incredulously.

He turned and stared back at her with surprise.

She covered her face and wailed quietly, "Sometimes I don't know anything about you Kiri, I love you so much it's crazy, but I didn't know where you keep your chocolate, or your blankets, and I had no idea that was a TV cabinet."

By the time she finished her list he was on his knees in front of her. He pulled her hands away from her face and onto his shoulders. "Didn't you tell me last night that we're going out to play and eat ice cream when I'm ninety?" he asked demanding.

Confused she replied, "Yes?"

He smiled a little and told her, "Then you've got plenty of time to learn everything. I intend to spend my whole life with you Hikaru." He leaned in and kissed her. After a minute of that he said a little plaintively, "And we have to stop this, what kind of movie should we watch?"

--

Kiri spent several hours of the afternoon trying to adjust his schedule for the days Hikaru needed to recover. After listening to the last round, Hikaru told him grumpily, "Kiri, just go to work tomorrow and Monday. My mother or Risa or Shizuoka can come spend the day with me tomorrow, and Monday I'm allowed to move around and I should go do our concert rehearsal."

He refused to give up completely. Eventually he worked things out so that he had the morning free, and he asked Miri to come stay with Hikaru for the afternoon.

--

Sunday Miri was late, and Hikaru was afraid that Kiri would refuse to go to work. She thought Kiri was also anxious, since he kept going back into his office and shuffling things. Just when she'd decided to call Risa, and ask her to come, she heard footsteps on the front steps and a moment later Miri sailed through the door.

She wasn't alone, Takahashi followed her in, spotted Hikaru on the couch and made a beeline to her. He pulled her up into his arms and buried his nose in her hair.

Miri looked around and asked worriedly, "Did Kiri-kun leave? Sorry we're late, Taka-chan showed up just as I was leaving."

Hikaru looked toward the office to see Kiri freeze in the doorway and stare back at her as Takahashi said, "I've missed you love. Your mother told me you had to go to the hospital. Are you OK?"

Before she could answer, Kiri spoke in a tight voice, "Please let go of my fiancé."

Takahashi turned and raised a sardonic brow at him and declared, "She was mine first."

"What? Taka-ji!" Hikaru exclaimed.

Miri laughed and replied, "I remember that, she was about four I think."

"I don't care, put her back on the couch," Kiri said firmly.

"I'm fine," Hikaru told him, surprised by his reaction.

Takahashi set her back on the couch and turned toward Kiri and folded his arms with a grim expression.

Kiri ignored him. He brushed by the taller man, and knelt in front of Hikaru. He raised his hand to her cheek and said seriously, "If you don't promise to keep still and rest while I'm gone, I'm not leaving."

Hikaru blushed and said, "I promise Kiri, don't worry. And Taka-ji wasn't hurting me, I feel fine."

He leaned in and kissed her and replied, "Good, because if you're serious about rehearsing tomorrow anyway, you can't go pushing things today."

Takahashi glanced at Miri and saw that she was grinning at the pair fondly. He relaxed his stance and asked, "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Belatedly, Hikaru did, and then Kiri left.

She looked Takahashi over. He had some grey in his hair these days, but he looked good.

He was the one who'd kept Night Dreams going after Akira died. He was the one who'd taught her to play the guitar. He was the one that carried her out of the hospital and shielded her from the reporters. And he was the one who told Yuki and Hikaru that getting Miri pregnant was the best thing that ever happened to Akira.

He'd said one night after the funeral was over and Hikaru was home again, just before the band went back on tour, "Your father was always talented, but he was always angry. Akira was angry at the whole world, until he found out Miri was pregnant. Oh, he already loved her, but that was when he suddenly realized he had a family to hold on to. Sure, it was rough, with them so young, but it gave him a center. It gave him drive. You three are the reason 'Night Dreams' exists."

Hikaru looked at him now and said, "Welcome home Taka-ji. I missed you too." Then she laughed and asked, "Did you have to taunt Kiri like that?"

Takahashi looked her over and asked bluntly, "Do you love him?"

Hikaru smiled and answered simply, "Yes. I'm going to marry him."

"Hmm, then I have to tease him a lot while I'm here," he replied with a grin, but then he frowned at her. "What if I'm not ready to let you go?"

Miri whacked his arm and said, "Don't pout Taka-chan. You'll ruin your image."

"Pah, image be damned. Hikaru you can't get married yet!" he declared. Then he added, "Unless the reason you're stuck on the couch resting is that you're pregnant too?"

Hikaru's smile faded and she said, "No, I'm not. There was a problem with my implant." She looked at him seriously and added, "I'm going to marry him this summer, even if you're not ready."

"I see," he replied, then scooted over and kissed her forehead. "I'd figured you'd wind up with Ryu-chan or maybe that brat Rin. Who is this guy? How'd you meet?"

"Ooh, I want to know that too," Miri exclaimed and bounced excitedly on the cushion she'd curled up on.

Hikaru just stared at him and asked uncertainly, "Did everyone but me always know Ryu-sensei loved me?"

Takahashi gave her a thoughtful look and answered with a question, "Does knowing change anything?"

Hikaru replied quickly, "No!" But then she hesitated and changed her answer, "Well, maybe. I never worried about making him unhappy before."

"Didn't you?" he inquired searchingly, and shushed Miri when she started to speak.

Hikaru thought about it and replied, "I guess I did, because I tried not to ask about things I thought would hurt him. So, no, it doesn't change anything." Somehow she felt relieved, being able to declare that.

Takahashi gave her a knowing grin and asked again, "So how did you meet your Kiri," and his eyes slid over to meet Miri's and he added, "and why doesn't your mother already know?"

Hikaru laughed and blushed and mumbled, "Because it's embarrassing."

"So embarrassing you can't tell anyone?" he asked with surprise.

"Risa and Shizuoka know," she replied promptly.

"I see," he said with a laugh.

Miri pouted and asked plaintively, "You can tell your friends, but not your own mother?"

Hikaru spent a painfully embarrassing but restful afternoon, telling her loved ones how she'd met and fallen for Kiri.

Monday's rehearsal turned into a jam session with Night Dreams in the afternoon. Partway through the night they moved onto the stage at Blue Moon. Ryuske, Rin and Hatsuharu had played with Takahashi when he came to visit before, but only Hikaru had ever played music with the whole band. Those times had been more casual, mostly just fooling around when she'd been smaller. Playing together for real, that was something different.

At one point when Hikaru and Rin were doing a song with Night Dreams Koriyu and Emmett, Ryuske turned to Takahashi and said abruptly, "You can't have her."

Takahashi looked at him in surprise and said, "Neither can you, I hear."

"She's the reason Mirage exists, Night Dreams can't have Hikaru," Ryuske clarified.

"Why would we," Takahashi began and then his breath caught as the four on stage started one of Akira's songs. He turned and stared at Hikaru.

All of Night Dreams members were staring at Hikaru. Her voice lowered as she hit the low notes her father had rung before the song had been adapted to its current form, and then soared again as the song lifted.

"Dear gods," whispered Takahashi.

Ryuske repeated, "You can't have her, she's mine."

Takahashi recovered his composure and teased, "Oh really, I'm pretty sure she claims she's Kiri-kun's."

Ryuske didn't react, just looked at him seriously.

Takahashi yielded and said quietly, "I know. Akira is gone, we won't ever try to pretend Hikaru is his replacement. But she's really amazing, gods, I had no idea she could sing his full range."

"Practice and natural ability," replied Ryuske calmly.

"Yeah," Takahashi laughed.

82: Night Dreams.

The night of the concert featuring Night Dreams and Mirage, Hikaru followed Ryuske onto the stage, and froze. The audience stretched before them like an endless sea.

Rin nudged her from behind and whispered, "Keep moving," on the internal line.

Ryuske turned and said calmly on the same channel, "We are going to play just like always." He walked backward, eyes locked on Hikaru.

Hikaru reluctantly stepped forward and said nervously over the internal, "There are so many people, I can't see the end."

Rin laughed and asked, "Are you always staring at the back row Hikaru?"

She nodded.

Hatsuharu commented, "Now we know why the underwear always hit Hikaru when everyone else manages to dodge."

They all laughed at that. It had actually only happened a few times and usually they were aiming at Rin.

Ryuske saw Hikaru's shoulders relax a little, and with relief, he spun and walked to the front of the stage.

They took up their positions and then Ryuske gave the introduction speech welcoming the audience, and introducing Mirage.

The audience's reaction to their first song was a little cool. They were playing only their own compositions for the concert, and most of the crowd had come for Night Dreams. Mirage did have several sections of dedicated fans though, and they cheered wildly to the confusion of the rest of the audience.

Ryuske surveyed the crowd as the last strains died away and then suggested over the internal line, "Let's switch to Mirage next, and move Dancing to the intermission."

Hatsuharu hit the drums and Ryuske almost screamed, "The bright light lies!" at the crowd.

Hikaru thought a visible wave of tension rocked through the crowd. They followed with the usual smooth harmony of the next line. By the time they reached the end, the crowd was ready for the next song, and when they turned the stage over to Night Dreams, the whole crowd screamed back in unison.

Night Dreams played their first set and when they finished over an hour later, they turned the crowd back over to Mirage. Hikaru was a little nervous about following them, but the audience was in a cheerful mood and welcomed Mirage back with enthusiasm.

Mirage played their softer songs, letting the audience rest a little in a mellow mood, and then wound things back up with their last song. Night Dreams took over the stage and the music rolled like thunder across the fans.

Hikaru murmured, "Wow, will Mirage be like this someday?"

Ryuske startled her by leaning in and whispering against her ear, "We're already on our way."

When Night Dreams finished their last set and the audience screamed for an encore, Takahashi called Mirage back out, and together both bands played Akira's last song.

The audience that had been screaming and cheering dropped to a murmur as Hikaru sang, "You're just sitting there watching the sun go down, sinking into the cold ground, while snow lays all around."

They fell as silent as stone when she sang, "And you're thinking that you're all alone, in this garden of stone, you think you're all alone."

And when the bands joined back in on the chorus, it felt like the whole world took a breath at the same time, as they all sang, "This is the land of the rising sun."

It was like a magic spell between the stage and the audience. And it didn't break for Hikaru until they were leaving under the watchful eyes of Night Dreams security staff, and someone called out from the side, "Hitoshi Yuki, are you going to take Akira's place in Night Dreams?"

Hikaru froze and looked for the speaker, but Takahashi wrapped his arms around her and growled, "Don't stop, don't look, just go love."

He bundled her into the waiting limousine, and the other members of the two bands piled in behind them. It was crowded with all of them, even though there was so much room, and Takahashi asked her anxiously, "Are you going to be OK?"

She blinked in surprise, then nodded. "I'll be fine."

Ryuske crammed himself in between Hikaru and the window and said, "Damn, I never thought of that."

"What?" asked Hikaru.

Ryuske looked across her to Takahashi and asked, "Do you think we dare take her home tonight?"

