

You wake up.

The first breath you draw tells you everything you need to know about this day – it's going to be dry and hot, and work is going to be a pain again. While you force yourself out of bed, you catch yourself thinking that it would be quite bad if the weather continued to be this relentless. Harvest has already been bad last year, and you wouldn't want to imagine the consequences of an even longer, even harsher summer this year. Just like any other morning, you throw on some clothes and then head downstairs for breakfast, only to discover that your little brother has eaten most of it already. Typical.

You think of throwing a barbed remark at him but then remember what happened last time – dad would just tell you again „It's not him who's waking up early, it's you who wakes up late!“, and that would settle the matter. Instead, you sit down and content yourself with the 2 pieces of bread that are left. Just as you do so, your little brother announces that he's finished, and that he's off to school now, leaving only you and your mother behind.

“Dad's already out?“, you ask casually in the direction of the kitchen as you chew on the somewhat stale bread. Your question prompts the clinking of pots and dishes in the background to stop. “Yes, he said he had to get something at the market. You'll need to take care of the cattle in his stead today.“

You sigh. At least it would take up time that you'd otherwise have to spend plowing the fields. Even 5 years after having left school, working on the fields was something you hadn't fully gotten used to. It was hard work, and even though you've built up enough muscle to be useful to your family at this point, it still made you exhausted and dull for the rest of the day. It didn't help seeing your brother go to school merrily every morning and tell mom and dad about the games he played with his friends every evening, either.

Well, what has to be done has to be done.

The cattle was fine. One cow didn't give any milk, but she was old and going to be slaughtered soon anyways. You'd already checked on all the animals, given them food when necessary, milked the cows and collected eggs, but it was barely even noon.

If I can stretch this out a little longer, I should at least get half the day off from farming. What else can I do to pass the time, though?

Standing in the cooler shadow of the barn, you let your gaze wander around the farm and ponder. It's by no means a big farm, and not a particularly profitable one either. In addition, it's on the outskirts of the human village, meaning that transport of goods takes longer than with other farms, and Youkai steal some of your produce every now and then. Whoever thought of starting a farm here must've been a real idiot.

Just as that thought crossed your head, you're startled by a loud explosion somewhere off in the distance. You look around to try and find its origin until you spot a cloud of dust and rubble emitting from somewhere in the forest of magic. *Well, as good of an excuse to skip work as I'm gonna get, I guess.*

Even though your parents had told you not to go into the forest on your own throughout your entire childhood, you'd always been fascinated by Youkai and their behavior. At the tender age of 12, you'd already sneak out at night and explore the woods all on your own, looking for traces of the fabled creatures, maybe even hoping to meet one of them for yourself. However, you had been ridiculously (un?)lucky and never managed to meet a wild Youkai face-to-face. Maybe you had just been going to the wrong parts of the forest, or they had been avoiding you for fear of causing trouble with the humans, but whatever the reason was, it had frustrated you to the point where your fascination with Youkai had died off over the years.

Now, that you were once again setting foot inside the forest – for the first time in years – you catch yourself feeling that childish spark again. What will await you in there? Will it still look the same as 5 years ago?

Well, only one way to find out.

There was nothing.

Or, rather, nothing interesting. The ground was still scorched and warm to the touch from whatever had caused the explosion, and trees had been cleared left and right, some remaining as nothing but shreds of wood, others having been snapped apart and bleeding resin onto the dark forest floor. Other than those traces of destruction, there was nothing, just the darkness of the forest and the chirping of birds somewhere above the treetops.

You decide to take a few steps towards the center of the roughly circular patch of burnt soil and suddenly feel something hard underneath your shoe. Curious, you pick it up and discover that it's some sort of metal... shrapnel. Did someone detonate a bomb here?

The darkness makes it hard to see, but, crawling across the ground, you eventually find more and more small metal pieces, most of them painted in black, ripped and bent out of shape. Did someone explode a metal... bomb of some sort?

Before you get the opportunity to confirm that thought, however, you're startled by what appears to be the sounds of footsteps coming closer. Then, a young woman's voice joined them.

"Seriously though, it didn't look like a bomb at all."

"I told you, Nitori. It had a big container and something to make fire with. It was obviously going to explode once that knob was turned! And that's our chance at getting to know anything more about it.", a male voice berates her.

"Hey, at least no one was harmed, right?"

"...if I may remind you, *you* were the one who wanted to light this thing *inside my store*."

As the voices get closer, you realize that they might belong to the ones who caused the explosion, and, not sparing a second thought, you start heading towards them.

"Oh come on, that was-", she interrupts herself, noticing someone else's footsteps approaching.

„You hear that too, right?"

"Yup", he responds casually. „Looks like someone found out already."

"So this is... Kourindou?", you manage to say after the considerable letdown that was the opening of the shop's front door. „I imagined it to be... well, bigger... at least after what you told me."

After having been introduced to Rinnosuke and Nitori, who were quite surprised to see a lone human this deep inside the forest, they had offered to take you to Rinnosuke's shop and explain everything on the way. Apparently, they had tried to activate an item from the outside world called a „propane grill" but instead of functioning like intended, it had, well... exploded.

Your reserved reaction is met with a hearty laugh from the shopkeeper himself. „Well, you can probably guess that I don't get too many customers around here... So most of my inventory's in storage, I'm afraid! Usually, people just stop by and tell me what they're looking for, and then I go and fetch it. Come on, give it a try!", he offers with a slightly taunting smirk while holding out his right hand. Looking around the tiny interior of the store, you try to come up with something exotic for him to look for. Even though there's barely enough room in here for the three of you, Rinnosuke's somehow managed to stack shelves full of odd machines and contraptions along each wall, even right next to the door. Some of these things you've at least heard about before, „computers", „televisions", and „calculators", but others seem like outlandish creations from another dimension, some loosely dangling their wires from the shelves, others looking like entries into a „How many different random forms can we produce using metal" contest.

You rack your brain, trying to come up with something original, maybe even impossible to request, but owing to your lackluster knowledge of the outside world, there's simply nothing that comes to mind. Finally, you give up, and tell him to just show you the newest „computer" in his collection. Immediately, the tall, white-haired man's eyes light up, and with a grin, he disappears through a door behind his counter, just to come back a few seconds later with a flat, black device in his hand.

“Good timing you have, my boy! This came in just yesterday!“, he exclaims while waving it around in front of your face. „See here? It’s called ‚Atari Portfolio‘, and it’s a tiny computer that can fit into your pocket! And if you want to use it, you can open it, like this!“

Of course, since you have little to no knowledge of what „computers“ actually do, Rinnosuke’s explanations and his fascination for the little „Portfolio“ go straight over your head. Nonetheless, you do find yourself wanting to know more about the man’s shop and his trade.

“Nevermind the details about that computer“, you interject. „How come I’ve never heard of your shop? Surely, you get some human customers as well...“

The light of excitement in Rinnosuke’s eyes goes dim as he suddenly gets pulled back to reality by your remark.

“Well... I used to, a long time ago. Now, it’s mostly Youkai and their servants... The villagers tend to avoid my shop, precisely because I deal mostly with Youkai. It’s somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy.“, he says while grabbing something random lying around on his counter and fiddling with it. „Some even think my goods are cursed, since I get them from the other side of the border.“

This is not the first time you’ve heard rumors like that. Every now and then, a ‚weird‘ item appears in the human village, sometimes in the hands of someone who knows how to use it, and sometimes just randomly on the market. Come to think of it, those items are probably things Rinnosuke has sold at some point...

SLAM

Without any warning, the door to the shop bursts open, hitting the nearby shelves in the process. Inside the doorframe stands a young-looking girl with shoulder-length brown hair, accompanied by a crow. Before anyone can get out just a single word, she’s already raised her camera and started taking snapshots of the inside of the store.

“Aya, plea-“

“Yo!“, she cut him off. „I heard a big explosion in the neighborhood and came to investigate! You wouldn’t happen to know what caused it, Rinnosuke?“

And with that, she’d already entered the store and closed the door behind her again, bringing the number of people in the room up to four and taking up what little space was left. Instead of waiting for Rinnosuke to answer, she immediately walks up to you and starts taking pictures.

“And what do we have here? A mysterious young boy from the village? Could he be... the culprit?! I smell a scoop!“

Through the blinding flashes of the girl’s camera, you hear Nitori annoyed voice. „Cut it out, Aya. He’s here for the same reason as you, he saw the explosion and went to investigate.“

The flashes stop. „Ooh, so you’re a reporter as well, huh?“, she beams before stretching out her hand to shake yours. „Nice to meet you, my name’s Shameimaru Aya, head editor of the Bunbunmaru Newspaper!“

You return her greeting and try to clarify that, no, you’re not a reporter, but before you can explain any further, the girl’s already turned your handshake into a firm grasp and started dragging you out of the store. Almost simultaneously, you, Nitori and Rinnosuke exclaim something to the effect of „Hey, wait!“, but Aya’s too quick for the two unintentional arsonists to catch up with and before you know it, the two of you are up in the air, flying atop the forest trees.

“Wait... wait what?!“, you stammer as you notice your feet disconnecting from the ground, and as you rapidly ascend, your stammering turns into a loud cry of panic.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!“

As a human villager, you’ve of course never flown before. Sure, you’ve heard of Youkai that can do it, and even seen some flying in the distance, across the plains, towards Youkai mountain before, but that experience pales in comparison to actually flying yourself. In your spontaneous panic, you attempt to cling harder to Aya in order not to fall down. You reach for her waist with your other hand and manage to grab the rim of her skirt, much to her dismay.

With a swift motion, she comes to a halt just before the ascent to Youkai mountain, and hits you on the head with her hauchiwa fan.

“No no no, where do you think you’re touching? I know you can’t fly on your own, but that’s no reason to be pulling my skirt like that! If you’re really that scared about falling down, I can form a pocket of air beneath you that’ll make you feel like you’re just gliding along. How does that sound?“

Still out of breath from screaming for about a solid minute, her words take some time to reach your cranium. Then, it dawns on you.

“Y-you’re a Youkai, aren’t you?!“, you ask her, prompting a puzzled look from the flying reporter.

“Yes? Don’t tell me you’ve never met one of us before!“

“W-well, I live in the outskirts of the village, and rarely ever go to the market, and...“

“Well“, she interrupts your flustered stuttering. „Are you afraid of me?“

The question catches you offguard, and you find yourself thinking for a second that she could’ve meant something specific by it. „N-no... I just wish you’d fly a little less... quickly.“

“Haha, that I can do. But once we’re at my office, you’re gonna have to tell me all about your work in the village and how it can be that a fellow reporter has never met a Youkai before!“

Oh no. She’s onto me.

Even though the flight up Youkai mountain was a lot less rowdy than at the start, you still feel a bit sick as you arrive at Aya’s residence. It’s a common one-storey, traditional Japanese house, made completely out of wood and tucked inbetween a few trees just on the edge of the plateau atop the mountain peak. A small footpath leads down into the forest, and in the opposite direction, further down the plateau, a small shrine can be seen sitting on top of a large rock. All in all, it looks like a fairly desolate area to have an office in, but it all starts making sense as Aya opens the door and lets you in.

There is no office.

And there’s no editors, no writers, no photographers, either.

It’s just a typewriter sitting on top of a table in the corner of the living room, surrounded by stacks of paper that are half blank, and half filled to the edge with densely packed sentences. And to top it all off, there’s a tiny sign neatly affixed above the desk reading „文文。新聞事務所“.

“Looks like we both exaggerated, huh.“, you remark coyly as you eye the rest of the room for anything else that might stand out. Aya, however, responds with but a questioning look.

“Exaggerated? You’re talking about my office? It’s right here, can’t you see! I even have a second typewriter for when Momiji stops by to help me with articles.“

“If this is an office then I’m a reporter.“

“Oh... Wait, but then what were you doing in the woods? Was it you after all?!“

The crow tengu gets excited again and rushes up to you, grabbing you by the shoulders, despite being about a head shorter than you.

“I told you, it wasn’t me... If you had given Rinnosuke some time to explain, he could’ve told you that they were trying to test a... something from the outside world, and it blew up.“

“So that means you *are* a reporter!“, she says as the gleam in her eyes returns. „Because, as it just so happens, we here at Bunbunmaru are looking for young talents to help with our expansion project!“

“Oh? And what might that be?”, you ask with a good portion of fake curiosity.

“Something you might be excited to hear about – we’re gonna be expanding to the human village!”

“Remind me again why you think I’m the right person for this.”

As Aya rummages through her storage closet trying to find her second typewriter, you’re starting to seriously worry about what exactly this girl is planning to do with you. Not only do you need to return home to help with the farm tomorrow, the only writing experience you have is from school, and that was more than 5 years ago! This girl couldn’t seriously want you to write for her simply because you’re a human villager, and she’s planning to set up a new newspaper in the human village...

“I already told you! It’s because you’re a villager, and you know my future readers better than I ever will!”, she responds from the depths of her closet which she has now dove into hip-deep. As she wiggles around inside of it, you can’t help but notice her plaid skirt accenting the curves of her shapely butt. You force yourself to look somewhere else and respond: „Even so, I’ve never had any formal writing education! You can’t just-“

“You’ve learned to write at school, right?”, she interrupts you, leaning back out of the closet again. You respond with a short nod. „Then you can write.“ And she’s back inside again.

“Aha, found it!”, she hums happily as she procures a dusty, old, all-metal typewriter. Even though you’ve only seen a few of these things while shopping at the market, even you know that this one is a particularly old specimen that’s probably more of a stopgap solution than something you could actually rely on for daily use.

“That looks like it’ll break within my first week here.”

Your straightforward attitude is met by the tengu with a pout. „Don’t be so rude to my equipment! Just 50 years ago, I used to write everything with a fountain pen made out of one of my own feathers! It took *ages* to write just one article!“

There are many, many questions you want to ask her after that little tirade, but before you can even open her mouth, she’s already moved on to another topic.

“See, it’s not gonna be that hard at all. You can still live in the town as you’re used to, all I’m asking you to do is keep your eyes open and keep tabs on the important stuff that’s happening. You write down things as they’re happening, and at the end of the day, I stop by to collect everything!“

“But I already work on the fields all day! I’m tired as fuck when I come back home, and then I gotta head out to the market and try to get info on what’s happening? That’s just way too much!“

For what may very well be the first time today, Aya stops and thinks. Just for a moment though, and then she already has a solution ready.

“Why don’t you split up your time? Maybe work less on the field, and go to the market more instead? Or talk to someone who does, ask them to ask around for you? I’m sure you can reach a compromise, and it’s not like writing down a few things you’ve overheard anyways takes that much time... Unless you really like working on the fields, I guess?“

For a second, you’re stumped. Yes, you really don’t like working on the fields that much, and you used to long for a job in the village when you were younger, but... as the first-born son, you’d been forced to shelve that dream as soon as you’d left school. Maybe, just maybe, you could convince your parents that-

“Oh, and of course, I shall pay you appropriately. Depending on how popular the newspaper is, of course, but we could start at a rate of... lets say, 20,000 yen per week?“

Now *that* was a good argument to have in your pocket for the upcoming negotiations.

The talk went surprisingly well. After having heard the monthly sum that you'd bring into the house just from working for Aya a few hours per day, your dad had agreed almost instantly. „That alone will make us more than this month's crop income! And it's a stable job that holds through winter too, right? We can finally have some money to count on!“

He'd also explained that he had originally hoped for your younger brother to become the one working in the village for a stable, season-independent source of income, but that he thought this was an opportunity you shouldn't miss out on. And so, with the blessings from your father (as well as your mother and brother, who seemed to be rather uninvested in the matter to begin with), you went to Kourindou again, in order to have Rinnosuke tell Aya. To your surprise, Nitori just so happened to be there as well and offered to take you with her to the base of Youkai mountain, where her folk of Kappa lived. It was also then that you finally realized that both Nitori and Rinnosuke were also Youkai. Having cleared that up, Nitori and you started heading for Kappa Valley.

“So, I understand that you Kappa are good with machinery and technology, but why exactly is that? From what I understand, Kappa live in rivers and attack human hikers and steal their souls by-“

“Nononono!“, she quickly interjects before you can finish your sentence. „That's the Kappa of the outside world. Here in Gensokyo, we have a long tradition of machine building and engineering. In fact, some of the products you use in your village are manufactured here in Kappa Valley!“

“And some of Rinnosuke's inventory too, I bet.“

“Nope! He's too much of a purist for that. Only stuff he finds himself or buys off of other people. Although...“, she adds with a wide grin „really, he himself sometimes can't tell whether it comes from us or from the outside.“

Before long, Nitori has successfully guided you through the – according to her – dangerous forest of magic, and the two of you end up in front of a large, metal gate surrounded by walls on both sides.

“Believe it or not, our inventions are very prone to being stolen! So we had to, uh, take some precautions.“, she explains as she fumbles out a key from her pocket and inserts it into a small lock on the side of the gate. Instead of the gate opening, however, it just reveals a small strip of plastic with something shining on the inside. In a routine motion, Nitori then proceeds to take off her hat and hold it in front of the shining strip, prompting a metallic clicking noise, and finally, the opening of the gates.

“I'm particularly proud of this one. It scans the code on your hat to register entries and exits.

Reverse-engineered it from something Rinnosuke found. Or, well, I took it apart, found out the part that did this, and put it in the gate mechanism. But hey, it works!“

Needless to say, you had understood every word she said, nodding in agreement.

“Anyways, it's just a short turn left here, and then we're at the printing office.“

“Oh, so this is where Aya's newspaper is actually printed?“

“Yep!“, Nitori said cheerily. „And not just the Bunbunmaru, we also print the Kakashi Spirit News here!“ She steps ahead of you, holds her hat close to the door again, and, uh, „scans“ it.

“Oh? A rival publication?“

“Well, you *could* say that...“, she responds hesitantly before opening the door and letting you in.

“Anyways, Aya should be here in half an hour or so. Sadly, I've got to get going already, but I'm sure you'll find plenty of stuff to read here to pass the time.“

“Ah, thank you for everything, Nitori! You've been a huge help.“, you manage to respond as she's already halfway out of the door already. „If there's ever anything a simple farmboy can help you out with, feel free to ask me!“

“Haha, I'll remember that!“, Nitori responds, already on the street, smiling and waving back at you. „Take care, and don't let that Tengu work you to death!“

The first 10 minutes of waiting at the printing office pass uneventfully. There's not much here besides a small waiting room, a stove, some tea utensils, and a whole bunch of old newspapers lying around, but if you had to guess, there's probably only two people frequenting this place anyways – Aya and whoever the author of the „Kakashi Spirit News“ is. You pick up one of the newspapers strewn about – it's an edition of the Bunbunmaru from over a year ago. Wondering just how rarely this place gets cleaned, you pick up another paper. This one is a lot thinner and lighter than the Bunbunmaru, at perhaps half its page count. Its title: „Kakashi Spirit News“.

Having gotten curious, you take a closer look at it. Compared to the Bunbunmaru, the Kakashi has much more text and smaller-scale pictures, which are also generally less high-quality. Some of them are outright blurred and seem to have been taken with either an extremely old camera by a different process entirely. Just as you're about to start reading the head article about the supposed appearance of a „UFO“, you hear the door unlocking and someone entering.

You put down the newspaper and turn around, ready to greet Aya, but are instead met with a small, inconspicuous girl. She's got long brown hair, tied into twintails, and is wearing a shirt that looks like it was once white, as well as a purple-and-black plaid skirt that not only looks like it hasn't been ironed in years, but is also rather short for even her size.

Upon noticing you, she shoots you a quick glare, then immediately proceeds to the door on the other side of the room. As she paces by you, you notice that she is carrying some sort of manuscript with her. You can't read what it says on it, however, and before you can ask her, she's already disappeared into the other room. Luckily, the walls are thin enough to be able to hear her conversation with who you suppose is a worker at the printing machine.

“F-four hundred this time, please.”

“...going down again?”

“Gh! J-just a temporary measure as we... r-restructure our editorial department...”

The Kappa sighs loudly enough that you can hear it. „You know, we usually don't do jobs of less than 500 copies for this price anymore... Every time you start this thing up, it costs quite a bit of electricity, and so the longer it keeps running, the less you have to pay per page... I'm sure you know how it works, Miss Himekaidou.”

“O-of course! T-that's why I said, i-it's just for this week! We'll be back to 500 next week, a-and by the time we launch in the human village, we'll double that, easily!”

Wait, so the Kakashi Spirit News are also planning to expand to the village? This could be interesting...

“Alright alright, I get it“, the kappa's exhausted voice cuts her off. „Just for this week, 400 copies for the usual price per unit, but we can't keep doing you favors like this for much longer, you know?”

“O-of course not! I-I w-would never ask something like that from you!“, the girl manages to stutter out before leaving with a hasty „A-as always, t-thank you for your support!“ and emerging out of the doorway again.

As she steps out and notices your eyes on her, she flinches for a second. Before she can regain her composure, you start talking to her.

“You're from the Kakashi Spirit News, right?”

The girl flinches again, awkwardly hiding her hands in her pockets.

“Y-yes... W-what do you want?”

“Well, umm... I'm actually also a reporter, or rather, I'm becoming one... A-and I would like to tell you good luck with your newspaper!”

She's halfway through stammering out a silent „T-thank you...” before stopping herself and going over what she just heard again. „Wait, if you're a reporter too... A-and I don't remember hiring anybody... D-does that mean... Y-you work... for Aya?”

“Yup, that's right! She picked me up from Kourindou at one point, and-“

Before you could even finish your sentence, the girl had already rushed over to your seat and knelt down next to you, bringing the two of you on about eye level.

“Y-you’re one of her village reporters, correct?“, she asks intently, breathing slightly more heavily than usual, either because of her excitement or because she ran across the room so fast.

“Well, uhh, I suppose-“

“D-don’t listen to her! She probably promised you a large sum of money every week, right? She’s promised that a lot of lonely boys, all around the village, and she’s used her charms to sell it! There’s no way she’ll be able to pay you all, so she’ll just keep delaying payments, or maybe use some mind manipulation to make you forget about it! You can’t trust this woman, she’s been in the business for hundreds of years, and she’s become dull to the point where journalistic ethics don’t matter to her anymore! I-I’ve gone against her with my own newspaper for a long time, I know what I’m talking about! Please, don’t do this to yourself!!“

As she spouts all these accusations, she clenches down on your arm tightly with her hands, shaking it as if to give her words more weight. „Please, stop before it’s too late!“, she says as tears start forming in her eyes.

You yank your arm away from her, telling her to calm down.

“If what you say is true, why hasn’t anyone else told me about it yet?“, you ask her.

