

AYA KA

— あ や か —

SIDE STORIES



08

約束

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"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 08": PROMISE

At Kaizumi Shrine in Minoshima, a festival called "Haze Festival" is held four times a year.

The winter festival held between the end of the year and New Year to celebrate New Year's Eve.

The spring festival is held at the time when peach blossoms bloom to celebrate the arrival of spring.

The summer festival held in the middle of summer, during the Obon period.

The autumn festival is celebrated when the trees in the mountains change color and produce various blessings.

When Aka Ibuki first heard this story when he was still young, he muttered to himself: "It's too much."

And even now, more than ten years since then, he still feels like it's too much.

However, for the current Aka, it doesn't really matter whether the number of festivals is held four or ten times a year.

Today, the day of the Spring Festival, Aka's life is no different from usual.

After waking up and getting ready, he heads to the "Ayaka Security" office, reads the necessary documents, and then walks around the city to see what's going on.

The view of the city is also very normal. The only thing that is different from usual is that he occasionally sees people in yukata.

While he thought about that, Aka walked down the gentle slope that led to GOZ.

"Hey, if you don't hurry up, the festival will end."

"Wait, brother!"

Two children with masks tied to their heads walked past Aka. It is customary for all participants in festivals on Ayaka Island to wear masks. Therefore, such a sight is not unusual and there is nothing special about it.

Judging from their conversation, they must be brothers. He was a little worried about the whereabouts of their parents, but they didn't seem to be missing children, so it's not a problem. First of all, protecting missing children is the job of the police, not "Ayaka Security".

"However, if you rush like this, you might fall."

As if he saw that Aka was thinking that, the younger one snorted.

"Gah..."

The boy collapsed with a small cry, and the older boy's face went rigid as if he had lost control.

"Did you do it after all?"

At the same time, he felt strength in his legs, and heard running footsteps and a voice calling from behind.

"Look, that's why I told you not to be in such a hurry."

"You are injured?"

The people who passed by Aka and ran towards the children were two men. No, it would be better to call them children. Probably middle school or high school students.

They called the child, who began to cry like a prey, they checked his wounds and then they stroked his head. Every movement is natural and familiar. Maybe that type of situation is an everyday occurrence.

However, the faces of the two children who came next did not look alike. Plus, if he looks closely, the kids he thought were brothers don't look much alike. Maybe they are family or childhood friends who live nearby.

That's not unusual on Ayaka Island, where ties between residents are stronger than in the city. So it's not really something to worry about.

But...

"....."

Their appearance brought back memories of the past. Memories of when he was an older brother, a younger brother, a protector and someone who protected him.

And... suddenly, he remembered a promise that he had long forgotten.

It was a broken promise made by a child.

Beep, beep, beep.

Aka looked away from the four people as he heard the vibration of the cell phone he had in his pocket. When he looked at the screen, he saw an incoming call from his subordinate.

When he answered the phone, he immediately heard a familiar voice.

"Thank you for your hard work, Boss. There was no problem here."

"I see. In that case, just end it."

"I understand. I can hear someone crying, are you okay?"

"No problem. A child just fell. The parents are nearby."

"I see. If that's the case, it's fine..."

"Ah... no problem."

After repeating the words to himself, he hung up the phone and before he knew it, Aka stopped and turned towards GOZ, the store he runs.

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"Well, it really suits you. You seem like a different person. Oh, of course I mean that in a good way."

The interior of GOZ in the afternoon sun. The manager of this store, Makita, was smiling with satisfaction as he nodded in front of Ibara, who was wearing a yukata.

Ibara, on the other hand, looked displeased, but she just didn't know how to react in a situation like this, so she looked away.

"...I just asked Ranko-san to dress me."

Ranko is an employee of "Ayaka Security" who is also Ibara's roommate.

"Haha, I guess she was excited when she heard that Ibara was going to the festival with her friends."

(I want to have the day of the festival off because I'm going out with my friends.)

When Ibara said that a few days ago, everyone present was surprised. It's been quite a while since she became a member of "Ayaka Security", but when she went to festivals with her friends... no, she had never informed that she was going out before that.

Makita may not know it, but there is no doubt that it is a rare event. So even though he knows it's not a good idea to make too much of a fuss, he still worries about it no matter what.

"I see, aren't you cold in that suit? Why don't you bring a jacket?"

"I'm fine. I'm wearing thick underwear."

"Underwear? Oh, I see. I understand. If it's too difficult to walk, how about I take you to the station?"

"That's good too. It's almost time to meet."

"Ah, that's right. I'm sorry I stopped you."

"No."

Just as Ibara turned on her heel, she heard the faint sound of the elevator stopping outside the door, and soon the door opened.

"Boss."

The person at the door was Aka Ibuki, Ibara and Makita's boss.

Aka silently looked at Ibara, who was wearing a yukata. His eyes were cold and sharp, but there was no one there who was afraid of him. That's Aka's usual face. Aka was probably a little surprised to see Ibara wearing a yukata.

"Oh, yes, I didn't tell you, Boss. Ibara is going to the festival with her friends."

"I see. It's still cold at night. Bring a jacket if you need it."

"Yes."

"If it's too difficult to walk, take a car to the station."

"Alright."

Seeing Aka say the same thing he did just now, Makita suppressed a smile behind the counter. This person may seem cold, but he also cares about Ibara.

"By the way..."

However, when he heard Aka's voice next, Makita felt a slight sense of discomfort and turned his gaze. That was unusual for him and he could sense a slight hesitation in his voice.

"Will Yukito go with you?"

Makita tilted his head slightly. What does that statement mean?

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"No, there is not."

".....?"

"Jingi too?"

"No, he won't go."

"Oh, really...?"

Ibara tilted her head at the sudden question.

However, after a brief silence, Aka spoke in his usual tone.

"It's Yukito's first time attending a festival on this island. Show him around."

"Yes."

"Be careful when you go."

Ibara bowed slightly at those words and walked out, trying to blend in like Aka.

Aka sat at the counter and said, "A hamburger."

Makita answered "Yes." and he started cooking while he watched Aka. The situation is no different from usual. But today it seems different than usual.

"I see, Yukito-kun said before that he never participated in a festival on this island, but he was born on this island, right? So, he probably participated in festivals when he was a child, right?"

Makita asked Aka as he cooked.

It wasn't like he was trying to figure out what was inside him. He was just trying to make small talk to lighten the heavy atmosphere. However, there was no response from Aka.

"I mean, he's been away from the island for ten years. It's natural that he doesn't remember anything from when he was little."

Was this a bad topic? Deciding thus, Makita said that in a light tone, and then immediately searched for a different topic. But this time there was a response.

"Yukito has never really participated in a festival on this island."

However, Aka was not looking at Makita, instead he was looking out the window, which was tinted red.

"Uh... I see."

Apparently this topic is not good.

There is a lot for him. Naturally, Makita doesn't know all the "various things" his boss is dealing with. Maybe there are many things he doesn't know.

However, he is aware of that and is working for him.

The only thing he can do now is make him a particularly delicious burger. Changing his mind, Makita returned to cooking.

Then, he never realized. Aka, who looked back at him from outside the window, carefully touched his palm.

To be more precise, he was looking at his little finger.

"The four of us will go to the next festival together. It's a promise."

It was an innocent promise between two children.

And it was a promise he took for granted.

"Yubikiri genman, if you lie, you will receive a thousand needles. We are done with this."

However, it was a promise that could not be kept.

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"It's disgusting to break a promise!"

