



M Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by
N necömi

LOOKS
ARE ALL YOU
NEED

2. Tatsuki's Breakbeats

Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by
necömi

LOOKS ARE ALL YOU NEED

▶ 2. Tatsuki's Breakbeats





Dancer Ryuzetsuran
Tatsuki Ootsuka

Genius Vsinger Seeker
Shiika Ikebukuro



Devilish Fashion Designer

Azusa Harajuku

Six-Octave Diva

Erio Shibuya

"Erio Shibuya...isn't it?
Do you need something
from me?"



LOOKS ARE ALL YOU NEED

▶ 2. Tatsuki's Breakbeats

Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by
necömi



New York

Copyright

LOOKS ARE ALL YOU NEED

2. Tatsuki's Breakbeats

M Ghost Mikawa

N Illustration by
necömi

Translation by: **Evie Lund**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

KAOSAE YOKEREBBA IIKYOSHITSU Vol. 2 TATSUKI BREAKBEATS

©Ghost Mikawa, necömi 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at [yenpress.com](https://www.yenpress.com)

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: January 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial

Designed by Yen Press Design: Jane Sohn

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mikawa, Ghost, author. | necömi, illustrator. | Lund, Evie, translator.

Title: Looks are all you need / Ghost Mikawa ; illustration by necömi ; translation by Evie Lund.

Other titles: Kaosae yokereba iikyoshitsu. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023- |

Identifiers: LCCN 2023016566 | ISBN 9781975371258 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388935 (v. 2 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M5537 Lo 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023016566>

ISBNs: 978-1-97538893-5 (paperback)

978-1-9753-8894-2 (ebook)

CONTENTS

EVERYONE HAS TALENT.

IF ONLY WE COULD REALIZE IT.

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 0 After Good Luck Comes Bad Luck](#)

[Chapter 1 Dancer in the Limelight](#)

[Chapter 2 Cooperation](#)

[Chapter 3 The Woman Known as Azusa Harajuku](#)

[Chapter 4 Conservative Reformists](#)

[Chapter 5 The Chasm Between Reformation and Respect](#)


[Epilogue](#)


[Afterword](#)


[Yen Newsletter](#)


CONTENTS


EVERYONE HAS TALENT.
IF ONLY WE COULD REALIZE IT.


-  **Chapter 0** After Good Luck Comes Bad Luck


-  **Chapter 1** Dancer in the Limelight

-  **Chapter 2** Cooperation

-  **Chapter 3** The Woman Known as Azusa Harajuku

-  **Chapter 4** Conservative Reformists

-  **Chapter 5** The Chasm Between Reformation
and Respect

-  **Epilogue**

Chapter 0:

After Good Luck Comes Bad Luck

Pretentious adults claim that since humans have inherent strengths and weaknesses, we should develop our strengths rather than try to fix our weaknesses.

Everyone, get in line and face right. I saw a video on WayTube talking about how we should break away from schooling that aims to create the stereotypical student. And I totally agree.

You see, I'm Gakuto Ikebukuro. An asshole and dropout NEET who struggles with social interaction. I'm no good at the kinds of things they grade you on in school, like studying and sports. Some might ridicule me for my lack of effort, but I'd tell them: *Hey, jerks, effort isn't a skill I have in the first place.*

I embrace mediocrity. I live for escapism. My few pleasures in life are eating three square meals a day and gaming with online friends.

And up until this spring, I immersed myself fully in that lazy lifestyle.

However.

June 24. Two months into the school year. I checked the clock, and saw it was eleven PM.

"Ah, Mr. Zeke. It's about time for me to hit the hay, so I'm logging off now," I said.

"What, again, Lord Gaku-Gaku?"

Through my headphones, I heard the man sigh with regret. Zeke—an online handle, of course. Real name...unknown. He's a buddy from the battle-royale FPS game known as *EPEX*. We play together almost every day, chatting via Wizcode.

"Yeah, well. Tomorrow's another early day."

"Hmm. You used to hang out with me all night long. You haven't been playing much lately."

"Well, school life is tiring, y'know."

"Could it be that you plan to abandon me in favor of making the most of your youth, or something like that?"

"Give me a break. I'm not made for that."

I smiled wryly.

It's true that I've been busy with real life lately, so I've been spending less time playing games, but it's not like people can change that easily.

"And our diva, Seeker, hasn't been uploading any new videos. I may sink into an ocean of despair. *Sob, sob.*"

"Cut the fake crying. I'm sure Seeker is just busy, too."

I rolled my eyes, listening to my online buddy sniffle.

Seeker is the name of a Vsinger, or virtual singer, who posts on the video-hosting site WayTube.

She uses a 2D anime avatar, and neither her real name nor her actual face has been disclosed.

Despite that, I had a pretty good idea of what this Seeker was up to.

That's because the true identity of Seeker is that of my younger sister, Shiika Ikebukuro. And she's a fledgling pop star who, starting in the spring this year, has joined me at the private performing arts high school known as Ryouran High.

She's been busy with school activities, so the frequency of her I Tried Singing videos under her Seeker persona has decreased considerably. Mr. Zeke would

no doubt be relieved if I explained the circumstances, but unfortunately, the connection between Shiika and Seeker remains a trade secret. I can't even tell close friends.

"Well then, it's about that time."

"Wait! Don't leave me! I'm a lonely bachelor!"

"I'm logging off."

"How horrib—"

I ruthlessly ended the call, ignoring my friend who wailed in a villain's dying voice.

Sorry, Zeke. Can't stay up late, not with my new lifestyle.

After a moment of sorrowful reflection, I turned off my PC, got up from my gaming chair, and left the room.

I went straight to the next room over: the room of my sister, Shiika.

When I opened the door, what caught my eye first were the clothes strewn about on the floor.

Roughly rolled-up printouts, a plastic bottle (with a little liquid left at the bottom), and a bag of sweets also lay on the ground.

Immutable proof that one's habits and personality don't change even if their life does.

It was a filthy room that embodied the personality of the lazy layabout who was Shiika.

"Can you stop leaving sweets and drinks lying around? It's so dirty. Oh, how depressing. I'll have Akiba clean this room, too..."

Akiba—Mana Akihabara—is our maid. Of course, *maid* is just what I call her in my own mind. I believe in the saying that if you lie a hundred times, it becomes the truth. See, in my own way, I'm working hard.

I'll do whatever I have to in order to live a comfortable life! That's my philosophy.

In fact, thanks to Akiba, the environment in our home has improved

considerably.

The living room is now clean and tidy, the sink is spotless and shiny, and occasionally she comes to make nutritious dishes, which is just awesome. She's just a classmate and friend from Ryouran High School, but she takes such good care of us that I sometimes convince myself she really is our maid.

Of course, Akiba wasn't working for free. She was trying to get Shiika to be in her debt, since among the students in the Music Department at school, Shiika showed great promise. That Akiba, she's a shrewd businesswoman.

"Hey, Shiika? It's time for our pre-bedtime arrangement."

I called out to the closet door.

But there was no response...just silence.

"Tsk, don't tell me... Again?!"

I had a bad feeling.

Getting impatient, I yanked open the closet door.

"Zzz..."

With headphones on, Shiika was asleep at her desk inside the airtight, self-made recording studio that was practically steaming with the hot humid air of early summer.

She looked so cute and happy, sleeping away... No, never mind that!

"Hey, wake up! It's time for bed, but you can't go to sleep yet!"

"Hmm... Hmm? Nyam..."

"You haven't brushed your teeth yet! Brush your teeth before you go to bed! A pop star's teeth are everything!"

"Hmm... Ahhh... Zzz."

I grabbed her shoulders and shook her this way and that. Her long hair fluttered.

"Myam... Gak?"

"Ah! You're awake, Sis!"

Slowly opening her eyes, Shiika looked up at me with hooded eyes.

“Myan... Arrangement...? Pre-bedtime?”

“It’s fine. Just get up. Walk to the bathroom by yourself, please.”

“...” *Thunk.*

“No, don’t fall back asleep! Agh, whatever. Stay half-asleep. Just come here... Gah!”

Grunting in desperation, I removed the headphones from Shiika’s head, put one of her arms over my shoulders, and dragged her to her feet.

Good thing I work out every day. The young men who aspire to live with their sisters don’t anticipate how much physical strength it can take to care for one.

I dragged her weak, heavy body to the bathroom and propped it in front of the mirror.

I put some toothpaste on her toothbrush and stuck it in Shiika’s little mouth.

“Glop... Gurgle...”

“Don’t resist, now. Yes, yes, right into the corners. Look. Scrub-a-dub-dub.”

“Shcrub-a-dub-dub. Schrub...”

“You don’t need to say it, too. Just keep quiet.”

I adjusted Shiika’s face, preventing the white foam at the corners of her mouth from spilling onto her clothes.

“Yes, open your mouth wide. Have to properly brush the back teeth, too.”

“Ahhh... Chomp, chomp.”

“Don’t move!”

“Foamy sounds...yellow... So fun...”

She obeyed me meekly, despite being half-asleep. Muscle memory.

Such a hopeless little sister... But terribly cute.

That’s how I feel, but I have to say, I think things are a lot better than they were before this April.

Shiika's terrible everyday habits are the same, but when she goes out, she does care at least somewhat about her appearance (even though it's always me and Akiba getting her ready), and she's able to go to bed before midnight now. Those are big changes.

Of course, Shiika's improved lifestyle wasn't due to her own will, but thanks to the new school environment. Instead of relying on me so much, she's now totally independent... Or at least, the first step toward it. But that's good enough for her.

Because she's not an ordinary person like you or me. She's a genius.

Some say that people should develop their strengths rather than fix their weaknesses—I feel the same way.

And Shiika has a special talent.

She has synesthesia, which means she perceives sounds as colors. She can see colors in sounds and view paintings within songs.

She can perceive subtle differences in sounds that others can't hear and can express them with her own singing.

Because of this, even within the Music Department of Ryouran High School, she's beginning to carve out a reputation for herself as a genius.

If you have an overwhelming strength, you can turn a blind eye to any weaknesses.

Shiika was fine just being Shiika. If she lacked anything, I could make up for it with my role as her manager and support staff.

While I was thinking about that, I helped Shiika rinse her mouth and wiped her face with a towel. That was when I felt something vibrating against my leg. It was my phone in my pants pocket.

“Hmm, a message?”

I wiped Shiika's face roughly with one hand and looked at my phone with the other. A new message in the Shibuya Gang group chat.

The group chat was composed of five people who became friends after a dispute during the midterm exam and decided to work together: me, Shiika,

Mana Akihabara, Erio Shibuya, and Nokia Komae.

The name of our group, which up until a little while ago was Ryouran High Music Department (working title), had been changed to Shibuya Gang, in honor of Erio, who had the biggest numbers of us all.

And the sender was the Erio Shibuya in question.

“What does she want, at this hour? Tch, what a bad student.”

But my complaining had no bite to it. I was really just teasing as I skimmed Shibuya’s message.

“...Huh?”

Unable to believe my eyes, I stiffened.

“Mmm. Gak, what’s wrong?”

“...”

Half-awake, Shiika turned and looked up at me as I stood there, frozen, staring at my screen.

“HAVE YOU SEEN THE SCHOOL PORTAL SITE? ISN’T IT CRAZY?”

A very short sentence from Erio Shibuya and a copied-and-pasted URL.

I clicked the link, and it went straight to the portal site, a home page accessible only to students of Ryouran High.

“FOR THE FINAL MUSIC DEPARTMENT EXAM, ONE IS REQUIRED TO POST A DANCE VIDEO.”

Dance.

Those five letters were deadly enough to knock me to the very brink of despair.

People have inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Shiika has demonstrated outstanding talent in singing, writing lyrics, and composing music, and she worked on her appearance to meet the bare minimum requirements, but at her core, she’s a shut-in weirdo.

And her coordination is, as ever...appalling. A little light muscle training, and

she collapses from exhaustion.

Dance requires all sorts of abilities: stamina, nimbleness, flexibility, power, muscle, and cardio strength...

Clinging to a sliver of hope, I looked at Shiika.

“Shiika, did you wake up one day and, without me realizing, master the art of dance?”

“Um, no.”

“I thought not...”

