

It was a day like any other.

The cool, stale breeze of the air conditioning trickled through the room, at the same monotonous pace of yesterday, with the same gentle force as tomorrow. There was no wind here, no light smell of shining sun and sudden gusts of fresh spring air, no need to quickly flatten your skirts in embarrassment and laugh softly with your friends beside you, the blue sky spread gloriously before you and naive youthful hope in your hearts.

Sonoko looked up at the ceiling, at the artificial lights illuminating the room fairly and evenly, safe from the fear of being blinded in the light of the raging sun. She listened to the humming of the cold machines slaving away endlessly in the dark corners of the room, and felt the clean, sterile bedsheets beneath her fingertips.

“Hey, Sukucchi~. Are you looking forward to the holidays? Only a few more days to go~.”

Ryoumensukuna did not respond.

“What about you, Dai-kun? Got any plans~? We can head down to Ines sometime if you’re free~.”

Daidarabocchi did not respond.

“Still, I’m going to miss Shinju-kan. We sure had some great times here, and it’ll be so sad to say good-bye to everyone going to different middle schools~. Right, Doku?

Gashadokuro did not respond.

Today was Sonoko’s 157th day confined to this room, her 157th day unable to move even her littlest finger freely, her 157th day since she last saw her dearest friend’s bright and passionate face and heard her inspiring and caring voice. If they were but normal girls, with no worries heavier than schoolwork and making friends, no need to risk their lives and their limbs protecting the last remnants of the human race, Sonoko, Wasshi and Mino-san would be reaching the end of their days at Shinju-kan right now.

With her aloft and lonesome upbringing, Sonoko initially had much difficulty getting along with her classmates. It was not their fault in the slightest, if anything Sonoko knew she was fully responsible with her passive attitude and her clumsy nature, left alone with nothing but dreams of a laughter-filled youth and envy of the tight-knit groups of friends forming around her. But those days had started to fade, not only had she made two irreplaceably precious friends of her own, not only was she enjoying the simple pleasure of light-hearted conversation in a small circle during those breaks between classes, but her other classmates had opened up to her too. For the first time, she felt like a member of a unified class filled with people who knew and cared about her, just as she’d always dreamed of.

Not that that meant anything now.

Come to think of it, Sonoko never properly got to say goodbye to her classmates. She imagined a masked faceless Taisha member in her place, announcing to the class in a passionate and outspoken voice, “Praise be to Sonoko-sama, glorious and noble leader of Heroes, saviour of humanity in its darkest hours! May the light glinting off her mighty lance bring us hope for the future! In came an incomparably fierce army of Vertex, more terrifying than any

the world has ever seen, but when it seemed Shikoku faced nothing but certain destruction, our hero of heroes, Sonoko-sama, gathered forth the full might of Shinju-sama's blessing, and vanquished our evil foes! Oh, it was tough, it was arduous, Sonoko-sama lost much in the fighting, unable to even come here before you and greet you herself, sacrificing everything so you could stand before me right now as free and as healthy as ever! So give thanks to Sonoko-sama, remember her battle, be grateful to her as you live out your fun-filled youth!"

She imagined the roaring rounds of applause, the tears in her classmates' eyes and the cheers of love and respect sent straight to her, here in this hospital bed.

Of course, that was not what happened. The Taisha would never reveal so much to mere children, no doubt it was just Aki-sensei with a dark clouded face, her strong eyes holding back her sadness and loss and how much her precious students really meant to her, telling everyone how they would never meet Sonoko again. The class would simmer with doubt and fear, sadness and confusion, afraid to speak their true feelings lest they "disappear", unable to properly grieve or know the truth. They would live out the rest of their days always wondering what really happened to that sleepy girl who sat next to them and always did well in tests despite not paying attention, never knowing if she was even still alive.

But maybe that was for the best. After all, imagine if they knew the truth. Imagine if they could see her right now, covered in bandages from feet to face, immobile upon this hospital bed, more like a finely crafted traditional doll than a cheerful young girl. Imagine if as they ran across the road with their schoolbags bouncing on their back and their long hair blowing fiercely in the wind, they had in the back of their minds Sonoko, who would never walk again, never feel the soft warm ground beneath the soles of her feet. They were happier this way.

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Sonoko's room showed no signs of change, no indication that several days had passed. She lay in the exact same pose on the exact same bed in the exact same position within the exact same room, as if she had merely blinked and only the slightest moment had gone by.

If her calculations were correct, today was the Shinju-kan graduation ceremony. Right now, her classmates would be saying their farewells to each other, saying goodbye to the classroom they knew so well, making tear-filled promises to keep in touch. It was a sight Sonoko had always dreamed of, for there was nothing more heart-wrenching than loving friends sobbing into each other's shoulders, each knowing how much they'd miss their wonderful days here. In fact, some of her novels contained this exact scene, and she'd received swarms of praise at how emotionally impactful it was.

But Sonoko would never experience it for herself.