At dusk on a certain summer day. In the garden of his boarding house, Jingi Sagawa, a second-year primary school student in Ayakashima, expressed the anger that welled up from the bottom of his heart and vented it against his master.

"Well... that's why it was bad."

Master Makoto Yanagi, the person he was angry with, scratched his head in confusion.

Makoto Yanagi is a very rude person, even from the perspective of Jingi, who is a child. He does not keep what he thinks and takes advantage of his free time. It is common for him to drink alcohol during the day.

However, Jingi was also impressed by his master's boldness. His bold personality, never knowing what he would do, always excited Jingi and he was fun to be around.

But what happened that time was truly unacceptable.

"Look, Jingi. I understand how you feel, but Master apologized too, so why don't you try to calm down?"

"Master didn't want to be bad either."

Kurama Haruaki and Ibuki Aka, his older brothers, try to calm him down from both sides, but Jingi shook his head as if to say "How noisy."

"I don't like it! I won't forgive you! Because I..."

Jingi stared at the puddle that had formed in the middle of the garden.

It had been sunny since that morning and the ground around them was white and dry. However, the area Jingi was looking at was black and wet, as if he had overturned a bucket.

That puddle is the result of the efforts that Jingi has been making behind the scenes since the beginning of the summer vacation until today.

From the time Jingi came to master it several years ago until today, he has been banned from participating in the festival.

According to his master, "Jingi with high water content and poor control does not do well in festival venues".

Therefore, Jingi and his younger brother Yukito, who also has a strong will, are forced to stay at home whenever there is a festival.

You might think it would be a good idea not to go with everyone, but the festival is overseen by the Kaizumi Shrine, which is the home of the Kurama family and where Makoto currently serves as a priest. Not only Makoto and Haruaki, but also Aka have no choice but to participate as helpers.

However, that explanation is not enough to convince people. Every time something happened, he would get angry, demanding to be taken to the festival next time, and when they said no, he would bend his navel.

However, for some reason, just before the summer vacation began, Makoto said, "Once you are good enough to be considered a full-fledged person, I will take you to the next festival.".

Jingi was overjoyed at those words and, after repeatedly reminding himself that it was a promise, he began training secretly the next day, hiding from his master.

There is no important reason why he trained secretly. However, it was a bit embarrassing to suddenly get motivated even though he usually skipped training and, most importantly, everyone would be surprised if he showed off his genius techniques. That's how he thought of it.

And today is the day before the summer festival. Finally, Jingi showed the results of his training to his master, his disciples, and Yukito.

When Jingi appeared riding on the shoulders of a water doll created using the art of pouring life into water to create humanoid dolls, both his master and his disciples were stunned, with their mouths wide open.

That should be all. Until recently, Jingi did the best he could by simply making water dolls that were smaller than his own height. No one would have expected him to be big enough to comfortably carry Jingi on his shoulders, much less that he could control himself so stably.

It was just as he imagined it.

Yukito was delighted and when he played with the water doll, his brothers praised Jingi even more. His master even told him that he was on par with his brothers in terms of control over that technique.

It was more than he imagined.

Then Jingi asked with great enthusiasm.

"Then I can go to the festival tomorrow too, right?"

However, from then on he was different from what he expected.

Makoto had completely forgotten about his promise to Jingi.

Looking back, it was already well into the night when they made that promise. Naturally, Makoto had alcohol in his body. Perhaps, given Jingi's personality, he never expected him to work hard at training, so he made the promise casually. But a promise is a promise.

On top of that, the person in question, Makoto, said things like: "Promises made while drunk are invalid.", "Taking care of Yukito is also an important role.", "Now is not the right time." and "The power of dragons.". He kept making excuses like "I'm going to have problems.", and they didn't let him participate in the festival.

It's awful.

Of course, there have been times when he has broken a promise. In fact, there are quite a few. No, he has so many memories of broken promises that he can't count them.

After all, although he was only ten years old, Jingi's notoriety resonated throughout Ninoshima.

But, BUT! The severity of a child breaking a promise is different than that of an adult master breaking a promise.

That's all. Must be like this. Jingi put aside his own misdeeds and criticized his master once again.

What a horrible master to make his disciple feel like this. Even as an adult, he would never drink alcohol, and even if he takes on an apprentice, he will never make vague promises or break them, nor behave in an authoritarian manner.

"Because I thought he might go to the festival, so I trained hard."

As he looked at the black blur that was a water doll until a few minutes ago, Jingi grumbled in disgust.

"Okay. Ok, tomorrow I'll buy you more souvenirs than usual."

"I can't forgive you for something like that! Oh, that's all! Makita was serious! Every time, my master enjoys drinking at the festival, and I'm tired of staying at home with Yukito all the time! Stop joke! I'm definitely going to the festival!"

As soon as he said that, Jingi threw a full punch at his master. However, after all, he is a primary school student and an adult. He didn't feel like it was working at all.

Jingi became even angrier at his master who didn't even try to dodge him, and when he tried to land another hit in quick succession, he tried to attack him.

"Dad!"

Yukito, who had been silently observing Jingi's argument until now, suddenly clung to Makoto's leg.

"Yukito, don't bother me!"

Yukito hates fights. He especially hates fights between family members, and when Jingi and his friends fight, he always tries desperately to stop them. That's probably why this time he also hugged his father while they beat him, trying to stop him.

But this time, even though Yukito cried and protected his father, he had no intention of backing down.

After all, no matter how you look at it, the culprit is the master who forgot his promise to him.

Yes, Jingi has a strong heart. But...

"Dad... Jin-nii-chan, please take me to the festival."

Contrary to Jingi's expectations, what came out of Yukito's mouth were not words to stop the fight, but words pleading for Jingi's wish to come true.

"Hey. Yukito, what happened suddenly?"

"Dad... you promised, right? That's why Jin-nii... you did your best, right?"

"Oh... oh, that's true."

Makoto's gaze shifted, as if he flinched from Yukito's direct gaze.

"No... Because of me, Jin-nii-chan... can't go to the festival... Oh, no..."

"Wait, Yukito. The reason Jingi can't go to the festival isn't just because he has to take care of you."

Makoto, his father, hastily explained that that was not the case, but Yukito's expression only turned depressed.

While there were many difficult topics for young Yukito to discuss, such as the strength of water and compatibility with the place, the only words that came out were: "Someone has to take care of Yukito." and "I'm tired of having to stay home with Yukito.". It seems that left a strong impression on him.

Aka and Haruaki, who couldn't bear to see it, teamed up to try to persuade him, saying, "That's not true.". But his words didn't seem to get through.

Finally, Yukito burst into tears and Jingi looked down, alone, in front of the three who were struggling to calm him down.

What was that?

If Yukito starts crying, and furthermore, if he says something that protects him, he will have nowhere to vent his remaining anger.

It is unreasonable for him to break a promise and then not be able to satisfactorily vent his anger.

However, Jingi put a lot of pressure on his hands, took a deep breath, and then laughed out loud.

"Ah~ Festivals are getting a bit troublesome!"

He had the same disheveled and somewhat stupid expression as when the neighbors called him "bad boy".

He felt angry because he could no longer vent his anger. However, for Jingi, Yukito is the only "existence to protect" and "treasure" in this world.

To adults, Jingi is still a "child", and even to his siblings, he is nothing more than an "immature younger brother". However, Yukito is the only one in his family who actually praises him when he does something. If he has any problem, he can trust him.

