

## **CHAPTER 2: *I can do this, definitely.***

"I can do this, definitely."

Ichinose Kaoru said this to himself as he left the house. Shirt and jersey on, simple enough.

The time: 4am. It could be said that it was an early morning or a late night, depending on who you ask. Left leg, right leg, left leg... at this time of day he was able to enjoy a brisk pace in his run and take his time with it.

The asphalt was lit by street lamps, and the rhythmical sound of his footsteps reverberated in the silence. The usual course through the usual streets in the dead of night.

It didn't take long before he started to breathe heavily. But Kaoru didn't let this discourage him. He knew from experience that the first 15 minutes was always the hardest.

It made sense that one's body gets tired delivering hemoglobin in that 15 minute time period. But after that, one always feels lighter, just like he did now. All he had to do now was keep up the pace, but not surpass it. Can't put too much stress on your knees.

It had been about a year since Kaoru started going on these night jogs.

At the beginning, his lungs and knees went through so much pain that he would have to stop halfway through the course and walk the rest of it. As he got better he became able to speed walk through it. Before he knew it he was able to run 1 kilometre, then 2, then 3, and so on, until now he was able to run unbroken at a speed of 8 kilometres in 2 hours.

Today, he thought, let's try 10 kilometres.

By preserving his strength and keeping the speed, it should be possible. It would be alright. "I can do this, definitely."

Once upon a time Kaoru was a hikikomori NEET.

Actually, that's not entirely true. He *is* a hikikomori NEET. While he is a NEET, the hikikomori part is becoming less true by the day.

He found it difficult to leave the house in the daytime, but in the wee hours of the morning when no one else was out he found the strength to leave the house. Compared to the days of being unable to leave even his own room, this was a massive improvement.

Kaoru waved his hands, moved his legs, and ran through the city at night.

At a certain point on his runs the streetlights turn off. He didn't hate the feeling of being wrapped in darkness. He had a reflective band on his right arm so as not to get

hit by a car, but even then when the lights turned off there was a bit more care put into each step.

He tripped a little on the sidewalk but made sure not to fall.

The light shined on his arm band and revealed the shape of a small black cat on the road. Kaoru called out to it, but in a flash the cat disappeared into the side of the road, and Kaoru could no longer make out its shape.

He picked up his pace to make sure his body didn't cool down.

The cat had had the same look in his eye as his old friend.

Kaoru was an addict of The World. There's really nothing else you could call it. He played nearly 24 hours a day. But of course, it wasn't like that at first.

When he first started playing he was still a middle school student. It was over ten years ago now. He had made a PC named Elk. He wanted to make friends and do something about his shyness.

And then a strange character named Mia came into his life. An NPC that looked like a cat. That's right, Mia had no player controlling her. A vagrant AI. A lost program. But that made no difference to him. Mia was Kaoru's first ever friend. In that world, Mia was always there for him. She accepted him. That was reality for him.

But Mia eventually began to question her own existence and was destroyed.

Even though it happened right in front of him, Kaoru rejected that reality. He continued to log in everyday, looking for her in The World.

Eventually, the game upgraded to R:2, but Kaoru quickly created the PC called Endrance and continued his search, logging in day after day. And then finally he found her, or so he thought. That Mia turned out to be a fake. And then Kaoru met Haseo, a new friend. He didn't need Mia anymore. Even still, she was always by his side, in the power of the Epitaph. In the PC known as Endrance.

And inside Kaoru too, the memories of Mia rest softly, where they will be for the rest of his life.

That's why he will be okay.



Kaoru suddenly found himself at the end of his course. At this rate, I should be able to make 10 kilometers, he thought.

But it was long. 2 kilometers is a long way. He could feel it in his knees. Pain. I want to stop, he thought.

But as soon as he thought that, he saw the familiar garden outside his home. If he can just make it there, then it'll be exactly 10 kilometers.

Without noticing, too, the area around him had become bathed in light. The night had passed and the sky began to brighten. Without even looking at the clock, he knew it had become 6am.

Just as he approached the garden, a jogging girl appeared. Unlike Kaoru, she was dressed in bright colours, upbeat as ever. Maybe the same age or a year older. She gave a polite nod in his direction, and Kaoru lowered his head in response as they passed each other.

That simple nod had been his first communication with another person outside his family in a long time.

Little by little, Kaoru could feel himself changing.

He felt completely different from when he had lost Mia.

Different from when he thought he found her again too.

The pain in his knees had disappeared.

As the night receded, people began to appear.

Kaoru ran towards his goal.

The rhythm of his pace synchronized with his heart, and he felt at peace.

"I'm okay."