

The cheerful laughter of juvenile antics of holidays past echoed in the heart of the walls. A puddle of tears that bled from a heart wounded by the decisive strike of the single-edged blade swung in the springtime of youth has been trivialized by time. A three-year friendship was immortalized in the dust of a silenced clubroom as those who filled the realm with life set their sights on the future. With the memories left lingering in all who had witnessed them, the screen fades to black.

The credits flowed upward. The familiar song of the opening sequence played—the one from the first season. The animation production credits ended with the popular tune. The localization credits mutely blinked on the screen soon thereafter.

The DVD player chugged a bit and came back to the DVD main menu. That same opening song played in the background in a less-than-seamless thirty-second loop. A still image of the main character and his childhood friend stared at the menu options with frozen smiles. Having nowhere else to progress, the menu cursor hovered on the final episode, hoping for an input from whomever has the remote.

“Can we watch something else now?” Yayako complains, squirming in the spot on the rug that she had been warming with her belly for the past six hours.

“Waaaaaaah! I can’t believe you’re ready to move on to another show already! I’m still not over Ken-chan choosing the transfer girl over his very own best friend,” Linhua lamented, also not moving from the spot on the couch that has been thoroughly imprinted by her bum.

“Yeah, yeah,” Yayako retorted. “That ship sank as soon as sensei introduced the new kid. Now I wanna watch something with more punching and kicking!”

“Choose something off the shelf,” Linhua requested, gesturing at her DVD collection.

“I don’t wanna get up. I just got comfortable.”

“Waaaaaaah! I don’t wanna get up either.”

The two came to a standstill.

“We wouldn’t have this problem if you had Crunchy. Streaming is made for times like this.”

Linhua crossed her arms at the familiarity of the argument. “I don’t feel like paying for another streaming service, darnit.”

“Yeah, yeah. What’s the big deal? Your family’s loaded. If they can afford this swanky apartment, what’s another streaming service?”

“The apartment’s not THAT swanky, Yayako.”

Linhua came from a line of old money. From renowned scholars to successful businessmen, her family has been living in high society for generations. However, the family did not expect Linhua to inherit the family business as it was suited to someone more scholastically inclined. Thus, Linhua’s life had been a relatively modest one with average schooling, average fast food, and average ants crawling from one end of the apartment to another.

“Yeah, yeah. I guess to my itty, bitty baby high schooler eyes, any apartment you have all to yourself is swanky.”

“Waaaaaaah! Yayako, are you sassing me because you’re a jelly donut?”

“Yeah, yeah! I’m a jelly donut of anyone who doesn’t have to worry about school or any of that annoying stuff! I mean, when was the last time you had to worry about something as dumb as homework?”

Linhua's gaze drifted off to five years into the past to when she was last writing an essay for school. She wrote a few paragraphs summarizing an anime she watched recently and plagiarized a video she saw about it. That content creator wasn't super smart. The essay only got Linhua a C+. Her science teacher was hard to impress. The chagrin she felt getting that grade was topped only by the fact that getting that grade was a prominent memory Linhua had of the last five years.

"I don't wanna answer that," Linhua retorted, as she snapped back to the present.

"Yeah, yeah. I understand. Thinking about that stuff ruffles me too. Now I wanna drown my problems in a milkshake."

"I could use a milkshake," Linhua conceded.

"My allowance can't pay for an apartment, but it can pay for a milkshake and a burger at Two-fiddy Borgar."

"Then, to Two-fiddy Borgar we go, soul sistah!" With that, Linhua and Yayako headed out the apartment to see what good a Saturday afternoon in Underbelly may bring them.

Between Topside, the sunkist world familiar to humans and Subversa, the shadowy enigma where demons dwell is the rainless city of perpetual overcast, Underbelly. The city center of Underbelly flaunts metropolitan signs and billboards that sell the week's newest fragrant fad or the latest and greatest entertainment the industry has money to tell people about. Yayako often gawks at the video game advertisements in a campaign to get Linhua to put money down. In this nexus between worlds is a cultural melting pot that embraces both first-world human ideals as well as mild demonic tendencies. Finding a Two-fiddy Borgar right next to a second-hand demonic tome store is commonplace in the social structure of Underbelly.