Rin met Hikaru's confused gaze and shrugged. "What happened," he asked.

No one answered and Hikaru asked grumpily, "Why do you think I can't go home? Why did someone call out for onii-chan? What's going on?"

Takahashi still didn't answer right away, but finally he said, "Let's ask your manager what we should do."

Ryuske nodded and called Takeda, who was still backstage with Miri and Hatsuharu's wife where they'd been watching the concert from the wings. Kiri had only been able to watch the first hour and was off at another job across town. Ryuske was obviously frustrated by Takeda's questions as he snapped answers into the phone.

When he replied angrily, "Because they seem to have assumed it was his son onstage tonight. What if we lead reporters to her house, and they realize it's Hikaru, and they publish," he stopped mid sentence when Hikaru pulled his phone away from his ear.

She had finally grasped what was upsetting Taka-ji and Ryuske. "They will realize as soon as they look up Mirage. So what? I don't really want to lead reporters home, but if that one was so unprepared he didn't look up Mirage's info before the concert, what makes you think he's ready to follow us?" Ryuske shrugged and she continued, "And you can't blame Takeda for not understanding, he doesn't even know about how

they used to hunt Yuki-ni and I when we were still in grade school."

Takahashi frowned at her with concern as Ryuske apologized and explained the situation more clearly to Takeda. "Hikaru, I'm sorry," he began.

She shook her head and ground her elbow into his side. When he winced she grinned at him and asked lightly, "Sorry you invited such an inexperienced band to play with Night Dreams tonight?"

"Never," he swore.

Ryuske told them as he hung up, "We're going out to dinner at a five star hotel, and then we're all sneaking home one at a time afterwards. Takeda said that he doesn't think most people realize Night Dreams is a local band, so anyone looking for one of you, or Akira's son will assume they can find you at the hotel in the morning when you're off guard. If anyone really even does follow us."

Rin said, "Sweet! I'm starving," and everyone laughed.

--

Kiri joined them while they were still eating. He kept looking at the members of Night Dreams with a kind of startled expression.

Hikaru was about to ask him about it when Rin stood up abruptly and said, "I'm leaving first, I'm late."

"Late for what?" Hikaru asked him curiously.

Rin flicked his long hair back and replied almost shyly, "I told Ami I wouldn't stay out all night after the concert."

Hikaru regarded him with shock. "Ami our fan, who does piercings?"

Everyone looked at Rin with surprise when he answered, "Yes."

Ryuske asked, "Have you been dating her since our concert in the park?"

Rin replied a little defensively, "She's a little different than most women, more confident. She's already been running her own business for several years, and she never acts like she assumes I'm going to cheat on her."

"Cool," Ryuske replied calmly, and ate another bite of his salad.

Hikaru silently gave Rin a thumbs up gesture, though when he'd left she murmured to Kiri, "The confidence of a queen," and he laughed.

Hatsuharu was the next to leave, and then a couple of the guys from Night Dreams.

--

When they got home, Hikaru remembered to ask Kiri about his expression when he looked at the other band's members at their table.

He pulled her close and said quietly, "Watching you eat and gossip so casually with such a famous group makes me afraid I'm going to wake up and find you're completely out of my reach one morning."

She blinked with surprise and protested, "But you work with famous people everyday Kiri."

He laughed unhappily and replied, "Not that famous!" He looked at her, saw her confusion and said more calmly, "It's on a different level Hikaru, Inline has some pretty famous people, but nothing on the level Night Dreams has been standing on for over a decade."

Hikaru frowned at him and then leaned into him and kissed him softly, and when he started to relax into her, she kissed him more deeply and started to unfasten his shirt. When he looked at her warmly, and a little surprised, she grinned at him and whispered, "Better get ready then. We're going to follow in their footsteps."

He laughed a little and then gasped when Hikaru turned him with her hands on his hips and pushed him back onto the couch. She crawled into his lap and asked, "Feel like making out with me for awhile?"

He groaned and whispered, "Gods, for a moment I forgot. Yes."

They kissed and exchanged caresses for a little while, and Hikaru whispered shyly, "Should I do that, since we can't yet?"

"Please," Kiri groaned.

83: Under the dolphins.

Kiri, Hikaru, and Miri boarded the train to visit Yuki. Miri had been disappointed that Izumi hadn't been able to get a day off to go with them, but privately, Hikaru was relieved.

Kiri watched the pair of them and laughed. They didn't look much like mother and daughter, but they wore nearly identical expressions of excitement as the train pulled out of the station and sped up to express speed.

--

Yuki was shocked when his mother and sister showed up at the restaurant he was waiting tables at. His sister's boyfriend turned around and kissed her before Yuki remembered who he was. "What are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

Puzzled, Hikaru asked, "Did you forget we were coming?"

"No," he denied swiftly, "I just didn't expect you to show up at my job, I thought we were meeting up this afternoon."

Worriedly, Miri asked, "Is it a problem for us to come here?"

Yuki quickly reassured his mother, "No, it's OK, I was just surprised, and I can't stop and spend time with you."

Another waiter came up behind him and asked, "Yuki? Oh my god, is this your mother?" The slender young man exclaimed, "She's so tiny and cute! You look older than she does!"

Hikaru blinked at him in surprise while Miri blushed, and Hikaru asked, "How did you know? No one ever assumes she's our mother anymore."

He looked at her and declared, "And you have to be Hikaru-chan, no one else could look so much like him."

Embarrassed Yuki interrupted, "This is my friend Shuichi, I've told him about you, and we have to get back to work."

He gripped Shuichi's arm and pulled him away quickly. Shuichi cheerfully waved farewell as they went, and Miri waved back happily.

"That must be the friend he was thinking about rooming with, and usually has dinner with," Miri said cheerfully.

"Oh," Hikaru replied and then asked, "are they dating?"

Miri glanced up at her daughter with shock and replied, "I don't think so."

Kiri looked at Hikaru inquisitively, and she shrugged and replied, "I'm just surprised he's usually eating dinner with a guy."

Miri said comfortably, "I think he's just busier with college than you realize and hasn't had as much time to date as he did in highschool."

--

After Yuki's shift ended, he collected his family and suggested, as he led them away from the restaurant, "I thought maybe we could visit the aquarium, since we're all here, and they have a new dolphin tunnel."

Miri clapped with delight and declared, "I'd love that!"

Hikaru asked dubiously, "Isn't it expensive?"

Kiri poked her and said, "Don't worry about it."

Yuki looked at him with surprise, and then answered his little sister, "Shuichi gave me a pair of tickets he won at the grocery store, we'll only have to buy two." Hikaru looked at him thoughtfully, and he asked, "What? You don't want to?"

She shrugged and replied, "I don't mind, but I hope the dolphins aren't as creepy as the sharks were." She shuddered and Kiri looked at her with surprise.

Miri and Yuki laughed and took turns reassuring Hikaru and extolling the tale of their last visit, when one shark had followed Hikaru up the tunnel, and even turned to follow her when she turned back to

see if it would. Kiri laughed and cuddled Hikaru, who blushed and declared, "It was just creepy, I wasn't scared."

Yuki grinned at her and ruffled her hair. Mercifully he changed the subject and asked his mother, "Are you sure about your due date? You look so very pregnant. Should you be traveling?"

Miri giggled and said cheerfully, "You should have seen when I was carrying you. Hikaru was a little smaller, and there's a ways to go with this one yet." She patted her belly. The baby either responded or chose that moment to move and Miri gasped as her belly fluxed a little.

Yuki regarded her with wide alarmed eyes and Miri laughed and assured him everything was fine.

--

They wandered the aquariums with frequent rest stops. Fortunately many benches were scattered around the facility so that people could sit and watch the fish.

Kiri mostly watched Hikaru, grinning at her reactions to the fish and the crowds. He noticed that Yuki kept sneaking looks at him and arched an eyebrow at him the next time their eyes met.

Yuki didn't pretend he hadn't been looking, but said uncomfortably, "Do you really intend to marry Hikaru?"

Hikaru glanced back at them and Kiri grinned at her and replied, "Absolutely. Why? Is there something you don't like about me?"

Yuki looked startled and answered quickly, "No, I mean, I don't know you very well, but you seem fine I guess, just..." He trailed off.

Kiri looked at him and asked curiously, "Just?"

Yuki shrugged and then leaned closer and whispered, "She's not very feminine, she doesn't cook, and she never really cared about dating before, so why?"

Kiri burst with laughter, and when he recovered enough to reply, he whispered back, "Maybe it's the sex?" He winked at Yuki who stared back with horrified shock. When Yuki unfroze, Kiri said softly but firmly, "I adore her. She's beautiful, she's talented, and careful with money. She always tells me everything I need to hear, I can't live without her anymore. I'm going to marry her this summer."

"Oh," Yuki replied.

--

It was a long afternoon for Yuki. Hikaru cornered him near the jellyfish while Miri was in the restroom. She'd asked Kiri to give them a few moments and he had kissed her and wandered off to look at the octopi.

Yuki looked at her expression and asked, "What's wrong?"

Hesitantly Hikaru asked, "Are you dating your friend Shuichi?"

Alarmed, Yuki asked, "Why would you even ask that?"

Hikaru shrugged, and replied with some embarrassment, "I don't know, you just seem, um, I don't know, you've talked about him a lot and you seem close."

Yuki asked, "And I didn't seem close with my friends at home? Kyosuke and Tsubasa? We didn't seem close?"

Hikaru shrugged and replied, "You did, it's just, I don't know. Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you, I just wanted to ask before we have to go home."

Yuki stared at his sister and then blurted uncomfortably, "He says he loves me. He says just being friends is enough, but I know he wants more. I'm afraid to try being more than just friends."

Hikaru raised her eyebrows and asked, "Why are you afraid?"

Yuki gazed back at her and asked breathlessly, "You don't think that would be weird?"

She shrugged and replied calmly, "Why would it? Ryusuke was in love with his friend. Even Kao-ji-chan has that one friend that likes to tease him about when they tried to be lovers. And they've been good friends for ages since."

Yuki stared at his little sister silently.

Uncomfortably she said, "It's fine if you don't try it either. But I don't think it would be bad or anything. Your girlfriends used to get mad and say you didn't really love them and leave before you'd been together this long."

Yuki finally replied, "I just don't want to mess things up and lose my friend. Can we drop it?"

She nodded and hugged him. And when Miri returned, they collected Kiri and went to walk the new dolphin tunnel. To Hikaru's relief, none of the dolphins decided to stalk her, though sometimes one would pause in front of the glass and peer at the humans in a cute fashion.

--

Yuki walked them to the train in the evening after they'd gone to dinner. He hugged and kissed his mother and sister affectionately. He looked at Kiri uncomfortably and Kiri reached out and cuffed his arm lightly. "Take your time," he said cheerfully, "we'll meet like this many times throughout the years."

Yuki laughed and replied, "I guess."

Then the three of them squeezed into their train home.

