



Lycoris Recoil
Ordinary Days
The Novel

Lycoris Recoil



Asaura

[ILLUSTRATION BY] Imigimuru
[ORIGINAL STORY BY] Spider Lily



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Ordinary Days
The Novel



Lycoris Recoil



MENU




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Chapter 2: Gunfight, Coffee, and Chisato's Red Flowers




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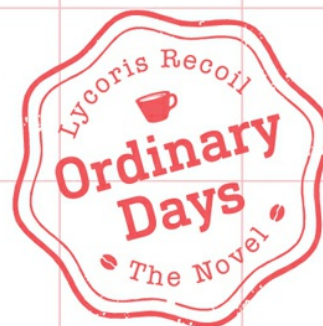


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Outro





CHARACTERS

Chisato Nishikigi

Age: 17 Birthday: Sep 23
Blood type: AB
Famed as the strongest Lycoris ever. Happily solves problems that fall outside of DA's scope. Seen herself as the poster girl for Café Lycoreco, where she diligently works as a waitress.



Takina Inoue

Age: 16 Birthday: Aug 2
Blood type: A
An outstanding Lycoris transferred over to Café Lycoreco after causing problems at DA. Values logic and efficiency, which sometimes leaves her frustrated with the decidedly un-Lycorislike Chisato. Hopes to prove her worth while working at Lycoreco.



Kurumi

Age: 9 Birthday: Dec 16
Blood type: AB
Japan's top hacker who goes by the moniker Walnut. Looks young, but when she talks to Mika, she sounds like an adult, so maybe older than she seems. Lying low at Café Lycoreco because people are looking for her.



Mizuki Nakahara

Age: 27 Birthday: Jun 6
Blood type: O
Ex-DA intelligence agent who's known Chisato for a long time. She quit DA and started working at Café Lycoreco hoping to find a life partner. Spends her evenings drinking and reading bridal magazines.



Mika

Age: 46 Birthday: Jul 13
Blood type: O
A former DA instructor, Chisato's mentor and father figure. Officially the owner of Café Lycoreco, where he serves delicious coffee and delightful desserts, and unofficially a problem solver, handling jobs DA won't take.



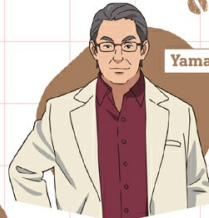
Café Lycoreco Regulars



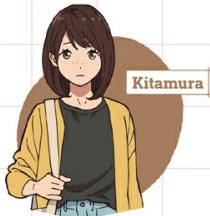
Gotou



Itou



Yamadera



Kitamura



Yoneoka

CAFÉ LYCORECO

Asaura

[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Imigimuru

[ORIGINAL STORY BY]
Spider Lily



Lycoris Recoil



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Intro 1

Kazuhiko Tokuda was a twenty-eight-year-old magazine writer who had been divorced once and had no children. While “magazine writer” sounded impressive, the truth was that Kazuhiko was just a versatile writer whose job was to create not-too-deep content on any topic to fill the pages. Eagerly accepting any jobs he was given, he constantly stressed over short deadlines and low pay.

While Kazuhiko typically worked on assignments given to him by clients, that day, he had his own passion project to pitch to a publisher. What had sparked this passion was a random discovery he’d made the other day at a certain café.

The café in question was a hidden gem never featured in any mainstream media. It was the sort of place only a select few knew about. Kazuhiko wanted to introduce this café to a wider audience and make it more popular. He would only get paid the standard rate for writing this article, but it would be an original feature piece—something to be proud of. His desire to distinguish himself, even with a minor accomplishment, became his driving force.

The café was in a quiet location near the Kinshicho Station in Tokyo’s Sumida City. People who knew the area well would no doubt raise their eyebrows at the suggestion that anyone would like to write a feature about a small café on a street corner in Kinshicho, part of Tokyo’s pleasure district, with Kabukicho to the west and Yoshiwara not too far away. But they would be wrong to dismiss the area as nothing more than a hub of sketchy businesses—the nightlife scene was primarily focused on the southern side, while the northern side (with the view of the demolished radio tower) had undergone a revival, becoming a quaint place for families to hang out. The Kinshicho Park, for example, located near the station exit, was always filled with happy voices of children whose enthusiastic, noisy play might make a passerby think the place was a zoo.

Kazuhiko had happened upon Café LycoReco when exploring the area north

of the station. He had left the Kinshicho Station through the north exit, wandered the quiet streets for a bit, and noted with surprise a very stylish café on one corner, sporting a wooden exterior very much unlike the surroundings. The modern but classic building would have fit in more at some tourist hot spots than in Kinshicho. With stained glass windows and elegant greenery, it beckoned a curious passersby to stop and take a better look, see the signboard indicating that the unusual house was a café, and venture inside, which was precisely what Kazuhiko did.

Fast-forward to the present time. Kazuhiko was determined to write his article about the café, but his gait betrayed anxiety as he headed there.



Kazuhiko opened the door. The bell attached to it tinkled, and Kazuhiko was greeted with welcomes from the staff and the gentle aroma of coffee.

It was somewhat unusual for an establishment serving coffee to be in the Japanese style and have such an extensive dessert menu. This quirky fusion extended to the staff dressed in kimonos but not acting in the exaggerated, pandering-to-tourists way you'd see at a popular destination for globe-trotting travelers. The inside was modern and the staff friendly...or rather, comfortably laid-back, making you immediately feel at home.

Reassured that there were no other customers, Kazuhiko went over to sit in his favorite spot, the middle counter chair. He was about to order an American coffee, as always.

"Would you like your usual?" asked the café owner, Mika, from behind the counter.

Kazuhiko found Mika's deep, unhurried voice calming. He nodded. It was impossible to deny that it felt good to be asked if he wanted "his usual." The café owner had only started asking him that a week ago.

As Mika began preparing the coffee, Kazuhiko watched him from his counter seat, thinking about how even though Kinshicho had perhaps the highest number of Scandinavian-type bars and restaurants in all of Japan, there was

probably no other place, and certainly not a café, where you'd be served by a dark-skinned man in a kimono. At the same time, the barista's appearance was evocative of what Café LycoReco specialized in—coffee and Japanese desserts.

Mika had an air of mature confidence and a gentle look in his bespectacled eyes. He was tall, yet his finger movements were delicate and graceful, even sensuous.

"You look very relaxed for a weekday afternoon. Remind me what it is that you do, Mr. Tokuda."

The request came from a waitress sitting at the counter's corner seat. She was leafing through a book. Her name was Mizuki Nakahara, and although she wasn't drinking that day, Kazuhiko had seen her before with a bottle of this or that alcohol, getting tipsy during work hours. Condoning such behavior from a waitress went beyond having a relaxed work ethic—she seemed to have a bit too much freedom. Perhaps she had considerable bargaining power, being the one to serve customers seated at the tables in place of Mika, who had a bad leg.

Kazuhiko noticed it wasn't a book Mizuki was reading but a bridal magazine, *Zeksy*. It was hugely popular with women planning their weddings, but for the divorced Kazuhiko, it was a cursed publication. Seeing the magazine brought him nothing but bad memories.

It was odd, though, that Mizuki would be reading *Zeksy*. Kazuhiko recalled an earlier conversation with her in which she revealed she was single. She had complained to him that there were no good men, by which Kazuhiko guessed she might've set her expectations too high.

Never mind her dowdy glasses; Mizuki was a natural beauty. She looked fit and was well-endowed, so she could probably pick and choose from a great many suitors. Kazuhiko himself would have made advances on her if it hadn't been for his unfortunate experience with his marriage.

In this day and age, many women had ambitions other than getting married. Kazuhiko cautiously touched on that subject with Mizuki, who replied with a tired smile, "Nowadays, women get to choose, no? And I'm an old-fashioned lady who dreams of a happy marriage."

With a pang of shame, Kazuhiko realized then that they'd been conditioned to

reject old-fashioned ways of thinking as unequivocally wrong, uncritically believing the often-repeated opinion that the times had changed, and with more doors open to them, women could no longer find contentment solely through marriage. He only had himself to blame for such close-minded thinking, of course, but it was common for teenagers and people in their twenties to be obsessed with keeping up with the latest trends. Mizuki wasn't like that at all, however. Kazuhiko thought with appreciation that she was a freethinker.

“Well? What’s wrong, Mr. Tokuda? Oh... Is your job the sort you don’t want to talk about?”

He was writing for several popular columns, but the type of generic content he was producing wasn't anything to boast about. Whenever he explained what he did for a living to curious people, it always resulted in awkwardness, as they'd be unsure about how to react. Having experienced this many times over, Kazuhiko had decided it wasn't worth discussing his work at all. This time, though, he would have to make an exception...

“Stop prying, Mizuki. You have no tact.”

The interruption came just as Kazuhiko was bracing himself to speak. It wasn't Mika who'd told off Mizuki, but a short girl who'd just emerged from the far end of the café munching on some snacks. She looked to be in her early teens... or maybe she was still a preteen? Her name was Kurumi. It seemed that Mika was looking after the girl, but Kazuhiko didn't know the particulars of the situation, having judged it insensitive to probe into it.

While Kurumi's fair skin, long, wavy blond hair, and blue eyes hinted at Caucasian ethnicity, something about her face made her look Asian, too. She spoke perfect Japanese, but Kazuhiko had heard her talking in English like a native to a lost tourist who'd come into the café another day, so it was safe to say she was at least bilingual. Kazuhiko couldn't guess her nationality, but then again, Kinshicho was home to many people of mixed nationality.

Whether the girl was going to any school was unclear, but she was brilliant and would sometimes join in adults' conversations about the economy or other grown-up topics. Her interactions with Mizuki also made Kurumi seem like the more mature of the two. She was a mystery.

Kurumi walked over to the low tables on the raised tatami floor and started setting up board game pieces. A group of regulars was meeting up for a game party later, so she was getting everything ready for them in advance. When Mika approached her, she bowed her head slightly.

“We used to host game parties only after opening hours, but since younger players have joined the group, we have daytime sessions, too,” Mika explained.

“Huh,” Kazuhiko grunted in surprise. “Don’t kids prefer digital games? I sure did.”

Thoughtful, Mika turned his profile toward Kazuhiko.

“I think that with digital entertainment being so common, it no longer has the same appeal to kids. It’s analog games that you play in person with other people that feel exciting and different now... Especially for Kurumi.”

Kazuhiko thought that it made sense that old trends were making a comeback. As the novelty of the digital world wore off, people were seeing value in real-world experiences again.

“Do you want to play too, Mr. Tokuda? There’s space for one more,” Kurumi offered.

On another day, Kazuhiko might have been up for it, but on this particular visit to the café, he had important business to focus on. He wasn’t there just for leisure.

“Mika, um, I have something important to ask you today...”

“Omigosh, is it a love confession?!” Mizuki cut in, to Kazuhiko’s consternation.

If he had fallen for the barista, he surely wouldn’t have come to tell him that at his workplace at lunchtime with other people around.

Mika told off Mizuki with a sigh and passed the freshly brewed coffee to Kazuhiko, who took a sip to calm himself before resuming the interrupted conversation.

“You see, Mika, I’d like to discuss—”

Ding-a-ling! The bell rang as the door opened, but it wasn’t a customer who came in—it was two high school girls in cute uniforms. They worked at the café

too. They were its poster girls.

“We’ve bought everything, Boss,” announced the pretty girl with long black hair as she carried the shopping to the back.

Her name was Takina Inoue. She was quiet and graceful, and while her presence was unobtrusive, she had a strange, subtle charm that made your gaze linger on her.

“Oh, hey! It’s Mr. Kazuhiko! So what were you two talking about? Oh, sorry if we’re interrupting!” said the girl who came in after Takina, Chisato Nishikigi.

Her hair was a very light shade of blonde, dazzlingly radiant in the sun. She accessorized it with a red ribbon on her left side. She came to the counter and darted her gaze between Mika and Kazuhiko. Mizuki butted in again.

“Mr. Tokuda was just about to confess his love for the boss!”

“Are you serious? I did notice Mr. Kazuhiko pays special attention to the boss, but I didn’t think it was *that* kind of special... Teach, stop stealing hearts, or they’ll put you in jail!”

Chisato banged her hand on the counter, teasing Mika like an auntie might a nephew.

The way she approached anyone without reservation, could never sit still, and always spoke fast and excitedly made her resemble a puppy happily chasing down an interesting scent. She was the opposite of Takina, naturally becoming the center of attention wherever she went.

Kazuhiko thought that if he’d had a friend like Chisato when he was a boy, his childhood would have been much more fun.

“Chisato, please... I don’t think that is what Mr. Tokuda wanted to discuss with me at all.”

Chisato looked back at Mika blankly.

It occurred to Kazuhiko that while the other staff called Mika “Boss,” Chisato was the only one to refer to him as “Teach.” He wondered why.

“No love confessions? Then what is it? Hm... Maybe something to do with work?”

“That’s it, actually...”

Kazuhiko smiled awkwardly. How did Chisato know? Did she somehow read it in his face?

“Is it urgent? Oh, Takina! Don’t get changed yet! Stop! Come back! Back here, babe!”

Takina, who was about to disappear in the back, stopped and scowled at Chisato.

“Don’t panic; I heard you. Work it is, then.”

For some reason, everyone’s eyes were on Kazuhiko. Even Kurumi stopped setting up the game pieces and was watching him intently. An unusual, tense silence fell on the café.

“Please, go ahead and tell us what it is,” said Mika.

Kazuhiko was feeling increasingly anxious.

“I wanted to ask you if it’d be all right for me to...write a feature about your café for a magazine.”

For a few nerve-racking seconds, nobody said a thing...and then, to Kazuhiko’s bewilderment, the staff laughed and looked away from him.

“Whew, so that’s what it was about! Mr. Kazuhiko, you joker, you shouldn’t keep us in suspense like that!”

Chisato poked his shoulder, chuckling. Takina quietly left the room, and Kurumi resumed her work.

“Er... Um... Sorry, I’m confused...”

Why had everyone been acting so out of character earlier? As if they weren’t café staff, but...what, exactly?

Mizuki closed her bridal magazine and looked Kazuhiko up and down.

“Wait, so you work for a publishing company? Ah, now I understand. Hmm... Well... I didn’t notice before that you were so handsome...”

“Oh, I’m just a freelance writer. I’ve recently mentioned to a publisher I’m on pretty good terms with that I’d like to write a piece about your café, and that’s

what I came to talk to you about today...”

“You mean you’re not employed full-time by any major publisher?”

“No, I’m not...”

Mizuki started reading the magazine again, and Kazuhiko painfully learned that some people didn’t bother hiding their complete loss of interest in you.

Incidentally, as a full-time employee of a major publisher, once you were in your forties, you’d have a salary you could live on in Tokyo as the breadwinner of your family. However, freelance writers like Kazuhiko could only dream of financial stability.

Only Chisato seemed interested in the article.

“So, what do you want to write about LycoReco?” she asked with her curious eyes fixed on Kazuhiko.

“Well, I was thinking of writing a feature on Kinshicho cafés with the main focus on Café LycoReco.”

“Hey, that sounds cool! Yeah! You know what we’ve got! Delicious coffee, Japanese desserts, and adorable waitresses... Whoo! I can totally see it! This is going to get us a ton more customers!”

Chisato’s big smile made Kazuhiko think of summer sunflowers in full bloom. She was bursting with life. Her cheerfulness energized those around her.

Kazuhiko’s original concept for the article was to present the café as a curious, chic establishment with a refined aesthetic, focusing on Mika, the owner. However, Chisato’s idea—putting the spotlight on the waitresses—wasn’t bad either.

“Isn’t that exciting, Teach?! Oh, will there be a photo shoot? With professional cameramen?”

“Yes. If you’re okay with this, let me know which day works best for you, and I’ll arrange everything.”

“Wow, wow, wow! I’ll have to book an appointment with a stylist pronto!”

“So, do I have your permission to proceed with the article...?”

“Yeah, sure—”

“I cannot agree to this.”

Mika’s flat refusal froze the smiles on Chisato’s and Kazuhiko’s faces.

“What were you thinking, Chisato?” Kurumi said without looking at them.
“Attracting attention to the café?”

Chisato dashed over to the tables on the tatami floor.

“But...what’s wrong with that? It would be good for our business and make my life more fulfilling! We might become famous, maybe even turn into a household name across the whole country! Wouldn’t that be nice, hmm? Ku! Ru! Mi!”

“That’s the whole problem. It’d get in the way of our work.”

Mika smiled apologetically at Kazuhiko.

“I appreciate the offer, but we do not want to be featured in the media.”

“You say that, but you have a social media presence. Your café isn’t a secret.”

“The social media account...is mostly for the benefit of our regular customers. It was her idea.”

Mika looked over at Chisato with a fatherly gaze. Chisato was still passionately trying to convince Kurumi that they should say yes to the article.

“...There’s no changing your mind, is there? I think it’s a pity that few people know this wonderful café is here.”

“I’m pleased you hold us in such high esteem. If you like the atmosphere here, then maybe you can understand why I prefer to keep a low profile and avoid the bustle of more popular places?”

“Preserving the atmosphere isn’t the main reason,” Mizuki commented without taking her eyes off her magazine.

Kazuhiko looked to Mika, waiting for him to elaborate, but the barista said nothing, turning to do some work in the kitchen as if he hadn’t heard Mizuki’s remark.

That left Kazuhiko wondering if the aversion to publicity was due to some

closely guarded secret. No, what a silly idea. That sort of thing happened only in comics.

Kazuhiko scratched his head and sipped his requested American coffee, which had a delicate flavor. To be clear, this was not an Americano, which would have been an espresso diluted with water. Café LycoReco's American coffee was purposefully weak black coffee brewed using light-roasted beans. Kazuhiko found the lightness of the beverage comforting, encouraging him to enjoy the moment and worry less.

Suddenly, Kazuhiko became aware of a pleasant smell wafting from the kitchen to the accompaniment of gentle crackling. He craned his neck to see Mika toasting something over a wire mesh. While Kazuhiko was still wondering what it might be, Mika swiftly placed a scoop of sweet azuki bean paste onto the mystery items and placed them on a plate. When he set it in front of Kazuhiko, the writer saw it held two monaka desserts—little mochi wafers filled with red bean paste. Kazuhiko guessed Mika had made him the treat as an apology.

“I hope this doesn't put you off from coming here again.”

“No, of course not. I love your café so much, I wanted to tell more people about it, that's all. I...would like to keep coming here, if you don't mind.”

“You're always welcome.”

Mika smiled, and Kazuhiko felt for a moment like a little boy who had just been told he was a good kid by a grown-up. It was curiously heartwarming.

Ding-a-ling! The bell rang again as another customer came in.

While Mika and the waitresses turned to the newcomer, Kazuhiko picked up one of the monaka. It was tube-shaped, light brown, and still hot. Some parts were a darker shade of brown—prepared by hand, they had been toasted a little unevenly. When Kazuhiko brought the wafer to his lips, he thought about characters from mafia movies with cigars in their mouths. It was an unusual shape for a monaka. At first, Kazuhiko thought it was made like that simply for the sake of novelty, but when he was just about to take a bite, it dawned on him that it made perfect sense for monaka to be tubular.

Your usual cookie-sandwich-shaped monaka broke when you bit into them, leaving crumbs sticking to the corners of your mouth. Most of the filling was at the center, so your first and last bites were pretty much just the wafer, which was a little unsatisfying. Making the monaka tube-shaped removed both of those problems.

Kazuhiko thought it must've been an idea of one of the girls. Was it Mizuki, Chisato, or Takina? Not Kurumi. Or had it been one of the customers who'd suggested it? A lady working at some Kinshicho night bar? In any case, it was very clever.

Biting into the monaka, Kazuhiko felt rising excitement as if he were about to unwrap a present. With every crunch, the delightful smell of freshly toasted mochi wafer filled his senses. Toasting it over an open flame really did bring out an amazing aroma. Kazuhiko's lips and tongue felt the heat of the wafer, but as he bit down on it, a refreshingly cold sensation hit him. Inside the satisfyingly crispy wafer was chilled sweet azuki paste. Two temperatures, two textures. And because Mika had opted for the chunkier red bean paste rather than the smooth kind, the azuki beans truly sang in this composition. These layers came together with each bite for a sublimely perfect mouthfeel at just the right temperature, slowly revealing delicate sweetness.

"Oh wow... Ha-ha-ha."

Exhilarated, Kazuhiko let out a joyous laugh. This monaka was incredible, delighting first with its smell and then with the contrasting temperatures and textures. Each bite took you on a sensory adventure. And the taste was, of course, superb. It was a delicious treat that was fun to eat.

Everything served at Café LycoReco had an original twist, elevating it to new heights. It was a wonderful place. The style, the staff, the menu—it ticked all the boxes.

Even though Kazuhiko was disappointed he wouldn't get to write a piece to popularize this unique café, he was smiling. The dessert had worked like magic. Or maybe the magic was Mika's? In either case, Kazuhiko was happy to be under this spell. He took another sip of his coffee. It went remarkably well with the Japanese sweet.

Chapter 1

Sweetening the Twilight Years

Ding-a-ling! The moment Yoshiharu Doi stepped inside the café, he clicked his tongue in dismay, realizing he'd made a mistake. He'd worked in Kinshicho for many years but hadn't known about this café until today. He'd been so surprised when he'd seen it that he'd walked in without thinking...but it turned out not to be the sort of place for a fifty-something like him.

The interior was stylish, but what stood out to him the most was that the only people he could initially see were young girls. To him, they were mere children. There were low tables on a tatami floor, and a very young girl—a customer or the owner's daughter—was sitting there with a board game in front of her. Beside her was another girl in a high school uniform Yoshiharu didn't recognize. That one was looking bored.

As for the staff, there was a waitress in her late twenties who looked like a retired hostess-bar girl. In the kitchen was a Black man, presumably the owner.

The only other man on the premises was a youngster sitting at the counter, eating a monaka.

Yoshiharu felt out of place. He guessed smoking wasn't allowed there. It didn't look like the sort of café where you could light up a cigarette. It was more like a trendy place where young people went to take cool selfies to post online. You could tell by the way the staff were dressed in kimonos. The owner wore his properly, but the waitress tied hers loosely, wearing it rather sloppily. It was one of those “concept cafés,” no doubt.

Yoshiharu let out the tiniest of sighs, not wanting the staff to notice. He cursed himself for rashly going into a place that was clearly meant for a different crowd. What should he do? He wanted to leave, but that would be awkward. He supposed he could have a quick cup of tea before retreating. He

scanned the café for a place to sit. There were counter seats, low tables on the tatami floor, and Western-style tables on the second floor... He didn't want to sit near the little girl in the tatami area, but going upstairs with so many open spots downstairs would seem unnatural...which left the counter seats. He sat down on the opposite end from the waitress, who remained rudely seated despite there being customers in the café.

"Is it your first time here? Mizuki, stop slacking and bring the gentleman a menu," the owner spoke firmly.

The waitress, Mizuki, reluctantly got off her chair.

"I can take over, Boss."

Another waitress appeared from the back dressed in a blue kimono. She wore her long black hair in two ponytails. She seemed to be high school age, but unlike Mizuki, she had put on her kimono properly. She looked elegant, her back straight as a pole, and while her eyes were serious, they only added to her refined bearing. She'd undoubtedly be a great beauty in ten or so more years. For now, she was still only a child.

The girl brought him a menu, which Yoshiharu intended to give only a cursory glance, but the content surprised him. The dessert section listed parfaits, but it primarily had traditional Japanese sweets. To Yoshiharu, that was a big plus. The problem was choosing something to drink. Despite offering Japanese desserts, the café seemed to not have any tea on the menu. What it did have was all sorts of coffee. Was this what they called one of those fusion cuisine venues? How bizarre. Cafés were supposed to sell coffee and cake, even if they had a Japanese aesthetic and served their fare on Japanese tableware. But maybe it was just as well that this café was different. It wouldn't feel right to order tea without anything to go with it, but coffee was perfectly fine to have on its own.

"Er... I'll just have a black coffee."

"Certainly. Would you like anything else?"

"No, that's all."

"One black coffee. Right away, sir."

The black-haired waitress had a clear, pretty voice to match her looks. Yoshiharu couldn't help thinking that if she'd only been born earlier, or if he were younger, he would've tried chatting her up.

The waitress went away, and the bell rang, announcing a customer coming in—a middle-aged tough guy, the sort Yoshiharu would have expected to see on the south side, not here in this quiet corner of Kinshicho. The man casually greeted the staff, called over the little girl (whose name was Kurumi), and sat down at one of the tables with a board game out. He was acting like a regular.

To Yoshiharu's mounting surprise, more and more people started coming in. There was an elderly man, a woman with an infant, a terribly tired-looking middle-aged woman carrying a tablet under her arm, a middle schooler in a uniform not commonly seen in these parts... This motley crew headed to the tables prepared by Kurumi like it was a familiar routine.

The owner set a cup of coffee in front of Yoshiharu.

"One black coffee for you, sir... It's going to be a bit livelier than usual today. My apologies."

"Oh, it doesn't bother me... I have to say, this café isn't what I expected."

The other customer sitting at the counter, eating monaka, laughed in a friendly manner.

"I know exactly what you mean," he said. "It looks like an exclusive, stylish place for those in the know, but it's a whole different story once you go inside! It's a vibrant, welcoming space. Eclectic in the best possible way."

Meanwhile, more customers of various ages were coming in. The café was filling up. There was a couple, a man by himself like Yoshiharu who was drinking coffee while perusing a horse racing newspaper—not something you saw much these days—and teenagers taking photos of their food with their smartphones. Perhaps that was what the café was usually like, and Yoshiharu had just happened to come in at a rare quiet moment.

The high school girl who'd been hanging out by the low tables turned out to be a waitress too. Once it had gotten busy, she'd quickly changed into a kimono, and was now bustling between the tables.

Yoshiharu noticed that his earlier sense of not belonging had faded away. The customer who had been eating monaka earlier, who'd left when the other customers had started pouring in, was right about the café. It was a friendly space where everyone was welcome. The customers drinking coffee, enjoying desserts, playing board games in the corner, the waitresses weaving in and out among them—they were all smiling, having a good time. Yoshiharu reflected upon his initial unfavorable opinion of the place and found it unjustified—it was a wonderful café with equally wonderful customers. But what about him? He gazed down at his reflection inside his almost-empty coffee cup. People used to tell him he resembled Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, but his face had rounded recently, the features had lost their sharpness, so any resemblance to the famous writer was long gone. It wasn't only because he'd put on weight, though—he was already two decades older than Akutagawa was when he'd died. He was getting on in years, and he felt he looked older than he was. Much older than three years ago, when he'd retired. He was surprised by how much he had aged in such a short time.

The weariness in his bones was adding more years to his age, he supposed, which was odd when you thought about it. He wasn't working anymore, yet every day, he woke up tired. It put him in a gloomy mood, and he no longer smiled. All that added up, making him seem like an old man.

He'd been excited about early retirement, looking forward to having the freedom to spend his days how he wanted to, but the reality was different. He'd go for "walks," which were just aimless strolls through the town; he'd kill time watching shows on TV that he had no interest in and drink alcohol to try to speed up the passage of time until, finally, yet another unnecessarily long day was over.

Back when he was working, when he was young, did he glow like these café girls? Not realizing he was living the best part of his life, was he single-mindedly devoting himself to whatever cause? He couldn't tell. He'd forgotten what it was like. Maybe he used to have that same spark. Maybe he never did. In any case, he was sure that the rest of his life would be dull, without as much as a hint of dazzling joy.

Chisato was running. In present-day Japan, youngsters didn't have many reasons to run in the city—it was usually because they were late for something. Several factors contributed to Chisato leaving the house late that day.

Her bangs were being unruly that morning...

She had to search in panic for a matching set of bra and underwear...

A customer had gifted her delicious rice from Niigata, so instead of having a slice of toast for breakfast, she cooked that rice to have with grilled mackerel...

The night before, she finally got her hands on a Blu-ray of *Dynamite Police 2*, the sequel to a popular silly Hollywood action flick released fifteen years after the first movie. Of course, watching it was a top priority.

And of course, watching the sequel made her want to rewatch the first movie, so she did that too...

It was impossible to blame a single event for her tardiness. As bad luck would have it, they all combined, creating a situation in which lateness was inevitable, and Chisato was merely a victim of circumstance—or so she told herself.

She could now see Café LycoReco, built out of the way in a quiet residential area. It was her workplace, which she loved very much.

Chisato energetically opened the café door and strode in.

"The long-awaited Chisato has arrived. Yay!" she announced.

"'Yay' my butt. Thought you weren't coming."

While Chisato wasn't expecting a standing ovation, cheers, bouquets, and confetti (which would've been nice), she thought she'd be greeted with something nicer than a snarky comment from Mizuki, who was scuttling between customers.

Surprised, Chisato looked around. The café was packed. Mizuki was going from one customer to another like a busy bee, helped by Takina and even Kurumi. Her hands full, Mizuki was very clearly annoyed at Chisato. Takina shot Chisato a cold stare while Kurumi looked at her, silently pleading for help.

“Ha-ha... Sorry I’m late!”

“Hurry up and get changed, Chisato,” Mika said without looking, busy making a coffee.

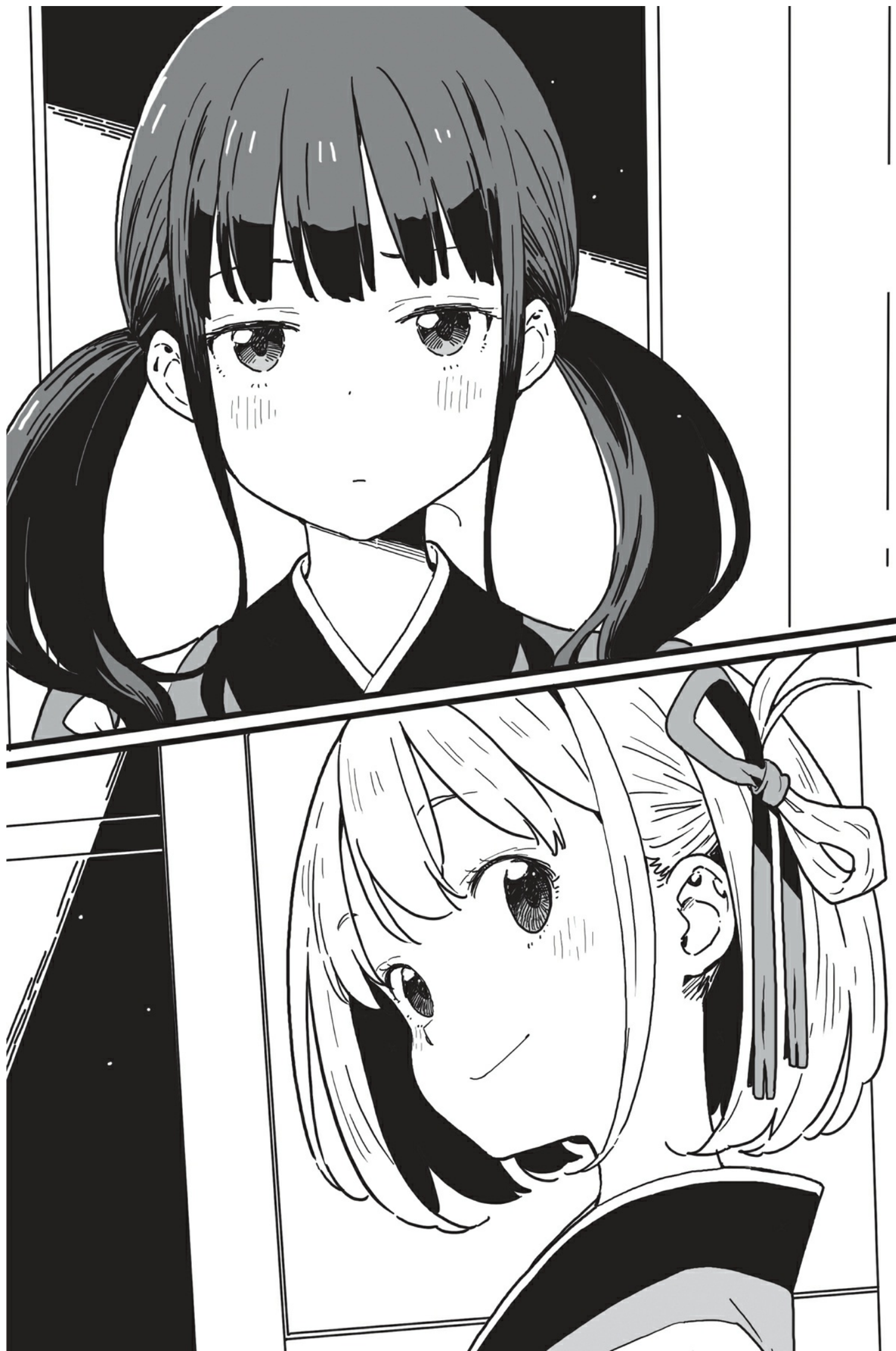
Usually, he’d tell her off for not using the rear door, but he was too busy.

“Sure!”

Chisato headed to the staff room at the back, greeting customers as she walked. The clientele was of all ages—from Kana, who was in a uniform identifying her as a middle schooler, to Mr. Gotou, who was nearing retirement. Chisato greeted them all in the same strong, cheerful voice. She saw them all as her wonderful customers, no matter their age.

Mr. Doi, who had started coming in not so long ago, was at his usual counter seat. Chisato said hi to him, too. He looked up to reply to her, as gloomy as always. After the brief exchange, he hung his head again, as if peering at his reflection in his coffee cup.

As soon as Chisato entered the staff room to change into her work clothes, she heard a loud crash and a clatter from the café floor, followed by cries and laughter. Chisato giggled, guessing Kurumi had dropped something. The chaos amused her.



She'd begun taking off her red First Lycoris uniform when Takina walked in looking cross. Her kimono was drenched in coffee.

"No way. It was you who had an accident?"

"No. Kurumi tripped over her feet. I tried to help and became collateral damage."

Takina briskly took the kimono off and began putting on a clean one.

"By the way, Chisato, did you see that Mr. Doi is back again?"

"Good, good! He's turning into a regular."

Takina shot a sideways glance at Chisato, who was tying her robe.

"He's always sitting at the counter looking dejected, like he's enduring something painful, drinking the same black coffee. He's never ordered anything else. Any idea why he's like that?"

"Didn't Mizuki say something about that? He made boatloads of money and retired early."

Mizuki had once tried to chat him up, attracted to money like a bee to honey, but the older man had completely ignored her.

"Maybe he's brooding over what to do with all that money."

"I don't know... Somehow I don't think that's the case..." Takina said quietly, her expression clouding as she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"No...?"

Adjusting her sash, Chisato looked quizzically at Takina.

"Chisato! Takina! How long can it take to change?! I need you here now!"

"Sorry, coming!" Chisato shouted back to Mizuki. "I'll go help her," she added to Takina.

She left the staff room with a vague feeling that something had been left unsaid.

Mika raised his eyebrows.

“Takina is being strange?”

After they closed the café for the day, Chisato finally confessed to him what had been bugging her recently. Takina had left early that day to go to a medical checkup, giving Chisato a rare chance to talk to Mika without Takina there.

Mika stopped doing the dishes and came over to the counter. Chisato was sitting on the other side of it.

“In what way is she being strange?”

“She’s always been strange,” interjected Mizuki.

There was still work to do tidying up, but Mizuki had already gotten a bottle of booze for herself. Kurumi, who was lying on the tatami floor, watching something on her laptop, nodded in agreement.

Mika half-smiled.

“I think you’d struggle to find a Lycoris who wasn’t at least a bit strange. I can only imagine one who could pass for a perfectly ordinary girl. She comes here sometimes... Sakura Otome, that’s her name.”

Having been a Lycoris instructor in the past, Mika probably had a good idea of what he was talking about.

“Oh, come on, I don’t mean it that way. She vaguely mentioned something to me the other day... Um... I don’t remember exactly what she said, though. It was that day I was late for work.”

“When I stumbled and spilled coffee on her?” asked Kurumi.

“Yeah!”

Mizuki took a big sip of the clear liquid from her glass.

“So, anyway, what was it Takina told you?” she asked.

“She seems to be thinking about Mr. Doi a lot.”

The atmosphere in the café changed, as if someone had flipped a switch. Everyone other than Chisato tensed up. Mizuki, glass in hand, and Kurumi quickly moved to sit next to Chisato at the counter. They brought their faces

closer and started spinning their theories in hushed voices.

“Is it the money, do you think?”

“Nah, Takina’s not a gold digger.”

“Takina’s been thinking about him, huh..?.” Mika joined in. “That’s a surprise. Not to be rude, of course. Well... The heart knows no master.”

“Guys, sorry, I should’ve been clearer. She’s not *into* him. She’s just worried about the guy because he’s always looking so depressed.”

“In this day and age, it’s pretty much the norm for men to look depressed.”

“We have other moody customers, like that writer, Yoneoka.”

The writer Kurumi named was a man in his forties who was somehow making ends meet, but his life seemed to be a precarious balancing act. Seven out of ten times, he was in good spirits when visiting the café, but the rest of the time, he’d appear in the morning terribly frazzled and spend the entire day typing away on his laptop in desperation. When Chisato learned of a superstitious belief that cafés where writers liked to do their work quickly went out of business, Mr. Yoneoka’s presence caused the staff quite a lot of anxiety, but that was another story. Besides, at the time, Takina seemed unperturbed, adopting the “just let him be” stance.

“If it’s not money, it could be the age. Takina’s strike zone could be men in their fifties,” suggested Mizuki.

Mika rubbed his chin.

“Now that you mention it, we don’t have many regular customers that age... Mr. Gotou is past sixty. Mr. Yamadera is about forty-five.”

“Hey, hold on, are you telling me people can simply fall in love with someone because they’re a specific age?”

“They do, and they can go to hell! There are way too many shitty men who won’t even consider you for marriage if you’re past twenty-five! Just ask any matchmaking agency! They’ll tell you! Screw those guys!”

Chisato shrank away, realizing she had accidentally triggered Mizuki.

Mika folded his arms.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” he said. “People don’t fall in love just because someone fits their type—they become interested, not immediately lovesick. And sometimes your true love turns out to be someone completely different from your type.”

“Hmm... So, you still think love is the reason Takina’s been acting differently? Oh well. Let me see what I can find on this man.”

Kurumi sat down on the floor and started quickly typing on her laptop. Chisato peered at the screen, curious to see how Kurumi would get the data on Mr. Doi, but she couldn’t make much sense of the strings of commands and numbers.

“There we go. Yoshiharu Doi, fifty-five years old. He lives in an apartment block in Sumida. Never married. Used to own a few restaurants, but he sold them and retired three years ago. What else...? From what I can see in his records, he suddenly came into big money. From stocks, maybe? His current real estate assets are valued at about a hundred million yen, and he still has some money in stocks, too.”

Mizuki scowled at the hacker.

“You check people’s personal information the way normal people look up the weather...”

Kurumi smiled smugly in response.

“Honest taxpayers leave a long paper trail, which helps. Hmm... Nothing to write home about on his criminal record.”

Mizuki glanced at Kurumi’s screen and frowned. Just like Chisato earlier, she had no idea what she was looking at.

“Nothing to write home about isn’t the same as nothing at all. What crimes did he commit?”

“Oh, just parking violations and a few instances of speeding. He’s a Goody Two-shoes.”

Chisato had given up on trying to decipher the code on Kurumi’s screen and

was staring at the ceiling with her arms crossed.

“So... He’s retired and rich with a clean past. Sounds like he should have no worries in life, so why’s he always so glum? Teach, did he tell you anything?”

“He never really spoke about himself to me, no. But, you know, some things come with age...”

“He’s only fifty-five! That’s not old! He’s young enough to go on a grand adventure and save a world or two! Right, Mizuki?”

“...Why are you asking me?”

“She probably thinks you’re around that age,” Kurumi quipped.

She picked up her laptop and started running away, with the angry Mizuki shouting after her. Chisato and Mika were left alone.

“Oh dear,” Mika sighed. “Chisato, you’re very young, so you wouldn’t know, but as you age, the doors of possibility begin to shut on you. It’s a very real feeling, like a curtain slowly but inexorably falling on the stage that is your life. And you can’t do anything about it.”

“Sorry, I don’t get it...”

“You become conscious of not being able to do as many things as young people can, of losing potential. It gets quite pronounced from about the age of thirty.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Mr. Doi is fifty-five, right? So, going by the average life expectancy, he’s still got twenty more years to live! And since he’s retired, he can get enough sleep and has time for exercise, so with a healthy lifestyle, he can expect to live even longer! With this much time, he can achieve anything!”

Mika looked at Chisato with patient sympathy and a hint of wistfulness.

“It’s almost painful to hear you casually equating twenty years to a teenager and twenty years to someone in their fifties... I do like your way of thinking—I do—but it stems from your being so young—”

“You opened this café ten years ago, right, Teach? At first, you sucked at it, but now you make great coffee that draws in the crowds. Which proves you can do anything, no matter your age!”

Chisato's earnestness made Mika smile softly.

"Well, you got me there. You're right that you can still do new things when you're older, but trust me, there are fewer and fewer of those chances with every passing day."

Chisato made a face. She understood what Mika was saying, but she didn't agree with him.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You'll understand when you're... When you're a bit older. Maybe," Mika finished without conviction.

Chisato pointed her fingers like a gun, aiming at him. She smiled and said cockily, "Looking forward to growing old."

Mika held his gaze on Chisato for a bit longer, then closed his eyes, imagining what she might be like in the future.

"Are you, now? I do think it's a wonderful thing, growing old. Most people want to live to an old age, but they don't really think of aging as a good thing. Usually, all people see are the downsides."

"But some people only get cooler as they age! Like you, Teach. I like how you look now way more than you used to."

Mika laughed and rested his eyes back on Chisato. She liked the way he looked at her. In the past, he'd often look at her as if not really seeing her. As if he was looking through her, eyes unfocused. But that changed, and he now really saw her. Chisato believed it was due to the amount of time they'd known each other. One more reason to think of the passage of time as something positive and wonderful.

"Thanks... But you see, Chisato, in Mr. Doi's case, it's more than just age—the fact he doesn't have anything to keep him occupied plays a major part too, I think. For some people, work is their entire life. It's what keeps them going and they don't know what to do with themselves when they suddenly have free time on their hands. Younger people can generally find something else they want to do or, as is often the case, are forced to look for another job for financial reasons, but Mr. Doi is no longer under that sort of pressure."

“What you’re saying is he’s bored, and because of his age, he can’t find anything to do?”

“You’re getting confused, Chisato,” said Kurumi, who’d just come out of the staff room rubbing her head—Mizuki had probably gotten rough with her.

“Confused how?”

“Why are you even talking about Doi’s quality of life? The issue you wanted to discuss was Takina acting unlike herself.”

“That’s true, but...but at the same time...his funky mood is the reason why Takina’s worried, so... Oh, I got it! As caring Café LycoReco staff, we should take it upon ourselves to cheer up our gloomy regulars!”

