

Dead Mileage/Living Memories

by /a/non

Iwaizumi (o.okm)

Do you remember your childhood dream?

Perhaps you might have wanted to be a professional baseball player, the star of the team, to be worshipped by the crowd.

Or you might have wanted to become a great inventor, one to solve society's problems with eureka's that nobody else has thought of.

As for me, my dream wasn't that grand. I have, at the age of six, decided that I wanted to be a train driver for my local train line.

I don't really remember what made me make up my mind back then. After all, it has been twenty four years since, and with each passing year more and more details escape my memory.

What I can say for sure, is that I have not let my younger self down. After graduating from high school, I sent in my application to the train company, and was hired immediately. After several months of training, I was put on the driver's roster.

The first few years on the job were smooth running for me, however even back then the troubles with ridership were beginning to surface. Our train line was originally built to service the coal mine in Iwaizumi, and passenger service was only added later on. The coal mine has long shuttered before I entered the company, and with the town thinning out, the number of riders have slowly dwindled over the years.

When I first started out I could count several dozen passengers each way, yet now I would be lucky to find the same numbers across the entire shift.

Among the general public, there was a suspicion that the announcement to shutter our operations would come anytime soon, yet year after year went by and they were surprised to find us still around.

“My good friend entrusted this train line to me,” the president would cry while adjusting his round glasses, light bouncing off his balding crown, whenever he was asked about the sustainability of the line, “and I will do anything to keep it afloat!” Those not in the know would think the president was holding the company together through sheer willpower, yet people on the ground like us were more aware of what was going on.

We didn’t have a cute calico cat hanging around our stations to put on a pedestal to draw in tourists, nor did our president have a second business to help bring in revenue with. Naturally, with no additional income, our expenditures had to decrease.

First it was the wage freezes and the pay cuts. “We need to save as much money as we can to keep this running,” said the president. He halved his salary as well, a much larger decrease than any of us. Nobody could complain since he led by example, but several of the staff who had extra mouths to feed really could not afford the decrement, and tendered their resignations soon after.

Next, we heard from the maintenance team that preventive works have been reduced to the bare minimum. If a fault did not impact safety and operations, it was left unfixed. That was also around the time when I noticed the rides started becoming bumpier.

Lastly, the timetable has been changed to reduce the number of journeys made each day. What used to be a train coming by every hour was now an hour and a half, or even two hours. It was understandable, as less trips meant less need for maintenance, and our ridership numbers did not justify the need for the previous frequency. Of course, there were a few grumbles at first, but interestingly there was no noticeable additional drop in passengers from that change.

This more laxed maintenance scheduling also gave us leeway for when sudden corrective works were needed, which were slowly increasing as the time spent on preventive works were decreasing.

Today was one of those days.

“Hey Taniya, you’re here, huh,” the president popped in to the staff break room. “Are you feeling better now?”

I looked up from the electric stove in front of me. The warm orange glow of the stove was also visible from the top of the president’s head.

“Yes, thank you. Sorry for the trouble,” I said, my words slightly muffled behind the surgical mask.

“I know you’re feeling feverish today and ought to rest more,” the president continued, “but Sugiwarara just ended his shift and reported that the heater in the Five-Four is out. Can I get you to bring the Five-Four down to the Moshi Yard? I’ll get someone else to bring the Four-Zero back up. You can take the rest of the day off and rest.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Really sorry to trouble you like this, but you know how it is with Sugiwarara,” the president added sheepishly. “Clocking out on time is non-negotiable with him.”

I nodded, got up from my seat, and put on my coat. Stepping outside, a blast of cold air caused me to flinch slightly.

“Oh and also, please take this with you,” the president said, handing over a box of single-use hand warmers. “It’s probably going to be cold inside the train, so please be careful.”

“Thank you.”

I made my way towards the platform where the train was waiting for me. It had snowed last night, and the ground was covered in a sheet of white, contrasting against the gray sky. Footprints dotted the paths that people had taken between the station building and the platform, breaking up what would have otherwise been a pristine surface.

I took a good look at the train parked next to the platform. A red accent line cut across the length of the single railcar, boldly marking the otherwise silver body, making it stand out in the snow.

A closer look, however, would reveal years of wear that were never touched up. Scratches to the paint job, slight dents in the

steel, caked up mud at the skirtings. A far cry from when the train first made its debut.

In a way, both of us are the same, huh. Battered by the waves of time, our youth and optimism gave way long ago; now we're just fighting to survive and trying to get through the day.

I entered the driver's cabin.

The temperature inside the cabin was slightly warmer than outside, but only slightly, most likely due to the lack of wind indoors. During normal operations, the heater below the passenger seats would have made it much more comfortable. I broke open a hand warmer and stuck it inside my coat.

"Fluid levels OK, check. Brakes working, check. Passenger doors all closed. Signage changed to "Out Of Service". Clear vision ahead, check." After doing the dozen routine checks that needs to be done when taking over control, I placed my hand on the throttle and pushed it forward.

The diesel engine, which had been making a low humming sound while on standby, roared into life. A small jerk shook my body as the train started moving.

The streets of Iwaizumi quickly gave way to the pine forest as the train made its way down the tracks. Trees and snow in front of me, on both sides, as far as the eye can see. Suddenly, a chill passed through my body, not from the cold, but from the realization that I was all alone.

It's not my first time doing an empty train run in the winter; I should have been used to it by now. Yet today, the sight of nothing but trees and snow inexplicably made my heart sink. Perhaps it was also due to the cold I was nursing, for the dull headache that I had earlier was starting to get ever so louder.

My thoughts turned to the train line. How many more winters can I drive this train through? The constant shaking of the car did not give a good prognosis. When we close down, these tracks will definitely be slowly reclaimed by the mountains. Although the sounds of this train currently punctuate the air, in the near future there will only be silence.

Silence, trees, and snow.

A wave of melancholy crashed against my heart, knowing what has been, what is, and what it cannot be.

I felt myself sinking, sinking, sinking—

“Hey, Taniya,” I heard a knock on the door, pulling me back to the present.

What? Who’s there? There shouldn’t have been anyone else on this train besides myself.

I took a quick glance out the door of the driver’s cabin. On the other side of the glass was a petite, red haired girl in a long beige coat. Other than a small side ponytail, her straight locks rested downwards, as if they hardly carried any weight. Her eyes were like topaz, sparkling even as the sky remained overcast outside.

“Can I come in?”

I hit the brakes.