“I’ve written about it in my last few publications, but she keeps surpressing my newspaper everywhere, especially in the village! That’s why I need someone trustworthy who will help me spread the truth to the people! You must’ve overheard my conversation in there, I fly around for hours every day delivering my newspapers and yet I can’t even distribute 400 of them before she stops me... A-all the shops are under her control, and her circulation is over 2000 copies per day! A-and when I try to get a shop to sell my newspaper, t-they just tell me... ,No, Aya said you’d ruin our reputation‘... a-and things like that... h-hii...“

With every sentence, she gets more and more teary-eyed until she finally breaks out into a soft but desperate cry. As she wipes away her tears with her hands, you notice she has odd, red marks on her wrists. Then, it dawns on you.

- This girl is a psycho! [Aya-route]

- This girl needs help! [Hatate-route]

- Man, I wanna FUCK a Kappa! [Nitori-route, fucking never]

- This girl needs help! [Hatate-route]

Following a sudden impulse, you grab her by the wrists. She instinctively shrieks and tries to wind herself out of your grasp, but to no avail – you're far stronger than her.

"These are cutting wounds, aren't they."

She stops moving and looks you straight in the eye.

"P-please don't tell anyone..."

Even though you've never had to deal with someone like her before, you feel like you know what you need to do.

"I won't, don't worry... In fact, I want to help you get through this. I-if all these things you say really are true... I want to help you fight against Aya."

Upon hearing these words, her pained face loosens up just a little bit, and her mouth forms a tiny, but cute smile.

"Y-you mean it?", she asks as innocently as a child who's just been told by their parent that they didn't do anything wrong.

"Yes. I... I believe you."

As the two of you exit the printing office, the girl suddenly quickly pulls you into a back alley. Before you can ask her what she's doing, she's already put her finger on your lips in a „shh“ motion. Caught up in the moment, you comply.

"Aya's here. She's looking for you. Looks like we made it just in time."

You throw a glance onto the street, and indeed, there she is, landing just in front of the printing office before scanning a little card by the door and entering.

"Alright, she'll be busy for a minute or two now. This is our chance, let's move!"

"Wait... I-I don't even know your name yet!"

The girl stops for a second before turning back towards you and smiling.

"You eavesdropped on me already, didn't you? My name's Hatate. Hatate Himekaidou!"

And with that, just like Aya had done the day before, Hatate grabs you by the hand and flies off with you towards Youkai mountain. This time around, you've gotten a little more used to flying, so the experience is not bad enough to make you scream, and contrary to Aya, Hatate doesn't seem to mind you clinging to her skirt, either.

Maybe you really had done the right thing.

Without further disturbances, you eventually reach Hatate's house in the middle of the Youkai forest, close to the base of the mountain. Contrary to Aya's house, there is no beautiful view over all of Gensokyo from here, and it is quite humid due to the thick forest around you. Hatate's „house“ is more of a shack, too, with there only being three rooms and a small attic from what you can tell. The front door creaks as the tengu opens it, and the damp smell of unwashed linen and old tea leaves blows into your face.

"S-sorry for the mess, I... I don't u-usually have visitors...", the girl shyly excuses herself before asking you to wait outside for a bit so she can clean up a little. After about 10 minutes, she returns, visibly exhausted, and invites you in. The old floor boards creak under your weight as you set foot into the living room, which is comparable in size to your bedroom back at home. On your right stands a shoe rack, stacked not with shoes but with old books, next to which is a door that you can only guess leads to the restroom. Opposite you is the entrance to a very messy-looking kitchen, to the left of which a futon has been spread out between all sorts of electrical devices, boxes and other accessories. At its footend stands a lone, apparently also electrically powered heating apparatus. That's it.

“Well, umm, Hatate-“

“Oh“, she interjects. „Y-you can call me Hata-chan.“

“Ah, well...“, you try to sound not too flustered „H-Hata-chan, i-isn‘t it a bit dark in here?“

You point to the closed curtains on the only window in the room. The girl escapes a small „oh!“ before she hurries not to the window, but to a little switch next to the entrance door. She flips it, and a dim light starts shining from the ceiling.

„T-thank you...“, you say as you try to think of a conversation topic that won‘t make her mad. „I-is this where you work?“

Upon being asked about her work, she visibly lightens up again. „Oh, yes! I can show you, give me a second!“

She bends over her futon and gets into a position the designer of her skirt definitely did not have in mind. From a tiny cupboard situated underneath the only window in the room, she procures a thin slate, and in doing so, accidentally reveals the gorgeous sight of her purple-and-white frilled panties. She then sits down on her futon, opens the slate, and gestures you to sit down next to her. For about 5 seconds, you try finding a spot on the futon that isn‘t weirdly colored before giving up and just sitting down next to her. To your surprise, the other part of the slate has a layout quite similar to what Rinnosuke showed you yesterday... The portfolio or whatever. On the top is a „screen“ for viewing data and on the bottom a „keyboard“ for putting in data. Despite her initially slightly offputting nature, Hatate’s actually very patient and enthusiastic in explaining you how this slate works and how she writes articles using it. For the next few hours, the two of you are submerged in the art of journalism, with Hatate teaching you the very basics and laying out her plans for your cooperation over the next few months.

Essentially, she wants you to do the same for her as Aya, but there’s one problem with that: Aya already knows what you look like, and could track you down in the village quite easily. So, instead of going to the market during the morning, when it’s easy for Aya to find you, the plan involves you staying at the farm throughout the day as usual, and only going to the village in the evening, when Aya would be busy editing the paper for the following day. Finally, Hatate would stop by around midnight and collect things as necessary. According to her, this was better anyways, since she preferred working through the night and delivering her paper at noon, rather than during the morning.

Hatate’s explanations grow increasingly complex as time passes, and before you know it, it’s already gotten dark outside. She’s just about to switch to the topic of proving Aya’s malicious deeds to all of Gensokyo when you tell her that it’s late and you’d like to go home again.

“A-ah, yes, of course!“, Hatate says as she stands up as well, seemingly having forgotten that she’d have to bring you back home again. As you head out of the front door, the moon is already high up in the sky, and you ask Hatate for the time. In response, she pulls a little device out of her cleavage and flips it open. „Half past eight.“

“Ah, that means I’ve missed dinner. Oh well-“

“I-if you want to... I-I can make dinner for us here...“

Images of her dirty kitchen force their way into your mind.

“N-no thanks, I’m sure my family has left something over for me... They always make too much food, anyways... M-maybe next time.“

Just 10 minutes later, Hatate sets you down in front of your farm. She’s about to take flight again when she turns around, as if having forgotten something.

“O-oh, before I forget it... I-it’s custom at Kakashi to... have an editorial meeting o-once every week... A-are you free anytime d-during the week?“, she asks as you get your shoes ready.

“Oh, sure. I have Sundays off, so... around 10, maybe?“

Hatate smiles a little. „Let’s say 12, okay? I’ll pick you up, as usual.“

“Sounds good.“, you respond, before waving her off and then treading back into the same old home you’ve always slept in.

You sleep surprisingly well that night for not having had dinner.

During breakfast, you tell your family about the change in plans, being careful not to mention anything about the situation between Aya and Hatate – all they needed to know was that you'd be gone during the evenings now, and that manuscripts would be picked up late at night.

Of course, this also meant that you would have more work in total, as you couldn't substitute farmwork for time spent investigating in the village. But if what Hatate said was true, then that was still a better deal than working for free for someone who just wanted to rip you off. Just thinking about you made the blood rise to your head – who would shamelessly use other people for their own goals like that?! And how could you have trusted her so blindly?

They say frustration makes you work harder, and today, you experience the truth in that. Before you even know, you've already finished work on the fields, and it's barely even 4PM. After checking back with your father, who affirms that you're done for the day, you head out for the village.

It's been a while, maybe two or three months, since you've taken this road, but its beauty is just as stunning as you remember it to be. Even though it's little more than a simple gravel path lined with the tracks of merchant carts, it leads right through the heart of the vast, green valley that the human village is located in, following the river along its way. It takes about half an hour for you to get there, but the walking felt more relaxing than strenuous, and you find yourself thinking a lot about whom to ask about information.

You don't know most villagers that well, as you rarely go there, but there's a few people you talk to whenever you're there, one of them being the son of the local sake brewery's owner who sells their produce at the market. Naturally, as they're the only brewery in town, almost everyone stops by their stand at least once a week to stock up on alcohol, so he's always on top of things when it comes to the big events in town. That said, since everyone knows he's a popular guy with a big mouth, he's probably not gonna know too many 'exciting' things about the other villagers, so for real scoops, you'd probably have to look elsewhere.

As you rack your brain trying to think of someone who'd divulge such secrets to you, you absentmindedly bump into someone while walking around a corner, causing them to trip and fall. You snap back to reality and are greeted with the sight of a young girl with light-brown hair lying on the ground, surrounded by the books she had been carrying just a second ago. She's maybe 7 or 8 years younger than you and is wearing a wide-sleeved plaid shirt with a yellow apron on top. You immediately switch into apologetic-mode and offer to help her up before helping her collect her books. As she begins to stack them up in front of herself again, you realize that she's been carrying quite a lot for someone as small as her and, wanting to make up for the red marks on her forehead, offer to help her carry the books to her destination.

It's clear that she doesn't really know how to react at first, her eyes dart across the street as if trying to avoid you, and her inability to answer rounds it all off, but before she knows it, you've already picked up some of the books yourself and asked her „Well, where do we need to go?“, which earns you a pout from the little girl.

“F-fine.“, she says, and starts walking down the street again, with you following behind.

“So, uhh... what's your name?“, you ask, hoping to break the ice a little.

“K-Kosuzu... What's yours?“

After telling her your name, you ask her where she's headed, to which she replies that she's bringing books she bought at the market to the book-renter that she works at called „Suzunaan“.

Luckily, it's fairly close by, and before long, the two of you have entered the small, charming book store and loaded the books onto the counter in front. Curious, you take a look around.

“Nobody's here, huh? Not even anyone behind the counter...“

“Oh, dad's probably in the back, sorting out the delivery we got yesterday... Daad, I'm back!“

Her call prompts a large, surprisingly muscular man to appear from the doorway behind the counter, greeting the two of you with a smile.

“Ah, good job as always. I see you brought a friend?“, he gestures in your direction.

“Ah, that’s... not really, I...”

“Haha, I didn’t pay attention and ran into her, so I offered to make up for it by helping her carry everything. Sorry for the troubles.”, you explain. The smile on the man’s face grows larger.

“Ah, what a delightfully common story! It’s good to see there’s still upright people like you, could I maybe offer you some tea in return for your kindness?”

Your first thought is of politely turning him down, but just as you start answering, your gaze stumbles over a stack of newspapers lying on the edge of the counter, next to the weekly book recommendations.

“*Kakashi Spirit News*”

The tea is way better than you’d expected. At home, your family is usually fairly conservative with the amount of leaves used, as it saves money, but in this household, that problem seems too far-fetched to even consider. It’s a rich herbal tea, filled with too many flavors for you to tell them all apart, and somehow, it’s particularly effective at loosening your tongue. After complimenting them on the tea, you try shifting the conversation to where you want it.

“Truth be told, I couldn’t help but notice the stack of newspapers on your counter there... I thought the *Kakashi* wasn’t sold inside the village?”

“Oh!”, the shopkeeper exclaims. „Want to take a look? It is quite rare for humans to be interested in it, and in fact, we’re the only shop that sells them in the entire village...”

You accept his offer and reach over to pull the topmost paper off the stack. Its headline reads „Debate sparks over new Myouren Temple“, featuring a picture of a large, buddhist temple in front of what looks like the eastern gates of the village. You haven’t been there for a while, and you’ve definitely never heard of a „Myouren Temple“ before, so you start reading curiously. That is, until your host interrupts you.

“You really do find them interesting, huh? The articles, I mean.”

You nod.

“There’s two, maybe three people who regularly go here to buy the *Kakashi*... Everyone else just complains about the articles being too long, there not being enough pictures, and about the fact that the news are aimed more at Youkai than at humans.”

“Ah, actually...” , you begin. „I... I kinda started working for them now. *Kakashi*, I mean.”

Upon hearing this, the owner’s eyes widen. „Really? Don’t tell me they’re planning to expand to our village, too?”

The way he said this makes you believe that he already knows about Aya’s plans. Did she advertise it everywhere already, while Hatate failed to do the same?

“I suppose you’ve already heard about the Bunbunmaru’s plans, then.”

“Why of course! That’s basically the big news in town right now! Rumor is Aya’s already looking for new writers, too... even though practically everyone in town is so busy already. It won’t be easy for her! But Hatate...” , he ponders, and falls silent for a bit. „I don’t know if she can compete. She’s a nice girl, honest and hard-working, but... she just doesn’t have the same sensationalist streak... I don’t think a... „village version“ of the *Kakashi*, so to speak, would be very popular. They’re barely reading newspapers as is, and if anything, most people are interested in flashy pictures and scoops, and Aya’s simply unbeatable when it comes to that.”

Spotting an opportunity, you interject: „Well, if you’d like to help... I’m currently looking for stories to report on. I don’t really know how the editing process works just yet, but I’m sure if they’re interesting enough, they’ll be published!”

“Well”, he says with a smile „in that case...”

During the next 4 hours, you learn quite a lot about book trade, rental and sales in the town. While the owner, named Kosuke, turns out to be particularly fond of telling stories about his own shop, he also displays quite a lot of knowledge about the other shops in the village, as well as some of the commercial customs of the more human-friendly Youkai. One of the stories he was able to tell centered around a rabbit-girl from the moon who regularly visited the town in disguise in order to sell medicine so powerful, it was said to cure almost any common ailment with just a single drop. And just like the faithful reporter that you are, you write it all down, page for page, in a little notebook that was once supposed to be your diary for the next year.

Note to self: Ask Hatate for writing materials.

When you started heading back, the sun had already left the horizon behind long ago, and the town had fallen silent. Now, on the track back to your farm, it's even more silent, with only the moon and the occasional late-summer cicada breaking through the dark of the night. You catch yourself looking forward to seeing Hatate again, and telling her about all the interesting stories Kosuke had told you. You're sure there's going to be at least two or three worthy of an in-depth report in there. As you return home, you're glad to see that you haven't been forgotten during dinner this time - the soup pot is still a quarter full and there's 3 slices of bread left on the table, one more than usual. After dinner, you head upstairs into your room and go over your notes again. You count 15 pages in total, which you think is a pretty good start. Just as you're sorting through them, you hear a tap on your window. You look over and are greeted by Hatate's grinning face. She waves at you, and you hurry to open the window for her, letting her in.

"Hi!", she says cheerily. „How'd it go?“

"Really well, I think!", you say in an attempt to sound less overconfident than you actually are.

„The notes are all on my table, take a look for yourself.“

Hatate moves over to your table and carefully studies the pieces of paper spread out across it. They carry headings such as „Village people concerned about Myouren temple“, „The secret life of Youkai traders“ and „Town hall barred after drunken fight“. After a few minutes of immersing herself in your notes, she looks back up at you and says: „Wow. And that's just from today?“

"Umm, y-yes.", you respond, taken aback by her reaction. Was she... impressed?

"Holy shit... This is enough for an entire week! Sure, some things need to be fleshed out a little, but that's nothing I can't do myself... And those titles! I could just copy those one to one for the paper! This is... this is really awesome!"

With every word that leaves her mouth, Hatate seems to be getting more and more excited, until finally, she just jumps at you to hug you. You can feel her modest chest press against yours as she locks her arms around you and squeezes you against her. The sweet smell of the girl's sweat, coupled with a hint of the fragrance of her home, wafts up into your nostrils.

"Thanks for your hard work! I'm counting on you tomorrow as well, okay?", she chirps before releasing you again. You notice too late that your face has turned bright red from her sudden display of affection, and try to hide it by turning away, but to no avail.

"Hehe, you embarrassed? Never been hugged by a girl before?", she giggles. You're caught off-guard, and before you can answer, she adds „I guess it's not that unusual for a country boy... Well, at least you'll get to go out more in this line of work“.

"T-that's not it! You just surprised me, that's all..."

"Whatever you say~", she teases you as she picks up your notes and stuffs them into the hem of her skirt. „Well, I'll come back tomorrow then. Unless...", she pauses „there's something else you need from me?“

"Oh, yeah, actually. Umm, I kinda don't have any writing material of myself... So... could you lend me some?"

Your words cause Hatate's face to show a hint of irritation, but only for a bit, and then she's back to her usual, casual self. „Oh, sure. I'll stop by to bring you some tomorrow. You're fine until then, right?", she asks, already halfway out of the window again.

“Sure, I’ll manage somehow.”, you respond. „Take care, and good luck with the editing!“

“Thanks! See you tomorrow then!“

And just like that, she takes off into the moonlit night.

Hatate made good on her promise the next day, and returned to pick up your notes with a few notebooks and pencils in tow. Again, you had managed to gather lots of info, this time talking to the loquacious sake seller, and again, Hatate ‚rewarded‘ you with an almost overenthusiastic seeming hug. However, the following days turned out a bit less fruitful, as you weren’t lucky enough to just randomly bump into interesting people, and many villagers didn’t want to talk to you after you’d mentioned the name „Kakashi Spirit News“. There really seemed to be a widespread dislike for the paper, but nobody could or wanted to explain to you why.

And before you knew it, Sunday morning came around.

Today is way too hot for late September... And I’ve been standing here for almost an hour now...

Braving the intense heat, you’ve decided to come out early in order to wait for Hatate, but even now, she’s nowhere to be seen, and you’re starting to get impatient. Then, it appears.

At first, it’s just a small spot on the horizon. Then, it becomes larger, and more shapely – the silhouette of a young woman with twintails, flying through the air at speeds any vehicle in the town couldn’t even dream of reaching. Finally, she descends, landing right in front of you.

“Sorry I’m late, overslept.“

“Overslept? It’s almost 1PM!“, you respond in disbelief. Even if it’s Sunday, how long does this girl sleep?

“Hey, give me a break here.“, she yawns at you. „I already wake up at 10 every morning in order to get the papers delivered on time, I should at least get to sleep in properly on Sundays. Or was there anything you needed me here for at noon?“

Knowing the last question was a rhetorical one, you overhear it and decide to just get going. Last night, the two of you had spontaneously decided to go to town together in order to consolidate some important information and maybe work out a strategy for the first week of publication slated to begin in October.

Even though you’ve gotten used to walking down the path to the town by now, walking it with Hatate seems like a completely different experience. She tells you about the many places she’s been to during the past week, and how she’s friends with quite a lot of Youkai but hasn’t been to the human village that often. When you tell her about the owner of the bookshop selling her newspaper, she gets excited like a little girl and proclaims that „We’ll go meet him first then!“

Time passes fast, and before you realize it, you’re standing in front of Suzunaan again.

“Excuse the intrusion!“, Hatate announces herself as she steps through the front door, only to be met with silence. „Noone here?“, she asks puzzled.

“Maybe one of them went out... as far as I know, it’s just one guy with his daughter running this place.“, you explain to her. Just then, a small head peeks out behind the corner of the counter, and, upon seeing you, the rest of Kosuzu’s body follows.

“H-hi! You came back...“, she says shyly, keeping her distance from Hatate.

“Yup! And I brought the nice lady with me who’s responsible for the newspaper you sell here. May I introduce you: Hatate, this is Kosuzu, Kosuzu, this is Hatate.“

“Nice to meet you!“, the crow tengu beams, and Kosuzu, in a weird mixture of reluctance and dutiful respect, shakes her hand. „N-nice to meet you as well, Miss Hatate...“

“Your dad’s out, I guess?“, you ask, and Kosuzu nods. „He should be back soon, though. Just running some errands... I-if you’d like, I can set up some tea for you!“

“Only if it’s not too much trouble.“, you respond. „Hatate would like to meet your father to thank him for supporting her newspaper.“

“S-sure, I’ll be right back!“

And with that, little Kosuzu disappeared behind the counter again.

“How cute.“, Hatate remarks, and you can’t help but agree. „That was the girl you ran into, right?“

“Yeah. After seeing her lying inbetween all those books, I felt like I just had to help her.“

“Eh, she’s probably used to carrying that many. Not like she started working here only recently, right?“

“I guess.“, you shrug. Suddenly, Hatate takes a step towards you, and leans in to whisper into your ear: „You... you don’t have a thing for little girls like her, right?“

The question stumps you. What was this tengu implying?!

“You mean... romantically?“

“Yeah. Like, I’ve met some weird Youkai in my time, and... I guess I just wanna make su-“

“Oh, no no no, you’ve gotten the completely wrong idea!“, you cut her off hastily. „I mean, I’m sure she’ll grow up to be a fine woman one day, worthy of taking over her father’s business, but right now, I mean, she’s just a little girl, and-“

“Alright, alright, I get it.“, Hatate says with a notable amount of relief in her voice. „Just wanted to make sure, hehe. A Youkai can never know with you humans.“

Even though you don’t want to admit it, you can feel your face turning red again. Does this girl enjoy making you embarrassed or something?!

Before you can get back at her, however, Kosuzu has already returned and placed a tray with a pot and four cups on the couch table.

“Make yourselves at home, daddy should be back soon.“, she smiles at you two, but Hatate for some reason has to suppress a giggle. After a few minutes of tea and irrelevant chatter, a shape suddenly appears at the doorstep. Kosuzu is the first to notice it, and instinctively shifts a bit closer to you. Taking this as a prompt, you turn your head towards the entrance and turn white.

There, in front of you, the newest issue of Bunbunmaru tucked under her arm, stands...

Aya.

Your first instinct is trying to hide, but there is, of course, nowhere to hide. The three of you are sitting right out in the open, and as Aya’s view glides across the room, she finally notices you, and a soft, almost innocent look of surprise washes across her face.

She calls out your name, and at that point, Hatate turns her head as well. Immediately, Aya’s face turns sour, and she starts pacing towards her, eyes darting between you and the crow tengu.

It is Hatate who speaks first.

“So you’ve finally tracked him down, huh? I guess you-“

SMACK

Before she can finish her sentence, Aya has gotten close to her and smacked her across the face, shutting her up.

“What do you think you’re doing?!“, she yells at the girl sitting next to you, who looks like she’s too busy assessing the reality of the current situation to answer.

“Rivalry is one thing, but stealing my co-workers?!“ She turns to you. „Did you really believe her? I bet she’s made all sorts of empty promises, didn’t she? Actually, knowing her, I wouldn’t be surprised if she offered you se-“

“SHUT UP!!“

The loud shriek makes Kosuzu jump, and she starts clinging to the side of your shirt.

“I’m just saying it like it is, you know! I haven’t forgotten about your past, Hatate, and I’m quite aware of what you’re capable of! You’d do anything to keep your newspaper relevant, even-“

Now it’s Hatate’s time to slap Aya – or at least, that’s what she must be thinking as she leaps over the backrest of the couch and extends her arm in an attempt to hit her rival. However, Aya’s simply too fast for her, and dodges her attack easily. Acting as if it hadn’t even happened, she addresses you directly again.