“That’s not our job.”

“Hmmgh, somehow that doesn’t feel right!”

Chisato slumped despondently over the short girl.

“Don’t delude yourself. You can’t change someone’s life for the better through coffee and desserts like it’s a food manga. Don’t worry about something that’s not your business. Anyway, this was originally about Takina, wasn’t it?”

“Takina! That’s right!”

Revived, Chisato sprang to her feet and banged her fist on the counter.

“Could Takina’s broody mood be caused by feelings of love toward Mr. Doi? What do you think, Watson?”

Tired of Chisato’s antics, Mika went back into the kitchen to resume washing the dishes.

“It’s a possibility, but let’s not assume. She might simply be concerned about him.”

“But would you be concerned about someone you didn’t like? All the evidence points to love, Watson!”

She received no response, as nobody found her Sherlock Holmes act remotely funny. But Chisato continued, undeterred, “From tomorrow on, I’d like

everyone to support Takina on her love journey!”

Again, nobody said anything. They could tell that Chisato had made up her mind and wouldn't listen to anyone trying to convince her she might be wrong... and they also couldn't help entertaining a slight suspicion that she might be right.

It was exceedingly rare for Takina to show interest in other human beings besides highly talented individuals she wanted to learn from or challenging enemies who stood in her way. This was what made love seem like a strangely plausible explanation, and if Takina were in love, it wouldn't bother anyone. If anything, they would be willing to see her faint feelings blossom. What would be stopping them from lending a helpful hand...?

“Focus on your own love life instead of meddling in someone else's,” Mizuki called from the back.

The others exchanged looks, suddenly remembering that they were all single. Deep down, even Chisato had to agree that Mizuki had a point there.

3

Mr. Doi arrived at the café when it was still empty, not long before lunchtime. He went to sit at his usual corner seat at the counter, and Mika started preparing him a standard black coffee right away. Mr. Doi had been coming in regularly, always ordering the same thing, so Mika had stopped asking him if he wanted “the usual,” confident of the answer.

But even as the customer and the barista settled into that predictable routine, Takina walked over to Mr. Doi to take his order, clutching a tray to her chest. Chisato was watching her like a hawk.

“What would you like today, sir?”

“Hello, Takina. One black coffee... And here it is. Thank you.”

Mr. Doi's lips stretched into a slight smile as Mika set a cup of coffee before him. Chisato wondered if she only imagined Takina looking disappointed as she walked away.

“Takina, you know, you don't have to ask him what he wants every time. It's

always the same anyway.”

“I’m just doing my job,” Takina replied coldly.

She had to be in love with the man after all, right? Chisato was pretty sure of it. No, she was absolutely sure. There was no other explanation!

Then it occurred to Chisato that Mika was getting in the way. The only time Mr. Doi smiled was at Mika when the barista gave him his coffee.

Mika was an attractive man. It was a fact—in the span of ten years since the café had opened its doors, countless customers had crushed on him, and he’d even had a stalker at one point.

If Mika was obstructing this new love story...they’d have to lure Mr. Doi out of the café.

“Say, Takina, weren’t you going shopping today?”

“I will be. Why do you ask?”

“I’m coming along!”

“...Since when?”

“I’m in charge of restocking! Anyway! Let’s go and get changed!”

“What? Now? Hold on, Chisato. I was supposed to go after my shift...”

But Chisato was already pushing Takina to the staff room.

Once they were back in their Lycoris uniforms, Chisato dragged Takina over to Mr. Doi. She beamed at the man staring morosely at his coffee, as was his habit.

“Mr. Doi! How are you today?!”

Mr. Doi looked up, smiling fleetingly at Chisato. It was an empty smile forced for the sake of politeness. He really seemed deeply depressed.

“It’s a day like any other day, I suppose...”

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“No, not yet...”

“That’s not good, is it? Delicious food is one of life’s pleasures!”

“At my age, it doesn’t make much of a difference if I skip lunch...”

“If it doesn’t make a difference, then let’s go have lunch together!”

Chisato heard Takina groan behind her.

“So, that’s what this is all about? Trying to scrounge a free meal off poor Mr. Doi?”

“No, I’d never!”

Why didn’t Takina catch on to how Chisato was doing her a favor? She couldn’t explain her motivations to Takina’s face, though. That’d be too crude, like dumping sauce on soba noodles instead of dipping them a little at a time, even though it was all the same once it got to your stomach.

“Ha-ha-ha! You girls are hungry?”

Mika looked like he was about to intervene, but Chisato didn’t even need to convey the complex message of *This is the first step of my Supporting Takina’s Love Plan!* with the power of her gaze alone because Mr. Doi took their side right away.

“It’s all right. I don’t mind... What would you like to eat, girls?”

“Yay! Hmm... Takina, what are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t need any—”

“No, you know what! Mr. Doi should choose! What do you like, Mr. Doi?”

“Me? For lunch, I wouldn’t mind...sushi?”

“Sounds good! That reminds me, the sushi chef from the restaurant outside the station often comes here!”

“Really? Well, shall we order from there? I’ll pay.”

Nooo! The whole point was to get Mr. Doi out of the café and steer things toward him going on a date with Takina. Getting food delivered to their workplace would thwart Chisato’s plan. She couldn’t allow it!

“Er... Maybe not this time! Actually, there’s this other great sushi place I know! They do amazing inarizushi! Do you like inari? Yeah? Terrific! There are a few sushi restaurants that do nice inarizushi, but Ajigin in Narihira, near the old

radio tower, is totally worth checking out!”

“Ah, yes, I know it. Their salty-sweet, moist abura-age is really good.”

Oh no! Come to think of it, Mr. Doi was a local, so it was only natural he’d know the neighborhood well. He probably knew all the good restaurants in Asakusa, too.

Chisato wanted to take him somewhere he hadn’t been to before. Helping Takina hook up with him was the main objective, but Chisato also wanted to treat the sad man to a new experience that he’d then associate with Takina, and that’d cement their bright future together. She’d be feeding two birds with one scone.

There was a particular place that should fit the bill!

“Oh, and do you know Hana Inari, near the Kameido Tenjin shrine?”

“The name sounds familiar... Hmm... I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“Ah,” Takina piped up. “Their inarizushi is a notch above the others. I had their inari with pickled plum, and I can recommend it—”

“Yeah, that’s a winner! What do you say, Mr. Doi? Shall we go with Takina Inoue’s top recommendation, Hana Inari?!”

“Yes, why not? Do they deliver?”

“Unfortunately, no! So let’s just go there!”

“You said it’s near the Tenjin shrine? Isn’t that a bit far? Should we take the bus or go by train?”

“It’s faster to walk from here!”

“Let’s call a taxi, then.”

“No, let’s walk! It’s good exercise, and the weather’s nice, perfect for a lovely walk together! All right! Mr. Doi, Takina! Let’s go!”

“Now? But... Wait, I haven’t finished my coffee...”

“Are you serious, Chisato? We’re supposed to be working...”

“It’s fine, Takina! Let’s go, go! Oh, you can finish your coffee first, Mr. Doi!”

After Mr. Doi hurriedly finished his drink, Chisato dragged him and Takina out, and they headed to Kameido.

4

Looking unamused, Mika and Mizuki watched the two waitresses leave with the customer in tow.

“They just, like, abandoned their post.”

“If it gets busy, we can ask Risu for help.”

“It’s irresponsible. That’s what it is.”

“Well, it’s quiet for now. We’ll manage.”

“And Mr. Doi? Chisato ruined his quiet coffee time.”

“It didn’t seem like he minded, and it might be a welcome change of scenery for him. It’s never too late to try something new.”

“Then, what about Takina?”

“Who knows?”

Was that what Takina wanted? Perhaps even Takina couldn’t answer that question. She might not yet have understood her feelings. When it came to first loves, things could take time.

Mika smiled to himself, remembering certain embarrassing events from his own distant youth.

5

“So, how did your sushi date with Mr. Doi go?” Kurumi asked, somehow sounding interested and disinterested at the same time.

The café had closed for the day. Chisato had brought inarizushi to share, which Kurumi, sitting on the raised tatami floor, was taking out of the box.

Chisato pressed her finger to her lips, silencing Kurumi. After their lunch outing, she and Takina had returned to the café to finish their shift, and Takina was in the staff room, getting changed. She might be able to hear them talking.

Chisato stepped onto the raised floor and sat at a low table.

“Not bad, I guess? We talked a lot. Hana Inari is takeout only, so we had our food while walking around the shrine, which I think was nice. Oh, by the way, these are the best, in my opinion. Try one. Here. Pickled-plum flavor.”

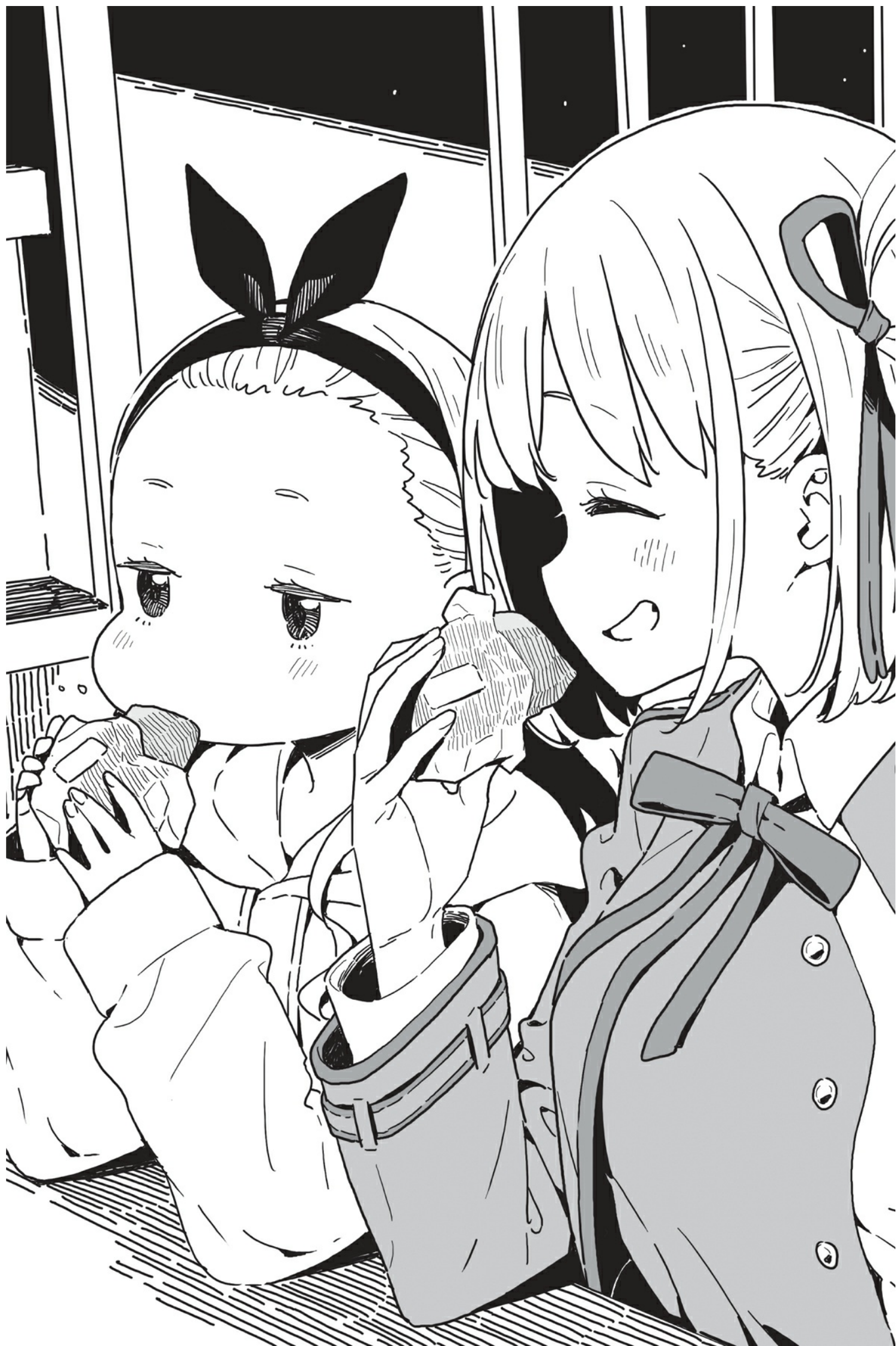
Chisato got an inarizushi out of the box to show Kurumi.

“Is that why there are so many of them?”

There were sixteen inarizushi in the box, in pickled-plum, yuzu, sesame, ginger, and prune flavors. With seven pickled-plum ones, it was easy to see that those were Chisato’s favorite. She’d bought that many because some were for Mika. He had gone to a neighborhood-association meeting, but Chisato was going to leave him some of the sushi to have after coming back.

Each piece of sushi was individually wrapped. You could eat it like a little burger, holding it in your hands without getting them dirty, not needing to bring out plates and chopsticks.

Chisato unwrapped the one she was holding and bit into it. The subtly sweet, deep-fried tofu skin surrounding the rice wasn’t too moist, and the wrapper around it helped the sushi keep its shape. The delicate sweet-and-sour flavor of the vinegared rice soon gave way to the refreshing kick from finely chopped, aromatic green shiso leaves before introducing the star of this show—the pickled plum, with its delightfully balanced sourness.



Neither of these bold flavors overwhelmed the others. Each of them was a gentle note in this refined composition.

It was the sort of inarizushi you could eat every day without getting tired of it. Chisato wished the sushi store weren't so far from Café LycoReco, but at the same time, she looked forward to the sushi even more because of it.

"Mmm! Tee-hee-hee!"

Chisato giggled happily, munching on her sushi. She couldn't tell why, but inarizushi brought her a special bliss she didn't experience when eating other sushi or rice balls. It made her feel fulfilled, and she couldn't help smiling.

"You were right. It is pretty good."

"Hey, why are you eating the prune one first when I told you the plum was the best?"

"I start with what I know."

Kurumi was so small, but it took her only three, no, four bites to finish the inari. She reached for a plum one next, took a bite, and grunted appreciatively before quickly chomping down on it again. Chisato knew without asking that Kurumi loved it, which made her happy.

Mizuki emerged from the staff room, having finished getting changed before Takina.

"So, about Mr. Doi. Impressions?"

"He liked the inari, saying the taste was nostalgic."

"I'm not asking if he liked the food. What was he like?"

Mizuki turned her head to make sure Takina wasn't coming out yet. They probably didn't have much time left to talk without her.

"He smiled a lot. He hadn't visited much of Kameido on foot before, so Takina told him about the local attractions... We had a good conversation going, never a dull moment."

"Kameido, though... What have they got there besides gyoza and offal restaurants?"

Chisato thought that Mizuki's biased opinion of the area proved she only ever went there looking for a place to drink. Every part of town had its unique, famous restaurants and cuisine. There was a lot more to Kameido besides the foods Mizuki had mentioned.

Mizuki sat down at the counter and reached toward Chisato with one hand. Chisato handed her an inarizushi.

"So, what's your verdict? Think they'll get together with a little helping nudge, maybe?"

"Detective Chisato's expert opinion is...yes!"

"Hold on," said Kurumi. "Shouldn't you first check with Takina to see if she really is interested in that man? Because I think you're making a mistake."

"What, no way! If you'd only seen how today—"

"Seen what?" asked Takina, coming out of the staff room in her Lycoris uniform.

Chisato froze for a moment.

"Seen how...how Mr. Doi was actually having fun today!"

"Ah, yes. He didn't look depressed for a change. He smiled and laughed... I'm glad he was in better spirits than usual."

A little smile appeared on Takina's face.

The other girls exchanged looks, having an unspoken conversation.

"See, she's into him!"

"Maybe you're right about her after all."

"What a piece of work, having the hots for older guys."

Takina was only smiling to herself, remembering the day, but a little smile from a person who typically hardly displayed any emotion, much less any sign of affection, seemed monumentally significant. When did she ever smile like that? Only when she was particularly pleased with the results of her work. In this case, she was evidently pleased that Mr. Doi had had a good time in her company.

Chisato beamed, happy that everything was pointing to her being correct.

“It would be nice if Mr. Doi came in tomorrow in a good mood like he was earlier! Right, Takina?”

“Yes... It would be nice.”

Takina excused herself and went home. As soon as she was out the door, Mizuki sat on the tatami floor, and the girls started quarreling about Takina and Mr. Doi again.

When Mika returned from the neighborhood-association meeting later that night, only one inarizushi was left for him, and he remembered that nobody had done the restocking that day.

6

Mr. Doi's thoughts turned to that unexpected walk to the sushi place the previous day. Somehow it made time flow faster, and he didn't need to drink in the evening to get himself to sleep. He felt confused, as if he hadn't quite woken up from a dream. He walked to Café LycoReco on uncertain feet, not sure if he could trust the ground.

Was it simply because his body had been unused to exercise for so long?

He entered the café, which was empty at that hour. He always chose a time when there were few or no other customers. The café didn't serve meals, so it emptied around lunchtime, and Mr. Doi could count on getting his favorite counter seat.

“Welcome.” The owner greeted him in his calm voice.

Mr. Doi sat down at the counter and was served a black coffee moments later. To him, it was a treasured ritual.

“I'm sorry about my waitress's behavior yesterday.”

“Oh, no, no. There is no need to apologize. We had a very enjoyable time. I haven't been walking much lately, so I'm feeling it a bit today. I really should exercise more...”

“What?! You don't exercise, Mr. Doi?! We need to do something about that!”

Mr. Doi turned and saw Chisato standing behind Takina, who was clutching a tray to her chest. Chisato had her hands on Takina's shoulders, peering at him from behind her.

"Takina, get ready! We're going out!"

"But...what about work...?"

"Work can wait! This is more urgent!"

Before the bewildered Mr. Doi could say anything, a new plan hatched in Chisato's head—the Getting More Exercise Project, which she automatically enrolled Mr. Doi in. He was given no choice but to join the girls for an energetic ten-kilometer walk along the Sumida River in his leather shoes. It made him reflect on how, at his age, he tired far more easily than younger people... Although, as he thought about it some more, he realized that even in his twenties, he never went for walks that long.

At the end of it, he was ragged with exhaustion and had blisters on his feet. He thought the girls might also get blisters, since they left the café wearing loafers, but they seemed perfectly fine and not tired after the fast walk. Apparently, their shoes were specially made and designed to be comfortable no matter the situation, despite the heels. Chisato joked that they were perfect even for a gunfight, like in Hollywood movies. Back when Mr. Doi was a youngster, school uniforms weren't remotely that comfortable, he thought.

The next morning, Mr. Doi woke up still feeling tired after that walk. For the next two days, he suffered from delayed-onset muscle soreness, and it took him three days in bed to recover.

7

One day, Mr. Doi noticed that his attitude toward Café LycoReco had changed, as he could never expect what he'd be made to do when he turned up there. The only thing that was certain was that he wouldn't be left alone with his coffee. The waitresses took him out for walks, sightseeing, exercise, meals, games, and movies.

He couldn't figure out why they were always asking him out, but knowing they were waiting for him every day, he felt obliged to go to the café. It had

been years since he'd felt like someone had been looking forward to seeing him, so despite his tiredness, he'd head to the café filled with anticipation, feeling a bit younger again.

That day, he left for the café as usual, packing a change of comfortable clothes, a towel, and sneakers into his bag so that he'd be ready for anything. He took a change of clothes with him instead of simply dressing casually, because the first time he did that, the girls took him to see a movie and then they had a meal at a fancy restaurant on the top floor of a posh hotel.

Yet, despite taking those extra measures to not look out of place, he still did sometimes. The other day, the girls took him to a sushi bar, where you wouldn't normally wear a suit, but sportswear was just as jarring.

Didn't Chisato and Takina face a similar problem when picking different destinations every day? Actually, Mr. Doi discovered they didn't. Somehow their school uniforms fit in no matter the surroundings. Well, maybe it would stand out in a pub at night, but during the day, the girls could be eating lunch in a pub, wearing their uniforms, and they wouldn't look out of place at all. The uniforms were smart enough for exclusive restaurants with strict dress codes, but they weren't so formal they'd look unnatural when the girls were running around, playing.

A school uniform was at once formal and everyday wear. Magically, it seemed designed to fit any situation. It instantly identified its wearer as young, inviting trust and disarming suspicion.

Mr. Doi felt a little envious that there was no such uniform for older men, but then he thought that maybe there was—a suit. With a suit, he could go to most places... No, that wasn't true. Nobody wore a suit, leather shoes, and a tie to a sports ground. But if you wore a suit to a pub or bar at night, it did lend you a look of sophistication no other outfit could match...

Mr. Doi pushed those meandering thoughts aside and opened the door to the café.

“Welcome. Today you can enjoy your coffee in peace.”

The owner explained that Chisato and Takina had another job that day. Maybe they'd gone out to deliver coffee beans, or maybe Mika meant they

were working on some school assignment. In any case, that day, Mr. Doi would have no random activity. He was simultaneously mildly relieved and disappointed.

“The other girls aren’t in either?”

“They also have other work to do.”

It was odd not to see Mizuki and Kurumi lazing around. A regular customer seemed to be helping out the owner.

Mr. Doi used to think it was a rather bizarre café, but it had grown on him, and he’d become familiar with the staff. He felt at home at LycoReco and didn’t mind helping out a little from time to time, either. He honestly enjoyed it. It had been a long time since he’d become a part of a new community.

When he was working, his community was made up of the people at his workplace, but from around the time he turned thirty, he found it difficult to form new connections, and the number of old friends was always only decreasing. His world was shrinking, and he feared that when he’d be the only one left in it, that would be the end of Yoshiharu Doi.

Yet his world had stopped shrinking and was starting to expand again.

“It must be my age... What I used to take for granted a long time ago feels fresh again,” Mr. Doi said quietly after sitting down.

“For example?” Mika asked without turning away from his work.

Mr. Doi told him he meant trying new things and joining new social circles.

“Chisato would say age should never stop you.”

“She is so young.”

“Yes...but she isn’t wrong. Age brings inertia...but while it becomes more difficult to get started with anything, once you do get going, even though your pace might be slow, you may find there’s no stopping you.”

“That getting-started part can seem an impossible task.”

“I won’t deny it. That’s why sometimes we need a gentle push from someone else. Once you overcome that first hurdle, it gets surprisingly easy.”

“...And that’s what those girls have been doing, giving me the push I needed?”

“Indeed, and today the push will come from me... Enjoy.”

Mika set in front of Mr. Doi a plate with four sweet rice balls, two black with a pink one and a green one between them. It was the *ohagi* set. Next, he set down a cup of coffee.

Mr. Doi had just finished his first cup, so he was glad to get another, but the dessert was most unexpected, and he couldn’t imagine eating *ohagi* without tea.

“Boss, I’ve been meaning to confess...I don’t think coffee and Japanese desserts make for a good pairing.”

Mika had probably heard that many times. He smiled patiently as if dealing with a child.

“From the left, they’re with smooth azuki paste, sakura, matcha, and chunky azuki paste. I would recommend you start with one of the azuki-paste *ohagi*. Please do try them.”

At this point, Mr. Doi felt he couldn’t refuse the dessert. Following Mika’s recommendation, he decided to try the first *ohagi* from the left. Instead of a fork, he’d been given a bamboo skewer, but Mr. Doi didn’t like fiddly things, and since a small towel for wiping hands had been provided alongside the food, he simply picked up the rice ball with his hand.

As this was a set of four, the *ohagi* were smaller than usual. Mr. Doi took a bite. The azuki bean paste felt sticky on his lips and teeth. The rice inside retained its grainy texture, having been soaked long enough to be soft but not so long it’d turn mushy. This texture was pleasant and hearty. *Ohagi* were easier to eat than the chewy mochi. He liked how the azuki paste mixed with the rice in his mouth.

The azuki paste was gently sweetened, and the glutinous rice had a subtle sweetness, compounded by umami. Mr. Doi tasted just a hint of salt, which was carefully added to bring out the flavors of the other ingredients.

For a man whose usual indulgence was drinking, desserts didn’t normally have much appeal, but this was a welcome exception.

“This is nice. It’s been a while since I had *ohagi*. It goes down easily.”

Mika gestured to the coffee. Mr. Doi smiled with one side of his mouth, thinking that the barista was being untypically authoritative that day, but reached for the cup and took a sip... He was in for a surprise.

“What...? It does go well with the *ohagi*?”

The coffee’s flavor didn’t clash with the gentle sweetness of the Japanese dessert. The light bitterness cleansed the palate of the sweet aftertaste in a most agreeable way.

“This isn’t the coffee I normally order, is it?”

“It’s an American coffee made with lightly roasted Mandheling coffee beans.”

“Ah, I suppose it works because weak coffee has this clean, light taste. I would have never guessed.”

“Standard black coffee would work just as well, but four *ohagi*, small as they are, are quite filling, and with regular-strength coffee, they might feel too heavy on the stomach. With this dessert, we normally serve weak coffee.”

“I see. But how come your coffee makes such a good match for Japanese desserts? It’s like magic.”

“Well, there are some countries where people believe quality coffee to be magical, but the explanation is far simpler. There are of course Japanese desserts that the flavor of coffee would overpower, but that isn’t true when it comes to azuki-based ones. Why? Because, like coffee, they’re made using beans.”

Coffee beans and azuki beans... Mr. Doi wasn’t sure if it was true that any azuki-based dessert would go well with coffee, but Mika’s explanation did sound convincing.

A feeling he’d missed—curiosity—propelled him to have another bite of the *ohagi* and take a sip of coffee with a little bit of the *ohagi* still in his mouth. It was excellent, and he would have said so if it weren’t for the fact it was rude to speak with food in your mouth.

As the coffee cleansed his palate, he was immediately ready for another bite.

Still, he also noticed that the bitter flavor attuned him more to the subtle sweetness of the mochi rice, enriching it.

“Hm... Not bad. I think I quite like it. Yes, I do like it.”

That’s how Mr. Doi felt about the smooth azuki paste *ohagi*, but what about the other ones, which weren’t made with beans? The matcha and sakura *ohagi*?

Finishing the smooth azuki dessert all too quickly, Mr. Doi reached for another—the sakura *ohagi*.

“Oh-ho.”

What a treat. Mr. Doi thought that there was no way any coffee, weak or otherwise, wouldn’t overpower the delicate flavor of sweet white bean paste with salt-preserved sakura petals, but that wasn’t the case at all. The sophisticated sweetness of the white bean paste did fade into the background when the bitterness of coffee overlapped it. Still, the aroma of the slightly salty sakura petals shone through. It was almost like drinking sakura-flavored coffee. Mr. Doi couldn’t help smiling, delighted by the fragrance even more than the flavor.

Next was the matcha *ohagi*, which was made with white bean paste mixed with matcha. The bitterness of coffee would normally compete with the bitterness of green tea, but the latter was so mellow that the rivalry turned into cooperation, toning down the sweetness of the dessert for a refreshingly light finish. Now, this was a pairing attuned to the refined taste buds of adults.

Lastly, there was the chunky azuki paste *ohagi*, and this, too, was a winner.

After the last bite, Mr. Doi had a surprising thought. The *ohagi* set was so well designed, with azuki-flavored *ohagi* on each side so that whether you started from left or right, you would learn of the excellent compatibility between azuki and coffee. Reassured, you would try the other flavors with more courage and finish your adventure with the comforting azuki again. People like himself, who doubted the pairing of coffee with traditional Japanese desserts, would find themselves converted.

Mr. Doi smiled at Mika, his eyes admitting defeat. Mika smiled back confidently.

“You surprised me there,” said Mr. Doi. “Thanks to you, I’ve made a new discovery today... Everything is worth a try, I suppose.”

“No matter your age... Or rather, the older we are, the more preconceptions we harbor, which makes us all the more susceptible to surprise as we make discoveries. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“It is wonderful when you’re served a discovery on a, well, not a silver platter, but at least a plate.”

The men laughed.

“Here’s a perspective for you to think about. You don’t have that much life left. There is a precious short span of time still available to you.”

Mr. Doi frowned, confused. Mika’s words sounded cruel, but his eyes were kind.

“The time you have is running out as we speak... Will you watch it trickle away until none is left?”

It was a surprising thing to hear from a barista. Nobody liked to think they might not have long to live, and Mr. Doi considered it a given that you wouldn’t remind anyone of it. The polite things to say were “You’re still young” and “You can still achieve so much.” That was the norm. Why was Mika saying the opposite?

“That way of thinking can be depressing...”

“Of course. Some people would give up on trying to do anything, thinking there is no point. But are you one of them? Are you the type to sit and wait for death as the clock ticks the seconds away?”

Mr. Doi fell silent, thinking about it. It occurred to him that that might have been his attitude not so long ago, but that had changed lately...

He’d already lived through most of his lifespan. It was a depressing thought, but it also galvanized him to try to do as much as he could while he could. It made him restless, prompting him to move, to do. Chisato and Takina had opened his eyes to the possibilities he thought had no longer been there for him.

Age did close many doors, but if you stopped sitting around and went looking, you'd find new ones you never knew were there.

Now that Mr. Doi had discovered that the café's premise of pairing Japanese desserts with coffee was sound, he would need to devote himself to exploring all the combinations. Given his limited time, sitting at the counter and gazing despondently into a cup of black coffee was no longer an option.

To think his shrunken world could expand again so quickly...

"Well, you read me like a book."

Mika smiled assuredly.

He was a fine man. Mr. Doi thought that if he were a woman, he'd have fallen in love with the barista's knowing smile.

"This outlook is actually Chisato's, although she might not be aware of it. She lives fiercely, treasuring every minute, every second, as if it might be her last."

"Really? A young girl like her?"

"Life has already taught her a hard lesson."

If she made sure every moment of her existence counted from a young age, her life would be as densely packed as several average lifespans. How extraordinary!

"And that's how she turned out the way she is, never giving others a moment of peace."

Mr. Doi laughed, thinking Chisato's excessive energy wasn't bad.

"Life's only too short..."

Lost in thought, he gazed out the window. The sun was shining brightly. It was summer already, and soon the days would get oppressively hot... How many more summers would he experience? How many times would he go to the beach or the mountains? How much time would he spend happily drinking with his friends? It was depressing to think he didn't have many days left, but there was no use dwelling on it as the clock kept ticking. He had to find something to occupy himself with to not waste the remainder of his life.

The last time he'd gone away somewhere in the summer had been five years ago. What about this year? Where should he go? Or maybe he should buy a plane ticket—no, a train ticket—on the spur of the moment and simply enjoy the act of traveling? Whatever he chose to do, he was sure he would appreciate it. Of course he would—no more giving up on anything that took effort. Life was short, and he'd lived through most of his already. He mustn't put things off until "some other time" because there might not be "some other time."

Time was a precious commodity, and as he had less and less of it with each passing day, he had to be greedy. Inaction was a waste of his life.

He had to get moving right away...

"Well, you made me realize I've been making a mistake sitting here moping over my coffee."

"And what will you do instead from now on?"

"I think I'd like to start with trying all the desserts you have on the menu."

"Excellent. You may find many of them quite filling, so I would suggest spreading it out over several days at the least. And don't forget healthy exercise."

"But of course."

As the men laughed, the doorbell rang. *Ding-a-ling!*

"Hello! We're baaack!" Chisato called cheerfully.

She and Takina sped into the café. The regulars greeted them as if they were triumphant warriors returning from a battle, not merely cute waitresses.

"Teach, we've got an order from Niigata. I'll need a bag of our best beans! An extra-large bag! Oh, Mr. Doi... You're here... Er... Takina!"

Takina seemed either sleepy or tired. Chisato pushed her toward Mr. Doi. As she approached him, she noticed the empty plate before him and gasped.

"Mr. Doi... You had a dessert?"

"How did you...? Ah. Yes, I had *ohagi*."

"By the way," Mika spoke up, "Takina helped prepare the *ohagi* for today."

Mr. Doi was a little surprised, having assumed that Mika had prepared everything by himself. The café served a variety of beverages and desserts, though, so he should have guessed that Mika needed some help.

To think the little *ohagi* had been made by the girl, shaped by her hands with fingers so slender and delicate, they looked as if anything weighing more than a pen would be too much for them...

“Did you...like the *ohagi*?”

“Yes, they were delicious. Took me by surprise. I was just telling the boss that I’ll have to try all the other desserts as well.”

When he said that, a beautiful smile appeared on Takina’s usually impassive face. She blushed a little, but the reddish tinge was easy to see on her pale cheeks. It was the prettiest smile that only young girls possessed.

“I’m so happy to hear that! The other desserts are just as delicious, I promise... I will gladly serve you something different on your next visit!”

Mr. Doi told her he wasn’t leaving yet, and they all laughed—Takina a little shyly.

8

All set, thought Chisato. Takina was on track to hook up with Mr. Doi. Or maybe Mr. Doi was on track to hook up with Takina. Either way, the result would be the same.

“What is it, Chisato? You’re looking pleased with yourself!”

Chisato inwardly scolded herself for staring with a smug grin. She laughed the question off and went to the staff room with Takina to get changed. She was feeling buoyant.

The job she and Takina were working on throughout last night proved harder than expected. Chisato had been planning to finish it quickly and see a movie with Takina, but when they were done, she was so tired she thought she might have to cancel that... Fortunately, she got to nap in Mizuki’s car on the way to the café and felt much better. She had the energy to last until evening. The fact that her plan to help Takina hook up with Mr. Doi was going exceedingly well

energized her even more.

When she removed the Lycoris uniform, Chisato felt the remnants of tension from the nighttime action leave her. A mental switch had been flicked, and she couldn't stop grinning.

"I'll refill the ammo first."

How typical of Takina to always prioritize Lycoris work.

They'd done a lot of shooting last night. The satchels where they kept their guns and ammunition felt lighter than they should have.

A Lycoris should always be ready for dispatch. While it was okay not to clean their work equipment after returning from a mission, ammunition should constantly be restocked... That was the theory, but Chisato would sometimes put that off until later. She didn't want to feel like she was constantly on duty, and besides, she was confident that as long as she had at least one full magazine, she'd manage in an emergency.

As Takina disappeared into the basement, which housed the firing range and the arsenal, Mizuki came in. Kurumi came out of the wardrobe from which she'd been remotely supporting the Lycoris.

"What's this smug face for?"

"Huh? Me, smug? I'm just happy about...stuff!"

Mizuki and Kurumi grunted appreciatively, immediately picking up on what Chisato was happy about.

"Takina and Mr. Doi are a thing, then?"

"Yup! The romance flag has been triggered! It's in the bag, girls."

"Okay. I don't really know anything about romance. What happens next?"

Chisato stopped, half-naked. She crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side, thinking. She also didn't know what was supposed to happen next.

In dating sims, once you raised your friendship level past a certain point with another character, they'd ask you out and confess their love.

Finding nothing better to say, Chisato told the others about this game

mechanic.

“Then you may have a problem,” Kurumi said, cocking her head. “No matter how friendly you get with someone, if they don’t see you as a potential partner, you end up in the friend zone, no?”

“Younger men are easier. You just need to get them horny. But Mr. Doi isn’t young anymore. He’s not so simple. At his age, men are more discerning,” Mizuki added.

This worried Chisato. She’d triggered all the flags to unlock this love route, but it wasn’t enough? Were her efforts for nothing?!

“Hold on, Mizuki. Let’s look at it from another angle. So, the objective is to make Mr. Doi see Takina as someone datable, and once that’s cleared, we’re good?”

“Possibly?”

“Okay! Leave it to me!”

Chisato hurriedly finished changing into her kimono apron and went to the café floor. Everyone’s eyes were drawn to her, but she didn’t care. A beautiful girl was always bound to attract attention. At that moment, she was focused on looking for Mr. Doi. Where was he? *Ah, there.* He was just leaving. She saw him open the door and walk out. She couldn’t lose him!

Chisato ran out of the café, calling Mr. Doi’s name.

“What is the matter, Chisato? Oh, did I forget something?”

“No, you didn’t, but... I need to tell you something.”

Chisato took a deep breath, and then she started explaining. She told him why she and Takina had been asking him to accompany them to all sorts of places lately—it was because Takina had feelings for him...

Maybe she was crossing the line, but the whole plan would be for nothing if she didn’t. So, it had to be done. She’d already put so much work into it, after all, and more importantly, it was worth it if it made Takina happy. She deserved happiness, and their relationship would be a fresh start for the depressed Mr. Doi. It would be a win-win. Chisato loved that phrase.

What could be better than an outcome that made everyone happy at no cost? Her friend's happiness would radiate to everyone around her. It would be so wonderful. And all it would take was one last push from Chisato!

"Now you know, Mr. Doi... Takina is so in love with you... It would be amazing if you'd consider getting together with her!"

Oh, wait... She didn't need to tell Mr. Doi that Takina was in love with him. She only had to make him think of her as a potential girlfriend... Oh well! What was the harm?

Chisato realized that she'd handled it with the finesse of a bull in a china shop, but she didn't like to dwell on things that had gone a little wrong—it was a waste of time. You couldn't change the past, no matter how much you regretted it. "Don't worry, and move on" was her motto.

"This... This is very unexpected for me... Life can be stranger than fiction... Are you sure Takina...thinks about me this way?"

"Yes, totally! Trust me on that! Wait... You haven't noticed?"

When Mr. Doi opened his mouth to confirm that he'd had no idea, something occurred to him, and he fell silent, thinking back to Takina's attitude toward him now that he'd been given this new context.

She did always come to take his order, even though it seemed like a given he'd only ask for a black coffee as usual. And when they were out together, Takina tried to cheer him up through both words and actions.

Mr. Doi shared his thoughts with Chisato, who palmed her fist triumphantly.

"Yes! This is exactly how a girl in love behaves! A shy girl, desperately trying to convey how much you mean to her! So you did notice! This is great. I can feel love in the air!"

Takina's love had a high chance of success. No, it was already being reciprocated. Chisato could feel it. She'd played the part of Cupid to perfection.

She could already picture the wedding, with Lycoris members singing "Ladybug Samba"... She'd get that arranged, too—there was nothing Chisato couldn't do!

Mizuki sighed, rolling her eyes after Chisato dashed out of the staff room.

“There are always girls like that, who just have to stick their noses where they don’t belong. It’s girls like this who ruin relationships, I tell you. They’re just trying to be a matchmaker for their dear friend, but, oops, the dude falls in love with them instead, for example.”

“You sound salty. Speaking from firsthand experience?”

Mizuki huffed at Kurumi, refusing to answer the question.

“Was there a problem? I heard running,” said Takina, returning from the basement.

Mizuki and Kurumi just shrugged.

“Chisato’s just being Chisato. Don’t worry about it,” said Kurumi.

“A direct question, Takina: How do you feel about Mr. Doi?”

Kurumi shot Mizuki a warning look. Mizuki had a disgruntled expression on her face. So much for telling everyone she didn’t care about other people’s love affairs since she had her own love life to sort out... But maybe it wasn’t that she *cared*—she was just annoyed by the whole thing with Takina. If everything went well and Takina got to be with the man she liked, it’d probably be a thorn in Mizuki’s side. While Mizuki’s greatest fear was being an unhappy single lady forever, her biggest peeve was witnessing others becoming happy couples. Or at least that was how Kurumi understood her.

“Mr. Doi...? I’m glad he’s no longer so depressed.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. Do you personally like him or not?”

“Oh, I hate him.”

“...What?”

Both Kurumi and Mizuki froze, entirely taken by surprise. They’d assumed Takina was into the man, and Mizuki was trying to get her to finally admit it. The possibility that Takina didn’t like Mr. Doi hadn’t even occurred to her.

“You...hate him? Hold on, Takina... But... You’ve been paying so much

attention to him. No?”

“Yes, because he’s been a problem, ordering one coffee and sitting in the café for hours, taking up a seat even when it’s busy. He’s the lowest-value customer we have, and having a depressed man hanging out in our café has a negative effect on the atmosphere.”

An uncomfortable silence followed.

“So, you’ve been giving him special attention to cheer him up and raise his value as a customer...?”

“Yes. Why else would I be giving him any of my time?”

“You didn’t...see him as a man...?”

Takina stared at Mizuki with a complete lack of comprehension.

“He is a man, isn’t he? Or does he identify as a woman?”

Mizuki shook her head in frustration. Kurumi had a new question for Takina, though.

“Wait, Takina, I’m confused. We have other customers like Mr. Doi. That writer, for example, Mr. Yoneoka. He also takes up a counter seat for hours, depressed over this or that. You don’t give him a second look...”

“He says his brain cannot function without sugar, so he always orders desserts, and he drinks a lot of espressos to cope with lack of sleep. He’s one of our top customers if we go by the revenue he provides us.”

Kurumi suddenly remembered that Café LycoReco’s chaos-bringer Chisato had rushed out after Mr. Doi, and she felt beads of cold sweat on her back.

“So you really don’t like Mr. Doi?”

“I could barely stand him...but I’m glad he’s finally started ordering desserts. I won’t hate him being here anymore.”

“But why were you hanging out with him if you didn’t like him?”

“Chisato forced me to... Do you know why?”

“Er... What had she been thinking, that Chisato...?” Kurumi replied vaguely.

Takina looked from Kurumi to Mizuki and, deciding there was nothing to be learned there, lost interest in the conversation. She changed into her work kimono, tied her long black hair into two ponytails, and left the staff room.

“...What do we do?” asked Mizuki with a sour look.

Both she and Kurumi knew it was probably too late to do anything anyway. Chisato acted before thinking. Chisato got this idea in her head that Takina was in love with a customer. Chisato came up with the plan to get Takina and Mr. Doi to spend time together and start dating. Chisato did this, Chisato did that—she single-handedly created this troublesome situation.

“Why should we do anything? It’s all Chisato’s fault” was Kurumi’s conclusion.

She pigeonholed this case in a deep corner of her mind and withdrew to the second-floor closet like a squirrel returning to its nest.

“Right, it’s none of our business,” muttered Mizuki. “But I swear I knew from the start it would end like this.”

Kurumi shut the door to the closet behind her, mentally agreeing with Mizuki.

10

What was he to make of it? Mr. Doi had been profoundly shaken by the news from Chisato. At fifty-five, he was conscious of nearing the dusk of his life, and never would he have imagined something like this was possible.

While he didn’t know Takina Inoue’s exact age, he reckoned she was a little past her mid-teens. She was a beautiful girl with long black hair. She would blossom into a beautiful woman in the future, but for now she was a tightly closed bud.

A fifty-five-year-old surely had no business taking an interest in a girl so young.

But then he remembered novels about samurai that he loved to read as a schoolboy. The stories often featured master swordsmen much older than Mr. Doi falling in love with young girls and either marrying them or keeping them as mistresses.

Indeed, Mr. Doi thought having a girlfriend with a significant age gap was not

absurd. In the Japan of old, it was perfectly normal and not at all rare for older men to be together with young girls. People would raise eyebrows at men with wives older than them, but nobody questioned it if it were the other way around.