As the train slid to a halt, my mind began to race. I didn’t see anyone else in the train when I came in; how did she show up here?

“Ta~ni~ya~!” she protested, her hand leaning against the front-facing window. “I almost fell over, you know!”

I opened the door.

“Sorry, but how did you get in here?” I asked. “And, who are you?”

I can’t put my finger on where I’ve met her before, but the sight of her had a sense of familiarity to it. At least, I have the feeling she’s not a criminal out to hijack this train or anything.

“Wow, that’s pretty cold,” she said, lightly patting invisible dust off her coat. “I’ve come to find you after so long, and this is the way you respond?”

I racked my brains trying to recall where we’ve met. The ongoing headache did not help.

“It’s me, Kiha Itsuyo,” she said, doing a little bow. “It’s been a while.”

Still bowing, she lifted her head and looked at me. “So, mind if I come in? It’s getting chilly in the passenger section.”

Well, it’s not like this is an actual train service and I have to be prim and professional; I can cut myself some slack, right?

“Fine, but don’t touch anything,” I said. Kiha cheered and trotted into the driver’s cabin. I reached into my bag and took out the box of hand warmers.

“You said you were cold, didn’t you? Would you like one?”

“That would be great, thank you so much.” Kiha nodded, drew one from the box and stuck it under her coat.

Putting away the box, I placed my hand on the throttle and started the train back up. “I need to have my eyes on the track in front just so you know,” I said, “so I apologize if I can’t make eye contact.”

“No, that’s alright,” she said. “Just being here and talking to you makes me happy enough.”

The trees on both sides of the snowscape slowly picked up speed.

“So, you haven’t told me how you ended up on this train yet.”

“When I woke up in the passenger section, you were already pulling out from the station.”

“Was it? I didn’t see you on the way to the front of the train.” Well, there was always the possibility that I might have just overlooked her presence. “Anyway, we’re already on the way to Horono, so how about I drop you off there when we arrive. The next train back to Iwaizumi won’t be here for another hour and a half though, so I’d suggest you take the bus back instead.”

“Chasing me away already?” Kiha’s sounded a bit down. “I hardly get to see you, and the one time I actually get to hang out with you you shoo me off.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m heading to the train yard though, and it’d be hard to explain to the people there why you were stowed away on the same ride.”

“You’ll have to make a stop by Moshi Port before reversing into the yard, right? I can disappear myself there.”

“That works for me,” I nodded.

The tracks made a bend to the left, and right after making the turn we headed straight into a tunnel. Everything turned dark save for the headlamps illuminating the path right in front of us.

It was a rather short tunnel, and so within moments the daylight resumed again.

“Hey Kiha,” I said, “I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t really remember where we’ve met. Can you give me a hint?”

Were we classmates at school? Neighbors? Or perhaps, even distant relatives?

“Hmm, why don’t you make a guess? If you get it right I’ll give you a hug.”

I don’t really need a hug from her, but I fired off the first three possibilities that came to mind earlier anyway. “Bzzt~” Kiha readily denied all three of them.

Suddenly, something else came to mind.

“Say, there’s this manga that I’ve been reading. It’s about four high school girls forming a band together, and there’s a girl in it that looks just like you, and has a similar sounding name to yours. You won’t happen to be named after her, would you?”

“You could have at least asked if she was named after me instead!” Kiha protested with a hint of amusement. “But that sure sounds interesting. I don’t really read manga myself, so I didn’t know about that.”

“Jokes about that character aside, I’m sure we’ve known each other previously, but it’s just that I can’t think of where at the moment. Maybe my head’s going blank from this ongoing headache that I’m having.”

“A headache? Are you okay?”

“To tell the truth, not really. I think I might be developing a cold. Yet, we are so short staffed at the moment that they had no choice but to call me—”

I felt a soft, cool touch on my forehead. Kiha’s back of the hand was petite, barely reaching out of the sleeve of her coat.

“It’s rather hot,” she said, slowly pulling her hand away.

“I figured,” I said, touching my forehead and searching for that residual coolness. “When I reach the train yard I’m getting a ride home and calling in sick for the next few days, scheduling be damned.”

“Is the staffing situation that bad...?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” I began, “This company’s been in the red for the last seven years. We had to cut wages to stay afloat, and of course most people won’t work for mere peanuts. Right now it’s just me, Sugiwarara, Izaki, and a few others left. Izaki knows he has a lot of bargaining power by staying, just not in wages, and had somehow gotten himself a salaryman’s working hours. Morning to evenings on weekdays, and Saturday mornings only. Kasugano and Mito took up his example and demanded the same, so between the three of them they have the prime shifts, and the rest of us get the nights and weekends. As for Sugiwarara, although he doesn’t mind the leftover shift slots, he strictly enforces his working hours. He hasn’t done a minute of overtime in years.”

I gave a small sigh. “Perhaps I should have been more selfish as well, or I wouldn’t be pushed around like I am right now.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Huh?” I was supposed to keep my eyes in front, but Kiha’s reply made me reflexively look at her.

“I think you can be a little bit selfish too, as a treat,” she said, flashing a playful smile.

“It’s a bit late for that,” I started, “all the good shift timings are already taken and it’s hard to get them to give it up.”

“There are other ways to be selfish, you know.” Kiha’s smile slowly grew larger. “How about we go on a date right now?”

“That came out of nowhere,” I said nonchalantly. “Besides, I have to bring this train to the yard.”

“Yes you do,” she said, “but you don’t have to do so immediately, right? We can make stops at each station and take it easy. Look, Horono is coming up.”

Indeed, the presence of the various markings and signage on the side of the tracks indicate that we are approaching Horono Station. I reduced the speed on the throttle as we made our approach.

Back in the coal hauling days, the trains went straight from Iwaizumi to Moshi Port to unload the coal, and then straight back to Iwaizumi for the next load. As the number of loads

moved every day were not too frequent, the train line only had a single track between the two stations. When the decision was made to start moving passengers as well, the number of trains on the line had to increase, and this necessitated the trains to be able to pass by each other while on the same track. To make this possible, both Horono and Omoto Stations were built as passing loops with side platforms, so that both trains going the opposite directions would stop at the station at the same time, and then depart the other way.

Well, that was back in the day when the train frequency required such arrangements; we've since went back to having a single train on the track during normal operations. But as the train slowly made the small bend into the right side platform, I found Kiha's suggestion to be feasible. Parking the train at the station platform would not hinder the replacement train's path coming up to Iwaizumi.