“You can’t be okay with this, right? She must’ve tricked you into it!“

Sensing an opportunity to calm down the situation, you respond.

“Please, you two. Let’s settle this like civilized people, not like a bunch of wild crows. Besides, you’re scaring little Kosuzu here.”

However, your response only earns a dry laugh from Aya.

“Ah, I see how it is now. You’re one of those guys who really like weak women, huh? Is that it?! You saw Hatate and thought to yourself: ‘Oh, what a poor girl, running a paper all on her own, and even though she really tries her best, no one reads it!’ - That’s what you were thinking, isn’t it?!”

“Aya, if you could stop insulting us for a minute, we might actually listen to-“

“Oh, no.“, she cuts you off. „No, no, no. I see already what has happened, and I don’t want anything to do with it. Just so you know, you’re stuck with a little self-harming pile of crap now who thinks of herself as a ‚journalist‘. I’m sure there’ll be lots more fun stuff for you to discover, but that’s on you now. I really did have a wrong first impression of you. Sorry for getting your hopes up.“

And with that, she leaves as swiftly as she had appeared, leaving you alone with a shivering Kosuzu and a sobbing Hatate.

After the scene with Aya, Hatate had suddenly jumped up and dragged you out of the shop and into the nearest back alley, silently suppressing her tears all the way. When she finally stopped halfway through a damp, dirty alleyway, she sunk onto her knees and began crying loudly.

Being faced with such a situation for the first time in your life, you’re completely unsure of what to do next, and, unable to think of a better thing to do, go down on your knees as well to embrace her. She doesn’t resist, and, after a while, responds in kind, burying her face into your shoulder. For 5 or 6 minutes, she holds onto you like this and cries until her tears stop, and all that’s left of her is a whimpering, shivering figure.

You raise your hand above her head and pet her. Once, twice. Three times.

“Do you feel better now?“, you ask, and Hatate finds no answer. Her deep, irregular breaths vibrate against your body as she pulls you even closer, grasping your back as if you were the only thing keeping her from falling into a dark, deep abyss. Then, finally, she whispers.

“Please... can we stay like this... just a little longer?“

You nod, and close your eyes in an attempt to calm down not just her, but yourself, as well. Some part of you is secretly very proud of how well you’re handling this, but most of you is busy replaying what had just happened in that book store. Aya had said some really mean things, but were they true? Or was she really just that much of a despicable person? You want to ask Hatate at some point, but now is really not the right time, that much you know.

After a few more sniffles, Hatate loosens her embrace, and you slowly back away from her a little. She looks at you helplessly, tiny paths of tears still streaming down her eyes, her mouth slightly open, as if gasping for air on the surface of an endless ocean.

“Y-you see... why I don’t like her now...“, she manages to voice between her sniffles, and as she gets up, and you offer her your help, she adds: „Thanks. I... don’t know what I would have done there without you...“

She clumsily grasps your hands and pulls herself up by them, and as you look down on her, you can’t help but notice the red streaks on her arms again. Hatate looks up at you, follows your gaze, and quickly withdraws her hands, clumsily hiding them in her pockets.

She tries to say something, tries to force out words in an attempt to justify herself, but to you, there’s nothing to justify here. Instead, you grab her hands again and put them together with yours in front of her face.

“Hey, remember? We were gonna have fun at the market today.“, you say as you look into her eyes.

„Oh, and let’s not forget the editorial meeting! Can’t be a real newspaper without that!“

Your overly serious remark succeeds in evoking a small smile from Hatate, and you smile back.

Maybe this day could still turn out well after all.

After something that turned out to be more of a date than a journalistic investigation, the two of you leave the town and head for Hatate's hut on Youkai mountain. This time, you're allowed to enter immediately, and although her room isn't quite as... relatively tidy as it was last time, you find yourself not caring that much about the empty food boxes and random pieces of underwear strewn about. Having experienced how Aya treated her, and how often she probably went through this sort of treatment, you suddenly felt much more sympathetic about Hatate than before.

In fact, it's starting to look to you like the only one who wants to have a 'rivalry' here is Aya, and it doesn't seem far-fetched to say that she's only doing it to feel better about herself – after all, Hatate's Spirit News is nowhere close to seriously threatening the sales of the Bunbunmaru, and therefore, Aya might just as well ignore her.

"S-sorry for the mess..." , Hatate excuses herself, but you wave it off.

"It's fine, if I lived on my own, my room would probably look similarly... chaotic."

Again, Hatate gives a small giggle, but it's more subdued than on the days before. The quarrels with Aya must really get to her.

"Oh, is it fine if I use your bathroom for a bit? We've been out for quite a long time, and I just forgot about it..."

"Sure, sure, make yourself at-", she stops. „Oh, give me just a second, actually."

Hastily, she disappears into the bathroom and you can hear her turn on the sink. Had she been using it to wash her underwear today? Before you can ponder it any further, she's already returned with an excusatory look on her face. „A-all clear now!", she says awkwardly, before returning to her futon and pretending to be busy with her computer.

As you enter the bathroom, you find nothing out of the ordinary, but also no underwear. It's fairly cramped in here, and there's only barely enough space for the sink and the toilet. How does this girl shower? Deciding not to pursue the question any further for fear of finding out things you weren't supposed to, you concentrate on just doing your business instead.

Barely a minute later, you open the door to the main room again, you are greeted with an incredible sight.

On the futon in front of you lies a half-naked Hatate, casually tapping away at her computer wearing nothing but her underwear. Her lazily unzipped skirt is still tucked underneath her legs, as if she'd tried to take it off while already lying down and then just forgot about it. She's lying on her side, facing away from you, and seems wholly absorbed in her work.

Two parts in your brain are having a fierce battle to the death at this point – one of them wants to tell your arm to shut the door as quickly as possible, the other wants to take a closer look. For a moment, it looks like the embarrassed part is winning, but then the interested part pulverizes it using the power of logic.

She knew you were here. If she didn't want you to see her like this, she wouldn't have undressed.

"Ah", you mumble, almost to yourself, but it's just barely loud enough for Hatate to notice it. She looks away from her screen, over her shoulder, and, upon spotting you standing in the door like a dumbfounded pillar of salt, turns onto her back.

"Wait", she says, raising her right index finger like a teacher telling their student to sit still.

"I can explain."



“First off, it’s hot today, yeah? Especially in here, since this place is insulated so badly. So I was just... taking off some unnecessary weight, alright?”

You nod unwillingly.

“And second off, as you might have noticed, I don’t have a shower. So I either need to ask the Kappa for a favor, or I go and bathe in the river... that’s why I try to sweat as little as absolutely necessary.”

Against better knowledge, you nod again.

“Although... really, I’ve kinda already screwed that up.”

Unable to control either your head nor your eye movements, you erratically take in different parts of Hatate’s body as it’s laid out bare in front of you. From her collarbones, perfectly accenting her soft, slender neck, to her D-cup breasts, lying flatly on top of her and only vaguely being held in shape by her frilled bra, further down across her perfectly rounded belly, curving first in, then out, and finally guiding you towards the outer rim of her panties, which have shifted downwards just far enough to allow a peek at a small spot of soft, brown pubic hair, playfully inviting you to discover the treasure that lies underneath it.

It was only at this point that you realized.

Hatate Himekaidou is actually really fucking hot.

“Well then.”, you say, taking a step forward and closing the door behind you. „If that’s how it is...”

You take another few steps towards her, and her casual facade starts crumbling.

“I guess...” , you get down on your knees in front of her and look her straight in the eyes. Her nonchalant look has turned into an indescribable mixture of excitement and fear.

“...it doesn’t really matter if you get a little more sweaty then.”

Even though she flinches as you run your fingers down her bare stomach, she makes no motions to stop you. Despite never having touched a woman like this before, you know your fair share about anatomy and think you have a more or less good grasp of what is necessary to satisfy them. As your fingers reach the first of her pubic hairs, she pulls your head close to hers, and breathes „Wait... we... we haven’t even kissed yet...” , and you consider kissing her for a split second, but decide that it’ll be more fun to play with her a little instead.

Just as she pulls you in for the kiss, you hold the index finger of your free hand inbetween her lips and whisper back: „No. You’ll have to earn it first.”

And with that, you continue making your fingers slide further down her valley, basking in the softness of her hair, until you’ve finally hit her point and notice her drawing a sharp breath.

Carefully, you slide your finger across her unprotected clitoris, and, in a vain attempt at stopping you, she closes her legs a little, brushing up her pubic hair against you in the process. This only makes you more excited, and you travel down her lips until you find the tiny, soft opening that you were told was there. You look into Hatate’s eyes, but find only a pleading puppy-like look in them. Her chest rises and sinks under her extatic breaths as she waits for you to enter, and from the corner of your eyes, you can see her nipples perk out underneath her loose bra.

You start prodding, but just a little, not with enough force to enter her just yet.

“This here.”, you say with an amount of amusement in your voice that surprises even you. „If... if you can make me feel good with it, you’ve earned your kiss.”

Even though you can’t pin down exactly how, you notice that what you just said made her even hornier, and so you press down a little stronger, and finally, your finger slides in. She reflexively closes her legs again, but manages to achieve as little as the first time.

“Now, now, Hata-tan.”, you tease her. „If you can’t even endure my fingers, how will you ever earn that kiss?”

You push in further, and her insides give way to you. After another few seconds, your finger is all the way inside her, and she winces as she feels your knuckles make contact with her pussy. Before she has any time to protest against it, you add another one before starting to slowly move them.

Hatate’s breathing gets more erratic with every thrust, and she pulls you towards her in a tight embrace. You enjoy it for a bit, but then get an even better idea. You stop your movements.

“You know, Hata-tan... I like you and all, but I can’t help but think you’re being too impatient about this.” She responds with a dumbfounded, but also very exhausted, look.

“What... are... you saying? Y-you’re... you’re the one who’s p-p-poking around i-inside... me... right now...”

“Ah, you really don’t get it, do you? Hugging me like that, suddenly... when we’ve barely even known each other for a week! Let me... show you what I mean.”



And with that, you withdraw from her embrace, leaving behind a dissatisfied mess of a girl. Instead of returning to her immediately, you take your time undressing, and Hatate's look suddenly turns excited again. As you make your hard dick jump out of your underwear, she gasps a little, but you force yourself to ignore it.

"That's not the point right now, Hata-tan. I'm not finished with you yet."

And with those words, you position yourself between her closed legs before putting one hand on each of her thighs and forcing them open.

"D-don't!!! I-it's too embarrassing, p-please--"

"Do you want that kiss or not?", you stop her. „I told you, you'll have to work for it."

"uuu...", she responds with little more than a wimper, proof that she's given up.

Carefully, you pull her panties down one of her legs, leaving it to dangle on it, and then lift Hatate's entire lower end up onto your chest. She squirms, blushes, but doesn't resist.

Finally, her raw pussy is laid bare to you. Already, there are streams of liquid running down her body from it, and it feels like even just looking at it makes it twitch.

Once again, you sink your fingers into her, prompting her to let out even louder wimpers than before. „Haah... haahh... D-don't... d-don't y-you... t-think... you're... haaah... overdoing... it?", she manages to force out between her heavy breaths. You stop.

"No, not really.", you answer. „Don't worry, you'll get to make me feel good too, soon."

"T-that's not it...", she tries to stop you, but you cut her off by moving around inside of her again.

Even though you knew a little about vaginas beforehand, you'd never thought that they'd be so... elastic on the inside. You try prodding a little in every direction, and suddenly, Hatate convulses around you. „N-no!! I... I... wa-wa... wanttocometogetherwithyou..."

Again, you stop.

"So that's what you meant, hm?", you taunt her more as you look into her pleading eyes.

"Please... I want you... inside me already..."

You pretend to ponder about her request for a little. Then, you withdraw your fingers.

“Fine.“, you say with as much feigned indifference as you can muster. „But no kissing just yet!“

Before you’ve even finished your last sentence, Hatate’s already wrapped her legs around your bag and drawn you in, forcing your naked body on top of her.

Your faces are now just millimeters away from each other, and you feel like you can see every little drip of sweat on her. Carefully, she moves her hands down towards your manhood and guides it towards her opening. As you get closer and closer to her, you feel first her heat, and then her moisture on your tip, until finally, you’re ready to enter her. Inch by inch, you force apart the walls of her vagina as you dive deeper and deeper into her. However, as you’re fully concentrating on taking in the pleasure of penetrating a girl for the first time, you fail to notice her hands making their way back up and suddenly appearing behind your head, pressing your lips down onto hers, just as you reach her deepest spot.

Unable to control herself, she moans into your lips, unwittingly opening an attack path for your tongue. Forcing yourself into her even more, you entwine your tongue with hers, breathing in her moans as you thrust in and out of her. Despite having held up reasonably well for your first time so far, you notice yourself getting closer to the edge, and fast.

Hatate seems to be having the same problem, having lost contact with your lips and now fighting to contain her moans. Just as you realize it might be a good idea to warn her, one of Hatate’s convulsions pushes you over the edge and you slam deep inside her, finally releasing your seed.

Hatate, in what seems like her orgasm, digs her nails into your back as she arches up hers, practically causing your bodies to melt together.

After a few seconds, however, it’s all over, and you collapse on top of her, exhausted.

For a while, the two of you just lie there, deafened by the sound of the other’s breath, simmering in the afterglow. Then, she whispers: „Not gonna lie... that was... pretty good for your first time.“

It takes you a little longer to catch your own breath, and you consider whether or not to challenge her statement, but finally decide against it. „Guess it was... pretty obvious, huh?“

Hatate giggles. „Yup. Didn’t pick up on any of my hints, either. That’s why... I thought I’d have to go full-out like this, y’know? Well... short of just jumping at you naked, I guess.“

“Haha, well... it worked, after all.“

“Oh, by the way... I don’t know how much they teach you in school but... you know coming inside is dangerous, right?“

“Eh?“, you stop for a second until the meaning of her words dawn on you. „Oh, t-that’s... right...“

Before you can say any more, however, Hatate’s soft, girlish laugh cuts you off.

“Don’t worry, I was just messin’ with you. I know a wonderful doctor who can take care of... ,accidents’ like these.“

“Well, that’s one way to call it. Anyway, wanna go clean ourselves up? We... made quite a mess here.“

Before long, the two of you have wiped the worst stains off with towels, put your clothes back on and headed out for the river, sheets in tow.

“Fun fact about this river“, Hatate smiles as the stream comes into sight. „It leads straight down into the Kappa Valley. So, uhh... We should probably keep this a secret from them, or they’ll get mad.“

“Haha, I could see how they... would probably rather not know.“

Washing up takes less time than you expected, and before long, Hatate’s already started unbuttoning her shirt. You pretend to be busy hanging up the sheets to dry as you steal a look every now and then. Next up is her belt, followed by the zipper on her skirt. Finally, she slips down her panties, revealing her modest patch of hair, now in disarray and glistening from sweat and other bodily fluids. You are now far beyond caring about the laundry and have your eyes firmly fixated on Hatate as she carefully places her clothes on a nearby rock and delicately dips her feet into the river to test the water temperature.

“We’re lucky!“, she says, turning around towards you, and you hastily pretend you were busy with the laundry the entire time. „The water is warmer than usual today.“

“Ah... that’s good to hear then.“, you respond in a vain attempt to sound innocent.

“I totally noticed, by the way. You’re cute.“

Her playful comment makes the blood rise to your head, and you find yourself wanting to say something in response, but being unable to come up with something good. Finally, you give up, and decide to join her.

Contrary to your expectations, Hatate and you actually managed to get some work done that day, as well. She showed you the two new editions of the Kakashi Village News she’d already compiled, and a third that she had almost finished last night. She also asked you a bunch of questions about the village, its history, and its people, in order to get a better feeling for what would be deemed ‘newsworthy’ with her new readership. There was also the question of how to market the Kakashi, and where it would be sold. All in all, you spent the better part of the night ironing out these problems, and by the time Hatate dropped you off at the farm, the first sunrays were already peeking around the horizon.

As the two of you land, it slowly dawns on you that you’re most likely not getting more than 2 or 3 hours of sleep tonight, but you do your best to ignore the implications of this and just deal with it when it’s time. Your feet make contact with the ground again, and you try to come up with something to say.

“Thanks for everything today, Hatate. This was... the most fun I’ve had in a while.“

“N-not at all!“, she responds, a little flustered. „I should be the one thanking you! You’ve done so much for me already... A-and also, I told you...“

“Hm?“

“You should call me Hata-chan already! S-since we’re a couple now...“

Darn, I wanted to say it first... Oh well.

“Sure thing, Hata-chan! I love you, Hata-chan! Please marry me, Hata-chan!“

Hata-chan rewards your efforts with a sudden, unexpected kiss. „Well, you went and said it now. You better be ready to make good on it!“, she demands as she draws away from you again. You’re too surprised to respond immediately, and so instead, Hatate does it for you.

„Anyways... I don’t want to hold you up any longer. You’ll probably get too little sleep as it is already.“

“Y-yeah... I’ll... be fine, I think... I guess my dad will pick me up and throw me out of the bed sooner or later, haha...“

“Sounds like you have a fun family...“, Hatate remarks, and for just a split second, you sense a feeling of... nostalgia, perhaps, wash across her face. „Well, I’ll better be off then. I’ll see you... tomorrow night I guess.“

“You mean tonight“, you jokingly correct her. „But yeah, have a safe trip back, and sleep well. And don’t overwork yourself!“

By the time you’ve finished your sentence, Hatate’s already taken off again. Just before speeding away, she calls back to you: „Hey, if anything, I should be worried about *you* here – you’re my kouhai, after all!“

And with that, she disappears into the orange-tinted morning sky.

Your day went about as horrible as expected. Working on the fields all day after getting barely 3 hours of sleep is an experience you really don't want to relive again if possible. At least your father showed some understanding by letting you off two hours earlier than usual, after you'd stumbled over the field ridges for probably the tenth time today. Normally, you would've used that time to go into town, but you were fairly certain that any major attempts at movement today would just cause you to faint on the spot, so you decided to take a nap, just for a few hours, and maybe head to an Izakaya later instead of to the marketplace as usual.

By the time you wake up, it's already 9PM, and the sun has long set. The perfect time to head out for some drinks and catch up on the town's gossip. Just as you're getting ready to go, you hear someone tap against your window.

"You're early tonight, Hata-chan."

Your casually lovey-dovey way of addressing her trips Hatate up a little, and he can't hide a light blush forming on her soft cheeks.

"Thought I'd forget again, didn't you?", you tease her.

"T-that's not it!", she weakly tries to defend herself. „I'm just... a little happy, that's all..."

You can't help but suppress a small chuckle at her cute behavior. „Anyways", you continue. „I was just about to head out to town. Didn't get a lot of sleep today and had to catch up on it this afternoon..."

"Oh, I totally understand!", the tengu girl exclaims. „You don't need to feel bad about that at all! In fact, I came early tonight because I kinda expected something like this would happen... So... I thought we two could go into town again, and maybe... pick up on some rumors at the Izakaya? Heck, maybe even tell them about the Kakashi-"

"You know, it's funny, I was actually thinking the same."

"Well then, what are you waiting on? Put on your shoes and let's go!"

It takes a while, but eventually, the flickering lights of the town gates and street lights come into sight, painting a tranquil and comfortable picture in the middle of the pitch-black Gensokyan night.

"Come to think of it, you never offered to fly us into town, why's that?", you ask Hatate.

"Well, there's two reasons.", she explains. „First off, as I'm sure you're aware, most villagers are a little suspicious of Youkai, and that includes us tengu. Aya gets somewhat of a free pass, probably because her newspaper is already read by some people there, but practically noone in the village even knows of the Kakashi... You remember how surprised I was when you told me you found someone selling it there! Anyways, if they see a flying Youkai heading straight for the village, it would certainly raise some red flags for them."

"Well, we're trying to change that, aren't we?"

"The newspaper part, yeah. About their suspicions against Youkai... I don't know if we can do anything there, sadly.", Hatate replies resignedly.

"I don't think I've told you yet, but I actually used to be really interested in Youkai. Throughout my entire childhood, I dreamt of meeting one up close, to the point where I headed out into the forest, hoping to run into one..."

"Sounds suicidal.", Hatate remarks with a weak laugh. „But I guess they would seem pretty interesting to a rebellious young boy like you..."

"And look at what it got me.", you pat her on the head. „A little tengu cutie to go on dates with. I'd say it all paid off in the end."

As you step through the town gates, you silently greet one of the guards, gaining a slight nod in response. Seems like they don't particularly care who enters at this time, and like they definitely didn't notice the fact that your girlfriend is a Youkai. And just like that, you arrive at the Izakaya without any problems.

“Lemme... tell you shomfin’ ‘bout that tengu reporter y’all know and love!“, Hatate suddenly blurts out after quietly having sat around her fourth cup of Sake for a while.

“Ooooh, now it’s getting interesting! What do you have on her, missy? I always knew Aya seemed too nice for a tengu!“, the burly man who is apparently the town’s blacksmith responds as he leans over the counter to get a better look at Hatate. You, sitting inbetween the two, sigh, and put away your notebook.

That’s about all the info we’re gonna get today, I guess. We better start getting going before Hatate says something that’ll cause an uproar...

“Well, like that one time where... where she paid Tewi like... a few hundred thousand to... steal Reisen’s panties... all of them!“

“W-whoa...“, the blacksmith seemed legitimately impressed. „Getting paid to steal panties... sounds like a dream come true!“ His friends, taking up most of the other stools in front of the bar, nodded in agreement.

“Oh, I’m shure... I’m shure y’all enjoy that... And the... article that came wiffit, yeah? But listen... this is a real mean thing to do to girls, okay? It... caused her trouble for... the entire week... and now... all of Gensokyo’s seen her... nude, lewd vayayay...“

“Aaaalright!“, you finally stop her. „I’m sure Hata-chan would love to prattle with you guys for a little longer, but she’s got editorial duties, and the deadline for the first edition is coming up fast! Now“, you take her by the hand „if you’ll excuse us...“, and start dragging her out of the bar.

“If you run more stories like that, we might even check out your Kokoshi or whatever, Hata-chan~!“, someone yells after you, before his friends joins in: „Or just put panty-shots everywhere, that’s fine too!“ „Bah! Nopan or go home!“ „A report on the super-secret extra-services offered by the Haku-“ „Shh! They’re supposed to be a secret, you idiot!“ „Tch, just cause you like Sa-“

Eventually, you make it to the door, and the mens’ voices become a jumbled mess of sounds, too agitated and far away to make out any of what they’re saying.

