

The Hierarchy – Short Story from *Love, Murder, Basketball*.

Featuring The Ishikawa family

Written by: Kurutta Hito

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The hierarchy in my family is simple. My father. My mother. My older brother. The servants. The dog. And then me.

I was never wanted.

I still remember the first look my father gave me when I was born and I wasn't a boy. Pure disdain. Annoyance. My mother told me he didn't even stay in the room for five minutes before walking out.

As I grew up, he made sure to remind me.

“You were supposed to be a boy.”

“How bothersome it is to deal with your emotions.”

“Be more like your mother. Stop whining.”

In his own way, he was right. I was nothing like my mother. She was calculating, careful, and knew exactly how to stay on his good side. My childhood felt like a nightmare, though I never really had one to compare it to.

It didn't get better when I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at twelve.

“Of course there's something else wrong with you,” my father said.

“It's unbelievable. Stop all that crying. It's annoying me. Learn to compose yourself, Hina. I won't tell you again.”

My mother was no better. She made things clear in her own way. One hand gripped my shoulder as she knelt to meet my eyes.

“Hina dear,” she said, her voice gentle, her smile stern. “No one will love you if you’re so emotional.”

In that moment, I had nothing else to say. I was never much of a talker anyway. In some quiet, aching way, I felt disappointed that my mother never understood how I felt. I had never seen her lose her composure before, much less shed a tear. At one point, I even wondered if she was human at all.

I was put on Valium, and even then, it felt like it wasn’t enough. Still, it helped me, in its own way. As I got older, I realized I was being raised for only one purpose, to be Goro’s wife. Nothing else mattered to my parents, and eventually, I suppose nothing else mattered to me either.

As long as I could make him love me, I would have served him gladly, without complaint. I would bite my tongue. I would cry less. I would give him children. I would protect his image. I would respect him, even if he never respected me.

I told myself it was okay, as long as he loved me.

I could accept anything.

We were having dinner. Like usual. At our parents' request, we were required to see each other twice a week and have sex at least once, to build intimacy. I was happy with that.

Goro grew colder as we got older, but that was fine. I was used to it. I could accept it.

To the public, we were in a serious relationship. One that looked like love. To me, it felt like that too, in some way. To Goro, it was nothing more than an arrangement, and he treated it accordingly. Unfortunately, Goro was a man. And like many men, I became intolerable the moment I started to voice my opinions.

"You always do things without telling me," He said from across the table. His eyes were colder than usual.

I glanced down at the barely touched food in front of me before looking back up. "I thought—"

"You say you think, but it doesn't really seem like you use that brain of yours as much as you believe," he cut in.

I swallowed. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"And yet you always seem to find a way," he replied, taking a slow breath.

“I’m sorry,” I managed, just as his phone began to ring on the table.

He lifted one finger, telling me to stop. I did. Without thinking.

He picked up the phone and glanced at the screen. His expression softened instantly.

“I have to take this,” he said, standing and walking away.

I stayed seated. My thoughts drifted despite myself. It had started a few years ago. He used to leave his phone face up. Now it was always face down.

He no longer looked at me with any gentleness. What replaced it was bitterness. Resentment. Goro was a man of few emotions, but his eyes had always betrayed him.

I knew there was someone else. Someone he actually cared about.

I knew, and I said nothing. No matter how much it hurt, I told myself it was better not to know the details. Most men cheat on their wives.

I wasn’t special.

It took him about thirty minutes. I was always patient, even when my body felt like it was boiling over, even when tears pressed at my throat.

It took me years to learn how to contain myself, but with Goro it was harder than with anyone else.

“Who was it?” I asked softly.

He looked at me, then placed his phone back on the table, face down.

When he sat, his voice was flat.

“Is that really something you need to know? I don’t think it is.”

I stared at him, my fingers gripping the hem of my shirt beneath the table. I told myself I was fine with him seeing someone else. Truly. But I couldn’t understand why he felt the need to lie. The thought irritated me more than it should have.