If there was nothing improper about him having a young girlfriend, he should consider it. It would be rude of him not to treat Takina seriously because of her young age, and of course, he wouldn't want to hurt her.

Or was his reasoning guided by self-interest? Did that mean...he was interested in the girl?

Mr. Doi tentatively imagined what his future might be like if he did start a relationship with the girl.

She was so much younger, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She was living in a world unlike his own, but learning about each other's worlds might be interesting. They might have nothing in common, but that meant they would have so much to discover about each other. They would never be short of topics to talk about.

They would benefit more than if they were dating their peers. Mr. Doi's obvious benefits aside, Takina would get to enjoy dates more varied and luxurious than anything a teenage boyfriend could offer her.

Mr. Doi had more money than he could spend before his death, so he might as well spend it on Takina.

Yes, that idea appealed to him. They wouldn't even need to be together until the very end. She had so much longer to live than him. He would be her friend, watching over her as she grew up into a fine lady, and then he'd disappear, leaving behind only cherished memories... Now, that would be stylish.

This felt right to him. If you cared about another person, you wished for their happiness whether you were together or not.

As soon as he thought that, Mr. Doi remembered what Mika had told him earlier. He didn't have that long to live. He couldn't afford to procrastinate.

And so, Mr. Doi jumped to action. He registered with a local gym and then went to an aesthetician. The walks with Chisato and Takina made him acutely

aware that his old body wasn't as fit anymore, but with time and effort, he could make improvements and make up for the rest with enthusiasm. He had money, and he was unafraid to use it.

Three weeks later...

Summer was in full swing. The buzzing of cicadas mixed with the ringing of Café LycoReco's doorbell as Mr. Doi walked in for the first time after a long absence. Mika and the regulars who recognized him looked at him with mild surprise. He walked over to the counter and took his usual seat.

The regulars' reactions weren't unexpected. Not only because it'd been a while since Mr. Doi had been to the café but also because of the change in his appearance. Strikingly, he seemed younger. He'd gained some musculature while losing the flabby bits, and his skin had a healthy sheen thanks to better skin care. However, Mr. Doi hadn't gone overboard trying to make himself look young. It would be foolish to discard the appeal of a mature man at the ripe age of fifty-five. He was wearing a casual but neat, well-tailored outfit.

Tap-tap-tap went Takina's sandals as she approached Mr. Doi, carrying a tray.

"It's good to see you back, Mr. Doi. May I take your order?" she asked in her usual neutral tone.

A lukewarm "It's good to see you back" didn't seem proportional to a three-week absence from a customer who used to come in daily, but Mr. Doi liked Takina's stoicism. He quickly glanced around. Chisato, who was serving someone else, caught his eye and winked at him encouragingly.

Mr. Doi took the menu from Takina and began reading it.

"Hmm, what to go for...? The three-colored dango, definitely, and a coffee that goes well with it. And ice cream—on a day like this, you just have to have ice cream. And also... Well, this isn't part of my order. I wanted to ask you, Takina, if you'd like to eat after work. Just you and me?"

Mr. Doi flashed his coolest smile.

In order to preserve everyone's dignity, we will not disclose what happened next.

Intro 2

The factory had been abandoned long ago, but that's not to say it wasn't in use. One corner of its underground warehouse had even been nicknamed "the lounge." It was the only part of the warehouse with an internet signal, and somebody had placed a sofa there, so it naturally became the designated spot for lounging. Apart from that, with no windows, no space to prep food, and a massive stash of drugs, it didn't look like a place that'd fall into the "lounge" category.

A man called Bulldog was sitting on the sofa in that corner, drinking his favorite beverage—coffee—except that this was coffee in a can. Canned coffee had been a cultural shock for him when he'd arrived in Japan. They didn't sell that sort of stuff in his home country. Or maybe they did, but he'd never seen it there himself. His boss had given him canned coffee in a big box when he'd said his crew could not work without coffee.

Bulldog didn't consider himself picky when it came to food or drink, but he'd been aghast when he'd first seen canned coffee. It had an obnoxious metallic taste, and it was obvious that artificial flavoring was used to disguise just how weak the brew was. He hated it, but he still drank it because that was the only coffee he had.

While his home country was piss-poor, it was a coffee-growing region, and you could get good-quality beans cheaply. That fact alone made Bulldog think fondly of his homeland.

When he was young, his sick, bedridden grandmother told him that delicious coffee worked like magic. It could both energize and calm people... It had another effect that was not worth mentioning, but all in all, it made people happy.

The canned coffee did not make Bulldog happy. But whether all canned coffee was shit or just this particular kind his boss gave him, he didn't know.

“Hmph.”

This was the only coffee he had, so he had to drink it, which he did quietly, thinking nostalgically about his homeland. People like him had to commit crimes to survive there, so Bulldog did just that. But eventually, his notoriety forced him to flee across the border, and since then, he’d lived in many different countries. Eventually, he wound up in a corner of Asia—Japan. And there, he plied a trade as disgraceful as the coffee he was drinking.

Apart from the coffee, though, the country wasn’t a bad place to live. The food was good, and you could find restaurants serving all sorts of cuisine, from Chinese to food from his homeland, which surprised him. Some places served the food he’d grown up with but poshed up. The people here didn’t use many spices, so everything had a Japanese twist. Maybe the chefs had to cut down on spices to cater to the locals. The ingredients were very fresh, so you could get away with less spice. Bulldog liked his food to have a fiery kick, but that was good too.

“It’s a good country.”

Bulldog’s employer was talking to someone on his PC. They were talking in English, but Bulldog’s boss was Asian. He looked decidedly Asian, and that was what he called himself, too. It was the nickname he went by. He had Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, plus a bit of Singaporean, Mongolian, and Scandinavian blood, and he was born on a smuggler’s boat. Assigning him a single nationality was impossible, which didn’t bother him. Asian was proud of his mixed ethnicity. All of East Eurasia was his homeland.

Bulldog admired his boss’s unshakeable self-confidence.

“It’s a good country. The demand for drugs is bottomless. It was like the market was waiting for us with arms wide open. Nobody’s defending the turf. In any other place, newcomers like us would have to fight to the death with the local gangs to carve out a piece of the market, but here? Not a single bullet fired in our direction!”

Bulldog finished his disgusting coffee and, having nothing to do, looked over at his boss’s screen. Asian was talking to a Japanese man, probably one of the yakuza, the local mafia. Or maybe it was just a gangster from a smaller

organization. On second thought, it was perhaps the latter, based on how the twenty-something-year-old looked like a softy with black hair partially dyed blond.

Bulldog's group had gotten in a massive shipment from abroad the other day, which they'd be selling to multiple customers. That gangster was probably their next buyer.

He could overhear that the gangster's group had unique distribution routes. A small-profits, quick-returns sort of outfit, but given what they were selling, there was still plenty of money to be made. The gangster said something about herbal tea, which Bulldog didn't understand. His field of expertise was limited to guns, killing, and coffee.

Bulldog knew he didn't need to understand everything, though. The particulars of this deal didn't matter. He and his crew would do what they always did: protect their employer and the goods. If everything went smoothly, they'd be paid for just being there. Easy.

"Don't get too comfortable, Asian," said the man on the screen. "Think about why there's room for latecomers to move in here. I asked some clients about it, and they said larger groups always get wiped out somehow."

"By some rival?"

"Nobody knows who's behind it, but it doesn't look like it's a rival group based on how supply immediately drops. But it ain't the cops, either—no official records of them seizing goods, no arrests. No dead bodies ever left on the scene, either. The dealers just disappear, leaving only clueless clients who hang around the trade spots like zombies. It's really weird. Basically an urban legend at this point."

"Are you telling me we have to watch out for superhero vigilantes or something?"

Asian laughed, and the man he was talking to joined in.

"You never know, could be. Doesn't hurt to keep your eyes open..."

Suddenly, the man on the screen froze, and a moment later, the call got cut off. Maybe the connection died.

Bulldog picked up another can of coffee, but just as he was to pull the tab, he stopped, the hair on the back of his neck rising. Something was coming. His instinct, honed through countless brushes with death, told him that.

But who was it? A special police unit? The army? No. Their presence felt oppressive, like a cold metal club about to crush your balls. Whoever was coming was bad news.

If it wasn't the police or the army, then who? Bulldog was drawing a blank. The enemy was unlike anything he'd faced before.

He put the coffee can on the floor and reached for his "work clothes"—full-body ballistic armor with a neck guard that looked like a giant dog collar. That was where his nickname came from. Lastly, he put on a steel mask.

"What the hell? The connection dropped... Huh? What are you doing, Bulldog?"

"Getting ready for work, Boss. You got a gun for self-protection too, right? Is it loaded? Better check now."

While he was talking to his boss, Bulldog got his own gun, which looked like an AK-47 with a bipod attached—an RPK.

"Come on, man, no need to panic just because the internet cut out. Maybe it was a problem on the other end. Anyway—"

The lights went out.

Here they come, thought Bulldog.

Asian hurriedly grabbed a walkie-talkie to call his men outside the factory building. The blackout wouldn't affect the walkie-talkie. But a strained expression appeared on Asian's face as he stood there with his ear pressed to the transceiver. Bulldog knew what it meant. It was time to work. He heard gunshots upstairs.

"They don't know who's attacking, but they've taken out lots of our guys up there already... You got this, Bulldog, right?"

"No worries, Boss. You brought us to Japan to deal with this situation for you, and we will. It's going to be fine... But how come they couldn't tell you who's

attacking? Must've seen them, right?"

Asian screwed up his face.

"They did see them... Said they were girls."

"What?"

"Cute girls, apparently."

Bulldog wondered if his boss was high.

Chapter 2

Gunfight, Coffee, and Chisato's Red Flowers

Takina and Chisato were standing outside the criminals' hideout—which was pretty much just the usual haunt for a gang of hoodlums—kitted out with the standard Lycoris equipment.

Their uniforms were crafted using cutting-edge Japanese manufacturing techniques, providing protection against knives and bullets, as well as making them invisible to infrared cameras. The loafers that went with the uniform were semi-custom and were a perfect fit. Reinforced with metal inserts, they were comfortable enough to run in. Meanwhile, the combat satchels were equipped with hidden holsters, and inside, they carried preloaded magazines, special grenades, a knife, paracord, a first aid kit, and a few other tools. The bag also had a rather flashy mechanism for emergencies. Every inch was crammed with functionality.

That was what Takina was geared with, anyway. On the other hand, Chisato had some equipment DA Lycoris wouldn't be given—her gun and ammo weren't standard-issue.

The gun was modeled after the M1911 .45 ACP pistol, also known as the Colt Government, but the compensator attached to it was unlike anything Takina had ever seen. Perhaps it was a custom, one-off type.

Compensators usually had apertures for redirecting gases upward when firing, which reduced muzzle climb. That, in turn, improved shooting accuracy and allowed the shooter to have a shorter interval between shots. Additionally, it made it possible to fire with the muzzle pressed against the target. When shooting a semiautomatic gun without such a device, whenever the muzzle was pressed into a soft target such as a human body, there was a high risk of the slide not operating properly, which prevented shooting. A compensator fixed to

the frame or the barrel would keep the slide and barrel in battery, ensuring smooth operation.

What was different about Chisato's compensator was that it had spikes on it, making it clear, even when seen from a distance, that this was a unique design adapted for special use. It wasn't a device for improving accuracy but for striking with. Takina had witnessed Chisato using her gun as a blunt weapon to smash a car window. It had made her cringe to see a gun used like that, but later, she'd learned a particular fact that explained the rationale behind it.

Chisato smiled, reloading her gun.

"They noticed us sooner than expected."

Takina looked around for targets.

"The enemy is better trained than we initially thought, so that's why."

They'd made it inside the factory. Kurumi and Mizuki had done a remote reconnaissance for them, finding the locations of the enemies and the drugs in the basement. To avoid getting pincered, Takina and Chisato planned to stealthily take out the goons, starting from outside and gradually working their way down to the factory basement.

They took out the guards outside and on the roof without getting spotted, but when they had almost made it down to the first floor, they exchanged fire with the enemy, making a lot of noise. They had to give up on stealth. Kurumi immediately cut off the factory from the internet, and soon after, shut down its electricity.

"The dealers must have their own hired guns, more experienced than the buyers' goons. Their behavior and equipment are different... Don't let down your guard, Chisato."

It was late night, before dawn. When the lights went out, the darkness confused the enemies, facilitating Takina and Chisato's takeover of the factory's upper levels. Only the basement was left.

The girls proceeded down the first-floor corridor without being challenged. At that point, all of the enemies on that level should have been neutralized, but they were cautious just in case.

Chisato heard Kurumi on her headset.

“You can’t use the cargo elevator. It got stuck between floors when the electricity went down, with a load of goons inside. Head for the stairs instead.”

Chisato giggled, imagining the elevator full of thugs stuck there in pitch dark.

“The stairway’s over there?” asked Takina.

“Yes,” Kurumi confirmed.

The girls had memorized the facility layout before going in, but it was always best to double-check.

“Keep going straight, and you’ll find the stairwell behind the steel door, but there’ll almost certainly be—”

“Someone waiting on the other side to ambush us, I know!”

“Yes, Chisato. I can’t check the situation on the lower level right now, so I want to send in a drone after you open that door. I can bank on it getting destroyed, but if it reveals the enemy positions, it’s worth it.”

“No, it’s not. Besides, we’ve been getting complaints about going over budget anyway.”

“DA is paying all the expenses this time, remember? So, don’t worry. It’ll reduce the risk—”

“I meant, it’s a waste of time.”

Not waiting for Kurumi’s reply, Chisato reached into the bag on her back and took out a stun grenade. She pulled out the safety pin and let go of the fly-off lever.

Takina’s eyes widened when she saw it. Releasing the lever was what you did immediately before throwing, but Chisato was running with the grenade still in her hand. She had mere seconds until detonation. Just as Takina thought the grenade was about to explode, Chisato opened the metal door a few centimeters, lobbed the grenade in, and shut the door again. They could see a flash of light in the narrow gap between the door and the doorframe, followed by a boom and men shrieking. That was Chisato’s cue to open the door again and run inside. Takina followed after her, ready to fire anytime.

The stairwell had a small landing between two narrow flights of concrete stairs. The men who'd been waiting in ambush had nowhere to hide from the blinding flash and the deafening bang of the stun grenade.

Chisato ran down, shooting the men crawling on the steps as she passed them by. In contrast to Takina, she wasn't using a silencer. Each shot of her .45 pistol was loud, echoing in the staircase. Some men were still briefly groaning. Red flowers were flashing in the gloom of the staircase, illuminated only by a dim emergency light. Spider lilies blossomed on the enemy bodies.

Chisato kicked off the landing wall and spun in the air, changing her magazine. The empty one was still falling when Chisato had already landed on the lower flight of stairs. She fired her gun several more times. Red spider lilies bloomed left and right.

Takina chased after her. When she made it to the landing, she saw three men lying on the staircase below.

Then two men rushed into the stairwell from the lower level. They stared in shock as Chisato landed on one knee right in front of them. The battle-hardened men simply watched as the unassuming girl fired a few rounds at them. There was no time to adjust tactics based on whether the opponent was one of the goons or the experienced fighters, so Chisato was probably treating everyone as if they were the latter. Which meant she had likely emptied her magazine. And that made her vulnerable.

It was time for Takina to step in. She took aim...but before she fired, Chisato made her move. She stood up and smashed her gun with all her strength into the solar plexus of the man in front of her. He doubled over, knocked off his feet. Thankfully, he collapsed onto the ground before he had the chance to puke all over Chisato. Stepping over the man, she fished out another magazine from her bag. She was getting close to the second man. He was panicking but remembered the assault rifle he was holding and tried to take aim at Chisato. By the time he got his rifle in position, though, Chisato had nimbly slipped past the barrel and was well within arm's reach.

As the Japanese saying went, "Even a hunter cannot kill a bird that flies to him for refuge," but the reason the man couldn't harm Chisato wasn't a sudden

surge of compassion. His AK was unwieldy when the target was *this* close. Chisato's pistol wasn't, and she had already finished reloading. She prepared to shoot at extreme-close range by holding the gun with both hands directly in front of her chest, steadied herself, and fired. A red flower blossomed between them and the man staggered backward.

Chisato aimed her trusty gun at an angle, holding it in front of her face. She fired at the man's jaw, finishing him off.

Takina watched everything play out in astonishment. As usual, her gun was at the ready, but no enemies remained.

"Hey, Takina. You're getting faster every day!"

Chisato smiled at her partner, lowering her gun so that it pointed at the retching man she had hit earlier. She fired at the back of his neck and he stopped moving.

Chisato was a stickler for nonlethal methods, but neutralizing her opponents by *almost* killing them was perfectly acceptable in her book. There was no pity and no hesitation in her movements.

"You used to have real trouble catching up. Good progress! I'm proud of you!"

If this had been their first mission together, Chisato would have probably finished off everyone on the staircase and moved on to the basement before Takina had even gotten to the stairs. After many joint operations when Takina struggled to keep pace with Chisato, she did, in fact, get faster. Still... She was aware that she wasn't good enough yet. She didn't have sufficient experience and ability... Or maybe she was simply too ordinary.

There were three ranks among the Lycoris. The first-rank Lycoris were true beasts when it came to combat. Takina's partner and senior at DA, Fuki Harukawa, was a first-rank Lycoris. She used her short stature to an advantage. Staying low to the ground, she could run extremely fast, easily outspeeding big, bulky men. Her superpower-like speed was also effective on smaller targets like her fellow Lycoris. Second-rank or lower Lycoris couldn't hope to win against Fuki. After frustrating training sessions, they spitefully called her "Cockroach" behind her back.

Yet even Fuki was no match for Chisato. Chisato was in a league of her own.

“Slow down, Chisato. If you’d made even a single mistake back there…”

“If something goes wrong, I’ve got you to back me up!”

Chisato chuckled as if they weren’t in the middle of a mission. Takina couldn’t tell if Chisato’s laid-back attitude was a mark of superiority or if she simply couldn’t switch off the part of her that was always messing around.

Takina let out a little sigh.

“You should just use standard ammo. One shot from your .45 would be enough to finish a target. You wouldn’t have to waste so many rounds.”

Chisato had to fight in her own unique way because she adamantly refused to use the regular ammunition that all other Lycoris were supplied with. Chisato used nonlethal rounds only—rubber bullets. Hers were a special make, utilizing red powdered rubber. They weren’t made with natural rubber but a synthetic kind—essentially plastic—like what was used to make erasers, for example, mixed with powdered metal for increased weight and impact force. They fell into the category of frangible plastic rounds. On impact, the bullets fractured into tiny pieces, which looked like blood gushing out of the target or like a red spider lily flower when seen from the side.

Chisato never shot from a distance because of her unique ammunition. Rubber bullets were lighter than metal ones, and their power dropped dramatically the farther they had to travel. You couldn’t hope for decent accuracy with them unless you were up close. These disadvantages were even more pronounced given Chisato’s bullets were the frangible type.

Chisato needed to get as close as possible to fight on the same level as armed, armored opponents. At extreme close range, her pistol packed a punch, rubber bullets or not. While other Lycoris employed the Weaver stance or Isosceles stance, Chisato had developed her own shooting style based on the close-range-oriented CAR system.

The biggest difference was her extended position—shooting with the gun held with both hands in front of her face, aiming straight or at a slight angle. In the CAR system, you hold the gun so that the back of the hand that’s directly

holding the grip is pressed against your eye on the opposite side of the body—so, if your right hand's on the grip, it blocks your left eye—to allow for more accurate aiming with the unobstructed eye. Chisato didn't block either of her eyes, though. When Takina asked about it, Chisato said it worked well enough for her. Takina supposed that Chisato's adaptation was because, at super-close range, a slight improvement in accuracy didn't matter, and Chisato didn't want to lose her situational awareness even for a moment. Her style often involved jumping right in between enemies, so she had to know what was happening around her at all times.

But it could also have something to do with Chisato's left eye being dominant, unusual for a right-handed person. She probably didn't need to cover her right eye to aim well with the left. Takina hadn't seen her do it, but if Chisato switched between aiming with her right and left eye without covering them, that would count as textbook CAR.

"It's okay, I don't mind. I prefer nonlethal, so I'm cool with the slight inconvenience. My rubber bullets have their upsides, too!"

"I fail to see any."

"You'll understand someday!"

"Or you could just explain now."

"Don't like to give out spoilers."

Takina felt mildly annoyed.

"If you don't want to kill, that's fine, but you could still use normal ammo. You're skilled enough to disable an enemy without killing them."

"You can do that, Takina. Dividing tasks is what makes a duo like us effective! Anyway! Let's go, go!"

While chatting, Chisato attached a wireless communication device to the stairwell wall so that Kurumi could reach them.

"Why the hurry?"

"What a question from the logical, efficiency-oriented Takina! Hah, how love changes people! You want to be with your beloved Chisato as long as possible!"

“Incorrect.”

“D’aw!”

“Will you tell me why you’re in such a rush?”

“Because I want to wrap this up already and see a movie with you before our shift at LycoReco starts. The prequel to the zombie movie we saw with Mr. Doi the other day. The first movie is way better than the second!”

Takina was irritated that her suspicion was right.

“You guessed it was something like that, huh?”

“Yes. Please stop reading my mind. And if you knew that’s what I was thinking, why didn’t you say so outright...?”

“Enough chatting. Let’s go, Takina!”

Chisato had probably had enough of Takina’s persistence with that topic. She ran out of the stairwell. Takina let out a little sigh again and followed her into a dark corridor. After a turn, it continued in a long straight line. If there were enemies at the end, Chisato would be at a disadvantage due to the long range. Takina would have to take point.

“Whoa?!”

Chisato was about to turn around the corner, but she jumped right back.

“Something’s there!”

Something? Takina frowned suspiciously. She swapped positions with Chisato and momentarily peered around the corner into the long part of the L-shaped corridor. With the electricity cut off, it was dark, but the emergency lights were on, casting a dim glow. Takina made out a shape that could be a person at the far end, about thirty meters from them... Something was odd, though.

Takina knelt on one knee and peered round the corner again from a different height. She quickly withdrew. As she expected, the enemy fired at her with a rifle, maybe an AK chambered in 7.62. The shot chipped the wall slightly above where Takina had stuck out her head.

She understood why Chisato had said that “something” was there. There was

a person there, but they looked strangely...huge. Bulky like a bear and as tall as one standing on its hind legs. The strange foe wasn't taking cover behind anything—they stood confidently right in the middle of the corridor, which only added to the bizarre aura... The enemy looked so massive, Takina at first wondered if she'd judged the distance correctly.

"Kurumi, can you restore electricity only for the basement corridor?"

"You sure you want that? You'll be completely exposed."

"That probably won't make a difference anyway. Go ahead!"

Darkness usually gave the attacking side an edge but didn't offer much of an advantage when the enemy knew where you were and was already lying in wait. The girls didn't have night-vision goggles with them, but the enemy might. Takina thought that Chisato had made the right call.

When the lights turned back on a few seconds later, Chisato stuck out the top of her phone to quickly snap a photo of what was waiting for them around the corner. The photo confirmed Takina's initial impression.

The tall enemy was clad from head to heel in black body armor. Based on the ceiling height, he was almost two meters tall. Joints were usually the weak points you'd go for, but they too were covered with round cowls, leaving no gaps. The enemy's face was protected by a steel mask with only slits for the eyes. The neck was another part of the body that was hard to protect without compromising movement or obscuring field of vision, but this foe was wearing something like a giant dog collar with spikes around it as a guard. They were holding a squad automatic weapon at their side, an RPK with a 75-round drum magazine.

They were like a juggernaut. Guarding a metal door behind them, they made for an imposing sight.

"Bulldog," said Kurumi when she saw the photo.

"You know them?" Takina asked in all seriousness.

"Ha-ha," Chisato said to hint to her partner that it was a silly comment.

Although a famous hacker like Walnut (Kurumi) might have some weird

acquaintances...

“I’m not being funny. That’s his nickname. I remembered him since he looked so outrageous. He’s the leader of a small mercenary group known for his full-body ballistic armor. It’s Class III.”

“Class III?!”

Takina had raised her voice despite herself.

So much for Chisato’s rubber bullets. Takina was running 9mm Parabellum, full metal jacket cartridges. Her chosen ammunition was subsonic to maximize the effect of her suppressor, which meant it was also a heavier round with higher penetration potential. But her ammo was also useless. Class III armor could stop even 7.62 rifle rounds.

“Here in Japan, he must feel invincible.”

It was exceedingly rare for Japanese police to be using rifles. They didn’t need such weapons, often relying on nonlethal ammunition and perhaps grenades when the situation called for it.

Takina got thinking. Class III armor was tough but not unbreakable. They could double back, pick up the AKs the other enemies were using, and fire several rounds into the same spot... No, that wasn’t realistic. She hadn’t stopped by to check, but from what she could see, the foes’ weapons weren’t genuine Izhmash AKs but unlicensed copies. They also seemed old. Even if she were able to shoot with the precision required to open up a hole in the armor, in the time it took her to aim carefully, the enemy would riddle her with bullets.

“Chisato, let’s retreat,” she said. “We should regroup. We don’t stand a chance with our current equipment.”

It was a logical suggestion. To deal with that opponent, they would need a lot of explosives or antimaterial rifles.

Chisato stroked her cheek, humming to herself.

“He’s not moving, though, and I’m pretty sure he can tell we’re not geared to take him down.”

“That’s probably because the armor’s very heavy,” said Kurumi on the comms.

“Full-body armor like that must weigh tens of kilos... Maybe even a hundred. He wouldn’t want to move too much only to stupidly fall over. It’s impossible to move fast in that.”

“Just like I thought,” Chisato said to herself, taking a smoke grenade from her bag.

“Chisato... Are you going to do what I’m thinking...?”

“Ooh, you’re learning to read me... Cover me, Takina. I’m going in.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious! Don’t worry, it’s not a crazy plan. This is gonna be too easy.”

Takina knew there was no changing Chisato’s mind. She watched as her partner threw the smoke grenade past the bend in the corridor without even counting down or checking with Takina to see if she was ready.

There was a bang, and the other part of the corridor was filled with smoke, presumably. Takina wasn’t going to peek just to check. A few moments later, strands of smoke made it to where they were standing.

Smoke grenades were extremely effective when used indoors. By then, the other part of the corridor must have been completely filled with white smoke, reducing visibility to about a meter.

Bulldog started firing at irregular intervals to deter the girls from trying to get closer.

Takina thought Chisato would dash in soon after throwing the grenade, but her partner was standing still as if waiting for something.

Several seconds passed and nothing. Several more seconds...

The smoke cleared sooner than Takina expected. The ventilation system must have turned on when the electricity was restored.

“Not much longer now...”

Bulldog stopped shooting. Maybe the smoke had cleared and he could see again... No sooner had Takina thought that than Chisato stuck out the tip of her

gun behind the bend and fired toward Bulldog. Takina couldn't understand why she did that. She wasn't even aiming, so she was unlikely to hit Bulldog, and even if she did happen to hit him, her rubber bullet would be stopped by his armor.

"The hell? Rubber bullets? Are you joking?" Bulldog spoke in English, in a throaty voice.

He fired right back with his machine gun. Chisato moved her arm away from the corner a millisecond before the bullet made another chip in the wall.

"Almost time to go."

"...What?"

"His RPK has five, maybe six bullets left."

"You've been counting the shots?"

"Were you not? Aw, silly you. Okay, here we go!"

And she was off.

If the enemy was only firing sporadically, it'd be one thing. And while most assault rifle magazines held between twenty and thirty rounds, this was a machine gun. Most people wouldn't even dream of counting shots in that case.

Even assuming Chisato was correct, and Bulldog had only five or six bullets left, that was more than enough to kill her. Maybe Chisato really was crazy.

Takina leaned out so that only half of her face and the arm holding the gun were exposed, and she took aim at the far side of the corridor. Bulldog must have been aware that he was running low on bullets since he'd gotten out a new drum magazine and was holding it in his left hand, ready to reload.

Chisato was sprinting toward him, bent low to the ground.

Takina was holding her gun with only one hand, but she took aim very carefully so as not to accidentally hit Chisato and fired two shots. The first one hit Bulldog's abdomen, the second—his head. He didn't even flinch.

Takina continued shooting at him, but Bulldog wasn't paying her any attention. He fired two shots at Chisato, but even as she was running, she saw

which way he was pointing his gun and easily dodged each shot to the side. Building momentum, she jumped onto the wall and continued running on it. Bulldog shot at her again. Chisato kicked off the wall and cartwheeled in the air to dodge it.

If Bulldog fired another shot while Chisato was still in the air, there was no way she'd be able to dodge that.

Takina fully stepped out from behind the corner, gripped her gun firmly with both hands, and fired a round. She wasn't going for Bulldog's mask but for the RPK in his hands.

Chisato, upside down and in midair, fired rapidly. Sparks flew among a burst of red flowers as bullets collided, deflecting the RPK's rounds toward the wall, where they exploded, leaving gashes behind.

And that was it. Bulldog was pulling the trigger hard, but his RPK was silent. It was out of ammo.

That was the opening they'd been waiting for. Takina ran out from behind the corner at full speed, changing her magazine, which was almost empty. Chisato landed on the floor and ran at the enemy. She was fifteen meters from him.

Bulldog knocked off the empty drum magazine with the new one, reloading in great haste. He could easily take both of them out if he finished before the girls got to him.

Takina fired. Shooting accurately while running was next to impossible, but there was a slim chance she'd hit, and if she destroyed the enemy's fresh magazine, it'd be game over for him. It was worth trying.

None of her bullets hit the target, though. The new 75-round drum magazine was in. Bulldog prioritized Chisato, who was running at him with inhuman speed. He took a few steps back, lifting the RPK to hold it under his arm.

Chisato pulled her bag off her back and threw it in front of her, tugging at a hidden string—and a ballistic airbag, the Lycoris tech department's prize invention, explosively inflated in front of her. The white balloon completely blocked the corridor, stopping Bulldog's bullets.

The bulletproof airbag was only usable for about a second, but that was

enough for Chisato. By the time it burst from the impact of rifle rounds, Chisato was already right in front of Bulldog. Hoisting her bag onto her back again, she struck Bulldog's hand on the RPK's grip with her spiked gun, firing at the same time.

Even the best bulletproof gloves couldn't completely protect the fingers. They were in fact quite vulnerable, and the combined impact from the spikes and the frangible plastic bullet crushed them. The RPK fell out of Bulldog's hands, and he staggered.

Chisato wasn't finished. She almost pressed her body against the man, aiming her gun at his lower abdomen. She fired repeatedly in between the plates of his body armor. A cloud of red filled the air like a mist of blood.

Bulldog staggered again. He took a few steps backward before dropping to one knee. He swiftly reached behind his back and drew out a kukri knife.

Chisato was out of bullets, but she didn't even think of retreating. She leaped at the man and kicked upward, hitting his steel mask, and then downward, hitting it again with the heel this time.

Lycoris loafers had both tips and heels reinforced with steel. A kick with a shoe like that could smash a concrete block. Bulldog took two kicks, but it didn't stop him from trying to attack Chisato with the massive knife.

"Chisato!"

Running, Takina dropped to the floor and slid with one knee up and her arms resting on it to steady her aiming. She fired all her remaining bullets at Bulldog's knife. It shattered—and so did his fingers. Real blood spurted into the air.

Chisato finished reloading her gun. She grabbed Bulldog's left bleeding arm and shoved the muzzle of her gun into the armpit opening of his armor.

"This is going to hurt."

She fired all her remaining bullets so fast it seemed like her gun was fully automatic. For the first time, Bulldog didn't silently endure the pain. Howling hoarsely, the mountain of a man crumpled to the floor. He could still move, even though he certainly had at least one broken rib and some damage to his organs. He started to stand up, but Takina, who'd only then made it to him,

kicked him back down and shot at his hip joints to prevent him from standing up again. She wasn't sure if her bullets would get through the armor, but it was better than nothing.

Chisato knelt down on top of Bulldog, digging one knee into his chest. She looked into his eyes through the slits in his mask. Their movements were shaky from shock at what was happening to him.

Chisato smiled, not without kindness.

"You're tough, so I'm going to go harder on you than usual. Do your best not to die, okay?" she told him in English.

The emotion in Bulldog's eyes changed from shock to resignation.

"Why? Will I win something by not dying?"

"Why not?! What do you want?"

"...A cup of good fucking coffee."

"You got it!"

Without hesitation, Chisato fired all six rounds of her magazine—each round of .45 ACP hitting like a baseball bat—directly at Bulldog's masked face. The red spider lilies of pain but not death were in full bloom.

Takina and Chisato charged into the underground warehouse. They combed through the large facility but only found some arms and a large stockpile of drugs.

"Chisato, Takina, sorry," Kurumi said on the comms. "It's my mistake. The target has escaped outside the factory."

"What?" Chisato and Takina asked simultaneously.

There should have been only one way out of the warehouse.

"There's an air duct... Probably wide enough for a person to pass through."

"Are you kidding?! That's straight out of a Hollywood movie!"

"Why is that getting you excited, Chisato?" asked Takina.

"Because, well, it's just like in the movies!"

Unlike in the movies, real air ducts weren't built to allow people to crawl through them. They were too narrow, wouldn't support the weight of a human, and had metal dampers and meshes blocking the way. Infiltrating a facility or escaping from it using an air duct was a cool but sadly unrealistic fantasy for action movie fans, as Chisato explained to Takina.

"I'm assuming the dampers were removed from the air duct at some point to create an emergency escape route," said Kurumi.

Damper removal was a noisy job, so it thwarted any attempts at stealth. This was not a problem when using an abandoned factory as a hideout, though.

Chisato was impressed at how the enemy appropriated a movie trope and gave it a realistic application, but what Takina appreciated was Bulldog's code. It was only in retrospect that she realized the big man acted as a decoy to enable his boss to escape safely. He'd been guarding the entrance to the underground warehouse with such persistence that the girls had no doubt his boss was behind the door. Bulldog tenaciously guarded the spot, stalling for a time, perhaps even longer than was needed. He wasn't planning on sacrificing his life for it but was prepared for that eventuality.

Dedication and thoroughness like that were admirable in Takina's eyes.

"Sorry to spoil your mood, Chisato... If we're going to follow the target, we won't make it back early."

"Huh?! Arrgh! Damn!"

"The target is heading toward the city on a scooter. I have a drone following them, but I'm not sure how long that'll last," reported Kurumi.

"Perhaps we should hand it over to the police."

"We can't, Takina. They may be armed. We don't want it to become a high-profile incident."

It was the job of the Lycoris to preserve the illusion of unbroken peace and safety in Japan. Takina knew that, of course. Police in this low-crime country weren't trained, equipped, or mentally prepared for gunfights.

"DA hired us for this mission to deal with the targets swiftly, without any

casualties. And...”

Chisato pointed to her gun.

“...to capture all targets alive. Which is something neither Japanese police nor DA’s own Lycoris can do.”

“That’s the spoiler you didn’t want to give out earlier?”

One of the reasons Chisato used nonlethal rounds was that capturing the foes alive could be far more useful than simply killing them... And as a rule, if targets could be neutralized with nonlethal methods, that should always be the default course of action.

In the case of drug dealers especially, capturing the criminals alive was essential for discovering their supply routes. Takina knew that, but to her, it was madness to take on a ridiculously strong enemy like Bulldog armed with subpar, nonlethal equipment. She didn’t have the skill to succeed in such a massively disadvantageous situation nor the fearless attitude required to try.

But Chisato did. Her extraordinary skills were extremely valuable, so DA didn’t want to lose her despite considering her a chronic troublemaker.

“Well, okay. If you don’t want to hand it over, that’s fine by me. So, what next?”

“We go after the target. What else?! Work’s work.”

“No movie today, then. Got it.”

“Ugh...!”

Takina remembered she was in charge of making *ohagi* that day. She’d only done the initial prep that morning and was planning to finish after returning from this mission. There wasn’t much she could do about that now. Mika would have to make the *ohagi* himself, carefully molding each rice cake into a dainty shape with his massive hands.

“Let’s go, Chisato.”

“Yeah...”

The cars parked outside the abandoned factory had been smashed, but the beat-up scooter the goons used for going to the stores, which was left lying on the ground, had been spared, probably mistaken for scrap material. Asian got on it and sped away from the factory.

He'd used pretty much all of his funds to get that drug shipment into Japan. As long as he made it out of this alive, though, he could always start again, he was sure.

His current priority was to escape with his life. He wouldn't stop until he felt absolutely safe.

He made it to the city and left the scooter there. It was safer to use multiple means of transportation. Next, he'd get on the train to some rural town.

The sun had risen, but it was still early morning before rush hour. There were fewer people on the trains going out of the city than to it.

Asian sat down, the entire bench along the side of the train car empty. The gentle rocking of the train had a strangely calming effect on his agitated brain. Fatigue had finally caught up with him.

The train stopped at a station. When Asian heard female voices, he reflexively reached for his gun, a Glock 42. The pistol was so small he could almost hide it in his hand. Despite the size, though, it was perfectly capable of killing people.

A group of girls in school uniforms got on the train. Maybe they were heading to morning sports club practice.

He remembered his goons telling him they were attacked by cute girls. "Cute" was a subjective description, so it didn't matter. The vital part was that the goon had definitely said "girls." At a glance, their enemies were described as young girls as opposed to women. Were they children, then? Schoolgirls...?

Asian was suddenly sweating all over. The girls on the train started looking at him curiously. Why? Right... He was staring at them, sweating like a pig, with one hand under his shirt... It'd be a lie to say he didn't look suspicious.

Asian stood up and walked to the end of the train car. He didn't want attention. What if the schoolgirls called the cops on him...? Hold on. That was an idea!

Whoever his enemy was, it definitely wasn't the police. The police didn't employ underage girls. No, the enemy had to belong to some other criminal organization, like him and Bulldog. Which meant they couldn't use the N-system or city CCTV cameras to track him.

He should've thought of that sooner. He would have if he hadn't been so panicked and tired. Not being able to think clearly put him at significant risk, given the situation.

Asian told himself to calm down. He was likely safe. Everything was going to be all right. He'd get away from the city and lose the enemy for good.

There was one problem, though—his gun. In the peace-loving country of Japan, a gun made you unstoppable, no matter who you were. But at the same time, guns were considered a big deal, and if anyone spotted him carrying one, things would escalate fast. In Japan, a gun was at once like an ace up your sleeve and a joker that could be your downfall.

Shit. He was already looking suspicious, and those schoolgirls might report him...

He had a fake ID, and his behavior on the train could be explained away by him being drunk, but if he got searched...

The small firearm with a six-round magazine was fine for self-defense, but it wouldn't save his bacon in a full-on gunfight.

Asian changed train cars, thinking hard about the merits and demerits of holding on to his gun. They seemed pretty evenly balanced.

Then he had an idea.

He walked all the way to the last car, which was quite empty. There were only two sleepy office workers and a timid-looking schoolgirl. Perfect.

Asian sat down in the middle of the car and stealthily removed his gun from the inner pocket of his shirt. He reached behind and stuffed the weapon deep into the gap between the upholstered backrest and seat. If anyone called the cops on him, he'd stand up and pretend the gun wasn't his. If nobody bothered him, he'd ride to the last station, put the gun back in his pocket, and get off the train. It was the safest course of action.

He could finally breathe easy. At first, he'd been wary of the schoolgirl, but she had been in this train car before him, so she was unlikely to be a pursuer. Besides, she seemed timid and looked too delicate to be able to fight anyone.

The next station might have been a bigger town since that was where everyone else in the car got off, including the schoolgirl. Asian was relieved. There hadn't been any reason to be on guard against her after all. The train was heading toward a rural area, so he reckoned nobody would be getting on there...but he was wrong. Two uniformed schoolgirls entered his train car.

Asian tensed up, but when the girls started talking about some zombie movie, he relaxed again and closed his eyes. He was too nervous and really needed a rest.

"In older movies, it's excusable, but when I see newer ones where most of the action takes place in the dark, I feel like they're just being cheap, you know? I get that sometimes it's because they don't have a big budget, but when they *do*, why not actually let us see what's going on? I think that'd make it both cooler and scarier."

"It's the atmosphere. Darkness triggers an innate, primal fear. I can't imagine a horror movie without it."

Asian listened to their exchange, siding with the first girl. Darkness wasn't usually employed for fear but for an element of surprise. And surprise wasn't the same as fear. Asian liked horror movies, but jump scares didn't do much for him.

"I get it about the atmosphere, sure—dark vibes. Great in a book, but I want to see all the details in a movie. Why else—?"

"Right, so it's not about the production values at all, is it? You're just greedy. You don't want anything left for your imagination. You want it all served up on a silver tray."

No, that's not it, Asian thought. He had a eureka moment. The girls weren't talking about the same thing. That was why they had drastically different views. One was talking about action movies, the other about horror. Zombie flicks fit into both categories, and you'd judge them differently depending on whether you saw them as the former or the latter.

“I’m greedy? I don’t really agree with that. And what do you think, Asian?”

What?

Asian’s eyes shot open. He couldn’t see anyone in the train car... No, the girls were there. They were sitting on either side of him with their arms crossed, pointing a gun at his ribs.

His goons’ description of the attackers as cute young girls was justified.

“Hold on, if you shoot me now, the bullets will go through my body and hit you too. You’re planning on committing suicide?”

“Don’t worry, my ammo’s nonlethal. It does hurt pretty bad, though.”

“I’m using full metal jacket bullets, but they’re reserved as a backup in case Chisato makes a mistake. And it doesn’t matter if they pass through you. Our uniforms are bulletproof.”

They spoke to him calmly, in the same casual tone as when talking about zombie movies. That was how Asian knew they were pros—experienced and confident. He wouldn’t have a chance to pull out the Glock 42 he’d stuffed behind the seat cushion.

He smiled with resignation, deciding he might as well talk with the girls about movies until they reached the next station. He told them that to judge a zombie movie fairly, you had to first state whether you were assessing it as an action or horror movie. The girls readily agreed that it made a lot of sense.

Intro 3

“After some research, I’m finding that cafés in this area are rather peculiar,” Kazuhiko said to Mika.

The barista paused his work and turned to his customer at the counter.

“Research?”

“I’m not going to write that article featuring your café, of course, but I’m writing something similar...”

When Mika had refused to have Café LycoReco featured in a magazine, he’d taken the wind out of Kazuhiko’s sails...but his publisher had gotten really fired up about the concept. Ultimately, they wanted to go with a special about daytime Kinshicho and Kameido venues appealing to young women, including a ten-page feature solely about cafés. Kazuhiko was commissioned as the leading writer for that part.

“I’ve started the fieldwork, visiting the famous local cafés. Sumida Coffee aside, there’s Hokusai Teahouse, which serves Japanese fare. Near the Kameido Station, we have Coffee Dojo Samurai, where the servers are handsome young men dressed in quirky samurai armor. Then there’s Funabashi-ya, with a big line of tourists every day. There are, of course, other long-established or specialty cafés, but it’s striking how so many have a Japanese theme, don’t you think?”