And I knew that already.

Ever since we entered Ryouran High School in April, I’ve been by her side at all times, as her older brother and her manager. I haven’t seen her learning any new techniques, and even when we take our regular walks and do some light muscle training on the weekends to stave off inactivity, she never seems to improve much.

“After we passed the midterm exam, and now that your view counts and popularity have stabilized, I thought things were going well, but...”

I clutched my head, writhing.

Pretentious adults claim that since humans have inherent strengths and weaknesses, we should develop our strengths rather than try to fix our weaknesses.

I’d like to have those irresponsible people answer this one question: If you can’t escape from facing your weaknesses, what should you do?

But it’s not like I was expecting anyone to answer.

Darn it. This IS bad.

Chapter 1:

Dancer in the Limelight

Walk a few minutes from the downtown area, and the neon signs and the hustle and bustle disappear, and you enter a residential area. Amid this residential neighborhood is an oddly stylish-looking building that stands out conspicuously.

Ryouran High School—official name, Ryouran Private High School.

In this space, outlined by redbrick walls, you can hear the students cheerfully chattering like twittering birds.

It was currently lunchtime. The most concentrated chatter can be found in the student cafeteria, I'd say, which is just a short distance away from the main school building.

"...So I've called everyone here today for an emergency meeting."

We were sitting outside on the terrace. Under the sun, my friends were gathered around me, and I cut right to the chase with a very solemn expression on my face.

"The topic of discussion is...the final exam's requirements are seriously crazy. This is what I'd like to discuss."

"Dancing... Urgh."

Shiika was the first to speak.

Despite being usually quiet, she was quick to voice her dislikes.

“I agree with Shiika! We’re in the Music Department, and I’m a composer! What do they mean dance is an essential element?!”

The next to voice her mind was Mana Akihabara. At Ryouran High, attended mostly by fashionable, gorgeous, and attractive students, Mana stood out because of her plain and ordinary face.

Perhaps it’s because of the boyish way she speaks... Even me, a guy who has little experience chatting with girls my age, has no problem talking with her.

“You haven’t actually composed anything, though, have you?”

“Sh-shut up. You’re one to talk, Gakuto. You don’t do anything!”

“How dare you. No appreciation for those who work behind the scenes. If you keep being arrogant, as soon as you debut in the entertainment world, gossip will be flying about you online.”

“No appreciation for those who work behind the scenes? You’re the one who doesn’t appreciate all the housework I do for you!”

“Yo, thanks, hey, I’m always grateful. I got mad respect for you. Yeah!”

“What the hell is that fake-sounding rap about?!”

Akiba, still furious, shoved a piece of fried shrimp into her mouth.

The typical scene at a lunchtime meeting. Today, as usual, Akiba was enjoying all the spoils the cafeteria had to offer, indulging in a rich and luxurious lunch. Was it impressive how Akiba had managed to improve her standard of living despite her extreme mediocrity, or was it a sign of her arrogance?

Shiika and I were sitting before bowls of cheap udon. The fact that we’d been able to add deep-fried tofu and squid tempura was for me a source of pride.

We’ve started pulling in some good numbers when streaming, so our living stipend was surely due to increase, too. But as an ordinary person, a civvy, I know numbers can be fickle. It was possible the view count could drop anytime, so I couldn’t loosen our purse strings.

“Tch, you really are an unpopular loser of a guy. Gakuto, you should learn a thing or two from Komae’s host-like power.”

“Heh... Well, it’s true. I’m not like Gakuto. I know how to provide a pleasing service.”

Nokia Komae. The minute he was brought into the conversation, he jumped right in. A handsome redhead. A pickup artist who uses his good looks for his own gains and proudly whispers sweet nothings to girls. In tune with his identity, he now brought his face uncomfortably close to Akiba’s.

“Don’t worry, Mana. I’ll be here, watching as you develop your talents through your hard work. ☆”

“Th-thanks...”

Corny lines. And the way he’s always winking.

He’s got that host technique. And with that handsome face so close to Akiba’s, she was blushing like a young maiden.

“Komae, you’re being creepy.”

Correction. Akiba was turned-off.

“Guh! That’s mean! I was just doing my usual routine!”

“Hmm, but when it’s focused on me, it feels worse than I expected. It’s like, ‘What the heck does this guy think he’s doing, and does he realize this is a public space?’ Honestly, I’ve got secondhand embarrassment.”

“Well, it works on ordinary girls! The girls in this group are way too guarded!”

Apparently, Akiba’s blushes weren’t out of her own embarrassment but out of secondhand embarrassment.

Komae looked shocked, as if someone had knocked a ladder out from under him. I put a hand on his shoulder and smiled.

“What do you think you’re doing, hitting on girls when Shiika’s sitting right there? I thought you said you were serious about my sister. Well?”

“H-hold on, Gakuto. You’ve got it all wrong. And can you not say things like that right in front of Shiika?”

“Be quiet. You may have a pretty face, but don’t get cheeky.”

“This treatment is just too much!” Komae protested with teary eyes.

Just seeing him look that way gave me extra appetite for my udon. Ahhh, why is food so good?

Just then, I heard a sigh.

The girl sitting beside Komae twirled her spaghetti around her fork, looking disgusted.

“Can you two stop wasting our time talking nonsense? I feel like you’re way, WAY off topic.”

Erio Shibuya. A fashionable girl who’s the personification of a stylish person.

She wore her uniform with stylish modifications. Her lightened hair had subtle highlights, a key feature of her look, and the earrings she wore looked great on her. She knew how to capitalize on her beautiful face, and one glance at her reassured you that she was perfectly placed as the top student of the performing arts discipline.

“The topic is...the final exam.”

“Yes! Exactly that! The dance thing!”

Shibuya had gotten us back on track, so I continued our discussion right away.

At first glance, Erio Shibuya looked frivolous and flashy, but she was more professional than anyone else we knew when it came to music and performing arts activities.

At a meeting like this, she was the type to take things seriously.

“Honestly, I just don’t get what they mean. We’re in the Music Department. Why should we be evaluated on our dance skills?”

The specifics of the final examination posted on the portal site were as follows:

The Final Examination

1. Our school does not conduct final examinations for each class individually. All grades will take the examination of their respective department.

2. The exam period is from July 14 to July 21.

3. The specifics of the examination for each department are as follows:

Music Department

Post a video of a performance that combines original music and dance, and earn a specific number of views and likes.

Dance Department

Post a video of a performance that combines original music and dance, and earn a specific number of views and likes.

TV Talent Department

Post a music video in which you appear, and earn a specific number of views and likes.

Content Creator Department

Direct a music video and post it, and earn a specific number of views and likes.

Fashion Department

Provide costumes for a music video that earns a specific number of views and likes.

4. You may form teams and collaborate on a single video. However, the total number of views and likes will be divided among the team members, and points will be awarded accordingly.

Teams can decide among themselves on how to allocate the numbers of views and likes, but if a decision is not made by the designated date and time, the amount will be divided equally and points awarded accordingly.

5. Those who place in the top three in each department and each grade will be given the right to perform on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival.

6. There are no penalties for poor grades.

7. However, earning the right to perform at the festival will give you

the opportunity to catch the eye of high-ranking industry figures, so aim for the top and give it your best shot.

“By the way, Shibuya, what is the Ryouran Summer Festival?” I asked.

“What, you don’t know? You must be the first student in the history of the school who doesn’t know about it.”

“Well, I’m a transfer student who only entered this spring. Give me a break.”

“Just search using the keywords, and you can easily find the info you need.”

“I can’t be bothered with that. Come on—cut me some slack here.”

“Hey, don’t sass me! Darn it. If you’re serious about calling yourself a manager, you should do your own research yourself.”

“It’s faster to just ask you. I don’t mind tossing aside my pride and asking someone more knowledgeable than myself.”

“Grrr. You’re so good at giving weaselly answers.”

Shibuya bit her lip in frustration and glared at me.

As a performer, she mesmerizes (and almost overwhelms) the audience with her powerful singing voice—she’s like a mad dog on stage. And a little doglike offstage, too.

Sighing, Shibuya continued. “The Ryouran Summer Festival is kinda like an ordinary high school’s culture festival.”

“Culture festival, huh... Then...”

“Hmm? You okay?”

“Guh... BLEURGH!”

“Oh my gosh, are you puking? What are you puking for?!”

“Culture festival. My brother has a trauma... And me too...”

Shiika turned pale and trembled as she rubbed my back, while I was still in a state of Udon Reverse.

The words *culture festival* were like poison for those of us who’ve struggled in school.

“The whole class working together... All for one and one for all... YERK!” I vomited again.

“Trite sayings about teamwork incite yet more puking? It sounds like you two have been through a lot. I totally sympathize,” Shibuya said.

“Hahhh, hahhh... It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I survived...with just some light, fatal injuries. But tell us more about the Ryouran Summer Festival.”

“Fatal injuries would have killed you. Well, to put it in simple terms, it’s Ryouran High’s culture festival. But it’s totally different from that of a normal high school.”

Shibuya lifted a finger as she spoke.

“For one thing, the scale of it is totally different. It’s a major event that attracts a huge crowd of ordinary folk.”

“I mean, culture festivals tend to do that?”

“Sure, other high schools’ culture festivals may be open to the public, but to be frank, no one actually goes except for the students’ own families and maybe kids from nearby schools, right?”

“Well, yeah. Not a lot of people would be clamoring to go to such a crummy event.”

“Putting aside your sad hatred of culture festivals, Gakuto, each and every student at Ryouran High has their own circle of devoted fans, be it large or small, so the festival attracts members of the public who come to see their faves. And there’s a lot of them, too.”

“Ah, yes. Impachi Live has tens of thousands of subscribers to its platform, after all.”

I’d seen on the news that a broadcaster active on WayTube actually managed to fill Tokyo Dome.

Now, I wouldn’t say this would go that far, but no doubt the festival could attract a considerable audience.

“Alumni currently active in the entertainment world will take the stage for certain events, so you can count on their fans coming, and of course there’s the

talent scouts and other industry bigwigs. It'd be no exaggeration to say that the festival is the one event more than any other where attention will be focused on Ryouran High."

"Party people love live events... But hey, what's the special stage?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like! The one with the biggest crowd, the most visible stage of all!"

Shibuya spread her arms wide, showing just how big we were talking here.

Then Akiba joined the conversation.

"That's not all! Almost without exception, the students who perform on the special stage become big stars after graduating. In other words, if you're aiming for future success, you can't skip this opportunity! If you guys get up there, my connections to you will be worth bank!"

"Relying solely on the success of others, huh?"

"You're a fine one to talk, Gakuto. But only the top three can get onstage. There's no way it's gonna be us. Shiika, Shibuya, Komae. That's three. And that's more than good enough for me! Oh, I can almost taste it! Nya-ha-ha!"

Akiba, a woman who throws all her eggs in someone else's basket when it comes to making a living for herself, gave a confident laugh.

I agreed it was a good idea.

Anyhow, thanks to reliable information sources, I think I found out more or less everything I needed to know about the Ryouran Summer Festival. And I believe I grasped the importance of that special stage. In short, win a spot, and you can gain popularity and earn big bucks. Excellent!

"...But never mind all that! Why is dancing a requirement?! It doesn't make any sense, does it?!" I shouted.

"Looking at the requisites for the other departments... You can't just stick to your own lane and be successful," Akiba said.

"A message from the school saying that we should cooperate with one another beyond our departments...maybe," Komae suggested.

“Well, I don’t like it. But if it’s a condition, then it can’t be helped. Dance routines are necessary now, even during live music performances. If we need to dance, all we can really do is practice our butts off,” Shibuya said.

“Erio, do you dance?” Komae asked.

“When Nakameguro was my manager, I took a few lessons. Just the basics, though. Nothing complex.”

“Ah, we’d expect no less from you, Erio. But if your foundations are solid, there shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

Shibuya and Komae sounded calm, in contrast to me, wailing my laments.

“Guh. You can talk; you’re both good-looking and overflowing with confidence. But don’t underestimate Shiika’s true lack of coordination. She wouldn’t even cut it as a backup dancer.”

“Nnngh. No. I refuse to dance.”