I wanted to sweep the dishes onto the floor. I wanted to tell him I hated the idea of him speaking to another woman.

I did neither.

“You can’t love two people at once,” I said instead.

He lifted his wine glass. “Thankfully, I only have room to feel that way for one person,” he replied, taking a slow sip.

The words lodged in my head, heavy and throbbing. I could feel my blood rushing, heat crawling up my neck. Like always, I retreated.

“Excuse me,” I said, forcing a faint smile. “I’ll go to the ladies’ room.”

The bathroom was empty.

The door clicked shut behind me, soft enough not to draw attention.

Marble floors, warm lighting, everything polished to the point of sterility. I stood in front of the sink for a moment, gripping the edge, staring at my reflection like it might say something I didn’t already know.

My face looked calm. A little too calm.

I leaned forward and turned on the tap, letting the water run. The sound grounded me. It always covered everything else.

I bent over the toilet and did what I always did. Two fingers down my throat.

There was barely anything to come up. Just wine, half-chewed food, bitterness burning my throat. My eyes watered, lashes clumping together as my stomach clenched and heaved anyway, desperate to give me something to empty. My body understood before my mind ever did.

Control.

I stayed there longer than necessary, breathing through my nose, knuckles white against the porcelain. My chest felt tight, like something was trapped inside me with no place to go.

Anger made it worse.

It wasn't loud. It didn't explode. It sat in my ribs and pressed outward, sharp and suffocating. I thought of his eyes softening for someone else. Of his phone face down, so I couldn't see who called him. Of the way he raised one finger and I obeyed without hesitation.

I hated that part of myself more than I love him.

When it was over, I flushed, wiped my mouth carefully, and rinsed until the taste was gone. I straightened slowly, catching my reflection again. My eyes were red now, a faint flush crawling up my neck.

That was good.

At least something showed.

I pressed my palms to the counter and let myself feel it, just for a second. The resentment. The humiliation. The violent urge to scream, to break something, to tell him I knew and I didn't care and I cared too much all at once.

Then I swallowed it.

Like everything else.

I fixed my hair. Dabbed under my eyes. Practiced my expression until it was neutral again, pleasant enough to pass. By the time I reached for the door handle, the anger had been folded neatly back into its place.

Contained.

I could go back now. Like I always did.

Per usual, after we had sex, we went our separate ways until the next meeting. I think, somewhere inside me, I always hoped it would be different. That maybe he would hold me afterward. Stroke my hair. Say something, anything. Even the smallest gesture would have been enough.

I loved having sex with him. So why did I always feel like used toilet paper afterward?

When I looked at Goro, I could never tell what was going on inside his head. I had no idea what he thought of me, if he thought of me at all.

Why did I always want people who didn't want me back? Maybe I was flawed. Maybe something about me invited this kind of love.

I couldn't stop thinking about him with someone else. What was he like afterward? Did he hold them? Did he offer them comfort, the kind I pretended not to need?

“Hina. Do you not hear me?”

The voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?” I muttered, turning toward the driver's seat.

Ren shot me a look before returning his eyes to the road. “What the hell are you thinking about? I called your name at least ten times.”

I looked out the window instead, watching the city slide past. “Sorry. I'm just tired, I guess.”

He scoffed quietly. “How many pills did you take? I told you to stop taking that shit.”

“I'm fine,” I said, meeting his eyes this time. “I swear. You know I have to take them.”

Ren's hands tightened on the steering wheel, his jaw set. “You don't need that crap. You only take it because Dad tells you to.”

Then, more quietly, “I hate how it makes you feel. Just stop.”

I didn't answer. Instead, I leaned closer, just enough to invade his space, resting my head against his arm.

"I don't feel anything," I murmured. "That's good."

I glanced up at him. "Can you sleep in my bed tonight? I know you hate being home, but..." My fingers curled into his sleeve. "I think I could really use some comfort. Even a little."

He sighed as the car stopped at a red light. I felt his gaze drop to me.

"You should be asking Goro for comfort," he said. "I won't always be here for you. He's the one you're marrying."