“Might that not be because of proximity to Asakusa?”

“Asakusa is more about Taisho nostalgia, I’d say, or retro-style cafés.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true... I suppose it is a local oddity that we have so many Japanese-theme cafés.”

“Why did you choose to go with this aesthetic?”

“Mr. Tokuda, I thought I’d made it clear we didn’t want to be featured in your article.”

“Yes, but I’m not asking for work reasons... Just personal curiosity.”

“Well, in that case... It appealed to me as I’m a fan of Japanese culture. I suppose I was also influenced by my previous workplace, which placed great stock in traditional Japanese culture. That was where I first encountered the finest quality Japanese desserts, which I fell in love with. I prefer coffee to green tea, though... So, there you have it.”

“And what was your previous workplace?”

Mika looked away and smiled. As a regular customer, Kazuhiko understood that meant Mika wouldn’t tell him more.

It was strange about this café how an innocent question would mysteriously go unanswered as if the staff was guarding some secret. The other regulars simply enjoyed the atmosphere, but Kazuhiko’s journalistic senses were tingling. The past, in particular, seemed a sensitive topic.

“By the way, Mr. Tokuda, if you’re not writing about Japanese-theme cafés specifically but noteworthy Kinshicho cafés, may I suggest Tommy? They serve amazing, classic Japanese pancakes. They’re located close to the station on the north side. If you haven’t tried them already, you definitely should.”

Kazuhiko thought Mika was intentionally changing the topic, but as a writer constantly looking for inspiration, he dutifully noted the name of the pancake place on his phone. If Mika recommended the store, he could expect stand-out quality.

“Thanks. I’ll head over there later.”

“Their pancakes are crazy good! I love them!” said Chisato, coming out of the staff room.

She walked over to the low tables on the tatami floor...where she set down a gas takoyaki maker.

“Chisato... What on earth?” Mika asked her suspiciously.

“It’s a takoyaki maker! I found it dirt cheap at Mr. Orimoto’s thrift store!”

“I’m asking, what on earth are you doing?”

“Making staff lunch! It’s my turn today.”

Mizuki appeared out of nowhere with a can of beer.

“Now we’re talking!”

Kurumi came over, narrowing her eyes.

“Are you crazy, Chisato? Cooking takoyaki right in the middle of the café during business hours?”

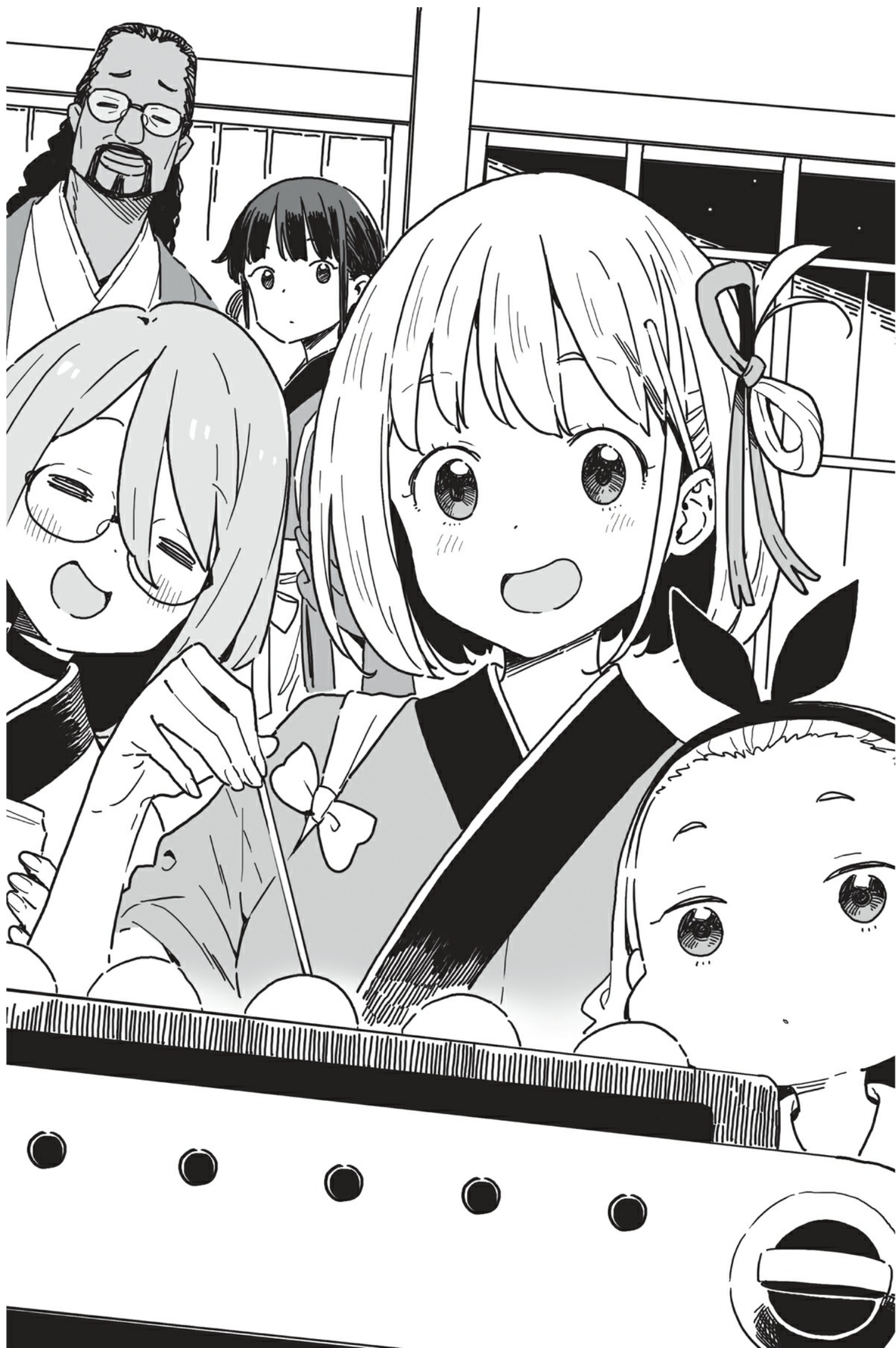
Despite her grumbling, she sat down at the table, evidently not opposed to eating takoyaki.

Chisato began laying out all the ingredients. Kurumi curiously peered at each of them, like a dog sniffing something it hadn’t seen before. She’d never watched takoyaki being made in person.

“So...how do you put all this together?”

“Wait and see! First, we need to heat the metal plate, and then we add a generous amount of oil.”

Before long, the café began to fill with the smell of dough frying in oil, accompanied by gentle sizzling. Mika turned the extractor fan on at full power, but it was pretty pointless. The smell of cooking oil overwhelmed all the other gentler scents of his café.



By the time the first batch was ready, a crowd of regulars had gathered around the low tables as if lured in by the smell. People who couldn't find a seat lingered in the tatami area nonetheless.

"Oooh, yeah! This is good! What's better than freshly cooked takoyaki and a cold one?!" shouted Mizuki, helping herself to a takoyaki from the first batch.

On cue, customers started reaching for the little octopus balls with the same urgency usually reserved for bargain sales. They picked them up with chopsticks and skewered them with toothpicks. The tray that held twenty takoyaki emptied in seconds. Chisato started cooking the next batch right away.

"Boss, everything's going to smell of oil at this rate...," Takina said worriedly, giving Kazuhiko a fresh glass of water.

"It's too late to do anything about it... Go and eat some takoyaki, Takina."

She walked away, and Mika sighed deeply, resignation in his eyes.

"Your staff meals are quite unusual," remarked Kazuhiko.

"They're not... Except when it's Chisato's turn to cook. On other days, it's standard fare... Well, maybe not always standard... Ahem..."

Kazuhiko sensed there was something Mika didn't want to discuss, but he didn't press the barista. He took a sip of his American coffee.

Now and again, the barista would conspicuously go quiet. As a grown man, Kazuhiko understood the importance of respecting boundaries, which was why Mika's mysterious smile was enough to stop him from asking about his past.

Kazuhiko finished his coffee in one big gulp, slowly breathed out, and smiled wryly. The aroma of coffee was all but drowned out by the smell of the takoyaki. It made him strangely restless, or perhaps excited?

"It does look fun."

Regular customers surrounded Chisato and the takoyaki maker like a food stall at a festival... No, the atmosphere was more heartwarming and intimate than at a festival. A house party? A takoyaki party?

Kazuhiko wasn't as critical as Kurumi, but even he had to admit it was bizarre

for a café to serve takoyaki at lunchtime. But if any place was going to do that, it had to be Café LycoReco. It had to be Chisato.

“And here’s some for you, Mr. Kazuhiko!”

Chisato came over to Kazuhiko, carrying two takoyaki on a small plate, with bonito flakes and green nori sprinkled on top. A dollop of dark takoyaki sauce was on the side of the plate with a line of mayonnaise over it. It looked quite fancy served like that, but the main reason Chisato didn’t squirt the sauces directly onto the takoyaki was to keep them from getting soggy.

Kazuhiko looked from Chisato to the dispirited Mika.

“It’s okay, Mr. Tokuda. Enjoy the takoyaki... It’s on the house.”

“Ha-ha... Thank you.”

A toothpick was provided on the side of the plate. Kazuhiko picked it up and pierced a takoyaki, feeling how crisp it was on the outside. A puff of steam escaped from the inside. The takoyaki must have been very hot, but he had a glass of cool water if needed.

Deciding not to wait for the food to cool down, Kazuhiko dipped the takoyaki in the little sauce puddle and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth.

Trying to eat a freshly fried takoyaki in one bite was exceedingly foolhardy, but he hoped the cool sauces would lessen the impact... They didn’t.

“Itf hawt!” Kazuhiko squealed as the piping hot liquid takoyaki filling spilled into his mouth.

He breathed out a white cloud of steam.

Chisato laughed. The other customers turned to look and laughed as well, which at first irked Kazuhiko, desperately trying to bear the scalding hot sensation, but by the time he finished chewing, he also found himself laughing.

Café LycoReco was no ordinary café—where else would the staff sometimes share their food with you? It was fun, and the food was delicious. How could anyone not to love the place?

However, Kazuhiko would have to pick another day to check out the pancake place. He’d scalded his tongue pretty badly.

Chapter 3

Takina's Cooking

Takina was crazy. It took only a few months after she started working at Café LycoReco for the rest of the crew to accept that as a fact.

They had a system at the café where the members took turns preparing staff lunches. Everyone dreaded Takina's turn.

As should go without saying, Mika could quickly whip up a proper lunch for everyone, and you could bank on it being delicious.

Chisato liked challenges and entertainment. She'd try her hand at cooking some foreign dish for the first time or prepare party food, turning the lunch break into an event. She was a good cook, though, and she made the meals fun.

The food Mizuki served would go well with booze, or she'd make something using ingredients that could double up as beer snacks. Any leftovers—and there always were leftovers since she would purposely buy too much of the ingredients with Mika's money—she'd claim for herself and enjoy later when she was drinking. Mika disregarded it. At least Mizuki had the decency to put effort into cooking, so the lunches she made were pretty good.

As the youngest of the bunch, Kurumi didn't have much experience with cooking, but her preference probably also played a part in her choice of frozen meals and junk food for the shared staff lunches. Apart from Mika, everyone was happy with whatever Kurumi brought for them, though.

Takina, on the other hand, was terrible news.

It was her turn that day. She came in carrying food for her coworkers. There were no customers then, so the staff sat down in the tatami area to have a meal. But then they saw what Takina was carrying.

"Er, Takina..., " said Chisato. "What exactly is this?"

“Today’s staff lunch. Let’s hurry up and finish before we get more customers,” Takina replied matter-of-factly.

“This...is our lunch...?”

Chisato peered at the items Takina set out in front of the five of them—semitransparent cups with lids containing what appeared to be milkshakes.

Mizuki picked up her cup and shook it. A cloudy white liquid sloshed around inside.

“What is this...?”

“A protein shake. Banana flavor.”

Chisato, Mika, Kurumi, and Mizuki stared at the shakes, crestfallen. Takina frowned.

“They’re very good quality, made in Japan... Would you have preferred chocolate flavor instead?”

Mika pushed his glasses higher on his nose, trying to assume a neutral expression.

“No, Takina, that’s not the problem. What we’d prefer is...something recognizable as a meal. As a lunch... How should I put this...?”

Mika tried to be delicate, but unable to find a delicate way to explain the matter to Takina, he decided to let it go. He picked up his cup, shook it, and sipped some.

“At first, I thought it was pancake mix,” said Kurumi. “I thought you would have us make our own pancakes, adding fruit and toppings we liked. I should’ve known better...”

She also started drinking the shake in big gulps. She seemed to be okay with the flavor.

“I’m curious, Takina,” said Chisato, getting started with her shake. “Why did you decide to go with protein shakes today?”

The protein shake was better than the ones Chisato had tried before. It didn’t have an unpleasant artificial flavor.

“It’s the optimal nourishment to ingest while at work. Not only is it quick to prepare, but it also has a well-balanced nutritional profile... Oh, we have a customer.”

The bell at the door rang, announcing someone’s arrival. Takina got up and went to serve them while the others stayed at the table, dejectedly staring at the shakes.

“She didn’t make lunch for us to eat. She brought *nourishment*,” Kurumi complained, as if she were waiting for someone to do something about their predicament.

The previous meal Takina had served them was about-to-expire instant food they’d been keeping for emergencies. They didn’t complain then. Chisato thought it made perfect sense, and the others also agreed it was better to use that food up than let it go to waste.

Before that, Takina had served up leftover curry that Chisato had made a copious amount of the day before. Again, it was better for the curry to get used up than go to waste.

But before the curry, the lunch Takina made was really nice. It had included rice, boiled taro, daikon-green *furikake* that Takina made herself, pickles, miso soup, silken tofu with toppings, and boiled hijiki seaweed. Chisato remembered it well because it was a lunch to which she’d given a five-star rating.

When she mentioned that single great lunch by Takina to the others, Mika looked at her as if she’d just solved the case.

“I could, of course, be wrong...but it seems Takina is simply doing her best to follow instructions.”

“What instructions, Teach?”

“Don’t you remember what happened after lunch that day? Mizuki, at least, should remember. She had a go at Takina.”

“Ah, that’s right. It was a hectic day, and Takina just disappeared into the kitchen for, like, hours! I did tell her off for that, sure. I told her not to waste so much time making food for us. Serving customers was more important, so she had to be more efficient.”

Kurumi stared blankly at Mizuki. Then her eyes narrowed in anger.

“And since then, she’s been feeding us whatever was the quickest to make... *You* brought this disaster upon us, Mizuki!”

“How was I wrong?! She was boiling frigging taro in the café kitchen! While customers were pouring in! Is that somehow acceptable to you?!”

Chisato shook her shake. *Splish-splash.*

“You know how Takina is... What do we do?”

“Do we need to do anything?”

“You’re awfully relaxed about this, Mika!” Kurumi snapped. “Of course something has to be done. Our quality of life is at stake!”

Nobody disagreed.

Mizuki sniffed her shake but didn’t drink it.

“Easy to say, but do you have any suggestions?” she asked.

Chisato got thinking. Takina didn’t know how to cut corners. She was a perfectionist with a rigid mindset. She could either cook an elaborate meal or serve up protein shakes. It was all black-and-white to her.

Imagining a future where they’d be given protein shakes every time it was Takina’s turn to make lunch was painful... Chisato would have preferred the sort of food Takina had made the first time, even if it meant they were left short-staffed while Takina cooked. Still, Takina wasn’t assertive enough to do that after being told by Mizuki that she was inconveniencing them all by taking too long in the kitchen.

Mika folded his arms.

“We should have made it clear to Takina what qualified as an acceptable staff lunch.”

“Hmm... Yeah, give her guidelines to follow...”

They tried to develop such guidelines, but it was surprisingly difficult. There was no single answer that would work every time. For example, toast with eggs and bacon made a perfectly good breakfast, but then they imagined having it

several days in a row. It wouldn't take long before they would be sick of it.

If the requirement was that lunches had to be varied, be quick to make and eat, and taste good, protein shakes would still fit the bill. Nobody besides Takina would be content with that, though.

Coming up with menus was surprisingly hard.

"What are you doing? The customers are placing orders. Please get back to work," Takina called.

They downed the rest of their protein shakes and stood up.

Ding-a-ling!

The bell rang again as someone else walked past. Chisato looked over toward the door. It was Mr. Doi. Perfect timing! He could help teach Takina what sort of food made people happy, and spending some fun time together would help bring them closer. This was just what Takina needed!

Chisato headed right over to Mr. Doi.

"Mr. Doi! Mr. Doi! Welcome! Um, before I take your order... Have you had lunch yet? No?! If you haven't, then, well, how about, um, we go for lunch together? Let's do this! Let's go out for lunch! Taaakinaaaa! Get changed. We're going out with Mr. Doi!"

Not giving Takina any choice in this matter, Chisato dragged her out for an impromptu date with Mr. Doi, who looked flustered but never refused to go out with the girls. A nice guy, Chisato thought, but maybe he went along with them because he was interested in Takina.

A sushi place Mr. Doi frequented offered whatever the staff was having that day for lunch as a set meal to customers, too, so they headed there.

It was a tiny restaurant with only two tables and counter seats. At night, they really put the *bar* in *sushi bar* by serving alcohol, too. The setting was informal, with the sushi chef casually dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He manned the counter while preparing fish purchased that morning for serving later in the day.

"We've already had lunch," Takina protested to Chisato.

“We did, and I’m sure it had the optimal nutritional profile like you said, but it didn’t have enough calories! It also didn’t feel particularly satisfying!”

“It meets our energy needs. If we eat more, we’ll put on weight.”

“Hold on... You’re not assuming the day will end as normal, are you? We might suddenly find ourselves in a situation that will push us to our physical limits! If our bodies didn’t have enough fuel for that, it wouldn’t end well, right?”

At DA, the grown-ups carefully planned and prepared, streamlining every operation for the Lycoris. For example, a Lycoris’s job might be limited to quickly firing a shot at the target while passing them by in town without even lifting her eyes off her smartphone. A specialized team would take care of the cleanup.

Things were different at Café LycoReco. They never knew when they might get an urgent assignment requiring the use of firearms, so there was precious little time for planning. The prep stage usually consisted of the girls grabbing their equipment. They had to improvise, which often involved a lot of running around and even direct combat. Any extra calories they consumed during the day *might* come in handy.

“If nothing much happens, and at the end of the day, you’re worried about putting on weight, just do some exercises before going to sleep!”

“I suppose... what you’re saying makes sense, but...”

“If you don’t want to exercise alone, we can do it together!”

“I’ll do it alone.”

“Aw, don’t be like that!”

Until then, Mr. Doi had been silent while they waited for their food, but after listening to the girls, he got worried.

“Do you have something athletic planned after this? I’m afraid I haven’t brought my sneakers today.”

“Oh, it’s okay, Mr. Doi! We won’t be doing anything sporty together. Today’s all about having Takina eat a delicious lunch... Actually, I’ve been wondering

what you usually have for lunch, Mr. Doi! Do you come here often?”

“Not too often, but yes... You promise no exercise for me after this?”

Chisato had to reassure the wary older man that there absolutely wasn't going to be any physical exertion later. Meanwhile, the limited set lunch for that day arrived on their table. Each of them got a bowl of rice topped with white fish sashimi marinated in light soy sauce or something similar, with wasabi on the side. They were also given miso soup and empty plates lined with paper—it looked like they were going to get freshly fried tempura soon.

“Wow! Look at that! Amazing! Looks sooo good!” exclaimed Chisato.

The sushi chef half-smiled, embarrassed.

“For the lunches, I use leftover ingredients from the day before, so the food is not top quality. I'm glad you're excited about it, but you might end up disappointed.”

Given that the lunches consisted of ingredients from the previous day, the type and amount of sashimi served with rice varied greatly. According to Mr. Doi, they were fortunate today.

“I can't wait to try it!” Chisato said, pressing her hands together in a gesture of thanks.

By then, she had already lost sight of her original objective, and nobody bothered to remind her.

She split her disposable chopsticks and started with the miso soup. It was made with red miso, finely cubed firm tofu, seaweed, and julienned scallion. Chisato liked the feel of the little tofu cubes in her mouth, warmed by the soup.

After a refreshing sip of the soup, Chisato wet the tips of her chopsticks and was ready to dig into the centerpiece of the meal. She put one hand on the rice bowl, taking a closer look at the fish slices lying on top. She couldn't tell what type of fish it was, but it sure looked good.

The sashimi being marinated was a plus, as far as Chisato was concerned, since it eliminated the usual sashimi donburi dilemma of whether to mix wasabi with soy sauce and pour it over the entire thing, put only a little on each piece

of fish as you ate, or approach it in some other convoluted way. Everyone had their own individual preferences that could get in the way of enjoying the meal with others if they thought it should be eaten differently.

Anyway, Chisato peered closely at the fish, trying to identify it. On closer inspection, the sashimi could be more than one type of fish. The slices were of different shapes, reflecting either difference in the size of each fish or the sashimi block they'd been cut off from.

Chisato picked up one slice, along with some vinegared rice from underneath, and stuffed it into her mouth. She first tasted the still slightly warm rice, but the marinated sashimi's flavor hit soon enough. The saltiness of light soy sauce, umami from kombu, and a hint of sweetness of mirin enveloped the fatty fish. Was it amberjack? Yellowtail amberjack or greater amberjack? Chisato couldn't tell for sure as she continued chewing, but it was probably one or the other. *Hold on, there's something crunchy on the fish.* No sooner had she noticed the unexpected texture than a crisp, refreshing flavor spread through her mouth. Then she realized—it was myoga ginger, very finely chopped and added to the sashimi to counter the fishy smell. It wasn't pungent, so it must have been soaked in water first for a pleasant, clean taste. This chef sure paid attention to every detail.

"Mmm! So good! Isn't it, Takina?"

Takina gave a slight nod, chewing her food.

"Yes, it's delicious. This is sea bream, isn't it? The marinade is excellent."

"Wait, s-sea bream? Oh. Sea bream, of course!" Chisato quickly said, flustered at how far off the mark her guess had been.

The sushi chef smiled at them.

"Correct! You're so young, but you know your fish."

He started cooking the tempura at the far side of the kitchen. The sizzling sound was homey and carried to the counter.

Chisato couldn't believe the sashimi was sea bream. Seriously, *sea bream*? She'd dodged a bullet by not saying first that she thought it was yellowtail amberjack or some other sort of amberjack. They'd think she had no sense of

taste. Thankfully, Takina had identified the fish first...

“There is actually red-fleshed fish sashimi in there, too. It’s very thinly sliced so that the flavor won’t be so strong, but it’s yellowtail amberjack. It’s in season right now.”

“Sounds good... Chisato? Is something wrong? Did you have too much wasabi?”

Chisato was sitting with her eyes shut, head hanging down, clutching her chopsticks.

“I...I knew it. That was my first thought, that it was yellowtail amberjack!”

The chef chuckled while Takina rolled her eyes.

“There’s no need to feel bad, Chisato. Marinated sashimi can be hard to tell apart. At first, I wasn’t sure if it was sea bream either.”

“Argh! No, I honestly thought it was yellowtail, that slice I tried! I swear!”

“Girls, girls. You were both right. Let’s leave it at that, hmm?”

“You heard Mr. Doi, Chisato. We were both right. Are you satisfied now?”

Mr. Doi and the chef laughed.

“Nobody believes me...!”

“There’s more besides the sea bream and yellowtail amberjack,” said Takina.

“Oh?”

Chisato promptly picked up a different slice of fish with rice. But was that the sea bream? She wasn’t sure. The next morsel she uncovered had a very distinct taste and texture. It was shrimp, plump, sweet, and packed with umami. It added a new depth of flavor to the dish.

“The shrimp’s sooo good!”

“I’m happy to hear that. I think you’ll like this, too,” said the chef, placing tempura on the previously empty side plates.

It came in three bite-size pieces, but what was under the batter? Takina looked at it this and that way, but even she couldn’t tell.

“What’s in it?”

“Try it, and you’ll find out. I recommend a dash of salt.”

Trusting the chef, Chisato took the saltshaker, sprinkled some on her tempura, and picked up one piece with her chopsticks. Having just been made, it was scalding, but she could feel with the chopsticks that the batter was at peak crunchiness and should be enjoyed as soon as possible.

Mentally preparing herself to get her tongue burned, Chisato put the whole little tempura in her mouth. She felt the heat radiating from it, as expected. After a breath’s pause, she bit into it...through crunchy batter into a melty filling.

“Huh?! What’s this?!”

It was an unexpected texture. Chisato thought the little tempura might be made with chunks of shrimp, octopus tentacles, or possibly pieces of yam, but she was wrong. Under the deliciously smelling batter was an entirely different melt-in-the-mouth delicacy—a rich, creamy flavor filled Chisato’s mouth, blending with the savory batter. The filling didn’t taste fishy but was packed with rich umami. It was wonderfully delicious but too powerful to be paired with rice... It would be the perfect accompaniment to beer or some other kind of alcohol, Chisato supposed.

But what exactly was Chisato eating? There was something familiar about that flavor, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Ah, milt. But what kind? Not cod. Fugu?” asked Takina.

“I don’t do fugu here. It’s sea bream milt.”

“Sea bream milt! I’ve never had that before!” exclaimed Chisato.

Takina asked the chef how he made the tempura. Apparently, she had never had anything like that before either. The chef explained that first, he used salt to remove the fishy odor, then he lightly boiled the milt, chopped it up, battered it, and deep-fried it. He said that as long as the milt was fresh, it was guaranteed to taste great.

“Boss, weren’t you keeping this for the evening?”

“Consider it a special treat for you, my friend, since you’ve brought ladies with you today. Though they’re a bit too young for you, in my opinion.”

Chisato hastily swallowed her food.

“You shouldn’t discriminate based on age!” she said in Mr. Doi’s defense.

Mr. Doi scratched his head, looking a bit flustered.

“It’s nothing like what you’re imagining, Boss,” he said.

Chisato muttered under her breath that it was exactly what the chef imagined. She looked encouragingly at Mr. Doi and Takina.

The food was so good, they ate it ravenously, and the meal was over before they knew it. They’d really made short work of their food. Takina’s lesson in cooking lunches and her date with Mr. Doi were over.

Mr. Doi said he felt like sticking around to have a drink after their meal. Chisato thanked him for treating them, and she left the sushi bar with Takina.

Takina had insisted on paying herself, which Chisato thought was a smart move. It presented her in a good light and earned her points with Mr. Doi. Mizuki had explained that tactic to Chisato earlier.

As for Chisato, she’d just thanked the man for the meal without even thinking of offering to chip in.

“Chisato, why did we have to go out for this meal?” Takina asked while they were walking back to LycoReco.

“Well, Takina, not to be critical or anything, but everyone thought the lunch you served us today was a bit...lacking, you know? I thought it might be a good idea to show you an example of a good lunch!”

She told Takina a little bit of what the others had said about those protein shakes, and it seemed to get through to Takina that protein shakes weren’t a normal lunch option. She shot Chisato a downcast look.

“What is the right answer, then? I can’t spend too long making the lunch, but if I make it too simple, it’s not good either?”

“I mean, it’s okay to sometimes have protein shakes, I guess? I mean, take

Kurumi, for example: She gets away with snacks. As long as it's not shakes every time; that'd be too much. It's always fun seeing what you come up with, though."

"It's...fun?"

"Yeah! Just be you, Takina!"

Chisato loved great food, sure, but what she also loved about lunch at work was having a good time with her friends. Life was short. You never knew how many more times you'd have to eat lunch with friends. Tasty food was great. Food eaten in good company was also great.

For the rest of her life, Chisato would remember how hilariously crushed everyone looked when Takina walked in with a tray of protein shakes for them. It would be one of her treasured memories from Café LycoReco.

"The shakes should generally be avoided, right?"

"Um, not necessarily, but... We like tasty food..."

A good time together could only be improved by good food. Chisato was internally torn about what advice to give Takina. Takina couldn't help but notice and sighed.

"Okay. I'll try to come up with a different menu."

1

"Let's take our lunch break now," Takina said when the café emptied of customers.

The staff exchanged wary glances. It was the sixth business day since the "protein shake incident." And that meant it was Takina's turn to make lunch for everyone again.

They were reluctant, watching Takina in the kitchen out of the corners of their eyes. Then they sat down at a table, and only fifteen minutes later, Takina came over carrying a large tray with several bowls on it.

"I'm sure you will be happy with today's lunch," she said.

What was in the bowls...? The small ones had soup, and the bigger ones had

rice topped with marinated fish that looked very familiar to Chisato. While everyone else gasped in surprise, Chisato clutched her head with her hands, despairing over Takina, who always took everything to the extremes instead of finding a middle ground.

“It’s marinated sea bream with rice. You do not need to add any sauce. It already has plenty of flavor. The soup is fish head broth. I will serve the milt tempura shortly.”

“What’s happening? Somebody pinch me!” Mizuki cried in a high-pitched voice. “A restaurant-quality lunch?!”

Unable to wait any longer, Mizuki pressed her hands together so quickly that they made a clapping sound, and the next moment, she was already eating. The others thanked Takina for the food and also began eating with the same urgency Chisato had felt that day at the sushi bar.

Chisato tried the food without hurry... To her surprise, the flavor was the same as at the sushi bar, although Takina used only sea bream and no shrimp or amberjack. However, having only one type of fish, each uniform slice seasoned with kombu stock marinade, made the dish seem more refined, each piece of fish boasting unfailing quality.

Takina hadn’t simply copied the lunch from the sushi bar. She’d elevated it to new heights.

“Honestly, this is delicious! I’ve never had donburi make me crave a drink so much before!”

“It is tasty. What happened, Takina?”

Mizuki started looking longingly at bottles of booze at the back. Mika smiled. Kurumi devoured most of her food, and when there was only a bit of rice left, she dumped the fish broth into the rice bowl and began to drink it unashamedly as soup.

Even the normally reserved Takina had to smile, seeing everyone enjoy the food so much.

“Chisato showed me that this is what staff lunches should be like.”

Mizuki gave Chisato a thumbs-up.

“Thanks, but... Sorry, Takina. I’ve been wondering, how did you get this sea bream? You didn’t buy an entire sushi-quality sea bream for our lunch, right...?”

“No, of course not. That would be over the budget.”

“Right! That’s too expensive for a staff lunch! Ha-ha! You got me worried for a second! But then, how did you get the fish? It’s not leftovers from yesterday for sure...”

“No. Yesterday’s lunch was stew, after all.”

Mika, who’d been sipping the fish broth, froze with the bowl in his hand, alarm bells ringing in his head. With mounting fear, he lifted a large bream head out of the bowl. It was cut in half and grilled to remove any unpleasant odors.

“Takina... This sea bream...must have been huge?”

“It was very large indeed.”

Every reply from Takina was frustratingly missing the point.

Mizuki and Kurumi carried on eating, but Mika and Chisato, confused and increasingly worried, sat still and stared blankly.

“Milt tempura coming up!”

“Huh...?”

Chisato looked up... A middle-aged man came in carrying a plate.

“Whoa, what’s this?!”

“The milt tempura,” Takina said patiently.

“No, Takina, I mean, what’s this man doing here...? Hold up... That’s...the sushi chef...?”

Chisato recognized the chef from that sushi bar they’d gone to with Mr. Doi.

Mika asked Takina to explain how the sushi chef had gotten involved in their staff lunch.

“Chisato showed me an exemplary lunch, which, at first, I wanted to recreate myself, but I soon realized the costs and the skill required made it unrealistic. I

sought advice from the chef, who told me to leave it to him.”

“And...how did you pay him to cook for us?”

The chef laughed cordially at Mika’s question.

“You don’t need to pay me nada. I got the sea bream from a friend who goes fishing. Gave it to me for free when I told him I’d be cooking it for some very nice girls.”

“Anglers rock!” said Mizuki.

Kurumi, with her cheeks stuffed full of food, making her look like a squirrel, raised her fist in triumph.

“Enjoy the food; it’s my pleasure. Here’s the milt tempura. It goes well with just a dash of salt.”

“Oh-ho-ho! So creamy inside! Unbelievable! This tempura is the best!”

Mizuki was loud and commented on everything, while Chisato and Mika quietly groaned as if suffering from a bad headache.

“Hey, you two,” said Kurumi, having finished the rice and soup first despite being the smallest, ready to move on to the tempura. “Why so glum? This is probably the best lunch we’ve ever had here.”

Chisato honestly didn’t know what to say. Takina looked from her to Mika, puzzled.

“Is something wrong? Do you not like the food?”

“No, no, it’s great. I mean it. Everything’s amazing!”

Chisato decided there was no point in feeling bad. She should enjoy the food and the company to the fullest! That was the thing about Chisato Nishikigi; she was quick to change gears.

Takina cocked her head, confused by Chisato’s unpredictable behavior. Chisato thought it looked cute. She stuffed a piece of tempura in her mouth. Crunchy on the outside, melty on the inside... Delish. That was a flavor that brought a smile to your face.

Out of the corner of her eye, Chisato could see Mika bowing his head deeply

in apology to the sushi chef. She unconcernedly thought it was a tough job being the guardian of a girl like Takina.

2

It was the café's sixth business day. The staff was waiting for a break in the stream of customers, but it was bustling.

Takina was washing the dishes in the kitchen. Chisato brought her more. Mizuki was quickly preparing a sundae on a side counter.

"It's so tiring today... Oh! Um, aren't we forgetting something? When's lunch going to be ready? I'm starving."

She shot a sideways glance at Takina.

"I believe it's your turn today, Takina?" she added.

Takina tried to ignore the question at first, but, feeling Chisato and Mizuki staring at her relentlessly, she sensed they wouldn't let her off the hook. She sighed.

"There is no time for lunch. Business is good today."

Chisato grabbed Takina by the shoulders and shook her.

"But we're hungry! Takina, feed us!"

"Why don't you make something for yourself to eat, then? There are always complaints when I provide the food."

"Café LycoReco's poster girl can't just disappear, leaving her customers wanting! Nobody will notice Mizuki's absence, so she can grab a bite somewhere."

"Excuse me?!"

"Do what you want, but I'm not cooking any more staff lunches. I'm not suited for this sort of task."

"Wallowing in self-pity, huh?" Mizuki snarked, laughing.

"I'm not."

"Oh yes you are, darling."

“I’m not!”

Takina slammed her wet hand against the sink with more force than intended. The loud bang and clatter of the dishes in the sink immediately made the kitchen atmosphere tense and prickly. With an awkward smile, Chisato stepped in between Takina and Mizuki, gesturing for them to calm down.

“Okay, okay. I can see that you’re angry, Takina.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Listen, Takina. At times like this, you should try this one weird trick. Close your mouth and puff out your cheeks.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Just try it, okay? Just this one time. Come on.”

Takina felt flustered. She had no idea what puffing out her cheeks was supposed to achieve. She thought she could ignore Chisato, but what if that “one weird trick” was useful for something?

Most of the time, Chisato acted like an airhead, but sometimes... Very rarely, when Takina had given up on seeing her do anything sensible, out of the blue, she’d teach her something new and valuable. She’d show Takina a new perspective, a new way of thinking, a world Takina never knew existed... Like that time by the fountain, for example...

“All right. Like this...?”

Takina pursed her lips and puffed out her cheeks.

“Aww, sulky Takina is so cuuute! Gotcha!”

Chisato pressed her fingertips against Takina’s cheeks, forcing the air out of her cheeks so it sounded like a deflating balloon. Mizuki and Chisato laughed.

“What are you doing, Chisato?”

“Not sure myself, but didn’t she look cute?”

Chisato was just fooling around, her default behavior pattern. Takina regretted gambling on the insanely low odds that Chisato was doing something smart.

“So anyway, Takina, don’t be so mad! And make us something to eat!”

“No. Absolutely not. I’m not cooking.”

“But we’re all counting on you to make us lunch today.”

“I’m aware, but you’d only complain—”

“Oh, don’t be so negative! It doesn’t help anyone to be negative, does it? Give it a go. See what’s in the fridge and try to come up with something to serve us. I’m sure you can make something nice.”

People who were good at cooking thought it was so easy. Takina was annoyed, but it was true that everyone was expecting her to make lunch that day. The café’s rule was that the staff would take turns doing that, and Takina didn’t want to break the rules.

Mika stuck his head into the kitchen, checking in on the girls.

“Were you fighting over lunch? The good news is, I’ve cooked rice, so all we need is something simple to go with it. Chisato, I need you back here to serve the customers. I can’t do it on my own.”

“On your own? What about Kurumi?”

“She started playing a board game with customers...”

“No way! Without me?!”

“Don’t think you’re so funny!” Mizuki yelled at Chisato, who ignored her.

Chisato headed out of the kitchen...but before disappearing behind the door, she stuck her head back in again.

“Takina, you’ve got this!”

Then she left, together with Mizuki, who had finished with the sundae.

Alone in the kitchen, Takina opened the fridge, thinking of all the guidelines for preparing a staff lunch. Use leftovers, don’t spend much money, and don’t spend too much time, but still make it tasty and enjoyable... The more she thought of it, the more she remembered. There wasn’t much in the fridge to work with, though. The café served desserts, not proper meals. There weren’t many leftovers she could use for lunch.

The fridge contents were as follows: a lot of sweet red bean paste, various types of fruit, flour, fresh cream, milk, eggs, pickled plums, wieners...

“Wait, pickled plums...?”

The sausages were probably Mizuki’s snacks for when she’d drink later, but who brought the pickled plums...? On second thought, they might be Mizuki’s snacks too. Takina had seen her pop a pickled plum into a bottle of shochu and share it with customers who stayed after a board game meetup.

Takina searched the fridge more but found only snacks meant to go with Mizuki’s drinks.

Before looking in the fridge, Takina’s problem was that she didn’t know what to cook. After checking, her problem changed to not knowing if making anything for lunch with the available ingredients was even possible. The café was too busy for her to go out and buy anything.

Wieners and eggs... Mika had made an omelet for them before, so there must be a frying pan in the kitchen that Takina could use for that... The pickled plums could be served as is on rice, like in *hinomaru* bento...

But would that make for an acceptable lunch? Even Takina, with her love for efficiency, felt that it didn’t seem quite right. She could sprinkle sesame seeds on top—they always had sesame seeds on hand—but that wouldn’t make up for the lack of side dishes.

Takina crossed her arms and thought about what she could do. She lacked the ingredients to make side dishes. That was a fact. What she had was rice... Rice with *furikake* sprinkles? No, she didn’t have anything to turn into *furikake* besides those pickled plums...

Then, maybe just *ochazuke*, or rice with raw egg... But those simple dishes fell into the dinner rather than lunch category. The only option left was plain rice with a pickled plum on top...

“Oh... I have an idea...”

Remembering something, Takina checked the condiments shelf. Besides everyday condiments, she found packets of nori seaweed sheets for wrapping grilled rice cakes. They would also work for what Takina had in mind.

Takina made cuts on one end of each wiener sausage and fried them. They were the cheap red sort, with low fat content, so Takina figured they wouldn't lose anything by being served cold, and she cooked them first. After frying, she arranged them on a plate.

Next, she started making rolled omelets. While she'd eaten them many times, this was her first time cooking them. She warmed up a rectangular frying pan and coated it in oil, following instructions from a cooking video she played on her phone. She poured a little bit of egg beaten with dashi and a sprinkling of salt, spread it around on the pan, and proceeded to fold the omelet. Being from Kyoto, she was going about it the Kansai way, folding the omelet from the end nearest her and rolling it outward... But there was a problem.

"Why...? Why is it sticking?"

That shouldn't be happening. In the video, the cook easily rolled the thin omelet up on the pan, but Takina couldn't even manage to lift one layer. Her omelet was turning into scrambled eggs.

"Don't give up if it's not turning out perfect. Your rolled omelet will be fine as long as the last layer is all right. Cover up earlier mistakes with the next layer," the cook in the video advised.

That was reassuring for Takina. She pushed the unintended scrambled eggs to the far side of the pan and poured in more of the egg mixture, which resulted in even more scrambled eggs.

"What...? Why...?"

She must've gotten the method or the recipe wrong, but now that she was in the middle of the rolled omelet project, she couldn't stop. The eggs were already cooking on the frying pan. She had no choice. And so, Takina poured the rest of the egg mixture into the pan. It solidified into a big chunk of scrambled egg-thing, which Takina moved onto a chopping board.

Her momentary hesitation resulted in dark brown bits on the egg. It would be a lie to say she wasn't a bit put off by the shapeless yellow clump with brown spots she'd created, but it was still food. It would do.

Takina put the bowl she used to mix the eggs into the sink full of water,

knowing it would be harder to clean it if she left it to dry. Then, she began preparing the final component of the lunch.

That part was easy. She was making rice balls—simple ones with salt and sesame seeds and a pickled plum inside, wrapped in toasted nori seaweed.

Takina wasn't sure if what she'd made would pass muster as a staff lunch, but she had made the most of what was available to her... At least, so she thought.

Mizuki laughed when she saw the food.

“What the heck is this?”

Chisato came over.

“What have you got there? I want to see!”

It was in Chisato's nature to make people laugh, but she was also attracted by others laughing. If there was fun to be had, she wanted to be part of it.

“Take a look at this, Chisato.”

Mizuki pointed at the food Takina had placed on the kitchen table.

“What do you think of Takina's showstopper?” Mizuki asked, laughing uncontrollably.

Takina knew what Mizuki was laughing at. The wieners were okay, but the egg rolls had a strange spotty pattern, and it was blatantly obvious she'd sliced them and rolled after cooking because she'd failed to do it on the pan.

But it wasn't just the eggs...

“These rice balls, aren't they something else? Not balls. They're majestic pyramids!”

The rice balls were an unexpected failure. Takina thought it'd be easy to make them. She had experience making oval *ohagi*, so triangular rice balls shouldn't have presented any difficulty. They were a staple anyone could make.

Well, as it turned out, that wasn't true for her. However much she tried, she couldn't get them into a triangular shape. She wondered how anyone could squeeze the rice into a triangle shape when human hands weren't flat. Despite her best efforts, she ended with pathetic, pyramid-shaped rice balls.

“Okay, don’t eat it, then. Every time I try to cook for you, it ends in fail—”

“Takina!” Chisato pressed her finger to Takina’s lips. “No negativity!”

Takina shut her mouth, not finishing what she was going to say. She wasn’t allowed to voice it, but she felt pretty negative. She turned away from Chisato and Mizuki and started washing the dishes as the girls talked behind her back.

“Maybe she’s never made this before.”

“Bet she didn’t.”

“Oh! Mizuki, look! Octopus wieners! She even gave them little eyes with sesame seeds!”

“That’s surprisingly detailed.”

“Yeah! And they’re tasty, too!”

“They’re just wieners. Anyone can fry a wiener, and it’ll taste good... Huh. Despite the appearance, the egg roll tastes normal.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty solid. Now, what about...?”