“Actually, isn’t the scarecrow dance all the rage among young people? Yeah? You don’t really need to move, just sort of stand there. It’s a whole new style...”

“Nice idea, Gak. I think I could do that.”

“What do you think, Akiba? A new dance trend popular with the youths...”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Argh, we’re done for!!!”

“Gah...”

Reality was cruel.

Shibuya patted Shiika’s head and gave her an encouraging smile as Shiika openly despaired.

“It’s okay. We can learn together!”

“Huh...?”

“As long as you learn the basics and pull off a decent performance, it’ll be fine. There’s no one else in the Music Department who can beat me and you, Shiika!” Shibuya said reassuringly and with conviction.

But Komae stiffened.

“Ah... Well, I wouldn’t say that with such confidence...”

“Oh? What is it, Komae? Why do you sound so dubious? What happened to the handsome ladies’ man who’s always brimming with confidence?”

“Hey, Gakuto. Don’t think you can get away with saying whatever you want to me.”

I did think that, actually. “Spare me your complaints. Let’s get right down to it. What are you worried about, here?”

“Whoa, chill. But anyway... My concern is about the top performers in the Music Department. I think it goes without saying that Erio and Shiika are the top two among the current first-year students. This is an undisputable fact.”

“Indeed, indeed. Shiika is a genius, after all.”

“But when we’re talking about dance, it’s a whole different story. There’s only one amazing talent among the first-years when it comes to dance music.”

“...! Ryan Sengoku! He used to be in BRAVE!” Akiba leaned forward, picking up on what Komae was trying to say.

“Exactly. He’s a pretty strong opponent, isn’t he?”

“Gah! I totally forgot! That’s bad. That’s very bad!” Akiba shouted.

“Hey, hey, hold on a sec, you guys. Fill me in. I’m not in the loop. Don’t just introduce a new main character all excitedly without context.”

“Right. Who the heck is Sengoku? Don’t go getting all fired up over the name of some guy we don’t even know,” Shibuya said.

“Shiika’s the main character, but fine, explain. Akiba, Komae?”

After a barrage of complaints that sounded more like coordinated attacks, Komae cleared his throat. He paused and regained his composure, then put on a serious expression.

“Ryan Sengoku. He’s in the Music Department, too, just in a different class. He’s extremely talented, and he’s been attending a dance school that represents the dance and vocal group BRAVE since elementary school.”

“You must have heard of the performing unit BRAVE?” Akiba asked us, following up on Komae’s explanation.

“Hey, don’t just assume your geek knowledge will be widely understood by anyone,” I said.

“Geek knowledge? More like common... Ah, but I get it. You don’t watch TV, do you, Gakuto? Shibuya, you know, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve heard the name. The guy in the center of things always wears sunglasses and is super buff... It seems the students do all sorts of activities, like appear in movies, and there are multiple subunits.”

“Right, right. Through dance and music, they attain national popularity!” Akiba shouted.

“Wow, so they formed an actual dance school...,” I said.

Shiika and I were unfamiliar with that mainstream world, and Shibuya and the others chattered away about topics only normies would understand.

The next person to speak was Komae.

“Right, well, Ryan Sengoku was the number one student at the BRAVE school.”

“Was? Why past tense?” Shibuya asked.

“He doesn’t go there anymore. To be more accurate, he got expelled.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Rumors of bad behavior. Looks like he goes out of his way to hang out with yakuza-looking guys, and stays out all night, that kind of thing. What an idiot. He could have had a major label debut with a unit under the BRAVE umbrella.”

“Still, sounds like he’s got a lot of clout.”

I found a gap in the conversation to throw in my two cents.

Komae nodded.

“Yeah, and the fan base to match. When it comes to dance and music combined, he might be even more popular than Erio Shibuya. I’ve seen him on TV dancing with just two male backup dancers. I bet he’ll submit his entry for

the exam with those two. Well, that's your top three ranking students right there."

"But if we combine the fandoms of Shiika and Komae, we should be in the clear, right?"

"Naive thinking, Gakuto." Akiba waved aside my suggestion, looking smug.

"I told you before that the influence of dance videos is nothing to sniff at, right?" she continued.

"You did. We need some dance moves to accompany Shiika's singing, right?"

"Indeed. Sengoku has the dance chops, no doubt. AND he used to go to the BRAVE school. The public will absolutely LOVE that!"

"A big star, huh?" My words were dripping with irony.

Since entering Ryouran High, I've realized how much I hate all this crap about looks being everything.

And this time, it was even worse.

Ryan Sengoku had already been expelled from BRAVE. He no longer had anything to do with it. Yet for some reason, he managed to retain that prestige. People don't care about actual facts. They hold on to their inherent biases in the face of conflicting information. Absolutely deplorable.

The only issue is that on this occasion at least, it sounds like Sengoku outclasses Shiika when it comes to dancing.

It's not like her singing ability. She can't wow the crowd by pulling something special out of the bag. Shiika is extremely uncoordinated, and that much is obvious from looking at her. She can't win like that... Actually, she can barely even manage to scramble up onto the same stage.

That being the case, there was only one conclusion I could draw as her manager.

"Okay, let's give up!"

"Whoa, quick decision much? You can't just give up!" Shibuya rolled her eyes at me.

“Well, it’s hopeless. Impossible. And there’s no penalty, is there, for failing the final exam? We should just give up. And hope for better odds next time.”

“The Shibuya Gang doesn’t know the meaning of the words *GIVE UP*! Show some guts, would you?!”

“Guts? Give me a break. And that team name is lame, you know?”

“Lame? How dare you!”

“Calm down, Shibuya. Gakuto’s an idiot. Don’t try to reason with him. You’ll only exhaust yourself.”

Shibuya was still baring her fangs at me and gnashing her teeth like a mad dog when Akiba, who rolled her eyes, tried to intervene. Then suddenly Akiba leaned in close to me and said, “THIS is how you deal with him” with a knowing look reminiscent of a common-law wife who had been by my side for many years.

Akiba continued, “Singers who release videos with lame dance routines disillusion their fans, and that leads to their viewing figures dropping like a rock. Take a look at last year’s data. The trends are clearly visible.”

“What...did you say?”

“And if the viewing figures drop, then, well...it goes without saying that the stipend from the school will decrease like crazy as well...”

“Gack!”

“And once those numbers start dropping, they tend to keep on falling...”

“Guhhh!”

“Then before you know it, you’ll find it impossible to get them back up again.”

“Ngaaah!”

“Forget tempura. You’ll be eating plain udon forever. Not even a single slice of fried tofu...”

“Ababababa!”

“And you can forget about fresh raw maguro. Soon the day will come when you can’t even eat dried sardines...”

“Enough! I’ve heard enough!”

Writhing like a man possessed by a demon, I shook Akiba off and grabbed Shiika’s shoulder with, no doubt, a crazed look in my eyes.

Shiika shuddered; she most likely guessed what I was going to say. She averted her eyes, but I wasn’t about to back down now.

“Which would you prefer, a daily life where you can eat raw maguro or a daily life where you can’t?” I asked.

“...Gak, that kind of question isn’t fair.”

“Which would you prefer, a luxurious life where you can eat delicious food every day or a poor life where you might die of hunger?”

“Ugh...”

Shiika looked conflicted, screwing her eyes shut, her lips moving as she mumbled.

And then she muttered something.

“...I want the tuna.”

“Right! Can you do it, then? Dance! Dance for the sake of tuna!”

“...Maybe...if it’s with Erio and the others...I could...try.”

After a long silence, Shiika finally nodded.

And so we decided to produce a dance video for the final exam. But to be honest, I couldn’t even say we were at the starting line. There were too many obstacles we still had to overcome. How could uncoordinated Shiika, and Shibuya and Komae, whose disciplines weren’t in dance at all, compete against Ryan Sengoku and company, who specialized in dance?

In this kind of situation, we couldn’t rely on Shiika’s inherent talents, and it seemed to me like my work as a manager was about to get a heck of a lot more difficult. The thought plunged me into despair. This is a story in which Shiika is the main character, after all, so we don’t want side characters like myself dominating the scene too much, now, do we?

But still, this was for the sake of my dear little sister. So I was just going to

have to do my best.



Even after eating lunch, we still had time until our afternoon classes. We separated, some of us going to the bathroom or the library or wherever. Shiika and I wandered around the school with nowhere to go, until we finally decided to go out into the courtyard.

Gone are the days when we shut-in vampires were weak to direct sunlight. Shiika and I had regained some of our social skills enough to be able to enjoy a little sun-basking on days when the weather was pleasant.

Shiika sat on a bench looking like a soft plush toy, and I kept one eye on her as I gazed at the sky, wondering what, indeed, we were going to do.

Dance. That was the crux of the issue here.

How could uncoordinated, unfit Shiika compete against individuals who were great at dancing?

Shiika was sunbathing, and judging by her relaxed expression, it didn't seem like she was thinking about anything. Maybe because she trusted me and just left everything to me. But because of that, she lacked a sense of danger, even when it directly involved her. She was as nonchalant as ever, in fact.

Ah, this was an insurmountable hurdle. I just wanted to go home and sleep.

"Hmm?"

Gazing into the distance, hoping for some sweet escapism, I noticed a group of students in one corner of the courtyard who seemed oddly excited about something.

What's going on over there? I wondered, approaching the crowd.

The audience was gazing at a scene that would look highly abnormal in a regular school, but here at Ryouran High, it was par for the course.

Female students having a dance-off.

Two female students danced to the lively tempo music as if they were surfing a wave of sound and were enjoying the heck out of it.

The loud music flowed from a phone and a pair of speakers placed on the grass.

The students clustered around the dancers also seemed to be moving to the rhythm.

I recognized one face: Tatsuki Ootsuka.

The star student among the first-years in the Dance Department. She takes the same hip-hop music class as me and Shiika.

She had uploaded a dance performance to the song we had posted to Impachi Live—the one Komae had provided—and that had really given us a boost.

I'd seen Tatsuki Ootsuka's dancing a few times on videos and streams. Being an amateur myself, I couldn't speak to her technique, but her movements had a polished crispness to them.

But this was the first time I'd seen her seriously dancing in person.

There was so much to her dancing that couldn't be conveyed via visual media, and I was captivated.

She had...a kind of heat.

A heat that could compete even with the sultry heat of summer. Like a sun, radiating passion around her.

And dynamism.

Sweat glistened on her skin. Her body twisted fluidly this way and that. The ground was like a trampoline beneath her feet. She was like an alien who lived on a planet with a gravity totally unlike our own.

Ootsuka in the flesh was a hundred times more dazzling than she was on video.

Both girls were dancing to the same track, but the audience seemed to understand how superior Ootsuka's performance was to that of her opponent... And Ootsuka herself seemed to be enjoying the battle. She wore a wide grin of pure joy.

Then she sprang into a headstand, her body floating in the air, supporting her

weight with only her hands and neck against the ground. She paused for a moment, then jumped up with momentum and did a backflip. Unable to keep up with Ootsuka's acrobatic moves, the student she was battling against lost her balance and fell to the ground.

"Yeek!"

"..."

For a moment, Ootsuka turned her attention to her fallen opponent. But she quickly returned to her own performance without losing focus.

As the song began to reach its climax, the audience's enthusiasm surged.

And a grand finale.

Ootsuka struck a flashy pose, landing on her feet with style, just when the music ended.

"""" ... """"

""""...YEAAHHH!!!""""

A moment of silence always precedes thunderous applause. It rang out across the courtyard.

"Hee-hee! Thanks, everyone! Yay!"

Where did she find the energy, after that kind of vigorous dancing? Ootsuka, dripping with sweat, waved to the crowd and swung her arms, her movements an explosion of pure joy.

Then she trotted over to her opponent, who'd eaten dirt in the middle of their bout, and offered her a hand with zero hesitation.

"I guess I won this time! But let's have a battle again soon, okay?"

"S-sure... You really are amazing, Ootsuka..."

"I am, aren't I? My dancing is just next-level, isn't it?"

"Eh-heh-heh... If it was anyone else, that would sound arrogant, but you, Ootsuka... You're just speaking facts."

"Yes, you know it!"

Ootsuka laughed, throwing a devil's horns sign.