Now then, should I take up Kiha's suggestion, or should I pass through the station and keep going?

I thought of my current situation at the train company, of the low pay, of the staffing shortage that required me to be clocked in even when I was nursing a cold. Even though all of these were not really anyone's fault in particular, over time the circumstances have stiffened and closed in on me, gradually applying a pressure that now manifested as the dull headache around my temples.

I thought of the silence I had felt in the woods earlier, of being alone while struggling to save the train line from the streams of entropy, of knowing the futility of doing so. Yet, even though I know it's only a matter of time before we have to inevitably close down, I still want to keep this train running as long as I can. But at the same time, the fatigue and loneliness are slowly taking their toll on me over the years.

I then looked at Kiha who was looking out the front cheerfully, almost like she might be humming a tune if I listened carefully enough. I still don't know where I met her previously, but she did say she came all the way to find me, so perhaps it would be good for us to spend some more time together.

Besides, her saying it's okay for me to be selfish made me happy, even if it was for a bit.

I turned the throttle to the braking position, and tore off the surgical mask covering my face.

“Horono. Horono. The doors on the right side will open.”

Horono (11.6km)

Beep, ka-clunk.

There was a vending machine in the small station building right next to the platform. The person who invented the hot drink option for vending machines have my utmost gratitude.

“I bought potato potage and shiruko, which one do you want?” I said, walking over to Kiha, who was sitting on a row of blue plastic chairs.

“Shiruko, please!”

I handed the maroon can over to her. She took it, her small hands barely sticking out of her coat sleeves.

“Thank you, Taniya.” She held it to her face. “It’s so warm~”

I sat down next to her and opened the can of potato potage. A creamy smell wafted through the air. Slowly sipping the hot soup, I felt it warm up my insides.

“A hot drink on a cold day is the best, isn’t it?” Kiha said, also sipping her shiruko.

“You know, it wouldn’t be as cold if we sat inside the train instead,” I said. Being an unmanned station, the building was a minimal construction meant to keep out the wind in winter, but it was otherwise unheated. Compared to the driver’s cabin in the train which we had occupied for the last twenty minutes, the empty waiting area definitely had a much lower temperature.

“You have no sense of aesthetics, Taniya,” Kiha said, wagging her index finger while holding the can on the same hand. “Look how beautiful the view is.”

I looked up. There was no electric lighting inside the station building during the day, and hence the only light came from outside through the window. The warm white rays streamed into the dimly lit space, gently lapping on the both of us and sparkled the dust fairies in the air. Outside the window, the rear end

of our train could be seen, and further out was a field of white backdropped by a similarly white mountain ridge, with no other building in sight. From the tenebrism of the light shining on us against the relative dimness of the rest of the station building interior came a sense of silence, though reminiscent of what I would see when passing through the woods when I drove the train down the line, had a sense of calm that I had not encountered before.

“You’re right,” I said, “it’s really pretty. I’ve passed through this station countless times in my years of being a train driver, yet I have never stopped and witnessed this view before.”

I looked at Kiha next to me. Her face basked in the warm glow as she held the can to her lips.

“Thank you for insisting we come in,” I added. “Is this one of your favorite spots?”

“Actually, this is my first time coming here too.” Kiha said, lowering the can to her lap.

“I’m surprised. I thought that surely you knew this place previously.”

“Well like you, I’ve been busy for quite a number of years.”

Makes sense, since I’ve not seen her all this while.

“But, you know? That one photography contest? The one with the winners displayed in the train?”

“Ah, that one!” I remembered.

Around seven to eight years ago, our company held a photography contest.

“Memories along the railroad” was the name the president came up with; it was pretty self-explanatory. The plan was to encourage more people to take our train in search of the perfect shot on or around the train line. As results go, there was no noticeable increase to the ridership during the year the contest was held, which if you think about it made sense, as photographers taking the train one or two times weren’t really comparable to regular riders taking it every day.

Still, the contest somehow managed to draw in rather impressive entries. I don’t really remember any of them, but I do

vaguely remember that they all looked really good.

That is, until Kiha reminded me of this one.

“The one that got third prize, was it?” I said. “I think it was of this very station building. I don’t remember what the photographer titled it, though.”

“‘A Chance Encounter,’” Kiha said, “by this one Ishimura Yume.”

“That’s not a very memorable title,” I remarked.

“I remembered it,” Kiha said, “and all the other entries as well. They really livened up the train interior when they were displayed.”

“What was the one that got the top prize, by the way?” I asked out of curiosity.

“It was the one of the lighthouse at Moshi Port with the train and station staff in the foreground. ‘Professionalism’ by Takahara Senzou.”

I remember now. The one which the president bumped to first place during the closed-doors judging meeting; this was when there was still hair on his head. “It makes our train company look good,” he said, adjusting his glasses. Only the staff present at that meeting knew that this transpired, which was a good thing, for it would have made for a big scandal if it leaked out.

“What did you think of that one? I felt it was just alright.”

“I loved it!” Kiha said enthusiastically. “The light beam from the lighthouse sweeping right behind the train made for a very dramatic composition. The choice of focal length also made the train look larger than life.”

I was surprised by the show of energy. “Art sure is subjective, huh,” I said, emptying my can of potato potage.

I wasn’t sure if it was the warmth from the canned soup, the ambience of the station building, or the conversations with Kiha, but I found my headache had subsided somewhat.

I got up from the plastic chair.

“Since we’re here already, do you want to take a look around the area? I’ve not been anywhere beyond the platform before.”

“I’d love to,” Kiha smiled, “I’ve not had the chance to explore this place either, even though I pass by the station all the time myself.”

I took her empty can with mine and binned both of them.

“You said that you pass by this station regularly, but I really don’t recall seeing you on the train,” I said.

There was a small path outside the station that linked to the main road. At the intersection was a single signpost indicating the presence of a bus stop. Though I called it a main road, it was really just a small one that was barely wide enough to allow for two vehicles to pass each other by.

We were slowly, somewhat aimlessly, walking down the road. On the side of the road closest to the station was a sheet of pure white. In warmer weather they would be rice fields, but for now the snow has blanketed the land and lulled it into winter sleep. The other side had a handful of houses and sheds, equally quiet as the fields they were watching over.

“I see you all the time though,” Kiha said, walking by my side. “Maybe you’re just too focused on your job to notice.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I’d notice that red hair of yours. Unless you dyed it recently?”

Kiha smiled cheekily without giving an answer.