I thought about that for a moment before shaking my head. "No. That's not true."

I tightened my grip on his arm. "You'll always be there for me. I know you will."

After a pause, I added softly, "You're my big brother. Even after I get married, that won't change."

The light turned green. Ren started driving again, slower this time.

"...That's a good point," he said at last. "I guess."

“Big brother... do you think something is wrong with me?” I asked softly, unable to meet his eyes.

Ren sighed, gaze fixed on the road. “Nothing is wrong with you, Hina. Nothing at all. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Ren came home because of me. I hated that. I hated forcing him into that house, into that air. Father and Ren barely got along, but at least he was the favorite. In my own way, I envied him. And in another, I didn’t. I carried pressure too, but Ren carried something heavier. He was going to inherit the company, the expectations and the name. It didn’t help that I was dating his ex-best friend. His rival.

At the dinner table, my parents questioned my brother. Or rather, my father did. My mother barely spoke. She barely looked at me.

“And the match? How did it go?”, my father asked sharply.

“We lost, obviously,” Ren snapped. “Don’t ask stupid questions. You already know we can’t beat Kobayashi.”

I tuned out after that. This week was my ballet tournament, and all my father could talk about was basketball. He didn’t even like basketball. All he cared about was winning, about competing with the Nakamuras.

Ren had been cursed with height, but at least he liked the sport.

Everything in our house revolved around victory.

I started ballet because it was the only thing I was good at. It didn't overwhelm me. For a while, my father was proud. Then I grew older, and he stopped caring. The only thing he ever asked me about after that was my relationship with Goro.

My mother was different. She had always been involved in my private life. From childhood, I was enrolled in endless classes. Lessons on how a lady should act. How I should sit. How I should eat. What I should wear. I grew tired of it, but I never had a choice.

When I hit puberty, it became unbearable.

She body-shamed me until her voice became my own. Until every bite I took felt like a mistake. She watched my weight like a hawk. Morning measurements. Weigh-ins. Sometimes even at night. I had a strict list of foods I was allowed and not allowed to eat.

I have never tasted cake in my life.

Not even on my birthdays.

I wasn't even allowed to eat my own birthday cake. I had to sit there and watch everyone else enjoy it in front of me.

I crave sweets. I want to know what they taste like. I want to understand why they are so forbidden.

Forty kilograms is the most I have ever weighed. To my mother, that was the absolute limit. The highest I was ever allowed to go.

It's hard to maintain.

I am always hungry. So, fucking hungry.

I sat on my bed in my pajamas, staring out at the balcony doors. I liked my room. It was the only place in that cold house that felt even remotely safe.

Ren stepped inside and closed the door behind him. One hand stayed hidden behind his back as he spoke.

“Hey, sis. Guess what?”

I turned slightly to look at him. His hair was still damp with a towel draped loosely around his neck.

“What?” I asked.

He laughed under his breath and stepped closer, hands still concealed.

“Come on. Guess. It'll be fun.”

I raised a brow. “You got me something. You always stand like that when you do.”

He smirked. “Yeah. And it’s something you’ve been asking for since last year—”

My eyes widened, excitement bubbling up before I could stop it. “No way! The Lucy doll? You’re lying.”

Ren chuckled and finally pulled it out from behind his back.

It was exactly what I wanted.

I had been talking about it for over two years. It would complete my collection, something I’d been building since I was a child. Dolls were one of the few things I could ever ask my parents for without guilt. They were special to me. I related to them in a way I could never quite explain.

Strange, but comforting.

I always thought I was more like a doll than a human being. Quiet. Decorative. Meant to belong. It soothed me to collect them, knowing they would never complain about being owned, the way I was owned by everyone else.

But the moment Ren placed the doll into my hands, something inside me cracked.

The weight of it. The softness. The kindness of the gesture. It all came crashing down at once. Goro's face flashed through my mind. His cold eyes. His softened expression for someone else.

I hated how much control he had over me.