Horny little bastards, they all are, you think to yourself. Indeed, after Hatate’s mentioned that she intended to rival the Bunbunmaru, their first suggestions had already been „You’ll need pantyshots, then!“ and „If you want to beat Aya, you’ll have to cause even more scandalous incidents than her!“ Hatate had proven highly unimpressed by those suggestions, initially insisting that she was going to introduce „more serious journalism“ into the village. However, as time had passed, it had become clear that, at the very last, pretty much everyone at the Izakaya was only interested in sensational stories, as well as, well, pantyshots. Completely unintentional ones, of course, otherwise the feeling would be ruined.

All in all, it hadn’t been a particularly fruitful evening, but you still had fun listening to the outrages stories of some and witnessing the group antics of friends who’ve probably been going to drink like this every evening for the past 20-30 years. Hatate, on the other hand, had probably not really taken notice of much after the first two sake cups, and was now heavily leaning onto you, staggering across the cobblestone streets as she complained about you dragging her away from „the party“.

Somehow, the two of you managed to make it home safely.

As you sit her down in front of your porch, you consider your options: First off, Hatate’s definitely too drunk to walk, let alone fly. So she’s probably going to have to sleep over at your’s. You don’t really know how your father would react to finding the editor of the newspaper in your bed at morning, but you’d rather not risk evoking his wrath, so it’s probably for the best if you shoo her out early during the morning. However, if she sleeps in your bed, you’d have to sleep on the couch, and if you don’t wake up early enough, your family’s gonna find out soon enough what happened... *Aaargh, there’s just no good solutions to this, are there?!*

For now, you decide to focus on bringing Hata-chan into your room safely and quietly. You take out your keys and unlock the door, then turn to Hatate – she’s asleep already.

Well, that might make it easier.

Even though you're carrying your sleeping girlfriend up the stairs, you manage to be surprisingly sneaky about it, and you're *pretty* sure nobody heard you come home. You carefully lie the inebriated Hatate down onto your bed and go back to close the door.

"Awwweeeiiik...", you hear a soft groan from behind, and are met with the sight of your girlfriend drunkenly stirring about in your bed, trying her most earnest to kick the sheets off of it.

"'s too hot in here... ssss..."

You try to think back to why you even let her get this drunk in the first place, but you probably were simply too invested in your chats with the locals to even notice her ordering sake after sake. Your recollections are cut short by Hatate running her hands over her body, apparently trying to remember how to take her clothes off correctly.

"Hata-chan, what are you doing? You're in my house, you know? If we're too loud here, everyone will know you're here, and I don't-"

"Ah, so they'll... get to know my cute husband... And I'll be his cute wife! Hehe, y-you can... introduce me whenever you like..."

Even though it should've been impossible, Hatate actually manages to correctly identify her shirt's buttons and starts fumbling around with them in a vain effort to take them off.

"And then... We'll be a wonderfull... family...", she continues as she manages to undo the first one. Sensing she's about to do something risky, you walk over to her and kneel down in front of the bed before petting her on the head.

"Hey, come on... Let's just go sleep now, okay? We can have some fun together tomorrow."

Hatate, however, is having none of that. She's reached the third button by now, and repeats her complaint: „But... it's sooooo hot in here... I can't... sleep like this..."

She reaches the fourth button, and before you can stop her, she's managed to open her shirt completely, causing it to slowly slide down her slender figure, drooping onto the bed, revealing her soft, ample breasts, held in place by only a standard, bland white bra. At the very least, she wasn't going to get that off, r-right?

Nope, she did.

Shit.

As she awkwardly brushes her bra off of herself, Hatate's bouncy breasts break free, wobbling a little before reaching a sort of equilibrium-like state resting on top of her. Her hardened nipples perking up at you blatantly give away the fact that there's more too this than just the room temperature. „Hey...", she beckons, while moving her hands down towards her skirt, finding the zipper with such ease one wouldn't guess she was absolutely shitfaced right now. „You... you want it, don't you?"

Her zipper gets stuck, but she doesn't care. Instead, she holds down her skirt with one hand and begins haphazardly winding out of it. Not only does this strategy actually work, it also reveals her plain-white panties, framing her two perfectly rounded thighs, rounded off by a thin stream of clear, white liquid running down them. Finally, Hatate's found what she's been searching for, and begins pushing one of her hands down her panties. „Ah~", she moans quietly as her fingers trail the outside of her wet lips before prying their way inside. „nn..."

Hatate turns onto her side, revealing her full beauty right in front of you, who finds himself too mesmerized to try to stop her anymore. Her upper right leg is slowly becoming drenched in her own juices as she pushes her fingers deeper and deeper inside of her and her breathing becomes more and more erratic.

"haah... haaah... come on... already...", she moans, becoming a little louder with every thrust.

This isn't good, you realize, if she wakes up your parents during this, it's all gonna be over.

Meanwhile, after managing to slide down her panties even further, she's now moved her other free hand to her breasts, fondling them while fingering herself.



“If you... won’t take me... I’ll just... come on my own!“, she declares in a surprisingly clearly spoken sentence. „And... haahh... I’ll wake up everyone... And-“

“Hata-chan, wait!“, you plead, and indeed, she stops her movements, leaving her whole body to quiver with the need for more stimulation. You realize you have to think of something, and fast. If you don’t do anything, she’s going to bring herself to orgasm, and possibly wake up the entire house. However, if you two fuck, there’s no way of guaranteeing she won’t do the same – after all, she had been pretty loud the last time! Then, it hits you.

“Fine, you win.“, you declare, and the crow tengu’s eyes light up at her supposed victory. She pulls your face towards her, giving you a sloppy kiss. „I loooove you~“, she chirps as you can feel the smell of alcohol in your face. Quickly, you remove your pants, causing your already hard member to poke out in front of her. Then, you stand up.

“Right, so here’s the deal, Hata-chan. You’re not only drunk, but also fucking loud. Yet you still want me to fuck you.“

She nods eagerly.

“Well, if we have normal sex, you’re gonna wake everyone up, so... you’re gonna make me feel good tonight.“

This time, she doesn’t nod, but it’s too late – you’re already sitting on top of her, dick pointing at her face, and hovering just centimeters above her bouncy breasts. Finally, she begins to understand. „Eehhh, how unfair... Only you get to feel good...“, she complains with a pouty face, but you’re not about to give in to her.

“Nope, I’m not taking that risk, it’s either this, or nothing.“, you announce.

“But you forgot...”, she continues, putting on a smug face „that... I can still make myself cum!“ And with that, she attempts to move her hands down again, but this time, you’re faster. Before she can do anything, you’ve already grabbed both of them and forced them onto the bed, above her head. Your bold advance earns you a quiet „uu~“ from the girl as she’s realized she’s lost this one. “F-fine... b-but y-you owe... owe me a favor f-for this!“, she declares defiantly, prompting you to respond by closing in on her face and whispering: „Sure, but only if you do well tonight~“ And with that, you shift down a little, onto her soft belly, and bring your dick into position. Carefully, you slide it into the space inbetween her D-cups, savoring the warmth and the softness of her skin wrapping around you. It’s a totally different feeling from being inside her vagina, and every time you thrust forward, you can see your member poke out from the top, reaching until just underneath her nose. This gives you two wonderful ideas.

“Hata-chan, I want you to suck on it when it comes out on top, okay?“, you ask her in a way that is normally reserved for rhetorical questions. She responds with a faint, but visible, nod. „Also, I’m gonna do this-“, and with that, you bring her hands down from above her head to the sides of her boobs, forcing her to push against them. Immediately, you notice a tighter, and even warmer feeling than before. A moan escapes your lips, and Hatate smiles. „Are... my boobs that amazing?“, she asks as innocently as anyone could ask such a question. „Y-yes... I didn’t... q-quite expect it, either...“, you admit. Already, you can feel yourself getting closer and closer to the peak, and then, Hatate starts licking your tip as you push all the way through her breasts. Her unexpected move sends a jolt through your entire body, and you push in even deeper as her soft mounds give way to your pelvis and your tip enters her mouth.

Hatate is now breathing heavily, trying to deal with both your weight on top of her and your cock pushing forward into her mouth, all the while having her boobs ravaged by your heavy thrusting. As you notice she’s really getting into it as well, you decide to try a little experiment by removing your hands from hers – and indeed, she doesn’t notice! With both your hands now free, and Hatate doing all the hard work for you, you grab her by the back of her head and force her even further onto your dick. Now *that’s* the ticket – every thrust feels like stepping from the garden of eden straight into heaven: At first, there’s just the gentle softness of her breasts, a kind, familiar place full of warmth and comfort. But at its end lies the gate into the dark, wet unknown, a lewd place full of desire, lashing tongues of ecstasy and fire. Perhaps, instead of heaven, it was its own kind of hell – but, if this is what hell was like, you wouldn’t mind dying a sinner.

Every time the head of your penis enters her mouth, Hatate gets a little more adapt at handling it with her tongue, now being able to give it extended licks before it disappears again. And every time it does, it forms thin strips of saliva, dripping down onto her throat and collarbones, and her breath pants for the next opportunity to taste you. Finally, you can feel your climax approaching.

“I’ve... haahh... got... good news for you... H-Hata-chan...“, you manage to voice between your heavy breaths. „I... aahh... I owe you one...“

And with that, you push inside of her one last time, spraying your semen directly into her mouth. Hatate, however, resists, and pushes you off of her, causing your second and third loads to hit first her face, and then her boobs. The power of her push actually causes you to fall sideways, half off of the bed, and then finally onto the floor. You catch yourself just in time to avoid hitting your head on anything. As you get back up, you can hear Hatate start caughing in the background.



“Hey, hey, try to keep quiet, okay? That was the whole point of-“

“Mou-! S-seriously, warn me next time, okay?“, she interrupts you as a stream of semen-tainted saliva leaves her mouth, dribbling onto her sweat-drenched breasts.

“Hey, I... I totally did! See, I was making a reference to the thing I said in the begin-“

“Idiot, just tell-“, she’s stopped by another caught „Just tell me straight-up ne-next time, okay?“

“Fine, I’m sorry...“, you apologize, indeed feeling a little sorry seeing her helpless figure drenched in your cum like this.

“I-if you’re really sorry... G-get me some water, pl-“, she starts, but is again interrupted by her own caughing. Water, sure, got it.

You're not quite sure how, but after what seemed like an hour of wiping, you managed to get Hatate clean for the most part. What's more, you discovered that, while it was a bit cramped, it was perfectly possible for the two of you to sleep in your bed at the same time. In fact, everything would be just fine right now, except that the tengu insists on an absolute monopoly on your only blanket - „'cause you were so mean to me just now“. Even though the days are as hot as in mid-summer, the nights are much more reasonably tempered for the season, which means that, even with the windows closed, it's just *slightly* too cold for you to fall asleep easily. Hatate, on the other hand, is sleeping like a log next to you. You glance to the clock sitting on your bedroom table... Quarter past 2. About 4 hours until the alarm goes. It's gonna be one of those nights again.

Riiiiing-

Although your arm feels like it's made out of solid lead as you swing it out of your bed and onto the alarm clock, you manage to hit it immediately, silencing it before anyone else in your house gets a chance to hear it. You glance at the clock face, and then at Hatate, who's still sleeping soundly right next to you, wrapped in the blanket as if it was a cocoon. It's difficult, but you manage to move your lead hand over carefully enough to brush through her hair, granting her a less disruptive awakening than you had.

„Ewh-?“, she murmurs as she comes to. „Ah, right...”

„Good morning, cutie.“, you greet her in the sweetest voice you can wring out of your vocal chords after only 3 hours of sleep. „I... don't like rushing things like this, but my family's gonna wake up in about... 15 minutes, so, uh... you might wanna leave now.“

„Aww, no breakfast?“, she asks before yawning so loud she could've drowned out the sound of the alarm were it still going. „I'm joking, I'm joking...“, she quickly adds as she notices you wanting to remind her of what you were talking about yesterday. „I remember most of what happened, don't worry.“

And with that, she gets herself out of your bed before searching for her clothes.

„You know, we... gotta plan this stuff better next time.“, she sighs as she holds up her still damp panties. „I can't shower in here, and I don't have any spare clothes in here, either... I mean sure, it's just a flight of like 10 minutes, but...”

„I'm sorry... Didn't think about it properly.“, you start, but then remember something important. „A-also, I wasn't even the one who initiated it! I-I was fine with just going to bed normally, but-“

„That's why I said ,we', you know?“, Hatate interjects, now looking across the room for her skirt. You fish it out from underneath the covers and hand it to her, earning a slightly dumbfounded look in response. „I... slept on these without noticing, huh.“

„Yup.“

„Remind me not to get that drunk again next time.“

„Yup.“

„Anyways... time for me to leave, huh?“, she asks, finally fully dressed again. „Are you... gonna be alright? You look like you'r half-dead.“

„Ah... it's fine, really... Just... I'm gonna have to go to bed early tonight. Two nights of sleeping only 3 hours in a row don't go well with having to do manual labor during the day. But yeah, I'll survive, somehow.“

You give her a weak smile, which seems to satisfy her concern for now.

„It's alright if you take it easy today, we already have enough material for a whole week, maybe even more... Just relax tonight, alright?“

As you throw your first glance at the clock on Wednesday morning, you wonder when the last time was that you slept for this long. 12... no, maybe even 13 hours? It certainly did wonders, though, and you're feeling almost as energetic as usual. If Hatate tried visiting you last night, you didn't notice, but she said to take it easy anyways, so it was probably fine. As you make your way down the creaky stairs of the family house, you hear your father's voice poke out from the kitchen: "Oh hey, look who's awake! You know, if you worked for as long as you slept, I could retire tomorrow!"

"Ha ha, very funny.", you mumble, mostly to yourself. „It's not like I'm only working on the fields nowadays, you know?“ As you reach the bottom of the steps, you're greeted by your father's grinning face and a slap on the shoulder. „I was just joking, of course! I know you... worked hard Monday night!“

Fuck.

Breakfast is uneventful, mostly because you're the only one eating – as usual, your brother's already off to school, and your parents are busy around the house. You finish your last piece of bread, trying not to think about what your father knew or didn't know about you and Hatate. It probably wasn't... *bad* if he'd found out about your relationship, but you really don't feel like talking to him about anything like that. Throughout your childhood, the two of you had always been a little... distant from each other, and thus never really conversed outside of work and the occasional family chat in front of the fireplace. In a way, you were probably afraid of his reaction, not because he'd disapprove, but because he'd try to make lame jokes about it and try to make conversation on topics you really didn't want to discuss with him.

You gather the dishes together and head for the kitchen. As you wash your plates, you let your gaze wonder outside the window and notice him out on the fields. You catch yourself thinking of ways to avoid work today, but quickly realize that that would only serve to make your dad suspicious of why you want to avoid him. Alright, no choice but to face it head-on then.

A small sigh of relief escapes your mouth as the sun begins to dip into the forest of magic, behind the horizon. He didn't say a single word about it, after all. Maybe he really just wanted to take a small jab at you this morning, maybe he wasn't even sure and tried to test a theory of his, or maybe you just interpreted too much into it. Either way, you're pretty sure that he won't-

"Listen, come here for a sec."

Fuck.

You can feel your father's hand on your shoulder, and, unable to really do anything against it, you turn around. Again, he's smiling, but not as brightly as this morning. But there's also something else in his eyes... Worry?

"I... I know what your relationship with your editor is, okay? Like-", he interrupts himself, perhaps in an attempt to interrupt you before you can tell him you don't want to talk to him about it. „I know I probably shouldn't be sticking my head into this, but I mean... it's been obvious, yeah? This house's walls are made of wood, which is like, barely a grade above paper, son.“

You nod involuntarily. Should've probably seen that coming.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of you and all... But, y'know... There's this rumor going around that your editor... well... she doesn't have any money to pay for herself, let alone... you."

"Ah, well...", you begin. „I guess that's Aya spreading rumors again in order to discredit..."

Wait. Something wasn't right here. Did...

Did Hatate and you ever talk about your salary?

You decide not to go to town that night, and instead just idly wait for Hatate at home. After the sunset, it started to rain, and the constant rhythm of the falling drops onto the muddy soil act like sweet golden oil on the cogs of your mind. Every now and then, you get an idea for something that might be interesting to write about, but for the most part, you're busy searching your memory for a moment where Hatate talked about your salary, or... even just money in general.

Nothing.

The familiar tapping on your window snaps you back to reality. Surely enough, she came again today. There wasn't anything here for her to pick up though. Not... yet.

"Hey, Hata, um, Hata-chan, how's it going?", you ask as you open the window, and are greeted with splashes of water to the face as Hatate hops into your room. „Wet, as you can probably tell.“, she responds casually as she haphazardly tries to brush the moisture off her clothes. „Also, busy.

Printing for the first edition starts on Friday, you know?“

You manage to get out little more than an „Ah“ as a response, being too caught-up in your thoughts about how to properly ask her about the money. „Umm, you see... I was actually wondering today... How exactly... is the monetary thing going to work out? You know, after the town version of the Kakashi actually takes off... Is it... gonna be, like, shared half-half? Or some other amount, I mean, it doesn't really matter to me what the percentage is, but I thought-“

“Shh-“, she interrupts you, placing her slender index finger on your lips. „Don't worry, I'm not gonna keep it all for myself“, she continues with an intonation that, perhaps, a young mother would use to tell her son that she's always going to be there for him. „I wouldn't rip off my own boyfriend, you know~?“

As her words gain a more playful undertone, you can feel her gently placing her free hand on your stomach before moving it down towards your belt. „You probably worked really hard all day again, why don't we... relax and take it easy for a little?“

There's no doubt about it, she definitely knows how to get your attention. But at the same time there's... another feeling besides arousal within you. Something's not right. What kind of editor would react to a... reasonable request for info like that? Surely, she could've at least given you a proper answer, some details on her plans, maybe even some numbers...

“H-hatate... Before we do anything... I'd, umm, I'd at least like to know what kind of... return you're expecting on... the first few issues.“

Hatate, now only a few centimeters away from your face, clearly must've heard what you said, but obviously decided to ignore it as she fumbles your belt open before maneuvering her hand onto your crotch.

Okay then. Two can play this game.

“H-hey, wait. My... my parents almost found out last time we did something here. We... can we go to your place instead?“

Just as her fingers reach your penis, already bulging out against the fabric of your trousers, she finally stops.

“Oh, haha, yeah...“, she replies awkwardly before withdrawing her hands. „I guess I didn't... consider that. But sure, yeah. Just... be sure to get a coat or something. Oh, and spare clothes. Don't know if we can wash them tonight.“

Well, that was easy.

Despite you bringing two coats, Hatate and you still arrive at her hut drenched to the bones. However, for a couple that's about to get it on, this poses few actual problems. Within less than a minute, the two of you are standing butt-naked in front of each other, and before you can do anything else, Hatate's already pulled you on top of her.

"I missed you last night", she whispers into your ear before giving you a short kiss. With a few wiggles of her body, she positions herself right in front of your member, inviting you to enter her. However, you have different plans for now. Slowly but firmly, you trail your fingers alongside her thighs, prompting her to flinch a little, before arriving at her already glistening lips.

"N-no, you idiot... I'm already wet down there, don't you- hyaaa~!"

Ignoring her interjection, you insert two of your fingers into her tight, warm crevice, while moving in for a deep kiss. Hatate's resistance is quickly broken, and she gives into you, moving her hips against your fingers and following your tongue's movements. Your kiss breaks up a few moments later, allowing her to speak again.

"Haah... H-hey, that's... really enough now... Come on already... get... inside me...", she hushes inbetween breaths, but you're having none of it. Instead, you remove your fingers from her insides, and grab both her arms with your hands, forcing them above her head. „H-hey, what are you-!“, Hatate protests, but before she can do anything else, you've already reached for your trouser pockets and procured a small length of thin but durable rope. Hatate's eyes flare up as she realizes what you're about to do. „No, wait! We never talked about this... Wait, you can't just-“, she pleads as she tried to wind out of your grip, but to no avail. With a few efficient movements, you bind her hands together and then finally to the radiator behind her futon, rendering her mostly unable to move. You restrict that last bit of her freedom as well by proceeding to hold down her legs with your hands, positioning yourself inbetween her thighs.

"I thought we agreed I'd give you something back this time?", you sheepishly ask Hatate, whose face now displays a fascinating mixture of horror and excitement. „Since you did all the work last time..."

"T-that's fine and all, but... I'm really not... I don't want to be tied up, please!"

She really seems to not enjoy having her freedom completely taken like this. Well, she's not supposed to enjoy this, anyways.

"Tough shit", you retort before moving in on her. You stick out your tongue, but pause a little before it makes contact. You've never eaten a girl out before, and you're probably gonna be horrible at it, but that's not the point anyways. As your tongue makes contact, you come to the sudden realization that it doesn't taste that great, either. Oh well.

The lack of flavor, however, is more than made up by Hatate's reaction to your licking. Her squirming becomes more intense, and she tries her best at winding herself out of your grasp. For a split second, it almost looks like she's going to succeed, but you simply put more of your weight onto her legs in response, and she's back at square one.

After a while, you notice her breathing becoming increasingly quicker. Her pleas for you to stop become more erratic, being interrupted by her needing to catch her breath, before dying down completely. Finally, a little moan escapes her lips, and then another one.

Good, we're almost there.

You start lowering your pressure on her hips. She either doesn't notice, or doesn't care anymore. Finally, both of your hands are free again, and Hatate's too caught up in the pleasure to do anything about it. You remove your head from inbetween her legs and bring it back up to her face again, letting your fingers do the job from now on. Inbetween her half-closed eyelids, she looks at you like a helpless little puppy. You make your hand movements slow down, and as you can feel her starting to tighten around you, you pull out of her again.

Your unexpected move instinctively makes her raise her hips, as if wanting to catch your fingers before they can get away, but to no avail. Finally, she opens her mouth.

"P-please... j-just... make me cum already... T-that's what you want, right?"

There we go.

"No, Hata-chan. What I want is the truth."

“Eh?”, she breathes, as her pupils become smaller and smaller, almost disappearing into the white of her eyes. „W-what...?”

“I may just be a country boy, but it’s obvious what you were trying back at my home. You’re dodging the question, Hatate.”

“Y-you’re seriously... still about that...?”, she says in a weak attempt to mock you.

“Well, I’m not the one who desperately wants to cum right now. I could just leave you here for hours, chained to the wall, unsatisfied... Or you could just tell me if you intend to pay me at all, or if you’ve been lying all the time.”

“Hah, t-that’s rich... I’m a girl, I can... manage like this just fine!”

“Your actions betray your words, Hata-chan. Just look at how much you’re twitching!”

Geniune surprise lights up in the girl’s eyes as she looks down at herself and discovers her legs rubbing against each other in a vain attempt to induce enough pleasure to bring her over the edge.