They were about to try the rice balls. Takina clenched her teeth, bracing herself for harsh comments. The rice balls were her biggest mistake. She thought she could do basic cooking. She wasn’t a total klutz.

How foolish she’d been to think she could cook well if she’d only applied herself and followed the instructions to the letter, step-by-step. The wieners were fine, but even though she’d followed the cooking video demonstrating how to make the rolled omelet, she’d failed, and the rice balls were a disaster.

Takina had really tried her best, but she’d made rice pyramids. Each new try ended with the same result. There must have been some trick to it that she just didn’t know.

“Don’t force yourself to eat that. I’ll eat it all. Better it ends in my mouth than in the trash can...”

“Takina.” Chisato called her name to stop her.

Takina turned around. Chisato held one rice pyramid in her hands, but a bite had already been taken out of it. She looked Takina in the eyes.

...And then she smiled.

“It’s yummy!”

Takina gasped. Chisato’s smile and words praised Takina and her cooking efforts. They felt like one big hug.



Takina pressed her lips together and turned back toward the sink. Blushing or letting her happiness show would be so unspeakably embarrassing for her.

Damn you, Chisato, Takina thought. It was not that Chisato had done anything wrong to her, but Takina somehow felt vulnerable, and she didn't like it.

Intro 4

The item Kazuhiko held in his hand brought back fond memories. It was a Beretta 92, a beautifully crafted gun highly acclaimed by a whole generation of shooters. Besides being adopted by the American army, its elegant design made it a popular weapon to feature in movies and video games.

In the hand of a Japanese person, though, it looked clunky and heavy. A Japanese person couldn't use it with the same ease as an American or a European person.

Sitting at the counter at Café LycoReco, Kazuhiko held the gun hidden under the table lightly but with his fingers tightly closed around the grip. His index finger was stretched toward the trigger, not placed on it. He wasn't going to touch the trigger until it was time to shoot, time to kill. Only amateurs put their fingers on the trigger before it was necessary, or people driven into a corner who'd completely lost their cool. Kazuhiko wasn't a second-rate shooter like that.

He furtively glanced around. There were a few people seated here and there, posing as customers. They looked fake and relaxed, but he could sense they were coiled like a spring.

Kazuhiko was tense too. How could he not be? The job he had to do that day wasn't what he'd typically do in a café. He'd never dreamed of sitting at Café LycoReco with a gun in his hand.

Frankly, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle the gun as well as when he was younger, but at least he'd do better than any of those amateurs.

Kazuhiko's eyes met Yoshiharu Doi's. The older man was sitting at the far end of the counter. He smirked at Kazuhiko as if picking up on his tension.

Yoshiharu used to own several restaurants in Kinshicho, which was probably why he was so calm. He'd been through some rough times himself and was no

stranger to trouble.

Kazuhiko told himself to get a grip, not wanting to appear any less professional.

Ding-a-ling, rang the bell at the door. A customer. A blonde woman with a paper shopping bag. She was the target.

Kazuhiko's hand on the gun began to sweat.

"Have you...been waiting long?" the woman asked, stopping at the center of the café floor.

A black-haired woman stood up from a table on the second floor.

"You sure took your time... Got the goods?"

The black-haired woman walked down the stairs to the first floor. The woman with the bag smiled smugly.

"Of course... Look!"

She pulled out a gun from the bag. A small caliber revolver. She raised her arm to aim at the black-haired woman... On cue, Kazuhiko and the others jumped into action.

"Freeze!" they all shouted at once.

Everyone—Kazuhiko and Yoshiharu at the counter, a girl who looked to be a student and a lady with a baby sitting at the low tables in the tatami area, a uniformed schoolgirl on the second floor, and the dark-skinned barista who emerged from the kitchen carrying a shotgun—pointed their weapons at the blond woman. She stopped still, a look of surprise on her face, her gun not entirely aligned with her target.

The black-haired woman casually walked over to the blond woman and whispered, "I don't think you can take on six opponents with that five-round revolver."

"...Grr!"

They stood in silence, neither side backing down, the atmosphere so thick you could slice it with a knife...

“Okay, that’s good! Thanks, everyone!” called Itou, a manga artist filming the whole thing with a camera recorder.

The tension burst like a bubble, and everyone started talking, one over the other.

“I hadn’t been in a performance like this in forever.”

“It was fun, but I’ve been thinking, isn’t this sort of thing just done using 3D CG nowadays?”

“I wouldn’t have the budget for that or the programming know-how.”

“Wasn’t it so cool? Wasn’t it? I was super excited the whole time!”

“The only acting I’d done before this was in junior high. Maybe I should look for opportunities to do it more often!”

The customers were chatting and laughing together.

They’d agreed to participate in the recording to help out the manga artist, who needed it for reference for a scene that she was finding very difficult to draw. The blonde and the black-haired woman were played by Chisato and Takina, respectively. The first character was the protagonist of the manga series Itou was working on, and the latter was her rival. The protagonist was modeled after Chisato, so nobody was better than her for the role.

Itou had taken not only a video but also many photos of the scene. Everyone sat down together in the tatami area to take a look, suddenly feeling self-conscious and even a little embarrassed.

“I’ll base my drawings on the material collected today... And by ‘base on,’ I mean I’m going to trace the shots, so it will be very realistic... Does anyone want any changes or improvements to how their character will look?”

Yoshiharu asked her to make him look more like a dandy. The university student wanted Itou to dial up the coolness factor for her, and so on... But one actor’s request wasn’t like the others.

“Um... Can you draw Mr. Kazuhiko’s hand differently?” asked Chisato.

Kazuhiko was taken by surprise.

“Huh?”

Takina looked at the screen of Itou’s laptop and made a little noise of understanding.

“See, the way he’s holding the gun, that’s called ‘cup and saucer.’ He’s supposed to be a pro, but this makes him look amateurish.”

Kazuhiko had been holding the gun’s grip with his right hand, using his left palm to support it from the bottom. This “cup and saucer” hold wasn’t uncommon when revolvers were coming into their own. Still, since the introduction of semiautomatic ones like the Beretta, this way of holding the gun had become a giveaway that you were an amateur.

Supporting the grip from below was pointless. Kazuhiko should’ve held the gun’s grip with both hands for better stability, or he could have held it with one hand, and the arm extended, as Mr. Doi did, Chisato explained.

“When you shoot, your right hand absorbs the recoil, but if you put your left hand over it like this, you can absorb it with both hands, and you’re ready to fire again right away.”

Chisato demonstrated it to Itou, who took notes with interest.

“Gosh, I’m sorry,” said Kazuhiko. “That was the only hold I knew...”

In his teens, Kazuhiko had impulsively bought an air gun. He’d always held it using that “cup and saucer” method when playing with his friends, thinking that was the right way to do it. Now he felt a little embarrassed.

Itou and the others smiled at him and reassured him that he’d done great, especially since he hadn’t been given detailed instructions on handling the gun. What stung Kazuhiko the most, though, was that he had smugly told the manga artist before the shoot that he had experience with firearms.

“You’re surprisingly knowledgeable about guns, Chisato,” he said, changing the focus of the conversation away from himself.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Chisato’s laughter sounded somehow forced. “I just...watch a lot of movies, I guess!”

Was she self-conscious, or was it a subject she didn’t want to discuss for some

reason? Kazuhiko couldn't tell.

"You really are a movie buff, Chisato," said Itou. "Old or new, if it's action, you know it."

Chisato scratched the scruff of her neck bashfully.

"I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a movie buff. I just watch whatever seems fun. Like the other day, I bought the Blu-ray box set of the Alien series."

Kazuhiko grunted appreciatively. These days, most people streamed movies instead of buying physical copies—only collectors did that. And teenage movie collectors were a rarity. He asked Chisato about her motivation for buying Blu-rays.

"Hmm, how to explain? The picture and sound quality are better, and you know it won't suddenly disappear like when a movie's taken off streaming... But the biggest reason for me is the feeling that I actually own the movie. Like, I'm holding this famous movie right in my hands! Other than that... It makes it easier to recommend movies to friends! Like, here, watch this, it's awesome! With streaming, if your friend's signed up for a service that doesn't have that movie, it's not like they'll get a new subscription just to check it out, you know?"

Takina shot Chisato a tired look.

"She's been forcing me to borrow piles of Blu-rays."

"They're the very best movies, carefully selected by me! You like them, right?"

"I wish I hadn't wasted my time taking notes, thinking at first you were making me watch those movies for work."

That explained why the girls knew so much about guns, thought Kazuhiko. Chisato was a serious movie buff, and Takina learned about guns from all the movies Chisato forced her to watch. Cinephiles were known for enthusiastically recommending movies to their friends, and Chisato was no exception.

"Every now and again, Chisato tries to dump a bag of 'must-see' movies on me. Can't you give it up already, Chisato?"

“Don’t be so mean! I don’t just ‘dump’ random movies on you. They’re super fun, I promise!”

People who liked to recommend movies could generally be divided into a few categories. Chisato seemed to be in the “I liked it, so you watch it too!” category. She wanted her friends to see the movies she liked best so that they could enjoy talking about them together.

Kazuhiko used to have a similar hobby when he was in college. He’d go to video rental stores, which were going out of business fast at the time, and search for ultra-niche movies to show off to his friends as his “cool discoveries.”

It was something of an embarrassing memory to him. On careful introspection, he hadn’t changed much since then. Not so long ago, he’d wanted to boast about “discovering” Café LycoReco, to be the first to write about it and make it popular.

“Why don’t you take Takina with you to see the movies in a theater or take her home with you for a movie night, lock the door, and refuse to let her out until the last credits roll?” suggested Itou.

Takina gave her the stink eye.

“That would greatly inconvenience me.”

“Good thinking, Ms. Itou!” said Chisato.

She crossed her arms and looked slyly at Takina.

“Takina, my friend, won’t you come over tonight?”

“We’re working tonight.”

“Aww! You’re right...”

The schoolgirl... Was her name Kana? She looked curiously at Takina and Chisato.

“You work...at night?”

“That’s right, Kana. We have a secret after-hours job!” Chisato said cockily, putting her hands on her hips.

Kazuhiko exchanged glances with Yoshiharu. They read from each other’s

expressions that they had the same thought about what sort of “secret job” there was for young girls at night.

Chisato was remarkably well-endowed, and Takina was a classic beauty. In addition, there was no shortage of unsavory rumors about what happened at night in Kinshicho.

“Stop imagining dirty things, you two. They just do honest physical labor,” said Kurumi, walking out from the back.

The young girl looked like she’d just gotten up, even though it was well past noon.

“It’s social service. Removing trash off the streets of Japan,” she added.

Volunteering, then? But why did they have to do that at night...?

Kazuhiko cocked his head to the side.

Just then, Mika came over to the table, the last of the bunch, holding a shotgun in one hand and his walking stick in another.

“May I see? Hmm, nice. I look pretty good there.”

He didn’t really stand out in the video and pictures, looking very short behind the counter despite his height. In fact, his body was almost entirely obscured, with only the tip of his nose and his shotgun sticking out.

“Hold on...”

It suddenly occurred to Kazuhiko that it looked as if Mika was taking cover behind the counter in case his opponent shot back at him. He wasn’t acting like a confident action-movie hero like Yoshiharu, but neither did he make a rookie mistake like Kazuhiko. Mika’s acting was more down-to-earth.

Aware that it was wrong to judge people by their appearances, Kazuhiko wondered if Mika had been born and raised outside of Japan, in some country where guns were more common. That would explain how he handled the scene, wouldn’t it?

Kazuhiko’s list of Café LycoReco’s mysteries grew by one.

“I need something to keep me awake for the nighttime work. Can’t do it

without the stuff, Teach.”

“Of course, Chisato. I’ll get you your fix.”

“What are you talking about...?” asked Kana.

“Just finely ground dark roast beans.”

Only then did Kazuhiko realize that the stuff Chisato needed to stay awake was an espresso.

Chapter 4

LycoReco of the Dead

“Everybody, please remain calm. This may be the apocalypse, but don’t give up hope just yet. Help may arrive—”

Takina groaned, feeling a hard yet somehow reassuring wooden surface pressed against her cheek. She must’ve nodded off. Her body felt leaden, and her eyes didn’t want to open.

She began to register smells around her. There was the refreshing, slightly sweet aroma of coffee beans... The smell of Café LycoReco. There was another smell, too—Chisato’s.

“...Looks like this is it for this studio. We can hear them groaning outside. They’re just past the barricade now... Thank you, everyone, for doing your job right till the end... Argh! Aaaaargh!”

There was the crash of something breaking, a stampede, and screaming... followed by silence.

Takina could hear only even breathing. Not hers, though. But then, whose was it?

She opened her eyes with the effort of pushing open a heavy door, forcing her consciousness to rise out of the dark depths that were pulling it in.

At first, her vision was blurry, the world sepia colored. Then Takina’s eyes focused on Chisato’s face, her eyes closed.

“...Hnngh?”

Chisato was sleeping with her head on the café counter, dressed in her Lycoris uniform. As Takina’s awareness slowly returned, she realized she was sitting next to Chisato, her head on the counter, facing her partner.

It was rare for Takina to nod off, and it was even more strange that she'd nod off next to Chisato.

She sat upright and rubbed her eyes. Something didn't feel right. She looked around the café, which was empty, the last rays of the setting sun bathing the interior in their orange glow. *Hold on.* LycoReco got plenty of natural sunlight, having been built to make the most of the stained-glass windows, but the lights were always on nonetheless, so you'd never see that orange evening glow normally.

Why were the lights off? Was the café closed that day, or was it after opening hours?

Takina couldn't remember what day of the week it was. She looked at the TV, but it showed colored bars as if the broadcast was over. Takina took out her phone and checked the date and time—it was a regular day, still during their normal opening hours. Oddly, though, the phone wasn't getting a signal. There was no cellular network reception or even LycoReco Wi-Fi. Was the router off?

"Nn... Hmm?"

Chisato muttered, sat upright, and did a big yawn.

"Huh? Where is everybody? Where's Teach?"

"I don't know. I also only just woke up. Something's not right."

Chisato looked around, like Takina had earlier. She cocked her head.

"A blackout?"

It couldn't be. The TV was on.

Ding-a-ling rang the doorbell. The girls stood up on reflex.

"Welco... Er..."

Takina's voice got caught in her throat. The man who came in was clearly not okay. His clothes were dirty, torn, and stank like garbage. He was looking at them with lifeless eyes, his mouth hanging open, groaning inanely. Some of his skin was peeling off... He was rotting. In short, the man looked like a corpse. A moving corpse...

“He’s a zombie! Wow!”

Chisato excitedly ran over to the “customer.”

“What’s the occasion, some sort of event? The last time I checked, it wasn’t Halloween today! Wow, this getup is super realistic!”

If he was a cosplayer, his costume was worthy of a Hollywood movie. The rotten smell, though, betrayed that this wasn’t just a fancy outfit.

This man was, without doubt, a zombie, as Chisato said. But that only raised more questions in Takina’s head. Why...? How...? Takina had to push them out of her mind since this was no ordinary situation, and she couldn’t afford to become confused. Confusion prevented swift action, making matters worse. It was irrelevant why the zombie was there. Its presence was a fact—a fact that had to be dealt with. In emergencies, you didn’t have the luxury to carefully analyze the situation. You had to act.

Takina picked up one of the counter stools and threw it with all her strength at the zombie, hitting it square in the face. The stool shattered, and the zombie staggered backward, falling out of the café and landing on its butt on the street outside.

“Takina! What did you do that for?!”

Ignoring Chisato, Takina went to lock the front door.

“That was mean, Takina! That’s no way to treat a customer...”

“Did that look like a customer to you?”

“Huh? Did he look like a customer? Well, he looked like a zombie...”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Maybe he’s from Hawaii.”

“What?”

Suddenly, there was a loud bang on the door.

“See, Takina? He’s angry now!”

“Do you think a normal person would knock on the door, without even saying a word, after having a stool thrown at their face? No. A normal person would

call the police or an ambulance.”

“Um... Yeah, probably, but he could be really tough. Let’s check on him.”

“Why are you siding with the zombie?”

“Because... Come on, Takina. He can’t be a zombie.”

“It does seem crazy, but there he was.”

“Let’s calm down, okay? You must be watching too many movies. Or reading too much manga.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, Chisato.”

“Okay, then... Too many video games?”

“You’re starting to make me angry.”

“Not games, then... TV?”

“You’re being awfully persistent about this.”

“I know—old variety shows? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Let’s think about this rationally, okay? That dude was a bit...rotten, right?”

“Yes, he appeared to be in a state of decay, just like a zombie would—”

“Hold up, Takina. The popular image of a zombie being a rotting corpse comes from old movies. Now, the canon is that a virus causes zombification, but in the past, it was the result of black magic or some religious stuff. The dead would crawl out of the graves. But that’s impossible here because dead bodies get cremated in Japan!”

“Wait, Chisato. In the movie we saw at the theater with Mr. Doi, it was a virus turning people into zombies, but they were a bit rotten, weren’t they?”

“That was just a way of showing that it was a long time since they’d become infected.”

“Oh.”

That changed everything. A rotten zombie was impossible in Japan, regardless of whether a virus or magic had zombified them. A corpse would need many days to rot to that extent unless it were the height of summer... No, even then it

would take quite a while. Waking up to a world filled with rotting zombies was absolutely impossible.

“But then, how do you explain him?”

“I honestly think he’s just a very dedicated cosplayer.”

“Shall we check?”

“Yeah.”

They unlocked the door and opened it. On the other side was the man, his neck bent in a disturbing direction. He groaned.

Simultaneously, the girls kicked him off into the distance and locked the door again.

“Takina, I think that was a genuine zombie.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying...”

They looked at each other, thinking for some time.

“We need to get a better handle on the situation,” Chisato said in the end.

She ran over to a window and peered outside. Meanwhile, Takina went to lock the rear door and checked the café for potential intruders, looking for the rest of the LycoReco crew. She opened the closet where Kurumi liked to sit, but all she found there was Kurumi’s computer, which was switched off.

Thinking it best to be armed, Takina fetched her and Chisato’s gun satchels from the staff room.

Back on the café floor, she saw Chisato holding the TV remote.

“The TV isn’t getting any signal. My phone also has no internet, and I can’t make calls.”

“That’s what I found as well. I got out equipment, just to be safe. I didn’t find the others.”

“Oh. I hope they’re okay... There’s nobody but zombies outside. No living humans... I’m getting a little worried.”

“If more of those things are outside, we should assume that the police...no,

the city is dead.”

“Why’s all this exciting stuff happening so out of the blue?”

“You think this is...exciting?”

“Sure is! Are you not excited? It’s like a fantasy coming to life! Have you never fantasized about something like this? Narrowly escaping the zombies and barricading yourself in a shopping mall with a few other survivors... Wait, this is it! A shopping mall! Let’s go! We have to! It’s our calling as zombie apocalypse survivors!”

“Chisato, there aren’t nearly as many big shopping malls here in Japan like the ones you’d see in movies. Besides, those malls have too many entrances we’d need to block, and then we’d have to find and destroy any zombies already inside. It’s too much work for the two of us. I know what sort of fun you’re looking forward to, but allow me to remind you, there are no gun stores in Japanese shopping malls.”

“Aw, damn... But there could be stores with chain saws, at least.”

“...You don’t want to be killing those zombies with a chain saw, trust me.”

A chain saw could be used to cut a skinned carcass with no blood in it... But cutting zombies would quickly result in the chain saw getting clogged with blood, flesh, bits of clothing, and hair. Moreover, chain saws were heavy and unwieldy. In the worst-case scenario, the chain might suddenly snap and be flung in an unforeseen direction... There could be all sorts of trouble. It wasn’t a sensible weapon.

Takina explained all this to Chisato, who looked at her with irritation.

“It’s like you have no dreams, Takina.”

“I do have a dream, to become a first-rank Lycoris and—”

“That’s not what I meant! More like indulging in fantasies sometimes, even if they’re not realistic!”

“I have no interest in that. More importantly, we need more information. The emergency bag should have a radio.”

“Radios, huh...? Why can’t we ever be on the same wavelength, Takina? Why

can't we both enjoy this exciting adventure?"

"Maybe next time," Takina said dismissively.

Without further ado, she took the emergency bag from under the counter and removed the radio.

Ding-a-ling!

Startled, Takina raised her head over the counter to see who had come in, but nobody was there. The door was closed.

"Chisato...?"

Chisato was gone.

1

Only one radio station was still working. According to the broadcast, the mysterious zombie pandemic had started rapidly spreading in the early morning hours. By noon, Japanese cities had stopped functioning. It was unknown where the pandemic originated, but overseas countries seemed to have been thrown into chaos before Japan, so it didn't seem likely anyone overseas would be coming to Japan's rescue. Japan's Self-Defense Forces and police had quickly mobilized at the start of the pandemic, but whether any of them still survived was another unknown...

And just like in clichéd zombie movies, the zombies attacked humans to devour their flesh, and anyone bitten turned into another zombie.

The news station was barricaded and powered by a private generator. At times, the presenter could be heard weeping.

Takina noted everything down and then read her notes. The information was very strange. How could the pandemic spread so fast at such a scale? Supposing the zombie virus also sped up decay, it seemed unrealistic that the zombies would have gained so much ground in a single day. If all this had been going on since early morning, how had Takina and Chisato spent half of the day peacefully napping at the café counter?

It didn't make sense. The more Takina thought about it, the more she leaned toward one conclusion—a word Chisato had mentioned earlier.

“It’s...a dream.”

Everything that was happening pointed to that. This couldn’t be reality. But there was one problem still. Why would Takina be having a dream like that? It was more the sort of thing that—

Ding-a-ling!

“I’m baaack!”

It was Chisato, carrying on her shoulders two Boston bags with the price tags still attached.

“Don’t forget to lock the door, Chisato.”

“Huh? Are you not happy to see that I’m back alive? I thought you’d run to me crying, saying things like ‘I missed you!’ or ‘Where have you been, you idiot, you could’ve gotten killed!’”

“You took your satchel, so I knew you had your gun and could look after yourself. But I’d like you to refrain from rashly going off on your own again.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“What did you bring in those bags?”

“Food that keeps a long time, the canned stuff, and vitamins, aaand...this!”

Chisato took out a wooden baseball bat and, to Takina’s confusion, a DIY tool set.

“What’s the classic weapon to use against zombies? A spiked bat! But they don’t sell those, so I’ll have to make my own.”

“Suit yourself... And what’s the situation like outside?”

“Everyone’s a zombie! It’s too unreal to be scary. They kinda stink, but they’re so slow when they try to attack, I didn’t even need to use my gun in the end.”

Takina fell silent, thinking for a moment. She decided to share her hypothesis with Chisato.

“Chisato, I believe this is a dream.”

The sun had set, and it had gotten dark inside the café. Chisato went to press

the light switch.

“That’s what I think too. So, let’s enjoy it, Takina! Let’s not let this cool dream go to waste... Huh? There’s no electricity?”

Takina looked at the TV, which had earlier shown colored bars. It was off. The electricity must have been cut off at some point.

“We have a light,” she said, getting out an LED lantern from the emergency bag.

She switched it on, and Chisato immediately applied herself to drilling holes in the bat with an electric drill. She couldn’t simply hammer nails in, or the hardwood bat would crack, as she explained.

Takina wouldn’t have thought of that. If this was a dream...it wasn’t hers. But then, what was she? Was the person dreaming all this also dreaming of her? Did that include what she was thinking that very moment? That would mean...

2

The water supply got cut off at the same time as the electricity. Takina had filled some buckets with water while Chisato was away getting that baseball bat, but the amount of water she had saved wouldn’t last them long.

They couldn’t stay holed up in the café, Takina decided. They didn’t have sufficient supplies to stay there long, and it was highly unlikely that anyone who could help them would find them in that little café.

The girls discussed their options as they checked their supplies in the light of the LED lantern.

“If a shopping mall is a no, then the only other place to go I can think of is...a Self-Defense Force base?”

Chisato had drilled many holes in the baseball bat, methodically filling each one with glue and pushing a nail in. The weapon was beginning to resemble a hedgehog.

“The JSDF...might have all been wiped out.”

Takina fetched as much ammunition as she could from their armory and

began loading bullets into a magazine. She'd typically use round-nose full metal jacket bullets, but since their enemies would be mostly soft-bodied ex-humans, she went with hollow-points, reasoning that stopping power was more important than penetration.

"It doesn't matter if the soldiers got wiped out. There'll be supplies and weapons. Besides, they may be fine—the bases are supposed to function even if they get cut off from the grid if a war breaks out, right?"

She was right. JSDF bases were designed to be self-sufficient for a time even if they were completely cut off from local infrastructure...but Takina doubted the soldiers' survival for another reason.

"I don't think the JSDF would actually shoot anyone, even zombies."

"Oh... Good point..."

Japanese Self-Defense Force soldiers were taught how to use guns, but at the same time, it was instilled in them that they should never, ever shoot anyone. They were unlikely to be mentally prepared to use their guns against their fellow countrymen, even if they had become zombies. As a rule, soldiers who were deemed capable of shooting anyone would either be expelled or moved to special forces.

If the zombies made it inside the bases, the soldiers would probably all end up zombified.

"Will you shoot them, Chisato?"

Chisato stopped sticking nails into her bat. Takina also paused what she was doing and looked straight at Chisato.

"Dunno... I don't like the idea of killing anyone...but they're zombies."

"From what I can see, you can't wait to start killing the zombies."

Chisato looked down at the spiked bat and laughed. It wasn't the sort of weapon you'd choose if you weren't prepared to kill.

"It's probably a dream anyway, and we'll be fighting zombies, not people... If I have to, I'll shoot them with the bullets I normally use."

"Why not make an exception?"

“You know, even in games, I don’t like to change my play style just because another style might be stronger or more efficient, or it would up my chances of winning.”

“It’s a matter of pride, then?”

“Nah, I wouldn’t call it that. I just want to be myself right until the very end.”

“I see.”

Takina started loading Chisato’s magazines. If the zombies were in a state of decomposition, then Chisato’s rubber bullets would be just as effective against them. Or perhaps even more effective than regular rounds. If the zombies they were dealing with were as unnaturally soft as zombies in movies, then even hollow-point bullets might simply pass through them. Meanwhile, frangible plastic rounds worked both on hard and soft targets, and they might pack even more of a punch when the target was soft.

“So, Takina. Where do you think we should go?”

“DA headquarters.”

“Oh, good one!”

DA HQ was surrounded by a fence, and it was equipped to function self-sufficiently, although maybe not to the same extent as JSDF bases. DA had its own bases all over the country, but the one in the capital was the main one, where Chisato had grown up and Takina had trained. The headquarters used to be in Kyoto, but when Tokyo was made the new capital, DA moved their main forces there, building facilities for raising and training Lycoris, becoming Japan’s largest and best-equipped extrajudicial anti-terrorist organization.

The reason Takina suggested DA HQ was that its members were trained for combat and conditioned to kill. They weren’t taught only how to restrain armed opponents who attacked them first—they’d kill a defenseless person without a second thought if DA decided that person needed to be killed. National emergencies were their bread and butter. There was no organization better equipped to deal with the zombies than them.

Takina also suspected that there might be sister organizations DA would be able to reach out to.

DA was short for “Direct Attack.” A strange name for a secret organization. If it were a standalone organization, it would seem more appropriate for it to go by a vague codename, like the Lycoris did. Takina always suspected that “Direct Attack” sounded more like the name of a specialized group that maintained public order in Japan together with others, who, unlike DA, didn’t directly attack targets. DA was either allied with multiple other extrajudicial groups or just one organ of a much larger organization. There had to be some supervisory organization that had given DA its name.

Of course, nobody had ever mentioned the existence of such an organization to Takina. Still, anyone who thought about DA’s name would likely arrive at the same conclusion as she did. It was taboo, though, so the Lycoris didn’t discuss it even among themselves.

Whatever this secret umbrella organization was, it was certainly the most reliable institution out there, with the best combat readiness and survival potential.

“Okay, then, Takina. Let’s go say hi to Ms. Kusunoki!” Chisato said casually after Takina told her about her theory.

Did Chisato suspect the same? Or...did she know that there was an umbrella organization encompassing DA? Takina had a feeling that Fuki Harukawa was also in the know. Maybe once you became a first-rank Lycoris, DA shared some secrets with you?

Takina wondered if she’d ever be trusted with the whole truth about DA. Maybe when she finally put on a red First Lycoris uniform...

But that might never happen, with the world being taken over by zombies. It was pointless to daydream. Rather than let her mind wander or dwell on how frustrating the whole thing was, she should focus on surviving. She had to get a grip on herself.

“Okay... What next...?”

She finished loading the magazines and went back to the armory. There, she noticed two unusual gun cases that had never caught her attention. She opened them to check what was inside and found a sniper rifle and a shotgun. They must have been Chisato’s and Mika’s. What a lucky find. Not so much the sniper

rifle, but that shotgun would come in handy. It was Kel-Tec KSG. It would be loaded with nonlethal ammunition, Takina assumed, but just to be sure, she opened one shotgun shell to check. It held six rubber bullets with metal cores. At close range, one shot would be enough to send three henchmen to the hospital. If you fired it at someone's head, even nonlethal rounds would probably be enough to kill. And if your targets were zombies, you could take out a whole bunch of them with one shot.

Takina took the shotgun. She talked with Chisato about the sniper rifle, and they both agreed to leave it. They had enough stuff to carry as it was. Besides, a bolt-action gun would be too slow to use against a horde of zombies. As for zombies who were far away, it was better to simply ignore them than to snipe them. They didn't have to worry about ranged attacks.

The girls started packing the essentials into the Boston bags. Guns, ammo, maintenance kits, a portable stove, food, water, sanitary supplies and medicines, a change of clothes, flashlights, radios, chocolate-coated biscuits...

"Wait. Biscuits?"

"Um, yeah? They're yummy."

"Okay..."

Takina sighed and put the biscuits in the bag, knowing that it was pointless to argue with Chisato.

They stuffed the two Boston bags to max capacity. They were so heavy that the girls couldn't help but grunt when hoisting them onto their shoulders. They'd split the supplies between them, but the spiked bat, shotgun, food, and water accounted for most of the weight. Also, the weight wasn't distributed evenly, as the bags had to be carried on one shoulder. Backpacks would have been easier to carry, but the girls also had their satchels, so they had to make do with shoulder-strapping the Boston bags.

Even Chisato grimaced when she lifted her bag.

"I can walk with it, but I'm not signing up for a marathon or any kind of fighting."

"Let's get a car. We need transport anyway."

“Why didn’t you say so sooner? With a car, we can take way more stuff!”

“Because we can’t rely on having access to one at all times. We might have to ditch the car and run, so our luggage should be limited to what we can carry.”

When the situation is highly unpredictable, do you pack extra things just in case, or do you take as little as you can get away with, also just in case? It was a difficult choice. Either approach was justifiable and could prove to be a mistake, depending on the circumstances. Takina preferred to travel light, but if Chisato insisted, she’d consider agreeing to take a few more things. Chisato wasn’t fussed, though. It seemed she was happy as long as she had that spiked bat.

Packing supplies took them longer than expected. It was already quite late, so the girls decided to stay the night at the café. Takina took two futon mattresses out of the closet and spread them out on the tatami floor. Chisato immediately moved them so that they touched.

“Why did you do that?”

“It’ll be more fun!”

Chisato slipped under the quilt without taking off her uniform. She lifted the quilt on the other futon invitingly.

“Come on, don’t keep me waiting, Takina!”

Takina narrowed her eyes and took out the gun from her satchel.

“Yiiiikes! Are you mad at me?!”

“What are you talking about? I’m just putting it down by the pillow.”

“Ah, okay. I guess I’ll put my bat next to mine!”

Takina had been planning on them taking turns sleeping and keeping watch, three hours at a time, but she couldn’t be bothered to persuade Chisato to go with that. She wasn’t sleepy or tired, having only awakened from a nap a few hours earlier. She’d get in the futon but stay awake, keeping watch.

Takina tied her long hair with a scrunchie, letting the ponytail rest on her shoulder. She got under the quilt, a bit unhappy that her uniform would get creased, but taking it off was out of the question.

“I hope Teach and the others are okay.”

“They disappeared without a trace. I am also slightly concerned.”

Mika and Mizuki would sometimes go out, but Kurumi usually never left the café. Even before the zombies, danger awaited her outside of this safe haven. Her hacking skills were her lifeline, but the city had no electricity...

Kurumi kept her computer running 24/7, driving up the café's electricity bills, which led to arguments. Takina had never seen Kurumi's computer off before.

If this was a dream, it looked like Kurumi's character wouldn't be making an appearance.

“Hey, Takina... Is there someone you like-like? There's gotta be someone, right?”

“Why are you asking me this?”

The totally irrelevant question puzzled Takina. She turned to look at Chisato in the futon next to her...but the closeness of Chisato's face startled her, and she shuffled away.

“Talking about love is a classic for girls our age having a sleepover.”

“...Really? You want to talk about love when there are zombies prowling outside, and you're going to sleep with a spiked bat by your pillow?”

“As long as mankind survives, we humans can't help but talk about love! Come on, Takina, be honest with me now.”

“I have nothing to say on this subject.”

“I bet you do. Pretty sure you have a special someone. Well, Takina?”

Takina fixed her gaze on the ceiling, trying to ignore Chisato, but they were so close that Chisato's breath tickled her ear. Unable to bear it, Takina turned her back on Chisato.

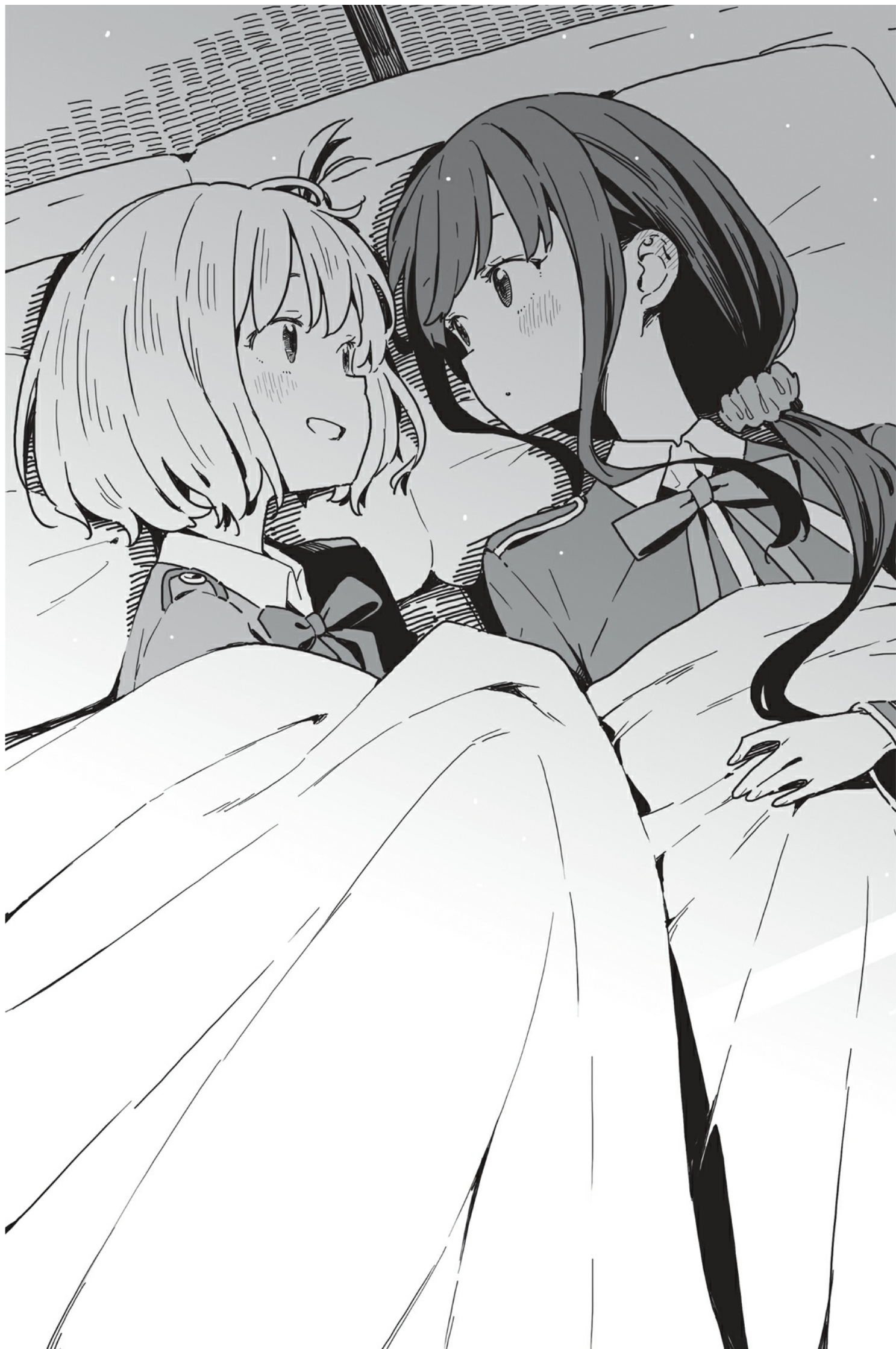
“Your hair is always looking great. It smells nice, too...” Chisato whispered.

Takina felt Chisato touching her hair. She ignored it, which Chisato took as a green light to remove Takina's scrunchie.

“Chisato! Stop fooling around— Eek!”

When Chisato buried her face in Takina's hair, the tip of her nose and her lips touching the nape of Takina's neck, Takina squealed, jerking away.

"That was a funny noise."



Chisato giggled, softly putting her arm around Takina from behind to snuggle up to her. She'd slipped under Takina's quilt.

Takina was about to remove Chisato from her futon with a kick when one of the windows shattered, letting in a horrible stench accompanied by loud groans. Zombies had broken in and were pouring inside one after another.

"Damn it! That clichéd trope of getting attacked right when things are getting good!"

"Stop talking nonsense, and let's get rid of them!"

Takina kicked away her quilt and grabbed the gun. Eight zombies had made it inside, although there might be more waiting on the street. The zombies were on the floor, having fallen while clambering through the window—nothing to be scared of.

Without hesitation, Takina shot one of the crawling zombies in the head. It was common knowledge that was where you should aim to kill zombies and, at such close range, where you could get a headshot without fail.

The zombie spasmed once and then stopped moving. Takina was reassured. They could be killed.

She started shooting the other ones without emotion.

"Chisato, grab the bags! We're getting out of here!"

LycoReco was a small café. Even though the opponents were mindless rag dolls, they might win if they swarmed the girls in there.

Takina regretted that she hadn't thought of boarding up the windows, using the tools Chisato had brought back with her. The zombies were coming after her and Chisato. She aimed at another one and pulled the trigger.

"Ugh... I don't know if I can do this..."

Like a scared little girl, Chisato stood petrified with that spiked bat in her hands.

"What are you doing, Chisato?!"

"It's just that they look so much like people... Or, they kind of are people...? I

somehow can't bring myself to hit them..."

"Okay, just grab the bags, and let's run—"

"Look, it's Mizuki."

"What?!"

Takina spun around and looked at the zombies crawling into the café. One of them, walking slowly, was certainly Mizuki. Her eyes were milky white, and her rotten skin was peeling off. She had bite marks on her body and even large gashes where flesh had been chewed off. Still, she was instantly recognizable as Mizuki.

Groaning ominously and with drool dripping from her open mouth, the zombie Mizuki was walking toward Chisato.

"Chiii...saaa...tooo..."

"Eeek! Mizuki, why are you one of them...? Why did they have to get you, waah...? DIEEE!"

Chisato swung back and hit Mizuki with the spiked bat, which broke on impact, but knocked Mizuki away, smashing her into the wall. She slowly crumpled onto the floor.

"Oh no, my bat broke?! My precious handmade spiked bat?!"

"That...that was good, Chisato. You've overcome your resistance against killing the zombies?"

"Um, well, I just felt that as a good friend, I should put her to rest. She was, like, totally zombified, after all. Besides, it's just a dream."

Chisato chucked the broken bat at Mizuki's corpse, quickly took out her trusty gun from her satchel, and loaded bullets into the chamber.

"Let's get out of here, Takina!"

"That's what I said earlier..."

Mizuki's body was lying curled up on the floor. Chisato didn't want to take any chances—she shot her zombified friend in the head. Then she hoisted her Boston bag onto her shoulder, ran to the front door, and unlocked it. Behind

were countless zombies, standing around as if they'd been waiting for the girls to come out. Chisato boldly approached them and began very precisely shooting them in the neck from an extended stance with the gun held diagonally in front of her face.

When she'd shot Mizuki, she must have realized that her nonlethal ammo might not penetrate the zombies' skulls, even though their bodies were softened by decomposition. That was why she aimed for the neck. A rubber bullet could kill a person if it hit the vulnerable neck at close range. It did even more damage to the rotting zombies. Their heads jerked upward as if punched from below, flesh bursting. Some had their heads completely severed from their bodies by the impact. Chisato was very efficiently mowing down the zombies.

The undead were sluggish, but it wasn't easy to shoot them precisely in the neck while they were moving, trying to lunge at them. Chisato didn't hesitate, though, executing them methodically like in the zombie games she played over and over: five bullets, five dead zombies. Chisato headed out into the street, reloading her gun.

"Don't throw the magazine away, Chisato! Think long-term. We might not have a chance to resupply for a while!"

Takina picked up the magazine Chisato had dropped and shoved it into her Boston bag. She sprinted after Chisato...

"Yiiikes!"

Takina bumped into Chisato, who was walking backward.

"What's wrong?! Oh..."

It was a surreal sight—the usually quiet area between the café and the Kinshicho Station was packed as if there was a street festival, except it was packed with zombies. And they were all looking at the girls, their cloudy white eyes gleaming in the darkness of a city without power. A primal fear made the girls shudder.

"Ugh, what do we do?! There're so many!"

"We make a path. Move over!"

Takina stepped out in front of Chisato, planted one leg in front of the other, and held her gun with both hands, arms extended. It wasn't quite the Isosceles stance or the Weaver stance, but a sort of modified Isosceles combat stance suited to rapidly shooting multiple targets to the left or right of the shooter as they created a break in the enemy lines.

Takina firmly braced her feet against the ground and locked her upper body in position. She would turn only at her hips, moving like a gun turret.

The zombies groaned and started shambling toward the girls. Takina opened fire, taking them down one by one, starting from the targets closest to her, like it was shooting practice. She had told Chisato earlier not to discard empty magazines, but there was no time for her to save hers. She let the empties drop to the ground, loaded new ones, assumed the same stance again, and fired.

It was surprisingly easy. The zombies were about the same height and moved in a predictable line toward the girls without trying to dodge, one wave after another. It was almost too easy. As long as she had enough ammunition, Takina could keep going... Or so she thought.