...Y and S

Yuki sat on the mattress against the wall and ran his hands through his hair. He looked at Shuichi and said with determination, "Let's kiss."

Shuichi stopped fiddling with the book he was holding and stared at Yuki, "You don't have to."

Yuki replied, "I know, and I'm not promising anything, but let's try it."

Shuichi knelt in front of Yuki, and nervously, breathlessly leaned in to kiss him.

They kissed for a moment.

Yuki said, "I don't know."

Shuichi offered, "I could dress like a girl, I don't mind if you'll feel more comfortable."

Yuki glared at him and he flinched. Exasperated Yuki said, "There's no point in this if you have to pretend to be something else. I already can't stand the thought of losing you, that's why I've been afraid to try this. So just kiss me."

Their next kiss was longer.

After a while Shuichi said, "I really love you."

Yuki replied, "I know."

"Jerk," breathed Shuichi laughingly.

"I know," replied Yuki, and kissed him again.

Hikaru and Kiri accompanied Miri all the way home despite the late hour. Izumi was waiting up for her, and greeted them gruffly, but not unkindly.

Hikaru grinned happily as they left, and Kiri pulled her closer and asked lightly, "What are you so pleased about?"

"Well, I'm glad that Izumi is making my mother happy, and doing little things like waiting up for her," Hikaru replied seriously. "And it was good to see Yuki-ni, and hear more than he puts in the occasional note." And then she smiled and kissed Kiri, and said, "And I'm really happy I'm going home with you now."

"Me too," he assured her, and stole another kiss.

84: Fantasy interrupted.

The rest of spring break passed too quickly. Mirage played somewhere every night. Sunday Hikaru only saw Kiri for a few minutes in the morning as they were getting dressed.

She pouted, but then grinned at him. He arched his eyebrow at her and straightened his tie. She said, "This is what I imagine being an old married couple will be like, it's almost a routine and we haven't really had sex in over a week."

Kiri laughed and pulled her closer, then nibbled at her ear and whispered, "What makes you think we're not having sex when we're older hmm?"

She blushed and shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, it just seems like people don't."

"Maybe," he agreed. "But don't count on it," he teased, and kissed her. Then he sighed and said, "Let's go."

--

Monday after school, which was somehow both chaotic and dead boring on the first day back, Hikaru went to her checkup appointment. Risa went with her, when she found out that Kiri was still working and Hikaru was going alone.

Hikaru laughed and said, "You don't have to come, it's just a checkup."

Risa looked at her seriously and said, "A checkup for a surgery, for something that could have killed you Hikaru. What if they tell you something awful like you won't be able to have kids?"

Hikaru stopped and looked at her in shock.

Risa backpedaled and said reassuringly, "I doubt they will, I just don't want you to be alone, in case."

Hikaru nodded and then said quietly, "Kiri said it will be fine if we can't for some reason. But we'd like to have a couple later."

Risa asked, "You've already discussed it?"

Hikaru blushed and said, "Well, they said that it probably hadn't been functional for awhile, and I wasn't pregnant when they took it out."

Risa stared at her and asked in a horrified tone, "You've been having unprotected sex with him?"

Hikaru gazed back at her in surprise and admitted with embarrassment, "We did once."

Risa heaved a sigh of relief and quizzed Hikaru about how close to her cycle that had been and after they'd discussed it for awhile, she told Hikaru, "You probably wouldn't have caught then anyway, but what were you thinking? We're still in school!"

Hikaru shrugged and didn't meet Risa's eyes as she admitted, "Neither of us was thinking about that at all."

Risa snorted and replied, "Well if you don't start thinking about it everytime now, you'll be pregnant pretty soon. Since you don't have an implant anymore."

Hikaru told her seriously, "Kiri is usually very careful with me, I never even have to ask. It was just that one time."

"One time is enough Hikaru!" Risa declared laughingly. "Just look at our parents."

Hikaru grinned and replied, "I know right, such good examples of what not to do?"

They both laughed, but Risa told her quietly while they were waiting at the doctor's office, "Actually, I'm not sure I ever want to have kids. Sometimes I feel like I'm already raising five, even though my parents really do work hard not to leave them to me more than they can help."

Hikaru asked uncomfortably, "What if Makoto wants to?"

Risa thought for awhile and then replied, "If he can persuade me that we can afford them comfortably, and he's really determined, I wouldn't hate having one or two. I just don't think maybe I'll want to have them, just to have them, you know?"

Hikaru nodded.

Fortunately the doctor had no alarming news for her. She said, when asked, that the scar tissue might very slightly reduce Hikaru's future fertility, but nothing major. She cheerfully informed them that Hikaru looked to have healed up very well, and could even consider getting a new implant in a few months if she wanted to.

Hikaru messaged Kiri the good news, to Risa's amusement.

--

When Kiri got home, he walked over and knelt behind her, leaned his chin on her shoulder and whispered into her ear, "I really want to do you right now."

Hikaru laughed, laid down her homework and said, "OK".

They kissed for awhile and Kiri unbuttoned her shirt and ran kisses down her collarbone. She gasped as he slid his hands up her skirt and cupped her bottom. He grinned at her and lifted her onto the table.

She laughed and protested, "Kiri, we eat here!"

He got to his knees and pushed her back, leaned over her and licked her nipple making her quiver. "I'm going to eat you," he promised. He sucked on her nipple as he slid her underwear off and spread her legs, then he ran his tongue down her belly and pushed her skirt up.

She gasped as he bent and licked her there. Then he sucked and her whole body quivered. He withdrew and looked at her and groaned. "God Hikaru," he whispered, "you look like every man's pornographic fantasy of a high school girl right now. I really want to take a picture."

She looked at him searchingly and then hesitantly replied, "OK?"

He stared at her with disbelief so plain that she laughed and he grabbed her hips and demanded, "Don't move!"

She couldn't help laughing again as he fumbled his phone out and dropped it. He held it up and then hesitated. He reached out and adjusted her shirt so it

just covered her nipples and pulled her skirt down a little.

When she looked at him with surprise, he reached out and caressed her cheek and said, "I just want a memory of how unbelievably sexy you looked."

He took the picture and she blushed and looked at him, his hair was mussed by her fingers, his pants were unfastened, and his lips reddened with desire. She replied shyly, "Kiri, you are my fantasy too."

He dropped his phone and pulled her into his kiss. He somehow managed to get the condom open without ever letting her up for air, and when he entered her, he pushed her back against the table so he could look at her as he moved.

She cried out as the first wave of orgasm shook her and from the front doorway someone said, "Oh my god, that's disgusting!"

Hikaru and Kiri froze. The view was upside down and it took Hikaru a moment to register that Kiri's niece and sister stood in their open door. She felt paralyzed, she couldn't even breathe. Kiri looked down at her and then somehow he pulled her up against his chest and stood in one quick motion.

He carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. He groaned and said, "I feel like such a horny jerk right now."

Startled she looked into his face. He reached up and cupped her jaw and explained, "You look so

embarrassed you could die, and I just want to come," he explained in a raw voice.

"Come," she whispered, and pulled him closer.

He thrust into her again and moaned when she kissed him. He moaned when she kissed him and thrust into her again. He finished quickly. After he dealt with the mess he started to button up her shirt, she just laid there unmoving.

He looked at her with concern. "Hikaru," he said softly, and when her eyes moved to his face he said as lightly as he could, "You're never going to let me do you on the table again are you?"

A choked laugh escaped her and then tears started to drip down her cheeks. He pulled her back into his arms and held her. "What can I do?" he asked softly.

Someone pounded on the bedroom door and Kiri's sister called through it, "Kiri, get out here!"

"Go home!" he yelled back a little angrily.

Hikaru let out another choked laugh that sounded like half sob. Kiri hugged and caressed her.

"Kiri!" demanded his sister from the other side of the door, and then they heard her husband's voice murmuring something and it went quiet.

Kiri frowned at the door and Hikaru said haltingly, "I guess we should go out."

He looked back at her and said firmly, "You don't have to, you can stay here if you want."

She grabbed his arm and he looked at her searchingly. She said, a little more normally, "Just let me put on pants."

He nodded and hugged her and said quietly, "I love you like crazy."

She laughed for real this time and said, "I should certainly hope so after all that."

He blushed. She leaned in and kissed him, then stood and pulled out a pair of jeans. She removed her skirt and pulled them on quickly, and then nodded when he stood and looked at her.

He took her hand and they walked out to confront his sister.

He paused when he saw his sister and brother in law seated at his table, with their three youngest. Hikaru clung to his hand tightly and looked at him questioningly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kiri's sister demanded.

His gaze snapped back to her and his jaw tensed. "I thought I was making love to my fiancé in the privacy of our own home," he replied with coolly suppressed anger.

"A high-school aged fiancé? When is the baby due?" his sister demanded incredulously.

"That's enough Rei," her husband said quietly but firmly.

Kiri looked ready to explode and Hikaru squeezed and pulled his hand back until he looked at her. She shook her head.

"Why are you here?" Kiri asked the family instead.

Kiri's brother in law said simply, "My mother is dying."

A deep sigh escaped him and Kiri replied unhappily, "I'm sorry."

He took his wife's hand and said quietly, "We've known it's coming." She nodded and laid her other hand over his. He looked up at Kiri and said wryly, "We were hoping we could leave the kids with you and go tonight."

Kiri ran his hand through his hair and said, "Of course you can."

85: Obligatory episode.

After they'd worked out the small details of how to get the younger kids to school, what their current schedules were, and let Kiri know the outline of their eldest son's plans, Kiri's sister and brother in law left.

The eldest sibling was in his last year of highschool, like Hikaru, and had decided to stay home alone. He was too busy with his own classes and activities to take care of his younger siblings during

the week. Kiri's brother in law had promised, "but if we're gone that long, he said he'll take care of them on the weekend."

Hikaru had quietly, and with a blush like fire, scooped up the condom wrapper as she'd sat to listen to the arrangements, and she quickly carried it to the trash as soon as they were gone.

After her parents were gone, Chisaki turned to her uncle and Hikaru and asked with disgust, "How could you do that?"

Hikaru returned a neutral expression to her accusing glare.

Her uncle gave a calm reply of, "Do what?"

Chisaki incredulously demanded of Hikaru directly, "How can you have sex with an old man?" And before Hikaru could frame a reply, Chisaki told her uncle, "And you having sex with a high school girl, it is disgusting!"

Hikaru snapped at her, "It's not disgusting!"

"Hikaru," Kiri began, but Hikaru walked over and touched her finger to his lips and then turned back to Chisaki.

"It was so embarrassing that I couldn't breathe, when you and your family walked in on us, but Kiri has never done anything disgusting to me." Hikaru blushed before the stares of all three siblings.

Kiri chuckled and told them, "Hikaru will be your aunt soon, we're getting married this summer, so you may as well get used to it."

The youngest, who was in his first year of school, Yuehe, asked shyly, "Should I call you oba-chan?"