I hated how unbearable the thought of him with another woman felt.

I clutched the doll tightly, biting down on my bottom lip as tears spilled over anyway. Ugly. Uncontrolled. Childish. The only way I knew how to cry.

"I—I don't want him to be with another woman," I managed to choke out.

Ren froze, staring at me the way he always did in moments like this, searching for the right way to comfort his foolish little sister. He set his hands on my shoulders, steady but gentle.

"What are you talking about?" he asked quietly.

Ren frowned slightly, confusion knitting his brows. "Hina... what are you saying? Did he do something to you?"

I shook my head quickly, almost panicked. “No. No, it’s not like that.” I hugged the doll closer to my chest, fingers digging into the fabric of her dress. “He didn’t hit me or even yell. It’s just—” My voice cracked anyway.

I hated that it always did that.

“I know he’s probably seeing someone else,” I whispered. “I’ve known for a while. I just... I thought I could handle it. I really did.” My throat tightened. “But I can’t stop thinking about it. About him touching someone else. Holding them. Being gentle with them. It makes me feel sick.”

Ren’s jaw tightened. He sat down beside me on the bed, slow and careful, like I might shatter if he moved too fast.

“Hina,” he said, lower now. “That’s not normal. That’s not something you should just accept. No matter what our parents think.”

I laughed weakly, wiping my face with my sleeve. “Everything in my life is something I just accept.”

He couldn’t give me an answer, but he listened.

“I don’t even want much,” I continued, staring down at the doll. “I don’t need him to love me the way people talk about love. I just want... something. To feel like I matter to him. Even just a little.”

Ren exhaled through his nose. “You matter.”

I shook my head. “Only to you,” I corrected softly. “Not to him.”

That seemed to hit him harder than anything else I’d said tonight. His hand hovered for a moment before resting on my back, rubbing small circles like he used to when we were kids.

“You shouldn’t be marrying him,” he said finally.

My body tense at once. “Don’t say that.”

“I’m serious.” He said.

I pulled back just enough to look at him. “You know I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.” He repeated.

I smiled at him then, small and tired. “You say that because you’re allowed to have one. I’m not like you, big brother.”

Ren looked away, jaw clenched. The room felt heavy again, like the walls were listening and they probably were.

“If I don’t marry him,” I continued quietly, “then what? I stay here forever? With them?” I swallowed. “At least with Goro, I know what to expect.”

“That’s still not a good reason,” he muttered.

“It’s the only one I have.” I shot back.

Silence had settled between us. I rested my head against his shoulder, still holding the doll, my fingers slowly relaxing their grip.

“I’m sorry,” I said after a moment. “I ruined the gift.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Ren replied immediately. “Stop saying shit like that.”

“I always do,” I murmured. “Whenever something good happens.”

He couldn’t argue this time.

Instead, he shifted slightly so I was more comfortable and let me stay there, leaning against him, until my breathing finally evened out.

If you asked most people, they would say that sharing a bed with your older brother as adults is strange. Creepy, even. I can’t bring myself to accept that judgment.

I have never felt safer than I do in my brother's arms. As long as I can remember, that was the only place I ever felt truly comforted.

When I was young, I had terrible nightmares. I was never allowed to sleep with our parents, so I would sneak into Ren's room instead. I'd crawl into his bed, careful not to wake him, and somehow my breathing would slow. The fear would loosen its grip.

When Father beat us, we held onto each other just as tightly. In those moments, everything felt bearable. I did all the crying for the both of us. Ren was always the stronger one. Ren never cried.

The only time I ever saw him break was when it had something to do with me.

Father knew that. He took advantage of it. That's the reason Ren moved out.

Sometimes I feel selfish about depending on my big brother for everything. For my comfort. My sense of safety. My ability to keep going. I know it isn't fair to him.

But I don't think I would survive without him in my life. I don't think there would be anything left of me to hold together. I'd kill myself, without a second thought.

In another life, I hope I can marry a man like my older brother.

A kind man.

A gentle man.

Someone who only has eyes for me.