So, when Jingi heard that a neighborhood boy had bullied Yukito, he confronted him about Yukito, thinking he was older than him.

On cold days, even though he was cold, he had the courage to lend her his scarf. When he cut the steamed sweet potato in two, he gave the larger one to Yukito.

Jingi doesn't like to be patient, but interestingly, he can tolerate things about Yukito.

"Hey, I haven't finished the game I bought the other day! I don't have time to go to festivals or anything!"

"A game? What about the festival?"

"There is another festival in autumn, so the games are more important! After all, I have to save the world. Yukito, let's play together."

His tone and gestures were the same as always. Of course, from an adult's point of view, it's obvious that he was exaggerating. However, the effect on Yukito was surprising. Yukito's face, who had been crying a moment ago, suddenly brightened, perhaps relieved by Jingi's calm smile.

"I will do it!"

"Ok. Well, first of all, let's aim to become millionaires in the casino."

Then, the two ran out of the room at Jingi's scream.

That was the beginning of an event caused by a "promise" that happened to the Yanagi clan on a certain summer day.

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The next day. In his room, Sagawa Jingi stared at the game screen, pressing buttons almost subconsciously.

On the screen Jingi was looking at, three reels spun and stopped in time with upbeat music, spinning and stopping repeatedly. As he began to spin for the umpteenth time, the screen suddenly flashed and the number 7 held by a deformed character lined up next to him.

A fanfare sounded and a sound effect that sounded like coins crunching came out of the speakers.

Normally, he would have made a big fuss and shown his screen to everyone, but Jingi just fell on his back and looked up at the ceiling.

The coin display in the game is already "999999".

When he looked out the window, the sky was turning slightly reddish.

"...Haa. Is it almost time for the festival to start?"

There was a lot of silence inside the house. Now, only Jingi and Yukito are in the house. That's why it's natural that he's calm. Thinking about that, Jingi suddenly realized that Yukito, who left the room a while ago, has never returned.

"Yukito?"

He called his name while he was lying down, but there was no response.

Yukito is stable and is not the type of child who gets into mischief. However, if he took his eyes off Yukito and something happened, he would be the one to be scolded.

Jingi reluctantly stood up and left the room.

He thought he was in the kitchen or the living room, so he went downstairs and found Yukito without even having to look for him. He was looking at something at the door. Furthermore, he was so engrossed in it that he didn't even notice the sound of Jingi approaching.

What are you looking at? Jingi was about to ask that question, but just before he could do so, he realized that what Yukito was looking at was a brochure about the festival. At the same time, he realized something very obvious.

Yukito also wanted to go to the festival.

He really understood that such a thing was essential. No matter how much the adults try not to talk about the festival in front of them, as long as they live on this island, they will be able to hear them no matter what.

Even if they've never been there or have only seen the scenery in photographs, it's only natural that they want to go to a festival that everyone seems to be talking about and looking forward to.

And the loneliness of being left behind at that "festival"...

However, Yukito attempted to let Jingi, who is older than him, go to the festival, saying that he would wait alone.

What about him on the other hand? He didn't even try to approach Yukito's loneliness and regret, and he only felt a vague burning sensation deep in his chest.

"....."

A smaller back than his. Hands still round. Jingi couldn't see his expression from his perspective, but he was sure that he was looking at the brochure with bright eyes.

Facing such a Yukito, Jingi suddenly felt ashamed of himself. At the same time, he wondered if there was anything he could do for Yukito. Then, when he took a breath, the usual lazy face of his appeared...

"Yukito!"

"Huh? Jin-nii-chan..."

When he called Yukito, he was surprised, but quickly hid the pamphlet. He probably didn't want anyone to see him watching that.

However, Jingi didn't seem bothered, he just laughed and continued talking.

"Hey, the festival. Do you want to go see it?"

"The festival? Oh... no, no!"

Yukito was momentarily happy at the word festival, but he immediately shook his head.

"Dad said I shouldn't go to the festival."

"Of course, I can't go to the venue. I also don't want to be scolded. But as long as we are on the sea train and watch from a distance, there is no problem, right?"

"Eh?"

Hearing those words from Jingi, Yukito's gaze wandered between the brochure in his hand and Jingi, as if he was lost. And...

"Is it okay if I just look at it...?"

"Okay. Because we're not going into the place. It's not like we're going to the festival, right?"

He wanted to show Yukito the festival.

That was Jingi's unmistakable feeling. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't want to see it. But he wanted to show Yukito more than anything.

Plus, there's no way for them to know if it's just a short round trip by train.

"I see... In that case... I want to see it. I want to see the festival."

"That's right! Well, then let's go."

Needless to say, Jingi returned to his room at lightning speed and stuffed his empty wallet into his pocket.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he returned to the entrance, he quickly put Yukito's shoes on, grabbed his hand, and started running down the path that led to the station.

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When they arrived at the station, they saw the train gliding onto the platform in the afternoon sun. Fortunately, the two of them got on and after taking a breath, Jingi sat on his chair.

He was a little out of breath probably from all the running, but he didn't feel tired at all. When he looked next to him, he saw Yukito breathing heavily on his shoulder, but his face looked like he was having fun with a smile on his face.

He was looking forward to seeing the festival grounds that he had always admired, even from a distance. The thrill of breaking adult orders. And a children's only outing. All of this made his heart race. Yukito probably felt the same.

"Oh, it's so much fun!"

Jingi moved abruptly and fell back onto the seat. Even the way the top straps sway with the movement of the train is very interesting.

"Ah, Jin-nii-chan. That kind of thing is "dangerous"."

"Don't worry about it. There's no one on board."

When Yukito was told that and he looked around him, he saw that there was certainly no one else in that vehicle except them.

A familiar figure dressed in uniform could be seen sitting in the driver's seat at the front of the vehicle, but he did not appear to look back as he drove. Even if he noticed it, he probably wouldn't scold him since it was very empty.

"Well, Yukito, try lying down too. There aren't many opportunities like this."

"No."

After Jingi told him, Yukito lay down, confused.

Suddenly, an unknown sound began to come from his ear pressed against the seat.

The sound of the waves. The sound of the wind. Some kind of mechanical sound. The sound of his own heartbeat combined with them. Yukito's eyes widened at the sensation that sounds that were normally lost in loud noises were echoing directly in his head.

"Oh! This is fun!"

"Good!"

After that, the two of them listened to the sounds silently and watched the swinging of the straps, enjoying an extraordinary experience. And how long has it been?

"Soon it will be Minoshima Station. Minoshima Station. If you get off the train, be careful not to leave anything behind."

The two suddenly woke up when they heard the announcement. He was having so much fun on the train, where no one scolded him, that he almost forgot his original purpose of watching the festival.

He quickly looked out the window, and before he knew it, the sun had completely set, and only the area where the train was traveling, the area where the Kaizumi Shrine was, was shining brightly.

The brightest point on the mountainside is probably the area where the food stalls are lined up. The light a little further away could be the square where the tower is located, a specialty of the summer festivals. The main part of Kaizumi Shrine shines brightly near the top of the mountain.

"I know."

Hearing the words of his younger brother, who is a good boy who always obeys his orders, Jingi felt a little uncomfortable as an older brother, but as if to divert his gaze, he looked towards the platform where the train was about to enter.

(That is...?)

He suddenly felt slight discomfort.

"No one..."

Hearing Yukito's words as he followed Jingi's line of sight towards the platform, Jingi nodded, "Ah, yes... that's right."

He thought the platform would be more lively during festivals. However, there was not a single person on the platform where the train had just entered.