“Now, last chance, Hata-chan. Tell me properly or you’ll never see me again.”

“Haah... A-as if... you... get to decide that...”

“Yup, that’s what I figured.”, you sigh. „Using me for writing articles *and* sex. Guess I should’ve just listened to Aya from the start. Maybe it’s not too late to apologize yet, and she’ll-“

“Shut up!!”, Hatate’s scream interrupts your monologue. „T-this bitch!! She’s... You know nothing about her!!“

“Well, I know plenty enough about *you* to know that I’m not gonna get paid now. So thanks for that, Hata-chan.”, you say as you begin putting on your clothes again.

“W-what are you doing??”, Hatate’s pained voice pierces through the room. „Y-you can’t just leave now!”

“Oh?”, you respond absentmindedly, not bothering to look at her while you get ready to leave. „But I can. And I will. Goodbye, Hata-chan.”

You make your way to the door, your footsteps accompanied by Hatate first begging you to come back, then yelling curses at you. As you close the door behind you, you can hear her yelling become more and more silent, and finally, leading into a wimper full of countless difficult emotions.

“D-daddy would never do something like this! I-it’s... it’s not true!!“

“I’m sorry missy, but... I don’t know what he told you he would do if you said anything... but it’s fine now, it’s fine... He’s gone. You... you can be honest with us.”

“I-I’m...”, she sniffs „I’m honest! Daddy never did anything weird to me!! And I don’t... I don’t want him gone...! I want him with me!!“

A deep, troubled sigh escapes the wolf tengu’s throat as he stands up from his chair and leaves the little girl behind in the dimly lit room. He is greeted by the slender figure of a young woman emerging from the shadows. „She still maintains that her dad is innocent. I... I don’t really want to imagine what brought her to that conclusion...”

“Oh”, the figure responds. „That’s perfect, actually! Normally, the story would’ve been over here, right? But now there’s stockholm syndrome involved, too! That’s enough material for, at least, 3 more articles! I could get Erin’s opinion on it, maybe even talk to Yukari...”

“You know, I feel like it was a bad idea to even allow you in here. Reporters like you really don’t have any morals.”

“Yeah yeah, and be sure to tell all your friends about this horrible sensationalist piece of toiletpaper called the Bunbunmaru! Any reputation is good reputation~“

The figure, now more monster than girl, disappears back into the shadow, as her light giggling gets replaced by the sound of the little girl’s weak, sorrowful sobs, creeping out through the door cracks.

With all the force you can muster, you swing open the door to Hatate's shack again, violently banging it against the wall. The sobbing from the living room stops, and Hatate shrieks a little as she notices you standing in the door frame again, completely naked.

She barely manages to voice a silent „W-what...“ before you've already planted yourself on top of her. With one swift motion, you push all the way inside her, but before you even reach through to the end, Hatate's already started to violently convulse around you, eyes and mouth wide open, with her tongue hanging out a little. Finally, at last, like drawing her final breath as she sinks to the ocean floor... Hatate is pushed over the edge.

An exhausted, pained scream echoes through the woods as Hatate cums the hardest she ever has. You can feel her literally squashing your dick with her insides, legs involuntarily wrapped around your back in an attempt to push you deeper inside of her that she clearly does not have enough strength left for. Every part of her seems to arch up, wanting to melt into you, twitching, dripping sweat and tears.

“Savor the feeling.“, you grunt. „You won't be having any more of this from now on.“

One after the other, waves of pleasure rock through her body, pushing you deeper inside her every time. Hatate seems to have no time inbetween her scream to breathe, desperately trying to gasp for breath between the convulsions. For over a minute, her trembling body twitches against yours, and then-

You cum inside her.

Feeling your burning hot semen shoot directly into her womb, Hatate is brought to yet another climax. As her insides fill up with your sperm, her two climaxes converge, and with a final wimper, Hatate's body becomes limb, and she passes out, sliding off of your penis and onto the ground.

It takes a while for your own breathing to return to normal, and while you wait for it to do so, you savor the astonishing sight of the unconscious girl lying on the ground in front of you, thick streams of semen overflowing from her pussy.

...Fuck.

By the time you reach the foot of the mountain, it is already long past midnight. The trek down turned out to be a long and difficult one, although you should probably have expected that – though it's not like you properly planned out any of what happened tonight to begin with. You should probably just be happy that you made it down in one piece and didn't get eaten by wild Youkai or thrown into tengu jail or...

Your pondering is interrupted by a loud yell coming from somewhere in front of you. Even though the moon's out, it's kind of hard to see what's in front of you, owing to the seemingly endless amount of trees all around you. Again, you hear someone call out, and though you can't understand it, the voice seems familiar. N-nitori?

“Haha, looks like you got yourself into quite some trouble there“, the Kappa girl remarks with a cheeky grin after hearing about what happened tonight. „But hey, at least you're safe, and... I'm sure Hatate will get over it as well.“

You weren't so sure about that, but really didn't want to carry on talking about it. Really, you should probably just have made up some excuse for why you were walking around Youkai mountain all alone in the dead of the night. Now that chance is gone, and all you can try to do is change the topic.

“So, uhh... You guys just constantly monitor the mountain for human activity?“

“Mm, not quite“, Nitori responds. „We monitor it for any kind of activity, but usually with the goal of recording the actions of potentially hostile Youkai. It's not necessary most of the time, but if something important happens around here, we're usually the first to know. Y'know... large amounts of energy being released, strong magic auras passing by, that kind of stuff.“

“Such things can be... measured?“, you ask as the forest lightens up and the Kappa valley comes into view. „I always thought magic and technology were opposites, kinda.“

“Well... magic and technology are really just two ways of looking at the same thing.“, she explains while looking up at the stars. „You have some matter on one side and some on the other side, and then one uses a series of functions in order to manipulate the other one. Well, a little more complicated than that, but you get the gist. It’s all translatable.“

“Haha, well, I don’t understand much about technology, to be honest. And pretty much nothing about magic.“

“Yeah, humans tend to be pretty bad at both.“, she grins. „Although there was this one human who put it pretty well... What was it again...? „Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic‘ I think.“

Time flies as you listen to Nitori ramble on about science and the nature of the universe, and before you know it, you’re in front of the gates to Kappa valley once again. As she takes off her hat, Nitori turns around to you and says: „You should probably stay here for the night. Not only is it dangerous out there, but if you wanted to go home by foot, it’d be another... maybe 3 hours? You don’t really wanna do that, right?“

All it takes for Nitori to confirm that she’s right is a relieved sigh from you, and with a quick swipe of her hat, she opens the gates. „I have a couch downstairs, maybe even a spare blanket somewhere. Anything else you need? Our konbini are open 24/7.“

You resist the urge to ask her what a ‚konbini‘ is for fear of having her drag you to one this late at night, and just tell her you’re fine instead. Within a few minutes, the two of you reach Nitori’s house, a small and modern building in one of the market place’s side streets. Similar to the printing office, it seemed entirely constructed out of polished metal, giving it a slightly cold and sterile feeling. However, as you enter, you find that it’s quite comfortable and warm inside – and there’s even a fireplace!

“Huh, talk about a breach of style“, you remark as you scan the living room for the promised couch, eventually spotting it in one of the corners, next to something that looks like a big black rectangle.

“Hey, just because our houses are required to be well-armored doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy some rustic elements in my interior design.“, Nitori responds while heading upstairs, presumably to get your blanket.

As she comes back down, blanket in tow, you ask her why exactly Kappa think it’s necessary to put armor on... houses. Nitori throws first the blanket and then herself onto the couch in a manner that makes you wonder for a second if *she* is planning on sleeping there.

“You humans are lucky, you know?“, she starts nonchalantly while picking up a few long, thin bread-like sticks from a bowl on the table before offering you some. „Even though you are really weak, and your village leaders couldn’t do anything about a Youkai invasion... You all get to live in peace, and it’s been like that for centuries now. But some places aren’t that lucky...“

You take some of the sticks from Nitori’s hand and proceed to bite off part of one of them. It tastes like dry bread, but with salt on top. Weird.

“Well, I guess I don’t know much about the world outside the village... So you guys get, uhh, attacked often?“

“Not really.“, she continues as she sticks a whole bunch of them into her mouth at once before continuing to talk through her chewing motions. „But it happens. After all, we Kappa have valuable technology no one else has... There’s quite a few people who would be interested at getting their hands on it, to be honest.“

“So basically, humans are just not worth attacking, since we don’t have anything the Youkai are interested in?“

“Sure, let’s just go with that.“, Nitori responds flatly before pushing herself off the couch, leaving behind a few specks of bread and salt. „Anyways, it’s late and we should probably both be sleeping. I’ll, uhh, come and wake you up tomorrow, I guess? Do you need to leave early?“

“Eh, I can probably make some excuse for my dad... Told him I spent the night editing articles or whatever... Damn.”, you whisper the last word to yourself as you realize you’re eventually going to have to tell your dad that he was right about the whole payment thing. How could you have been so blind, anyways?! Not even asking about money until just now... Hatate really played you like a fiddle all along, and you didn’t even notice on your own...

Before you can sink any further into self-pity, Nitori interrupts your thoughts by placing her small hand on your shoulder. She looks a little silly, trying to comfort you like this despite her being a good 50cm smaller than you, but it is nonetheless effective.

“Hey, it’s gonna be alright, okay? I’m sure your dad will understand.”, she says calmly, looking you straight in the eyes. „Now, get some sleep, or I’ll sneak up on you while you sleep and steal your soul!“

Her silly remark catches you off-guard and you notice a smile forming on your face. That is, until you remember she’s a Kappa, and she probably could steal your soul if she wanted to. And it’d be a painful process to boot.

You wake up the next day feeling surprisingly rested for having slept on someone else’s couch (hey, that’s one mark off your bucket list, plus another because it was a cute girl). Nitori, judging from the various sounds coming from the kitchen, woke up before you and is now busying herself by making breakfast. Maybe.

You yawn and stretch before hopping off the couch and heading for the source of the breakfasty sounds. And, sure enough, there’s Nitori standing in front of the stove, holding a pot with one hand and some small device with the other. Whatever she’s doing, she seems very absorbed in it, to the point of failing to notice you sneaking up behind her.

“Whazzis?“, you abruptly ask, now mere centimeters away from the small girl. Your little prank works perfectly; she flinches and turns to face you, not quite suppressing the “Wah!” that escapes her lips. „Jeez, don’t scare me like that! I was making breakfast, you know?“, she says, putting on a playfully pouty face.

“Yeah, and now the egg’s all burnt. What’s so important about that thing, anyways?“, you point in the direction of the device, now hidden behind Nitori’s back. „Too complicated to explain. It’s like a newspaper but smaller and interactive. Also, the eggs are fine.“, she states as she puts the device into one of her pockets and proceeds to use her free hand to push the scrambled eggs around. Yep, definitely burnt. Nitori, now paying especially close attention to you after that prank, immediately notices your doubtful look and feels compelled to defend herself.

“W-well, I’m good at machines, not cooking! If you can do it better, just do it yourself!“

“Haha, it’s fine, I’ll eat it. Appreciating hospitality and all that.“

“That just sounds like you’re doing it out of a sense of duty!!“, she complains, becoming even poutier. Meanwhile, you find yourself having a surprising amount of fun teasing the Kappa girl, although you aren’t quite sure if she’s actually mad or just playing along.

“Where’d you get that idea?“ You adopt an overly heartbroken tone. „I always eat your home-cooked meals, Nicchan, and I truly and honestly enjoy every one of them with all my heart!“

Before you can sing any more praise about her cooking, Nitori bursts out into a fit of laughter.

„Hahaha, what the heck...! N-ni... Nicchan... Bwahahaha!! H-how’d... How’d you even come up with that??“

“Oh, I’m sorry. You meant that, after ten years of being married, you suddenly want me to call you something else? How about... Nito-tan, then? Or maybe Nitori~n! N-nito...“

As every one of your suggestions is met with another burst of laughter from the girl in front of you, you find yourself giggling along with her for a few moments, caught up in the comedy of the situation. Nitori was cute as heck when she smiled.

“Well thanks!“, she returns after catching her breath. „Now the eggs really *are* burnt. Wanna make new ones?“

By the time you leave Nitori's house, it's already well past noon. The two of you had perhaps enjoyed each other's company a bit too much – while you liked listening to Nitori ramble on about all sorts of machines and what she could do with them, she *really* liked your scrambled egg for some reason. Maybe she really did burn them every morning and had never even tasted properly seasoned, softly set eggs. Either way, after the third serving, you finally noticed the time and started getting ready to leave, but not without promising to return soon. After all... a friend like Nitori that you can confide in and have a great time with might be just what you need right now.

Having decided that, for now, your father didn't need to know the details of what happened, you follow through on your plan of telling him that you were busy all night „editing“, earning you that look of pride that fathers have when their sons „get the girl“. Sure, let him believe that's what happened, it certainly makes things easier for you.

You spend most of the rest of the day inside with the cattle, thanks to the autumn rains finally having arrived at your doorstep. For the most part, your mind is busy trying to think of the best way to break the news to your father, but sometimes, you feel a nagging thought trying to pierce into your consciousness...

“What is Hatate going to do now?”

During work, it's easy for you to brush it off, telling yourself she'll be fine, and focusing on the task at hand. But now that you're walking up the stairs to your room after dinner, pretending to be busy writing down notes for the Kakashi Spirit News, you notice it coming back, and this time, the gates of your mental fort are wide open.

You throw yourself onto your bed and out a long, pained sigh. Maybe you really overdid it last night. You could've at least untied her before leaving, right...? But then again, she's a tengu, so she'll surely be able to get rid of that bit of rope herself, yes? She wasn't going to... starve to death inside her own home, right? No, that radiator was moveable anyways, so at the very least, she could've called for help using her phone...

Do you hate Hatate? You certainly acted like it. Tied her up, forced yourself on her... and then just left her behind. But wasn't that similar to what she did to you? Played with your feelings, used you for her own selfish goals... Even if she was right about Aya, she was no better than her. If she hated her so much, why did she imitate her? Did she simply not notice? Then again, you did the same to her... tried to punish her for her selfishness by selfishly abusing her in return... If Hatate was wrong, then you were wrong as well. Maybe you should've just ignored her back at the printing office... Let her walk right out of the door, let her deal with those issues herself... Maybe... that would've been better for the both of you.

From the corner of your eye, you notice something moving in front of your window. Then, the familiar sound of a girl's delicate fingers brushing against the thin glass in almost perfect harmony with the rain.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Go away.“, you say into the emptiness of the room, just loud enough that the girl on the other side of the window should be able to hear it through the background noise of the pouring rain. „I’m not working for you anymore, and I want nothing to do with you.“

There is no response from the outside. Perplexed, you stand up. Was that really all it needed?

Finding it hard to believe that Hatate would give up that easily, you step towards the window as you feel your heartbeat getting faster and faster. You clench your fists, partly out of anger, partly out of fear of what awaits you. Finally, you are close enough to see what’s on the other side through the reflection of your ceiling lamp’s flickering flame. A slightly upset voice greets you, dampened by the rain and the glass inbetween your faces.

“I think you might be confusing me for someone else, no?“

You turn the steaming mug of hot chocolate in your hands around as you throw the girl sitting opposite you a puzzled look.

“So, basically... you’re willing to give me a second chance?“, you ask with an uncomfortably dry mouth before taking a wholly non-alleviating sip.

“Well, that sounds quite strict, doesn’t it...“, Aya sighs, holding a cup very similar to yours in both hands. Even though she’d been flying through the rain, she turned out to be completely dry when she jumped through your window, apparently thanks to her powers of wind control. Unlike Hatate, who would probably have asked for a towel first, Aya had only asked for something hot to drink, which you were more than happy to bring her. Maybe something good could come from all of this, after all.

“Rather than... ,second chance‘, maybe something like... ,new start‘ would be better? I mean...“, she pondered a little about how to word it. „I don’t really want to say that I told you so but... I kinda did.“

Unable to keep up eye contact, you direct your gaze at the hot liquid in your hands as the memories of that violent encounter in the book shop come back to you. She... had been right, after all.

“But I’ve made that mistake myself, so I suppose I can sympathize with you on some level... That’s why I thought... maybe we could start over. I mean, I won’t lie, I’ve already looked for other assistants in the village, but... it’s hard to find someone who’s even just interested in the first place, let alone someone with experience.“

“Aya, I told you I don’t have any exp-“, you try to explain to her again before noticing something important. No, that was right... you did have experience now. At least a little. In the few days you’d been working for Hatate, you’d written up maybe... 30 articles? Out of which maybe 10 Hatate’d actually accepted... but still, you’d done the job before, and this time, you’d even get paid for it. What was there to lose, really?

“You noticed it yourself, didn’t you?“, the crow tengu replies smugly. „You’re really the only one I can count on, here! And honestly... I mean, I’m not happy things went down like they did, but at least it happened after a few days and not, you know, after a year or something. To think she didn’t even discuss your wage with you beforehand! That was, like, the first thing we talked about!“ Even though you can’t deny Aya was right about everything she said, something felt a little off.

Where’d she get all this info from, in the first place?

“Word travels fast“, she responds. „Supposedly, someone paid a visit to Hatate’s shack after some rumors got spread, and, well... she didn’t look very good.“

“I-is she okay?“, you stammer as you feel yourself turning red. Oh god, hopefully nobody found out that-

“She... she’d locked herself in... I don’t think anyone actually saw her since you broke up with her... I mean, she’s probably in there cutting herself again, but honestly, she’ll get over it. If past experience is anything to go by, she’ll be out by Monday morning distributing the first issue of the Kakashi Village News again, complete with makeup to cover up her scars and everything. I feel like... as long as she has her newspaper, she won’t do anything too drastic. I guess it’s kinda her reason to stay alive at this point.“

You take another sip from your hot chocolate, but it tastes sour. The thick liquid works its way down your throat, almost plugging it up. What was this feeling? Something was wrong... wasn't it? "Anyways, that's her problem now, right? I already brought the contract and everything, so if you feel like leaving that chapter behind, you can sign right here and we can get to work, starting from tomorrow.", she continues uninterrupted, pulling out a small clipboard from her bag with a single sheet of paper on it. You absentmindedly grasp it, run your eyes over it, and find yourself unable to make out even just a single word.

"Can... can I have a little time to think about this?", you manage to force a few words out of your clogged-up throat. „I don't... I want to discuss this with my family first.“

"Oh?", Aya makes a surprised noise. „I'm sure they'll be thrilled, though! After all, it's pretty much the same work you've been doing already, but this time you'll have a proper contract, a proper weekly income... pretty much everything you can ask for!“

Too afraid of what might happen if you took another sip of your hot chocolate, you put it down on the table next to you before looking at the contract again. There's numbers on it, you're pretty sure. 25,000 yen per week... W-wasn't that more than before?

"I-I'll... uhh, I'll give it to you tomorrow night, okay? Signed... T-the contract.“

From the corner of your eyes, you can see Aya shooting you a weird look. What was up with you? What's holding you back here? This is almost enough money to pay your entire family's expenses for the month...! There's your name, her name, the description of your work... one-year contract... exclusivity...

"Alright, alright, you need some time to sleep on it, gotcha.", Aya's usual, cheerful voice drags you out of your inner reading exercise. „I'll come back same time tomorrow, so you'll have time to check everything it says on there and sign, okay? Right now, you look like you need some sleep.“

And with that, before you can say another word, she's already out of your window again. Your eyes trail first her fleeting figure, quickly disappearing in the heavy blanket of the night and the rainfall, before coming to rest on her cup, neatly placed on the other side of the table.

It's still half full, steaming barely noticeable white clouds and a heavy chocolatey aroma into your silent, cold room.

Today marks the third time within a week that you've lied to your father in order to get off of work. Even though he's nothing but an ordinary farmer, you know he's not dumb, and he's probably figured out at least roughly what's going on. Nonetheless, he let you leave this morning, and so, you find yourself in front of the gates to the Kappa Valley once again, just as the sun reaches its zenith. Of course, if you'd thought ahead, you'd realized that you wouldn't be able to enter Kappa Valley without the help of Nitori's hat, but in an undeserved stroke of luck, you happen to meet another Kappa currently returning to the city. You explain to him your plight, and as he hears Nitori's name, his eyes light up.

"Oh, I do think I remember hearing about you! You're the guy who dated the Kakashi reporter, aren't you? Can't blame you, pal... But man, get yourself some info about the girl you're interested in, first. And, another thing...", he continues, as he holds his wallet against the same spot of the wall that Nitori held her hat against. „Remember this for next time, friend: Don't stick your dick in crazy.“

And with that, he quickly waves you goodbye before slipping through the small crack of the slowly opening gate and disappearing in one of the next side streets. Before you lies, once again, the Kappa Village, and it suddenly seems a lot bigger without a helping hand to guide you through it. You really hope you can remember the way to Nitori's house all on your own.

After half an hour of more or less coordinated stumbling, you do eventually manage to reach the central marketplace, and from there, relatively quickly find Nitori's house hidden in one of the side streets. Fortunately, Kappa houses seem to be equipped with relatively normal door bells, but unfortunately, ringing it produces no effect. Well, it is in the middle of the day, and there's a good chance she might be out doing... whatever it is that Kappa do during the day. Not wanting to give up that easily after the 3-hour trek, you decide to look through the marketplace and ask some of the people there about her whereabouts.

Nitori seems to be well-known throughout the valley, as it doesn't even take you ten minutes before you get the information you need – apparently, she runs a small workshop a few streets down, selling all sorts of machines and gadgets to residents and travellers alike. As you come to a halt in front of the shop, you can't help but notice it's very... Nitori-ish vibe. Had you just randomly wandered by this place, you would've probably stopped here as well. Just from the outside, it looks like any other building, but from a quick look through the windows, it looks more like a hoarder's living room rather than a professional shop. Well, at least she piles up all the mechanical stuff in here and not in her actual living room.

As you enter, you're greeted by the bright sound of a door chime, something you're only used from one of the less traditional pubs in the village which has an actual door instead of the usual Noren. The next thing you notice is the heavy, damp air inside the room, complimenting its slightly run-down and faintly illuminated atmosphere. The experience is rounded off by an oddly satisfying combination of the smells of lacquered wood mixed with various types of oils. However, the shop seems surprisingly empty, despite it being in the middle of the day. And Nitori herself was nowhere in sight, either.

"H-hello?!", you call out, only to earn silence as an answer. You look around, trying to spot maybe a desk with a bell on it or some sort of employees-only door, but find nothing. There is, however, something weird, and as you take a few steps further into the room, you figure out what it is... There's music coming from somewhere in the back. At least... you think that it's music. It has a melody and lyrics, but seems to be have been created by instruments you've never heard before. As you wander around trying to find its source, you discover another doorway, tucked away behind some shelves filled with unexpectedly large tools, some probably bigger than Nitori herself. And indeed, the music seems to be coming from behind the door.