“No, really, I still haven’t figured out where we’ve met. Yet at the same time, I’m pretty sure I know you from somewhere. I’m really sorry about this.”

“Ah, there’s a smaller road ahead,” Kiha pointed straight ahead. We made a turn in.

“So, it’d really help me if you could help jog my memory. Could you please, please give me a hint?”

“No~pe,” Kiha teased. “Figure it out yourself.”

She took a few quick steps forward and then turned around. Distinct rays of sunlight peered through from above the clouds right behind her, almost as if shining a backlight behind her head.

“How about this, we could play Twenty Questions. You get to ask me twenty ‘yes or no’ questions about myself, and figure it out by the time we reach Moshi Port. If you get it right, I’ll give you a hug.”

Again with offering the hug. “You really want to hug me, huh?”

“Yep. Nineteen questions left.”

“That didn’t count!” I protested.

Kiha broke out in laughter. “Fine, fine,” she rubbed her eye gently, “I’ll give you this one for free, but just this once.”

I couldn’t help but smile too after this small bout of teasing. How long has it been since I interacted with someone like this?

We resumed our walk. Even just walking and having a chat together like this felt incredibly nostalgic.

“It feels like, we’ve known each other since childhood.” I mused. “Yes or no?”

“Whose childhood are you referring to?”

“Mine, I suppose.”

“Then, yes. Nineteen questions left.”

Kiha has just hinted that we were childhood friends. Yet at the same time, we weren’t classmates, nor neighbors, nor distant relatives, based off our earlier exchange. It felt like the scope narrowed, but at the same time not too much.

“Wait a minute, why did you have to ask ‘whose childhood was it’? Don’t tell me, you’re actually older than me?”

“Nope! Eighteen questions left.” Kiha appeared smug. It appears that I have been tricked out of yet another question.

“So how old are you this year?”

“Isn’t it rude to ask a maiden her age? Besides, that’s not a ‘yes or no’ question.”

“What, I can’t ask open-ended questions outside of the twenty questions? What if I wanted to know how you’ve been the past few years?”

Kiha stopped walking. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

Silence.

“Kiha?” I stopped and turned around to find her trembling slightly.

“It’s been hard,” she said, her face contorting in an attempt to keep tears from coming out.

“I’ve been working almost every day without rest, and it’s been getting to me. I really love what I do and everyone involved, but lately I’ve been thinking otherwise.”

So she’s in a similar situation as me, huh.

“Sometimes at night I ask myself, is it worth it to keep going?” she continued. “Maybe I should just give up. I’ve been falling sick more frequently as well from being overworked. There was a small voice at the back of my head which said, maybe the next one would finally end it all and give me release from all of this.”

A tear rolled down Kiha’s cheek.

“While I thought about such things, I suddenly thought of you. And then, I thought of wanting to meet you. So here I am.”

I looked at Kiha, who was trying her best to hold it in, said nothing, and slowly stepped towards her.

“I know it’s a bit late to say this, but sorry if I troubled you by showing up suddenly like this, but—”

Before Kiha could finish her sentence, I gently scooped the back of her head and brought her to my bosom.

“It’s okay,” I said, stroking her silky red hair. “It must have been difficult for you.”

Kiha softened up, and the wells of tears burst forth.

Her quiet sobs were lost in the silent snow.

After what seemed like half an hour, Kiha finally calmed down.

“Feeling better now?” I asked.

Kiha looked up at me and rubbed her eyes. “Yes, thank you. And, sorry for my selfish venting.”

“No worries,” I said. “Like you said earlier, it’s okay be a bit selfish, as a treat. Keeping it bottled up isn’t good for your health either.”

“Taniya, you’re really nice,” she said, looking away. Her ears seemed a bit more pink than usual.

“Even though I still don’t really know why you thought of me. What did I do to make you come look for me?”

“Ah, about that!” Kiha pushed me back lightly.

“You’ve already gotten your hug from me ahead of time, so you really, really, have to figure out who I am now, got it?”

“Wait, that didn’t count, did it? I was just trying to console you...”

“Those are two separate things!”

“All right, all right. But before that, let’s continue walking. I need to warm myself up again after all that standing around earlier.”

We made our way down the small road once more. Almost right away we reached its end, where it made a T-junction with another road, with its own set of houses and sheds. Without any particular deliberation, we turned left and kept going.

“You said you’ve been working almost everyday, isn’t there anybody else that could cover for you?” I asked.

“There’s only the two of us that could do it,” Kiha said. “They can’t afford to get a third, from what I’ve heard.”

“My company is already bad enough, but it seems like you have it way worse. Why don’t you quit and find another job?”

“Why don’t you quit yours?” Kiha threw the question back at me.

“I wonder that myself,” I said. “Just like you, I’ve been increasingly wondering whether it’s worth it to stay on this job, if I should just put in my notice.”

I looked at Kiha, who was looking down at her feet.

“I understand, even though the pay is bad and the scheduling leaves much to be desired, in the end they’re not really bad people, and we all know we are just trying to keep the company running for as long as we can. But it’d be great if someone could just give me a clear sign, if it’s all worth it at the end of the day.”

“...I’d prefer it if you continued being a train driver,” Kiha said.

“Why is that?”

“If you quit, I won’t be able to see you on the train anymore.”

“Is that so.” I looked up to the cloud-covered sky, which has once again completely concealed the sun’s rays. “In better times, we would probably just be a normally functioning train line, and I wouldn’t be thinking about these things. But I’ll take your comment into consideration.”

Kiha’s face lightened slightly.

“Anyway, I already have an idea what the answer would be, but I’d just like a confirmation: our reunion since childhood was due to my working as a train driver.”

“Yes,” Kiha finally smiled again. “Seventeen questions left.”

It seems like shifting the topic back onto the guessing game would cheer her up, so I decided to keep going.

“If there was a reunion, that means there was a period of time where we were unable to meet. Was it because you moved away to another town or something like that?”

“Nope. Sixteen questions.”

“So you’ve always been in Iwaizumi all this while?”

“Yes. Fifteen questions.”

That’s rather odd. Iwaizumi’s not a very big town, and if she has been here all the time, I should have seen her around town. But then again, she did say she was working almost everyday, so perhaps our schedules just never lined up. Wait, she also said she sees me all the time...?

“I’m getting more and more confounded,” I said, rubbing the ridge of my nose. “You said you see me all the time. Is this only when I’m on the train?”

“Yes. Fourteen questions.”