Her self-confidence was stunning. She had the ability to back it up, too, and a bright personality without any dark traits. She seemed so well-balanced. But like I said, this was just my amateur assessment.

“Dancing...”

“Ack! Shiika?! When did you sneak up behind me?”

“I was drawn by a beautiful sound...”

Shiika, who'd been baking in the sun on the bench just a little while before, was now in front of me, nestled against my chest.

“Oh! Hey, it's Shi!”

“Gah. She's seen us.”

Seeing us hiding in the crowd, Ootsuka yelled and pointed right at us. Of course, the other students all turned to look at us. In the spotlight all of a sudden, Shiika trembled.

“Ah, uh... Um... Gak... Human shield, human shield.”

“Huh?! What are you hiding for?”

Ootsuka came barreling over and seemed taken aback to see Shiika hiding behind me.

I sighed heavily.

“My sister's really shy. Unlike you.”

“What? But Shi and I are friends!”

“Shiika only opens her heart behind closed doors...”

“Oh! I didn't realize there were those sorts of restrictions. Seriously?!”

Ootsuka slapped her thighs, as if to say that thought never occurred to her.

Party people just can't understand the temperament of a withdrawn shut-in.

“...”

But Shiika poked her head out from behind me and looked at Ootsuka.

Ootsuka, noticing this, smiled back and gave Shiika a peace sign.



Like water and oil, they would never exactly mix, but they'd been on friendly terms since they met... Probably because they were both uniquely talented.

An idea popped into my head as I watched the two of them. Nothing special, just the kind of idea the same hundred people would come up with if you asked a hundred managers.

"Hey, Ootsuka. I have a favor to ask of you."

"Ooh. What could it be, Gakkun? Whatever you want. After all, we're buddies!"

I mean...she and I weren't exactly buddies, but...

...but I held back on pointing that out.

"Can you teach Shiika and our other friends how to dance?"

"Sure!"

"Of course, I'm not asking you to do it for free. We'll do something to support your goals, too, Ootsuka, and— Wait, did you say sure?!"

"Yeah, I said sure! I'm super happy you've taken an interest in dance!"

"Oh... Okay... Well, that simplifies things."

To be frank, it was a tad anticlimactic.

I hate bothersome things and love it when stuff goes smoothly, but somehow things were going *too* smoothly, and that was kinda... Egh.

I like playing games I can complete, but if the difficulty level is too easy, it doesn't feel like an achievement. I like to play on medium difficulty.

"And the reason you want me to teach you how to dance is... 'cause of the final exam, right?"

"Yeah. The thing is, we're amateurs and..."

"I...can't...dance... At this rate, the tuna will be at risk..."

"Okay, okay. Then let's do this! I'll teach you how to dance, and in return, you can come up with a piece of dance music for my video!"

"Huh?" Shiika stiffened, although it was a casual offer.

Ootsuka, not realizing this proposal would startle Shiika, rubbed her nose and beamed.

“I heard the song you performed for the midterm exam, you know!”

“What? You were in the audience then...?” I asked.

“Yeah! I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of performance you guys will come up with!”

The midterm exam was a month ago.

In front of pro-level judges, Shiika performed a song she’d composed herself. It was an original Seeker song: “Omnidirectional Lost Ones Catalog.”

Of course, we pretended she’d come across the song online and wanted to do a cover of it.

It was a kind of message, to open Erio Shibuya’s heart. At that time, Shibuya was competing with Shiika, although Shiika was only trying to protect Shibuya’s career as a singer. The midterm exam was a school-only event, with the goings-on not being disclosed on social media. So no one joined the dots and figured out that Shiika Ikebukuro and Seeker were in any way connected.

“I was so touched by that song! I want to dance to a song composed by you, Shi! That’s how I feel!”

“H-hold on. Don’t jump the gun here. That was a cover, okay?” I said.

“Huh? Don’t tell lies. That was Shi’s song through and through!”

“Wh-wh-what makes you say that?!”

“It’s just...obvious!”

Ootsuka wasn’t basing this on anything concrete.

But a hunch like that could be dangerous.

Natural intuition, or something like that? How terrifying, for her to be able to ignore logic and reach the correct conclusion with nothing more than instinct. Perhaps this was a special ability born from her insane aptitude for dance.

The audience who’d been watching the dance-off was listening to our conversation. If I denied it too strongly, and if Ootsuka ended up becoming

more insistent about it, people might think there was some connection between Shiika and Seeker.

Probably only a few Ryouran High School students would know about a virtual singer active in the darkest depths of the internet, but even so, it was better to keep the risk low.

Without mentioning the composer of “Omnidirectional Lost Ones Catalog,” I casually shifted the focus of the conversation by acknowledging Shiika’s ability to compose original songs.

“Sorry, but I can’t allow Shiika to compose a song for you.”

“What?! Why not?!”

“Songwriting is a mentally draining process. I can’t have Shiika becoming emotionally exhausted.”

“Hmm. She’s the type to withdraw into her own world, huh.”

“...I’m surprised. You understand what that’s like?”

“Of course! There are people like that when it comes to dancing, too, you know!”

“I see...”

I was honestly quite impressed.

Shiika’s talent spurred me to do all kinds of research, so I know a little about the music world. But I know almost nothing about dance.

Though if you think about it, it’s only natural. It’s the same art field, so it’s not unusual for there to be some similarities.

“How about a compromise? We’ll have Komae compose you a song instead. How about that?”

“That’s cool! I like Nokki’s songs, too!”

“Nokki...?”

Nokki, as in Nokia, no doubt. I wasn’t aware they knew each other. But perhaps she just liked giving people nicknames. After all, she’d been calling me Gakkun since we met. Maybe it was just a thing Tatsuki Ootsuka liked to do.

Anyway, at least she was on board!

Shiika and Ootsuka were both rising stars in the school, so this conversation naturally got the audience all excited.

“Tatsuki’s going to be collaborating with Shiika?!”

“The Dance Department’s and the Music Department’s top students! That Ryouran Summer Festival stage is in the bag!”

“I’m really looking forward to it! I wonder how the video is going to turn out!”

“Shiika Ikebukuro... She seems popular these days, but what’s so good about her? Can she really stand alongside Ryuzetsuran?”

“Well, she’s pretty cute, isn’t she? In a plain kinda way, I mean.”

The students were having fun gossiping. Many of them were watching us with some envy, and Shiika cowered behind me. She was surrounded by a cacophony of colors, a bubbling pot of emotions.

Compared to how things were when she first entered the school, fewer people viewed Shiika with animosity. They saw her as a plain country girl.

These days, however, there was a lot more gossip expressing jealousy, like that her singing voice wasn’t all that amazing and that she’d gained acclaim only because of her looks. It was ridiculous. At first, no one appreciated Shiika’s appearance, but once she started getting attention, everyone focused on it.

So, out of everyone, we could trust Tatsuki Ootsuka.

Ootsuka had a high opinion of Shiika before Shiika started getting popular, and she hasn’t changed her treatment toward Shiika at all since they first met. I was looking forward to seeing what kind of influence a relationship with another rare genius might have on Shiika.

After that, Ootsuka and I swapped message app IDs and made arrangements for a private dance lesson later. I told her I’d get in touch again once I ran through the plan with the other members of the Shibuya Gang, and for now, our business was finished.

Shiika and I waved good-bye to Ootsuka and tried to make our way out of the courtyard.

“Bye-bye, Shi! I can’t wait to dance with you again!” Ootsuka shouted after us, waving her hands unreservedly.

Shiika hung her head low as she turned back around.

Slowly lifting her head like a rusty gear clanking into place, Shiika managed to turn her gaze toward Ootsuka and look at her from behind her thick curtain of bangs. With her hand in front of her chest, Shiika gave a small wave.

“...Yeah. Bye-bye, Tatsu.”

...Okay. Good job, Little Sis.

Call me an overly devoted big brother if you wish, but I found myself smiling and nodding.

Shiika must have reached her limit, surrounded by unpleasant colors, under the scrutiny of the public eye. Despite that, she summoned the guts to respond properly to Ootsuka’s good-bye. Shiika, too, was slowly changing under the influence of Ryouran High School’s environment.



Later, after school.

Immediately after the end-of-day bell rang, the students all got up from their desks and began to walk down the hallways.

I grabbed Shiika by the collar as she staggered out of the classroom, practically swept along by a wave of sound.

“Where are you going?”

“Um... Home.”

“No. You promised to take Ootsuka’s dance lesson after school.”

After getting permission from the fellow members of the Shibuya Gang, I sent a message to Ootsuka to confirm our schedule, and she replied within seconds. We decided to start immediately and have the first lesson after school that same day. Popular kids really move fast. Caught in my grasp, Shiika shot me a resentful look, like a dejected cat.

“...Gak. So mean.”

“I have to be mean! I may be your big brother, but I’ll turn into a true demon if it means we can make some money!”

“I might end up hating you at this rate.”

“Guh! Hey! Don’t say that! You’re not allowed to play that card!”

Shiika’s words stabbed me like a knife, and the look in those glistening eyes just further rubbed salt in the wound. I fell to my knees, throwing up blood. (By which I mean in my mind, not physically. Physically, I was suffering zero damage, but mentally, I was wrecked.) “Don’t...don’t blame me. But if you really, really don’t want to do it, Shiika, then...I’ll let you off the hook!”

“Don’t talk nonsense, you sister-loving freak!” Shibuya shouted.

“Ouch! Hey, don’t punch me! Violent heroines aren’t popular in fiction these days! Are they?!”

“What heroine are you talking about? Just accept it, Shiika. And you too, Mana!”

“...Ugh, you caught me.”

Akiba was about to sneak out of the classroom, but Shibuya’s resonant voice stopped her.

Slipping between a still-complaining Shiika and Akiba, Shibuya slung her arms around their shoulders as if to bind them together, and she dragged them both along in a way that reminded me of a charging dinosaur...or a bulldozer.

“I don’t like moving around. I wanna go home and nap.”

“Gah, give me a break, please! If you were to decide to run us into the ground, Shibuya, I’d expire for sure! Expire, I say!”

“Oh, pipe down. Just come along and spare me the complaining. You really think you’ve got a chance of reigning at the top of the Music Department with that kind of attitude?!”

“Listen, I’m the type who believes there’s no one who’s a lost cause. That’s why I’ll help my friends with whatever when they’re in a tough spot! Maybe that time hasn’t come yet, but when it does, I’m gonna be ready!”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Listen, you fools! Don’t just stand around grinning. Get your butts to the dance studio!”

“Whoa, scary. All right, all right. We’ll do it. Just stop scowling, Erio,” Komae said.

“...Hey, Komae. Is she always this forceful?”

After checking that Shibuya and the others had gone out into the hallway first, I whispered into Komae’s ear so I wouldn’t be overheard.

“No, no, not at all.” Komae shrugged jokingly.

Right... I was relieved to know that the scene from earlier was probably just emotions running high. Meanwhile, Komae gave me an evil grin, as if he’d just read my mind.

“That was her at only about eighty percent of her true power. When her motivation is cranked up to max, she’s even more formidable than that.”

“That’s what I call overpowered! Just thinking about it gives me heartburn.”

“It’s going to be a lifelong friendship. So get used to it.”

“Hey, I’m an ex-shut-in. Don’t expect too much.”

But despite my complaints, this wasn’t a bad social setup.

Shiika was the exact opposite of Motivation Monster Shibuya. She was a lazy, slovenly downer of a girl.

A girl like Shibuya was just what we needed to prod Shiika into action.

And that way, I didn’t have to force myself to fake a positive attitude.

I wouldn’t even need to try, if Shibuya swooped in like she did just now and ushered Shiika off to the dance lesson. What could be easier?

How wonderful it is not to have to expend effort. Ah yes, highly motivated friends are a boon to have.

And so we headed to the annex crammed with studios next to the main school building.

We split up into boy-girl groups, changed in the changing room, then

reconvened in workout gear before heading to our destination—the fifth floor.

Unlike the floor where our classes were usually held, there were studios here that students could use freely if they made a reservation.

When I entered the room I had reserved, Ootsuka, who had already arrived, was doing flexibility exercises.

She had her legs spread out, her butt and thighs flat on the floor. She was as supple as a cat, and I couldn't help but think that it might actually be fun to exercise if I could move my body that freely.