Assuming there'd be no need for stealth, she hadn't attached a suppressor. Because of that, the continuous gunfire not only made her ears hurt, but the muzzle flash also partially blinded her. She could still make out what was near her, but everything else blended into the darkness.

"Chisato! See any cars we could take?!" Takina shouted over the crack of gunfire.

"Let me see... There's a delivery van parked outside Mr. Orimoto's store!"

Bingo, thought Takina. Mr. Orimoto from the thrift store used an old van. Without Kurumi's support, the girls wouldn't have been able to hijack a newer car with electronic security, but an old van could be easily broken into and jump-started with the tools they had.

"I'll clear the way!"

Takina switched to Weaver's stance and turned toward Mr. Orimoto's thrift store. The street was chock-full of zombies. Why did there have to be so many of them? Takina clicked her tongue in annoyance...

Bang! There was an explosive shot. A whole bunch of zombies got knocked away, falling like dominoes. Chisato lined up with Takina. She was holding the shotgun.

“Let’s go, partner!”

3

The Toyota HiAce engine started. Takina crawled back from under the dashboard, dropped her tools there, clicked her seat belt, and took the steering wheel.

“Get in, Chisato!”

“Aye!” Chisato shouted back from the roof, where she was shooting the incoming zombies.

She dropped her shotgun inside through the open sunroof, jumping down after it...

“Gwah! My boobs! Owwww!”

The sunroof was by no means big, and on her way down, Chisato’s large breasts got caught on the edge, slamming into it with a thud, her whole body weight momentarily supported by them alone. She kicked with her feet in the air, slowly squeezing through. After finally dropping onto the rear seat, Chisato pressed her hands to her breasts, writhing from pain.

“Okay if I drive now?”

“Yeah, just go!”

Takina switched on the high beams. A mass of zombies crowded in front of the car. By then, the girls were getting used to it.

Takina disengaged the parking brake, simultaneously stepping on the accelerator. The car jerked into motion, shaking disturbingly as it collided with squishy bodies, gaining speed. Zombies in the way stood no chance against the accelerating, heavy vehicle, getting knocked out of the way or ridden over.

Chisato unsteadily clambered over to the passenger-side seat, hindered not so much by the shaking but by the lingering pain in her breasts. She put on her

seat belt...and pressed her hands to her chest again, whimpering.

Takina shot a sideways glance at Chisato, noticing tears in her eyes. She really did seem to be in a lot of pain.

“I thought my boobs were going to get ripped off... I used to be able to easily fit through small windows like that.”

“I’m sure you did, but you’ve grown... Let’s get on the highway. There should be fewer zombies there.”

Takina headed to the interchange close to Kinshicho Station. A bar blocked the on-ramp, but she ignored it and drove right through it.

As expected, it was easier on the highway. There were some abandoned cars here and there, but no zombies. Takina thought she’d made the right call. The visibility was good there, too.

“It’s kind of eerily calm, isn’t it? You’d think there’d be fires breaking out, but the city’s just dark and quiet.”

“Isn’t that because the zombies took over so fast? The electricity went out soon after the outbreak, so that’s why there aren’t any fires.”

Takina’s thoughts went briefly to the situation at power plants, but she quickly resolved that worrying about something she had absolutely no control over was pointless.

They drove for some time. Chisato’s face finally relaxed, as if the pain in her breasts had subsided.

“Hmm. Not bad.”

“What is?”

“Driving on the dark highway, just me and my partner, like there’s no one else in the world... It’s kind of awesome, actually.”

“Are we going from zombies to a road movie theme? You like that genre, too, don’t you?”

“Well, wouldn’t it be nice to just keep driving like this forever?”

“You can’t drive forever. Sooner or later, we’ll run out of fuel and food...”

There'll be nothing nice about that."

"But being together, just me and you."

Takina thought about it silently for a while, confused.

"Sorry, what do you mean?"

"I think that was pretty self-explanatory."

"A group is preferable to a pair, and an organization can achieve even more... Am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong, but...wouldn't you like it?"

"Wouldn't I like what?"

"Just the two of us, together forever."

Takina turned onto a road going west and tried to imagine a future with just her and Chisato in Japan, overtaken by zombies...

If they put their minds to it, they could create a safe zone by exterminating all the zombies in a specific area. As for food, they could scavenge from people's houses and stores for a long time. Drinking water could be sourced from springs, which were prolific in Japan, or even wells...

That couldn't go on forever, though. With nobody to help, they'd be limited in what they could do. They didn't have the specialist knowledge or facilities to live their whole lives in that world, and some things were impossible without more people.

Both Takina and Chisato possessed specialist skills that the average civilian didn't, and it'd be a waste if they couldn't put those skills to use.

On second thought, Takina realized that Chisato wasn't asking her to envisage how they could survive by themselves. It took Takina a while to realize that.

No, Chisato didn't want a detailed survival plan. She probably didn't think too far into the future, basing her choices on whatever seemed the most fun at the moment rather than on efficiency. Chisato put having a good time before that. And she certainly didn't care what happened to the country. What she was asking was...literally how Takina would feel about being alone with Chisato.

Takina thought about how she'd felt in the past and how she'd feel if that were to be her future. A lot had happened in her life since being kicked out of DA. She and Chisato would have participated in many more missions together if it hadn't been for the sudden zombie outbreak. Takina didn't work as a Lycoris for the sake of Japan. She did that for herself. Same with her work at the café... With Chisato as her partner in both of those lives. Not so long ago, Takina had seen that as a merely tolerable state of affairs. But now...

"I suppose...it wouldn't be so bad," she eventually muttered quietly, as if talking to herself.

The pause between Chisato's question and Takina's answer was several minutes long. Maybe it was even longer than ten minutes. It didn't seem like part of the same conversation. Chisato would probably assume Takina was thinking out loud about something else, and that was fine. Takina didn't feel a particular need to convey her thoughts to Chisato. She'd only done that bit of introspection because Chisato had asked.

"Shall we go, then?" asked Chisato.

Takina turned to look at her. Chisato was looking out the side window, but she slowly turned toward Takina. Their eyes met. A bashful smile appeared on Chisato's face.

"Shall we go somewhere far away, just the two of us?"

Chisato had been waiting for that reply from Takina, despite the unreasonably long pause. She'd been patiently waiting to hear what Takina thought about them.

"Um..."

Takina wasn't sure what that little noise she'd made meant. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel without meaning to, and she pulled her focus back to what she was holding, where she was, and what she was doing.

She was driving a car on the highway at close to a hundred kilometers per hour. She had to keep her eyes on the road.

With that excuse to convince herself, Takina took her eyes off Chisato and looked straight ahead. Looking at Chisato any longer would have been

dangerous, or so she thought.

Would she have been able to break eye contact if she hadn't been driving? She wasn't sure, and this uncertainty puzzled her.

Takina told herself to get a grip. She must have subconsciously stepped harder on the accelerator because their speed increased slightly.



“...No. We’re going to DA HQ.”

“Whaaat? Oh, come on!”

Chisato whined like a kid having a tantrum.

“It’s for our survival. The alternative is a slow path to unavoidable death.”

“Hmm... Yeah, I guess... Hmm... Okay, I guess DA it is... I don’t like this, though...”

“DA? Because they kicked you out?”

“No, no, it’s not about that at all. You know how it is in postapocalyptic stories with zombies. It always ends with humans fighting humans, no? I honestly hate that. The fun, action-packed story where humans fight monsters suddenly turns into drama, bitterness, hurt feelings, loss, and love stealing the spotlight. I want zombies, not human drama! Kill the zombies, not each other!”

Chisato fell silent, and Takina also didn’t speak. She wondered if she’d misunderstood the intentions behind Chisato’s earlier question. Was Chisato asking her if she agreed it was better for them to be alone than with other people because conflict was guaranteed to arise in a larger group? Was that all there was to it instead of...what Takina imagined Chisato had been implying?

Takina broke out in a cold sweat as embarrassment washed over her. She thought she might even blush, or maybe she was blushing already. It was dark outside and in the car, so nobody could see whether she was blushing or not.

Why did she jump to conclusions to begin with? Takina clenched her jaw, internally battling embarrassment and regret.

“Is something wrong, Takina?”

“Nothing... Nothing’s wrong...”

“No, you’re being weird. What is it? Tell me.”

Chisato shuffled closer. Takina sensed Chisato’s proximity. She could pick out the gentle scent of Chisato in the air. Usually, neither of those things would affect her, but somehow, her pulse began to quicken.

Chisato touched Takina’s cheek.

“Chi-Chisato! What are you doing?!”

Chisato’s fingers were warm and so soft that it seemed inappropriate that they often held a pistol. Her fingertips first touched Takina’s cheek, then traced her jawline all the way to Takina’s left ear...

Takina squirmed in her seat, leaning away to escape Chisato’s touch.

“S-stop it!”

“Oh gosh! Takina, you feel so hot! Do you have a fever?!”

Looking suddenly worried, Chisato tried to move closer again to peer at Takina’s face.

“No! I don’t... What the...?!”

Light fell on the windscreen. A car coming from the other direction? No. It wasn’t coming from someone else’s headlights. It was the reflection of the van’s own full beam lights off a car lying on its side in their path. Driving at a hundred kilometers per hour, Takina had no time to swerve and avoid it. They crashed into it really badly.

4

“Hey now, chin up! Your fever seems to be gone!” Chisato said in her carefree way.

Takina was in so much shock that she remained frozen for a while. As a professional, she couldn’t forgive herself for losing her calm and letting Chisato distract her on the road. How could she, Takina, make such a stupid mistake? She sat on top of the van lying on its side, pulled her knees up to her chin, and tried to process her self-inflicted humiliation.

“Neither of us got hurt, so there’s no reason to feel bad! Isn’t it awesome how seat belts and airbags keep people safe?!”

It wasn’t true that they’d made it out of the crash without a scratch. Takina’s pride was deeply hurt.

Chisato went to pull out the Boston bags from the car. She hung them on her shoulders and climbed to sit next to Takina, anticipating a zombie attack. By

taking position on top of the overturned van, they'd have a high vantage point to deal with the first wave easily. If the zombies somehow managed to approach them undetected, they'd make noise and shake the van trying to climb up to the girls, alerting them to their presence.

Chisato opened her bag and took out the portable stove, a bottle of water, and a small silver pot.

"Might as well take a break, huh?"

Takina was sensitive to the word "break" after breaking the car and her spirit.

"Are you making espresso?"

"Yeah. I know we were supposed to pack only essentials, but I'd be miserable with a pour-over coffee maker. Don't look at me like that. I brought ground coffee, although I was tempted to bring a mill and whole beans!"

What Chisato did bring was a tall, silver moka pot for brewing coffee on the stove. All she needed to do was unscrew the top, fill the boiler chamber at the bottom with water, and fill the filter funnel in the middle with ground coffee, packing it tight. Then she would screw all the pieces back together and put the pot on the stove. As the water began to boil, the steam in the lower chamber created pressure, forcing the hot water upward, through the grounds in the filter part, and into the collection chamber. A moka pot used steam pressure, unlike a pour-over.

Mainstream cafés used large machines to prepare espresso by running hot water through the grounds at high pressure. This quick process resulted in a rich brew. Brewing coffee on a gas stove took more time, but that was how it was done at Café LycoReco.

Both of these methods resulted in great-tasting coffee, but Takina had a personal preference for stovetop coffee.

As the flames licked the bottom of the pot, the water came to a boil, and the pot began to rattle quietly from steam bubbling up or from the buildup of pressure. You could imagine what was going on inside. Soon the rich aroma of coffee began to spread through the air, steam hissing as the hot espresso collected in the top chamber. The scent of coffee suddenly grew intense,

enveloping the girls with its calming magic. When the sound changed to a gurgle and the lid rattled, it was a sign that the coffee was ready.

Chisato picked up the pot, holding the handle through a handkerchief, and poured the espresso into two mugs. The amount was about half the volume of a small coffee can per person, but that was enough. Lastly, Chisato dropped a sugar cube into each mug.

Only then did it occur to Takina that the moka pot Chisato had brought was a two-cup one intended for two people. They had others at the café, ranging from one-cup to four-cup ones... Maybe Takina was right after all about what Chisato had been asking her earlier...

“Here, enjoy!”

No, that couldn't be it... That was what Takina told herself firmly, taking the mug Chisato offered her.

The girls clinked their steaming mugs as if they were toasting to something, bringing them to their lips. The flavor was rich and bitter, but the sweetness of sugar softened it. The powerful aroma of the brew spread through the mouth, escaping through the nose with each breath.

Each mug had only so little coffee, but that was fine. It wasn't the sort of coffee you'd down in big gulps. Like whiskey, it was meant to be enjoyed in tiny sips, savoring each one with all your senses.

“Oh, did you want milk?”

“No, I think it's best like this.”

Other flavors would only obstruct the deliciousness of that coffee. At the moment, Takina wanted to focus fully on that clean taste, lapping it up a bit at a time. She let out a slow, deep exhale, feeling tension and bad thoughts leave her body.

“Hmm... Heh-heh, I can't make it as good as Teach's coffee somehow. I wonder what he does differently!” Chisato said with a slightly frustrated smile.

When making coffee on the stove, none of the steps were automated, so you could get quite different results depending on who was making it, Takina

thought. Even if you tried to do it exactly the same as another person, you might use an ever-so-slightly different amount of grounds, packing them more or less tightly into the filter funnel, or you might use a stronger or weaker flame. Those micro-differences gave the espresso a unique personality.

Takina took another sip. Her lips stretched into a delicate smile.

“It may not be the same, but I like it. You make delicious coffee.”

Chisato looked at Takina blankly for a second, but then her face lit up with a big smile.

“You think so? Yay! All right, now I’ve got the energy to last me all night!”

“Yes, no chance of sleeping after drinking this.”

The belief that espressos, being so small and traditionally done with dark roast beans, contained less caffeine than a cup of pour-over coffee even though espressos were more flavorful was false. This myth spread through Japan because of an article on an online blog—perhaps it was written by mistake, or the claims were intentionally made up—which was then ripped off by lots of other outlets due to the attention-grabbing potential of that counterintuitive information. After being repeated by many media sources, it began to be taken for granted.

The truth was that an espresso made by a coffee machine contained about the same amount of caffeine as a large cup of coffee from a pour-over. Brewing coffee on a stove might increase the caffeine content, as members of the LycoReco crew would confirm, based on firsthand experience. As to why that was—more grounds per cup or longer brewing time—that was anybody’s guess.

It had been Itou the manga artist and Yoneoka the writer who had brought the higher caffeine content of LycoReco’s coffee to the crew’s attention. They both claimed stovetop coffee was more potent than any energy or vitamin drink, helping them meet tight deadlines.

Takina and Chisato habitually drank espresso with lots of sugar before nighttime missions. With the extra energy from sugar, they could be sure they wouldn’t be sleepy until morning.

That night, they were having coffee in the small hours before morning. They

definitely weren't going to sleep anytime soon, which was fine since it'd be some time before they reached a safe place.

"Have some of these, too, Takina!"

Chisato got out the chocolate-covered biscuits from her bag. It was a popular brand. The biscuit had a satisfying crunch, and the melt-in-the-mouth chocolate on top was great too. These were quality biscuits, but they'd pair better with regular coffee than sweet espresso. That said, there was nothing wrong with having sweet biscuits with sweet coffee—it was just what the girls' tired bodies needed.

"They taste good."

"Right?! I love these biscuits!"

Chisato was unreliable in many ways, but her snack choices and her taste buds could be trusted.

Before she knew it, Takina had shaken off the trauma from the car crash and was chatting with Chisato, snacking on biscuits as if it were a perfectly normal day. They talked about movies, guns, the café...and for some reason, also about Mr. Doi. At times, Chisato would throw in random questions, too.

"...And next time we're in a pinch, I'll rip my sleeves off. Sleeveless shirt's the way to go."

"Because it doesn't constrict movement?"

"Nah, to unlock my full power."

"What are you talking about...?"

"Huh? Don't tell me you don't get the reference. Aw, man! You haven't studied that one yet, huh...? That's why you didn't get it... Makes sense."

"Sorry, but what do you mean? I didn't study what?"

"That foreign zombie movie where the main character only unlocks his full power when he's sleeveless! He's superhot, too, even though he's played by Norman Reedus."

"Ah, he was in *The Boondock Saints*, wasn't he?"

“Yeah! That’s him! Good memory, Takina!”

“That was one of the movies you made me watch without explanation soon after I joined LycoReco.”

“I gave you those movies hoping we’d become best buddies like the heroes! *The Boondock Saints* is my favorite! It’s so cool, fun, and just the best all around! I’m older than you, though, so you can have the role played by Norman.”

“I don’t really want a role...”

“Besides, my favorite character in that one is the FBI agent, Smecker!”

Takina laughed, not really caring, and finished her espresso. There was some undissolved sugar at the bottom of the mug. She enjoyed crunching it between her teeth and she just couldn’t get enough of the intense sweetness.

It suddenly hit her that it wasn’t so bad, spending time with Chisato like this. Zombies had taken over the world, they were sitting on top of the van she’d crashed, and their future was uncertain...but somehow it felt nice.

Maybe it was just the magic of that delicious espresso.

Or was it...?

“Hmm?”

Chisato sensed that Takina was looking at her, and she turned toward her, cocking her head to the side. She looked so pretty.

Takina thought back to the conversation in the van.

“Shall we go somewhere far away, just the two of us?”

Had Chisato asked her again, Takina would have said yes without thinking.

It was just a dream, wasn’t it? They could do whatever they wanted without worrying about risks, drawbacks, consequences... The bubble of that dream world would burst at some point anyway. The Takina from the dream would disappear. And if so, she might as well follow her heart like Chisato.

It was a dream. Just a dream. In a dream, you could do anything.

At the same time, a calm voice in the corner of Takina’s mind reminded her

not to be rash and not to use the fact that she was in a dream as an excuse to stop acting like herself.

Chisato was always true to herself, for better or for worse. Takina liked the idea of being herself too.

It was a conundrum: Be yourself or follow your heart. Either choice had its positives and negatives. Placed on a scale, the plates would keep shifting ever slightly up or down, never giving a clear answer. Takina felt uneasy. She wanted someone to push her in one direction or another, but that would be shifting responsibility for a choice she should make herself to someone else.

On the other hand... There was nobody except Chisato around. If Takina wanted someone to give her a push, it would have to be Chisato. Had Takina subconsciously made the decision already? Was...*that* what she wanted?

Takina felt her pulse quicken.

“You okay, Takina?”

Takina could see Chisato’s face clearer than before. Dawn must be approaching. The darkness of the night was subsiding.

“I’m okay... Chisato, the sun will rise soon. As soon as it gets bright, let’s get going, even if we don’t head directly to—”

Takina suddenly stopped, shocked by what she saw in the direction of the ruined old radio tower in the east. Against the brightening sky, she could see the tower and the silhouette of some giant creature.

“Oh, a monster,” Chisato stated matter-of-factly.

“What?”

Takina nearly dropped her mug. She couldn’t believe her eyes. The creature, with the rising sun behind it, was enormous. Remarkably so. It must have been hundreds of meters tall. And based on its outline against the sky, it was a squirrel walking on two legs.

“Quaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” roared the squirrel.

A squirrel shouldn’t be roaring, but this one certainly just had; its roar was so powerful that it made the air vibrate... It sounded oddly cute. Actually, its voice

sounded exactly like Kurumi's.

The monstrous squirrel approached the old radio tower, laying waste to the buildings in its way. Then it hit the tower with its paws. The city's symbol of peace broke into pieces like a brittle plastic model with a thunderous rumble. A terrible shock wave shook the ground.

"Right... First zombies, then a giant monster. That's how it goes."

"And with the squirrel's appearance, any semblance of reality is gone... I'm... not sure what to do now. What do you think?"

"What to do about the squirrel? I don't know. It's not like we could take it out with our guns."

They looked at each other, at a complete loss as to what to do. Just then, they heard a different rumble, and the ground began to strangely shake again. They turned toward the noise and saw a tank driving on the highway.

Takina was not surprised by anything anymore.

The tank stopped in front of them, and the hatch opened with a bang. A familiar face popped up—it was Mika.

"Ooh! Teach! I thought you weren't going to make an appearance!"

"The hero always arrives late. Well, Chisato and Takina. Are you ready to battle the monster?"

"Sure! Do you even need to ask? I love this sort of stuff!"

Chisato quickly packed up the portable stove and mugs, threw both bags into the tank, and hopped on top.

"Come on, Takina!"

She extended her hand toward Takina.

One moment, they were trying to escape from a zombie-infested city. The next, they were heading off to battle a giant monster... They were surprisingly busy, with barely any time to rest. Takina was glad they at least got to have a short coffee break.

"All right... All right, let's do this, Chisato."

Takina took Chisato's hand and let her friend pull her onto the tank and into her embrace.

"Okay, girls, we're heading in. Hold on tight."

Mika disappeared back into the tank, closing the hatch behind him.

"Off we go to save Japan and restore peace!"

Takina let Chisato hold her as the tank drove toward the ruins of the old radio tower, where the giant monster awaited.

There was always something happening with Chisato around, Takina thought. That was the norm ever since they'd met several months earlier. And actually, it wasn't so bad, although Takina wasn't sure when she'd started to enjoy it...

5

"Takinaaaa... Let's go..."

Takina awoke with a start, hearing Chisato's whisper right next to her ear. Her whole body tensed up. She quickly looked around, trying to remember where she was and what was happening. As to the first question, she was in a car, but it wasn't the van she had been in before. The interior looked familiar... It was Mizuki's car, and Takina and Chisato were in the back seat.

Takina looked out of the window next. They were driving on the highway toward the old radio tower. Based on the sun's position relative to the tower, it was late morning.

"Oh, you're awake?" Mizuki glanced at Takina in the rearview mirror. "The handover to DA took so long, didn't it? It turned into an all-nighter. It's okay if you want to nap some more."

"No, I'm fine..."

Memories were slowly returning to Takina, like droplets of water soaking into a piece of fabric until it was fully saturated. She remembered they'd been working on a drug dealing case, uncovering the supply route. They'd had to pursue their target, and they were on their way back from handing them over.

"You're going to work after we get back to the café, right? You'd better take a

page out of Chisato's book and rest while you can."

At the mention of Chisato's name, Takina suddenly realized why she was feeling strangely heavier on one side. Chisato was in the seat next to her, but she'd fallen asleep with her head on Takina's shoulder.

"Shoot... Keep shootiing..."

Takina pushed Chisato away toward the other side of the car, but as soon as she let go of her, Chisato slumped onto her shoulder again. Takina was annoyed, but she couldn't do anything about it.

"Look at her grinning like an idiot in her sleep. Must be having a fun dream."

"Yes, probably..."

"You were making faces in your sleep too, Takina."

"Was I...?"

"You moaned a bit, too."

"Please erase it from your memory."

As she had suspected, it was all but a dream. Takina breathed with relief and sunk back into the seat.

"You still look really tired."

"I had a tiring dream."

"Oh, was it a nightmare?"

Takina had to think about it.

"Not quite."

"Shoot... Shoooooot, Takinaaa... We have to...save...the world..." Chisato muttered in her sleep, her breath tickling Takina's ear.

Intro 5

Kazuhiko took a seat at the counter and opened his laptop. He had work to do. He didn't want to spend his time at the café working, but he had no choice—he had a pressing deadline for his article about local cafés. Kazuhiko had finished collecting materials for it but hadn't started writing the article yet.

Working on this article from another café wasn't an option since someone might notice he was writing about the best cafés in the area, and then they'd find out who Kazuhiko was. The only place he could think of where he'd be allowed to sit around working for a long time, with a pleasant atmosphere, a toilet he could use anytime, and where he'd feel safe leaving his laptop unattended for a while was Café LycoReco.

Well, he could go someplace out of town, but again, he was worried about news about his article leaking before it was ready for publishing, and there was always a chance he might come upon some juicy information if he stayed in the area the article focused on. Most of LycoReco's clientele were locals, who might mention something of interest while having coffee...

At least, that was the rationale Kazuhiko used to justify working from LycoReco to himself. The truth was, he simply felt more motivated when sitting there.

However, Kazuhiko didn't have to feel so bad about treating the café as his office. At the other end of the counter was Yoneoka, the writer, staring at his screen with the dour expression of someone at their parent's wake. Itou the mangaka, with dark rings under her eyes looking like misplaced eye shadow, was sitting at a table in the tatami area with a tablet in front of her, struggling with a cover illustration for some book.

Those two were evidently in much worse shape than Kazuhiko, or so he thought. His deadline had passed the previous night, actually, but it wasn't the end of the world. He didn't have that many pages to fill, and writing the article

wouldn't take him long once he got started. The problem was that he had so much he wanted to write about that it was hard to decide what to leave out.

Once he sorted everything out in his head, the writing itself would be a breeze. He honestly believed that, and this optimism was necessary for him in his line of work.

"Aren't we humans pitiful creatures?" asked Kurumi, entering the room. "Even when we find a job we enjoy, trying to make a living from it is impossible without suffering."

She rolled her shoulders and stretched her neck as if they had gotten stiff from many hours of gaming or sitting in front of a computer. Passing by Yoneoka and Itou, she looked at their screens.

"Lots of space there."

They hung their heads, sinking into depression.

Kurumi walked over to Kazuhiko.

"Nothing to see here either, huh?"

"Er... I have the materials. I just have to extract the story from them now... Once I get started, it'll be finished in no time..."

"How long have you been sitting here?"

"About three hours..."

"Plenty of time to get started, no?"

Kazuhiko also hung his head. Nothing hurt more than the truth.

"Kurumi, stop bothering the customers and take this," Mika called out from the kitchen.

"I'm on break. A well-deserved break..."

"Kurumi, please."

"Eh, all right."

She went to the kitchen and returned carrying a tray with four small espresso cups and one serving of ice cream. She placed one espresso each in front of

Kazuhiko, Yoneoka, and Itou.

The three freelancers scooped sugar from the sugar bowls on their tables and carelessly dropped it into their coffee. They looked at each other as if silently toasting and downed their beverages in one go. It was an insult to good coffee.

The silky espresso caressed the tongue, its bitterness filling the mouth only after they swallowed. Grains of sugar that didn't have the time to dissolve lingered behind, slowly melting for a sweet finish.

That was all Kazuhiko needed. A high dose of caffeine and sugar, the high-octane fuel for breezing through his work... Well.

"Goodness. I can't believe my eyes," said Mika, coming out from the kitchen.

He raised his eyebrows and laughed, pained by how his customers had crudely downed the coffee he'd so lovingly prepared for them. Kazuhiko silently begged him to forgive them just this one time.

"And who's the last espresso and the ice cream for?"

"Oh, that's mine! Sorry!"

Kana came out of the restroom. She was a middle-schooler who'd started frequenting the café around the same time as Kazuhiko. She was a cheerful girl, usually seen in her school uniform, the sailor suit style that was going out of fashion.

Kana hurriedly sat down at a table next to Itou's. Kurumi placed the plate with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and the last espresso in front of her.

When the grown-ups ordered their espressos, Kana remarked that she'd never tried it. They offered to buy her one as a treat, but since Kana wasn't a fan of bitter beverages, Mika added the ice cream for free to her order.

"Do I...eat the ice cream first or after the coffee...?" Kana asked uncertainly.

Itou laughed, drawing something on her tablet.

"Try pouring the espresso over the ice cream. It's nice that way."

Kana picked up the espresso cup, but she stopped before pouring it over the ice cream. It must have seemed wrong to her to pour a hot drink over a cold

dessert. The grown-ups and Kurumi couldn't help smiling.

"Go ahead. That's what the espresso is for," Mika said in his mature, reassuring voice.

Kana nodded slightly and carefully poured the black espresso over the white ice cream. The colors began to blend, and the ice cream's surface melted.

It was affogato, a very simple dessert that also happened to be very delicious. The hot and cold ingredients enhanced each other.

Ice cream is at its most delicious just as it begins to melt, and with affogato, it's possible to instantly reach that ideal moment. The duet of rich espresso bitterness and the cool, creamy sweetness was without comparison.

Café LycoReco used the finest coffee beans, and the ice cream primarily used for sundaes was also choice. That gave you an idea of just how good their affogato was...

"I-I'll try it now..."

The older customers observed Kana's first encounter with affogato.

She scooped up some of the ice cream and espresso with a spoon. The ice cream was melting, blending with the coffee. Kana tried it and frowned, tasting the bitterness first, but her face soon relaxed, and then she smiled blissfully. No one needed to ask her if she liked the affogato.

"I wish the rest of you enjoyed your orders like Kana," said Mika.

"I will, after I finish this job," said the manga artist with a sigh, and the other freelancers muttered in agreement.

"Hmm... I must be getting old," said Yoneoka. "Recently, simply watching a young person eating something deliciously makes me feel happy somehow."

Kazuhiko and Itou immediately said they felt the same.

Kana smiled.

"Feel free to treat me anytime!"

They all laughed.

"Well, you asked for it! I hope your body's ready!" said Itou.

“Try me!”

“You’ve got a knack for getting yourself freebies, Kana. When you grow up, you’re going to ruin some men,” Yoneoka joked rather inappropriately, but Kana just laughed, so nobody scolded him.

“By the way, is that the Kiuchi Kawara Junior High uniform?” asked Itou.

Kazuhiko saw Kana jump in her seat and open her eyes wide. Itou was looking at her tablet, so she didn’t notice that Kana’s manner had suddenly changed.

“I used to live near your school,” she continued. “Isn’t it pretty far from here? It’s not even in the city center, so you have to change trains to get to Kinshicho, but I always see you here. Are you taking extracurricular classes in the area?”

“Um... Extracurricular classes, yeah...”

“Let me guess. Seeing how cute you are, maybe you are learning performing arts. Dancing? Voice training? Or...are you attending a voice-acting school?”

“Not exactly that, but close. Yeah...”

“Hey, tell me what it is! Learning about what people do gives me inspiration for work!”

Itou only noticed that Kana had gone pale when she finally looked up from the tablet. Kana hung her head so that her eyes were hidden behind her bangs, the cheerfulness gone from her face.

“I’m baaack!”

The bell at the door jingled as Chisato came in carrying shopping bags.

“I did lots of shopping! And how is the busy freelance squad doing? Everyone making good progress?”

The arrival of the big-personality waitress dispelled the awkward atmosphere. Kazuhiko wasn’t the only one who felt relieved.

“Mr. Kazuhiko! How’s it going?”

“Well... It’s a bumpy road today... And not just for me.”

He glanced over at Kana, sitting perfectly still with the spoon in her hand, her ice cream dissolving into a puddle.

Chapter 5

May I Take Your Order?

Café LycoReco had closed for the day. The store signboard had been brought back inside...but customers were still in the café. That usually only happened on board game nights, but they weren't meeting today.

The customers in question were Yoneoka, Itou, and Tokuda, who'd been working on their projects all day and still weren't finished. By nine PM, they had finally put their laptops and tablets away.

Itou finished sketching, and since she had no more energy left, she decided to leave coloring to the designer she worked with. In any case, she'd finished her assignment.

Tokuda had also managed to write a first draft of his article and send it to his editors and designers.

Meanwhile, Yoneoka decided that even if he had spent the whole day working diligently, he wouldn't have made the deadline anyway, so there was no point in trying. Instead, he started chatting up anyone who would give him the time of day. The manga artist looked at him warily, thinking that no matter what, she must be careful not to ever become like him.

"Okay, here it goes!"

"Uh... Chisato...! Guh!"

Itou was lying on her front on the tatami floor, with Chisato straddling her back. She groaned when Chisato put both hands under her chin and pulled back. In pro wrestling, that move was called the camel clutch. Chisato performed the move slowly. It was very effective on Itou, who'd spent the whole day hunched over a tablet. Her joints were making popping and cracking noises.

“Okay, you’re good!”

Chisato was such a nice girl. She modeled for Itou, gave encouraging but honest feedback on Itou’s drafts, cheered Itou on when a deadline was approaching, and even helped with the illustrations sometimes... When Itou finished an assignment, Chisato even helped her with stretches.

Itou thought that if she had a son, she’d make him marry Chisato by any means necessary.

“Chisato, I could use a helping hand with stretching too,” Yoneoka said in a slightly lewd tone, gobbling up a large sundae.

Chisato was, of course, having none of it. The man himself wasn’t expecting her to take him seriously.

“Forget about it. This massage is a special service reserved only for those who make their deadlines!”

She walked over to Tokuda, who was drinking warm milk, perhaps to calm an upset stomach. When she started massaging his shoulders, Tokuda smiled awkwardly. He said he was twenty-eight, but sometimes he seemed distinctly inexperienced. Maybe he was nervous because of the age difference between him and Chisato. Having a peer rub your shoulders was nice. If a child did it, that was just cute. But a high-school girl and a single man in his twenties... that was treading a very fine line. That must have been what made Tokuda antsy.

“Oh, Mr. Kazuhiko! Remember our little deal...?”

“Ah, yes. It’s in, as promised.”

“Really?! Yay, you rock! Thanks! I’ll pay you back with a special favor!”

...Suspicious.

Itou furtively glanced over at Yoneoka, meeting his gaze. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded at her.

“You’ve given in to the temptation of crime, Tokuda? Pity. I thought we could be friends,” said Itou.

Tokuda looked at her, flustered, but before he could say anything, Yoneoka cut in, staring at the ceiling with his arms folded.

“I’d hate to have to report an acquaintance... Do you know Detective Abe? Do us both a favor and turn yourself in.”

“Sorry, but... What am I being accused of...?”

“Dealing in...guns? Or no, what would be more popular with youngsters? Drugs?”

“To think you were a dealer! Getting our dear Chisato hooked on that filth to get ‘special favors’ from her! We’re not turning a blind eye to that!”

Itou laughed, and Yoneoka joined in. Tokuda smiled awkwardly, but Chisato looked a bit uneasy for some reason. Maybe she was too young to enjoy that sort of banter.

“Hey now, let’s not throw around accusations like that, even as a joke. It doesn’t fit in with the good vibes we want to have at the café.”

“Sorry, sorry! No more suspicious topics at LycoReco, then... But wait, there’s just this one thing I wanted to mention earlier.”

Itou told them she thought there was something strange going on with Kana, the middle-schooler who often hung out at the café. She couldn’t talk with the other regulars about it earlier since she was in a rush to finish her work, but it had been on her mind the entire time.

“Kana? Strange? Why do you say that? She seems like an ordinary girl to me,” said Tokuda.

He was right that she did seem like an ordinary girl. Kana was friendly and cheerful. She’d chat with the grown-up customers, but she never forced herself into any conversation, and she openly admitted when she didn’t understand something... That was all perfectly normal. She was a nice girl, maybe too nice, even. Girls her age often tried to act older, to be taken seriously by grown-ups.

But Itou’s doubts concerned certain practicalities, not Kana’s behavior.

“Where does she get the money to be hanging out in a café all the time?”

LycoReco wasn’t super pricey, but a drink and a dessert added up to about a thousand yen. Junior high schoolers usually got pocket money to buy a snack on the way home, but a thousand yen was a lot of money for a young girl.

Next, Kana's school, Kiuchi Kawara Junior High School, wasn't even in Tokyo. It was in Saitama. Getting there by train from Kinshicho was easy enough, but that trip still took some time, and the train ticket cost a few hundred yen. Kana spent at least an hour a day traveling to and from the café, and it cost her almost two thousand yen.

Yoneoka cocked his head, thinking.

"That sounds like a lot, but she's taking some classes here, right? So I imagine her parents are paying for her travel expenses."

"But how do you explain the timing of her visits? I've seen her come in at all times of the day. Made me wonder if she even actually goes to school."

Yoneoka clapped his hands.

"I've got it! Her school's in Saitama, but she lives around here!"

"And if that were the case, why would she be enrolled at a school in Saitama? There's no shortage of junior high schools in Tokyo. Kiuchi Kawara is a big school but not prestigious enough that students would travel from far away just to go there."

Several things about Kana were bugging Itou, the issue of Kana's spending most of all.

"Maybe she simply comes from a rich family," suggested Tokuda. "Some kids get more pocket money than others."

It seemed reasonable to him, but Itou shot him down right away.

"You'd know if she was from a rich family from her outfits and makeup. That's also something girls spend their pocket money on."

Kana was commuting from Saitama dressed in her school uniform and white sneakers. That alone wouldn't be so unusual, but her bangs were overgrown, with strands sticking out in odd directions. Her hair was black, undyed. She didn't seem to use any makeup, and her nails weren't manicured. She only carried her no-brand schoolbag with her. Not the look of a girl coming into Tokyo to hang out.

Most girls Kana's age would prioritize so many other things to spend money

on before coffee. If Itou, in her thirties, could think of many fashion items that seemed indispensable to young girls, then actual young girls could probably think of twice as many.

“Her school might have strict rules about makeup. Besides, she’s so young and pretty. She doesn’t need makeup,” Yoneoka proposed.

“Strict rules or not, I guarantee you no schools have rules against simply straightening your hair. And nobody but old people think naturally pretty girls don’t need makeup.”

That stung Yoneoka, who was approaching his forties. He looked down at his table dejectedly. Itou felt terrible, but at the same time, fear of growing old crept into her mind. Eager to change the topic, she turned to Chisato.

“And what do you think, Chisato?”

Chisato only laughed in response. She smiled awkwardly and walked to stand behind Yoneoka. She started massaging his shoulders, which immediately cheered him up. With the young Chisato behind him, Yoneoka looked even older... Or did he look older because of his lecherous geezer energy? Itou wondered.

Mika emerged from the back room.

“My friends, let’s be respectful and not speculate about the girl’s private life... Instead, may I suggest a game before I chase you out?”

Chisato’s hand shot up.

“Let’s play *Mapputa Two-Tone Soul*!”

It was a new board game featured on LycoReco’s game nights. Chisato preferred playing something new rather than sticking with old favorites. She liked games that relied more on intuition than logic, and *Mapputa* fell into that category.

“Chisato, it’s your break time. You should get some rest.”

“I don’t need it! I’ll have more fun playing the game with everyone! You’re up for it, right? Right?!”

Yoneoka was the first to sign up.

“Let’s do this!”

The other customers saw the irony in how Yoneoka had the energy for playing games but not for working on his project, but they didn’t say anything. Yoneoka’s editor would have a fit, though.

“We can’t leave out Kurumi,” said Itou. “And...what about Takina and Mizuki? Are they off today?”

Chisato smiled.

“No, but they’re working elsewhere today. Even without them, we have enough players for an awesome gaming session!”

The two writers put their laptops away. Mika went to the kitchen to prepare drinks and snacks for the game, and Chisato went to get the game box. She opened it and quickly checked that everything was there.

“By the way,” she spoke quietly to Itou, “you said earlier you’ll be working on a one-shot story?”

“Yes, for a quarterly magazine. Why do you ask?”

“It’s a crime story, right? Or no, some other kind of mystery?”

“It is a mystery. I’ve never done one before, actually. It’s not easy coming up with ideas for the plot. But why do you bring it up now?”

“I just thought that you might have a talent for this sort of thing.”

Itou tilted her head to the side, puzzled by this unexpected compliment.

1

“What do I do now...? What do I do...?”

It was nighttime. Kana, dressed in a Kiuchi Kawara Junior High School uniform, was walking down the street, clutching her school bag to her chest, her head bent down low. She had a completely different energy from when she was at Café LycoReco, emanating gloominess as she walked with a hunched back, her overgrown bangs completely covering her eyes. She had always been like this outside of the café.

“What do I do...? How could I not see that coming...?”

She was sure nobody would recognize her school uniform, because who paid that much attention to school uniforms? She didn't really have a choice anyway—that was the only outfit she could wear in the city, and to the café. She didn't have many clothes, and what she did have would look embarrassing in Tokyo. Maybe she had one outfit that would pass muster, but she'd draw attention to herself by always wearing the same one. Her uniform had drawn attention to her in the end...

She shouldn't panic, though. Itou recognized the uniform because she used to live near her school, but she had no business hanging out there now. Even if she did happen to visit Saitama, it would be silly to think the manga artist would try to check in on Kana.

She was safe.

"It's fine... It's fine..."

She could keep hanging out at the café. If she talked to everyone like normal, nobody would suspect a thing. She'd just be Kana, the schoolgirl who liked to come to the café.

She wasn't doing anything bad anyway. Well, except for telling lies, like her name. She wasn't really called Kana. Her name was Kyouko Katashiki. An old-fashioned first name and a harsh-sounding second name. She hated them both, the first unwanted gift from her parents.

Kana got on the train at Kinshicho Station to go to her home in Saitama. After leaving the café in a hurry, she spent a ridiculous amount of time sitting in Kinshicho Park. It was already past nine PM. It was a late hour for a girl her age, but some other schoolkids were on the train to Saitama. It wasn't unusual for parents living in Saitama to send their kids to posh private schools or cram schools in Tokyo. Kana was sure she didn't stand out among them.

She turned when she heard laughing. She saw two high-school girls sitting opposite some tired-looking grown-ups returning from work.

The high-schoolers were well dressed and looked tough to Kana. They were slim, wore proper makeup, and their stuff was from brands so famous even Kana had heard of them. They belonged in a different world than Kana's.

The two girls laughed openly without any sign they might be worried about what the adults thought about them. Then they noticed Kana staring at them. They looked at her, then back at each other, and laughed again.

Kana clutched her bag more tightly. She felt like the girls were laughing at her, mocking her. No, they were definitely mocking her. She had no proof, of course, but she was sure of it. She felt terrible about herself, as usual.

She'd be fine, though. They could laugh at the person she was at that moment. She could become someone else who wouldn't be scared of anyone.

"I'll let you off the hook this time..."

The noise of the train drowned out her whisper. Kana held the bottom of her bag tightly, clinging to it as the train continued, taking her back to the world she hated.

Only when she was at Café LycoReco, only when she was Kana, did she feel alive. The rest of the time was pure suffering.

2

Kana lived in a large apartment block in a Saitama suburb. She got home past ten PM, but nobody said a thing to her. Her parents never asked her where she'd been, and she was okay with that.

When she entered her room, Kana blocked the door with a board to ensure nobody could get in from the outside. She had no way to lock the door, though, so she always had to make sure to have anything valuable to her in her bag when going out.

Suddenly, Kana sensed someone was on the other side of the door. It was that woman.

"A neighbor was asking why you get home so late. I told her you go to a cram school in Tokyo," the woman said to make sure Kana would repeat the same story if asked.

Kana understood immediately. She was glad the woman asked her to lie instead of telling her to return home earlier so that people wouldn't talk.

"Okay."

Kana heard the woman walk away.

The woman was effectively Kana's stepmom. Kana's mom had left three years earlier, and soon after, that woman had appeared in their house and stuck around. At some point, she'd started using the same surname as them, but Kana wasn't sure that her father had actually married her.

The stepmother wasn't a bad person; Kana knew that. She avoided dealing with Kana, kind of ignoring her as much as possible, but she wasn't mistreating her. And every weekday, she left Kana a thousand yen on the table, for lunch and other expenses. She was basically treating Kana like a stranger living in the same house.