"I guess everyone is at the festival site. You know, it's boring being on the station platform."

"I see."

Yukito seemed to be satisfied with his words and turned his gaze towards the place where the lanterns were swaying with a smile.

But really... is it like that?

Jingi has never been to a festival. That's why he doesn't know where everyone is at the time of the festival. If he says that's normal, he believes it could be.

However, for some reason, he was strangely confused.

Meanwhile, the train screeched to a stop and the door opened. Then, the sound of music resonated even louder inside the train.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

It is light and happy music played with flutes, bells and drums. But why did it feel so strange?

No, he was thinking too much. He was sure that he probably felt intimidated because he had come this far by disobeying the orders of the elders. He didn't feel like himself at all.

That train makes round trips between Ichinoshima and Minoshima. So, if they continue traveling like this, they should reach Ninoshima Station, where Jingi and his friends live, without hesitation. He will probably be able to get home at the time he usually has dinner. No problem.

Jingi tried to drown out the anxiety in his heart, but he felt stuck again.

(Now that I think about it... why is it so dark?)

When Jingi and Yukito left Ninoshima Station, the sun had not yet touched the horizon.

But at that moment, the only lights visible in the sky are faint stars, making it seem like it's midnight. Isn't it strange that it gets so dark after just one season?

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

And that sound... it was just strange.

No, the sound is not strange. But... it's too quiet. It's as if there is only music playing in an empty place.

Why are the trains so empty?

He didn't think much about it because he was very excited to go to the festival, but there was no way anyone could get to the place in time for the festival to start. Everyone has work, school and home responsibilities. Even if there are not many people, isn't it normal for there to be several people on board?

Once he started to notice it, he started to feel one unwell feeling one after another.

"I... I'll ask the driver."

Immediately, Jingi directed his attention to the driver's seat at the front of the vehicle, intending to ask an adult for help. However, the driver, who should have been there a moment ago, was nowhere to be seen.

(Wait... who was that driver?)

Jingi, who lives on the island, knows all the sea train drivers by sight. But he didn't know who that person behind was.

"The train will leave soon. The next stop is Reinoshima Station. The next stop is Reinoshima Station."

Reinoshima?

The name of a station he had never heard of filled him with indescribable fear.

"Yukito, get off!"

As soon as he said that, Jingi jumped off the train with Yukito in his arms. Almost as soon as his feet touched the platform, the doors closed behind them and the train, which was supposed to return to Ninoshima Station, continued straight ahead.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

While standing on the platform listening to upbeat music, Jingi's back felt stiff. His instincts told him that he shouldn't be there.

He timidly looked beyond the bushes towards the stairs leading to the festival site, but as expected, there was no one there.

He was just going to look at it from a distance.

He thought there would be no problem then. However...

"This turned out to be bad."

That's what Jingi thought in his heart as he held Yukito on the empty platform.

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When he climbed the long stairs leading from the station, he saw food stalls lined up along the street. Bright, happy sounds flowed from the speakers and delicious aromas wafted from everywhere.

It was the exact setting of the festival he had seen in his dreams. However, in the midst of all that, Jingi was holding Yukito's hand as he walked, seemingly uncomfortable.

As expected, there were no people anywhere. There was not a single member of staff at the station, even though it was a public holiday and there were many people getting on and off the train. He tried to call from a pay phone, but he couldn't get through. And that place, originally it should be full of people.

Since he landed on the platform, he had not heard a single voice, much less the shadow of a person.

However, upon paying attention to a nearby takoyaki shop, he saw bonito flakes dancing fluffily on the takoyaki in a paper container. It really seemed as if someone had been there just moments ago.

From there, they walked a little further and even when they reached the plaza where the turret was located, they still couldn't find anyone, and Jingi couldn't help but mutter something that sounded like dissatisfaction or anxiety.

"What happened?"

The tower was as beautiful as it looked in the photo, or even prettier. However, there were no people in the photo playing drums or dancing the Bon dance around him.

It didn't make any sense at all. Then he wondered if he felt Jingi's anxiety.

"Jin-nii-chan?"

Yukito, who had been holding Jingi's hand and following him silently, opened his mouth, looking anxious.

"Hey, where... where?"

Jingi had no answer to that question. Honestly, he'd like to hear it too.

But if he said that honestly, it would probably scare Yukito even more.

Perhaps because of his constitution, Jingi has had strange experiences since childhood, and he can also use the technique of connecting pulses. Furthermore, although he was an elementary school student, he was quite confident in his physical strength.

Combined with his naturally optimistic personality, he felt that things would work out somehow.

But Yukito is different.

He is naturally weak-willed and is not very fast when it comes to running. He can't even use the pulse connection technique. However, even though he is older, the only person he can trust is the kindness of a child.

(I don't want to scare Yukito anymore.)

Jingi tried his best to suppress the anxiety within him and responded to his words as cheerfully and casually as possible.

"Hmm, I guess it's just that. I feel like this is right next to our original world, or we just climbed a wall..."

"Wall?"

"You know, if you line up facing the wall, you won't be able to see the other person, even if you're in the next room. That's what it feels like."

".....?"

"Haha, I don't know. Well, I don't really understand it either."

As the saying goes, there is no proof. Of course, it is possible that such a premonition is misplaced and that they are in a completely different place. But as he toured the place, Jingi felt that his idea was "somehow" correct. Besides, thinking like that made him feel better than thinking that he was in a completely different place.

"Well, what I mean is that my master and my brothers are probably closer than I expected."

"Just because you can't see it?"

"That's the point. I think if we look for a place where the walls are thin, our voices will reach Master. So don't worry about that."

"What kind of place is the thin wall?"

"Huh? Oh, that's right. I guess the air is a little fuzzy. Anyway, you'll understand it when you see it!"

Yukito's question was more specific than he expected, but he tried to find a better answer, but Yukito's expression did not clear up.

That should be all. Jingi's words were like a figment of imagination based on assumptions and embellishments of hope, so they were neither persuasive nor reassuring.

However, Jingi couldn't think of anything that would calm Yukito more than that.

(If my master were here...)

While holding the hand of Yukito, who looked like he was going to burst into tears if he let his guard down, Jingi thought that from the bottom of his heart and suddenly, an idea occurred to him. It was a terribly stupid idea.

However, Jingi crouched down so he could look Yukito in the eyes and declared with great enthusiasm:

"...Okay, I've decided. Yukito, I'll make you my disciple from now on!"

Hearing such sudden words, Yukito widened his eyes in surprise and tilted his head.

"Eh?"

"That means I'm your master."

"Master?"

"It's okay. Listen, Yukito. You may not know it, but masters are incredibly strong. And masters protect their disciples! Good for you, Yukito. Well, now that I'm your master, you can rest easy."

Jingi's master, Makoto Yanagi, drinks a lot and is a rough person, but just being with Makoto gave him a feeling of security, like he could "take care" of anything.

Of course, the reason Jingi feels safe being with his master is because he is his true master.

Even if Jingi becomes only a formal master, nothing will change. Even Jingi, who is still a child, knows this.

However, it will be a bit of a relief. But...

"Oh, really?!"

It was Jingi's turn to be stunned. For some reason, Yukito, who looked like he was about to burst into tears a moment ago, was now looking at him with bright eyes.

(Eh?)

"You know, I always thought it would be cool if Jin-nii-chan was my teacher!"

"Ah, ok, I see."