Linhua and Yayako arrived at Two-fiddy Borgar, thankful that anything worth getting to was a walk away from Linhua's apartment. These girls were not known for their rapid walking pace. Linhua was accustomed to locomotion through hopping. Moving with stiff limbs was a habit from back when rigor mortis set in and the only way for her to get about was by hopping. Before coming to Underbelly, Linhua was referred to as a jiangshi. As a jiangshi, Linhua used to absorb energy from her annoying neighbors. Doing so helped her soften up a bit. Linhua has left most of her mischievous jiangshi habits behind in the human world, but hopping has stuck with her. Yayako was a perfect friend to go on a stroll with since her turtle-like shell made her move at a scenically indulgent pace. Yayako was always understood to be a kappa. Her shell was weighty, tough, and fashionable. The dish she had on her head was always polished and mindfully hydrated, otherwise Yayako would absolutely die, as kappa tended to should their dish go dry. Growing up in an old pond, Yayako only ate cucumbers and shirikodama her mother would provide for her. After learning about where shirikodama came from, she decided to leave that out of her diet, deeming them unfitting of her matured sanitation standards. Cucumbers are still a nice thing to gnaw on, though they are not as appetizing as the prospect of a Two-fiddy Borgar.

The two friends had their lunch at Two-fiddy Borgar as their plans for the day dictated. Each sandwich was grilled well to perfection. The smoky, flame-grilled quarter pound patty burst with savory flavor with every bite. The lettuce sang a loving harmony with the crispest pickle and the sweetest tomato. Two dollars and fifty cents was a bargain for the sensation, especially

considering inflation. Linhua had to buy a few more out of principle. Of course, she had intended to save them for dinner.

Linhua and Yayako toddle at their trademarked strolling pace back to the apartment with Linhua toting a sizable bag of warm Two-fiddy borgars. Yayako could hear the rustling of the wrappers that hugged the borgars, recognizing each sandwich for its own voice in the choir.

“You look like you need help carrying all that.”

In truth, walking with a bag full of this many two-fiddy borgars is a bit of a chore, no matter how delicious the content. This went especially for Linhua, whose movements were a hop and a skip away from what is considered by most to be practical locomotion.

“Waaaaaah, I guess I could use some help,” Linhua submitted.

“Yeah, yeah! I’ll give you a hand!” Yayako said as she scooped up the cargo from Linhua’s hands. Without another word, Yayako started to hustle her shuffle down the block.

After a moment, it sinks in that Yayako’s hastened pace was an attempt to get away with borgar theft.

“Yayako, you can’t steal my borgars!” she called out as her hops came to leaps in pursuit. Linhua turned the corner where she last saw Yayako and charged forward.

After reaching the end of the block, Linhua realized she didn’t see Yayako anymore. After scratching her head for a moment, Linhua went back down the block and found an alleyway she ignored. After further inspection, a door that led into one of the buildings was left open, swaying slightly. Peering through the door, Yayako was collapsed on the floor, chin scraped, yet in silent fixation at something ahead. Further down the scene the coveted Two-fiddy borgars were sprawling out of the bag. There was a mathematical anomaly before Linhua. She had half a grocery bag of quarter-pounders, yet when the emptied bag laid out the contents in front of Yayako and Linhua, only a fourth of the quarter-pounders that could fill that bag could be seen. Yayako hopped over for the truth.

A wormhole ate her borgars.

Linhua looked down the wormhole. It soundlessly distorted the floor around it in a murky, hypnotic swirl. Linhua could not keep her gaze out of the center as it exerted an almost magnetic pull on her as it enraptured her curiosity. Linhua’s palms started getting a bit sweaty with a feeling akin to looking down the cliff of a dizzying canyon, the vertigo both frightful and mesmerizing as it was impossible to tell where it could lead to. The distance between Linhua’s face and the wormhole slowly narrowed.

“Man, look at that swirly!”

Yayako made her exclamation inches away from Linhua’s ear.

“Waaaaaah! Yayako, don’t yell in my ear! You almost knocked me over,” Linhua scolded.

“Yeah, yeah. You looked like you could’ve knocked yourself over.”

“I would not!” Linhua argued. “Also, you owe me, like, five burgers!”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I do. My bad,” Yayako submitted. “But more important than borgars, just look at this thing!”

The two looked back at the wormhole.

“Where do you think it goes?” Yayako asked, stroking her scraped chin.

“Where do wormholes usually take people?”

“An alternate worm dimension where everything is worms!” Yayako answered excitedly.

“Waaaaaah! Why would there be a worm dimension? That’s so gross!”

“Yeah, yeah! Why would it be called a wormhole if it didn’t lead to the worm dimension?”

“I don’t know, Yayako! It’s just a sci-fi term people like to use for their holes.”

“Well, they should put more thought into it. I don’t want their falsely advertised holes.”