Of course, if she'd so desired, the Taisha would've granted her a mock ceremony without hesitation. A fake teacher to read out accolades and sing songs of praise, students forced to be there by Taisha decree, sobbing into each other's arms and reminiscing on their wonderful days, all pretending not to be disturbed by Sonoko's bandages and bed and inability to move, as if she was just another student saying goodbye to her class.

"We had so much fun here."

"I can't believe it's over."

"You know, Sensei might have strict at times, but she was a really good teacher, I'm actually going to miss her."

"I know, right? The way she explained things was just so clear and easy to understand, none of my other teachers have been like that."

"Well, hopefully we get good ones at our next school. Also I really hope we're in the same class!"

"Of course we will! We've been in the same one every year, it has to be fate!"

"Man, you two are so lucky. I'm not going to know anyone at my school, why did my parents have to make me go there?"

"It's your fault for being so smart, and getting into such a good school. You should've seen how disappointed mine were when my results came back, it was the worst."

"Haha, well at least we can still meet on the weekends, right?"

"Yup! I'll call you!"

But that wasn't what Sonoko wanted.

There was someone missing from this picture.

Wasshi.

The Taisha would grant her any desire, any luxury most people can only dream of, but she could never meet Wasshi. She could never graduate Shinju-kan alongside her precious friends, she could never laugh together about Mino-san showing up late to school or Wasshi telling her off for forgetting her homework or her forgetting to write her name on her test, bathing in the rose-coloured memories of days gone by. And what would be the point of a graduation ceremony without that?

Of course, it wasn't just her who missed out. She was fairly certain Wasshi lost her memories in that final battle against the Vertex, unable to even remember who Sonoko was. Maybe Sonoko could never wallow in nostalgia alongside her best friends, but at least she held each and every one of her vivid life-filled memories firmly inside her, thinking back on them every day, remembering just how much fun the best times of her life really were. Wasshi had lost even that.

"I wonder what Wasshi is doing right now~."

The Taisha would not have returned her to her old classroom, there would be no point, not if she didn't remember a single person there. She would have to start anew, and Sonoko knew just how hard Wasshi would find it. However much she was just a cute, kind girl on the inside, Wasshi would put on a stern and mature persona, one that would repel most young girls her age, afraid to try and draw close to her.

"Hopefully she finds someone. A friendly, outgoing girl, someone with the confidence to see past Wasshi's strict appearance and the positiveness to try and make friends with her. Someone bouncy and energetic, maybe slightly clumsy or silly, to perfectly complement Wasshi's maturity. Wouldn't that be wonderful~?"

Sonoko looked around at her empty room, thought back on the dry and stale conversations with unbelievably boring Taisha members, the only unbridled and cheerful laughter resonating through the air coming from her very own mouth. Maybe she had no friends here, maybe she was completely alone with only silent fairies and monotone Taisha for

company. But if Wasshi had managed to make new friends in her new life, that would be truly wonderful. At least one of them would be enjoying every day to the fullest, experiencing light-hearted conversations and simple jokes and exciting club activities, like any young girl their age had a right to.

Maybe it was for the best Wasshi couldn't remember her. She could move on without regrets, make new friends and new memories, live a normal and peaceful life. All Sonoko's existence could do, at this point, was hold her back. All she could be was a crack in the bubble of Wasshi's happiness.

But even then she still wanted, with every fibre of her being, to meet her precious friend.

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At least Sonoko could feel the stale breeze blowing past her unbandaged skin. At least she could see the steady lighting glowing unchangingly across the room. At least she could hear the constant humming of the lifeless machines behind her.

Mino-san might've acted strong, might've pretended to be optimistic about their new school and filled with hope for the future, but she would've cried the most at their graduation ceremony. Sonoko pictured Wasshi trying to comfort her, holding her tight in her arms, with tears welling up in her own eyes too.

And then they would've all left the school together, holding hands firmly, as if to comfort each other that everything will be okay, that the future will be brighter and more glorious than ever, that their days of laughter and cheer had only just begun. The bright spring sun would've shone down on their path, illuminating the endless future before them, and they would've looked towards tomorrow with hope in their eyes.

They would meet up in the holidays every single day, going to Ines to eat gelato together or each other's houses to simply relax and enjoy their precious rare break.

They would play with Mino-san's little brothers, Wasshi teaching them about her love for battleships of times long gone, they would eat Wasshi's delicious Japanese-style cooking, Sonoko marvelling at how much tastier it was than the finest meals prepared by the greatest chefs, because of the love poured into it.

They would sing karaoke together, Mino-san embarrassed at first, with no belief in her own voice, but by the end she'd be more energetic than anyone.

They would bathe in the falling sakura petals and the light of the rising sun.

And then comes middle school, the biggest change in their ordinary schoolgirl lives so far.

Wasshi would wear their new uniform impeccably, not a blemish or crease in sight, her firm eyes filled with determination and passion for what was to come.

Sonoko's would not quite suit her, making it clear as the shining blue sky before them that she'd never worn this set of clothing before.

Only Mino-san would look like a normal middle schooler, with a warm smile on her face and precious friends by her side, no different from every other happy young girl heading to school.