Noticing us, she smiled.

“Oh! You're here, you're here! I've been waiting for you!”

Ootsuka snapped her legs together and leaped to her feet, then jumped up and down on the spot like an excitable dog.

“Are you a cat or a dog? I'm getting confused, here.”

“Well, if I had to choose an animal, I love rabbits!”

“That doesn't answer my question. I'm not asking if you're a cat person or a dog person, you know.”

“Seriously?! Then what are you talking about?!”

“...I guess we aren't talking about anything, are we?”

I had unconsciously voiced my own thoughts. I'd better stop before I dug a deeper hole for myself.

But Ootsuka didn't seem to care about the details, so when I pretended not to know what we were talking about either, she immediately shifted her interest to Shiika.

“Then let's get started! Shi, Eripon, Nokki, ManaMana, nice to see you all!”

“Eripon...? We're practically meeting for the first time, aren't we? Of course, I think we both know of each other by reputation, though...”

“Yeah! This is our first time talking face-to-face!”

“But you've already come up with a nickname for me?”

“Well, yeah! We’re friends! If you don’t like Eripon, we can use something else. Eirin or something.”

“Ah... Er... Eripon’s fine.”

Shibuya accepted Ootsuka’s nickname for her with a bitter grin of defeat.

Beside her, Komae was grinning wryly, too.

“Wow, even Erio can give in to pressure sometimes. Looks like I have no choice but to answer to Nokki, too. Er...Mana?”

“Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee! Fine. Being given a nickname by the one and only Ootsuka is major! For the sake of future connections...!”

Akiba’s eyes seemed to burn with passion. Yes, she’d do anything to capitalize on another’s gains.

Incredibly vulgar. Even Komae, who was usually quite forgiving when it came to girls, looked revolted.

But Ootsuka gives out nicknames willy-nilly, so wouldn’t it be more special to be one of the rare few she actually addresses by name? She was like a natural-born extrovert, someone with hundreds of friends, a slut for friendship, if you will... Still, I’m not saying that’s a bad thing or anything.

As I stood there stunned by the rift in values between myself and the popular Ootsuka, I realized she had grabbed Shiika’s hand at one point and was now getting her started in some flexibility exercises.

“See, see, Shi? You have to squeeze harder. Your body won’t break.”

“Mmm. Impossible. Already at my limit.”

“You’re not even trying to bend! It’s okay, it’s okay. I swear you can do it! Come on! Squeeze!”

“Ah... Tatsu... Can you be gentler...?”

“What?! You’re at your limit already?”

“Limit? I’m about to snap.”

“I’ve never seen anyone so stiff in my life...”

The angle between her butt on the floor and her back was almost ninety degrees. Shiika couldn't bend forward any more, and even the positivity-monster Ootsuka wore a slightly deflated expression.

Shiika might look like an adorable, soft, floppy toy, but her body was extremely stiff.

Any way you slice it, she was a soft, weak creature (actually, her soft skin and amount of body fat were that of any normal girl's), but her joints and muscles were stiff and rigid.

"Shiika almost never leaves the house, and her posture is bad... I think her physical age is probably that of a thirty-year-old."

"Hey, now, don't say that," Ootsuka said.

"Nah, it's about what we can hope for. Right, Shiika?"

"Mmm, yeah... I feel like a sprightly grandma."

"Uh... Okay... Well, never mind! We all have our weaknesses!"

Shiika confessed to be well beyond the physical age of thirty. And Ootsuka accepted it with a smile, biting back a potential retort.

She had excellent people skills. She could change a negative situation into a positive one in seconds.

"Guh... Ngh! Muh!"

"Whoa. ManaMana, you're incredibly stiff, too."

"It's not like...I'm proud of it... I've never been good at forward bends, not since elementary school..."

"I see, I see. So ManaMana's another grandma... Well, I have to work with what I've got!"

"Gwah?!"

Ootsuka's carefree smile seemed to hit Akiba like a dagger to the chest, and for a second, Akiba's eyes rolled back in her head.

"Don't call me a grandma! That's so rude! I'm a fresh-as-a-daisy high school girl, I'll have you know!"

“Fresh-as-a-Daisy High? I haven’t heard of that school. What are you, an old alumni reliving her glory days?” Ootsuka responded.

“Huh? What? What are you talking about? It’s an expression! Are you saying I look old?”

“Super old,” I said.

Akiba stiffened, stunned, as I interjected from the side. I thought it was pretty funny, to be honest.

“Grrr! Grandma? You think I’m going to stand for that?! Grrrr...!”

“Oh, look, ManaMana is giving it another try! Go for it!”

Ootsuka cheered as Akiba tried to bend forward again, her face contorted in agony as she stretched herself beyond her body’s limits. Ootsuka even jumped on Akiba’s back and pushed down, clearly trying to encourage her, but Akiba just screamed: “Ouch! Don’t do that! You’re gonna break my spine!”

Still, I wasn’t quite sure why Akiba was so upset.

She’s a vulture who leeches off other people’s success, and though she might talk big, she has never composed a single song. Despite that, she’s prideful and seems to get easily embarrassed over things others would barely flinch at.

One day I’d like to ask Akiba where exactly she drew the line on what she considered shameful.

“One, two, three... Oh my, what are we even doing?”

“I think I can easily predict what comes next.”

In total contrast, Shibuya and Komae made for a beautiful, calm, and flexible duo.

Shibuya’s long hair, with its contrasting black and gray locks, was spread out smoothly on the floor. The casual athleisure she wore showed off her lines and curves and her toned body that was like a leopard’s.

She was a diva who believed in the importance of physical appearance, and she put her money where her mouth was, too.

We finished the flexibility exercises, although it was like night and day among

the two camps.

Finally, Tatsuki Ootsuka, top student in the Dance Department, began our lesson.

During our initial talk, I told her I wanted her to teach us the basics above all else.

For Shibuya and Komae, that might have been a bit low-level. But I needed to get Shiika's stats up to at least level one. So we had no choice but to start off easy with the absolute basics.

"Okay, everyone, eyes on me! The world's most easy-to-understand dance lesson is about to begin!"

Whoo. *Clap, clap.*

Shiika, Shibuya, and Akiba applauded listlessly. No one could keep up with Ootsuka's level of enthusiasm, but she didn't seem fazed, and she plunged ahead anyway.

"First, to learn how to dance, you need to know the four basics. Now, the first one is... Does anyone know?"

"Rhythm."

"Shi is correct! Rhythm is important, super important!"

Ootsuka clapped loudly.

Shiika blushed, almost as if she was happy to have gotten it right.

"And what else?"

"We just did it. Stretching, that's essential, right?"

"Eripon is correct! Actually, the flexibility exercise just now was already part of the basic training!"

"Basic? That's considered basic?!" Akiba voiced her indignation.

Akiba continued: "That's like if I wanted to learn the basics of writing a novel and the teacher said the most important step is to understand Japanese!"

"Don't be so naive!"

“Huh?!”

Ootsuka smacked Akiba on the back, and she leaped into the air in surprise.

People in Japan complain about corporal punishment, so you no longer see this kind of thing in education, but it wasn't some greasy middle-aged teacher doing the drill-sergeant bit. It was a petite, slim girl who radiated an aura of extreme cheerfulness. So the sight of it wasn't so galling. Hmm, optics really influence our impressions of things, don't they?

“What I'm saying is that these are dance hacks! If you can move your body freely, dancing itself will be a breeze!”

“I see. Then perhaps muscle training is another one of the basics?” I suggested as the idea suddenly came to me.

Ootsuka turned to me with eyes like a purring kitten...

“Oh, correct! Good job, Gakkun!”

“Hee-hee, maybe I'm a genius.”

“Genius! Genius!”

“Hee-hee-hee. I see, I see. Yeah, being praised like this isn't half-bad... Hee-hee-hee.”

“Wipe that disgusting smirk off your face. If stretching is one of the basics, it's obvious muscle training is, too.”

“Shibuya, don't eviscerate me...”

I'm aware I'm no genius, but I'd like to get some credit every now and then when I actually manage to say something smart. The leader of the Shibuya Gang is way too strict, not just on herself, but on the other members, too.

“Rhythm, stretching, muscle training... The perfect lineup of basics needed to master dancing.”

Komae counted on his fingers, summarizing the answers given so far.

Then he furrowed his brow and tilted his head quizzically.

“But I can't think of another one... Um, perhaps memorizing choreography? Like, the steps.”

“Wrong! It’s important, sure, but steps are a step that comes later.”

Steps are a step? All this dance terminology was scrambling my brain.

Still, I kinda understood what Ootsuka was saying.

“I think it’s probably unfamiliar to everyone in the Music Department, so I’ll give you the answer. The answer is...isolation!”

“Ice...lotion?”

“Ah-ha-ha! That sounds so cold and slimy!”

Clearly, Shiika wasn’t familiar with the word.

Ootsuka had broken into an impromptu dance, like something you’d find in an opening of an anime, her movements clearly meant to personify something cold and slimy.

“Isolation means moving each part of your body independently. I’m going to show you what I mean, so watch closely!”

And Ootsuka stopped doing her slimy dance.

Then she began moving only her head and neck.

“Huh?!”

“One, two, one, two, hup, hup, hoo!”

Her shoulders, torso, and lower body didn’t move even one millimeter.

Like a bobblehead, she moved her head and neck freely from left to right and up and down.

“Now, just the shoulders. Hup, hup, hup.”

“Gross! What’s wrong with your body?!”

“Ah-ha-ha! You’re so mean, ManaMana! But everyone in the Dance Department can do this!”

As she spoke, Ootsuka demonstrated the movements with different parts of her body.

Starting from the neck, shoulders, chest, waist...then to both legs and hands.

Seeing her move only certain parts of her body, I began to suspect that Ootsuka was some sort of elaborate ball-jointed doll only made to resemble an actual human being.

Her performance was amazing, like a first-class pantomime.

“I’ve seen videos of dancers, and you certainly see that kind of movement a lot.” Shibuya nodded as she spoke.

Komae also bobbed his head.

“It seems there are people who make a living with just that trick, so I thought it was a special skill. I had no idea it was one of the fundamentals of dance...” Komae said.

“We know a lot about music, but we don’t know much about dancing.”

“I’m not sure you know that much about music at all, Akiba.”

“Grrr, put a sock in it, Gakuto!”

“If you have any complaints, why don’t you try completing a song first? Huh?”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear that from a lazy NEET who attends school without ever actually doing anything!”

“Come on—don’t quarrel during my demonstration, guys!”

Seeing Akiba and me squabble, Ootsuka intervened, her look of patience beginning to fade.

Hey, maybe we can cut the dance teacher a break, just this one time.

With that thought in mind, I straightened, and looking to one side, I saw that Shiika was squirming around.

“Ngh... Guh...”

“...What are you doing?”

“Ice...lotion...”

“It’s isolation.”

“What do you think, Gak? Am I doing it?”

“Sorry. You look like you’re doing an impression of kelp undulating on the

ocean floor.”

“...Oh, nuts.”

Oh, nuts? Shiika’s reactions were so last decade.

I’m a devout follower of the sister-worshipping religion, and I’m reasonably good at telling lies, but I just couldn’t give Shiika my stamp of approval for her current effort.

When she moved her neck, her shoulders moved; when she moved her shoulders, her chest moved; and when she moved her chest, her hips moved... Unlike Ootsuka’s demonstration of isolated movement, where all the parts seemed to be independent, Shiika’s efforts were far too clumsy.

“Ah-ha-ha! It’s cool, it’s cool! Everyone’s like that at first!” Ootsuka shouted.

“...Really?”

“Yeah, of course. There, there!”

“...Hee-hee.”

Ootsuka stroked Shiika’s head.

Shiika loves having her hair stroked. She seemed to have really warmed up to Ootsuka.

“Anyway!” Ootsuka exclaimed, pointing a finger at us all.

“Stretching, isolation, rhythm, muscle training! Master these four basics, and you’ll be able to freely control your own body! That’s the most important thing! Okay?!”

“““““Okay.””””” ”

“All right, nice response there!”

The members of the Shibuya Gang all saluted but at staggered intervals.