Startled Hikaru looked down at the child and then questioningly to Kiri. Kiri shrugged and said, "It's between you two."

Hikaru rubbed her neck and replied seriously, "Yue-kun you may, but I won't tell you that you have to."

Mizuki, Chisaki's younger brother who had been present when Hikaru had seen the poster of her father, said cheerfully, "You still look more like a nii-san than an onee-san, but I don't mind calling you oba-chan right away."

Chisaki declared, "I am not ever calling you oba-chan!"

Hikaru laughed and replied, "You don't have to."

Chisaki glared and asked, "Are you even any older than I am?"

Hikaru offered her birthday and Chisaki discovered that Hikaru was just a little over a year older, but then discovered she was two grades ahead.

"That's not fair, Chisaki complained.

Kiri asked, "Have you all had supper? Do you still have homework to finish tonight?"

His nephews admitted that they'd eaten out with their parents on the way over.

Kiri cursed his sister silently, when Hikaru looked at him curiously he whispered, "She could have called me to let me know they were coming if they stopped to eat."

She made a face at him, but Chisaki asked mockingly before Hikaru spoke, "Shouldn't you worry about your fiance's homework first?"

Kiri gave Chisaki a measuring look and replied honestly, "No, if I'm interfering in Hikaru's homework too much, she tells me to stop."

"Oji-chan!" exclaimed Chisaki, outraged.

Kiri looked at his niece and a smile quivered at the corners of his mouth as he replied seriously, "I was just asking. Frankly, you're old enough that if you decide you'd rather fail than do your homework on your own, I don't care if you fall another year behind Hikaru."

Chisaki gasped and exclaimed with outrage, "I am old enough! I should have been allowed to stay home with onii-chan!"

Kiri regarded her seriously and asked, "And do you know why you weren't?"

Chisaki grimaced and declared with exasperation, "Because oka-san is over protective!"

Kiri asked mockingly, in much the same tone Chisaki had used earlier, "So you didn't ask me to rescue you a few weeks back, and you didn't need Hikaru to carry you out of a bar?"

"That was one time!" she protested.

Kiri looked at her calmly and replied, "But it scared your mother. She doesn't need to be worrying about how you're behaving while your grandmother is dying."

"Kiri," Hikaru protested. He looked at her and, embarrassed, she said, "It may be true, but, but you don't need to say it like that to her."

He kissed her lightly and ran his hand through his hair and then turned back to his niece and said, "Hikaru is right. I'm sorry. If you feel like homework and school are too much right now, we'll talk about it and I'll see if you can take a day off school."

Chisaki watched them with embarrassment, then bit her lip and replied, "I don't need to, we really have known it was going to happen soon, and I want to save my days off for after it's over."

"OK," Kiri agreed.

--

After Mizuki, Chisaki and Hikaru were settled at the table finishing their various homework, Kiri folded out

the couch and brought out two folded foam futons that he'd unearthed from his office.

Hikaru stared and asked, "Where did you have those stored?"

He shrugged and replied, "At the end of the filing cabinets under the stacks of old folders. I really should sort those and throw a bunch of stuff out and file the rest."

When they finished with their work, he moved the table into the office, and laid out the beds.

--

When they curled up in bed after the kids were settled, Kiri kissed her and Hikaru laid her hand against his chest and said uncomfortably, "Kiri."

He sighed and let go of her, though he complained, "I was really looking forward to tonight. It's just one thing after another."

She laughed and replied, "Kiri, that's how my life has always been I think. From one emergency or project to the next. Isn't that normal?"

He sighed and thought about it for a minute, then agreed, "Not always emergencies, but jobs and projects, yeah..."

She grinned and whispered, "Life's not fair, where's our obligatory hot spring episode, where it's all just silly fun for awhile?"

Kiri's eyes brightened and he turned to look at her and said, "I could arrange that!"

Hikaru laughed and asked lightly, "Is that how we'll spend our honeymoon then?"

Kiri took her hand and kissed her fingertips and replied, "I was actually hoping to take you somewhere tropical."

Hikaru whispered, "Kiri... I want to wait to get my passport until after we get married. Can we do that for our one year anniversary instead?"

"Why?" he asked with surprise.

She blushed and replied, "Because it will say that I'm married." After a moment she added, "I know it's silly."

He pulled her close and murmured, "I love you when you're silly." He kissed her. "We can do that." He kissed her again. "Which hotspring should we honeymoon at then?"

She kissed him and replied, "Your favorite?"

He kissed her again and said a little hesitantly, "My favorite is kind of remote and really quiet, you might not enjoy it."

Hikaru wriggled up against him and kissed along his jaw and bit his ear, he groaned and she whispered, "It'll be our honeymoon Kiri, what do you think I'm planning to do besides you?"

He rolled her onto her back and didn't answer with words. But they tried to be quiet.

86: Cakes and Mirrors.

In the morning, which started early in order to have time to get them all ready, Kiri and Hikaru showered together quickly and brushed their teeth together in front of the mirror.

Hikaru laughed and said, "This kind of rush." She asked after she rinsed, "Do you think mornings are always going to be like this when we have kids?"

Kiri kissed her, nodded seriously and whispered, "Let's stick to the waiting awhile plan."

--

At breakfast Yuehe asked, "Can we have cake tonight?"

Kiri looked at him and said, "I don't know, I may have to work too late to make cake."

Hikaru suggested, "We could just buy cakes?"

Kiri grinned at her and teased, "Spoiling them already oba-chan?"

Hikaru blushed and replied, "Maybe, but we haven't had cake since your mother was here, I'd like it too."

Kiri kissed her and agreed, "OK. We can have cake tonight."

Chisaki rolled her eyes and said, "Your nephew asks and you're not sure, but Hikaru asks and you say OK?"

Kiri grinned at her and replied sweetly, "Exactly, so you might want to get Hikaru on your side."

Mizuki laughed and asked, "Hikaru-oba-chan how can I get you on my side for going to see a movie with my friends?"

Kiri frowned at him and Mizuki sighed and said, "Nevermind, I can tell them I have to cancel."

Kiri asked, "Did you have permission to go before... before the news came in?"

Mizuki shook his head and said, "No, but I think they would have let me, I just didn't have time to ask, and then we were coming here."

"What movie?" asked Hikaru.

"Trying to get points with my brother?" Chisaki asked pointedly.

Hikaru just looked at her for a moment and Chisaki looked away.

Mizuki told them and Kiri looked it up quickly. He replied, "The movie looks OK, but will your friends be able to stay with you if I'm late being able to pick you up when it's over?"

Mizuki hesitated, and Hikaru asked practically, "Do you have a phone?"

He nodded and they arranged things so that Mizuki would message both of them if going to the movie was still on, after he asked his friends if being late would be OK with their families.

Kiri told Hikaru, "Assuming that works out, I'll have to bring Yue-kun and Chisaki home, go back to work, and pick up Mizuki on my way home again."

Hikaru said "OK."

Hikaru took the bus and Kiri took his nephews and niece to their schools in his car.

--

After school Hikaru saw that she had a dozen messages from Kiri. She quickly read through them and then changed her course and called a taxi. When it pulled up in front of her a few minutes later, she closed her eyes and then swallowed hard and got in.

She carefully fastened the belt, gave the driver the address of Yue-kun's school, her payment, and asked him to please drive carefully.

She was delivered safely and tumbled out of the cab in front of the grade school. She was shaking with fear, but it actually hadn't been an awful ride and she was able to calm down surprisingly quickly.

Hikaru approached the school and Yue-kun ran out to her, cheerfully calling out, "Oba-chan!"

His teacher followed him and looked Hikaru over dubiously.

Hikaru greeted Yuehe first, "Hi, how was school? Sorry I'm picking you up late."

"It was OK," Yuehe replied seriously and then asked, "is oji-chan still at work?"

"He is, he couldn't get off in time to pick you up, and he warned me he'll be home really late," Hikaru replied both to Yuehe and his teacher.

His teacher said uncertainly, "I don't think you're on the list of people approved to pick Yuehe-kun up from school. I know his parents are away, but..."

Embarrassed, Hikaru nodded and said honestly, "I'm not sure Kiri's sister would have added me to the list even if she'd realized I might be the one available."

Yuehe said helpfully, "Oka-san slapped oba-chan when she came to our house."

The teacher stared at Hikaru with alarm and said, "I really can't let you take him then."

Hikaru gazed back at her worriedly and replied, "But Kiri might not be home before 11. Um..." She looked at Yuehe and then asked the teacher, "Who else is on the list, is there anyone I might contact?"

Yuehe's teacher replied worriedly, "I already tried to contact his two eldest siblings, and none of his other family members live locally."

Hikaru looked up at that, and asked, "If his grandmother would vouch for me too, would that be OK?"

"His grandmother is dying," the teacher snapped, then glanced apologetically at Yuehe.

"His mother's mother," clarified Hikaru.

Reluctantly the teacher agreed that that would serve, and called Kiri's mother who assured her that Hikaru could be trusted to take Yuehe home with her.

After signing a note that said she was taking Yuehe and letting the teacher make a copy of her ID, Hikaru and Yuehe finally set off for the nearest bus stop hand in hand.

Dismally Yuehe asked, "Cake is cancelled isn't it?"

Startled, Hikaru asked, "Why?"

He looked up at her and replied, "Because oji-chan won't be able to buy it."

"So what?" Hikaru asked.

He looked up at her with surprise and she grinned and told him, "We can buy cake, but I think you should be more worried about who's cooking dinner."

Hikaru looked at the time and considered her options. While they were on the bus downtown, Kiri's mother called her and informed her, "I just spoke to my middle daughter, are you doing OK? Do you want me to come and help? I wouldn't be able to arrive

until tomorrow at the earliest and it might be over by then."

Hikaru admitted, "In some ways it would be nice to have you come and take over, but I'm OK. And if things get too rough, I can always call my mother for help too."

"That's true," agreed Tokiko. She told Hikaru firmly to let her know if she changed her mind, then ended the call.

Hikaru sent a message to Mizuki, letting him know her plan, he sent back an, "OK." She also sent the same message to Chisaki, though given Kiri's message, she didn't expect a reply.

--

Downtown, Hikaru didn't immediately switch to the bus that went home, but instead took Yuehe to the cake shop she liked. They chose six different single-serving cakes, one extra just in case, to be picked up later. Then they went to another shop and ordered take out for dinner, also to be picked up later.

Hikaru thought that Yuehe seemed surprisingly helpful about what he and his siblings liked or didn't like, but she wasn't really sure what she'd been like at that age.

Then they walked to the theatre Mizuki was watching the movie at, and waited. Eventually Mizuki and his friends came out and Hikaru and Yue met up with them. Hikaru made no mention of the change

when Mizuki carefully referred to her as Hikaru-san in front of his friends.

Finally they headed home, picking up the cakes and food on their way back to the bus station.