He hoped it was a little relaxing. That's all, just making someone laugh and say, "Jin-nii-chan is an idiot" is a great way to make money. As someone who had declared his intention to become a master with such feelings, he didn't know how he would react.

However, he would be lying if he said he wasn't happy.

No, he was sure he would be extremely happy.

"Hehe, if that's the case, then it's too early to talk. Well, from now on, you can call me master."

Jingi tried to act as dignified as possible, desperately suppressing the euphoria that was slowly surging within him.

"Yes, Master!"

"So, let's begin our escape mission from the mysterious space! This is our first mission together. We'll keep our spirits high."

"Yes! What should I do?"

"I'm going to tour the place, so please call the adults here and there. If the walls are thin, maybe they can hear your voice. Also, if anything strange happens, let me know right away."

"I understand!"

Yukito responded happily and Jingi nodded in satisfaction. He still didn't know how to get home, but he was sure that if they both looked, they would find a way.

"That's right, Yukito. It's a great opportunity. Let's seal the master-student contract."

Then, Jingi smiled mischievously and extended his little finger in front of Yukito.

"Seal the contract with your finger?"

"I will become your master and protect you, Yukito."

He had never heard of interlocking fingers as a bond between master and disciple, but unfortunately, Jingi didn't know how to formally make him a disciple. First of all, it is doubtful that such a thing exists. But now the form didn't matter.

"Yes! We'll seal it with our finger!"

When Yukito understood Jingi's words, his eyes lit up even more, and without hesitation he intertwined his own little finger with Jingi's.

"I will make Yukito my disciple."

"I will become Jin-nii-chan's disciple."

The two looked at each other and smiled.

"Yubikiri genman, if you lie, you will receive a thousand needles. We are done with this."

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After that, Jingi and Yukito explored the place together, trying to find a way to return home.

The square in front of the station. The main street full of food stalls. A long stone staircase. The sanctuary area decorated for the festival. No matter where he went, there were no people in sight, only a lively atmosphere spreading eerily around him.

But for some reason, the sight that seemed terrifying a moment ago was not so scary anymore.

In fact, it almost seemed as if the two of them had the place to themselves.

Of course, he would be lying if he said he wasn't afraid at all, but he was Yukito's master. When he thought of that, Jingi naturally felt a sense of strength and courage.

And he was sure that Yukito felt the same. "I am Jin-nii-chan's disciple!" He took the initiative and kept an eye on his surroundings, checking if anything was wrong.

"Dad! Haru-nii-chan! Aka-nii-chan!"

No one responded to Yukito's calls for help, but he showed no signs of giving up.

His steps were firm, so much so that he almost forgot that he had been walking a while ago, clinging to Jingi.

"Maybe it's time to take a break?"

About an hour after they got off the train, Jingi called Yukito.

The two sat on a bench in the square with a tower, vaguely looking at the place where red lanterns were hanging.

Looking again, the festival venue was very beautiful. It would have been even better if he had some shaved ice in there (there was an anime he watched a while ago that said that if you eat something from another world, you won't be able to return to this world, so he should refrain from borrowing something from a stall meal).

"It's beautiful, Master."

"That's right."

While he was exchanging those innocent words, Jingi was vaguely thinking about what he should do next.

As he looked around the place, he couldn't find the "place with thin walls" that Jingi had expected. And there was no sign of adult help arriving.

In other words, it's a complete stalemate.

Should he think about his next step?

However, he had no idea how to do it.

It might be possible to walk home along the sea railway tracks, but it would be dangerous to get stuck in the water, and if a train passed by, it would be a disaster. At that moment, Jingi was thinking that it would be impossible.

But...

Then, they both looked up when they heard what sounded like a flute coming from Shinoshima's direction. That is...

"It's a horn!"

Yukito nodded, "Yes.". At Jingi's voice he couldn't help but say that.

"It's the sound of the sea train. Maybe they've come to pick us up!"

"That's all!"

Finally help arrived. Feeling relieved, Jingi took Yukito's hand and started running.

He left the square towards the entrance full of food stalls and headed towards the station, trying to get rid of the delicious smell.

When he reached the middle of the stairs leading to the station, he could see the train heading toward the platform through the trees.

It was the scene Jingi had been waiting for. However, he suddenly had a bad feeling...

It was similar to the indescribable feeling of unease he felt when he saw the empty platform from inside the train.

Yukito seemed to feel the same sense of discomfort, and although they had not agreed, they both stopped in their tracks.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

He could almost hear the music echoing throughout the place. Feeling a bad feeling, Jingi was wary of his surroundings and, as he looked around...

"What...?"

Yukito muttered that under his breath and pointed towards the station with his finger.

Before he knew it, the train had stopped on the platform and the doors were open. Then, several figures descended from there.

"Ah!"

There was nothing strange about a figure getting off the train.

However, the next moment, Jingi grabbed Yukito's hand and started running towards the opposite side of the station.

What he saw was literally a "figure."

Something with a human shape, head, face, hands and feet, all black like a shadow.

The scene seemed to Jingi as if a shadow had risen and he had begun to walk on their own.

He didn't know what he had just seen. But at least it was clear that he was not a normal "person."

Jingi grabbed Yukito and ran somewhere far from the station. He headed to the plaza where the turret was located just now.

As he ran up the stairs with Yukito in his arms, Jingi gasped when he heard Yukito's voice, which was almost a shout, "Master...!" and he paused reflexively.

When he looked forward, he saw a series of "shadows" in the square where no one had been until now.

Some of them danced strange dances like Bon dances around the tower. Some of them were browsing the food stalls, while others seemed to gather in groups and chat.

It looked exactly like a photo from a festival Jingi had seen before. The only difference is that the people enjoying the festival are all "shadows".

"Shit!"

After thinking about the slight poison, Jingi ran up the stairs leading to the main shrine to climb even higher.

He was already running out of energy and his heart was pounding.

But he couldn't stop there.

He finally went upstairs.

"Haa..."

A small, dry laugh escaped Jingi's mouth.

It is a "figure". There is also a "figure" there.

And he was looking at Jingi and Yukito.

There are no eyes on the figure. However, he is being watched. He clearly felt the sense of duty. He could see himself clearly reflected in those eyes that shouldn't be there.

(What is this? What is this? What is this?)

Yukito, who was holding him, grabbed Jingi's arm tightly.

He should be fine. He meant that. Even if it is a relief. However, Jingi's body was not moving and he could barely catch his breath.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

He felt that the sound of ohayashi music had become even louder. It's probably a misunderstanding. However, it resonated loudly and persistently, as if it flowed directly into his brain.

"Smells good."

A voice came from somewhere. It is a voice that can be young or old, male or female.

"They are children."

He heard a voice again from somewhere. The voice seemed both muffled and resonant.

"Takaramono Takaramono."

This time he heard a voice from behind. It was as if a hundred people were talking underwater at the same time.

Bichari Bichari.

He heard a sound similar to footsteps after jumping into a rice field with his shoes on and looked back. There were several "figures" on the stairs he had just climbed and they were all looking at them. And...

"Yattomitsuketa."

After someone said that, countless hands began to reach out towards Yukito.

"Yukito!"

Immediately, Jingi held Yukito in his arms as if to protect him.

However, despite his desperate resistance, Jingi was torn away from Yukito and thrown into the air as if he were littering.

The thrown body had no other way than to trace a parabola.

He didn't understand what it meant. What is happening there? Who are these people? And what is happening with Yukito?

But now, the only one who could help Yukito was him.

That is why...

"Master!"