She probably disliked Kana but tolerated her presence. She was a grown-up, after all.

Kana, though, couldn't tolerate the woman. How could she stand some woman her father had been having an affair with moving in after her mom suddenly up and vanished? How could she stand having that woman live in the same house and use the same bath and toilet?

Kana missed her mom, but her mom probably didn't miss her, or she wouldn't have left Kana, who hadn't done anything wrong. But if she had her mom, at least she could have told her about that thing that happened, and maybe they'd report it to the police. Perhaps something could have been done about it. Without her mom, though, it was impossible, which made Kana feel awful.

And the woman who contributed to that problem was living under the same roof as her. That only made Kana feel even worse. That's why she wrote her name fourth on her list, and her father's name fifth.

3

Kana had to take the train to go to her school in Kiuchi Kawara. She used to attend a junior high school closer to home, but after her mother vanished, she didn't want to be around people who knew her, and she transferred farther away.

Kiuchi Kawara Junior High was a big school, with many other students commuting by train. Not wanting to accidentally bump into anyone she knew

and have to endure nerve-racking silence if they asked her any questions, Kana always left for school much earlier than necessary and got on a train when she was sure there'd be no other students there.

The train car was pretty empty, as usual. Kana sat down and put her back on the seat next to her. Her stomach felt like lead. She didn't want to go to school but she didn't have much choice. She did play hooky sometimes, but she knew not to do it too often, or her "concerned" homeroom teacher, Ishihara, would pay her a visit at home. She remembered with painful clarity how her teacher spoke grandly about wanting the school to be a safe place where she could thrive despite her problems and that the school understood her attendance issues were due to a difficult home situation... Ishihara, who used to be a promising baseball player in high school, was annoyingly overeager and would happily write up a report about how to support Kana to the head teacher. He wanted to be seen as a superhero teacher, but he was a pain in the neck for Kana. If only he weren't so persistent and confident that he could solve other people's problems.

Maybe it was just made-up gossip, but Kana had heard he'd gotten kicked out of another school for causing a violent incident. Kana wouldn't put it past Ishihara to base his methods on an old TV drama series where the teacher hero would sort out delinquent students by lining them up and slapping each of them.

Ishihara wasn't a bad person, though. He was just stupid and annoying.

What face would "Ishihara, the students' ally" make if she told him what was going on with the students in his class?

"Oh, wow, so you take the early train, Kyouko? Hello!"

Kana twitched, turning toward the girl who spoke to her, Ruri Mizokakushi. Ruri had long, glossy black hair, a pretty face with well-defined features, and milky-white skin. She was only in her second year of junior high but was tall and slim like a model and could pass for a high-schooler. She was holding a leather bag with both hands in a ladylike manner.

Ruri Mizokakushi was the very picture of a perfect student. She was astute, and her family was rich. One of her grandfathers was a politician, and her father

was the boss of a renowned real estate agency.

Ruri stopped in front of Kana. She looked down at her and smiled, narrowing her eyes... Kana could see malice in them.

“Kyouko? Hello?”

Kana didn’t want to answer. If only she could ignore Ruri. Live in a different world from her. She wouldn’t be allowed to pretend she didn’t hear, though. She had to say something back.

Kana pressed her bag to her cheek, curling around it to make herself look smaller, like a scared bug.

“Good... Good morning.”

The train’s rumble seemed louder than before, and the air suddenly felt heavy. Very slowly, Kana looked up. Ruri was still smiling at her, just like before.

“You know what?! I just had an idea! You finish school early, don’t you? Are you free after classes? Why don’t we go hang out together!”

Kana had no idea what face she was making. Was she a picture of despair, or did she freeze in shock? Whichever it was, Ruri found it funny and smiled ear to ear.

“Let’s go to Tokyo together!”

“I’m...busy today...”

Kana looked back down. It was easy for her to act like a different person at LycoReco, but outside the café, she was very bad at lying.

No, that wasn’t it. At LycoReco, Kana was being her true self. It was the self outside the café that was fake. That was why she could easily talk to anyone at the café, but once she stepped out, it was so hard.

“Oh yeah? What are you doing?”

“I’m just...busy...with stuff...”

“Must be super important if you care more about it than hanging out with me.”

Ruri’s voice changed. She opened her bag.

“It’s not that important, but... Why do you...?!”

Ruri showed Kana a picture on her smartphone—Kana lying on the floor, naked.

Kana stood up in shock. The train car was pretty empty, but there were some people around.

Ruri giggled.

The picture had been taken during a physical education class. Ruri’s friend had taken a photo of her when she was changing, and when she’d fought to grab the phone and delete the picture, Ruri’s other friends had ganged up on her, pulled her underwear off, pushed her onto the ground, and, laughing, taken that photo of her naked. Ruri had said then that it was punishment for Kana having attacked her friend, and she was going to keep it as insurance to make sure Kana didn’t get violent with her and her friends again. Nobody had tried to intervene, and Ruri had left the changing room unchallenged, laughing all the way.

Before that incident, Kana had endured Ruri and her friends mocking or pushing her around. She’d hated it, but she could bear it. Compared to living with her father’s woman, it was nothing.

That picture, though... It clearly showed Kana crying as she was held down on the floor by two others. You could identify a person in a photograph from something as minor as a mole on their chest or thigh, probably, but you didn’t need much sleuthing to find out who it was in the photo—the jersey with her name on it was in it too, adding to her humiliation.

Ruri liked to show that photo to Kana every now and again just to see her reaction. It always brought a smile to her face.

“If you don’t entertain me, I might just post this online.”

Ruri’s smile was freakishly wide, as if she were a monster. Kana corrected herself. Ruri *was* a monster.

“No...”

“Sorry, what did you say, Kyouko? Speak up, or I can’t hear you. Hmm, maybe

I should post it on one of those sugar daddy sites, together with your number.”

“No... Don’t do it...”

Kana thought Ruri was probably bluffing and wouldn’t post that photo anywhere without good reason. Having it gave her power over Kana, and if she shared it online, the police might see it and take action. The photo was all the evidence they’d need.

Ruri wasn’t stupid. She knew how to play her cards. She wouldn’t share the photo online, but she might show it to someone if Kana tried to oppose her. She probably already had shown it to someone, and if Kana provoked her somehow... There was no telling what else Ruri might do, which was terrifying. And there was a rumor that Ruri was dating a really scary guy.

“Sorry, Kyouko, I was teasing you because you were rude to me earlier. You’ll hang with me today, right? We’re such good friends, after all.”

What else could Kana do but nod, clutching her school bag so tight it was getting badly crumpled?

Ruri was at the top of Kana’s list. Number two and three were Ruri’s friends who’d held Kana down for that picture.

She could begin her plan that day... But no, it had to be carried out to completion all in one go, and she wouldn’t be able to get all the way to number five that day. It would have to be some other time. Kana told herself that she had to be patient as she tried to calm her racing heart.

She’d be okay. She was used to bullying, having endured it for so long. Until the other day, she’d been resigned to it, but now she had hope.

“I’d really like us to get to know each other better, Kyouko. I’m just a bit lacking in social skills, though. It’s like with boys who pick on the girls they like because they don’t know how to talk to them. It’s the same with me.”

A blatant lie. It sounded so sickeningly fake, laced with venom.

The train was approaching Kiuchi Kawara Station. Kana was shaking, looking down at the ground as Ruri stood right in front of her, smiling shamelessly.

“Kyouko, why aren’t you getting up? You don’t want to miss our station.”

Ruri laughed one more time and got off the train. The doors closed, and the train started moving again, with Kana still on board. Any Kiuchi Kawara Junior High students had left.

Kana was struggling to breathe under the crushing pressure. She'd burst like a tomato squeezed too hard if she wasn't strong. Maybe that would be better than living like this. But no, her oppressors would always stop short of crushing her completely. They'd push Kana to the breaking point, only to stop again and innocently assure her they had the best intentions.

What a joke. Kana didn't want the temporary relief. That only made it worse. But who should she protest to? What was she really fighting against? Why was everything so hard?

She clung to her schoolbag, her only lifeline. But this lifeline didn't lead to a safe place. It probably led to hell. Not that she minded. It was still a way out of this rotten world.

Kana sat on the train, feeling sick. When she finally felt ready to stand up, she was many stops past the one where she was supposed to get off, but since she'd left early, she could still make it in time for school if she went back on an express train. She loathed the idea of going to school, but she had to, or Ishihara would pay her a home visit.

Holding her bag to her chest, Kana changed trains, got off at the correct station, and walked to school. The tanned, already sweaty Ishihara was waiting by the school gates.

"There you are, Katashi! What happened? Did you stay up playing games and get up late? You barely made it today!"

He laughed jovially.

Kana dipped her head in greeting, quickly passing by him.

"Oh, hello there, Kyouko!"

She got spotted by Ruri, who was just coming out of the schoolhouse with two of her friends, carrying trash cans and tongs.

"You should learn from Mizokakushi and do some volunteering instead of only

playing games all the time, Katashi! It's good exercise, you'll make new friends, and it'll earn you points with the teachers! Ha-ha!"

Kana didn't play video games. Ishihara, with his limited worldview, had to put people into one of the few stereotyped categories he could wrap his head around so that he could feel like he understood them. He was so naive.

Kana walked into the schoolhouse, leaving behind her homeroom teacher and Ruri with her friends.

"Don't forget we're hanging out after school today," Ruri whispered when Kana passed her.

That whisper seemed to cling to Kana's skin.

4

She always liked going to Tokyo, not because she yearned to be in the big city, but simply because she liked places where she felt anonymous. A rural area would have been fine too, except that in small towns, outsiders immediately stood out. Not a problem in Tokyo.

While Kana didn't feel like she belonged in Tokyo, the big city seemed equally welcoming to anyone. At least that's how she saw it.

She got an allowance of a thousand yen every weekday, and she spent it all on going to and hanging out in Tokyo. In a stroke of good luck, she discovered Café LycoReco. It was a wonderful place. Everything about it was amazing.

The owner, Mika, was like an ideal grown-up—broad-minded and kind and always paying attention to Kana. If someone asked her what a perfect dad was like, she'd give him as an example.

Mizuki was like the sister or cousin she'd always wanted. Kana liked her direct manner. Despite their age difference, Kana found Mizuki very easy to talk to. While Mizuki put on a couldn't-care-less persona, Kana thought she was actually very organized and did a lot to hold Café LycoReco together.

Kurumi was a strange girl. She looked quite younger than Kana, but she was so smart, which made her really good at logic-based board games, but bad at ones in which had you figure out what someone else was thinking. It had been

Kurumi who'd approached Kana first, asking if she'd like to play a board game, making her feel welcome at the café. Kana was deeply thankful to her.

Then there was Takina. In Kana's eyes, Takina was perfect in every way. She had a strong character and nobody could intimidate her. She was diligent at work, and so, so pretty, with long black hair that was nothing like Kana's own unruly mop. Unlike a certain other pretty girl Kana knew, Takina never had flashes of malice in her eyes. If she had to describe Takina's general vibe, Kana would say she was like a well-honed katana. Her rare smiles were so lovely, they made Kana's pulse quicken even though she wasn't into girls.

The café staff were good people. No, not good—fantastic. Last, but definitely not least, was Chisato.

Chisato was like a puppy. The moment she appeared in the store, everyone wanted to talk to her, and she was more than happy to oblige. She was the embodiment of cuteness and good energy. She was very pretty, but most people would describe her as cute before beautiful. Before meeting her, Kana hadn't known it was possible for a human to be so immediately likable.

When they'd met, it had struck Kana that right away, Chisato had treated her with friendly familiarity, as if she were a younger cousin. When Kana was leaving, Chisato said bye to her with so much warmth. There was no disguised pity in it, and it wasn't fake friendliness toward a customer. It really did feel genuine.

"Promise to come again! I'll be really happy to see you!"

Nothing anybody had said to her in the last several years made Kana nearly as happy.

Kana had let herself believe that she really was welcome at the café, and she'd gone again the next week. Chisato had remembered her. She'd sat next to Kana and leisurely chatted to her about this and that. It was bliss. A lot of what Kana said was made-up, but it didn't matter. She was having such a good time. Never before would she have guessed simply talking to someone could feel so good.

If only Chisato was her classmate... Every day could be so fun, and Kana would have totally loved going to school.

Kana thought Chisato had the power to make everyone around her happy, and in a way that didn't come at a cost to herself. Somehow Chisato spread around happiness while putting herself first. It made it feel good to be around her. You never felt like she was doing you a favor and you owed her for it, but you were thankful for her presence.

It was probably thanks to Chisato that all of the café's customers were in such good spirits. Everywhere Kana looked, people were smiling, completely at ease... And they accepted her without a question. The staff and other regulars made Kana feel like there was always a seat for her among them.

Whenever she was on the way to Tokyo, Kana felt excited. She couldn't wait to be at Café LycoReco again. Not making any purchases that weren't absolutely necessary and going without lunch to save up for her trips to Tokyo was easy. Sometimes she even walked to school to save on train fare.

But that day, her mood on the train wasn't good at all. Sitting next to her was Ruri Mizokakushi, feigning angelic innocence. With the gloomy Kana next to her, Ruri was attracting attention. Everyone who got on looked at her.

The train was taking them to Tokyo. Kana was in an awful state of mind. The train fare was a few hundred yen. She'd have a lighter heart throwing that money into a gutter than spending it on train tickets to go somewhere with Ruri. It caused her suffocating anguish. She was queasy from stress.

What made it even worse was that she had no idea what Ruri had in mind, but she definitely wasn't going to leave Kana alone after they got off the train in Tokyo. No, she had something planned for Kana, something Kana would hate and that would cost her money. Ruri surely wouldn't be paying for anything. Anticipating that, Kana moved most of her money out of her wallet and into a hidden pocket between two inner linings of her schoolbag, where she kept all her valuables.

She got on the train when Ruri told her to and got off when Ruri told her to... at the Kinshicho Station. Why there, of all places? To Kana, it was as loathsome as having someone walk into her house wearing muddy shoes.

"My boyfriend has a store here. Follow me."

Kana found some consolation in the fact that Ruri took her out the south exit

from the station, not in the direction of the café. She never took that exit herself, as that part of Kinshicho was mostly nightclubs and bars. It wasn't yet dark outside, but the alleys between the multi-tenant buildings had this uncomfortable aura of sleaze.

After a short walk, Ruri led Kana to the entrance of an apartment block.

"This isn't a store..."

"Exclusive members-only venues don't have store signs outside. Don't you know anything? Anyway, follow me."

She pressed a number on the intercom. They heard a male voice saying "Come in," and the automatic door opened for them. The corridor was dimly lit. It looked like a tunnel leading somewhere bad. Kana moved her school bag from her back to her front and put her arms around it before stepping inside.

They got on an elevator which took them to the thirteenth floor, which was the last one. There was no sign with a business name, and there were only two doors on that floor—the entrance and the emergency exit—so it seemed the entire floor was occupied by a single tenant.

The entrance hall looked pretty normal, with slippers for guests. Kana took her shoes off and put a pair of slippers on.

Farther inside, the place was more like a restaurant, with a massive eat-in kitchen with a bigger counter than you'd see in a normal apartment. The equipment was more professional, too, with neatly lined cooking utensils and a restaurant-size fridge. A man wearing an apron was slicing vegetables in a very practiced manner.

"He's just a waiter. Don't worry about him. Act like he's not there."

The furniture looked expensive. A few large plush sofas were placed around the room. The most unusual feature, though, which also made the place seem bigger than it was, was that one entire wall was made of glass, with a sprawling roof balcony behind it. There were more sofas and tables on the balcony, with parasols over them. A man was sitting on one of the outside sofas, doing something on his phone. He was maybe twenty years old. When he noticed Ruri and Kana enter, he stood up and smiled warmly. He was quite tall, and it was

obvious at a glance that he was a creature of the night in Kinshicho—his hair was dyed flamboyantly, so that it was half-blond and half-black. He was dressed simply in jeans and a rock band T-shirt, but Kana could somehow smell money on him. Maybe it was his watch, or the earrings in his ears, that hinted he had cash to throw around.

“That over there is my boyfriend.”

Kana went out onto the balcony when Ruri gestured that way.

“Nice to meet you, Kyouko Katashiki. I’m Kadowaki, Ruri’s acting boyfriend. I’ve heard a bit about you. Don’t be shy, take a seat.”

Kana was sure whatever he’d heard about her from Ruri wasn’t good, although she did wonder what Ruri would say about her to make him so strangely gentle toward her... Unnaturally gentle, as if she weren’t a person, but a kitten in a pet shop window.

The sofa was softer than any Kana had ever sat on before. She was sinking into it, which was nice except that it made her feel too hot in the summer weather.

“What...sort of place is this...? What...do you want me to do...?”

“Have a chat and some tea, help you girls get to know each other better. At night, this is a members-only bar, but this time of day, it’s more like a café for young girls.”

Kadowaki turned toward the dining room, raising his hand. Kana realized that what she took for a window was a one-way mirror, with a silver reflective surface on the outside. It opened and the waiter she saw in the kitchen earlier came out onto the balcony carrying a glass teapot and cups. He poured tea for them. It was some kind of herbal tea. Flowers and herbs Kana didn’t recognize floated inside the teapot.

“This tea is really expensive. It has a bit of an unusual taste. Go on, try it... I’m sure you’ll like it... Aah, tastes so good,” Ruri said as if she were the hostess, taking a sip of the tea with a delighted look on her face.

At first, Kana suspected the tea might have been laced with something, but Ruri drank it first without any concern.

The somber waiter returned to the kitchen without saying anything.

Was it really just normal tea? Kana still wasn't convinced...

"Oh, sorry, Kyouko. You can leave your bag on the shelf over there."

"No, I... I'd like to keep it here."

Kana put her school bag down on the floor. She wanted to always keep it within reach. It was all she had for support.

Ruri and her boyfriend were waiting for her to try the tea, so she picked up a cup. The tea smelled strange, but then again, herbal teas often had unusual scents. Kana would have preferred coffee, and she almost said as much, but she caught herself just in time and pressed the teacup to her lips. She didn't drink the tea, though. She didn't want to eat or drink anything from Ruri. The thought of anything Ruri offered her becoming a part of her own body was too disgusting. Kana only pretended to take a sip.

Kana didn't know why Ruri had forced her to come along to that strange café, and that made her fearful. Ruri and her boyfriend, though, were chatting casually as if they didn't mind her being there. Kana didn't feel like she could join in that conversation anyway.

They were saying that the tea was really pricey. That it was really good for the body and mind, and even helped with weight loss. Recently, the availability on the market had dropped drastically, driving the price higher up than ever before, which might put customers off buying it so often. They needed more customers to keep the sales at the same level. Ruri's two friends were regulars at her boyfriend's café, as were other girls their age, including some from other schools...

"Kyouko, I invited you here today because I'd like you to join our little tea club... We may have started off with some misunderstandings, but I want to put it all behind us and be friends from now on."

Kana hated the look in Ruri's eyes. The pretty face and lovely smile did nothing to hide the reptilian coldness of her gaze. But maybe Kana's deep-seated hate for Ruri made her see her that way.

Unable to stand Ruri's gaze, Kana looked away, as it happened, at Ruri's

teacup. It was empty, but how could that be? She was sure she'd only seen Ruri take one sip of it. Had she drank it all in one go when Kana wasn't looking? No matter how thirsty you were, you wouldn't drink a whole cup of hot tea in one go on a hot summer evening.

On the other hand, Kadowaki had been bringing the cup to his lips many times while they talked, but his cup still had the exact same amount of tea in it as Kana's...which meant he hadn't drunk any.

Something was wrong. Kana was suddenly seized by the same kind of fear she felt when there was a sudden earthquake.

"What do you say, Kyouko? Will you join our tea club?"

"I... I don't really..."

"Oh, I know what it is. Are you worried about that photo? Tell you what, I'll delete it. Will that make things good between us?"

Ruri smiled ear to ear.

The whole situation was bizarre. Ruri wasn't the sort of person to have a change of heart and treat Kana to anything. She only ever had her own interests in mind and wouldn't just let go of something that gave her an advantage, surely...

"I really want us to be friends, Kana."

It was a trap. Kana didn't know exactly how, but Ruri was trying to take advantage of her. She shook her head.

"I...can't do this... You said...this tea's expensive... I...I can't afford it..."

Ruri smiled menacingly.

"Aah!"

Kadowaki suddenly leaned over and gathered up Kana's bangs in his hand.

"Sorry! Mind if I take a better look at you?"

He was asking for permission but didn't wait for it, lifting Kana's hair off her face and staring at her up close.

"Hey, you're prettier than Ruri said. Real cute. Go to a beautician and learn

how to put on makeup... No, on second thought, it's better like this. This childlike look is good... Real cute."

Kana was scared, but confusingly, she also felt a strange rush at having a man who wasn't a family member praise her for her looks.

"Kyouko, join the tea club. No need to worry about any fees. You're actually going to earn some money from it."

"...What?"

"Especially for your first time. It'll be a nice side hustle."

Not understanding, Kana looked toward Ruri, who desperately tried to get the last drops of herbal tea from the empty teapot into her cup. She got maybe two teaspoonfuls of it, which she lapped up greedily, with a look of delight...no, ecstasy, on her face.

At that moment, Kana knew she had to get away. Fast.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to stay out so long. I have to go."

She quickly stood up and picked up her bag from the floor.

"It's ten thousand yen," Kadowaki said in a different, cold voice. "That's how much that cup of tea was. Pay before leaving, okay? Running away without paying really isn't a good idea. I'd have to call up your school."

Anger welled up inside Kana. She glared at Kadowaki and spoke through clenched teeth, "I—I haven't drunk any of it. I was just pretending."

Kadowaki looked into her cup.

"Ah, that's why..." He paused to scratch his head. "Still, drink or not, you've gotta pay for your tea."

"I didn't ask for it! You just served it to me! I didn't want it!"

"That doesn't matter; you still gotta pay. Service charge... You don't understand what it is, do you? Look, you pay for being here, no matter what you do. If you don't pay, that makes you a criminal, you know?"

Her, a criminal? They were the criminals!

"I can let you go without paying if you join the tea club, at least for a bit."

Deal?”

“Come on, Kyouko. Don’t be upset. Let’s all be friends! The tea club is so much fun.”

Ruri reached into her bag and got her phone out. She was going to show Kana that photo again. Kana instinctively reached into her own bag.

Was this it? Should she do it then and there? Was it time?

But if she did, she’d have to include someone who wasn’t on her list.

What should she do...?

Kana clenched her teeth, her repressed anger boiling. She had to endure it. She had to. It wasn’t the right time yet. She had to wait patiently...

She fumbled inside her bag and got her hand into the hidden pocket where she felt crumpled thousand-yen notes. She pulled several of them out. She’d saved that money by skipping meals, by making do without buying anything...so that she’d be able to go to Café LycoReco.

She threw the notes, almost all of the money she had, onto the table.

Kadowaki let out a long sigh.

“Kids got money these days. Should’ve asked for more... Ruri, hey, you listening? What do we do now? I’ve already got a customer booked for her. What are we going to do with him? Can you deal with him, pretend it’s your first time?”

“Kyouko, hey, hey! We’re friends, aren’t we? Don’t say we’re not.”

Ruri giggled, quickly searching on her phone for the photo she’d used to blackmail Kana.

Kana wanted to be out of there before Ruri showed her that photo again.

“I paid the price you asked. Are you saying it was made up?”

“Tch! Fine, whatever. Go.”

Kana wanted to spit like a character in a foreign movie, but her throat felt terribly dry. She clutched her bag and quickly left Ruri and her boyfriend. She opened the one-way mirror-glass door...and had to cover her mouth with her

hand not to scream.

More people had entered the café while she'd sat on the balcony. Junior high and high school girls she didn't know and half-naked men who were groping them. There were pots of that herbal tea on the tables, along with cigarettes and syringes. There was a weird smell filling the room, which made Kana gag. She ran to the exit, kicked the slippers off her feet, picked up her shoes, and hurried to the elevator, carrying them in her hands. The elevator arrived as soon as she'd pressed the button, and the door opened.

"Whoa, whoa! What's this? Kyouko! You came out to greet me?!"

Inside the elevator, a fat man reached for Kana, a golden watch gleaming on his wrist.

Kana instinctively took a step back.

"Kyouko! Wait!"

Ruri was calling her, standing in the open door of the "café."

Kana cursed her shaking legs. She gave up on the elevator, opened the emergency door, and started running down the stairs, still in her socks. She kept running and running out of that building and into the night. When she finally stopped in some alley, hiding in the shadows, she threw up. It surprised her how much she managed to vomit. When that stopped, she started crying from maddening fear and disgust.

She'd seen and smelled something revolting, and those people wanted her to be part of that. That was what they'd intended all along.

They must have shown that photo of her naked to many people. Kadowaki had surely seen it, and that man in the elevator, too. Kana had suspected Ruri might have been showing that photo to others, but knowing it for sure was devastating. Kana couldn't stop shaking and feeling like she'd be sick, but she wasn't crying from humiliation—she was crying because she'd lost the money she'd painstakingly saved so that she could go to Café LycoReco. She'd had to sacrifice so much to save that much, going hungry, drinking only tap water from the restrooms, borrowing school supplies from classmates, or buying the cheapest things she could find from thrift stores. She hadn't even bought a

monthly commuter pass, taking the train only one way and walking back many kilometers, since it didn't matter if she got home late...

She'd cut back on everything possible to save that money so that she could go to LycoReco, talk and laugh with the other regulars and Chisato, and drink delicious coffee. She needed that money to spend a little bit of time in the one place where she felt welcome and could be Kana, an ordinary girl.

And now it was all gone. That hurt her so much that the tears kept flowing. Maybe she shouldn't have stopped herself earlier. Maybe it really had been the time to execute her plan. But she hadn't reached for *that*, even though it was within her grasp. She hadn't been thinking clearly at that moment, but she must have sensed that she couldn't be so rash, or she wouldn't finish what she intended to do. She'd stopped herself short with an enormous exertion of self-control. She'd done well...

"Um... Are you okay?"

Kana had been leaning with her forehead pressed to a wall, but she immediately straightened when she heard that voice. It was a voice she knew well. A voice she loved to hear, belonging to a person she desperately missed but was also the last person she wanted to see in her current state.

Why, why here, why now...?

Kana shakily turned toward a person outlined in the darkness by the street and store lights of Kinshicho. A girl in a school uniform. It was, of course, Chisato Nishikigi.

Kana squealed, hid her face, and ran away into the back alleys, jumping over or squeezing past bags of trash and air-conditioning condenser units like a stray cat running from people throwing rocks.

"Why...? Why...!"

She never wanted Chisato to see her when she wasn't being Kana. When she was the pitiful, pathetic Kyouko. She couldn't bear it and had to run away. That was the only thought in her head. Run away from everything.

There was that heaviness in her stomach again. She didn't want to go to school, but she had to. Her teacher Ishihara coming to speak with her parents wasn't the only reason. She was worried more about Ruri. There was no telling what Ruri might do, so Kana wanted to preemptively threaten her with the police and warn her that if she tried anything, she'd report what she'd seen in that building...

But would she actually report it? It would result in a huge scandal, and she couldn't ignore the possibility that Ruri would somehow get away with it. Her influential father and grandfather could pull some strings to sweep everything under the rug. Besides, Ruri was underage, so even though she'd been doing horrible things to people, she might end up being treated as a victim. What would happen to Kana then? She had no idea. There would surely be an investigation, though. In the worst case, the police might find out about her secret.

Reporting the case would be a last resort, but it was a useful threat to use against Ruri.

Kana arrived at the school gate. There was no sign of Ruri or her buddies that day. Kana anxiously made her way to her classroom... And there she was. As usual, the pretty Ruri was the center of attention. She was talking to her friends, but when Kana entered the classroom, she glanced at her. Their eye contact lasted only for a moment, though, as Ruri quickly looked away, resuming conversation with her friends, all smiles. As if nothing had happened the previous night. It was as if it was just a bad dream Kana had.

Ruri's unconcerned behavior scared Kana because she couldn't read Ruri at all. Was Ruri ignoring her because they both had something they could use to blackmail the other, and she didn't want any trouble? That'd be nice, but Ruri wasn't the type to accept such an armistice, or Kana wouldn't have come to hate her so much.

No, she was going to do something. Kana had no doubt about it. The fake peace between them was making her anxious. Fear was the worst when you didn't know what it was that you had to be afraid of.

Despite Kana's apprehensions, nothing happened during classes. The only

difference from any other day was that Ruri was ignoring her. Not pointedly excluding her to be mean, but simply not paying any particular attention to her. In a way, it was nice, but Kana couldn't shake off the feeling that something bad was coming.

The homeroom teacher, Ishihara, must have noticed that Ruri was strangely uninterested in Kana, while she watched Ruri closely; he kept looking at Kana throughout his class.

"Okay, everyone. That's it for today. The weekend's here, but that doesn't mean you should stay up late! Class dismissed. See you next week!"

The last class of the day was over, and nobody had bothered Kana. She sat back in her seat and watched Ruri walk out of the classroom, smiling like she was in an excellent mood.

"What's up with that...?"

"What's up with what?"

Kana nearly fell off her chair. She wasn't expecting a reply. Ishihara had walked up to her without her noticing, and he was staring at her blankly.

"Katashi, are you going somewhere now?"

"No..."

"Perfect. Come with me to the consultation room... Ah, no, sorry. I've got a teachers' meeting first. Can you find something to do for an hour and then come see me?"

"But...why?"

"Well, hmm... To talk about your home environment," he said in a hushed voice, as there were still some other students in the room.

When he'd come to her home after she'd missed school, her father's woman had told him a load of crap. To think that would have such long-lasting consequences. The woman was fourth on the list for a good reason: she constantly did things that made Kana's life worse.

An hour later, Kana went to the teacher-student consultation room on the third floor of the schoolhouse. She had to wait thirty minutes before Ishihara

finally showed up.

He pulled up a chair opposite Kana, apologizing for keeping her waiting. He began with pointless small talk, asking the world's most boring questions, like how was school, whether Kana was enjoying it, and so on. Kana gave him only vague replies until he ran out of questions and then there was silence. She wondered why Ishihara was wasting their time. The sun was already low in the sky.

"Excuse me... Is it okay if I go soon...?"

"Ah, it is getting late, isn't it? Don't worry. I'll drive you home in my car."

Kana was honestly glad to hear that. Otherwise, she'd be walking all the way home since she had to start saving up again for her next trip to Café LycoReco. She had to take the train in the morning, or she'd be late for school, but nobody cared what time she got home, so she could always walk back.

She smiled involuntarily, and Ishihara perked up and smiled back at her.

"Before we go, though... You see, there are some strange rumors about you... I happened to hear them earlier. Katashi, do you have...financial problems?"

"...Sorry?"

"Have you been...trying to make money doing something...strange?"

"Sorry, but...I don't understand what you're asking..."

"Katashi, you see, another student came to me earlier saying she was worried about you. She said you've been...selling your body."

"What?!"

Kana slammed her hands on the desk and stood up. Ishihara reflexively stood up too, raising his hands and asking her to please calm down, but how could she, after what he'd said?

"I'm not doing anything like that! Who said that...? Ah..."

The answer was obvious—Ruri. She was trying to get revenge, and this stupid teacher believed that load of crap. That was it. That was the last straw.

"Fuck her!"

Kana had had enough. She would start her plan. She couldn't let Ruri get away with this.

"Easy, easy, easy! Calm down!"

Ishihara leaned over the desk between them and grabbed Kana's shoulder. His hand was so big and strong, she couldn't tear it away.

"Sit down and cool your head. Then we'll talk. *Calmly.*"

Still holding on to her, he made her sit back in her chair. Ishihara must have been wary of her trying to run out of the room because he walked around the desk and stopped behind her, like a security guard positioned to stop a shoplifter from escaping.

"Well, tell me the truth, Katashi."

"That person told you a lie. I don't do...that sort of thing."

"You say that, but I didn't miss that glint of recognition in your eyes when I brought this up."

"That was because...I'm pretty sure I know who told you that lie."

"Look, Katashi. I understand that you have a difficult situation at home. It must be tough for you."

"That has nothing to do with it!"

"You need money, don't you? Not for fun, I know this. You're a serious girl. I've been watching you, so I know this."

"I said what that student told you is a lie! I haven't done anything she said I did!"

"Slow down, Katashi, and listen... The girl who was worried about you showed me this dating site. There was a picture of you. Without any clothes..."

Shit!

Had she really gone that far?

Kana remained seated, but she squeezed her skirt in her balled-up fists so hard that it was getting badly creased. If Ruri had played her trump card, Kana would play hers...!

“If you have problems, Katashi, you should always come to me first. I can help you.”

“Mr. Ishihara...there’s something I need to tell you...!”

“I knew you’d come around, Katashi.”

Kana felt his big hands on her shoulders. He wasn’t holding her down like earlier, just touching her softly, gently...grossly.

“You need to stop doing this. There are lots of strange men out there. Sick perverts... If you need money, come to me, Katashi.”

Her alarm bells were ringing. The hair on her neck stood up even before she consciously realized what she was afraid of.

Ishihara moved closer so that she felt his body pressing against the back of her head. He reached down to touch her chest, enveloping her with the stench of his sweat.

“No, stop...!”

“Don’t be afraid, Katashi. I’ll protect you.”

Ishihara was always sorting people into categories in his head. Was Kana a pitiful girl who needed his protection? Or a toy he could blackmail into doing whatever he wanted?

He was groping her breasts. She grabbed his hands and tried to push them away but couldn’t. He was too strong. She couldn’t even stand up with him looming over her, trapping her with his big body.

Kana’s knees were shaking. She felt weak from fear and was getting drenched from cold sweat.

“Katashi... I knew right away it was you, even with your face partially covered.”

“Wh-what?”

“Want to know how? That mole was a giveaway.”

He shoved his thick arm under her school uniform and found a mole on her skin that nobody should’ve known about and traced a circle around it with his

fingers.

Kana was desperately trying to think, but it was no use. She was too overwhelmed. It did suddenly dawn on her that the rumored incident that caused Ishihara to be kicked out from his last school was probably something like what he was doing to her. Did Ruri know about that, about his proclivities, and planned to use him...? No, that was reaching. And anyway, this wasn't time to analyze what Ruri did or not. She had a more pressing problem at hand.

"Please stop... Help...!"

"I will help you, Katashi. Leave everything to me."

Kana finally managed to stand up, but before she could escape, Ishihara pushed her with his body onto the desk in front, crushing her. Kana had the wind knocked out of her lungs. Her eyes overflowed with tears when the teacher put his hands under her skirt, and she felt his hands crawling over her body.

"Don't worry about anything, Katashi. I'll take care of everything."

She felt powerless, like always. Her entire life was like this, and that would probably never change... But how could she go on living like that?

"Fuck off!"

"Now, now, don't make noise."

Ishihara quickly covered her mouth with his hand, and Kana bit it fiercely, her sharp canines piercing through his flesh until she felt bone and heard a crunch.

The teacher yelped, and the weight holding Kana down disappeared. A chance to esca—

He hit her, slapping her face so hard she crashed into the wall. Kana collapsed to the floor, lights flashing in her eyes. It hurt so much that she wailed like a baby.

"Shit... You bitch!"

Ishihara stalked over to her, blood dripping from his hand. He wasn't wearing that usual dumb smile on his face. He looked absolutely furious.

Kana was seized with a primal fear. She thought he might kill her.

Her bag, where was it? She had to get it. Where did she leave it? It should be next to the chair...

“Ah...”

Ishihara stood between her and the chair, with Kana’s bag next to his feet. Shaking from fear, Kara desperately lunged, trying to get her bag, when Ishihara kicked her in the stomach.

“What is wrong with you?! You needed money, so I tried to help you, and this is the thanks I get?!”

Kana was sprawled on the floor, but she had her bag. She’d managed to grab it before he’d kicked her away. She didn’t need to be afraid anymore.

Kana reached inside the bag, into a hidden pocket between the double lining, and took out what she’d been carrying around with her all this time.

“Don’t move!” she shouted, pointing the thing at him.

It was a small semiautomatic pistol, Glock 42. It fit into her small hand perfectly, as if it were custom-made.

“What do you think you can do with that toy, huh?”

It was a real gun, not a toy. Kana quickly racked the slide back to load a round in the chamber, swiftly returning her hand to the grip.

The metallic sound, the change in Kana’s behavior, the look in her eyes, and the very genuine look of the gun made Ishihara suddenly lose confidence that it was just a toy.

Kana wiped her tears with her left hand, keeping Ishihara in the gun’s sight while holding it one-handed for a moment. She realized her nose was bleeding, so she wiped the blood off her face with the back of her hand, and then she grabbed the grip with both hands again. She moved her right leg back and held the gun with her right hand directly on the grip and the left hand over it for support, arms extended. It wasn’t perfect, but it was the Weaver stance, which Takina had explained to her when they’d been staging that scene at the café for the manga artist.

Kana was confident she could shoot Ishihara. She was sure she could kill him.

“What the hell are you doing, Katashi? What is this?”

She didn't reply to him. There was no need. The teacher had lost all authority he'd had over her. Now, she decided what happened. She'd already won, so she didn't need to say anything. There would be no negotiating.

She was breathing through clenched teeth, the air hissing like the panting of an animal. She could taste blood in her mouth. It could be hers, from her bleeding nose, or Ishihara's, from when she'd bitten him. That second possibility grossed her out, and she spat at the desk.

“Let's not play games, Katashi. Put that toy away,” Ishihara said after a long silence.

He tried to smile, but he was sweating profusely, clearly afraid, even though he still refused to believe that an unassuming schoolgirl had been carrying a real gun in her school bag. Categorizing her as a girl trying to intimidate a grown-up with a toy gun made him feel more at ease.

“Don't expect to get away with this, Katashi. Injuring a teacher and then threatening them with a toy gun is ridiculous. Give it up already.”

He must have convinced himself that he was right and that the gun was a toy. Looking sure of himself again, he started walking toward Kana, who responded by putting her index finger on the trigger.

She only needed to pull her finger back ever so slightly, and Ishihara would die. Her Glock was chambered in .380 ACP. This caliber was slightly less powerful than the standard 9×19mm Parabellum, but it could still kill a person in a single shot if she aimed properly.

“Stay away, or I'll shoot!”

“Go on, shoot me with that toy gun.”

If she only wanted to, she could kill him. But uncertainty took hold of her. Should she shoot him? The world would certainly be better off without that man...but he wasn't on her death list. She only had five bullets, one for each of the five people she intended to kill. She'd have to remove someone from her

list if she shot Ishihara. Her father was at the bottom of the list.

Which one deserved to die more, her father or Ishihara?

Unable to make up her mind, Kana froze with her finger on the trigger.

“You’re going to pay for this, Katashi. I hope you know that...”

He reached toward her with his arm. Kana told herself to stop thinking and just pull the trigger, but her finger wouldn’t move...

Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The ear-piercing noise was the emergency alarm. Kana and Ishihara froze, suddenly at a loss as to what to do. They both looked toward the hallway where the sound was coming from.

They heard someone running outside the room, opening the doors of the empty classrooms. They reached the counseling room, but the door only rattled in the doorframe as they tried to pull it open. It was locked. Kana hadn’t even noticed when Ishihara had locked the door behind them.

“Is someone in there?! There’s a fire! Everyone must evacuate!”

Ishihara sucked his teeth in annoyance and unlocked the door. He was blocking her view, so Kana couldn’t see who was standing outside the room, but she was wearing a white coat, so maybe it was the school nurse. Whoever it was, she couldn’t let them see the gun, so Kana picked up her bag and quickly hid her hand with the gun inside.

“Mr. Ishihara, everyone must evacuate the building! Please go to the emergency assembly area!”

“Yes, yes, of course. How did the fire start? Hold on, I don’t think I’ve seen you—”

“Mr. Ishihara! You’re wounded?! What happened?!”

“Oh, this... I... The alarm surprised me, and I stumbled...”

“This must be attended to at once! Quick, come with me to my office! Come!”

“Your office? But what about the alarm...?”

Ishihara was getting confused. Kana took that chance to sneak past him and

the nurse. She thought she could hear Ishihara shouting while she ran down the hallway, but she ignored him. She ran out of the schoolhouse, still in her indoor shoes. Outside, students who had stayed after classes for club activities and some teachers were standing in the designated evacuation area, unsure of what was happening. Kana was out of breath, and she didn't want to join the others, so she hid behind a stone monument commemorating the school's founding in a corner of the school grounds. Ishihara didn't seem to be coming after her.

Everything was okay. She'd done well. She hadn't wasted a precious bullet on Ishihara. She was okay. She was okay. She was okay...

She straightened her clothing and tried to calm her breathing and mind, but suddenly, tears started streaming from her eyes again. She crouched down, covering her mouth with her hand, and silently sobbed, the big teardrops rolling down her cheeks one after another.

"Are you okay, Kyouko?"

Ruri appeared out of nowhere, her smile making Kana think of a snake just before it struck its prey.

"Tee-hee... Did something happen between you and Ishihara? Tee-hee... That perv..."

Her beautiful face lit up with grotesque joy, telling Kana that Ruri had been waiting for her. That she was sure Ishihara would call her up to the counseling room and maybe assault her as well.

"You posted it! You posted that picture!" Kana shouted, getting back to her feet.

"Hey, chill. I blurred the name on your jersey and half of your face. Oh, and I edited out the hands holding you down. It's actually pretty amazing that Ishihara recognized you. I guess he's had lots of practice, that Peeping Tom."

"You're scum!"

"Be nice, or I'll post your real name and address on that site too. Don't ever go against me again. I went through a lot of shit last night because of you. What happened to you is nothing in comparison."

Kana wanted to take her gun out and shoot Ruri there and then, but the sound of sirens stopped her. Emergency vehicles were arriving at the school, alerted by the fire alarm. There were fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars...

Kana wasn't brave enough to take her gun out, knowing the police were there.

Ruri's two tea club friends came over with the same cruel, smug smiles as Ruri's. Their giggling was torture.

"Ruuuriii! Are we doing the tea club tonight?"

"Of course we are! My boyfriend's expecting me."

"I wonder how many people will turn up this time. It's going to be fun!"

Kana clutched her bag to her chest, turned away from the girls, and started running. She'd made up her mind. She was going to begin her plan today. She'd do it. She'd kill them, the five targets on her list. There was a certainty in her stride.

"Excuse me, we need a stretcher! One person got seriously injured. It's pretty bad... He's in the nurse's office!" a woman called out to the paramedics, who went to help her right away.

Kana ran past them in the commotion. Nobody tried to stop her. A uniformed schoolgirl was the very picture of innocence, after all. Nobody would ever guess that this small, young girl was carrying a gun capable of killing five people in her bag. Or that this particular girl had decided she'd become a murderer that day.

6

The beginning of Kana's plan could be traced back to Café LycoReco. That was where it had all begun about two weeks earlier.

Since that humiliating photo, Ruri's bullying of Kana was getting worse by the day. Kana's life had become a living hell, with no hope of ever getting better.