Embarrassed, Mizuki apologized once they were safely home. "Sorry, I said I would call you oba-chan, but then I got embarrassed when you came in your school uniform."

Hikaru just smiled cheerfully at him and said, "It's fine, I don't mind at all."

"Where is one-chan?" he asked, looking around with surprise.

Hikaru shrugged and replied calmly, "Kiri said she messaged that she wouldn't be back until eight, I don't have any idea."

Mizuki whistled and said, "She's going to get grounded."

Yuehe asked worriedly, "Again?"

Hikaru shrugged again and told them, "Unless she doesn't come home by eight, we don't need to worry about it. If she's breaking some rule you have at home, that's her business."

They all changed clothes, worked on homework for awhile, and then they had supper. They saved the cakes for later, hoping that Kiri and Chisaki would get home in time to share them.

Yuehe and Mizuki asked to watch anime after they'd finished and Hikaru agreed.

--

Chisaki didn't get home by eight, and ironically, Hikaru felt some sympathy for Izumi. It was kind of anxious to feel responsible for someone you had no control over. Hikaru hoped that Chisaki was safe.

Kiri got home at nine, and when he discovered that he was home before Chisaki he got really angry for a moment. Hikaru watched his jaw clench and worried. But Kiri looked up to see her watching him and he smiled and leaned in to kiss her, and relaxed.

He looked at Hikaru for a moment then warned her, "I am going to yell at Chisaki for awhile after she gets home." Then he greeted his nephews and asked what they'd had for dinner, and informed them both that they were taking baths tonight.

Chisaki's eldest brother called them about a quarter of an hour later and informed his uncle that Chisaki was at home. Kiri sighed, then called his sister and calmly let her know the situation. Hikaru could hear her yelling back at him even after he stood up and carried his phone into his office.

When Kiri stepped out of his office a little while later he laughed when Hikaru, Mizuki and Yuehe all looked up at him with worried expressions.

"It's OK, don't worry." Then he added to Mizuki and Yuehe, "Your mom is just stressed, and your sister is

just acting like a brat. You should be used to it by now."

Kiri ate supper, then they ate the cakes.

87: Closets and illusions.

Kiri's brother in law's mother passed away that night. He called and informed them in the morning, and told Kiri that they'd be home the day after.

Kiri was able to pick his nephews up that afternoon, and began the arrangements for them all to be released from school on Friday.

Hikaru had a job, so she was not too surprised to see them tucked in and asleep on the futons when she made it home. She was surprised to see Chisaki sleeping on the couch again.

At breakfast she learned that Chisaki had indeed been grounded again, and that her mother had threatened to take away her allowance if she didn't return to Kiri's and behave.

Chisaki glared at her and said spitefully, "Don't look at me like that, like you've never been grounded or had your allowance withdrawn."

Hikaru thought about it for a moment, then replied bluntly, "I've never had an allowance, though my mother has bought me things sometimes, and I don't believe I've ever been grounded, though I did have to deal with a curfew after she remarried."

Chisaki and Mizuki stared at her with disbelief.

Hikaru shrugged.

Chisaki exclaimed, "You may not have an allowance, but you're letting my uncle pay for things!"

Hikaru blushed and Kiri leaned in and interrupted his niece firmly, "Stop there. I already have enough trouble getting Hikaru to let me buy her anything. I don't need you adding more difficulties."

Chisaki stared at her uncle in disbelief and then turned to Hikaru and declared, "If you're marrying a rich older man, you really need to change how you do things and take some advantage of it!"

Hikaru shrugged and replied uncomfortably, "I don't need to take advantage of Kiri."

Chisaki argued with her, and Kiri laughed and told his niece, "If you can persuade her to buy more dresses, I won't mind."

Chisaki gasped and asked Hikaru disbelievingly, "You don't own any dresses?"

Hikaru replied firmly, "I own two, and they are both very nice, I don't need any more right now."

Kiri laughed as his niece spluttered.

--

Thursday night their parents collected them. His sister thanked him and then hesitantly turned to

Hikaru. "I spoke with my mother about you," she began.

Hikaru looked back at her in surprise, and fiddled nervously with her tea cup. Kiri frowned at his sister and slid his arm around Hikaru's waist.

Kiri's sister continued reluctantly, "She said she approves of you."

Hikaru blushed and replied quickly, "I like her too."

His sister frowned and told her, "I'm sorry I slapped you when I met you. Thanks for helping take care of my children. Please come have dinner with us sometime after the memorial and everything is over. My husband and I would like to meet my little brother's fiancé properly."

Kiri grinned at his sister and his brother in law leaned over and said, "Please do, though I doubt dinner with the six of us is going to feel very proper and formal. Thanks Kiri-kun and Hikaru-chan, we'll take these brats off your hands now."

Hikaru mumbled, "I didn't mind that much."

They said their goodbyes, and Hikaru smiled and ruffled Yue-kun's hair when he hugged her and said, "See you later oba-chan."

--

After they left Kiri said, "Sometime I need to introduce you to my eldest sister and my other sister too."

Hikaru sighed and replied, "I suppose so."

Kiri kissed her and asked, "You don't want to?"

She hugged him and thought about how to reply for a moment. "In general, I do want to Kiri. But your family is kind of overwhelming. I never really thought that my family was small before I met you, I just thought that Risa's family was enormous."

Kiri smiled wryly and replied, "Sorry."

She leaned in and kissed him, then said seriously, "I'll get used to it eventually."

He teased quietly, "We'll add to it later."

She blushed.

--

Friday while Kiri's family was attending the memorial, Mirage was filming the second to last video scheduled to be released before Hikaru graduated. Rysuke was a little worried about it, because Inline had asked to produce this one.

When Hikaru asked why they were going along with it, Rin said, "Hatsuharu and I both think it'll be pretty cool. A couple of fairly famous actors apparently requested to work with us as soon as Inline started letting people know there would be another two videos. That's a really lucky chance, and Rysuke said that if we were both in favor there was no point in putting it to an official vote. Should we have?"

Hikaru shook her head and followed Takeda and Ryuske into the hotel. She did look around and say thoughtfully, "It never occurred to me how many videos might have been taken in hotel rooms."

Takeda laughed and called back, "About as many are filmed in quickly rented apartments."

--

The film crew was set up in a suite, and they were given scripts and a tense middle aged woman explained the stage cues that would be used to the members of Mirage.

Hikaru listened but looked around at everything with interest. The woman snapped, "Young man, you'll cost us money if you're not paying attention."

Hikaru looked back curiously to see who she was talking to, to find her staring at Hikaru. She blinked in surprise and Takeda walked over and said calmly, "Haru-san, maybe you should take a moment to go over the information I gave you on the people you're working with today, and I'll have a word with the group."

Haru glared at Takeda and said stiffly, "Fine." She walked into the next room and Takeda looked at Hikaru who promptly spoke.

"I don't mind, I'm used to it," Hikaru told him reassuringly.

His lips quirked and he replied, "She's not wrong, the longer this takes, the more it will cost Mirage. And

what will you do if you don't realize what an instruction means?"

Hikaru frowned and looked at Ryuske, Rin and Hatsuharu. She asked worriedly, "Even though Inline asked to do this we are still paying for it directly?"

Ryuske nodded and replied, "Yes, some of it. Because of the way our contract is written. Don't worry about it."

Takeda said dryly, "That's not exactly the point I was going for."

Hikaru looked back at him and said calmly, "If the instructions she listed so far are all, it's fine. They are the same ones we used in my drama class first year."

Everyone regarded her with surprise and she said a little defensively, "Kao-ji-chan said it would be a good idea to take it if I planned to play on stage someday, because all kinds of stages can hold musicians."

Ryuske reached over and patted her shoulder, and said, "It was a good idea. Did you learn any shortcuts for remembering it all for the rest of us? I know some from doing videos and choreography with Edge."

Hatsuharu volunteered, "I learned some helping my kids with their plays in school."

It turned out that Rin was the only one of them with zero experience with stage terms. He shrugged and said, "I've done a few photo shoots and videos, but I was always just in the background, when someone told me 'stand here', I stood there."

Hikaru shrugged and told him, "I don't know any shortcuts, sorry."

Takeda fetched Haru back to continue instructing them.

--

When they met the two famous actors who had volunteered to work on Mirage's video, Hikaru worried that maybe this had been a terrible idea after all.

She wondered why Keito Kirari had decided to do Mirage's video until Keito bounced over to her directly after the introductions had been completed, and said smugly, "When I saw that your group needed someone small and beautiful to work on your video, I knew that I'd be perfect for it, so I asked Emri-san to get me assigned!" And she whispered, "And my new manager says that if I'm seen getting along well with you it will quell the rest of the rumors at Inline, so you had better start acting like you're really happy I'm here!" She gave Hikaru a radiant smile.

Hikaru tried not to grimace, and said, "Oh, cool?"

--

When Hikaru was shut in the wardrobe in the suite's largest bedroom with Keito, she tried to think on the bright side. At least she didn't have to worry about missing a cue, because Keito was determinedly, though quietly, repeating their instructions as if she was certain Hikaru would forget if she were left in silence for a moment.

At the first cue, Keito slipped out of the wardrobe and Hikaru watched her practically float to the bed where the handsome actor, Shinichiro, tossed and turned. Hikaru granted that Keito was very graceful.

At the second cue, the actors froze, and Hikaru stepped out of the wardrobe playing the line, "I was frozen in time until I found you."

Rin stepped out of the bathroom at the next cue, and played the next bit.

The bedroom scene was finished successfully.

--

Everything ground to a halt when they reached the scene in the bathroom. It wasn't even Mirage's fault, though Ryuske had taken his spot balanced behind the shower curtain with prayers against slipping and breaking something.

The two actors had a terrible row with their director who kept insisting that neither of them looked passionate about the embrace that went with the line, "Sometimes I want to wrap my arms around you and just hold you in one place."

After listening to them go back and forth for awhile Ryuske stepped out of the shower and snapped, "That's enough!"

The startled crew all stared at him. "I wrote this song," he said, "and I'll decide what their expressions should be."

Everyone outside of Mirage, except the actor Shinichiro argued with him. Finally, he turned to Hikaru and said, "Please, I don't care how, just make it work. Take Keito-san out and convince her she needs to keep a cool calm expression."

Hikaru stared at him with open mouthed surprise while he turned to Takeda and said, "We are having to pay for this mess, so if you can't convince him to cooperate, fire this director and bring in Seoshi." He moved on to Shinichiro and said, "That guy isn't entirely wrong, you do need to look more passionate, but also more desperate. While everyone else sorts out the rest, I'll go over it with you."

Keito grabbed Hikaru's arm and dragged her out of the room. In the hall she turned to Hikaru and whispered triumphantly, "This is perfect, you can take me on a date and convince me to cooperate!"

Hikaru replied with alarm, "I'm not sure that's a good plan."

Keito ignored her and dragged her to the elevators.