Almost at the same time he heard Yukito's voice. Jingi's back slammed into the hard floor and his consciousness melted into the darkness of the night.

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Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

Pihyara Hyararin Chinchirochin.

How long has it been since then? Jingi woke up under a large tree planted on the temple grounds.

Aside from the upbeat music playing from the speakers, the area was extremely quiet.

When he slowly woke up, he felt pain all over his body, but he couldn't move. It appears there were no major injuries.

However, there was no sign of Yukito. The many shadows that had been there had disappeared and Yukito was nowhere to be seen. Only Jingi was left standing there.

No matter how far he moved his eyes, all he could see is the tranquil scenery of the temple grounds, covered in dancing peach petals from the nearby peach forest.

"Yukito?"

He wondered if he would come out of nowhere. He called out his name due to such vague expectations, but no one responded.

After that, he looked around the temple grounds, but still couldn't find it.

That monster took Jingi's younger brother. As soon as he understood that, the strength left his body.

What happened to Yukito after that? It was scary to even think about it.

When he saw him as a master and disciple, he became excited and felt that he could do anything. But in the end he couldn't do anything.

Honestly, he was doubting it. He was in a strange space, but deep down he knew that things would somehow work out. He even thought that the adults, Makoto and his older siblings would eventually help him.

This is the result.

"What's wrong, Master?"

As soon as those words left his mouth, he remembered what happened yesterday.

Yesterday, when Jingi saw his master breaking his promise, he swore to himself that if he took a disciple, he would never make a careless promise and break it.

But if he reflects on himself now, what does he think?

He made Yukito his disciple on the spur of the moment, he promised to protect him, even though he doesn't have any skills, and even though he can't find a solution on his own, he somehow takes the situation lightly.

"It is awful."

It is true that Makoto Yanagi, Jingi's master, broke his promise to Jingi to "take him to the festival".

But now that he thinks about it, he believes that he was trying to fulfill the most important mission: protecting Jingi and Yukito's safety.

Don't go, it's dangerous. Even though he had been advised not to do so, he approached the festival site without permission, thinking: "Everything will be fine for now.". And the fact that he brought his precious younger brother to that place was all because of Jingi.

"...I'm sorry, Master. Please help me so I can apologize."

He looked at the sky longingly, but all he saw were trees illuminated by lights and a completely black sky. Then only the petals were left falling. There was no sign of any response, much less help.

He felt that he was about to give up, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Petals?"

The question that came to his mind came out involuntarily.

There is a peach forest within the grounds of Kaizumi Shrine. It's so close from there that it wouldn't be strange to see flower petals flying in the wind.

However, peach blossoms bloom in spring. There's no way it's blooming now, on the day of the summer festival.

(What does that mean?)

As another mysterious situation occurred, Jingi stared at the petals that fell one after another. Suddenly, a wind picked up and the petals that were falling to the ground were caught in the whirlwind and bunched together. Then, the mass moved and passed through the torii gate located in front of the stone stairs. Then, he unraveled and floated with the wind.

Jingi, whose eyes were captivated by the fantastic sight that suddenly appeared, staggered towards the torii gate, following the flower petals. And...

"Ah...!"

He opened his eyes. Beyond the petals that slowly fell with the wind, something stirred in the plaza where the turret was located, where Jingi and Yukito had been a while ago.

As soon as he looked closely, he realized that it was a series of "figures". The people he thought were gone were there. In that case...Yukito too!

As soon as he thought of that, Jingi ran down the stairs, forgetting about the pain in his body.

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A few minutes later. Jingi was silently hiding in the shadow of a food stall at the end of the square, resisting the temptation to jump out at any moment.

Beyond Jingi's line of sight, was Yukito on top of the turret. Yes, Yukito was there.

They haven't taken it completely yet. It is true that this relieved him, but it was not a situation that made him feel comfortable.

Yukito was sitting in a tower decorated with many flowers and fruits. The scene gave the impression that Yukito was being treated as if he were a god and, at the same time, it seemed that they were paying tribute to him.

Yukito's body stiffened with fear, which could be seen even from a distance, and he just looked down. That's probably the only thing he can do.

But that is to be expected. Dozens of "figures" dance in a circle around the tower where Yukito is, singing a song like this.

Yattomitsuketa takaramono.

Matsurigaowareba isshoni kaeru.

Mikoshininosete takaramono.

Waranosekai e isshoni kaeru.

The song, woven by a voice that could not be identified as young or old, told people that they would take their "treasure" home once the festival was over. Considering the situation, there was no doubt that the "treasure" they were talking about was Yukito.

Naturally, he wanted to jump in and help him right away.

But this will surely be the last chance to help Yukito.

That's why he had to find ways to help calmly and steadily.

Jingi is already aware of how useless he is as a master.

But he made a promise.

(If you become my disciple, I will protect you.)

Hiding, Jingi repeatedly told himself to stay calm and look for something he could use.

"If I climb a tree and jump directly to the turret... it won't work. As expected, I can't reach the turret and there is no way to escape after jumping on it. Well then... I'll use the gas cylinder from there to set fire to the stall and confuse the "figure"... isn't that too dangerous? Besides, if the "figure" didn't care about the fire, it would only become even more dangerous..."

Although he has held several brain meetings again and again, all ideas reach a dead end.

"Master... what should I do?"

He couldn't help but want to ask for help. However, the voice still did not return. However, a pale pink fragment suddenly crossed his line of sight.

Also, those peach petals.

Thanks to those petals, he was able to find Yukito just now. So maybe those mysterious petals will guide him this time too. With such expectations, Jingi closely followed the fate of the petals.

However, without pointing out anything in particular, the fluffy petals landed in the ice water that was cooling the canned beer on the eaves of the food stall next door.

"Beer? What should I do with beer? Are you saying I should hand out alcohol and get them drunk?"

Jingi muttered under his breath, but even though he said it to himself, he still couldn't believe it was a good idea. Was it a misunderstanding that the flower petals were giving him clues in the first place?

As he let out a sigh without hiding his disappointment, the petals fell again, and this time they fell into the icy water next to him, where a plastic bottle containing a soft drink had been submerged.

For some reason, Jingi felt as if the petals were saying, "That's not true."

And then he gasped.

What the petals point to is not beer or a plastic bottle.

"...Water."

To go to the festival, Jingi has been practicing the art of shaping a person into water and manipulating it like a water puppet since the beginning of the summer vacation. Then, he

was able to control it so well that he could easily lift him onto his shoulders and Yukito with ease.

But it was all in vain because the teacher broke his promise. He thought that was it.

But... with that technique, it might be possible.

He peeked out from the position he was hiding in and looked around. If he looks closely, he can see water everywhere. Water to wash food. Ice that cools the fruit. And several drinks stall just like the stalls next door. With that amount, he should be able to make a water doll that can hold Jingi and Yukito.

But can he really hold Yukito and himself and escape the shadows using the Tsukeyakiba technique?

He could do it. The same amount of anxiety he felt was born deep in Jingi's heart. However, Jingi clenched his fists to suppress his anxiety.

He had no choice but to do it.

That's because Jingi is Yukito's older brother.

And above all, Jingi is Yukito's master.

At that moment he heard the horn of a train in the distance. The sound that seemed to be a response to Jingi's determination was different from the previous one, coming from the direction of Ninoshima and the direction where Jingi and Yukito needed to return.

It's time to pick it up. He was strangely convinced of that. Furthermore, he realized that he is the only one who can take Yukito to the train to return.