“You guys are musicians, so you should have no problem with rhythm. I think we should focus on the other parts, how’s that?”

“No objection here!”

“I object!”

“Yeah, no objection.”

“I object, too!”

Opinions were split between Shibuya, Akiba, Komae, and Shiika.

Ignoring that, Ootsuka continued...

“First, you should know your own body! So I’m going to check the characteristics of each of your bodies right now!”

Her eyes were sparkling like a mischievous child, and her fingers were wriggling alarmingly.



“Hmm... Ha... It tickles...”

“Shi, don’t move, okay?”

There was a strange atmosphere in the lesson studio.

Ootsuka’s and Shiika’s bodies were entwined. Ootsuka had herself draped over Shiika’s back and was stimulating her body parts with a practiced hand.

“But...you’re touching...my personal spots...”

“Don’t you usually touch them yourself? You have to massage your body, you know, to stay supple!”

“I can’t do it myself...”

“Then have Gakkun do it.”

“Have Gak do it?”

“Yeah. You need to really dig the fingers in here and squeeze...”



“Hee! What are you...? I’ve never felt this before... It kinda hurts but also... feels good?”

Shiika’s face went lax, though her body jerked beneath Ootsuka’s skilled hands.

Her forehead, visible through strands of her long bangs, was soaked with sweat, and her cheeks were glowing red, perhaps because her blood circulation had improved.

It was odd. This was ostensibly a sports massage. Why was the atmosphere in here so...charged?

“Can you two maybe try to sound a bit less...well, you know?”

Maybe this was why...

As her older brother, I couldn’t just stand by and let my sister say X-rated dialogue like this.

“Hmm? What?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Gak.”

Ootsuka, who was pushing Shiika’s shoulder blades with her fists, and Shiika, who was lying on her stomach and allowing herself to be abused, both looked at me, speaking in unison.

Yes, what they were doing was completely innocent and wholesome. Only a deranged pervert would find the things they’d been saying to each other inappropriate. I mean, I am a pervert. And it made me wanna drop dead. Someone, please kill me.

I looked away, making a noise of disgust like a guilty knight, and someone tapped my shoulder.

When I turned around, Akiba was giving me a thumbs-up.

“I know how you feel.”

“You understand, my fellow comrade?”

Ah yes, one-of-the-guys-type female friends—they were the best.

“I’ve never heard Shiika moan before... It looks like this one’s got a secret trick.”

“Hey! That’s my little sister you’re talking about!”

It bothered me especially that she’d been looking at my sister that way.

“Hey, boys. Enough of this dumb talk, okay?” Shibuya said.

“I’m a girl, though?!”

“It’s all the same if you’re looking at her with dirty thoughts. Anyway, Ootsuka explained what she’s doing from the start, right? She’s just figuring out the characteristics of Shiika’s body.”

Shibuya was right.

“I’ll check her range of motion,” Ootsuka had said before she started generating all this weird, sexually charged tension.

Few people are aware of how far their arms, legs, and joints can move.

Even if you try to bend your body, you’ll unconsciously stop just before it feels painful. You might not even be able to predict exactly where that limit is yourself, either.

A prime example of this is the scapula.

Most people don’t know that the shoulder blades can be moved independently, so it’s only by having someone else move them for you that the true range of motion can be understood.

...At least that’s what Ootsuka said. Luckily, I’d learned about the importance of shoulder blades in the process of studying martial arts, so I was able to easily understand her explanation. It just never occurred to me that it would also be an important element when it came to dancing.

“All right. I think I’ve got a good idea of Shi’s range of motion now.”

“...How’d I do?”

“Shi, to be brutally frank... You’re totally hunchbacked!”

Yeah, I knew that.

Ootsuka's public declaration was merely a reaffirmation of that fact.

"Hunchback...like Quasimodo?"

"Incidentally, when it comes to making dancing look beautiful, it's the worst possible posture to have!"

"Oh, nuts..."

"Ootsuka. What are you thinking, destroying my sister's confidence like this?"

"Oh, I'm not trying to destroy her confidence. If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't be holding back."

Her smile was so bright, it was hard to tell if she was joking or being serious. Ootsuka once again ran her fingers over Shiika's shoulder blades.

Shiika jerked and trembled with excitement.

"But Shi's hunchback can be corrected. Due to the lack of exercise, she doesn't have a ton of muscle that might restrict her range of motion, and it doesn't seem like her bones are weirdly misaligned as a result. If she works on correcting her posture every day, she'll be fine. She might even get a really sexy body!"

"Whoa! That's my Shiika! I knew you had the potential!" I was impressed.

"Gakuto, could you be any more obsessed with your sister? By the way, though, how are we supposed to correct our postures?"

"That's a good question, ManaMana. Hee-hee-hee. Watch this! Tatsuki's god-hand technique!"

With her arms crossed in front of her body, Ootsuka struck a pose that made her look like the main character of a movie.

"I think I'll just..."

"Don't run away."

"Ugh!"

Ootsuka must have predicted that Shiika was about to run away. She grabbed Shiika's collar as she attempted to slink out of the studio.

I mean, I was as worried as Shiika was.

Ootsuka, please. I beg you. Be gentle with her...

Chapter 2: Cooperation

The next morning.

I roughly stopped the annoying phone alarm that started ringing while I was fast asleep.

I usually sleep through one or two or three alarms. Sometimes ten...

Today was different.

“Hnugh!”

I got up and jumped out of bed. The bedsprings gave me extra momentum for a tidy landing on the floor.

One slap to the cheek. That woke me up completely.

The clock showed five AM. I still had plenty of time before classes started, but thinking about everything I had to do between now and then made me realize I didn't have much time at all.

After listening to Tatsuki Ootsuka's explanation yesterday, I'd learned a thing or two about dancing.

For example, strength training is also important.

When I still hadn't known anything about dance, I'd thought of it as a joke and that I should give up, as there was nothing I could teach.

But if muscle training was a fundamental aspect of it, that changed things somewhat.

I have no talent for music, and my scholastic skills and my reflexes are both trash, but even I, a person devoid of the kind of talent Ryouran High School was supposed to foster, had a few special skills.

I had some know-how and achievements under my belt in the fields of muscle training and self-taught martial arts.

Thanks to my experiences with self-training during my shut-in period in order to learn how to protect Shiika as her older brother, I felt confident I could help both Shiika and Akiba gain the necessary muscle needed to dance.

That was the plan, so starting today, I intended to take the two of them out for morning training every day.

After sending a message to pressure Akiba and make sure she didn't oversleep, I changed into workout clothes and left my room.

My destination was, of course, my beloved sister's room.

"I'm coming in."

I announced my arrival with a knock, but I entered the room without waiting for a response. I knew that at this hour of the day, Shiika would be neither conscious nor capable of communicating normally.

"Zzz... Zzz..."

Sure enough, Shiika was curled up in bed, asleep.

I shook her shoulder, but she just made an adorable noise and showed no sign of waking.

I rolled Shiika onto her back and dragged her body to the edge of her bed so that only her head dangled off.

"Ung... Huh?"

"Good morning, Shiika. It's time for morning practice, as we agreed."

"Agreed...? Did I?"

"Yes, last night. But you were exhausted, and you only seemed to be half-listening."

"It can't be done."

“It can indeed be done.”

“Hmph. Gak, you’re mean.”

“Nonsense. This is love of the highest order.”

“By the way, Gak...”

“What?”

“Why are you upside down?”

“It’s not me who’s upside down—it’s you. It’s your head.”

“Oh... Come to think of it, my neck does feel kinda weird.”

Her long hair hung loosely down to the floor.

Sloppy, but I hadn’t put her in this position to tease her.

“It’s one of the best ways to straighten your back. Ootsuka said yesterday that you should do it regularly, right?”

“Did she?”

“Try to remember stuff better.”

It was a bad habit of Shiika’s to erase inconvenient memories from her mind in an attempt to escape from reality.

She takes music so, so seriously. It’s not like she’s weak-minded. But for some reason she can’t put the same passion into other things. If only she could diversify some of that effort, she’d be able to easily surpass the other talented candidates.

But I shrugged. It couldn’t be helped. I’ve known Shiika for a long time. Geniuses are just kinda like this.

Anyway, having Shiika’s head hanging off the bed like this is a legit technique to fix her hunchback.

People who are addicted to their computers and phones tend to bend forward on a daily basis, which causes the bones in their neck to warp inward.

As a result, the individual gets used to being bent over, and such a position starts to feel natural. Then their posture becomes more and more stooped.

Even if you want to fix it, it can be dangerous to have an amateur fiddling with your neck, and it's nearly impossible to correct your own form once it's gone wrong.

So we have this method.

Lie on your back on the bed, stick your head out, and allow gravity to pull your head down. Then, gradually, your body will be doing the exact opposite of hunching over, and the stoop will slowly be corrected.

"...How long do I have to stay like this?"

"All done. Now, we're gonna go jogging. Once we return, we'll start the muscle training."

"Gak, that's too strict. You're like a demon."

"Guh... That hurts. But no! This time, I won't indulge you."

"Tch."

Shiika's so cute when she's annoyed.

After I had Shiika change into a tracksuit, we left the house and headed to the nearby park.

This was where Shiika was scouted by Kei Tennouzu and where she accepted Shibuya's challenge. It's kind of a desolate place, with only one slide, so not many children come here to play.

But since we didn't have any need for playground equipment, it was the perfect workout environment for us today.

Akiba was already there, and when she spotted us arriving late, she snarled at us like a rottweiler baring its fangs.

"You're LATE, you two! I came by train, and I got here before you, even though this is literally your neighborhood!"

"Well, I gave you a time that was half an hour before the actual meeting time."

"Huh?!"

"I was expecting you to be, like, twenty minutes late. Groaning and

complaining about having to do morning training.”

“Ugh... Well, okay, so I arrived about ten minutes ago...”

Akiba’s eyes were narrowed, as if she was wondering how I’d known. I gave her a smug grin as I responded.

“I understand the mentality of a slacker! As I, too, am a slacker.”

“Don’t be so arrogant... But, Gakuto, er, what’s that?”

Akiba was pointing to the bicycle I had brought with me.

“What do you mean? It’s a bicycle.”

“But we’re jogging. What’s the bicycle for? We don’t need that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, you see, it’s just you two who’ll be running.”

“Huh?! You’re going to make us run while you cycle in comfort?!”

“Of course. After all, I’m not the one dancing. And I don’t want to tire myself out.”

“Guh, this is beyond the pale! Don’t you have a conscience?!”

“That’s rude. You’re hurting my feelings. I just don’t want to wear myself out and get my legs all tired.”

“Wow...”

She could look disgusted all she liked, but I wasn’t about to change my mind.

After all, just like Shiika, I, too, am a genuine shut-in at heart. Sure, I’m good at muscle training and martial arts, so you might get the wrong idea and think I’m a jock, but there are various categories of athletic ability.

In my case, I have strength, technique, and explosive power, but my stamina is trash. I was confident I’d be out of breath after just five minutes of jogging.

“But we don’t even know if we’re going to be part of the music video yet,” Akiba said.

The top three students would win the right to appear on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival. In the Shibuya Gang, we had Shiika, Shibuya,

Komae, and Akiba, so that was one more than we needed. In fact, considering the ability levels of those involved, it seemed reasonable to expect Akiba to be the one who got dropped.

“However, something could happen, so it’d be better if everyone’s trained and able to dance. Someone might get injured or fall sick suddenly. And three girls might be a better balance than two girls and one guy. Three girls might draw in bigger viewing figures. Summer festival aside, we need the best possible response,” I said.

“Guh... Well, I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am. So don’t just stand there complaining. Get your butt in gear.”

“Tch... Fine.” Akiba nodded reluctantly, still looking displeased.

“Come on—no time for grumbling. Do some warm-up exercises and then get running!”

“Guhhh... You dirty, underhanded bastard...”

“Gak, no fair...”

“Don’t glower. I’ve prepared a nice reward for afterward.”

“...Reward?”

Shiika’s eyes lit up in response to that sweet, sweet word.

Always in it for personal gain, I thought wryly, giving Shiika an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“You can eat some delicious, tasty meat.”

“Meat... *Droool...*”

“Can you do your best?”