Hikaru figured the elevator was probably as private as it was going to get at this rate and stepped in first.

As they descended she turned to Keito and asked seriously, "You do know I'm not a guy right? I mean, it would definitely change the rumors about you if I really took you on a date."

Keito stared at her. After a moment she said as though Hikaru were rambling on about nothing, "Of course. We're going shopping."

Nervously Hikaru replied, "Mirage is paying for all this, I don't want to take very long."

Keito turned and told her with exasperation, "You're supposed to be convincing me, that will take at least an hour. I won't be convinced in anything less, it will give people ideas!"

Hikaru rolled her eyes and went shopping with Keito Kirari.

--

When they returned, everyone was waiting patiently to all appearances. The director hadn't been replaced, but he was wearing that bland face that she'd seen Kiri and Takeda use sometimes.

The next take went well, and they proceeded to the final shots. Everything proceeded smoothly, only a few shots had to be repeated.

When they all exited the hotel, a reporter approached Hikaru, and since she was somehow expecting a question about Keito-san, she was frozen with shock when the man asked, "Hitoshi-san are you planning to follow in Akira's musical footsteps?"

Takeda leaned around Hikaru and said calmly, "If you want an interview with Mirage's Hikaru, you need to schedule it with me."

"Hikaru?" replied the reporter with a shocked expression. "The daughter!?"

Hikaru recovered a little and asked in return, "Why are you asking about if I plan to follow in my father's footsteps if you have no idea who I am?"

Takeda frowned at her and Ryuske looked back and saw them stopped and started rapidly back in Hikaru's direction.

Hikaru held up her hand to Takeda and said calmly, "His answer will be what I decide whether or not he can have you schedule an interview with me on."

The reporter opened his mouth, and then shut it. After a moment he answered Hikaru, "I went to Night Dreams concert and saw you sing Akira's song. I'm here to cover an interview with Shinichiro Arai, and I saw you come out. I asked because I was Akira's fan."

Hikaru looked around and confirmed that Shinichiro hadn't come out of the hotel and could possibly be waiting on an interview inside.

Ryuske reached her and asked, "What's going on?"

Takeda replied, "This reporter asked Hikaru-kun if she's following in Akira's footsteps."

Ryuske looked at Hikaru and asked, "What did you tell him?"

She shrugged and said, "I haven't answered yet. He says he asked because he's Akira's fan, but he apparently didn't look into Mirage at all."

The reporter started to protest, but Takeda interrupted and told him, "Here is my card. I'm Mirage's manager. If you decide you're interested in Mirage, you may contact me. If you're just asking because you're Akira's fan, have some respect and don't bother his children."

Takeda and Ryuske led her away in synch as though they'd planned it.

Belatedly Rin and Hatsuharu followed after them.

After they'd walked a ways Hikaru asked, "Where are we going?"

Takeda replied promptly, "Anywhere we can speak privately. Who's Akira? Besides, I gather your father, and associated with Night Dreams?"

Hikaru and Ryuske stopped walking and he stopped and turned to look at them.

"I guess it hasn't come up?" Hikaru said hesitantly.

Ryuske had a thoughtful look on his face when he replied, "I'm positive it was mentioned when Night Dreams was here." He looked at Takeda and said, "When you set up dinner for us, to throw off whoever called out for Hitoshi Yuki at the concert."

Rin and Hatsuharu caught up with them.

Takeda grimaced and said, "It sounds like I may have missed something that was obvious to both of you, so I won't accuse you of not telling me, but please inform me?"

Hikaru replied, "My father created the band Night Dreams with Taka-ji."

Takeda stared at her with a horrified expression and then turned to Ryuske, "And you never thought to bring this up when we were talking about using your name and marketing tactics?"

Ryuske shrugged and replied, "I don't want to use Hikaru's father's name for marketing."

Rin said from behind them, "I wondered what was going on. I never thought to ask if we were trying to hide the association?"

Hikaru said practically, "I don't see how we can hide it when I look just like him."

Takeda looked at her in surprise and asked, "What?"

Hikaru fished out her phone and brought up the photo that Chisaki had taken of her with her father's poster. She held it out to Takeda who stared at it for a few moments and then said, "You had a pretty father."

Hatsuharu chuckled and offered, "I bet he and Miri-chan made an adorable couple."

Ryuske replied, "They did, although I only saw them together once, when Edge and Night Dreams were on the same program."

"Can we use this photo?" Takeda asked.

Hikaru replied dubiously, "I don't know, my future niece took it, and that's her poster."

Ryuske repeated, "We don't want to use Hikaru's father's name."

Takeda grimaced at him and said, "It's such an amazing resemblance, it just screams publicity, sorry." He looked around and said, "Let's not just stand on the street."

--

They went out to dinner. Hikaru messaged Kiri and he met them at the restaurant.

When he heard what was going on Kiri laughed and told Takeda, "It was so obvious, but I didn't realize it either."

Takeda sighed and said, "The problem is what to do about it?"

"Why do we need to do anything about it?" Hikaru asked.

Takeda looked at her helplessly.

Kiri pursed his lips and hugged her closer before answering, "Because more and more people are going to notice, as you become more famous. And it can

either work for you, or against you. Some people fight against their parents fame and never escape their shadow, always X's child. Others outshine their parents, and it's the parent who gains the label parent of X."

Ryuske, Rin, and Hatsuharu replied almost in chorus, "Hikaru shines."

She blushed and opened her mouth to reply, but Ryuske spoke first. "Don't repeat that you're not as good a musician as your father Hikaru. You're only barely as old as he was when he got started. If you keep growing and improving, you're going to surpass him really soon. You have no idea."

Takeda looked thoughtful, and Rin, Hatsuharu and Kiri nodded in agreement.

Hikaru couldn't think of anything to say so she went back to eating.

Ryuske looked at her and laughed. He reached over and stole one of her fries and teased, "And if you eat like this you'll also outweigh him."

Hikaru just stuck out her tongue and replied, "Not when I'm always walking an extra nine miles a week."

Rin stared at her and asked, "You're still doing that?"

Hatsuharu spoke up, "I am. We've only been busier and on film more, not less."

Kiri laughed and asked her, "When did you do that last?"

Hikaru replied, "I've been walking an extra mile and a half or so before getting on the bus after school."

He blinked and replied, "Oh."

"It only takes an extra fifteen or twenty minutes," she added.

Takeda drew the conversation back around to the subject of Hikaru's father by asking, "Ryuske said he didn't want you doing interviews until after you're out of school, what do you all want to do if that reporter does apply for an interview?"

Hikaru replied tightly, "If he can show you he's researched Mirage properly, I'll talk to him."

Ryuske objected, "Not alone."

Takeda asked, "How are you defining properly?"

Hatsuharu suggested, "Ask him his fan number."

Everyone agreed.

Kiri asked, "Can't you put him off for the other six weeks even if he does?"

Takeda replied uncertainly, "That might do more harm than good."

Hikaru said, "As long as it's during the last month, I don't think it will matter as far as school goes."

Everyone looked at her in surprise and she explained, "It would be just as embarrassing for the school to kick me out right before graduation as it would for them to have it known that a member of Mirage is attending. Pointing that out is how my uncle arranged for Yuki-ni and I to change schools quietly at the end of the year when reporters kept coming to our grade school."

After that they talked a little about their schedule for the next week, and then went home.

--

A couple of weeks later, the reporter did apply for an interview with Hikaru, and Mirage. Takeda discussed it with them and then set it up for the following week.

Kiri complained to Hikaru, "Did you have to agree to do it while I'm gone?"

Hikaru walked into the kitchen and wrapped her arms around him from behind and settled her chin on his shoulder. Quietly she asked, "And what would you do from home that you can't do while you're away working? Mirage's manager will be there."

Kiri went still for a moment. "I know," he replied finally. "And I know that there's nothing I could do, because I refused to be that for you, but..."

Hikaru interrupted him, "You're being here for me in ways that Takeda and Mirage can't Kiri."

He turned in her arms and hugged her tightly. She kissed him. After a moment he murmured, "Our dinner will burn."

Hikaru suggested, "You could turn it off."

89: Endings and beginnings.

Graduation came upon them suddenly. Hikaru wondered how that was even possible when it had been creeping closer for so long. Miraculously, she passed within the very bottom of the top 20% and didn't have to pay the other half of her tuition.

Mirage had taken two weeks off and Yukito had turned down all her solo offers while she, Risa and Shizuoka had crammed frantically for their final tests. She hadn't even played Sundays at her uncle's restaurant.

When she'd mentioned to Kiri that taking that much time off was probably costing almost as much in lost earnings as paying her tuition, he asked her searchingly, "Have you changed your mind about applying to a college?"

She'd shaken her head and he'd said quietly, "Then just worry about finishing with the best grade you can Hikaru, in case you decide to go to one in the future. Even if you're just job hunting someday it may help. Don't worry about the money."

Yuki and his friend turned boyfriend came for Hikaru's graduation ceremony.

Shizuoka who had only met Yuki a couple of times whispered to Hikaru, "I always forget how hot you'd be as a guy."

Risa overheard and giggled. "I used to have a crush on Yuki-nii-san," she admitted.

Hikaru stared at her in shock.

Risa looked at her expression with surprise and asked, "You didn't know?"

Hikaru replied, "I don't remember you ever saying anything?"

Risa laughed and replied with embarrassment, "Well there was no point was there? He's always treated me like I'm even younger than you are, despite me being almost a year older, and he's always had girlfriends." She added, "I think his boyfriend suits him, which surprises me."

--

Miri also attended of course, though her children asked worriedly if she was really OK a dozen times. She just laughed and rubbed her back while assuring them that she was fine. Her belly was enormous and she was due the week after Hikaru's graduation trip.

Izumi didn't take the day off, at Hikaru's request.

When they'd had lunch on Sunday he'd brought it up. She'd told him firmly, "You don't need to do that.

Izumi-san, you don't need to think of yourself as one of my parents. If I were my mother's sister instead of her daughter, would you feel like you had to attend my graduation?"

He'd looked at Miri and then answered, "Only if she wanted me to."

They'd discussed it for awhile and agreed that Izumi should save his days off for after the baby arrived.

--

Kiri also attended her graduation. While he waited with her family, he asked Miri suddenly, "Why aren't you rich? Why is your family struggling with things like tuitions when Akira's songs are still being published?"

Miri blushed and said, "Because at the time of the accident, we didn't even know if the band could continue without Akira, and with Hikaru in the hospital and me never having held a job before, I decided to take the buyout offer the company gave me. It let me finish paying off the house Akira had bought for us and take care of everything my children needed until I could learn to support myself."

"Oh, that hadn't occurred to me, I don't know why not. It was a really good deal for that company in the end," Kiri replied after a moment.

Miri laughed and admitted, "Because of that Taka-chan keeps trying to give me gifts all the time and offered to pay for my children's college tuitions."

She glanced at her son who blushed, and added, "But Yuki refused to take it."