That morning, Kana woke up with a leaden feeling in her stomach. She didn't want to go to school. Instead, she wished she could go somewhere far away, but that was, of course, impossible. If she didn't turn up for her classes, Ishihara might come to speak with her parents, which was the last thing she wanted.

Every day, she had the same thoughts when she woke up. They became part of her routine, like leaving the house early to get on the train before the other students.

Usually, the train was almost empty at that hour, but many students were going to morning club activities that day. Kana walked to the last car, which wasn't so busy. She got off at the Kiuchi Kawara Station as usual...but just as she stepped off the train, she heard a familiar voice.

"The last movie we watched was good. The actors did an amazing job. Buuut! Old movies aside, I think it's really cheap that almost all new zombie flicks are so dark, you can barely see what's going on."

"...Chisato?" Kana whispered to herself.

She turned and saw Takina and Chisato getting on the train, the same car she had been in, through the other door. They hadn't seen her because of the timing of her getting off and them getting on.

What were they doing in Kiuchi Kawara? At that hour? So far from Tokyo?

Kana was a bit puzzled, but the thought that drowned out all the others was that she really wanted to talk to Takina and Chisato. She could, for example, ask them what they were doing there. Simply say hello, smile, tell them she was surprised to see them. Even exchanging a few words with them would be a lifeline for Kana. It would make her feel so much better. It would give her the strength to survive the rest of that day.

Kana wanted to return to the train, but the doors closed in her face. If she couldn't talk to them, she wanted to see them at least one more time, make eye contact, nod her head in greeting...!

She waved her hand, hoping to catch their attention, but Kana and Chisato were turned the other way. They sat down beside a man who'd been on that train for a while, flanking him. There was no chance of them looking back out the window where Kana was waving.

"No... I wasn't...quick enough..."

Kana blankly watched the train leave the station, her lifeline cut. She'd been thrown back into the rough sea, the sliver of hope morphing into more despair.

She thought she might go crazy right then and there.

As she stood on the platform, spacing out, a chime sounded, warning passengers of a train approaching. It was an express train... Kana realized that she could catch up to the train she'd just left three stations from Kiuchi Kawara if she got on it.

And that was what Kana did. But when she got on that local train again, she found the last car empty. Her hopes dashed, and Kana sat down where Chisato and Kana had sat earlier. She touched the seat, searching for any remnants of heat. She felt like crying.

"Why did they sit beside that man...? Was he Chisato's or Takina's boyfriend?"

If he was a boyfriend, maybe Chisato and Takina had ditched school that day to go out with him. In which case, they'd only be annoyed if she'd interrupted them. It was for the best that they hadn't seen her. It was for the best...

Tears started rolling down Kana's cheeks.

Whenever something bad happened to her, she tried convincing herself that the alternative would've been worse. It was her coping mechanism. Still, she couldn't keep it completely bottled up, and her hurt leaked out.

Kana hid her face in her hands and bent forward. She was thankful there was nobody else in that car, or they'd think something was wrong with her...

"What's this...?"

There was something hard at the back of her seat. She reached behind, thinking it might have been a toy dropped by a child, and felt something stuck between the seat cushions and the backrest. She pinched it with two fingers and pulled it out.

It was a small pistol that looked very real for a toy. It reminded Kana of the air gun she'd once touched at a thrift store, but this was clearly not an air gun. The slide was made of metal. Despite its small size, the pistol felt heavy in her hand. It had scratches on it here and there, as if it had seen quite a lot of use.

Kana pulled the slide back like she had seen in the movies, and a pointy cartridge shell flew out of the chamber. It rolled on the train floor.

“What...?”

Kana released the slide, and a new bullet was loaded from the magazine seated in the grip into the chamber with a satisfying *ka-chunk!* Holding the grip, Kana could feel every part of the gun moving with excellent precision. She was suddenly certain that if she pulled the trigger, a bullet would shoot out. She felt like she was holding a bow with the arrow nocked and the bowstring pulled back.

The thing in her hand was a forbidden item—something that had been banned in the peaceful country of Japan for a very long time. Nobody knew she had it.

Kana’s heart started beating fast. She picked up the fallen cartridge from the floor and quickly hid the gun and the cartridge in her school bag. She did that partially without thinking, but later, the realization of what plan was hatching in her heart slowly sank in.

She got off in some rural town and headed to the nearest woods she found on her smartphone. A path led to a campsite, but Kana got off it halfway, where the forest was thick. She pointed the gun at a tree and pulled a trigger. Her suspicion was proven correct.

A beam of light shone into the hellscape of her life.

“This... This is it...”

One lifeline had been cut right before her, but another had dropped down from the heavens. Or was it hell? She didn’t care. Her fate had turned. Besides, as long as the five people she hated from the bottom of her heart wouldn’t be there, even hell couldn’t be that bad.

7

When Kana got home, nobody else was there. Her father was at work, and that woman must have gone out shopping. That suited Kana perfectly. The woman and her father were on the second part of her list. They weren’t the ones to start with.

She put a few things she’d prepared in her bag, changed from her indoor

school shoes to sneakers, and went out again to get on the train.

At last, it was time. Time to begin. She was going to follow her lifeline to hell. She'd end it all after that awfully long wait. She'd been so patient, believing the time would come, and now all the conditions had been met.

Today, she would kill. She'd remove the people she hated from this world. A steely determination focused her.

On the train, it seemed people were stealing looks at her. Schoolkids, office clerks, little children. For some reason, they were all furtively glancing at her, or at least she thought they were. On a different day, Kana would assume they were laughing at her, and her chest would tighten painfully, but at that moment, she couldn't care less.

She got off at the Kinshicho Station and went to the restrooms. She had to wait in line for a bit. Inside a stall, she changed into a light summer hoodie and jeans she'd bought at a thrift store. She put on a cap, pulled her hair through the opening at the back, and then pulled the hood over her head. She stuffed her uniform and schoolbag into a tote bag she'd also gotten at the thrift store.

The gun went into the back pocket of her jeans. The oversize hoodie covered her bottom, so nobody could tell she was carrying a gun just by looking.

Kana left the stall. Women were standing before the wall mirror, touching up their makeup. Kana looked at her reflection. In her new getup, she looked like a boy. She also finally understood why people had been looking at her on the train—there was dried blood on her face, smudged sideways from when she'd wiped her bleeding nose earlier. She almost laughed out loud, thinking what a sight she must have made, a schoolgirl in her uniform with a bloodied face. Stifling giggles, she washed her face, wiped it with her sleeve, and left the restroom.

She found the station lockers and left the tote bag there. The less she had to carry, the better.

“This feels good...”

There was a lightness in her step. No, her whole body felt lighter. She had to stop herself from skipping. A weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Not the

weight of the bag she'd been carrying, but the mental load of suffering and depression. She'd shaken it off, which made her feel... a lot like how she did on the way to Café LycoReco. It was the feeling of becoming a different person, someone who wasn't Kyouko Katashiki, a pitiful schoolgirl bullied and blackmailed by her classmates, a helpless toy in the hands of others, treated as an outsider in her own home, almost forced into joining a criminal "tea club."

But who was she? Kana, or a nameless murderer?

She could tell that she was probably going down the wrong path, but it was better than being stuck at a crossroads as Kyouko Katashiki, who was destined for pain and suffering.

"I wonder if Ruri and her friends are already inside," she said to herself.

It surprised her how it sounded like a line spoken by an ordinary girl on the way to meet up with friends, and she laughed. She was feeling buoyant, exhilarated.

When she'd escaped from the "tea club" building, she'd run randomly, scared out of her mind, but she remembered which way Ruri had taken and had no trouble finding the place.

Kana observed the building's entrance for a while. Sure enough, adult men and teenage schoolgirls were going in, disappearing inside as if the building was sucking them in. From the looks of it, the tea party had already started, but numbers one to three from Kana's list weren't showing up. They'd had enough time to stop by at their houses after school, get changed, do their makeup, and arrive in Kinshicho, so they were likely already inside. That didn't put Kana off. She didn't mind waiting, no matter how long.

Kana went to stand next to a vending machine outside a nearby building. Given her surroundings and outfit, she probably looked like a hoodlum—she liked that. It would be fun waiting, pretending to be a hoodlum.

But after two hours standing there waiting, her excitement began to wane. It was nighttime, but nobody was leaving the building. Without anything better to do, Kana distracted herself with her phone. She tried to find some news about the fire at her school but couldn't find anything. She trawled social media next and found a few comments that were most likely written by students.

“Turns out there was no fire. Boring!”

“Must have been a prank. I bet it was someone from a sports club.”

“I-hara got injured, though, did you hear? Wonder how. Maybe he fell down the stairs. Lol.”

That last comment was evidently about Ishihara. If only Kana had more bullets, she'd have put him at the top of her list. He deserved it more than even numbers two and three... But she couldn't shoot him when she'd tried to. She probably hadn't been in the right state of mind to reprioritize her targets then. Yes, it was because she'd been too confused to decide if it was justifiable to shoot him. But now she was thinking clearly...

Thinking about Ishihara brought back that nauseating feeling from before she'd made her decision, though—the feeling of being the powerless Kyouko Katashiki.

“It's no good...”

The more she tried not to think about it, the more her thoughts gravitated to that incident. How annoying. If nothing else, Kana was pleased Ishihara had gotten injured. It served him right. That stretcher had probably been for him.

“You're always so popular, Ruri!”

Kana quickly looked up from her phone. Ruri and her two friends had come out of the building. Perfect to have all three of them together.

Hiding behind the vending machine, she took out the Glock 42 from her back pocket and slipped her hand and the gun into the front pocket of her hoodie.

“Your stamina is something else!”

“I've got to do my best for my boyfriend, after all.”

They giggled. If they hadn't been on the south side of Kinshicho and if they hadn't been talking about something so twisted, they'd make for a heartwarming sight of three cute schoolgirls.

Kana thought she couldn't shoot them in that alley lined with bars and nightclubs. Since night had fallen, more people were milling around. She had to be patient and wait for a clear shot. It didn't matter where she started her plan.

Her targets stood no chance, but she wanted to ensure everything went as smoothly as possible.

Then again, she couldn't wait too long. It would be riskier to try to kill them back in their town. Kana wanted to kill the three girls in Tokyo and return home before the police were on the hunt so that she could kill her father and his woman too. If news of Ruri and her friends' murder got out too fast, any of Kana's classmates would immediately point to her as the most likely suspect, and then her parents would be on guard against her.

Or was she worried for nothing? This was Kinshicho, after all. Nobody would probably make a connection between a gun crime incident and Kana.

"What do you guys want to do? We got all this money. Might as well go shopping."

Ruri and her friends headed to a shopping mall on the north side of Kinshicho.

That wasn't good. Kana would attract too much attention if she shot the girls inside a mall, which would be crowded even this late.

She clicked her tongue, annoyed, and followed after Ruri and her friends. Losing them would be the worst outcome.

The girls had a great time shopping. They bought stylish clothes and accessories aimed at a slightly higher age range, then picked up some notebooks and other stationery. They joked, laughed, talked about the latest drama series they were watching and celebrities...

So that was what hanging out with friends was like. That sort of activity was utterly missing from her life. It was upsetting to watch those girls act so happy. It made Kana feel even more pathetic. But she reflected that she shouldn't feel that way. She was superior to them. Their money was dirty. Meanwhile, she... She...

"Okay, girls. Let's go home," said Ruri.

The three left the mall and walked to the station through a park.

The park. This was it—no bystanders around and only a few streetlamps to light the paths. The girls were walking in single file. Three targets conveniently

lined up.

Kana's heart was racing as if it were about to jump out of her chest. She was getting closer and closer to the girls, but she was careful to stay far enough away that they wouldn't be able to lunge at her and grab her. The gun was most effective at close-range, but not too close.

When Kana closed the distance to about five meters, she took her right hand out of her pocket. The gun she was holding was already loaded. With the pull of the trigger, she'd begin clearing her list.

She stopped and aimed. *Good-bye, world of misery. Hello, slightly nicer hell.*

Kana was aiming at Ruri—the back of her head.

She was going to shoot. She was going to shoot Ruri now...

"Argh!"

Her hand was shaking. From too much excitement? No. Anxiety? Maybe a bit of that. Fear? Yes, it was something like fear.

"Why...? Why can't I do it...?"

She'd wished for Ruri to die so many times. When she'd found the gun, she'd decided to kill Ruri herself. It was her deepest desire. Now that the perfect opportunity had presented itself, why was she hesitating? She should just shoot. Shoot her already. Shoot her!

She only needed to pull the trigger three times, and she'd be safe, in a hell more welcoming than the dark world she'd been trapped in. It would benefit her and others, too—she'd save all the other would-be victims of Ruri and her friends. She'd become a hero. She just had to shoot them.

"Come on... What's the matter with me...?"

Her hands were shaking, and her index finger wouldn't budge, as if she had no control over it. If she could only move it a few centimeters, she'd shoot a hole in Ruri's head, and the gross ooze from the inside of her skull would burst out. That was what Kana wanted. So why was her finger not moving?

It was exactly like when she'd tried to shoot Ishihara. Right at the very last moment, she couldn't pull the trigger. Why was this happening again...?

“They deserve to die... The world will be better off once they’re dead... I need to do this...”

Tears started flowing from Kana’s eyes. Bitter tears. She hated what a coward she was. She had everything she needed to do the deed, and she’d already decided that this was the night, and this was the only choice she had...but her body refused to comply. She couldn’t do it.

She cursed herself for being a coward, but she didn’t budge. She knew that if she didn’t shoot those girls, the next day, she’d go right back to that horrible reality she’d been suffering so long. She didn’t want that. She didn’t. So why wasn’t she shooting? Was she not going to do it after all? No, no, she had to.

“I want to kill them so much... I swear I do...”

Was it that ingrained nonsense that killing was never good? Kana was sure that plenty of people didn’t deserve to live, and those girls were a prime example.

Why the hell can’t I kill them?!

She’d endured so much, and she’d endured it all alone, never telling anyone about her suffering, no matter how miserable she was... She just wanted it to end already...

Ruri and her friends were getting farther and farther away from Kana and closer to the station. They left the park and turned on a busy street. It was too late. Kana couldn’t hit any of them if she shot now.

She fell to her knees.

“I’m a coward... A coward! Too scared to do a thing! I’m a hypocrite!”

She couldn’t kill anyone. Why? Had she not suffered enough after all? Was the power of the lie that every life was precious stronger than her despair? *No!*

Why couldn’t she shoot them? Why? It’d bring her so much relief...

“No, no, no... No, no, no...”

Come tomorrow, Kana’s personal hell would resume. And what about Ishihara? Once he recovered from his injury and returned to work, he would definitely try to do something to her again. To him, she was a target.

And Ruri would keep using that photo to bully Kana. She had already predicted how it would affect Ishihara, so she'd have no problem setting other perverts on her.

Back home, Kana would feel like an unwanted stranger again. Her father would ignore her, drinking beer and watching variety TV late into the night...

She could have ended it all with a few shots. Then she wouldn't have had to endure another horrible day like that.

Ruri and her friends had gone, though. Kana wouldn't be able to shoot them. There'd be no end to her suffering. It would continue forever...

"I...can end it..."

The answer came to her suddenly. Her right hand moved like it had a mind of its own. She pressed the muzzle of the gun to her temple.

She hated it all. She couldn't take it anymore. When she'd found the gun, she'd been frustrated that there were only five bullets, but she was glad to have that many, at least... But now she realized she only needed one.

A single bullet could solve all her problems.

That gun was her lifeline. A lifeline that would take her straight to hell. She knew it all along. The answer was right there in front of her the entire time. So simple.

Staying on her knees, Kana raised her head to face the sky, closing her eyes. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She was having flashbacks, not of her parents or friends, but of a certain place filled with the aroma of coffee...

"I wanted to go there at least one more time..."

She didn't have any more money, though, and she'd only be an embarrassment in her state.

The café was a paradise where everyone was welcome. Still, it wasn't a shelter for losers, for desperate idiots who wanted to commit murder, only to find out they couldn't even do that and promptly dissolved into pathetic, sobbing messes that decided to just shoot themselves in the head instead.

The café was a beautiful place. It wasn't for someone like Kana.

It was time to end it all. Her existence was too wretched, pathetic, miserable. She'd be happier in hell, where the people she hated couldn't follow her.

"I should've done this long ago..."

Her finger on the trigger, which had been stubbornly frozen before, now moved with ease. For an instant, Kana felt like her entire being now rested in that finger.

She pulled the trigger.

Bang!

8

The unpleasant feeling of dust stuck to her mouth. Some had even gotten inside. When she reflexively coughed, the movement hurt the side of her face, which felt like it was being grated off, and she screamed. She covered her aching cheek with her right hand, realizing she was lying on the ground.

"...Huh?"

Where was the gun she'd had in her right hand? No, more importantly, how was she alive? What had happened?

Kana lifted her head a little. Her cap had fallen off, and her hair was loose. Some sort of dust or fine sand started falling off it.

What was going on? Had she misfired and injured her head, but not badly enough to die?

She got her phone out and checked her head in the camera. She wasn't injured, but she looked awful, with dirt all over her tear-streaked face and hair sticking out in all directions, raining down more of that dust when she moved...

"What is this? Red sand...? Rubber...?"

The red powder smelled like an eraser.

Nothing was making sense, but two things were certain—Kana was alive and she didn't have the Glock 42 anymore. Had it exploded? Or had it gotten knocked away from her by the blast? There must have been an explosion of some sort because Kana felt like she'd been hit with a baseball bat.

She had nothing left. Her tears had run dry, and she didn't even have the strength to feel sorry for herself. That emptiness was familiar to people who'd attempted suicide. She vaguely remembered reading that Ryunosuke Akutagawa talked about that too.

She felt like a miserable lump of flesh that had no reason to continue existing.

Her mind was completely blank as she raised her hand, holding her phone through some muscle memory. She felt something stuck to the back. It was a piece of paper...with a message written on it. *"Free voucher for a coffee combo! Come on in anytime to Café LycoReco!"*

It was written by hand, like a school event ticket, painstakingly written as neatly as possible by a student.

At the mention of Café LycoReco, Kana weakly stood up, clutching the paper in her hand. Like a person dying of thirst in the desert, she turned away from the station and dragged herself toward her oasis, LycoReco.

The café looked so stylish that nobody would pass it by without stopping for a better look. It should have been closed at that late hour, but the lights inside were still on, and the OPEN sign was still hanging on the door. Why didn't they close at the usual time? Kana pushed the door open, hoping for salvation in one form or another.

Ding-a-ling!

"Welcome, Kana!"

Only Chisato was inside, dressed in a red school uniform. She pulled out a chair at the counter and motioned for Kana to sit.

"Um... I got this..."

Kana showed Chisato the voucher, which had gotten severely crumpled from being squeezed tight in her hand. Chisato smiled and took it.

"Just a moment!"

It was very late, and Kana had arrived in a pitiful state, but Chisato didn't question anything. She was serving Kana as usual.

The aroma of coffee brewing in a siphon spread through the air. It was a

warming, aromatic, deeply comforting smell.

“According to Teach, delicious coffee has magic powers. It’s the power to make people happy... And this may be just me, but drinking coffee at night always feels extra special. It must have even more magic in it than daytime coffee. You feel a little bit guilty about having it so late, but it calms you and gets you totally relaxed... Oh wait, both of those mean the same thing, I guess.”

Was that comforting feel, that scent gently wrapping around Kana’s crushed spirit a touch of magic, then?

When the coffee was ready, Chisato handed it to Kana directly instead of serving it over the counter.

“Try just one sip at first. It’s not as good as when Teach makes it, but maybe this also has some magic in it. Well, you tell me!”

Kana did as Chisato said and took a sip of the coffee. She didn’t normally drink it black, but...it tasted good. The warmth she felt inside after drinking it wasn’t merely a change in temperature. Tension began to drain from her body.

“It tastes really good...,” she quietly said in surprise.

Chisato smiled.

“Great! Now, Kana, remember what was on the voucher? It wasn’t just for coffee. It was for a coffee combo! You can order one more thing totally free of charge... So, what would you like?”

Kana looked at Chisato, at her face, which was strangely childlike and grown-up at the same time. She was so pretty, so cute, and...so kind, you wanted her to spoil you.

“Can I...ask for anything I like?”

Chisato nodded.

“Yup, anything! Tell me, Kana. What will it be?”

Kana had thought she had no more tears, but when Chisato asked her that, her eyes overflowed again.

“Can you...help me...?” she asked in a shaking voice.

Chisato's eyes flashed as she smiled.

"Sure!" she said chirpily and hugged Kana—a gentle, heartfelt hug that held her close. "You've been through hell and back, haven't you?"

"How did you...?"

Chisato couldn't have known anything about Kana. She'd never told her about herself... So why did Chisato say that? She made it sound as if Kana was an open book to her.

"You've put up with more than you should've had to, Kana."

Kana put her arms around Chisato and hugged her back, seeking comfort.

"Yes..."

"It's okay now, though. Leave everything to me."

"Thank you!"

Kana couldn't stop sobbing, her tears flowing freely. She couldn't speak anymore. Chisato held her in her arms, stroking her hair, seemingly not minding that Kana's tears were soaking her uniform. That already made Kana happy.

9

In the depths of the night, two grown-ups were still at Café LycoReco—Mika and Mizuki. They sat on opposite sides of the counter, drinking.

"This job was a pain in the neck," said Mizuki. "Take time with this, take time with that, mind this, mind that... I think we should've just helped the girl right away."

Mika looked into his glass and smiled.

"We could have done that, but I don't think we would've really saved her that way."

"And why not?"

"You just don't get it," said Kurumi, entering the room with her laptop. She sat down next to Mizuki. "What would we do? Retrieve the gun Kana found, report her case to Child Protective Services and the police, then wash our hands

clean? Do you really think that would have solved Kana's problems? The school would probably put up stupid posters saying 'Bullying is wrong!' and not do anything beyond that. Would that change Kana's situation for the better? Would that satisfy Chisato?"

"Kurumi, how's progress?"

"It's already started. I got the original photo data from Ruri Mizokakushi's phone, fed it to AI, and released a virus into the net. By tomorrow, there won't be any copies or derivatives of that photo anywhere online."

"You have an easy job. You type a little on your laptop, and you're done. Me, on the other hand? I've spent who knows how many hours on surveillance! I had to deal with Takina, too, who almost shot that teacher to save Kana! 'He should be put down,' she says. 'Maybe, but calm down, don't shoot him right this second, just wait and see what happens,' I tell her. But when Kana pulled the gun out, Takina quietly stood there, not doing anything. Can you believe it?! And then she goes, 'If she shoots him, report that I did it so that it won't be a problem.' How freaking dumb is she not to see it would be a *massive* problem?! I didn't know what else to do at that point, so I pressed the emergency alarm button... I had to run to that classroom, still in the lab coat and heels, for goodness' sake! It was killing me, I tell you!"

"Wait, you said you stopped Takina from taking action, so how did the teacher end up in such bad shape?"

"I only told her not to kill him... He got what he deserved. She got him pretty good... I had a hard time convincing him to come with me to the nurse's office after telling him there was a fire. It didn't make *any* sense. It took everything I had to not burst out laughing when I said it, but what else was I gonna say...?"

Kurumi laughed, imagining it.

"I honestly think we stepped in too late, and not just because it saved us some effort," Mizuki added. "Kana wouldn't have had to suffer so long."

"Chisato didn't come up with that plan for no reason. The way it worked out was that Kana officially asked us for help. The gun belonged to Asian, and DA was in charge of that case, giving us the funding, so she knew this would be treated as an extension of that job."

Mizuki thought Mika looked like a proud father when he explained why he approved of how Chisato had handled the case.

“Besides,” he continued, “while Chisato’s always eager to help people as a Lycoris, she still needs to abide by certain rules, or she’ll get out of control.”

“Rules, huh? Only act when requested... As if she couldn’t make any exceptions,” grumbled Mizuki.

Kurumi gave her a look as if she were an idiot.

“The rules make sense because we can’t help everybody. They’re realistic.”

“I’m not saying they don’t make sense, but sometimes Chisato could be a little more flexible, right? It’s weird how she has to follow them to the letter all the time.”

Kurumi had to agree with that.

“Yeah, but thanks to waiting until the very last moment, Chisato could also get DA involved with all of their above-the-law powers. They crushed the gang dealing drugs to children and saved Kana’s life as a bonus. DA sure is happy with this result.”

“The gang’s been wiped out?”

Kurumi told Mizuki that a few hours earlier, a DA Lycoris had gone to the “tea party” posing as a member and shut that business down for good.

“Hmm... DA isn’t going to recruit Kana as a Lycoris, are they?”

“Obviously not,” said Mika. “She’s too old to be trained. Even if she expressed an interest, she’d be denied.”

“I was only joking,” Mizuki said, laughing.

She topped up Mika’s glass and then hers. She turned toward Kurumi but remembered what she was doing in time and quickly put the bottle back down. Mika gave Kurumi a cup of hot milk instead.

“One thing I wanted to ask... Mika, Mizuki... DA’s covering our expenses, but what about my reward?”

“Hmm, what should your reward be...? Having a happy regular customer? No,

Chisato's friend being happy?"

"I don't know if I'd call that good value!" Mizuki said with a laugh. "I think you're running a loss, Kurumi. For us grown-ups, it'd be a loss, at least."

"Works for me," Kurumi said curtly.

Outro

It was hot. Peak summer. Kazuhiko looked up at the sky with the relentlessly shining sun. He had to close his eyes. There was little greenery around, but the cicadas were annoyingly loud.

“Not the weather to stand around.”

He adjusted a small folder under his arm and headed for his usual café, LycoReco.

Ding-a-ling, the doorbell rang pleasantly as Kazuhiko stepped into the pleasantly cool café, letting the staff know they had a new customer. Except that nobody called out in greeting this time.

“...Huh?”

Doi, who hadn't been coming for some time, was back, sitting at the corner seat at the counter. He laughed like a broken toy as if he were making an impression of Robert De Niro's laughing through tears. Next to him, Chisato was on her knees, bowing her head to the floor in the most formal apology. Other regulars and Mika were staring at their hands, clearly uncomfortable.

Takina was there too, standing next to Chisato with an annoyed look on her face. She turned her head toward Kazuhiko.

“Ah... Welcome.”

“Is...something wrong?”

“No. Will you have your usual? Cold brew with ice?”

“...Yes, please.”

“Boss, one cold brew with ice.”

“Er... Right. Won't be a moment. Mr. Tokuda, please take a seat...”

Kazuhiko uncertainly made his way to the counter. Not understanding what

was going on made him wary.

Kurumi came in from the back, her hair messy as if she'd only just gotten up. She glared at Doi, who was still laughing.

"Doi, enough. You woke me up."

Doi finally stopped laughing and hung his head.

Mizuki came to the café floor and went over to console Doi. She left a bowl of shaved ice on the counter. Kurumi sat down and started eating it without doubt that it was hers.

"Say, Kurumi... Did something happen? Before I came in?"

"No? It's just a regular day here at Café LycoReco, with its usual ups and downs," Kurumi said nonchalantly, glancing at Chisato.

Whatever had happened, it was considered normal at LycoReco...

Kazuhiko guessed that Chisato had made a bad mistake of some sort. Well, he'd turned up at just the right moment to cheer her up.

"Chisato! Guess what I brought! It got okayed!"

"Oooh! For real?!"

Chisato straightened up and jumped to her feet. She zoomed over to Kazuhiko. Other regulars, except Doi, got curious and came over to see what had gotten Chisato so excited.

"I'm not supposed to show it to anyone yet, but... Well, what's the harm?!"

He took out a women's magazine from his folder. Hot off the presses, it was a special issue focusing on Kinshicho and Kameido, with the café feature written by Kazuhiko. It had taken a long time, but his work was finally in print.

Mizuki stuck her head out from the kitchen.

"We're not featured in that, though. What's all the fuss about?"

"I didn't write about LycoReco, but..."

Kazuhiko opened the magazine and everyone gasped as one, Chisato the loudest. She and Takina were in almost all shots showing off different cafés.

“This looks amaziing!”

“Ah. Interesting to see how you used those photos.”

There were photos of Takina and Chisato sitting at café tables, drinking coffee, eating sundaes or pancakes, or standing outside stylish cafés. It looked as if they were the feature of the article.

Kurumi craned her neck to see the pictures.

“I’m surprised your publisher approved this.”

“I thought I’d have a good chance if I pitched it from the angle of showing the readers that Kinshicho is somewhere young girls can go out for a nice day all by themselves, and my publisher said yes easily.”

“Mr. Tokuda, this is fantastic! Thank you! I’ll treasure this magazine forever!”

“Glad to hear it!”

As Chisato flipped through the pages, everyone around muttered in appreciation. Kazuhiko was pleased, but at the same time, he felt a bit disappointed that they were only looking at the pictures without reading the article he’d written. Then again, he could’ve guessed as much.

The magazine was taken to the tatami area so that more people could look at it at once. Only Kazuhiko and Mika stayed at the counter. No, there was Doi too.

“Good grief... How many times do I have to say we don’t want attention?”

“If you had agreed for me to write about LycoReco, I would have kept it more low-profile...”

“Is this some sort of payback?”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean that... I now understand why you don’t want to draw attention to LycoReco. At first, I wanted to tell the world about you no matter what, but not anymore.”

He was being honest. Going from telling everyone about the café to wanting to keep it secret was proof that he’d become a true regular.

Café LycoReco was amazing. It had a lovely, lively atmosphere enjoyed as much by regulars as first-timers. The decor was stylish, the staff was wonderful,

and the coffee was incredible. Anyone felt welcome here and had a relaxing, enjoyable time. It was a rare gem of a café.

The childish desire to be the first to tell everybody about this extraordinary café that he, Kazuhiko, discovered all by himself had faded away... Or at least, it had faded into the background. He no longer had this need to be a special customer. It was enough that the café was special to him.

Besides, if he wrote about the café, it would become so popular that people would line up to go in every day, and the peaceful sanctuary that was LycoReco would be no more. It had become so important to him that he wouldn't be able to accept that, and that was what he told Mika as he watched the customers and the waitresses chatting and laughing together in the tatami area.

"I see," said Mika. "I'm grateful you've changed your mind. I, too, would like ordinary days like this one to continue... Here is your cold brew."

The ice cubes floating inside the glass were black—they were frozen coffee cubes. A black beverage with black ice cubes.

Invigoratingly bitter but still light, the cold brew went down smoothly. On a scorching day, it was pure pleasure.

"You girls look like professional models in these photos!"

"Right?! That's what I was thinking!"

"I like the one where you're feeding Takina a pancake. It's so cute!"

"Wait...that was taken after the shoot was already finished..."

"A candid shot! That's why you look so natural. I love it!"

"I like how one of you looks calm while the other's smiling. It's a well-composed photo."

"Oh, in this picture, you can see the table where I always sit!"

"Where is this? It looks so nice. I think I'll go and check it out!"

"Why don't we all go together someday?!"

"You shouldn't encourage our customers to eat elsewhere, Chisato!"

Everyone burst out laughing.

It really was a lively place, unlike any other café. It was Kazuhiko's favorite. There was always some fun to be had, but it was also very peaceful... Sometimes unusual little incidents occurred there, as had happened to Doi, who looked as if he were about to give up the ghost.

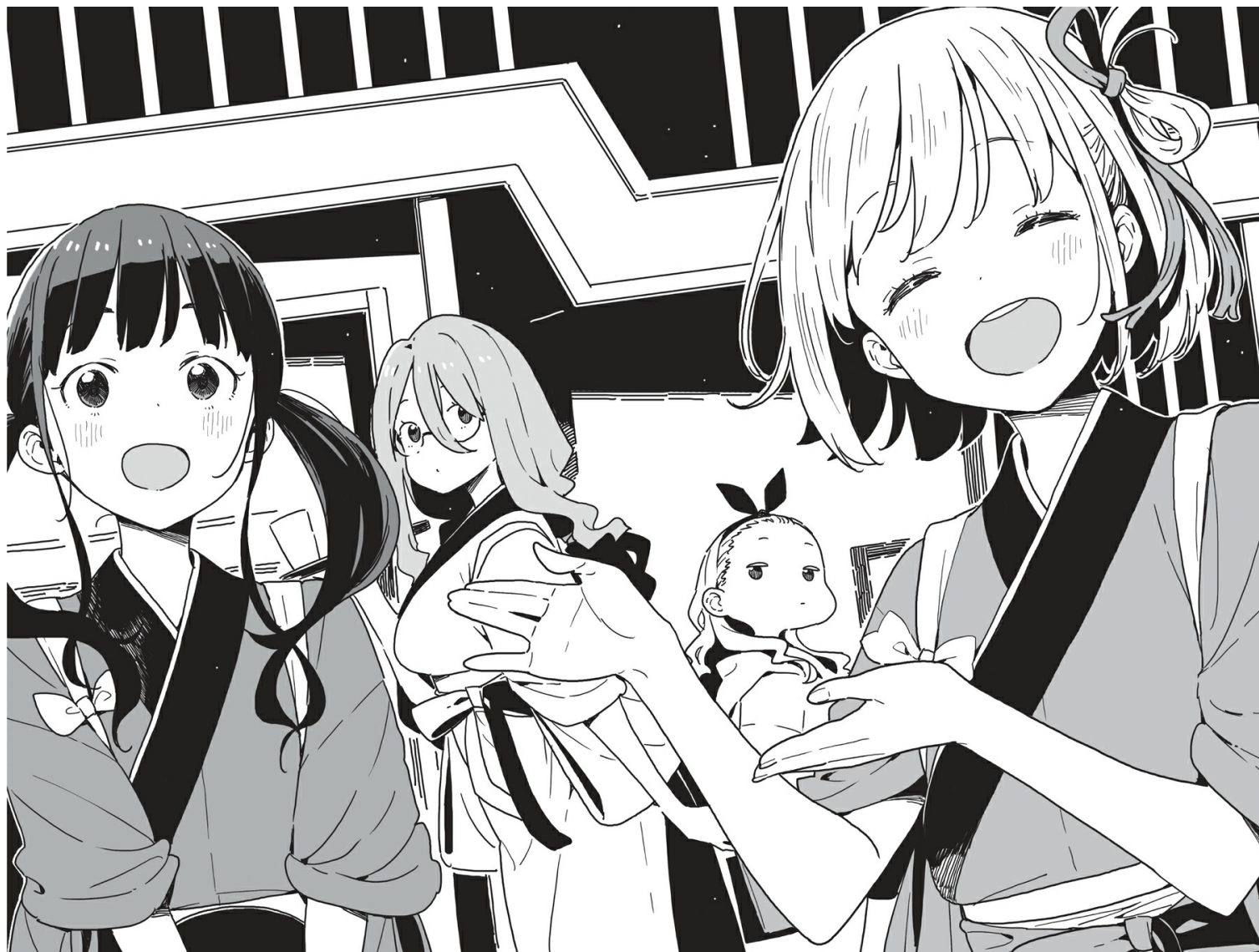
Café LycoReco was a special place, blending the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Ding-a-ling, rang the bell as the door opened. Another customer had come in. A regular or a would-be regular?

"Takina! Come on!"

The two star waitresses quickly went over to greet the newcomer.

"Welcome to Café LycoReco!"



Afterword

Hello, everyone! I'm Asaura, the author of *Lycoris Recoil*'s original story and this book!

It's been a surprise for me that we'd end up with this afterword since, you see, this isn't what I had originally written! At first, I wrote about a certain interesting event that actually happened, and it caused quite a stir among some apparently very important people... Sorry, sorry, forget about that! Nothing happened! I was only joking, ha-ha.

We Japanese are, after all, a kind and gentle people with a strong desire to follow social norms. Books published in our peaceful country are perfectly safe, with reliably peaceful, beautiful afterwords... This is the reality we must believe in for the sake of everyone's happiness, and the job of writers is to uphold this belief... Tee-hee!

On a more serious note, what surprised me the most about this book was the tightness of the deadline.

When I was told the book would be published in September, it hit me that other writers I knew whose books were coming out the same month had already pretty much finished writing their stories. So, I was starting at the time the draft should have already been complete...but, well, miracles can happen...

I had to adjust my writing style to make this work as a novel, but what helped was that I already had all these ideas to roll with—plots we didn't get to feature in the anime or ones that we didn't get to explore in depth. And so, I wrote about ordinary days at Café LycoReco and what Takina and Chisato do there all day.

I might have also used Director Adachi's deceptive (?) teaser for *Lycoris Recoil*, where he'd removed all gunfight elements from his original draft, probably written a bit too eagerly, as a concept for this novel...

In the end, it turned out a bit like a bag of mixed snacks, with all sorts of flavors... There's a bit of everything in this story! The brilliant thing about the Lycoris, and the café crew in particular, is that they can feature in any genre. So...I put them in all sorts of genres here in this very novel. I hope you enjoyed reading it!

Now time for thanks!

First, a big thank-you to Imigimuru the illustrator, who agreed to illustrate the novel despite the insane schedule! You're awesome, Imigimuru!

Next, my dear editor, Miya. Thank you for pushing the deadline for me as far as possible!

My heartfelt thanks also goes to everyone at the publishing house, Director Adachi, and the rest of the anime project team! I know you've worked so hard!

I'd also like to thank P. Kashiwada and all the other VIPs from a certain big company... Er, you know what I'm thanking you for... And apologies for causing you trouble with my, um, little joke... Ahem.

Finally, thank you, dear readers, for reading not only the novel but even the afterword! I'm sooo very happy that you made it so far!

I hope we'll meet again on the pages of another book. That's all for now! Take care, everyone!

—Asaura

Bonus

“Aaand, that was the last one! Thank you!”

As soon as Kazuhiko told them he was finished taking photos, Chisato’s prim face melted away like an ice cream on a hot day. She lazily leaned back in her chair.

“Oof! I was so tense!”

Takina, sitting next to Chisato, looked at her partner with surprise.

“We were supposed to act like we normally do. Why were you tense?”

“Are you serious? Because the photos are gonna be in a magazine! Published countrywide, which means people all over Japan might see us! It’s weirder to not be tense, if anything!”

“It’s a Kinshicho and Kameido special, so it’s unlikely that it’ll land on the shelves in stores all across Japan.”

“What, that’s discrimination! And anyway! It doesn’t matter if only one person sees those photos, or ten, or a million! If we’re modeling, we’ve got to be professional about it and do the absolute best job we can!”

“We’re not professional models, though.”

“Doesn’t matter! Think about the libraries, Takina! The national library keeps a copy of everything that’s been published, forever and ever! People in the future might come across the magazine with our photos in it! Try to imagine it, okay? Millions, no, billions of people will look at those photos and think, ‘Damn, girls from this era were insanely cute! Were they celebrities?’ I want our photos to be amazing enough to make the people of the future think that!”

“What difference does it make what people will think about us in the future?”

“It’ll make me happy!”

“.....Okay, if you say so.”

“Why do you care so little? Don’t be like that, Takina! Would it kill you to get a little excited?! Just try to imagine it; do it for me! In the distant future, when people might no longer even look human, the moment they see our photos, they will fall in love... Isn’t that exciting?!”

“No, because we’ll be dead by then anyway.”

“Nrrrrrgh!”

“Are you doing an impression of a cow?”

“No!”

“That was a joke.”

Kazuhiko smiled, watching the despairing Chisato and quietly laughing Takina. He sensed that someone was looking at him and turned around. It was the café owner, watching them with interest.

Kazuhiko bowed his head a little and told the owner that they had finished with the shoot, thanking him for letting them do it at his café.

The cameraman, who Kazuhiko had worked with before, came over to show him the photos on his digital camera.

“Where did you find these girls, Tokuda?”

“They’re actually waitresses from another café that I like. They asked to be featured in some way. Their boss didn’t give me permission to write about his café.”

“Ah, so they’re not professional models. Hmm... I didn’t think they were amateurs.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know if they’ve been doing some inner muscle training or what it is, but seen through the camera, they’re so picture-perfect in every shot. You don’t usually get that with amateurs.”

Kazuhiko had kind of noticed what the cameraman was talking about. No matter what Takina and Chisato were doing, they always looked incredibly

photogenic. Not only when standing properly with a straight back, but somehow even when they were just relaxing. Maybe it did have something to do with core muscles, like the cameraman said.

“In any case, I can tell you right now that we’ve got excellent material.”

Kazuhiko smiled, relieved that the shoot had gone well. It had been Chisato’s idea that he’d agreed to despite concerns about whether the photos would turn out good enough to be used in the magazine. The girls were amateurs, after all. He was honestly still a little worried. His publisher’s editing department would be doing the final review to decide if his article would go to press, and having good photographs to go with the text was an absolute must.

“Mr. Kazuhiko! Can we eat these pancakes now, before they get cold?”

“Don’t be greedy, Chisato. The food was only for the photos.”

“Not ‘only,’ for sure! Look at them, Takina! Don’t they look crazy good?! They’ve been soaking up all this syrup for a while now, and they’re at their peak deliciousness! We can’t let them go to waste! That’d be a crime! A sin! We’d go to hell for that, no doubt about it!”

“It’s okay, you can eat them.”

“Yay!”

The pancakes Chisato got so hyped for were the pride of that café. It was a big serving of three extra-fluffy pancakes with a load of syrup, designed to look great on social media, but probably too much for one girl to eat all by herself.

The pancakes did look irresistibly tempting, but given the portion size, a photo of just one girl poised to eat them all would have an eating contest vibe and that wasn’t what Kazuhiko was going for, so he’d decided to have both Chisato and Takina pose in front of just one serving as if they were sharing.

“Mmm...! So good! So fluffy! I wish I’d known earlier we had this amazing café in the neighborhood!”

The café boss overheard her. He saw her blissful expression and smiled to himself.

“Takina, you try some too! They’re amazing! Come on!”

“No, I’m fine...”

“Say ‘Aah!’”

Not put off by Takina saying she didn’t want any, Chisato brought a forkful of pancake to her mouth. Takina gave up and obediently faced the spoon.

That moment, Kazuhiko understood what it was about the girls that made them photogenic. It wasn’t that they had exceptional physiques and it wasn’t because they were so pretty either. No, what they had was a special charisma that drew people to them and made them happy just to be near those two girls. They naturally made people around them smile. They gave them joy...

Kazuhiko turned around, hearing the camera shutter. It wasn’t a loud sound, but the cameraman was right behind him. Hiding behind Kazuhiko, in fact.

“You took a picture?”

“Sure did. I’m a pro, my friend. This one’s going to be a winner. Take a look.”

The girls’ natural playfulness was indeed more charming than any of the posed photos they’d taken earlier. A candid photo showing them like that would definitely be magazine-worthy.

Kazuhiko had one more worry, though. He feared that the photos of the girls might steal the readers’ attention away from the article he’d written.

“Eh... I guess I don’t stand a chance...”

Kazuhiko sighed, checking the photo with a wry smile.





It's
Imigimura!
Hee-hee-hee!

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