Feeling a little like an intruder, you open it, discovering that it leads into a much bigger and more empty room drenched in the cold, sterile light of an electrical bulb. Contrary to the actual shop, the walls in this place were made from naked concrete, and in fact the floor was as well. The only other notable feature of this room is a large sort of... vehicle... standing in the middle, with a small machine next to it, ostensibly the source of the odd music.

As you get closer, you can hear someone humming along to the melody, seemingly from underneath the vehicle. You crouch down in front of it, and are met with Nitori's soft, but oil-covered face, poking out from the space between the bottom of the vehicle and the ground.

"Hi!", she smiles before starting to wriggle her body out from underneath. „Gimme... just a second here.“

As more of her body comes into sight, you notice she's wearing nothing but a loose tanktop and some blue working pants, both of which are covered in stains caused by hours of mechanical work. Her skin is painted in an oddly aesthetic mixture of sweat, rust particles and oil, causing it to look more like she's been sunbathing rather than working. Finally, Nitori has emerged completely from underneath the vehicle and promptly turned off the music player in front of it.

"So... what can I do for you today?", she asks as she stretches her arms out over her head.

"Well... a difficult situation came up and... you're kinda the only one who I can talk to about it.“

"Ah, good timing, then.“, she lights up. „I get to take a break and solve some emotional problems at the same time!“

"T-that's not even-“, you try to correct her, but Nitori cuts you short.

"Want something to drink? I have tea somewhere in the back... I think.“

And with that, the Kappa girl disappears through another door, followed by the sound of boxes and crates being shifted around. Curious, you decide to follow her and discover that she has entered some sort of... office attached to the side of her workshop. It doesn't actually look that different from the inside of her store, with various tools and apparatuses scattered around, both on shelves and on the ground. What makes it an 'office', rather, is the fact that there's a table with some sort of important-looking device on top and 4 chairs around it.

"Found it!", Nitori chirps as she pulls a small box off of a shelf, filled with small bottles containing different types of tea leaves. „I don't know what any of these are though... I got them off Kourin back in spring, but none of them are labeled, and I don't particularly drink tea, so..."

"Ah, that's alright, anything is fine.", you say as you pick out one of the bottles at random. Nitori, meanwhile, has already moved to another part of the room and started filling a weird-looking kettle with water from the tap. After filling it, she proceeds to put it onto some sort of pedestal and presses a button.

"Alright, just put the leaves in that thing, and that's pretty much it.", she instructs, pointing to a normal-looking pot sitting on top of a workbench. You do as you're told but can't help but wonder how she's going to make tea without a stove around.

"Nitori... you do know you need hot water for making tea, right?", you ask, just in case. Instead of an answer, however, you receive a slight tap on the head with a wrench.

"Of course, stupid. And I have a way better method of making hot water than you do.", she says as the sound of boiling water starts to emit from the weird-looking kettle. A short clicking noise prompts Nitori to take it off of its pedestal before pouring the still boiling water onto the leaves.

"Umm... magic?", you ask, not entirely sure what just happened.

"Technology!", she smiles proudly as she sits herself down. „Now, tell me aaaaaall about your problems and we'll see what we can do, yes?"

The tea tastes surprisingly good for being more than half a year old. Its fruity flavor with hints of strawberries and rhubarb in it loosens your tongue and makes explaining your situation to the Kappa girl much easier than expected. Nitori listens to it quietly all the way to the end, and then sighs.

"Just when you think you're done with something, huh..."

You take the last sip from your cup while watching Nitori ponder over what to say next. She puts her hands behind her head and sits back, staring at the ceiling. „I mean... I can understand why you'd be sceptical after all of this...", she begins, before looking back at you. „But honestly, why not try it? You said it yourself, Aya seems more trustworthy than Hatate, and she's ready to sign a contract on top of it all. So what's the problem?"

Actually, can I look at it for a second?"

You nod, taking the piece of paper out of your jacket pocket and handing it to Nitori. Her eyes run over the page twice, first skipping around seemingly randomly, then a second time, more carefully and slowly. Then, she places it flat onto the table and starts explaining.

"I get work contracts all the time, y'know? People ask me to build stuff for them, repair stuff for them... and of course, there's always the question of liability. So we set up a contract that basically says: Hey, if I break your shit, it's not my fault. And if I fix it, I get money in return. That kinda stuff."

"Well... what about this one, then?"

"It seems... okay. Pretty much everything is there, from payment details to clauses about cancelling the contract on either side. There's an exclusivity clause that basically says you can't write for anyone but Aya, and the runtime of the contract is for 2 years, although that's not coupled to your wages, so if Aya decides she doesn't want your articles anymore, you're kinda stuck not earning any money from journalism for the next 2 years. I don't... know if that's normal, honestly, but considering she's willing to hire you and pay you quite a good salary, I don't think she'll just lay you off after your first article of something."

"So... you'd say it's a good deal?", you ask carefully.

“Let’s say it this way... If I got a 2-year contract offering me that kind of money for my work, I’d seriously consider giving up on doing commissions and just work for whoever paid me.”, she states frankly, with a little sparkle in her eyes. „As far as I can see, there’s no reason to hold back here.“
“I... I don’t know.”, you mutter. „It just feels... weird. Like Aya has some covert motive for all of this...”

The sparkle in Nitori’s eyes disappears, and she sighs again. „So it’s about... *that*, huh.“

“W-what do you mean?”

“You feel bad about working for Aya because it’s going to add fuel to her rivalry with Hatate, right?”, Nitori states as she pours herself the last of the tea.

“I... I hadn’t thought of it like that, to be honest...” you admit.

“Well, that’s what it looks like to me, anyways. And honestly... I can kinda understand where you’re coming from. You know, usually I’d just say something like ,Who cares about her motive?’, but... I’ve seen the extents this rivalry has been brought to, and, well... it’s not pretty.“

You raise an eyebrow at her cryptic explanation. Clearly Nitori knows something you don’t, and the way she’s beating around the bush certainly doesn’t make your decision on whether to trust Aya or not any easier.

“Come on, if you’re gonna say things like that, at least tell it to me straight.”, you demand. „I want to know what’s up with those two, and why exactly they hate each other like that.“

Again, Nitori sighs and looks up against the ceiling. „...I suppose you have the right to know, considering how deeply you’ve become involved at this point. Just... before I tell you anything, you should know that I don’t know all the details either, and there’s a lot about their past that’s unclear.“
Oh boy, this is going to get complicated, isn’t it.

“First off, what you should know is that Aya is older, waaay older than Hatate. I hope I’m not shattering any of your mental images here, but Hatate is... about 200 years old, I think? Aya, on the other hand, is more than 5 times that. She’s... been around for a while, yeah.”, she adds as she notices your unbelieving expression. „Hey, Tengu get old, okay? Anyways... Hatate grew up on top of Youkai mountain, like all the other Tengu. She lived there alone with her father, who was working as part of the mountain’s defense brigade. They were a small family of two, but otherwise not much different from anyone else up there. And...” Nitori interrupts herself with a sigh before rubbing her eyes. „Well, it would’ve stayed that way, if it hadn’t been for an article published by Aya back when Hatate was about... 10 years old, maybe.“

“W-what happened?”, you gulp, unsure if you really want to hear more.

“Well... in the article, Aya alleged that... Hatate’s father had been abusing her... sexually. It... it was quite shocking news when it came out, I mean... Youkai mountain is one of the most stable and secure places in Gensokyo, and then something like that... Many just couldn’t believe it.“

“W-was it substantiated? I mean, I’ve read the bunbunmaru, and a lot of it seems just like gossip, or-“

“There was a witness report, yes. One of the wolf tengu working alongside her father in the brigade told Aya about something he’d seen while at their house... P-pictures, more specifically, of... well... explicit situations, basically. S-stored somewhere in a drawer... I don’t really remember the details, but yeah... It was pretty believable.“

“I... suppose things didn’t turn out well for Hatate after that?”

“Well, her father was taken into custody by the brigade pretty much immediately... I don’t think she ever saw him again after that. And of course, Aya continued to milk the story for all that it was worth... held interviews with people like Satori and Erin about psychological and medical effects of the case... it was the talking point of almost all of Gensokyo at that point.“

“So... everyone still remembers Hatate as ,the girl from back then’?”

“Pretty much. It’s no wonder her newspaper is selling so badly compared to Aya’s. Even though she puts so much effort into it, and her articles are usually more detailed and accurate... The Kakashi is, for the most part, seen as little more than a pathetic attempt by Hatate to get back at the woman that ruined her life.“

"I... I didn't know any of that..." , you mutter in disbelief. That was what this had all been about? Hatate hating, despising Aya because she'd exposed a dark truth about her father, the only kind of family she'd had, in turn branding her for life? Maybe... she hadn't worked together with you in order to get back at Aya... Maybe she had simply been afraid of talking about anything that might've caused you to consider leaving because she was simply so happy to finally have found someone she could work with together? Maybe... she didn't want to use you, but she was simply afraid of losing you?

"Nitori, I... I need to go."

One last time, the Kappa girl sighs. „You're going to visit her and apologize, aren't you."

You smile. „We've only known each other for a few days, and you can already read me like a book."

"I guess you're just a simple human, after all.", Nitori responds jokingly as she stands up from her chair and starts clearing away the cups. „Want me to give you a ride? That baby out there is as good as finished, and I've been meaning to test it out, anyways. Besides..." , she opens a weird-looking cupboard underneath one of the work benches before placing the cups inside. „it'd take you like 2 hours to walk up there, and I can shave about... 90 minutes off of that, easy."

Nitori had not promised too much. During the time it takes you to travel up Youkai mountain, she barely has enough time to roughly explain what exactly it is you are riding on before you reach Hatate's shack. Apparently, the weird vehicle consisting of different rods and plates is called a ,buggy', and this one is the 17th in a long series of Nitori's more or less successful attempts at building a fast land vehicle. The first few in the series were apparently powered by coal but didn't reach the speeds Nitori had intended, and therefore were ditched for alcohol-based ones, which worked by burning refined alcohol. However, those turned out to be very expensive to run, so for the current generation of ,buggies', Nitori had switched to a complicated mixture of some sort of electricity storage device and alcohol-burning, something she called a ,Hybrid'. Whatever it was, it managed to get the two of you uphill quickly, and in one piece, giving you a little bit of a feeling for just how advanced Kappa technology really was.

Finally, the humming of the buggy's motor subsides, and Nitori tells you that it's safe to get off now. As you climb out of the vehicle, you thank her again for everything she's done and are rewarded with her usual bright smile.

"Hey, the least I can do is help a friend out. Now it's all up to you though, make it count!", she cheers you on. „Oh, but do come back soon if you can. I wanna be back in the workshop by 4, otherwise my customers are gonna get mad."

"Sure, sure, I'll make it quick. Hopefully..."

Easier said than done. You have no idea how Hatate is going to react. She might not even let you in after... what you did last time. Heck, she might actually be afraid of you at this point...

Still, you have to apologize.

You have to at least try.

Gathering all your courage, you knock at her door.

And wait.

No response.

Again, you knock.

"H-hatate... I-it's me... I'm... I'm sorry!"

Again, nothing but silence.

"If you're in there, Hatate... I just want you to know I'm sorry... I fucked up big time, and I... I did something horrible to you, thinking you were just trying to get me to work for free... I didn't know anything about what you were doing, or why you were doing it... And I got mad, I wanted revenge, so I did something inexcusable... If you don't want anything to do with me after that, that's fine... I just... wanted you to know that I'm sorry."

Your long monologue is met with the same response as your other attempts. She should be in there, right...? Working on tomorrow's edition of the Kakashi, like every other day. Perhaps she really

doesn't want to see you or even just talk to you anymore. Frustrated, you turn back around and walk down the steps in front of her door again. Then, you finally notice it.

A small piece of white paper, wedged inbetween two of the steps. You pick it up and notice that it seems to have been glued to the door before and somehow gotten loose over time. It must've been lying there for a while, judging from how hard it is to make out the rain-smudged words it contains.

I have... failure...
my entire life...
nothing but a weak attempt...
gone...
kill myself... don't bother
looking for me...

Love,
Hatate

With every word you make out from the mess of wet ink, your heartbeat becomes faster and faster, and your grip around the thin piece of stringed cellulose tightens until it starts ripping, falling back to the ground. This... was a joke, right? A bad... a joke in bad taste, surely... Hey, Hatate, open the door already... Y-you're in there, right?

You bang against Hatate's door with all your might, shouting, telling her to open. You tell her about the paper someone attached to her door, a prank like the ones school bullies would pull, fake suicide messages on the outside of the locker of that one quiet girl in class. Even though your hands are starting to hurt, you keep hitting the wood, calling out to her.

There is no response.

„Hey.“

Nitori's soft voice, reverberating from inbetween the trees behind you, puts an end to your frenzy. Your fists and forehead still resting on the damp, dark wood of Hatate's front door, it feels like your body is entirely too heavy to turn around and face her right now.

„She's... not here, is she?“

„No...“, you mutter so silently even you can barely hear it. Was this really happening? Where could she have gone? Was there still time? Was this... all your fault? As the weight of these questions settles on top of your arched back, you feel the tears building up, finally. Was there... really nothing you could do anymore?

„S-she... She left a letter...“, you manage to voice as your tears force their way through your closed eyelids. „She's... going to...!“

A sudden warmth spreads from your back through your entire body, relieving you from the immense weight, if just for a moment. You shiver and finally look up to discover Nitori embracing you from behind. You don't know how she's doing it, but her tiny body feels incredibly warm right now.

„Don't give up yet.“, she whispers with her eyes closed and her head pressed against you. „We're going to find her and bring her back, okay?“

The little Kappa looks up at you, smiling. „Hatate wouldn't do something so irresponsible. You've seen for yourself how much she cares about those around her, haven't you?“

Nitori was right. Even... even if she hated you right now, she wasn't someone who'd just leave a note on her door before... killing herself. Maybe she actually just wanted some time off, or it wasn't her note, after all. But whatever it was, she definitely wasn't at home right now.

Pondering about these things, you realize Nitori's let go of you again and is now frantically doing something with that weird screen-device she'd been toying with last morning. After a few seconds, she begins holding it to her ear and speaking to it.

„Hey Kasei, it's me.“, she announced, seemingly to nobody. „Can I ask you to check the electricity usage logs for a sec? Thanks, you're a sweetheart!“

Her odd behavior catches your interest enough for you to finally lift your head off the door and turn around to get a closer look at what she's doing.

„Umm, Nitori... I've been meaning to ask, but what's that thing you're holding?“

„Oh, this? It's a smartphone.“, she states matter-of-factly before realizing that, perhaps, this wasn't really useful information to you. „It's, umm... it's a device that allows me to talk to people anywhere in the world... or, well, kinda. Other people who have something like it, rather.“

„So you're asking them if they know anything about where Hatate went...?“, you respond, not entirely sure if you understood any of what Nitori just said, but she's too busy with the Kappa on the other end to answer.

„Alright, I need data on Hatate's usage over the past... 2 days.“, she speaks into the device. After a few more seconds, she responds with an instinctive nod and a „Thanks, that's what I figured. Talk to you later, then!“ before turning back towards you again.

„Well... what did you find out?“, you ask, entirely unsure of what her conversation was even about.

„Electricity' was... that thing Kappa machinery ran on, right? Kinda like magic?“

„Hatate left last night around 8PM, probably in order to not be seen. Really, I just wanted to make sure she wasn't just ignoring us, but if she was inside, she'd almost certainly be on her laptop right now and she's not. Plus, the lights haven't been turned on since last night, so yeah, she's not here.“

„So, umm, that helps us how?“, you ask with a puzzled look.

„Well for one, we don't have to kick in her door, so that's good. Also-“, she interrupts you before you can even open your mouth. „I know you want me to look for hints on her whereabouts, but I actually have a really good idea about who to ask already... Let's get back to the buggy, and I'll take you there, okay?“

When Nitori started the motor, you'd expected her to turn around and drive back down into Kappa Valley, but instead, she started taking you higher up the mountain. After just a few minutes of driving, the two of you reach the top plateau of Youkai mountain and are immediately intercepted by one of the Tengu guards. Upon recognizing Nitori, however, she immediately waves the two of through without another word.

„Huh, that was easier than I expected“, you say audibly relieved. Nitori turns around halfway and grins at you.

„Well, I do provide all the maintenance for the machines up here, so they usually suppose I'm here to work on something.“

„You... make it sound like you already abuse that level of trust regularly.“

„Haha, well...“, she laughs awkwardly, but instead of explaining any further, just drops the topic. Maybe she feels uncomfortable about having been found out? That's actually pretty... cute.

You consider playfully patting her head and telling her that her secret is safe with you, but before you can do so, Nitori stops the buggy in front of a large, plainly rectangular building.

„Right, this is it. I'm, uhh, gonna think of an excuse that'll get us in, but you'll have to talk to the guy yourself.“

„Hey, Nitori, Nitori, you're getting way ahead of yourself here“, you stop her. „I don't even know what this is! Or who I'm supposed to talk to! Or...“

„Oh right, sorry...“, she interjects. „I just kinda got excited... feels a little like one of those undercover spy novels, you know?“

Yeah, of course you totally knew what she was on about. However, Nitori actually does go on to explain her plan in more detail to you, and you're starting to see where she's going with this. The building you're standing in front of is the Tengu prison, and inside, Hatate's father is still being locked up, serving the last years of his 250-year sentence.

„It’s really not that different from your human justice system“, Nitori remarks upon seeing your worried face. „Major crimes are punished by jail times of maybe half an ordinary human’s lifespan, are they not? Tengu live around 1200 years on average, so if anything, I’d say he got off lightly.“

As for why the two of you are going to ask Hatate’s father about her, Nitori has a quite simple explanation handy: „She’s never really had any close friends before getting to know you. So really, if there’s anyone who might have an idea where she’s headed other than you, it’s her father.“

The rest of the plan is quickly explained, as well. Nitori was going to feign the necessity of maintenance to some of the water systems within the prison cells, taking you inside the complex with her. Then, you’d simply wander off, find Hatate’s father, and explain the situation to him.

„Simple as cake, right?“, Nitori smiles proudly after having finished her explanation.

„Well, it beats sitting around doing nothing.“, you admit, unable to come up with something better yourself. „We’re... not going to get killed or something if we’re found out, right?“

„Haha, well... I can probably cover for you, in that case.“, Nitori waves it off before making her way toward the front entrance, leaving you no time to ask any further questions. This... was going to work, right?

„Basically, we’ve detected a sudden drop in water pressure at your facilities and decided to investigate. It’s probably just a small leak somewhere, so there’s no emergency or anything.“

The confidence and naturalness of Nitori’s fake explanation stuns you. Who would’ve thought this usually timid and shy girl could lie this convincingly? You notice the guard’s investigative look shift over from her towards you and start opening your mouth in an attempt to explain your presence, but Nitori is quicker.

„Of course, since the prison is so big, finding the leak on my own might take a while, so I decided to bring a trainee along. Just for the search, though, I’ll do all the actual work, don’t you worry.“, she adds while demonstratively holding up the tool box she’s taken with her.

„Well...“, the guard begins. „We haven’t noticed anything unusual with the water pressure ourselves, but sure, if you want to check, go right ahead. You know your way around, I presume?“

„Of course, we have our own maps and all that. Thanks for your cooperation, I’m certain it won’t take too long!“, Nitori replies with a smile before waltzing on like their conversation hadn’t even taken place. Hurriedly, you follow her, carrying another, mostly empty box with you.

„See? Easy.“, Nitori smiles proudly once you’re out of earshot of the entrance guard. „Now, remember what I told you and we should be done in maybe 30 minutes.“

Right.

Of course, neither of you knew exactly where within the 6-storey complex Hatate’s father was interned. Nitori had reasoned it would probably not be within the high-security area in the basement, but just in case, she was going to check it herself first, as you simply didn’t have the access rights necessary to be there. Meanwhile, you were going to head towards the section of prisoners whose last name started with „H“, as the normal-security cells were conveniently arranged in alphabetical order. While Nitori wasn’t sure how many guards were patrolling or what their timetables were, she had assured you that most floors were usually empty, as the high-tech Kappa-built cells were resistant to both technological and magical interference and usually did not require constant monitoring. And indeed, you find that the floor containing the „H“-row of cells appears completely empty upon your arrival. From a long, central corridor expanding down the length of the building, multiple side corridors branch off, labeled with the letters of the alphabet. It doesn’t take you too long to find the correct row, and before long, you stand in front of the correct cell. Its front consists of little less than a bleak, white metal door with a viewing glass embedded into it and a little plaque underneath, indicating the name, crime and sentence of the prisoner.

Himekaidou Toshirou

Heavy Domestic Abuse

Sentenced 19.11.1829 to 250 years of solitary confinement

With heavy steps, you approach the door and take a look through the glass. The cell itself mirrors the bleakness of its exterior, being furnished with little less than a sink, a bed, and a table situated next to the only barred window. Slouched over it sits a man, focusing intensely on something lying in front of him. His right hand moves back and forth in almost rhythmical patterns, and it soon becomes clear to you that he's writing something. Your sudden tapping against the viewing glass instantly gathers his attention, and he looks up like a wolf who's being disturbed while enjoying his kill. As he makes eye contact with you, he mutters something to himself, but he's too far away and the viewing glass is too thick for you to understand. In an attempt at an answer, you gesture him to come closer, and without sparing another thought, he does. As he stands up, you realize that he's actually quite a bit larger than you, to the point where he has to crouch down a little in order to look through the glass. His rough, slightly wrinkled face reminds you of that of your own father – perhaps a few years older, but with the same warm, if weary expression. He looks more like someone's aging father who's spent his entire life doing hard work on the farms and now lives alone after his children have left home. It feels a little unreal standing right in front of someone like this, locked behind a door reading „Heavy Domestic Abuse“ on it.

„You're not one of the guards.“, he states bluntly from the other side of the glass. „What do you want?“

„I'm looking for your daughter, Hatate.“

As soon as her name leaves your mouth, his eyes become watery. He blinks a few times, mutters something that sounds like „Sorry“, then turns around and uses a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his tears. When he turns back to you, his expression seems softer, and his facade starts to break. Even though he's visibly trying, he cannot stop the tears running down his face.

„I'm sorry... I just... I haven't heard anything about her in... so many years.“

As he struggles to speak inbetween his forcefully suppressed sobs, he starts to seem less like a man who's resigned to his fate in honor and more like a lost young boy.

„Is... is she okay? Wh- what is she doing right now?“

About a billion possible answers to that question rush through your head at once, and it takes you some time to filter out your answer.