“I can. I will!”

Shiika clenched her small fists. Ah, finally, some gumption.

Since she’s my sister, knowing exactly how to motivate her sure comes in handy sometimes.

After that, Shiika and Akiba followed the jogging and muscle-training workout

plan I'd devised.

I say *devised*, but really, I just copied the regime from a video I found on WayTube. As for muscle training, I carefully selected the things I'd done myself and found effective, so I was sure it would help. What do you mean, none of this was original? Say that to the select shops of the world!

Incidentally, here's a snapshot from the training montage:

""Huff! Haaah! Hyuh! Guh!""

"You look grim, Akiba. Can't you work out a little bit more attractively?"

"How dare you say that while you leisurely pedal on a bicycle, you jeeerk!!!"

"Huff! Hah! Ugh... Can't...go on..."

"It's okay, Shiika. It's almost over."

"Your treatment of her is nothing like your treatment toward me!"

Akiba's tongue was as sharp as ever. Apparently, jogging hadn't tired that part of her body.

"My abs are burning. I feel like my stomach is about to burst."

"Yes, yes, you want that crease line. Keep up the good work, Shiika!"

"Guh... Guhhh! Huff, puff!"

"Don't groan and moan like that while doing ab training, Akiba. Can't you be quieter?"

"Sh-shut up! Th-this hurts, you know! You think you can do it better, huh?!"

"I can do it easily. See? Hup, hup, hup."

"Darn it! The one thing you're good at! Guhhh!!!"

Akiba screamed, bestial, as she pushed through the pain.

And so, as you see, time passed, and now the hour was growing late. We needed to get to school.

After clapping my hands to signal the end of practice, I took the sweaty and exhausted twosome back to our house. I let Shiika and Akiba shower (Akiba also cleaned the bath afterward) while I finished preparing breakfast.

When Shiika and Akiba came out of the bath, I held two plates steaming with the fragrant smell of black pepper.

“Meat...!”

“Wow!”

“Steak, cooked rare. If you want to build muscle, you need to eat good-quality protein after your workout.”

The muscle-training WayTubers all say so, after all.

“You weren’t bluffing, then? Knowing you, Gakuto, I was certain you were dangling false bait with the meat thing!”

“How rude. Is that how you see me?”

“Uh, what? What goes on in your mind, Gakuto? Think back on every interaction we’ve had until now!”

“Okay, so I don’t cook for myself, but grilling meat is easy. Even I can do that much.”

“Gak, you’re a genius. Can we eat?”

“Sure. Make sure to chew well and grow strong!”

“Whoo! I’ll dig in! I mean, since you were kind enough to grill steak for us, Gakuto. It’s always me who ends up serving you, so knowing you had to do a little work for once makes me feel kinda good.”

“And it’s your job to wash the dishes and degrease the frying pan after eating, okay, Akiba?”

“When was that decided?!”

“Why do you think I invited you to join us for morning training anyway?”

“You invited me just so I could be your dishwasher?!”

The number one reason why cooking was troublesome was because of the cleanup afterward. Especially when using oil. I’ve heard it’s a major hassle, since you have to use a special oil sheet to absorb the used oil for easy disposal, and you have to carefully wipe the sticky ventilation fan with a cleaning agent.

If I didn't have a convenient maid like Akiba, I would never think of grilling meat at home.

"...I take back my previous statement. You really are trash, Gakuto."

"I permanently ban you from all future meat-eating sessions and from any future collabs with Shiika."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it! I'll gladly clean for you, Lord Gakuto!" Akiba apologized frantically, then bit into her steak, her expression growing soft and gooey.

The abrupt change of facial expression was just too funny. I've already secretly nicknamed her Girl of a Hundred Faces.

Shiika was huffing for air around a bulging mouthful of meat when she suddenly looked up. Her gold eyes were staring right at me.

"What's up?"

"If I train my body...eat meat...build muscle...will I get good at dancing?"

"Naturally. And you've got the best teacher around: Ootsuka."

"Hmm... Then I'll do my best."

"I'm sorry for making you do something you're not good at."

"It's okay."

She shook her head.

"I'm not good at dancing, but...I like the color of dance music. If I learn to dance, I feel like I'll be able to see more new colors."

"...That's right. Let's do our best to find those new colors."

"Yeah." Shiika nodded and stuffed another forkful of meat into her mouth again.

Shiika was trying to break out of her shell in her own way. Not only was she not trying to bury her head in the sand when it came to her weak points, she was actually bravely attempting to stretch her own limits.

With that being the case, I wanted to help her as much as I possibly could.

(...But we didn't have much time until the final exam...)

Lost in thought, I watched Shiika and Akiba eat.

Muscles, athletic performance... You can't achieve remarkable growth in those things overnight. The only subject you can't cram overnight is phys ed, you might say. And our chances of being able to beat skilled dancers like Ryan Sengoku were practically zilch anyway.

We might need to bring out the heavy guns here.

Focus not just on the quality of our dancing, but other things we could bring to the table. If we couldn't find something like that fast, Shiika's chances of standing on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival would soon be dwindling to nothing.

Information. That was what we needed.

If only I could speak to someone with experience of last year's Ryouran Summer Festival, I could get some hints and figure out a way to get ahead without relying on athletic performance.

Should I rely on Akiba's information network?

...No, no. Akiba's specialty is info-gathering among the first-years, since she's a first-year student herself. Once she becomes an upperclassman, she's going to have to go out and gather herself a whole new set of info.

Right now, I wanted her to focus on training, rather than wasting her time gathering info.

Besides, I had an inkling of where I might find myself an upperclassman familiar with last year's Ryouran Summer Festival.

"She's odd, so I'd rather not get involved too deeply with the likes of her... But I guess I've got no choice."

Muttering vaguely, I pictured the face of one particular female student.

Io Kanda. The genius actress. The eccentric I'd encountered during the basics of muscle-training class.



We were inside the Ryouran High School building. The interior was painted in a tasteful color palette that matched its distinguished redbrick exterior. The brown-and-white painted walls of the wooden corridor made me feel like I'd wandered into the Taisho period.

And contrasting with the old-school atmosphere, the corridors were filled with students dressed in the latest fashion trends.

Girls squealed together, and the atmosphere was that of your typical lunchtime.

But things looked a little different from usual. After all, this was the third-year student floor.

I was weirdly nervous.

Everyone here was the same age as me, but I was a first-year. The thought of standing in a space full of seniors made me anxious. I'm a shut-in, see, so I'm shy, and I'm not great at talking with people. I just wanted to quickly take care of my business and head home.

I sneaked down the corridor, peeking into classrooms, trying not to be noticed. I was looking for her...for Io Kanda.

She's a peerless beauty, a genius actress with an impressive aura. She ought to stand out from her surroundings. I should easily be able to spot her. That was my thinking.

But I couldn't find her anywhere.

Even though I strained my eyes and sharpened my senses, Io Kanda was nowhere to be seen.

I'd researched her class in advance, but perhaps my information was incorrect. Or maybe she went somewhere else for lunch break? As soon as class ended, I'd left Shiika in the care of our friends and run here in a hurry, but... Maybe I just missed her?

I was about to turn and retreat when I suddenly sensed someone behind me.

"...!"

I whirled around.

How long had she been standing there? A beautiful face, like Snow White's, so close to mine that our noses were almost touching.

"Did you need something from this class? Are you looking for someone? I can get them for you."

"Io... How long were you standing there?"

"Hello, Gakuto. I've been standing here for just a few moments actually."

It was the woman herself, Io Kanda, wearing a modest smile.

She had pale skin, white as snow, and silvery bleached hair. She was known to have an expressive face, yet it was currently unreadable, like she was wearing a painted mask. She wore her uniform in the orthodox manner, making her look like a well-behaved honor student but also mysterious at the same time.

She was the most talented student in Ryouran High, a school of talented students. She was already active as an actress and had already appeared in movies and TV dramas.

They call her the actress with a thousand emotions, due to her ability to play a wide variety of roles convincingly.

Why would an ordinary person like me be addressing such a celeb by her first name when there was such a hopeless disparity between us? Like the moon and a turtle, like diamond and stone, like a sniper rifle and a stone axe, that was me and her.

I'm not indecorous, you have to understand. It's not like I don't see the huge gap between us.

I would have liked to call her "Kanda," nice and proper.

But it was none other than Io herself who'd asked me to call her by her first name. She said it was fine since we were the same age. I'm not sure how she found out my age, but I had no choice after that but to indulge her in her wish and call her Io. I meant nothing bad by it, in other words.

"You were here for several moments? I didn't notice you approaching at all."

"Hee-hee. I also work as a stage actress, you see."

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“I can’t step loudly on the stage if it’s not part of the production. I’ve been training myself to walk silently. It’s an occupational hazard. I’m like an assassin. Don’t you think that’s super cool?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s cool, but...”

I’m a shut-in, but I am still very conscious of others. No, actually, I think it’s BECAUSE I am a shut-in.

I hate it when people look at me. When people stare at those like me in society, they’re rarely thinking anything good. After a bunch of unpleasant experiences, I’ve developed this chill that makes the fine hairs on my whole body stand on end whenever I notice someone looking at me.

Shiika’s sensitive to sound, but sounds don’t bother me that much. Still, I’m more sensitive than normies who’ve never experienced any hurdles in life.

It was amazing that Io had managed to sneak up on me—and closely enough for me to feel her breath.

“What is it? Captivated by my face?”

“Ah, no. I was wondering who you are, really. Like maybe you really are an assassin?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t answer so glibly. I can’t tell if you’re being serious or joking.”

“Hee-hee. Well, thank you.”

“Er, that’s a compliment?”

“Yes, yes. It was the best compliment for an actress.”

“Ah, I see. Depending on how you look at it, that makes sense...”

Just having a normal conversation with her felt like I was being swallowed alive by an ant lion, and my legs started to get wobbly.

As I stood there looking down, clutching my head, Io leaned forward and looked at my face, as if she could see right through my chin.

“Is it possible you came to see me?”

“You sure cut straight to the chase.”

“You were looking inside the classroom until just a little while ago, but since you started talking to me, you haven’t glanced over there even once, see.”

“Your insight is horrifyingly sharp. And you’re correct.”

“Hmm, so you’re captivated by me, is it? That’s... Well. Hee-hee-hee. I’m pleased.”

“It’s not you I’m interested in. I’m interested in learning about the final exam.”

I decided to get to the point. It felt like the conversation had been going on for too long already, and if I continued to let Io set the pace, we could be at this for hours.

“The end-of-term exam, huh?”

“Yeah. If you get a high grade, you can perform on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival, right?”

“Yeah. That’s the setup every year.”

“I want some tips on how to get on that stage. You’re a third-year student. I thought you might have some ideas, based on trends from the previous years.”

“I see. It’s true that I performed on the special stage last year and the year before that. I’m so great. Eh-heh-heh.” Io puffed out her chest.

Her childish gestures were at odds with her mature appearance. I couldn’t help finding her cute.

“Ah, but, you know... In your case, you don’t seem to need a strategy,” I said.

“Really? Why not?”

“You’ve got to be one of the best students in this school. I’m sure you were able to get ahead with your talent alone.”

“Well, that’s rude. You’re insulting me.”

“Er, what? How am I insulting you?”

Io puffed out her cheeks.

What was she sulking for when I'd just praised her? I had no idea what made this girl happy, and even less of what displeased her.

"I work hard and come up with plans, too, you know. I hate it when people think I just bulldoze through with my talent, like some kind of gorilla."

"Er, I don't think you should call yourself a gorilla."

"Anyway, like I said, I've applied myself and strategized to get where I am. I'm sure I can help you."

"Oh, thanks. Yes, I'm sure I can rely on you."

She clenched her fists and brought her face closer, and I bent back reflexively.

She's an oddly intimidating woman.

"But even with all your talent and popularity, you still strategized. Compared to the other students, you don't leave anything to chance. It's impressive."

"Second place was a triple score."

"Wow..."

I could easily imagine how the other students felt.

But that's what it takes to be Ryouran High's number one. No mercy.

"I don't mind brainstorming with you over how to ace the final exam. Only..." Io trailed off, looking closely at me. "In exchange, could you please do one thing for me?"