“Just wondering, when do you usually take the train and which are your stops?”

“Ah, there’s a shrine up ahead!” Kiha abruptly changed the subject. Clearly it was a question she wasn’t intending to answer.

We approached the torii gate. It was a small wooden one, and the paint was cracked in several places. A flight of stone steps could be seen behind it.

"Hmm, it's a Kumano shrine," I remarked, looking at the sign. "Since we're here already, how about we go in and pray for a bit?"

"Sure," Kiha said.

We took a bow in front of the gate, and started climbing the stone steps behind it.

Pine trees stood on both sides of the stone steps, hiding them from the road outside. Although the trees were crowned with a layer of snow, the steps had no snow on them at all. It was not like it was swept clean either; a thin layer of shed pine needles rested on the steps.

"I never knew there was a shrine here," Kiha said, "do you think they sell omamori here?"

"Probably not," I said. "I don't think this is a big enough shrine to have a sales booth."

Sure enough, when we reached the top of the steps, we found ourselves the only two people there.

There was a modest main building with the usual offering box and bell rope. Glass panels obscured the inner sanctum from our view. Behind the building was what seemed to be a storage shed. The structures had a few rough edges here and there, but overall it seemed like someone was maintaining it.

"Hey Taniya," Kiha spoke.

"What is it?"

"Do you think you could spare me some coin? I don't have any on me."

I handed Kiha a 10-yen coin.

"Thank you." She took it and promptly tossed it into the offering box. I took out another 10-yen coin and threw it in as well.

We held the rope together and gave it a good shake. The bell attached to it made a muffled clanging sound, breaking the silence of the woods.

We clapped our hands in prayer.

O Izanagi-sama, please give me the wisdom to figure out what's up with this girl beside me.

I bowed once more and opened my eyes. Kiha was still praying.

The light from the sun broke through the clouds once again, and shone upon Kiha like a spotlight within the forest. The warm, gentle glow that I had witnessed in the station building had enveloped her once more, making her seem almost...

“Kiha,” I called out once she had finished her prayer.

“Yes, Taniya?”

“This might seem out of nowhere, but you’re not exactly human, are you?”

“What makes you think so?”

“I can’t really put my finger on any single point, but it’s just a wild guess of mine.”

Kiha smiled, the glow around her slowly intensifying.

“Yes. Thirteen questions left.”

Omoto (17.3km)

Unlike from Iwaizumi to Horono where the tracks passed through the mountains, the stretch of railway between Horono and Omoto closely followed the path of the Omoto River. From the window on the left, the winding path of the river darted frequently in and out of view. The setting winter sun was behind us by now, casting a small shadow in front of our train that it kept chasing but could never reach.

Kiha was standing next to me in the driver's cabin. Even though my eyes were on the tracks ahead, I could almost see her gazing softly upon me.

"So, am I having a fever dream right now, and are you just a product of my imagination?" I asked.

"What makes you think that?" Kiha asked, lightly tapping a finger on her cheek.

"For one, I don't remember us walking back to Horono Station. Yet somehow, I find myself already driving the train towards Omoto."

Kiha nodded.

"Another point is that even though you said you aren't human, but I seem oddly calm after hearing it."

"Well, yes to the first part about the fever dream, but no to the second," Kiha said. "Should I count that as two questions? But the first question wasn't really about me, so I'll give it to you for free then." She gave a big smile. "Twelve questions left~"

"So what exactly are you? Did you die from overwork and now linger in the world as a ghost?"

"Nope. Eleven questions."

"Or more broadly, did you die with any regrets and come back as a ghost?"

"No! Ten questions."

“That’s reassuring,” I said. “At least I know you’re not coming for me for revenge over something I did to you previously.”

“...Did you do something I should know about?” Kiha pouted.

“No?” I wasn’t too sure myself. “Or at least, not that I know of.”

“To me, Taniya didn’t do anything wrong,” Kiha said, putting her hands on her cheeks. Her petite fingers barely made it out of her sleeves, making her seem smaller than she already was. “If you did, I wouldn’t have come to find you.”

“If you’re not here for revenge,” I said, rubbing my chin, “then can I say you’re here to repay gratitude instead?”

Kiha blushed. “Yes. Nine questions.”

“Are you a crane?”

“No! Eight questions! Please use them more carefully.”

“Come to think of it, when exactly did this fever dream take hold? Was it when I met you right after leaving Iwaizumi?”

“Yes, it was around that time.”

“That long ago? I even got to explore Horono and its surroundings in this dream; it’s like I’m Giovanni on the Galatic Railroad,” I joked.

“Oh, I know that one!” Kiha perked up upon hearing the name.

“Well, it’s a classic by now,” I said, “especially since the author was from Iwate, everyone has read it in school at some point. Have you read it before?”

“...No. Seven questions left.”

“...But I saw an exhibit about it on the train once!” she added.

“Oh?” I remember we had a Miyazawa Kenji exhibit in our trains around six years ago to commemorate the 120th anniversary of his birth. I didn’t really understand why we were doing it, as his hometown wasn’t anywhere near our train line in the first place. “Will anyone even read this?” was my thought when I put up the extremely text-heavy posters above the luggage racks. But it seemed like at least one person did read it after all.

“That exhibit? I was the one in charge of it,” I said.

“You were?” Kiha covered her mouth with her hand, though it looked more like she was covering it with her coat sleeve. “I found it quite well researched, thank you for your effort.”

“..Thank you for reading it.” I wasn’t expecting that six years later, someone would comment on a one-off thing I was assigned to do that wasn’t even part of my job description.

“So, if I’m Giovanni, does that make you Campanella?” I pondered.

“You’re trying really hard to make me a ghost, aren’t you?” Kiha protested.

“Sorry, sorry,” I chuckled. “I was thinking more along the lines of you being the childhood friend that I get to go on a whimsical train journey with.”

Kiha looked down and lightly tugged my coat.

“But in the end Giovanni and Campanella are separated forever, aren’t they?” she said softly. “I don’t want that.”

“Well, Giovanni does tell Campanella that they’ll always be together,” I added, attempting to salvage my increasingly inapt comparison.

“And in the next moment, he wakes up,” Kiha said flatly.

I looked at Kiha, who continued holding on to my coat.

Silence fell in the driver’s cabin; only the sound of the train on the rails reverberated throughout.