„She's... She started working as a journalist... set up her own newspaper... from what I heard it's going pretty well. Truth is... she actually recruited me to work for it alongside her, and, well...“

Even though you feel like you've done a horrible job at summarizing even just your personal experience with Hatate, Toshirou's eyes become more and more watery with your every word, and finally, seemingly unable to hold it in, he bursts out into tears.

„Please... please get me out of here! I... I just want to see her again... my... my daughter...“

His fists hit against the cold steel of the metal door separating the two of you, causing little more than a hollow, reverberating sound. You're so caught up in the moment that it takes you a few seconds to realize that being loud is probably a horrible idea right now.

„Please, calm down! Hatate and I need your help! You're the only one I can ask now!“, you plead, and to your relief, his knocking subsides. His fingers grab the lower edge of the window and Toshirou, with all his might, pulls himself back up to face you. You try avoid looking into his sorrowful eyes, but somehow, they seem to take up the entire space behind the glass.

You try to find the best way to lie to those eyes.

„I... Hatate left her home today... She's been in a couple of fights with Aya... Since they're both journalists... I kinda got involved as well... She said she needed some time on her own but... I'm worried about her.“

Upon mentioning Aya's name, you see a little flare light up through the water in his eyes, though just for a short time. Having taken note of your reaction, he moves to explain.

„I'm sorry... I really shouldn't react like that when hearing her name anymore...“, Toshirou says in a low voice, almost looking ashamed of himself now.

„But why...? Isn't she the reason you're here now?“

Your innocent question is met with a quick shake of the head from the other side.

„No... I thought so as well at first, but it's a lot more complicated than that. I... assume Hatate's told you the basic story?“

„Kinda, yeah.“, you say in an attempt to shorten the dialogue by not having to explain who Nitōri was or why she played any role in this. „From what I heard, Aya, well... assuming that you did what was written in that article...“

You stop. Was this really a man who could harm his own daughter like that? Had almost 200 years of prison just turned him „soft“...? You didn't know, but the answer doesn't matter to you right now. You need to find Hatate.

„You know... her entire story was built upon one witness testimony...“, Toshirō continues before you can. „I wasn't aware of it back then, but... there was someone who wanted me out of the army. In fact... it was my superior.“

„Wait a second...“, you interject. „Are you saying you were framed?“

„Yes.“, Toshirō answers without a moment's hesitation. „That is... if you're willing to believe me. I don't know how much you know about the Tengu, but... fair trial is not a value held in particularly high esteem up here.“

„There... was no way to appeal?“, you ask in disbelief. Up until now, you'd figured every race in Gensōkyō was pretty similar to humans in social structure... At least the Kappa had seemed to be like this, so you just presumed the same for Tengu.

„Appeal? Don't make me laugh. There wasn't even really a trial. Aya's article was pretty much just accepted as valid. I don't know whether she knew that would happen or not... Honestly, as a journalist, she just did what she's always done... Write down people's opinions on others, shocking and unfiltered as they may be.“

„So... this guy, your superior... he used Aya's newspaper as a way to accuse you of...“

„That's what I gather, yes. For one, from what I've heard from various friends I've made over the years here... and from the fact that I know I didn't do what Seijirō said I did. How could he even dare to...!“

Hatate's father closes his eyes and grits his teeth in anger. If what he said was true, then... the entire situation between the two journalists was much more complicated than you thought it was. And perhaps... neither of them really knew.

„But yes... that's why I'm here.“, Tojirō quickly starts again, perhaps in an attempt to avoid becoming too angry. „It doesn't matter right now, anyways... You said Hatate left her home and hasn't come back?“

„Yes... so I asked a friend, and she brought me here so I could talk to you. I thought maybe-“

„That I would have an idea where she'd gone.“, he finishes your sentence for you.

„Good thinking, old man.“, you answer, trying to make the atmosphere more lighthearted. Tojirō ponders for a bit, then says: „I will admit I haven't seen her in a long... long time. But there was one place we'd go to regularly... As a family outing, so to say. It's... a small shrine, dedicated to a goddess so old barely anyone even remembers her name anymore. It's about 30 minutes north of Youkai mountain. It's small, but you can actually live inside if you know how to get your water from the nearby river... Hatate used to love going there to view the cherry blossoms in spring... Since there's none growing up here with all the wind and cold weather we have.“

This was a better lead than you had hoped for. Sounds like the perfect place to hide out in and avoid people for a while.

„Is there any name I could find it by? Anything I can ask people on the way for?“

„It's called the Hakusan Shrine. If you ask the Kappa valley's eldest, he should know. Although... that might take too long for you. Darn... If only I could draw you a map or something.“

„I'm afraid I might not have the time for that. I do know a Kappa I can ask though... I'll definitely go there today, no matter what it takes!“

„Before you go... Please... tell Hatate I love her when you see her. Tell her... I'm waiting for the day I can finally see her again.“

„Don't worry, I will. And we'll do whatever it takes to make that day come as soon as possible.“

“Not gonna lie, I wasn’t expecting to take a road trip when I woke up this morning!” Nitori grins at you as she starts up the buggy’s motor with a roar and the two of you start making your way down the north side of Youkai mountain.

„You know, for something as improvised as this, it’s worked out really well so far!“, you yell back over the rhythmic sound of the motor propelling you through the forest path at near-frightening speed. Hadn’t you already experienced flight with Hatate this often, you’d probably feel compelled to ask Nitori to slow down, but the speed of the buggy barely even compares. It is a loud and bumpy ride downhill though, and the two of you barely find the time to exchange words, so you’re stuck admiring the few glimpses of the landscape you occasionally catch inbetween the increasingly large gaps between the trees. You’ve never seen this part of Gensokyo before, opposite the Youkai mountain, where neither Humans nor Tengu live. A vast, beautiful landscape, untouched for eons, framed by nothing but the mountains and the horizon in the distance. And it is this purest of sceneries that the sun has chosen as its stage for its grand finale.

Nitori looks at her smartphone and lets out another sigh.

„She said it’d be easy to find, but come on... This map’s just gotta be wrong.“

The two of you had arrived here almost an hour ago and were still searching for the shrine. Using her smartphone, Nitori had somehow managed to get another Kappa to send her a map of the area, but apparently, it wasn’t worth much.

„I would’ve thought with all that technology you guys have, cartography would be fairly easy...“, you say more to yourself than to the Kappa girl in front of you, but of course, she overhears it.

„It’s not that we can’t do it, it’s more that noone really wants to do it. I mean, let’s be honest... who wants to know about where exactly some random, abandoned shrine is located?“ Nitori shakes her head before returning to her phone. „Honestly, that shrine might not even be around anymore... it’s been what, 200 years now?“

That was, in fact, a good point – and something you hadn’t considered. However, the shrine was also your only lead, and you weren’t about to give up yet. Then, you suddenly remember something.

„Umm, Nitori, I don’t know if this is relevant, but...“, you begin while leaning over the girl’s shoulder in order to take a closer look at the map. „Hatate’s father said that the shrine was located near a river and some cherry trees. Does that... help in any way?“

You can’t make out much on the small device, but it does look like there’s a river nearby. Nitori perks up in response to your words, and almost hits your chin in the process.

„Geez, you could’ve told me that before, you know! We’ve been walking around aimlessly for a whole hour, too...“

„Well, I didn’t remember it before just now! Anyways, how far’s that river away from where we are?“ you ask, pointing at the map on her device.

„A little bit... But if it really is that river, I’ll need to talk with Amame again about these maps... To call these ‘Inaccurate’ would be a praise!“

And with that, she shuts off her device with the press of a button and starts walking back to the buggy. „Come on, it’ll be faster if we take this! Unless you wanna walk for another hour.“

Nah, you’re fine.

It's almost sunset by the time you arrive. As you turn around a small mound of rocks and other debris, lying on the side of a narrow river bank, an enchanting scene appears before you. The setting sun's orange light prys its way through the forest canopy, drenching the space between the trees in a ghostly, nearly fire-colored mist, formed by the evening moisture already building up in the woods. In the middle, the mist is a little lighter, and a clearing in the canopy causes the orange-tinted sky to reflect onto the ground like a spotlight. And in the center of that clearing stands an old shrine, made out of simple, brown wood. Though it looks old, it is also clear that someone must've taken care of it over the years – it is neither overgrown nor rotten, and fits into the surrounding environment almost as if nature itself had built it.

Its front doors are wide open and on its terrace stands a small donation box, and it even has a bell above it. However, since there's no lights on inside, it's hard to tell whether someone's living in it right now or not. Indeed, if it wasn't for that and its remote location, you could easily imagine people going here daily to pray. In the background, you hear the buggy's motor sounds dying down, and your attention shifts back to the situation at hand.

You're here to find Hatate.

Nitori routinely jumps off her vehicle and you clumsily follow. Once you've managed to get off, she turns to you and creates a little moment of *déjà-vû* for you both:

„Well, I'm gonna, uhh, stay behind again. You might want to be alone for this.“

This time, however, your answer is different.

„Nope, you ain't getting out of it this easily!“

„W-wait, what?“, she stammers, completely caught off-guard. She was obviously expecting you to just go alone.

„You're the reason I'm even here right now! Hatate needs to know how much you've done for me! Plus... you've been worried about her as well, right?“

„W-well, you're... not wrong.“, the tiny girl responds, averting her eyes and pulling her left arm against her body. „I'm just... not sure what to say to her after all this...“

„Neither am I, you know? But even if I'm not sure of what to say to her... I'm absolutely, 100-percent sure that I want to see her again. So that's why I'll be going, and why you're coming with me! Because we're both here for her. Because we both want her back!“

And with that, you grab her by her wrist and start walking towards the shrine. Nitori, though still a little hesitant, follows in your footsteps, and together, you walk up the stairs to the terrace. Finally, you're close enough to see inside through the front doors.

There's a few items strewn across the floor – books, pieces of wood, cooking utensils, numerous cans, and a very worn-out futon. However, aside from those tidbits, the shrine is largely empty. And there's no sign of Hatate.

„Would've been too easy, huh.“, you sigh. „Well, at least it looks like she's left some of her stuff here, so she might have only gone out for a while.“

Nitori's already scurried past you into the room and is now closely inspecting Hatate's leftovers. You notice her picking up one of the cans from the ground and move over to take a closer look yourself.

„Well, at least we can be pretty sure now that she isn't going to kill herself... At least not today.“, Nitori states with a glint in her eyes.

„You really enjoy playing detective, don't you?“, you remark smugly, and though Nitori's looking away from you, you know she's pouting in response. Looking around her, you notice that most cans lying on the ground are still unopened. There's also a book lying on the ground with a little page marker in it, further cementing your belief that Hatate is likely to come back later today.

„Anyways, any clue where she could've gone?“, you ask your Kappa friend who's now moved on to inspect the futon. Nitori, however, just ignores your question and begins lifting the futon over her head before sniffing it.

„Do you even know what Hatate smells like or is this still part of your detective play?“

„Hey smartie-pants, why don't you try it instead then? Surely you've gotten, um... closer to her than I have.“

Well, that's an unusually straightforward statement for her. Although, why not play along? Maybe it'd even work. Having come to that conclusion, you sit down next to Nitori who's still holding up part of the futon and move your head close to it. Then, you breathe in.

A curious mixture of the sweetness of sweat coupled with the rich scent of freshly chipped dark wood enters your nostrils. It has a heaviness to it, but smells warm and comforting at the same time. Slight hints of the smell of her hair and the skin around her neck round it all off. Instinctively, you breathe in again, and the scents mingle even more, combining in new ways, growing stronger. Yes, Hatate had been here. And she would definitely return.

“I should've kept my mouth shut.“, Nitori sighs behind you. „Just looks creepy when you do it.“ You shoot her an annoyed look while trying to come up with a good response, but the Kappa girl is quicker.

“Anyways, so we know Hatate's been here now. And judging from all these scraps of paper lying around, she's been busy, too.“

She bends down and picks up one of them. It's filled with Hatate's jagged handwriting, a chaotic mixture of what was probably words, numbers, and arrows connecting them all together. She really had a completely different way of working compared to you. How did she manage to condense this convoluted mess into an easily readable article?

“Since she's left so much stuff here, I'm pretty sure she's gonna be back at some point... Maybe she's out to do research for the Kakashi?“, you answer absentmindedly as you shuffle through the other paper scraps. Yup, nothing readable here either. „Actually, come to think of it, isn't tomorrow the day she was going to get the village edition printed?“

“Whaddaya ask me, I wouldn't know.“, Nitori says while placing her hands behind her head. „But if she's gonna be back soon, wanna wait here for her?“

“Well, we already came all the way, so we might as well.“, you answer with a yawn. For some reason, you were feeling pretty tired. You decide to lie down on your back and stare at the ceiling for a little and before you know it, your eyelids are closed and you're drifting away into the comfortable embrace of sleep as the last rays of the sun vanish inbetween the tree trunks.

“Hey.“, a high-pitched voice drills into your ear, bringing your journey into the land of dreams to an abrupt halt. „Don't fall asleep on me here. Do you know how awkward it'd be for me to be the one to meet her first? I would have to, like... explain everything!“

You feel someone grab you by the shoulders and pushing you into a sitting position. How annoying. Grumpily, you open your eyes. It seems to be nighttime, and the room is still as empty as it was when you arrived. Nitori behind you lets out a sigh. “Don't worry, it hasn't been that long yet. Maybe half an hour. Though... I'm not sure if I can stay the entire night, to be honest.“

You rub your eyes, trying to find a good way to answer her.

“That's alright... If you need to leave so you can be ready for work tomorrow, that's okay. Just, uhh... please check up on me, somehow. I don't know if I can walk all the way back to the Kappa Valley, let alone my home.“

“Haha, yeah, that'd be quite a trek from here.“, Nitori laughs. „Well, since you extended the offer, I guess I'll be off for tonight. Starting to get kinda cold, too.“

Now that she mentions it, the room really was getting fairly cold. Was there no way to heat this place up a little? You look around you, but no, there's no oven, no fireplace, and of course, no electricity. Had Hatate really stayed the night here?

“Yeah, that's weird, isn't it... I don't know if I'd sleep here, to be honest.“, you admit as doubts start to form in your mind whether Hatate really was going to come back. Sure, there were notes for Kakashi articles here, but maybe she'd gotten frustrated and given up? Maybe she'd stayed here one night and then realized that it was way too wet and cold to really sleep here? There was so much

you didn't know, and it slowly but surely started eating away at you. Was it a mistake to wait here for her?

"You sure you're gonna be fine here on your own? There's food and stuff I guess, but it's just going to get colder from now on.", Nitōri's voice wakes you from your inner monologue. She's already stepped outside of the shrine doors and seemed to be about to leave.

"Well, the sleeping bag will probably be warm enough", you reply as you force a smile. If it meant the possibility of seeing Hatate again, you didn't mind staying out in the cold for a night or two. Nitōri, seemingly pleased with your answer, waves at you from the outside before turning around and hopping down the shrine's terrace. You stand up and walk towards the doors in order to look after her, but she's already out of sight by the time you get there. Quick girl.

With a sigh, you close the shrine doors – a vain attempt at preserving what little warmth is inside the room. Now, to wait.

You barely last an hour before the freezing temperatures force you to take shelter inside Hatate's sleeping bag. It's warmer than you thought, and the comfort coupled with the sweet smell of your loved one is enough to quickly lull you into a half-awake state as you let your eyes wander across the ceiling, your thoughts getting more incoherent by the minute. The last thing you can remember is hoping that your dreams will be of her.

Hatate sitting opposite you at the dinner table, holding your hand and gazing into your eyes.

Hatate flying with you to the lake atop Youkai mountain for a picnic date.

Hatate blushing as she snatches a piece of chocolate out of your outstretched hand with her mouth.

Hatate proudly presenting the 100th issue of her new magazine at a town festival.

Hatate unexpectedly calling you onto the stage before pulling out a tiny box.

"This is how you humans do it, right?"

Hatate standing in front of you as the priest pours the sake.

Hatate looking excited after you admit you've written an editorial about your wedding.

Hatate lying next to you with an exhausted smile on her face.

"I love you."

Hatate walking with you hand-in-hand through a thick bamboo forest before stopping at a large residence.

Hatate holding your baby, smiling happily like everything was right in the world.

Hatate standing in your kitchen, greeting you with a smile as you come back from the farm.

Hatate scolding your son after he's been out chasing the chickens again.

Hatate smiling proudly and waving a bunch of paper sheets around.

"We've finally outsold the Bunbunmaru!"

Hatate grinning to herself as she sits at her desk, writing an article she probably shouldn't publish.

Hatate and you walking hand-in-hand, even after so much time.

Hatate in front of a market stand, negotiating prices with someone until he finally gives in.

Hatate sitting right in front of you, holding your wrinkled hand in hers, giving a weak, but somehow still reassuring smile.

Hatate sitting next to you as you both look at the doctor, trying to find something to say.

Hatate coming into your room with a tray of her homemade curry.

Hatate standing up from the side of your bed to open the window.

Hatate smiling at you as the light spring breeze plays with her invariably soft hair.

"I love you."

Hatate's face disappearing into a flurry of colors, sounds, and finally, darkness.

Hatate.

Ha...

ta..

te.

Something warm drips onto your face, and you flinch. It feels painful, having to return from the comfortable depths of your dream, return from the perfect life you were living just a second ago. You don't feel like opening your eyes.

Again, you feel the sensation of something warm, followed by the sound of someone breathing in heavily. It feels like... someone's lying on top of you?

Finally, you open your eyes, only to be greeted by a blurred image of something right in front of you. It feels like you've woken up underwater, and you struggle to even move your fingers.

"W-why are you crying...?"

Ah.

So she really had come.

Was this still the world inside your dream? A post-mortem reunion, perhaps? You want to raise your hand in order to check whether it's wrinkled or not, but you still feel unable to move. You try to calm down and focus on your own breathing for a bit, but the only thing you can think of is her. What kind of cruel dream was this, to hold you in its grasp even after the curtain had dropped? You want to wake up, no, be woken up by her, you want to be told it would be okay, you want to apologize, you want to make up with her, write articles with her, live out the life sketched out inside your imagination...

"I'm sorry... I... I kept so much from you... I was... so afraid... to lose you..."

Convulsed words poke through the water separating you from her, but you feel too exhausted to grasp their meaning. You want to answer something, ask her if she's really hear, but your mouth feels dry, and opening it requires all your strength. Just as you begin to form a word, the curtain of frosted glass is swept away from in front of your eyes by the soft touch of her fingers, and you can finally see.

No, this wasn't a dream.

You had been crying, and this was Hatate, lying on top of you, crying as well. And just as quick as the tears had vanished, they reappear. She really had come back... She was alive, and she cared about you... Even despite everything you did.

"I know... you think you did something horrible, but... I... I did something worse..."

As Hatate continues speaking, you finally feel the life return to your limbs, and you wrap your arms around her back in a comforting embrace.

"I kept the truth from you... I didn't want to tell you about the numbers... I was afraid you would go away... afraid you would leave like everyone else..."

She manages to force out the last few words inbetween a growing wave of sobs before losing the strength to even keep her head in front of yours, resting it on your chest instead. You move one of your hands onto her head and begin softly stroking her hair.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but... I wasn't any better", you finally answer. „I... The moment I started thinking about it, I suddenly cared more about the money than I did about you... I thought you'd just used me to get back at Aya... I was so mad, I went crazy..."

Against your expectations, Hatate does not protest to hearing your apology, but just listens silently, her still-erratic breathing pressing her against you.

"But I realized the next morning... that the kind of love you showed me couldn't have been fake. There had to be some other reason for it... So I realized I was the stupid one."

"D-don't... say that...", she murmurs, but lets you continue nonetheless.

"So I went to apologize today... Only to find you having left that letter... I was so afraid, Hata-chan... I was so afraid I'd lost you..."

You hug her tightly, and place a kiss on her soft, warm hair.

"I was... afraid too...", she sobs as her tears stain the outside of the sleeping bag. „I wanted to see you again... I don't think I could've... actually done it... Can you..."

She stops and raises her head in order to look into your eyes again.

"Can you promise me to never leave?"

“So“, Hatate says as she slowly removes the can from the boiler, careful not to burn herself. „You never told me... Why were you crying when you woke up?“

Her casual question prompts a short, but intense flashback to the dream you had. In any other situation, you probably wouldn't have told her about it, but right now, it just seemed like... the right thing to do.

“Well, I... You know how they say your life flashes before your eyes before you die?“

Hatate's face changes to a surprised expression and she almost drops the hot can.

“You thought you were dying?“

“Not quite... I mean, I guess that was part of it, but... I was dreaming of, well... how we'd spend our lives together.“, you say as your eyes become temporarily independent and dart around the room in a vain attempt to avoid Hatate's gaze. „You know, getting married and stuff...“

“Wow“, the crow girl breathes as she puts down the can in front of her. „Who... who knew you could be so cute?“

Then, out of nowhere, she jumps onto you, seizing you in a love-filled hug before moving in for a kiss. You accept her, and the two of you spend a few minutes cuddling and enjoying being so close to their loved one. It is only when you mention the food getting cold that Hatate lets go of you, and you manage to scoot over to the camping stove to eat something for the first time since the morning. Hatate, slightly upset, sits down next to you and pouts.

“Can't you read the mood? Geez.“

“What're you talking about?“, you answer with a mouthful of beans. „I really missed your homemade cooking, you know!“

“Pfft, this is just canned beans, silly.“, she says as she digs into her own can.

“You're right! And even though it's just canned beans, it *still* tastes better when you make it!“

A light giggle coming from Hatate's direction tells you she's given up and accepted the playful compliment. Both of you are fairly hungry, and so it only takes a few minutes before you're finished.

“Actually, I was thinking about this earlier, Hata-chan, but isn't tomorrow the printing date for the village edition?“

Hatate, busy scraping the last few beans out of her can, freezes.

“Y-yes“, she finally manages to stammer. „O-of course! I wouldn't forget something that important over a little personal business like that...“

A smirk forms on your face. She'd really forgotten, somehow.

“Yeah, you're right. After all, you have all these important memos lying around, I'm sure you were using your time away from home to do some more research, right?“, you say with as much earnest as you can muster.

“Of course! A true reporter never sleeps! I've been doing nothing but work since I came here!“, she responds with even more earnest. Welp, looks like she won. You can't hide your smile anymore and begin to chuckle.

“Sounds like you've earned yourself some time off, eh?“

“I was just thinking the same thing~!“

And with that, Hatate's back on top of you before you can say even a single word of protest.

“You know...“, she purrs, snuggling yourself against you. „We kinda need to make up for all those days we haven't seen each other...“

“It's only been two, though.“, you remark as if it mattered even slightly.