--

After Hikaru had endured the ceremony and a great deal of unaccustomed socialization with classmates who rarely spoke with her, Kiri touched her empty collar and teasingly said, "I'd hoped to claim your first button."

He laughed when she seriously withdrew a button from her pocket and whispered, "Of course I saved it for you."

--

When he took her to meet Risa and Shizuoka at the train station that evening, Kiri clung to her for a long time. Finally Hikaru said uncomfortably, "Stop acting like this is goodbye, you've been on longer trips."

He laughed and kissed her and replied, "Call me."

"I will," she promised.

When she followed her friends onto the train, Risa commented, "I'm jealous."

"Me too," agreed Shizuoka.

"Why?," Hikaru asked.

They both turned and gave her a disgusted look.

Risa replied first, "Because Makoto had to work this evening, and couldn't come see me off."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Hikaru replied.

Shizuoka spoke after they'd settled in, "I'm jealous, and I hate that I'm jealous because you seem to have everything I wish for."

Her friends looked at her in surprise and she explained, "You have a good looking older man with a good job, and he's going to marry you in a few months."

Hikaru blushed.

Risa protested, "Then why aren't you jealous of Makoto and I?"

Hikaru and Shizuoka asked in unison, "Are you engaged?"

Risa blushed and replied, "No, not yet."

Shizuoka answered, "I'm a little jealous of how well the two of you get along Risa, but Makoto-kun is still just a kid too. He doesn't have a career, or much in the way of resources." She looked at Risa and added quickly, "I'm not saying he won't in the future, he's a good guy."

Hikaru said dubiously, "I don't love Kiri for his job."

Shizuoka laughed a little bitterly and replied, "I know, you don't care, and you've got your own career that you're already working on. I just find it ironic that you have what I wanted."

They were silent for a little while and then Hikaru asked, "Don't you have almost as much of a career going as I do Shizuoka?"

"Right," agreed Risa quickly, "with your modeling jobs, you got to do that catalogue last fall?"

Shizuoka looked at them soberly and asked, "You remember when I did that first job with that weird guy making calendars?"

"Of course," they both answered, and Hikaru added, "He's filmed 5 of our music videos."

Shizuoka stared at her disbelievingly, and distracted, asked, "Really?"

Hikaru nodded.

Risa said, "When we accompanied you to that first photo shoot, it seemed like it was such a scam. Some guy giving cards to highschool girls on the street, and then the address was an apartment in that run down building. I was sure he was going to be some creep who was going to take pictures of you naked."

Shizuoka said uncomfortably, "I was afraid he was, that's why I asked Hikaru to go along. I thought he'd mistake her as my boyfriend."

Hikaru laughed and pointed out, "Instead he was like Rin, and knew I was a girl from the start."

Risa said, "I still have the photo he took of all three of us at the end."

"Anyway," Shizuoka continued, "what he said about photographing girls and capturing the moment while they're young, I've been thinking about it a lot."

"Why?" asked Hikaru.

Shizuoka pinched her cheek and asked, "How do you get through life so obliviously?"

Risa laughed and said teasingly, "Shizuoka thinks now that we've graduated she's getting old."

Hikaru protested, "It will be years before you're too old Shizuoka!"

Shizuoka sighed and sat back and replied, "Not that many years. And I haven't found the right guy, I'm not going to wind up happily married any time soon. I need to decide what I'm going to do." Embarrassed she muttered, "I was kind of thinking maybe I should study to be a teacher, because I like kids."

Risa exclaimed in shock, "A teacher?"

Hikaru said encouragingly, "That sounds like a great idea! You could still do it even when you're really old and you'd get to be part of raising children, even if they aren't yours."

Shizuoka looked at her and Hikaru added, "I'm proud of you for coming up with it, I've always wondered why it seemed like you were looking for someone who could support you?"

Risa nodded.

Shizuoka put an arm around each of them and said, "I love you guys. And I have been looking for someone who would support me, because that was my dream, a happy picture book family."

Risa and Hikaru looked at her unhappily at that.

Shizuoka said cheerfully, "I'm not giving that dream up, but I've got amazing friends now, who show me that there's room for more than one dream, so I'll just add a few."

They laughed and hugged her back.

--

Their first hotel was amazing. Hikaru stared at the twinkling cityscape view with the dark water of the bay in the distance and whispered, "Are you sure they gave us the right room? Are they going to charge us more later?"

Risa laughed and replied, "We're fine, but I'm sure we were only able to get something like this because we booked it almost at the beginning of the school year."

Hikaru almost regretted the time they spent out touring the dilapidated temple away from that amazing view the next day.

--

The next couple of places they stayed were more ordinary, but the sights were much better. She loved the historic castle they visited, even though Risa

muttered, "It's so fake, everything is so polished and touristy it's worse than a movie set."

--

Risa and Shizuoka were thrilled with the hot spring. Hikaru could see what Kiri had meant about it being bland and touristy, and she didn't enjoy soaking in public as much as Risa and Shizuoka did, but she still enjoyed it. There were many other recreational activities available in and around the site, and the food was decent.

On their way home, they promised to meet up a minimum of once a month. Hikaru asked, "Just once a month?"

Risa replied, "We can meet up more often than that, but I want you to promise at least once a month."

Shizuoka told Hikaru laughingly, "You're the one who will be most likely to not meet up, with your band and your husband!"

Hikaru promised, "I'll make time."

Risa and Shizuoka laughed and hugged her.

--

Kiri didn't meet her at the train, but when she got home she found him waiting. He'd obviously been cooking for awhile. He grinned and pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly, then whispered, "Welcome home."

"I'm home," she replied, and kissed him again.

They ate at the table, cuddled up together, and taking turns feeding each other.

After taking another bite, Kiri laughed and commented, "It doesn't embarrass you anymore."

Hikaru shrugged, then asked, "Are you disappointed?"

"Hell no," he answered with a grin. "I love this. I love you. It's perfect."

She grinned and kissed him again.

After a little while, she asked suddenly, "Kiri are you still counting the weeks until something?"

He blinked, and then laughed, and replied mysteriously, "It's already done, but I'm saving it for our wedding."

"OK," she replied and relaxed against his side.

"Why?" he asked.

She bit her lip and replied hesitantly, "I just realized that I forgot to ask if you wanted to do something special at three months, I'd thought maybe that was it, and then I got busy and forgot."

He grinned and replied, "I thought about asking you if you wanted to, but you were working so hard, I didn't dare." He kissed her and whispered, "I'm really proud of you if I forgot to say that."

After they'd finished eating he pulled her into the bathroom instead of the bedroom. He looked at her expression and asked, "Do you want sex first?"

She blushed and shrugged.

He pulled her up against him and said seriously, "Hikaru."

Embarrassed, she said, "I'm just a little surprised."

"Why?" he asked quietly.

She blushed and looked away before explaining, "I don't know, um I sort of thought we were going to do it before we ate, and now we're taking a bath first." She shrugged, then added, "I don't mind."

He touched his fingers to her chin and lifted her face to look at him and asked, "Do you want me to tell you why?"

She nodded.

And he ran his hands down her back and kissed her again. Then he said quietly, "Because you're being so passive. Usually you respond more and initiate more. Tonight I feel like you're being shy, so I've been going slower."

Startled, she stared at him for a moment. He just held her and waited. After a moment she nodded and agreed, "Maybe I have been feeling a little shy, I'm not used to being the one who just got home." Then grinned and leaned in to kiss him. "I love you Kiri," she whispered as she started to undo his shirt.

He grinned back and slid his hands under her shirt and unfastened her bra.

She looked at him seriously and said, "Let's have sex first."

"Yes", he agreed, and pulled her backwards into the bedroom.

90: Diamond butterfly.

Hikaru's mother went into labor the next morning, and that afternoon Hikaru held her little sister for the first time.

Kiri laughed at her when she repeated for the third or fourth time, "She's so tiny."

When she looked up at him he asked gently, "What were you expecting"

She would have shrugged but she was nervous about jostling the baby, so she answered, "I don't know, but my mother's belly was huge compared to how big she is."

Kiri laughed again and assured her, "That's normal."

Miri returned from visiting the bathroom and Izumi helped her back into the bed. Hikaru returned the baby to her mother with some relief.

Mirage's album release went surprisingly well. They weren't instant stars, but they were no longer a small local band either. They played small concerts in other towns across the country every other weekend throughout the summer.

--

Night Dreams came and played at Hikaru's wedding reception. Of course, Mirage also played some too.

While they were dancing, Hikaru told Kiri, "Taka-ji taught me to play the guitar when he found me trying to learn on my own. But since he could only visit a few times a year, the lessons were really spread out."

"Oh?" Kiri replied quizzically.

She continued, "I did well enough that he promised if I could play the Devil's Song perfectly on my 12th birthday, he'd buy me an electric guitar. I didn't manage to play it perfectly, but I did really well actually. And since he brought the guitar with him, I think he was only saying that anyway."

Kiri grinned at her and asked, "Is that your current guitar? Are you suggesting it's time to get a new one?"

"No!" She protested immediately and Kiri laughed. "Yes, that is my current guitar. And I was just telling you about it because, well, you don't seem to like Taka-ji very much and I thought maybe if you knew more about him..."

He regarded her with surprise and asked quietly, "What have I done that makes you think I don't like him?"

She shrugged and replied, "Nothing in particular, you just get really quiet?"

He thought for a moment before he replied, then said, "He's a little overwhelming, I guess. I don't mind him though. I wasn't trying to be quiet on purpose?"

"OK," Hikaru replied.

Kiri grinned at her, twirled her around, and caught her again before asking teasingly, "And what do you think after meeting my other sisters?"

Hikaru winced. "They love you a lot," she replied promptly.

"Mmm", Kiri murmured.

She rested her chin on his shoulder and added, "I don't think the eldest will forgive me for the fact that my mother is younger than all of your sisters for a really long time."

Kiri kissed her and said reassuringly, "I don't care what she thinks. Don't worry about it."

"I'll try not to," Hikaru promised. "Though I think she's way more intimidating than Taka-ji could ever be."

"Possibly," agreed Kiri.

--

A little while later, Shizuoka cornered Hikaru and asked, "Help me get a date with your husband's best man?"

Hikaru regarded her with alarm, and asked, "How? Isn't that up to Kazuha-san?"

Shizuoka smirked and replied, "I won't force him into anything. I just want you to start the conversation."

Hikaru replied hesitantly, "I don't know if it's a good idea."

Shizuoka asked with a frown, "Why, he seems sweet, and employed, and he's totally my type. What's wrong with it?"

Hikaru shrugged helplessly and replied, "Nothing, he's just had a rough time. I don't know..." She finished with, "he isn't comfortable with our age difference either."

Shizuoka replied, "If someone has already been rough on him, maybe he'll appreciate a nicer girl. And I'll give up if he refuses."

Hikaru shrugged again and asked, "Just don't, um, don't rush him?"