While I was thinking of what to say next, the bridge cutting across Omoto River showed up in front of the tracks. It was a steel truss bridge that crossed the river where it made a sharp bend, and right after exiting the bridge was the Omoto Town limits. As the train went onto the bridge, everything seemed to desaturate slightly, making the view look like it came out of an old photo.

“Omoto. Omoto. The doors on the right side will open,” I found myself speaking into the microphone as I pulled into the station.

The next moment, I felt something was odd. Why did I make the announcement on the microphone?

I said the same lines when we were arriving at Horono earlier, but it was just between Kiha and I. Yet for Omoto, I reverted to my usual work mode. Was it a force of habit?

The answer came soon enough. Kiha let go of my coat, turned around, and pulled up the window at the back of the driver's cabin.

There was a long line of passengers on the other side of the window planning to alight.

I froze up. Wait, since when...?

"Thank you," Kiha said, taking the numbered ticket and fare from an old lady at the front of the line, who then slowly trotted out of the train.

I looked at the old lady's back as she stepped out the door onto the platform, then at the rest of the people in the line. She seemed quite normal enough, as were the others. At least, they didn't seem like ghosts that descended upon the train all of a sudden.

"Thank you." Kiha continued to receive the numbered tickets and fare from the alighting passengers, and depositing them into the fare box in the driver's cabin.

Wait a minute. I turned back to the doors. Instead of being closed by default and requiring a button press to operate like in the usual winter weather configuration, the doors were all left wide open. The platform outside was free of snow, and a nearby tree was in full bloom, contrasting the rapidly darkening twilight sky. Instead of the biting winter wind, a cool spring breeze wafted through the doors instead.

I gave a light shrug. We had just established that this was a fever dream of mine, so I guess it wasn't surprising if things like passengers appearing out of nowhere or a sudden seasonal change happened at some point.

Still, this was a sight that I've never seen in my years of being with the train company. Besides the visible line of passengers waiting to alight, there were a few other people still on the seats in the train. It was a stark difference from the almost empty train that I see every day.

The line slowly thinned as Kiha tended to it. Before long, we had reached the last two alighting passengers—a young woman with a small child, who was throwing a tantrum. “I don’t want to get off the train!” he wailed, trying to pull his mother back to the seats.

“Shhh, you’re making a commotion!” The young woman was struggling with trying to hold her child in place while she fumbled with her purse trying to make the exact fare. “I’m terribly sorry,” she said, smiling weakly at Kiha. “This is his first time riding the train, you see.”

“Ara,” Kiha said, popping her head through the window and bending down to get closer to the boy. “You really like the train, huh?”

“Yes, it’s so cool and fast!” The boy gave a big grin, a complete 180 from the bawling mess he was a moment earlier. “And the train is so cool, with the blazing red stripe on the shiny metal!”

“Thank you,” Kiha said, her ears turning pink.

“We’ll be taking the train back home after this too,” the young woman said, “so won’t you behave for now?”

“I want to see the last stop of this train! I don’t want to get off here!”

“Your grandmother is waiting for us for dinner!”

“I don’t wanna I don’t wanna!”

The mother seemed like she might burst out any minute when Kiha spoke up.

“Hey there, what’s your name?” Kiha asked the little boy.

“...Soutarou.”

“Soutarou-kun, would you listen to big sis here for a minute?”

The boy nodded.

“We will always be on these railroad tracks and won’t be going anywhere. The railroad tracks aren’t moving anywhere either, so you don’t have to worry about the last stop running away.”

The two of them looked into each others’ eyes.

“Would you be a good boy and listen to your mother for now?” Kiha continued, “You can always ride with us to the end of the line next time. We’ll be waiting for your return.”

“...Promise?” The boy asked reluctantly.

“Pinky promise,” Kiha said, holding out her pinky finger. The boy extended his own pinky and lightly tugged Kiha’s three times.

“I’ll be back!” The boy ran out of the train onto the platform, turned around, and waved at us. Kiha smiled and waved back.

“Again, I’m sorry,” the mother said, putting the coins into Kiha’s hands, “and thank you.” Saying which, she promptly alighted the train as well, but not before bowing to the rest of the passengers on the train at the door.

Seeing that nobody else was boarding or alighting, I pressed the door close button.

“The train is moving out. Please be careful,” I announced into the microphone and placed my hand on the throttle.

The train picked up speed smoothly without any of the jerking that I was used to, which came as a pleasant surprise. We cruised smoothly through Omoto Town, which was bustling with activity in a volume that I have never seen. People were going about their day on the cleanly tiled streets with a sense of purpose and a spring in their step. Stores dotted along the sides, each of them occupied and open for business.

Suddenly, a gust went through the driver’s cabin sending a chill down my neck. After the wind went away as quickly as it came, I felt the train once again starting to shake while moving down the tracks. Looking out again, the scenery from just a moment earlier was nowhere to be found. Snow covered the empty streets, lit only by the streetlights, as if setting a stage for a dirge for all the shuttered stores in the background. Taking a quick glance behind, I confirmed that the rest of the train was once again empty as it had always been.

I turned to Kiha, who was looking at her pinky finger, her ears and cheek still pink.

“Was that from your memory?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” she said, “some things went a different way than I remembered it. Could it be yours?”

“I have no idea, I don’t remember anything from that day, actually. What I know was from my mother constantly reminding me about it over the years.”

My mother would sometimes tell relatives and friends the story of my taking the train for the first time, of how I fell in love with the train there and then, and how I really wanted to take it to the terminus at the first time and refused to alight. Of course, she would never leave out the part where she gave me a spanking after we’ve reached home, but also how that day was the start of many, many recreational train rides until I entered elementary school. “We bought the monthly ticket and ended up squeezing every last drop of value out of it,” she would laugh as she recounted that year where she would take me to ride the trains for fun, instead of going to the park or the playground. “Soutarou really loves our train line, it’s no wonder he ended up working with it.”

Even though I no longer remember the event itself, what my mother said about my love for the train line was definitely real.

That must be why I settled on this train company first thing out of school, why I continued sticking around with it, even though the circumstances have been getting harsher over the years. And although I had forgotten it for a time, I now remember the reason to keep going.

“Kiha,” I said.

“What is it, Taniya?”

“I’ve decided, I’m going to continue being a train driver here no matter what. I really love this train and this train company, and I’ll stick with it until the end.”

As I confidently made my proclamation to Kiha, she first widened her eyes and blushed even harder, before finally melting into a gentle smile.

“That’s good to hear,” she said, “I’ll get to continue to see you, huh. Maybe I will perservere for a while longer myself.”