“But it felt like an eternity“, Hatate answers with a hint of frustration in her voice. „And since you promised me to stay by my side from now on... You better start making up for that eternity right away!“

That didn't make any sense, but sense could wait for now. As Hatate moves her slender fingers down towards your shirt and begins to unbutton it, the warmth spreading inside of you seems to completely drown out the coldness of the room around you.

After she has completely unbuttoned your shirt, she moves down to your pants. You decide to let her do as she pleases for now, thinking it might be nice to enjoy the scene playing out in front of

your eyes. Contrary to your shirt, there's only one button on your trousers, and with that one opened, they slide off easily enough.

Eager to get started, Hatate takes your already erect member into her hands and begins stroking it while licking its tip. You flinch a little as you feel the warm sensation of her tongue travelling around your shaft. She teases you like this for a little while before finally beginning to suck on it properly. You move your hands onto her head, giving her a little guidance as she takes in a little more of your length with every movement. Just as she reaches the halfway-point, her eyes widen a little, and she quickly retreats, choking. You immediately remove your hands from her head and try to make eye contact.

"You alright?", you ask.

"Y-yeah...", Hatate answers inbetween caughs. „I... I thought I would try it out, but I guess it... takes a while to get good at it.“

"Yeah, I was surprised when you just... well, started like that. Wanna do it normally instead?"

"Mm, sounds like a good idea. Sorry for trying something like that-"

"Hey, nothing to apologize for. You wanna be on top this time? Since you... already kinda are."

Hatate's cute laugh gets your spirits up even higher as you watch her undress on top of you. With each layer of clothing she removes, her scent becomes stronger, until it finally seems to completely envelop you. She reaches behind her back to undo her bra, exposing her armpits just long enough for you to notice the small, delicate sweat beads on her skin, dimly reflecting what little light there is in the room. Her bra falls, granting you a first-row seat view of her delicate breasts. Hatate is, of course, fully aware of how much you enjoy the show, and decides to step it up a little. She slowly moves her hands downwards from her collarbone, stopping to carress her nipples for a while, and then moves further down towards her panties. As your gaze follows the movements of her hands, you catch sight of the familiar patch of hair lurking out from underneath the only remaining piece of fabric on her body. She runs her thumbs around the edge of her panties as if to remove them as well, but then stops and winks at you.

"Show's not over yet~"

And with that, she moves her right hand further down her panties and begins masturbating on top of you. The sound of her wetness mixes with her increasingly erratic breathing, completing the change of the shrine's atmosphere into that of a honeymoon bedroom. Her warm, wet entrance is now only a few centimeters away from your penis, still blocked off by both Hatate's panties and her fingers. Your urge to get inside her grows with each of her soft moans as she pleasures herself, but this situation is strangely erotic in and of itself, and you decide to see for how long you can take it. Hatate, meanwhile, has increased the speed of her motions and is breathing a lot harder now. Little streams of liquid crystal start forming around the hem of her panties before running down the insides of her thighs. You can feel that she's getting closer and closer to the peak, and your excitement starts mixing with another emotion... Jealousy?

In the spur of the moment, you grab the wrist of Hatate's busy hand, bringing her to a halt. You try to think of something to say, but Hatate is quicker.

"Frustrating, right?", she smiles at you before retreating her hand on her own. „That's how I felt the first time we... did it together. When you were teasing me like that.“

Ah, taste of your own medicine. At least it was one of those nicely flavored ones.

"I guess that's enough demonstration for now, though.", she adds, running her drenched finger across your chest. „I've been waiting for it as much as you have.“

Before you can fully register what she's doing, Hatate's already removed her panties and positioned herself on top of you. She's obviously enjoying being up there for a change, and takes a while to appreciate the view. Then, she leans in for a kiss, and as your tongues start entwining, lowers herself onto you. You're not even halfway inside when you suddenly feel her convulse, hastily break off the kiss, and gasp for air. Even though she's coming already, she forces herself further down, all the way to your base, which only seems to make her climax even stronger. A moan escapes her soft lips, and you finally decide that you can't wait any longer. Grabbing her by the waist, you lift her up a little and then move your hips to slam back into her. Even though she's enjoyed teasing you so much before, Hatate actually hadn't been ready for any of this.

"W-wai-! Haah, n-no...!"

She doesn't even manage to get another word out before the next wave of pleasure hits her. With every thrust, you force yourself a little deeper into her, and every time you do, another wave of extacy makes her clamp down harder on you. Hatate tries to say your name, but the only sounds escaping her mouth are short, breathless moans as she tries to deal with the pleasure. Eventually, she just gives up on it and kisses you deeply instead. You feel you're getting close to your own climax, and start increasing your speed. "I love you, Hatate."

"haah... you... too...", is all she manages to get out inbetween her gasps for air.

With a final slam, you bury yourself deep inside her, releasing your semen. Hatate, feeling your warm sperm flow into her, comes again, losing all her remaining strength and just collapsing on top of you. You shoot inside her a second, then third time, and then finally release her.



Her head lying right next to yours, Hatate is loudly gasping for air. It takes a while for her to regain control of her own breathing, and when she does, she immediately moves in for a kiss again. The two of you just lie there for a while, not even bothering to get off of each other. With every breath she takes, Hatate's warmth brushes against your neck, slowly but steadily drowning out any leftover thoughts you might've had.

"I'm sorry.", Hatate whispers almost too silently to hear. It's clear that she's still thinking about what happened two days ago, even though you've already made up.

"Hey, we should focus on tomorrow, alright?", you respond in an attempt to divert the topic. „And then, there's our big day on Sunday... we have a lot more to look forward to after that as well.“

You tilt your head down to look at the exhausted girl still lying on top of you. Hatate's smiling.

"You're right. It... It's gonna be a lot of work, too! So we better go to sleep soon... Pick up the laptop with all the files tomorrow... Head to the printing office... Then to the town..."

As she lists up all these things, her right hand blindly searches for the sleeping bag, which it eventually finds and then proceeds to just loosely drape it on top of her.

"Is that gonna be enough?", you ask a little concerned.

"You're warm, so yes~", she coos back.

Hatate turned out to have been right. You slept the night away like a baby, and wake up feeling more energetic than you have in a long time. However, you also wake up without Hatate. You almost begin to panic, thinking it was all nothing but a dream, until you notice the morning sun shining through the opened shrine doors, framing a still-topless figure standing in front of them, brushing her teeth while watching the forest.

You stretch and yawn, gaining her attention.

"Ah, did I wake you up?", she turns around and asks. You shake your head and smile at her.

"I don't remember you getting off of me, so probably not."

"Well, I would've woken you up soon anyways. There's work to be done!"

"Maybe put on some clothes first, honey."

"Right back at 'cha, Mister Morning Glory."

It's been a while since you've been in this waiting room. Even though nothing about the room itself has changed, its bleak, mostly metal-based interior seems far less cold than it did just a week ago. Hatate's currently busy with the printing staff, so you take the time to look around the usual stack of magazines on the desk in front of you. The most eye-piercing headline, as usual, comes from the Bunbunmaru.

PRISON PROBLEMS: ARE THE KAPPA TRYING TO UNDERMINE THE TENGU JUSTICE SYSTEM?

You quickly grab the newspaper and continue to read. Was this about...?

Another weird incident involving a resident of the Kappa Valley took place on Youkai Mountain yesterday. Prison staff are reporting that Kawashiro Nitori from the well-known tools store down in Kappa Valley paid a visit to the facility around noon, bringing a regular human boy with her. She claimed that she and her assistant were there to check on the local water supply, but no such checks were actually made. Instead, both Kawashiro and her as of yet unidentified assistant were spotted walking through the facility almost at random. It is not possible to say at this stage what their plans were, but it is likely that they used a false pretense in order to gain access to the prison interior. Perhaps, they were looking for a particular inmate, recently interned-

You lower the newspaper. This might be bad. But then again, Nitori said she would take care of it... right? And you weren't planning on going back to the plateau atop Youkai Mountain anytime soon, so...

Wait, that's not right.

You *were* actually planning on doing just that. You'd just simply forgot.

Toshirou's request.

The truth about her father's internment.

Hatate didn't know about any of this.

And, quite possibly, neither did Aya.

There was one thing that still needed fixing.

This time, Hatate leaves the printing room with a smile on her face. She thanks the Kappa worker on her way out before adding „Next time, prepare for a bigger order!“ and then closing the door behind her. She turns around and her smile becomes even bigger as your eyes meet.

„Oooh, I can't *wait* for Sunday!“, she chirps as she wraps her arms around your neck, nuzzling against your head. „We gotta make sure to prepare everything properly! In fact, let's head down to Suzunaan right now!“

She tries to pull you up by your hands, but you resist a little, just long enough for her to notice something's wrong. You turn your head around and are met with a confused, slightly concerned look. „Hm? Did something... happen?“

„Hatate, I... I actually forgot to tell you something important...“, you begin, unsure of how to bring up the subject. „While Nitori and I were looking for you... we came across your father in the Tengu prison.“ You point to the newspaper article lying in front of you, but Hatate's eyes don't follow your finger. Instead, they're still locked onto yours, framed by an expression too complicated to describe using words.

„He... was actually the one who told me about the shrine. And he... he also told me that he was innocent. I mean, I've heard the basic story from Nitori before, but, just, a lot happened, and your father told me that he got framed by his superior and that it's not Aya's fault, that she's simply been used herself, and he said he wanted the two of you to stop fighting over something that wasn't either of your fault...“

As you try juggling both the explanation of that complicated mess of a situation and trying to get ahead of Hatate's possible objections, you stumble over your words so much that nothing but a barely intelligible cluster of sounds remains. Hatate, meanwhile, doesn't seem like she's trying to object, but also doesn't seem to be listening all that much. Finally, after you've stopped, she takes a long breath and her facial expression returns to a normal state.

„I'm sorry, this is... a little much at once. Can we maybe sit down somewhere and... you can tell me exactly what happened?“

Hatate, despite her usually quite bold and un-girlish behavior, likes eating parfaits.

In fact, this particular parfait managed to surprise you a whole three times.

First when she ordered it immediately after sitting down, not even having looked at the menu.

Second when it actually got to the table: Standing inbetween the two of you, it was actually big enough to almost completely cover her face. You didn't think it possible, but Hatate didn't just manage to eat it all, she also made it happen in less time than it took you to tell your story. That was number three.

„You know...“, she eventually says after you've finished. „I won't lie, it's a little hard for me to get emotional about the entire thing that happened to my father now... it's just been so long. I miss him, of course, but I've lived almost my entire life without him, and it's just so... normal now.“

„You should eat less ice cream, Hata-chan. It makes you cold.“, you remark half-jokingly.

„I... guess I could've worded that better. But you know what I mean.“ You nod. „I've always thought that he was wrongfully imprisoned, but with the way the Tengu society works, it's... I just never had a chance to do anything about it, and eventually... I guess I just accepted it.“

„But I can't.“ You shake your head. „I've talked to this man, and it was... one of the most miserable experiences I've had. I don't... I don't even want to imagine what it must've been like for him, those hundreds of years locked away... for nothing.“

„Well, you're not gonna make things better by telling me how bad he's having it... the basic situation is still the same, everyone believes he's done it, and there's no court or other neutral entity we could go to in order to clear things up.“, Hatate sighs, staring at her now-empty parfait glass.

„One thing has changed.“, you correct her, and she looks up at you again. „I don't know if you trust your father's judgement of the situation, but... if Aya's not the main person responsible for this, we might get her to reconsider her position. If she publicly announces that she's been wrong, maybe-“

„Haha, good luck with that.“, Hatate cuts you off with a dry laugh. „As far as I'm aware, Aya's *never, not once* admitted to being wrong. Even though she publishes bullshit all the time. Plus, this is about something concerning her decade-long rival... Or whatever she sees me as.“

Halfway through her sentence, her words begin turning into mush, and eventually, are blocked out entirely by the steadily growing noise of gears turning in your head.

What Hatate just said was probably right – Aya would indeed never admit to being wrong. But... what if she didn't have to?

„You know... you're right, actually“, you finally say after what must have been minutes of silence.

„Aya probably wouldn't even react if we just told her that she was wrong. But... maybe we don't even need to do that.“

A smile forms on your face. Yes, this might work. It might also be a little risky, but at this point, it was most likely the best shot you'd have at setting things right.

All you needed now was a good bluff.

„Alright, I'll tell you my plan, and you'll decide if you want to tag along. How does that sound?“

Hatate lets out another sigh.

„I know it's my own fault I'm here, but... I'm kinda starting to have second thoughts here.“

„No backing out now!“, you cut her off, clinging to her back in a position that by now has almost become routine. „Besides, if you do, I'm kinda gonna, uhh, fall and die, probably.“

„Right right. I'm just saying, I don't particularly want to join my father in prison.“

„Well, then you better fly fast!“

„And you better hold on!“

You try to hold on harder, which in your current position basically just results in you hugging your girlfriend really hard in mid-air. Hatate speeds up, and before long, the sound of the wind rushing past your ears turns into an all-encompassing white noise. You think Hatate's trying to say something, but you can't make out a single sound. What you can make out, barely, between your squinted eyelids, is the rapidly approaching Youkai mountain, and on top, Aya's residence.

Suddenly, Hatate turns her head to the right, and following her line of sight, you spot a white figure rapidly approaching. As expected, the Tengu guards are taking their job seriously. Again, Hatate moves her mouth to say something, but before you can tell her that you can't hear anything, she's suddenly gone into a rapid dive towards the ground. Despite your best attempts at grasping onto her, you feel your grip loosen by the sheer force of the downwards movement, and for a moment, you feel like you're in free fall. Your heart skips a beat as mental images of you hitting the ground at ridiculous speeds and basically disintegrating into dust race past your inner eye. Then, suddenly, you feel your weight return to your body as you slam against Hatate's back mid-air.

„That’s enough!“

A warm, mature voice echoes through the air. You open your eyes and are greeted with the sight of light pink fabric, tinted a hint of orange by the sun nearing the horizon behind you. The next thing you notice is the position of your cramped hands, wedged inbetween something hard, leathery and something very soft. Ah, of course, her belt.

So you were still alive, and still with Hatate. That was good.

„I’ll take it from here, thank you.“

From inbetween her belt and the skin of her waist, you can feel Hatate begin to tremble. Oh yeah, that voice sounded like it belonged to Aya.

That, too, was good.

„If... you say so, Miss Shameimaru.“, a male voice quickly replies, and you finally turn your head away from Hatate’s shirt to follow its source – a young-looking wolf tengu, dressed completely in white and wielding a long Katana. Before you can make out anything else, he’s already turned around and sped off, leaving only the three of you. Tilting your head to the left, you now catch sight of Aya, hovering in mid-air less than a hundred meters away from you.

„Well, that takes care of that nuisance.“, she states flatly while facing Hatate. „As for you... I won’t even ask for an explanation. It’s pretty clear what’s going on here.“

And with that, she proceeds to draw a card from one of her skirt’s pockets. You’re sure you’ve seen this type of card before, and as your mind races to make sense of the situation, the card in Aya’s hands begins glowing.

„I suggest you get rid of that poor little human there before we start, though. Wouldn’t want him to get hurt.“

Aya winks at you. Oh, right. „Spellcards‘. You’d learned something about them in school.

Apparently a sort of talisman that could channel magic into powerful, intricate waves of bullets.

Keine-sensei had said that this was „how Youkai solve their disputes“, and that while it was little more than a playful sport to them, it was a potentially deadly threat to humans.

That’s when you notice Hatate’s hand moving towards her own skirt pocket. You quickly grab her wrist before she can do so and are met with a stern look from the crow tengu.

„Don’t let her rile you up. We have a plan, remember?“

As she hears your words, Hatate’s arm stops trembling, and she turns to face her decade-long rival again.

„We’re not here to fight, Aya!“, she shouts, holding up her hands demonstrably. „All we want to do is deliver some information!“

„Hah, that’s rich!“, Aya shoots back immediately. „You trying to cooperate now or something? Why would I be interested in what little information *you* might have?!“

„Aya!“ This time it’s you answering her. „We’ve re-investigated the case of Himekaidou Toshirou and have found concrete evidence that he’s not guilty of what he was accused of!“

Aya, in lieu of an answer, breaks out into a loud fit of laughter.

„The two of you are not even allowed onto Youkai Mountain! What kind of evidence could you possibly have gathered?! Besides, the story is so old, do you really think that-“

„Remember that story you published today? The one about the Kappa and the ,regular human boy‘ lying to get into Tengu prison? Guess who that boy was.“

Aya’s laughter breaks off, swiftly getting replaced with a difficult-to-judge look located somewhere between disbelief, smugness and interest.

„Well, I have to say, I did not make that connection. I guess our Hata-chan here really trains her boytoys quite well!“

You don’t need to look at Hatate to know she’s gritting her teeth right now, ready to jump at the girl opposite at the next possible moment. Wait just a little, Hata-chan, please...!

„She knows she can’t make it to Youkai Mountain herself anymore, so instead, she sends her lackey. How adorable!“ Aya smiles, gradually flying closer until she’s almost within an arm’s reach of you.

„But I’m feeling charitable today, so I won’t rat you out to the Tengu, darling. Conditions apply, of course.“, she adds with a wink.

„You can do whatever you want with me, Aya. But that won't change the fact that the special edition of the Kakashi carrying our investigative report on your fuck-up is already in print and is set to be distributed on Monday morning should Hatate not report back by then.“

Well, this is it.

The moment of decision.

„Trying to blackmail me now? Oh no, how horrible! The maybe 100 readers of your shoddy old paper will read an unsubstantiated opinion piece about how bad and evil Shameimaru Aya is! Just like they have in every Kakashi for the last few decades. Come on, you'll need something better if you want to blackmail me, sweeties.“

„I don't... know where you got that idea, Aya.“

Now it is Hatate who raises her voice. Still trembling from taking all those vocal bullets from her rival, she looks at Aya with an undeniably angry, but also determined glint in her eyes.

„We're giving you a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You don't even know the first bit of how big this story is. You were toyed with, Aya, just as much as you like to toy with your readers, making them believe whatever it takes to sell your paper. Seijirou needed Hatate's father gone from the Tengu council. He was the only one opposing the plans for stricter military control after the oni left more than 200 years ago. So he made up a story and used you to distribute it to the masses. And you did it all without him even having to pay you.“

Finally, Aya's facade begins to crumble. Her smug expression yields to that of confusion, insecurity even. As much as she tries to hide it, both Hatate and you realize that you've struck a chord.

„There's a reason that the rules up here are as strict as they are. And that reason is not necessity, but policy. Domination of individual interests. All the fancy political stuff that creates turmoil and causes people to talk about your topics, your news, your publication.“

Now it is Hatate who's moving in on Aya. Bewildered, she shifts backwards a little, but Hatate is quicker. Her face just mere centimeters away from Aya's, she whispers:

„But I'm feeling charitable today. So you can have that story. Conditions apply, of course.“

Wink.

„And it is with this that I'm proud to present to you all... the brand-new Kakashi Village News!“

Nitori, recognizing her prompt, presses a button on the control panel in front of her, smiling in anticipation of being able to show off her new gadget. A drumroll plays, and at its end, the mysterious veil atop the large table situated in the middle of the stage falls to the ground, revealing a pyramid-shaped stack of freshly printed newspapers - the culmination of your hard work during the last days.

The crowd of a few hundred villagers, having gathered in front of the stage to enjoy the pre-show, responds with a mixture of clapping and „oooh!“ sounds, and the first ones step up on the stage in order to grab their very own copy.

„Free this week, and available at Suzunaan, the Kirisame Magic Shop, and Kourindou for the low price of 500 yen starting next Sunday!“, Hatate announces proudly into the microphone, and again, receives elated applause from everyone currently not busy either getting their free sample or buying groceries at the otherwise almost-empty market place.

It isn't often that the village gets a little show like this, especially not during fall, so many people are probably only watching for the novelty aspect. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that they know about the Kakashi now, and that, with a little bit of effort and Quality Journalism, there was a market to serve here.

You step up next to Hatate and shoot her a bright smile before taking the microphone yourself.

„Thank you all for your patronage! We wish you a great week, and be sure to look forward to our next edition!“

„Come on, come on, ask me if I was scared!“

Hatate sighs. She had been trying her best to put up with the girl sitting opposite her the entire evening, but the alcohol was clearly getting to her head at this point, and you weren't much of a help either.

Monotonously, she parrots Aya's words.

„Were you scaaaared?“

„Haha, nope!“, Aya smiles, puffing out her chest. „After all, that's what a reporter is all about, right? Unearthing the dark, hidden secrets of society... with no regard for her own safety! The public right to accurate information must always... always come first!“

She takes another sip of her sake, and you follow suit. Aya's fun to watch while drunk. Within the past 10 minutes, she's gone from wholeheartedly apologizing for everything she's done to Hatachan' to bawling her eyes out about how horrible of a reporter she was, to suddenly regaining her pride and boasting about how much effort she's put into the story that finally made a clean sweep of the entire situation with Hatate's father.

„And in the end, you got off easy anyways.“, Hatate finishes Aya's short story for her. „So don't over-heroicize yourself here.“

„Hey... A few of these wolves yelled at me quite loudly, yeah? Momiji even came to my house wanting to kill me for... ,ruining her bretherens reputation'...“

„Good thing Lord Tenma's still around... God knows what would've happened if that bastard Seijirou had taken his place already.“

Again, Hatate sighs into her glass. However this time, it is a sigh of relief. You follow her gaze into the depths of the dark liquid in front of her, tracing her path of thought on whether to get another one or not.

„Ah, this week sold good as well, so whatever. Another round over here!“

The man on the other side of the bar quietly nods and then proceeds to make the last drinks of the night. You absentmindedly stare into the space between the two girls, once the fiercest of rivals, now in some sort of weird position between friends and colleagues. Only time will tell what will happen between these two, but whatever it'll be in the end, they will definitely walk that path together.

„So, when're you moving back in with your old man?“, Aya asks out of the blue before downing the last of her cup.

Hatate smiles to herself, but doesn't answer. There was a lot more to be done before she would attempt such a big step. For now, her father seemed to be doing well enough on his own, having been fully acquitted from all charges and re-accepted into the Tengu brigade as an advisor. He's moved into a small house by the edge of the plateau with a fantastic view over the entire east of Gensokyo. The first time Hatate had met him in that new living room, he couldn't stop crying, to the point where you had to make tea for him just to calm him down. He thanked you for taking care of her over and over that evening, and when the two of you finally left, he sent you off with his blessings and his best wishes for your future together.

The bartender arrives, bringing another two flasks of Sake and a glass of whisky with him. As he places them in front of the three of you, Hatate finally answers.

„You know... Actually, I was thinking about moving together with someone else once spring comes around~“



I love you, Anon <3