“You don’t have to buy into their hole advertisement, Yayako. Just ignore it and leave.”

“But wait. I don’t wanna leave. I wanna know where it leads to!” Yayako leaned in to stick her head into the wormhole. Linhua stopped her.

“Yayako, don’t stick your head in—it might fall off!” Linhua scolded. Yayako paused in contemplation.

“Yeah, yeah. I guess it could lead to the alternate guillotine universe where everything is guillotine...How about this, then?” Yayako said, as she picked up a two-fiddy borgar. “Listen closely, Linhua,” she instructed. Then, she tossed the sandwich into the wormhole.

The two stood in silence.

“Six. You owe me, like, six burgers, Yayako.”

“Forget the borgar! Did you hear when it landed, Linhua?”

“No, it’s just a borgar that makes borgar noises! You’ll need to toss in something noisier than that to get a sense for how far it falls, Yayako.”

“Yeah, yeah. I see your point. There has to be something around here that we can use.” Yayako gestured at the surroundings. The wormhole’s presence distracted Linhua from where exactly she was standing. It was an abandoned warehouse.

“C’mon, Linhua, help me find something better to toss in!” Yayako instructed while she was rummaging through some old crates.

Linhua hopped over to a pile of debris and started rummaging. Yayako was weighing the options she found in the crates. Yayako dropped the items into a single crate and took it back over to the wormhole. Linhua found a toolbox of rusty tools and brought that for their show and tell.

“Did you find anything good?” Linhua asked when she met up with Yayako again at the wormhole.

“Yeah, yeah! Look at all this stuff! Wanna go first?”

“Waaaaaaaah! You have so much stuff! You go first.”

Yayako gave an excited nod that emanated through her shaggy pigtail as she pulled a burnt-out lightbulb from her crate. She delicately held the bulb over the wormhole, pinching it between the tip of her index finger and thumb. She released her grip with a dainty flourish. The bulb flushed down the swirling time-space anomaly. The two girls listened carefully for the slightest hint of a shatter. There was nothing.

“We need something with more heft,” Yayako concluded.

“Like this wrench?” Linhua suggested, as she pulled the tool out of her toolbox.

“Yeah, yeah! Dunk it!”

Linhua followed through with the wrench. It gracelessly launched into the hole. Linhua and Yayako waited for auditory satisfaction. No sound to speak of shot back at them.

They started taking turns presenting their collections to the wormhole.

A rubber ducky, then some nails.

A tennis ball, then some screwdrivers.

A jack-in-the-box, then a measuring tape.

A wasps’ nest, then a fly swatter.

A handful of wasps, then some tweezers.

A bottle of aloe lotion, then some bandages.

The crate and whatever is left inside, then the whole dang toolbox.

“Waaaaah, we’re out of stuff. Did you catch how long it took for things to hit the bottom?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah! THAT’S why we were tossing everything in there.”

“I guess I can’t get too mad. I got carried away, too…”

“Yeah, yeah. But there wasn’t any noise to grab my attention. Maybe it’s just really deep.

“Like, a bottomless pit?” Linhua rubbed her chin, chewing on the idea.

As the two digested their scientific findings, they were disrupted by a deep, obstreperous rumbling.

“Yeah, yeah. You might be the true bottomless pit, Linhua,” Yayako teased, poking her friend’s belly.

“It would be convenient if I still had some burgers left, wouldn’t it, Yayako.” Linhua jabbed back.

“Don’t blame me, blame society for making food expensive, soul sistah!”

“Waaaaaah! Food is so expensive!”

The two decided to call it a day as they felt the wormhole had eaten enough of their time. Yayako had homework to think about and Linhua had a ceiling to stare at.

The next day snuck in through the window blinds, causing Linhua’s eyelids to tense. Had she fallen asleep or stayed in a thoughtless daze? The only thing she was sure of was that all the ceiling was definitely the same and she did not feel inclined to do anything but continue to inspect each thoughtless speck on the blank, lifeless ceiling ahead of her.

A knock at the door attempted to interrupt the routine. Linhua put the disturbance out of mind, questioning if such a fleeting noise was just something she made up in the twilight between sleep and the ceiling. The knock came again, more aggressively asserting its presence. Linhua chose to acknowledge it.

“Hola, Linhua!” Yayako boisterously greeted as Linhua opened the door.

“Are you skipping school again, Yayako?”

“I might’ve skipped a class or two, but that’s neither here nor there by 3pm, wouldn’t you say, soul sistah?”

“Waaaaaah! It’s already three o’clock?” Linhua whined, glancing around for every neglected clock.

