

## Chapter 4: "...Huh?"

"...Huh?"

Chigusa Kusaka said this in a small voice without thinking.

Now that she had said it she couldn't take it back and regretted it immediately. The way she was holding her phone made it seem like the other person couldn't hear it, however.

"...I see. Well, work is work, I guess? The same place as Ms. Saeki, right...? Well, it can't be helped then."

"I'm sorry, I'll make up for it another time."

The tired, apologetic voice on the other end of the line belonged to Ryo Misaki.

As Chigusa listened, the image of a tired, working man Ryo floated across her mind. Was he tired because he had just been working until he called? Chigusa wondered if that was really the case--even though he called to apologize for cancelling their plans, it felt like he had called to simply inform her they were cancelled.

He had begun working at the Network Analysis Bureau in the summer of 2017. The woman who had recruited him was Reiko Saeki--known as Pi in The World--after transferring there herself from CC Corp.

Chigusa knew, though, that the only reason Ryo had started working there was to solve the mystery of why Masato Indou had remained unconscious.

"Don't worry about it, really... By the way, what's work like?" asked Chigusa. At the very least she wanted to hear about it to let him vent and relieve a bit of his stress. After all, she was the one who suggested they go on a date anyway to raise his spirits from the dumps of overwork.

She looked at the clock and saw it was almost 9pm--just enough time to talk at least for a little.

"...Hmm. It's confidential work, so I can't really talk about it in detail." Ryo seemed hesitant to speak. "Basically I spend all day in front of a computer screen analyzing data, and sometimes I attend lectures on neurophysiology. Occasionally we go out for on-site investigations... various things like that."

"It sounds pretty tiresome!"

Other than the fact that they monitored the net, Chigusa did not know much about the exact operations of the NAB. Even after asking Ryo she had no idea how the things he did had anything to do with monitoring the net. All she could really tell was that it was incredibly involved work.

"It's pretty tiresome... Well, maybe because I make it that way for myself. Each day I go to work I feel like a kid who knows nothing. I'm definitely not able to pull my

weight." Ryo said this with a self-deprecating tone. "Lately I feel like maybe I'm getting used to it a little bit, but it's more like I can understand what I'm doing wrong, and I can't understand how to do it right...." It seemed like he was talking to himself more than he was to Chigusa.

"Oh, dammit. I've gotta go. Anyway, I'll see you later."



"Oh..."

But he had already hung up. She was surprised that he was still at work.

"Misaki..."

Dejected, she put her phone on the desk.

Her surprise turned to worry, and then her worry into a peculiar kind of loneliness that she could feel deep in her heart.

After being bullied in middle school, there was a time when Chigusa began skipping class and avoiding others. She began to blame herself for her problems and became very submissive. She found her salvation by isolating herself in the online game The World. After creating the character named Atoli she joined the guild Moon Tree and became involved with their Second Squad Leader, Sakaki. It was because of him that she was saved. Or at least, she once felt that way. Looking back on it she simply depended on him because she couldn't rely on herself. After all, being dependent on someone and being saved by them are easily misconstrued. It was Ryo who taught her that, back when she still called him Haseo.

Ryo was now on his own, facing the future alone no matter the cost.

Just what kind of relationship does he have with Masato Indou, Chigusa wondered. Perhaps the only ones who knew for sure were the two of them.

All Chigusa knew she could do for him was to be there for him when he needed her, to be someone he could rely on. She had relied on him for so long, and now she wanted to do the same. Chigusa wanted to help any way she could.

Looking away from her phone, she said something out loud to herself.

"I'll be alright."