"Alright," she agreed.

--

It rained on them all the way to the hot spring, despite being the middle of July. Kiri looked at Hikaru anxiously once in awhile as they drove along the winding mountain roads.

"What's wrong?" she asked after awhile.

"You've been tense since we left the reception, maybe I should have rented a van, or hired a limo," he replied.

"I'm OK," she said.

She watched him for a little while and then asked, "What else?"

He shrugged and replied, "It's raining."

She reached over and placed her hand on his thigh.

When he glanced at her she asked, "Is it better if we're touching?"

He laughed and replied, "Yes, always."

--

They arrived and checked in without incident.

Kiri turned to her while they were unpacking a little and changing clothes and raised her hand to his lips and kissed the spot beside her wedding band. "Thank you for agreeing to wear a ring," he said softly.

She blushed and touched his ring and said, "You too Kiri."

He pulled her close and kissed her very gently. Then he asked, "Hikaru, promise me if you aren't enjoying this after a couple days, you'll tell me, and we can go to the coast or something."

She laughed and waved at where the doors were open to the private spring in its little enclosed garden and told him, "It's beautiful here Kiri."

He sighed and replied, "And very wet."

She asked curiously, "Do you hate the rain? You complained about the rain in China too."

Surprised, he denied it quickly, "No, I don't mind rain when I'm not trying to work in it."

Hikaru raised her eyebrows at him skeptically.

He shrugged and said tentatively, "It's not very lucky for weddings though?"

Hikaru laughed and he arched an eyebrow at her. She kissed him again and said, "But it didn't rain during our wedding, only after." She glanced at the garden again and asked, "And isn't it beautiful and green. And that tree looks like it's decorated in a thousand diamonds the way the drops are collecting on its needles."

Kiri wordlessly let go of her and rummaged in his bag until he found a small box, which he handed to her.

Hikaru opened the box curiously, and then stared.

Kiri kissed her again and said, "I wanted to buy you a diamond you'd actually be able to wear, no matter what you decided about rings or names."

She lifted the silver butterfly, which she'd bet was made of platinum like their earrings. It's wings quivered and she gasped.

Kiri took it from her fingers gently and showed her how to open the hair clip without pulling on the springs that supported the wings.

She looked up at him and said anxiously, "Kiri it's so beautiful, I'll be afraid to lose it."

He touched her cheek with a warm caress and said lightly, "I got it for you to wear, not to keep in a box. Go ahead, lose it. It'll give me an excuse to buy you something new next year." He smiled and his eyes gleamed in the soft light.

Hikaru started to laugh but her breath caught as she looked at him sitting there in the yukata he'd changed into and she whispered suddenly, "My husband is the sexiest man I've ever seen."

He reached for her as she moved to him, and the sound of the warm gentle summer rain outside muted the soft moans and heated breaths that followed.

--

Two years later...

Hikaru cuddled her new little brother on the couch and grinned cheerfully at her little sister as she played on the floor.

Kiri smiled and leaned over her shoulder to brush her hair back from her cheek. "You are getting pretty comfortable with this," he commented.

Hikaru tilted her head back and looked at him and said seriously, "Not at all. When we have kids you might really wind up having to act like their mom."

He laughed and kissed her and replied comfortably, "I think it will be fine either way."

She smiled and asked, "Can you watch them for a couple minutes, I thought of a better line and I want to write it down before I forget."

He laughed and gently scooped the baby from her arms.

--

Five years later...

Hikaru approached Ryuske a little nervously after Rin and Hatsuharu left. They'd just finished arranging the newest song and it had been a longer practice session.

Hesitantly she said, "Um, Ryu, about our schedule this fall..."

He turned to her and grinned. "You're pregnant," he announced calmly.

Hikaru stared at him in surprise.

He reached over and touched her cheek affectionately.

"How did you know?" Hikaru asked. "I haven't even told Kiri yet."

Ryuske regarded her with shock and asked, "Why not?"

She shrugged and replied, "We've been really busy, and I wanted to talk to you about it first." She looked at Ryuske's expression and added, "I need to know if you think we can keep going with Mirage, if we're doing well enough to be OK if Kiri really does quit his job in order to stay home with the baby."

Ryuske looked at her seriously and replied, "We are, and I want to keep Mirage going. I've been afraid... I thought you'd want to leave when you started having kids."

Hikaru reached out and gripped his hand and said firmly, "No, I'm greedy, I want to have it all, Kiri, and Mirage, and children."

Ryuske smiled and replied. "I'm glad."

Hikaru asked again, "How did you know?"

He laughed and replied, "You look more feminine, it's already changing your body. How can Kiri not know?"

She shrugged and replied, "Maybe he does, and he's just waiting for me."

Songs

HALF HEARTED

I'll give you half of my heart,
I'll give you half of my soul,
So don't go!

When you're here by my side, that's when the music flows. I was frozen in time until I found you, god only knows.

I'll give you half of my heart,
I'll give you half of my soul,
So don't go!

Sometimes I want to wrap my arms around you and just hold you in one place, but if I'm keeping you held captive, how can I look you in the face?

I'll give you half of my heart,
I'll give you half of my soul,
So don't go!

Oh god I love you so,

Aye ~

I'll give you half of my heart,
I'll give you half of my soul,
So don't go!

THE SUN

Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun,
so deep your kisses run,

Deep deep deep, deep within my brain
a recurring sweet refrain,

Slam slam slam, the slamming of my heart
is tearing me apart...

....

Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun,
so deep your kisses run,
don't stop until we're done.

Sweet sweet sweet, sweeter than the rain
a warm and tender pain
that I just can't explain.

Soft soft soft, softer than the snow,
how deep your kisses go,
something you should know.

....

Hot hot hot, hotter than the sun,
you were hotter than the sun...

EVERYTHING CHANGED

Nothing happened, when everything happened.
Everything changed, when nothing changed.

The same sweet smile, but now I have to stop and
stare awhile, now there's something else behind it,
not sure what, but you can't hide it!

Nothing happened, when everything happened.
Everything changed, when nothing changed.

We're holding hands like yesterday, but with a
thousand little fingertip touches, everything inside of
me rushes!

Something happened, when nothing happened.
Nothing changed, when something changed.

It's like there's a place, where time doesn't matter,
but inside that space, time only rushes faster!

Nothing happened, when everything happened.
Everything changed, when nothing changed.

It's like I found the words to a magic spell, or cast my
heart down a wishing well!

Nothing happened, when everything happened.
Everything changed, when nothing changed.

DANCE ACROSS THE STARS

Do you remember when we were young? And we
danced across the stars?

Now we're getting older, but we're not old, sometimes
out in the park, we still go dancing in the dark.

I can see us when we're old, wrapped in wrinkles,
casting smiles, winks at lovers, that's our style!

And when we reach the bitter end, we'll go dancing
once again.

Then we'll dance across the stars, on and on and one
more time, until we do it all again.

WITHOUT YOU

Ch: It's too lonely waking up without you,
why must I spend all this time on my own?
It's too lonely waking up without you

So when can you come?

When I reach out my hand
I want to feel you there

your breath across my skin
my fingers in your hair
Ch
When can I be there?

People say you're too old
they say that I'm too young
I think they're all wrong
I think it's okay.
Ch
Tell me how much longer?

Even when I'm eighty
I want to eat icecream
Scream come out and play with me
and hold your hand
Ch
When can you come home?

It's too lonely, it's too lonely, it's too lonely....

MIRAGE

The bright light lies,
but it always tells the truth.
it leaves me drowning in the desert, chasing islands
across the sea.

The bright light lies
it's always shining in my eyes!

It shows you standing here before me, smiling into my eyes.

And if I never try to touch you,
if I don't reach out my hand,
you'll keep walking here beside me, across the
burning sand!

The bright light lies! It leaves me drowning in the
sand,
chasing islands across the ocean, and never reaching
land!

The bright light lies, but it only shows the truth.
The best mirage, is you.

AKIRA'S SONG

I'm just standing here watching the sun go down,
Trying to hold enough light
to make it through the night.

And I know that if I just hold on,
I'll soon see the dawn
Because I know that

This is the land of the rising sun,
with a light so hot and bright,
that if it didn't cool down at night,
the world would burst into flame,
like Tokyo in an anime.

You're just sitting there watching the sun go down,
sinking into the cold ground,
while snow lays all around.

And you're thinking that you're all alone,
in this garden of stone,
you think you're all alone.

This is the land of the rising sun,
And when the sun melts the snow,
it can break the stones you know
and before you turn around
spring will come bursting from the ground.

Still we're all sitting here watching the sun go down,
in this tired lonely town
the light fades without a sound.

But if you'll just believe in me,
for one more night you'll see,
I'll show you that

This is the land of the rising sun,
and we're still standing here
all together or one by one,
our day has just begun,
because this will always be,
I will make you see,
This is the land
of the rising sun.

Afterword

Bon Jovi's Bed of Roses, Pokemon's Pikachu, Sorachi's Gintama, Ginewine's Pony, Abdul's Rush Rush, Richie's Dancing on the Ceiling, and of course, Monoral's Kiri are referenced here.

--

This story, is not the kind I usually read. It's not the kind I'd ever imagine planning. There are no spaceships, no carriages, no cats... although I admit there is a wizard of sorts.

This is the story I dreamed and day dreamed over and over many long days stuck in bed slowly losing my vision, and maybe my mind. It's not the only one I visited, but it's the one I came back to over and over, breathing let's rewind as I started the play in my head again.

It didn't always play out exactly like this, but gradually some scenes became set, even if the order or other details changed, those would repeat. I wished we had video recorders for our heads, because there was no way in my current state that I could draw it all out. I don't think I'm good at telling stories, and I'm terrible at telling jokes.

Maybe someday I'll write down some of the other ones in my internal animephile dreamverse. Maybe not. I tried to write this one down many times. At first I simply could not write this. I practiced writing other

things, stuff I cared less about, that embarrassed me less, until I could begin to write this. Even then, I left it a little over half way for most of a year. Then I opened and read it one sleepless night. And I came to a halt, hadn't I written this? I'd skipped that. And I started to write and rewrite it all over again.

It's not realistic, there are things in it that I could point to that probably come from my life, from anime I've watched, from thousands of other stories. It's just a dream of warmth and light.

[[Edit:

After working on the two descendant tales (which I'm rewriting before I post them), I realized Hikaru's school schedule is off. But I'm just going to declare that the expensive private school she's going to with it's closed campus and gate guards is running on an international schedule.

I have continued though. A lighter tale about Ryuske's adopted son Aishin in Data Dragon Danika.]]

--

This would never have been put into words without Steelsoul who said I could write something he'd read over and over, SmilingNordic and the colour yellow, Wen Spencer's descriptions of her writing methods, and of course my friends and my family who

managed to keep me alive and sheltered and provided the writing tools.

Thank you for reading. Luck in your adventures.

GusDeFrog | K.A.H.D.