“Yeah, yeah. Must be nice not having to worry about what time it is. Most of the day, it feels like clocks just won’t shut up.”

“I don’t do it on purpose, Yayako.”

“Even better! Anyway, stop flexing on me with your adulthood and check out this stuff!” Yayako presented a cardboard box full of fireworks.

“Cool, fireworks! Are we celebrating something?”

“Yeah, yeah! We’re celebrating the fact that we found a crazy weird wormhole that we can throw things into yesterday.”

“Waaaaaah! That’s not something we get to celebrate every day!”

“Let’s go, soul sistah!”

The two toddle over to the warehouse they played in the day before with their explosive toys in tow.

They arrived. Everything was as they left it, except for some remains of two-fiddy borgars that rats had decided to save for later. Linhua ignored those so that her celebratory mood didn't sour. Yayako set the box of fireworks down and glanced over to the wormhole eagerly. She rifled through her box of explosive treasures, stopping only in momentary contemplation—this one or that one? She finally stopped when the one met her eyes from her palm. The one from a couple years ago when she and Linhua were still in school together hanging out at a festival. The one that they were going to set off because the fireworks at the festival just weren't cutting it for them. The one that Linhua was about to set off but got a bit too nervous that it might blow up in her face. The one that Yayako decided to save for when they were ready for the biggest explosion that night. The one Linhua told Yayako to hold on to because it was hard to figure out when the biggest explosion would, without a doubt, be the best explosion to see. The one that they still had after all other fireworks had faded from the night sky.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's use this one."

"Waaaaah! Yayako, we can't just use the best one first."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. I guess if we spark this one first, everything will just be downhill."

Yayako pulled out a different one. "Second best, then!"

"Second can definitely be first today!" Linhua agreed with a giddy applause for the second banana.

Yayako lit that sucker and tossed it into the wormhole.

The two waited, anticipating what they assumed would be an earth-shattering kaboom with unwavering grins.

A minute passed. The wormhole continued to spin its hypnotic swirl, distorting all matter and light caught in its anomalous circumference without contributing to the warehouse's white noise. No detectable second-banana explosion. Their grins faltered slightly.

"Man, what the heck," Yayako complained as she crouched down closer to the wormhole, making sure that it got a good look at her stink eye.

"Hey, fireworks are supposed to explode after going up, right? So if we dropped it down the hole, it can't have blown up since it was going down," Linhua suggested, flexing her high school diploma.

"Yeah, yeah. I see what you mean," Yayako said as she stroked her contemplative chin. "Well, we can't just let it be so dissatisfying—it's the second best one we have! Let's go get it back and try again." Without any further discourse, Yayako hopped into the hole, nose pinched as if she were jumping into a pool.

"Waaaaah! Yayako, don't leave me behind!" Linhua followed her friend into the murky depths of the wormhole, but not without snatching up the fireworks collection and shooting a suspicious glare at the rats that were hiding in the shadowy corners of the warehouse.

Down the wormhole, the space around them gave no hint to their velocity. It was a lightless tunnel. The only hint of progress was the light breeze coming up at the falling girls. Although there was no light emanating from any direction, it was still possible to perceive objects falling through the odd tunnel. Linhua was able to spot her friend easily as her green miniskirt and matching green t-shirt contrasted with the colorless space around her. Linhua

swam her way through the chasm in an attempt to catch up with Yayako, passing some familiar items on the way down.

A bottle of aloe lotion, then some bandages.

A handful of wasps, then some tweezers.

A wasps' nest, then a fly swatter.

A jack-in-the-box, then a measuring tape.

A tennis ball, then some screwdrivers.

A rubber ducky, then some nails.

"Hola, Linhua!" Yayako greeted, as if she hadn't seen her friend in a while. "What took you so long to catch up?"

Linhua was confused. "You weren't that far ahead of me, Yayako."

"Yeah, yeah? Sure felt like you took a while to get here. Like ten minutes."

"Waaaaah! Time's weird here."

The girls continued to flutter down at ambiguous velocities until just ahead they saw a glittering opening approaching them. The opening emanated a subtly warm, blinding light. Linhua and Yayako had to shield their eyes as they passed through the bright fissure.

As they opened their eyes, their feet were planted on the ground. A bright, new, uncanny world now surrounded them. The bright, blue sky caused their eyes to squint slightly, but they couldn't bring themselves to shut them again. The ambiance tweeted and buzzed harmoniously with a warm, gentle breeze whispering a welcome to them.

With every stimulating sensation, Linhua had felt time finally move forward.