Suddenly, a question popped into my mind.

“So, are you the ghost of a train conductor that used to work with us?” I asked.

“No! You out of all people should know that we’ve never had conductors. Six questions left.”

“Really? But you really looked the part just now, it’s almost like the position was made for you.”

“That’s because you were blanking out earlier so I had to step in to help! Also, what’s with your insistence to try to make me a ghost? You’ve been doing it ever since we left Horono!”

“Besides,” she added, “that’s not how I remembered that day either. I was just looking on silently and had no hand in what happened.”

“Still, you looked really cute handling the passengers just now,” I said in a small voice.

Kiha blushed again and shook her head lightly, her soft crimson hair momentarily floating in the air.

“S-so were you,” she retorted. “Sou-ta-rou-kun.”

I felt my cheeks flush as well, but I quickly regained my composure and volleyed back. “If you call me like that, it really sounds like you’re older than me, you know.”

“Wait, not like that,” Kiha protested.

Our laughter filled the driver’s cabin as we continued our way down to the final stop, with only the tracks right in front of us lit by the yellow headlights of the train.

Moshi Port (20.6km)

As we pulled into Moshi Port Station, Kiha spoke.

“Taniya, can you take me down to the lighthouse before you return to the train yard?”

“Sure,” I said. “Come to think of it, it’s been a while since I’ve been there.”

“Thank you,” Kiha fidgeted slightly. “I’ve never gotten the chance to see it up close myself, so I thought it would be nice if I could do so tonight.”

After applying the brakes and coming to a clean stop, I did the usual checks, and disembarked the train with Kiha.

A warm orange glow from the sodium lamps lit the station platform, the light dancing off the layer of snow on the ground, but it was otherwise pitch-dark outside. In the distance, a beam of light from the lighthouse slowly covered a horizontal arc.

“Moshi Port Station’s always this empty after night falls, isn’t it? It feels quite otherworldly,” Kiha turned around and smiled at me.

Just then, the white beam from the lighthouse swept across our direction, lighting up Kiha from her back.

It lasted but a split second, but the image lingered in my mind for a long while.

The white light wasn’t too bright due to the distance of the lighthouse from the station, and so while it gave Kiha a white glow around her, it did not obscure her features with a strong shadow. At the same time, the light from both the lighthouse and platform lamps bounced off the silver body of the train right beside her, lighting her face up from another angle and making her smiling visage even more pronounced.

I had a realization—this was the exact same scene that Takahara Senzou captured in his prize-winning photograph. Al-

though I had always dismissed its winning the contest as the result of favoritism from our president, but this was the first time that I thought, maybe others did feel something from that photo, in the same way that I am now feeling something welling up from within me, just by seeing Kiha smiling in front of me with the lighthouse in the background.

“Taniya?” Kiha called out, snapping me back to the present.

“Sorry, I was mesmerized by your smile,” I said.

Kiha quickly looked to the side, her cheeks rapidly turning hot. “S-shall we go now?” she said. I nodded.

We made our way to the station exit, where it connected with a footpath going in opposite directions.

“The path going left leads to the main road,” I explained, “it’s lit by streetlamps, but it’s a large detour to reach the lighthouse. Let’s go this way instead—it’s a much shorter path to the lighthouse, it’s just that there’s no lighting along the way.”

“That seems pretty dangerous,” Kiha noted, “Will we be okay?”

“I brought along the emergency flashlight from the driver’s cabin,” I said, pulling it out from my coat pocket. “Look.”

With a slide on the switch of the flashlight, it cast a localized daylight onto the snow-covered path in front of us.

“This path is unpaved underneath all the snow, so let’s take it slowly,” I said.

Just then, I felt Kiha’s arms wrapping around mine. I turned to see her hugging my left arm tightly.

“...To prevent slipping,” she said in a small voice.

The two of us trod cautiously along the snowy path. With the flashlight in hand, I made a sweeping motion back and forth across the ground in front of us, making sure we weren’t walking into a bush. As the path meandered along the coastline, the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks gave a clear audible rhythm to the obsidian night sky. On a whim, I pointed the flashlight onto the waters down below, illuminating the white seafoam circling below with each incoming wave.

Kiha let go of my arm, went around my back, and clutched my right arm instead.

“Sorry, it’s a bit scary being so close to the cliff,” Kiha said.

“It’s okay, I understand,” I said. There was a row of small bushes at the side of the path to mark the boundary and to prevent anyone from stepping over and getting dangerously close to the cliff edge, but they were low enough that it seemed like if the wind just happened to be a bit stronger, those bushes would not prevent you from falling over them and onto the rocks below.

“But maybe it was a bad idea to use this path at night after all,” I continued, “should we turn back and take the road instead?”

“I don’t dislike it,” Kiha said. “Walking down this path makes my heart race, it’s a sensation that I’ve never felt before.”

I stopped and focused inwards, and found my heart beating rapidly as well. Was it from our walking in near darkness, or was it from Kiha hugging my arm so close to herself? Maybe it was a bit of both.

“All right, let’s keep going then.”

The rest of the walk was mostly silent as we focused on the ground in front of us, with only the sound of the waves accompanying our journey. As we continued down the snowy path, the lighthouse in the distance, which was previously the size of my index finger when we had just left the station, gradually grew larger as we got closer to our destination.

Before long, we had hit the paved road once more. The amber glow of the street lamps greeted our arrival as we stepped out of the bushes. Right across the road in front of us was Moshi Port, where a small number of small fishing boats were tied down to the concrete slipway. On the other side of the port, the lighthouse was standing stoically at the tip of the breakwater, keeping watch over the night sky.

“The port was emptier than I expected,” Kiha noted.

“I’ve heard that it was more bustling back in the day,” I said. “There used to be two docks to load dry bulk carriers up with coal. Coal that we freighted, of course.” Those docks have long since

been dismantled without any remaining trace. “The only ones left using this port are the small fishing boats you see here.”

We looked at the boats as we passed them by on the way to the breakwater. They all looked well worn, with many years of age behind them, but still carefully maintained by their owners. Many of them had no snow on them, hinting at their recent use.

“I’ve not seen a lot of fishermen on the train though,” Kiha said, lightly touching her lips with her finger.

“They tend to set out to sea in the middle of the night,” I said, “so they would usually come to the port using their own trucks. Not to mention, they need to use the truck to haul their catch to the market too.”

“That makes sense,” Kiha said, “it’s no wonder the train empties out at Omoto.”