Having made up his mind, Jingi jumped out of the cubicle where he had been hiding and raised his voice as loud as he could.

"Man, earth and sky!"

At that moment, all the "figures" stopped moving and turned towards him all at once. While he received many piercing gazes from eyes that should not exist, Jingi returned his gaze to a single pair of eyes that were firmly present.

"Master!"

At the sound of the voice emanating from the top of the turret, Jingi's mouth lifted into a smile, and with all of his strength and courage, he put all of his energy into the spell that he had repeated over and over again.

"Water, do not fight for the benefit of all things, but face the evils of all people!"

The water in the entire square responded to Jingi's call and accumulated, forming a human figure while he solidified into a whirlpool.

At the same time as he jumped on the water puppet, which was growing in size, Jingi pointed to the turret where Yukito was standing.

Then the water doll did a little run and then took a big leap into the darkness.

"Yukito!"

Hearing Jingi's voice, Yukito in the tower climbed onto the railing and extended his hand with all his strength.

"Master!"

Almost at the same time as that voice, the water puppet controlled by Jingi landed in front of the turret with a loud bang, and then quickly picked up Yukito and jumped again.

It was then that the "figures" probably realized that their "treasure" had been stolen. They panicked and chased the water doll.

But they couldn't catch him there. As soon as Jingi landed, he used his water puppets to knock down the surrounding monsters and ran towards the station.

"Master! Master!"

Yukito, who was in the water doll's arms, screamed again and again.

"Yukito, I made you wait."

Jingi looked at Yukito as he paid attention to the figure chasing him from behind on the water doll's shoulders. Then, Yukito looked like he was going to cry, but he smiled with a look of admiration and relief, like when he was rescued by a hero.

"I thought Jin-nii-chan would help me!"

"Oh, of course. Yukito, you are my disciple after all!"

A brief exchange like that increased his courage even more.

When they ran down the long stairs that led to the station and looked ahead, the train was already waiting for them on the station platform. Then, he once again let out a short honk and slowly began to move towards Ninoshima, leaving the door open.

"You mean jump on it?"

They had to do it. Dodging the "figures" that attacked to prevent the two from escaping, Jingi increased the speed of the water doll.

And it was then that he thought that he had finally crossed the square in front of the station and jumped over the fence that separates the platforms while he ran parallel to the train. The water puppet stopped in midair.

When he looked at it immediately, he saw that one of the "figures" was holding the water doll's legs. If that continues, they will drag him back. The moment he understood that, his body moved before he could even think.

Jingi manipulated a water puppet and threw Yukito into the door of a passing train.

Whether it was because he was his older brother, because he was his master, or because he had made him a promise, none of that mattered anymore.

It just happened naturally.

"Eh?"

He could clearly hear Yukito's confused voice as he was sucked into the train door in an arc.

However, Jingi did not respond to that voice and simply smiled as always.

(I kept my promise.)

He tried his best to be a good master. Jingi let out a sigh of relief as the "figure" dragged him down.

However, what will become of him from now on? While he was thinking about that, something pink came out of the train.

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"Ah, Haruaki-kun and Aka-kun. You were here, right?"

"Thank you for your hard work, Inou-san."

"Thank you."

The festival was coming to an end and the food stalls were beginning to close. Haruaki and Aka, who were patrolling the place, stopped when they were called by Sanji Inou, a member of the town hall who is a friend of their master Makoto Yanagi.

"By the way, I can't find Makoto. Do you know where he is?"

"Ah...um, I don't know."

"If he is my master, he will sleep in the administration tent."

As Haruaki awkwardly looked away, Aka said that as he pointed to the tent set up at the back of the stall.

"Is he sleeping?! Is he drunk again?"

"No... I don't think that's the case. However, just after the festival started, he entered the tent because he had something urgent to do..."

"When I looked inside a while later, I discovered that he was asleep."

"Eh?! During the entire festival?"

"Even if I call him or shake him, he doesn't wake up."

"Geez. What is he doing forcing them to work...?"

Inou couldn't help but look at the sky. And at that moment, the entrance to the store that Aka had pointed out before was violently opened.

"Wow, I'm so tired."

What emerged was a large, suspicious-looking man wearing an aloha shirt and holding a pipe... in other words, Makoto Yanagi.

"Makoto. What are you doing forcing children to work?"

"Oh, Sanji. I just finished work. Do you want to go out for a drink?"

"So you just finished your work? I heard from Haruaki-kun and Aka-kun that you were asleep."

Hearing those words, Makoto turned his attention to the disciples next to Inou.

"Oh, you guys are here too. Just in time. There's a kid at the station who needs a lot of work, so please go pick him up."

"Eh?"

"Child?"

"That's right."

That's when Makoto opened his mouth.

"Yanagi-san!"

A man dressed in a station staff uniform called out to him as he made his way through the crowd on his way home.

"Ok, let's go right now."

"Immediately...? Um, what happened?"

Inou asked the station staff, tilting his head at Yanagi's words as if he knew what was coming.

"In fact... While I was checking the inside of the train, I found two children sleeping. They are probably Yanagi-san's children."

At those words, it was Haruaki who let out a voice that was a mix of surprise and irritation, "Jingi and Yukito-kun?!".

"Probably... It seems that the staff at Ninoshima Station saw them boarding the train at night. So, I think they might have been sleeping on the train the whole time... I checked the inside of the train regularly, but for some reason I couldn't find them. I'm sorry."

"That is so weird."

It's strange that he couldn't find them even though he must have gone back and forth several times. When Inou bowed his head further, Makoto intervened: "No."

"It's not your fault. I was the one who caused you trouble. Anyway, they're both safe, right?"

"Yes. We'll keep them at Minoshima Station."

When the station staff answered Makoto's question, Aka said, "I'll be there right away." and he took a step towards the station. Just as Haruaki was about to start walking after him, Makoto's voice rang out from behind.

"Ah. You two, wait a moment."

"What's happening?"

"When they wake up, promise to take them to the autumn festival."

Both Haruaki and Aka frowned at those words. It was yesterday when he made a promise lightly and then broke it and hurt Jingi.

"It's for real this time, right?"

When Haruaki looked at him suspiciously, Makoto shrugged and said, "I understand."

"I'll have everything ready for the fall festival. Besides, it would have been more troublesome for them to stay home."

".....?"

Aka and Haruaki bowed their heads in unison, unable to understand the meaning of their master's words, but quickly left the place, saying that their priority now is to make sure their younger brothers are safe.

A few minutes later. When the two entered the station's waiting room in a panic, they found Yukito and Jingi, who seemed surprisingly peaceful, sleeping soundly.

Seeing that, Aka let out a sigh, half surprised and half relieved. Then, as he neared the end, he slapped his forehead.

"Hey, Jingi. Wake up."

At that, Jingi groaned, "Hmm...", and then stood up with a start, shouting, "Aaaaaaah...".

"Jingi, are you okay?"

When Haruaki looked at his face in panic, Jingi seemed surprised and asked, "Haru-nii?!" Then he looked around and asked, "What happened to Yukito?"

"Yukito is here."

When Aka responded, looking at Yukito who had not yet woken up, Jingi let out a sigh of relief.

"It looks like you had a very bad dream."

Haruaki gently stroked Jingi's head as he didn't seem to look at his younger brother. However, the person in question looked at Haruaki and said, "It wasn't a dream!".

"Yukito ran away from the monster and got on a train, but I couldn't do it. So I thought it wouldn't be good, but the peach blossoms burst out and enveloped me!"