“We’ve considered closing Moshi Port Station multiple times before, but our train yard is situated here anyway, so there’s not really any benefit in doing so.”

Suddenly, Kiha giggled.

“Hmm?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just thinking,” she said cheerfully, “about how you were so adamant about riding all the way to the end of the line that time when you were a child. So, what was your reaction when you saw Moshi Port being this bleak for the first time?”

“As I said before, I don’t remember. Maybe I should ask my mother some time. But I do recall riding the entire line many times, so I guess having nothing much here wasn’t a deal breaker for me.”

“It’s more about the journey than the destination for you, huh?”

“Could be.”

Reaching the foot of the breakwater, we climbed the steps up to the top of the concrete bar and approached the lighthouse. It was a towering structure, painted red on the outside, with a metal door closing off the entrance. Looking up, the rotating lamp could be seen much more clearly inside the lantern room,

as some of the light from the beam reflected off the glass panes and illuminated the space within.

“This lighthouse has also been here for decades,” I remarked.

Originally erected to guide large ships around the port, its gargantuan size now feels out of place in a space occupied only by fishing boats.

“It must have witnessed a lot,” Kiha said.

I looked at Kiha, her warm gaze, and her soft, crimson red hair contrasting even against the red paint of the lighthouse.

And then, I gave a light pat on her head.

“Same goes for you, isn’t it? Watching over us over all these years.”

Kiha turned and looked at me. “Wait, the way you’re saying it, do you mean...?”

I looked at Kiha straight in her brilliant topaz eyes.

“Are you our diesel locomotive, the KiHa Type 54?”

Kiha’s eyes rounded, an extra dash of glimmer rolled in her irises. Then, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Congratulations, you’ve got it with five questions to spare.”

She held me in embrace for what seemed like several minutes. We said nothing throughout, merely sharing in each other’s warmth for the entire duration.

Eventually, she looked up at me.

“When did you realize it?” she asked.

“At Moshi Port Station,” I said. “You looked just like in that photo from the photo contest.”

“You mean Takahara Senzou’s ‘Professionalism’?”

“Yes, but instead of the station staff, you reminded me more of the train itself somehow. That’s when it clicked.”

“That doesn’t make too much sense,” Kiha laughed. I gave a small chuckle as well.

“In that moment,” I added, “I thought you were really, really beautiful. It was the same feeling I’ve had when I saw you for the first time when I was six.”

Hearing that, Kiha blushed, hid her face in my chest, and gave a light squeeze with her arms.

“You know, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about me,” Kiha said, her face still buried within my coat. “Everyone just saw me as a machine to work with; it was completely transactional. But you were the only one, back in that day, to see me as something more.”

“Even though your vocabulary only had ‘cool’ and ‘fast’ back then,” she teased, looking up at me.

“You can add ‘beautiful’ and ‘lovable’ to that list,” I said. “And ‘smart’, and ‘kind’, and...”

“Okay, okay, you can stop,” Kiha said, pulling her head back from my chest. “Any more, and I’ll be too flustered to think straight.”

“...And ‘cheerful’, and ‘pleasant’, and...”

Kiha made an amusing noise as she lightly thumped my chest with both fists in protest.

After the pinkness in Kiha’s ears subsided, she took both my hands and spoke.

“Thank you, Taniya. For appreciating me, and coming back to meet me as a driver.”

I gave her petite, almost-hidden-in-her-coat-sleeves hands a small squeeze.

“Thank you as well, Kiha. For coming to see me as well, and for being my childhood love.”

Kiha looked away into the ocean, the heat returning to her ears and cheeks. I turned to the same direction she was looking. The black water surface, dimly lit by the scattering light from the lighthouse’s beam, constantly fluxed and contoured down below.

“Say, would we be able to meet like this again?” I asked.

I could feel a bit more weight coming from Kiha’s hands.

“We were only able to have this time together because of my fever dream,” I said. “Does that mean once I recover from my cold, I won’t be able to talk to you like this anymore?”

“...I don’t know.”

“I’ve been praying for the chance to meet you,” she said, “and it’s an absolute miracle that I got this moment to spend with you. But it could be that when tomorrow comes, I go back to being just a train again, and we won’t be able to talk like this anymore.” Her lips started to quiver.

“Then, I’ll pray as well,” I said.

Kiha turned and looked at me with wide eyes.

“If your prayers were answered when you were going about it alone, surely it will be too when it’s the both of us doing it, right?” I said.

A smile bubbled up on Kiha’s face, and she nodded with conviction.

“Yes!”

Even as we hoped that we would meet again, at the same time we tried to make the most out of the present.

We sat down onto the concrete floor of the breakwater, the lighthouse behind us, looking into the ocean.

And then, we talked. About our past, about the present, about everything, about nothing in particular.

And as we talked, I silently prayed that the night lasts just a little longer.

Moshi Train Yard (19.8km)

The bright electrical lighting always took a moment to get used to when entering the train yard at night. Even though there was light coming from the headlights on the way to the train yard, its brightness was hardly comparable to the wash from the floodlights set outside the corrugated steel shed.

I slowly put on the brakes and parked the train into the shed, and started to do the closing checks.

“Hey, Taniya,” a voice came from outside the driver’s cabin.

I opened the door of the cabin.

“Ah, Isobe,” I greeted the maintenance crew member. “Good work today.”

“Same to you,” he said. “How are you feeling now? It’s only been a week since we found you barely conscious with a high fever at Moshi Port Station, are you sure you don’t need to take a longer break?”

“Thanks for asking, but I’m okay now.”

“It was strange though,” he continued, “the president called in that day to say that the Five-Four was coming in for us to fix the heater, but when we found you the heat was running just fine.”

“Yeah, it happens sometimes I guess,” I said. “Anyway, I’ve still got to do the checks. It’ll take a while, so you can go ahead and close up first.”

“You’ve been doing the closing shift the past few days too, did someone change the scheduling?”

“Well, I put in the request for it, actually. Just felt like a change of pace.”

“Alright then, as long as you’re fine with it. Let me know when you’re done, I’ll be in the office as usual.” Isobe alighted and made his way towards the side door of the shed.

I kept my eyes on him until his figure was no longer visible.

Looking around to make sure there was nobody else around, I put my hand on the door handle of the driver's cabin.

"Hey, Kiha," I said, closing the door and turning around.

In the driver's seat was that petite, red haired girl, in a long beige coat, with topaz eyes.

"Hey, Taniya. How was your day?"