"Oh, that's a great dream."

"That's why it wasn't a dream! It was really hard. We were at the festival site... Uh, what? So... what happened?"

He wanted his brothers to understand in some way what he went through. With that feeling in mind, Jingi tried to explain in detail what had happened to him.

However, for some reason, the memories that he had vividly remembered until now began to pour out of him as if he were grasping sand.

"I guess it was a dream after all."

As he muttered that to himself, his memory gradually faded.

And in that moment. Yukito squirmed, then slowly opened his eyes and looked around in panic.

When he saw Jingi, he shouted happily: "Master!"

At that moment, an indescribable feeling was born within his soul. It is a warm feeling that gives you strength, but at the same time it is also a painful feeling that comes with a sense of responsibility.

However, Jingi tilted his head, not understanding why he felt this way, and asked, "Master?".

"If it weren't for my master, I would still be in that place."

He must have been half asleep and said something wrong. Judging from that, Aka gently told Yukito where his father was, but Yukito tilted his head in confusion.

"It's not dad... I just... I thought he was calling Jin-nii-chan, but... I wonder why."

"Hehe, Yukito-kun, you're a little sleepy too."

"Yes... maybe so."

"First of all, being a "master" is not trivial."

Aka scoffed at him and Jingi pouted, "What do you mean?"

Haruaki and Yukito laughed at that exchange, and the strange atmosphere between the four of them collapsed, and the usual atmosphere began to flow.

"That's right. Master said that next time, Jingi and Yukito-kun will also be able to participate in the festival."

"Me too? Will I be able to join too?"

"Yes, Yukito-kun too."

"This time, Haruaki and I will be witnesses. Don't worry, we will definitely keep our promise."

Unlike Yukito, whose expression suddenly brightened, Aka noticed that Jingi had a somewhat doubtful expression on his face, and when he said that, Jingi reminded him, "It's a promise."

"Oh, that's a promise."

"Yes, I promise."

Jingi finally seemed to feel at ease after hearing the two brothers' words from him, and laughed heartily.

Then, Yukito's bright voice said, "Yes!".

"Hey, let's interlock fingers!"

"Interlock your fingers?"

When Aka bowed his head, Yukito continued speaking, his eyes shining even brighter.

"Yes! We promise that the four of us will go to the next festival together."

"Oh, great! That's a good idea, Yukito!"

"Wait. How do four people intertwine their fingers?"

"Ah... I see. It takes two people to intertwine fingers, right?"

Yukito lowered his head at Aka's calm comment. However, Jingi spoke up immediately.

"What? If we stand in a circle, we can interlace our fingers side by side, right? I mean, it doesn't really matter how we do it. This kind of thing is exciting, right?"

Hearing Jingi's words, Yukito's expression brightened again and Haruaki let out a small laugh.

"Well, that's true. Okay, let's do it."

Aka agreed and the four formed a circle in a corner of the station. The scene was strangely pleasant and Jingi laughed again. Then, he opened his fist, which he had been unconsciously clenching since he stood up to intertwine his little fingers. And in that moment...

Suddenly something slipped from his palm.

"Hmm? Is this a flower petal?"

"Peach blossom? Why do you have something like that?"

At Aka's question, Jingi shook his head and said, "I don't know."

However, Jingi felt that the petals were somehow important, so he picked them up from the ground and put them in his pocket.

"Let's interlace our fingers as soon as possible. If we break our promise, we will receive a thousand needles."

Then, he laughed with his usual lazy face and intertwined the little fingers of both hands with those of Haruaki and Aka.

Yukito, who was in front of him, also intertwined his fingers with Haruaki and Aka's fingers.

"The four of us will go to the next festival together. I promise."

Everyone nodded at Yukito's words and chanted the spell in unison.

"Yubikiri genman, if you lie, you will receive a thousand needles. We are done with this."

+++++

"Phew."

The grounds of Kaizumi Shrine in Minoshima. At the back of the room, Haruaki Kurama was taking a breather with a cup of tea in his hand.

Today is the day of the Spring Festival. The priest, Haruaki, should normally be so busy that he would not have time to rest, but his trusted disciples allow him to take a break, so he can take a short rest.

He sounds good saying that, but in reality, Haruaki, who always gives extras every time an amulet is sold, is being ridiculed as a nuisance.

However, there is no doubt that his disciples are trustworthy. Looking at the disciples in the distance, who were interacting with many people on the temple grounds who were busy with the festival, Haruaki let out a small laugh.

At that moment, he blew a gentle breeze and something floated into the teacup.

Those are pale pink petals.

Now is the time when peach blossoms bloom. These petals must have been plucked from a local peach tree. Those has come a long way. When Haruaki thought about that, a promise suddenly came to his mind.

That was ten years ago. When Jingi was still a child and Yukito was even younger.

Jingi and Yukito, who had been forbidden to participate in the festival by their master, silently rode the train to see the festival site, but fell asleep on the train and were detained.

"Even now that I think about it... it was a suspicious incident."

It was almost night when Jingi and Yukito left the house. So why did they continue sleeping on the train without anyone finding them until the festival ended?

Why did Master know that the two were being protected even before he received the news?

And why was Jingi holding peach petals on the day of the summer festival?

However, there was no way to confirm those questions now.

Promises made later remain unfulfilled.

Shortly after making that promise, Shinoshima exploded. There, his master died and Yukito was sent to an orphanage on the mainland.

Yukito returned to this island a while ago, but it seems that he won't be able to keep that promise. At this moment, the relationship between the four people who had intertwined fingers without any suspicion had changed considerably.

First, he's probably the only one who remembers the innocent promise they made when they were kids. Haruaki thought about that and smiled, looking a little sad.

At that moment, he heard familiar words from somewhere.

"Yubikiri genman, if you lie, you will receive a thousand needles. We are done with this."

When he looked in the direction of the voice, he saw four children standing in a circle interlocking their fingers, just like Haruaki and the others had done before.

There were two children of middle and high school age. One boy was in the upper grades of elementary school. And there was a boy who looked like a preschooler.

Seeing them laughing happily together reminded him of who they were in the past and gave him an indescribable feeling.

Will their promises be kept?

Of course, Haruaki has no way of knowing what kind of promise they made. It may be an innocent promise between children. However, no matter what the promise is, Haruaki sincerely hopes that it will be fulfilled.

At the same time, he hopes they can still laugh together in ten years.

Once they were out of sight, Haruaki drank the tea to suppress his sentimental mood, murmuring a small "It's okay." and then he sat down.

It turns out that Haruaki is now the priest of that shrine. He cannot simply leave the job to his disciples.

Furthermore, Yukito is scheduled to come pick up Haruaki's disciples, Yako and Chatarou, in a while. He heard that the two of them, Yukito and a disciple of Aka will be touring the festival.

Although the four brothers could not keep their promise of going to the festival together, the children who follow their respective origins go to the festival together with Yukito.

When he heard that story, he felt as if the promise he had made back then had been conveyed in a different way, and that made Haruaki's heart feel lighter.

"Yukito-kun is currently trying to form a new relationship. That must be very rewarding."

To be honest, he felt alone. But he wasn't sad.

And Jingi is the only one closest to Yukito, both now and in the past.

"He seems like he's a pretty random master."

Haruaki laughed at his own words and began walking towards the shrine office where his disciples are.

Suddenly, the wind blew and some peach petals flew again.

While he contemplated that landscape, Haruaki made a silent wish in his heart.

"I hope Yukito-kun's first festival on this island is fun."