"Oh, it's a tit-for-tat situation, is it? Well, if it's something I can do, I'll do it."

"Really? Oh, great! I've been wanting to do this, but I didn't have a partner, so I was in a real fix!"

She clapped her hands in delight, her cheeks red as she spoke.

"After school, I want you to have...a match with me."

A match. Somehow, I had the feeling she wasn't talking about a date.

I still had some questions, but I didn't want to act like a smart-ass. For now, I decided to pretend as if what she'd just said was totally normal.

I gave the safest possible reply.

“...All right. After school, then.”

“Right. Thanks a lot! ♪”

We exchanged contact information, then went our separate ways.

On the way back to the first-year classroom, I looked at Io’s contact information in my phone, and I realized something.

I’d basically just swapped contact info with a legitimate, working entertainer.

It’s not like I had a meadow of wildflowers bursting into bloom inside my mind or anything, but it definitely made me feel strange. For a guy who’d been an intense shut-in until as recently as last spring, I’d made a ton of progress.



“Well, I have to be somewhere now. You guys, don’t skip out on the lesson.”

It was after school. I entrusted Shiika to the other members of the Shibuya Gang, who’d gathered after homeroom, then I quickly left the classroom.

“Gak, where are you going?” Shiika asked.

“I just have some minor business. You’ll be fine with Shibuya and the others.”

“You weren’t here at lunch, either.”

“I had something to do at lunch. But you did just fine without me then, too, didn’t you? Don’t worry. Just work hard at your lesson, okay? Ha-ha-ha.”

“Is it a girl?”

“Excuse me, whaaat?”

Shiika hit the nail on the head, and I yelped.

Shibuya gave me a cold look.

“What? You were getting yourself a girlfriend while we’ve been working hard and sweating?”

“Hey, come on. Do I look like the kind of guy who’d do that?”

“You’re actually trash. Even though you don’t look like the type who’d be popular with girls.”

“Hey, that’s the worst combination of disses ever! At least let me be popular trash! Or unpopular and NOT trash!”

“Excuse me a sec...”

While I was protesting against Shibuya’s harsh treatment, Komae suddenly brought his nose close to my shoulder.

Sniffing and wriggling his nose like an animal, he looked up with a nasty grin.

“Whoa, whoa, what? Gakuto, you smell like sweet perfume, don’t you? I think you met a girl after all.”

“Seriously?! Ugh, does perfume last that long?!”

“That long, you say? Is that not an admission of guilt? ☆”

“Guh!”

Komae seemed to carry a torch for Shiika. Was this his revenge for me flexing my position as her older brother?

He’d found a weak point in my armor, and he was exploiting it.

“Komae, remember this. I will never entrust Shiika to a man with a corrupt heart.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I’m not criticizing you, here. All men want to have some fun with a cute girl. I get it, you know?”

“No, you don’t get it at all... Anyway, it’s not like that. It’s nothing juicy like that.”

“Right, Nokia. And you, Erio. You guys don’t know anything about Gakuto.”

Akiba sent out a rescue boat.

She shook her head, slapping Shibuya and Komae on the shoulders. Those two had been closing in on me like determined shogi players.

“You know, one of my favorite Vtubers said on a stream once...that the only way shut-in boys like him get to connect with girls is through a computer screen.”

“Darn it, Akiba! You’ve sure got my number!”

It was a heavy blow, but right now, it worked out in my favor, so I decided to roll with it.

Although, this alone wouldn't be enough to get me off the hook, so I needed another excuse. I glanced at Shibuya and Komae.

"Hmm, I see. Yeah, I just can't picture Gakuto with a girl," Shibuya said.

"Too bad. If he was serious about it, I was planning to teach him some of my pickup techniques," Komae joked.

"Hey, it's annoying me how solemnly you're taking this."

I really am unpopular with girls, not to mention socially awkward. Come on, man!

"Anyway, I'm off! Now, Shiika, be good and listen to what Ootsuka says! You need to show serious improvement, okay?"

"Guh. I'll do my best."

I gave her a thumbs-up, and Shiika returned it with both hands.

Good girl. I gave her head a few gentle pats, then left the classroom.

I sent a quick text to Io via a message app, then headed to the agreed-upon meeting spot.

Luckily, it was in a building far away from the dance studio that Shiika and the others used for practice.

The gym where we had our basic strength-training classes was in this building, but I wasn't heading there today.

Following the directions she'd sent in her text, I arrived at the right room.

When I opened the door and went inside, the scent of rubber hit my nose.

The floor was covered with pitch-black martial arts mats, and heavy-looking punching bags hung from iron posts. There was also a mirror used to check form, a bench press, and a treadmill.

It had the atmosphere of a full-fledged mixed martial arts gym or dojo.

The type of facility you see in videos on YouTube where MMA fighters spar or

fight bad guys for the likes.

Smack. Smack. The dull sound of fists hitting a punching bag reverberated throughout the space.

The dangling chains jangled, and the iron support posts creaked.

It was Io, hitting the punching bag with gloved fists. We'd planned to meet here, so I shouldn't have been surprised to see her, but for a moment, I was taken aback by the sight of her.

Was this...real?

How could one of the most talented actresses in the school throw such a perfect punch, in a stance that would put a professional martial artist to shame?

I was overwhelmed by the spectacle and stood there staring, until Io spotted me and stopped hitting the punching bag.

She lightly wiped the sweat off her forehead and welcomed me with a bright, refreshing sort of smile.

"I've been waiting for you. Now then, come this way."

"...Did you lure me here under false pretenses? Is this some kind of viral video project where you demonstrate how to knock out a guy who gets fresh?"

I looked around for cameras and strong men hiding in corners.

But there was no one in this spacious gym except for me and Io. And there was nowhere for anyone to hide.

"Viral video? What are you talking about?"

"...Nothing. Just talking to myself."

Was I overthinking things? If a well-known actress really did create such a vulgar video, she'd end up criticized by the public. The personal brand she'd worked so hard to build up—the Io Kanda persona—it would be besmirched if she did that.

"You said you wanted to have a match with me, so you meant..."

"Yes. Sparring, I want to spar with you."

“Oh, I see. That’s what you meant by *match*...”

Now it all made sense. Her odd intonation, too.

“Actually, I had another motive, too.”

“You’re so diligent. To think that an actress who’s got everything is still aiming for the top.”

“Yes. Daily reflection, daily devotion. Don’t forget to improve yourself and push forward. After all, that’s what it means to live.”

“All my mottos are antonyms of yours.”

It’s hard to find someone who’s the exact opposite of me in this way.

Her seriousness was too dazzling for me, with my laziness.

“I have an audition for a large-scale action movie funded by a North American production studio.”

“Oh. That’s another big project.”

“Since it’s a big deal, I thought I’d distinguish myself by proving that I can do all the scenes without using a stuntman. I’ve been studying kung fu in earnest.”

“...Huh?”

What she’d just said was so outrageous, it took me a moment to react.

“Wait, wait, really? You can’t be serious.”

“I am, though.”

“I saw on the internet that the actors themselves don’t do that kind of thing.”

“It’s common for casts to focus on the visuals, so yes, the dangerous stunts are often done with stuntmen or CG. But in North America, in order to stand out as an actor, you’re practically required to have skills beyond just your looks and acting ability. And that helps performers stand out in Japan, too, by the way. It’s so cool when an actor performs all their own stunts. That’s what I’m aiming for.”

“That’s outrageous, so dazzling... I feel like I’m being blinded by your ambitiousness.”

“Oh, I’m serious all right. I’ll take responsibility and pay for my own surgery if I end up needing to get a prosthetic eye.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or just joking, but please don’t say anything else like that.”

“But I am serious, you know?”

“...”

Io looked right at me, her head slightly tilted. I had nothing left to say in response. All I could do was sigh.

“Here,” Io said, putting an MMA glove in my hand.

“Do we really need to do this? Sparring, I mean.”

“I feel like it’s not enough to just memorize the fighting moves. To act as if I am a trained fighter, I need to practice sparring in such a way as to simulate a true battle.”

“I see... So that’s why you’re interested in me and not Shiika.”

“The way you train is unusual, and it seems like you’ve mastered some kind of martial art. Isn’t that right?”

“...Can you teach me how to get ahead on the final exam?”

I wanted to reemphasize this.

Information, that was what I was lacking. Before I went and revealed my hand, I wanted to make sure our agreement was set in stone.

“Of course. Women’s honor.”

“Because I recorded you saying that. And if you double-cross me, I’ll upload it to WayTube and have you totally canceled.”

“Hee-hee. Relax. I play it straight. That’s my personal policy.”

“Systema—it’s a martial art for soldiers; or rather, it’s a fighting technique. I’m self-taught, though... If a true soldier ever saw me, no doubt they’d be furious. That’s how amateur I am.”

“I see. Well, I’m looking forward to seeing you in action either way.”

“Try not to get injured. I may be an amateur, but that also means I’m not good at pulling my punches.”

“All right. Anyway, sometimes the risk of injury makes it more exciting.”

“Please give me a break with that.”

If I scarred the face of one of their most precious assets, her talent agency might send assassins after me.

I didn’t want to lead a life in fear, like that one WayTuber who lives abroad for their own safety after exposing the dark side of certain celebrities. That’s the kind of thing I’d only do if I had nothing left to lose.

As I thought about that, I pulled the glove over my hand.

Io was already in the middle of the mat. Bouncing on the spot, checking her footwork, waiting impatiently for me to be done getting ready.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Sure. I’m ready for you anytime,” Io said.

There wasn’t a gong, but we both sensed when it was right to start, and lightly bumped our fists to signal the beginning of the match.

Io lowered her hips halfway and took a deep breath.

A kung fu stance. The back of her left hand was facing me, and she curled her fingers, provocatively beckoning me.

These were the kind of moves I’d seen in films. It was impressive.

Amazing. My first time seeing this in real life.

“You’re ready anytime, huh? You’ve got...some...NERVE!”

Scraping my feet against the floor, I covered the shortest distance in the shortest amount of time... A one-inch punch.

The overwhelming force generated by the twisting of the hips and the rotating of the shoulder went all the way through my arm and into my fist, putting an even amount of weight behind my rapid strike.

A blow like that could even knock out a thug with decent fighting skills. Now, I

have some self-confidence, but I'm not just tooting my own horn here. I can say it based on my past experiences, but...

"Huh...? Hah!"

"Wha...? Are you serious?!"

Io parried the blow with the back of her left hand and instantly moved into my exposed space.

Then she gently placed her beautiful white palm on my navel and jabbed it inward.

It was like getting a wrecking ball to the solar plexus. I took a step back, my legs tangling together.

I wanted to congratulate myself for not losing my footing after a blow like that. I was able to keep my feet planted to the ground with a rootlike tenacity. No doubt a result of all my training to my lower body and core. Yes, muscle training really is important. And I'm glad I kept it up. Very, very vital.

"Wow, you really did pull your punches. I see, I see. Great technique."

"Since when did Ryouran become a school for training martial artists?"

"Well, for me, this is all part of the arts."

"I see... Well then!"

"...! Whoa, that was a sharp blow. I barely managed to dodge that."

Smack. Smack. Io and I punched glove against glove, letting off a dull sound.

The sweaty sparring continued in silence for a while after that, but since it's got nothing to do with Shiika's story, I'll omit the blow-by-blow here. This is just some behind-the-scenes work, you see. What's important is the conversation we had after that.

"The final exam. Each year...the key is to..."

Io threw a punch at me, then finished her sentence.

"The key is to get someone talented in the Fashion Department on your side."

"The...Fashion Department?" I mindlessly parroted her own words.

I barely paid any thought to the Fashion Department. Some fashion students were in a few of our elective classes, but to be honest, our grade was so full of flashy students I'd never felt like getting involved with any of them.

"Theatrical performances, movies, concerts, dance events... Costumes play a vital role in all of them."

"So...looks are what's most important, you mean?"

"Yes. The costuming's actual merits aside, having a designer with a great reputation provide the outfits always greatly increases the reception of the audience to any given production."

"But why team up with students from the Fashion Department? If we hire a first-class designer and have them make costumes for us, that would be even better, surely?"

"Do you think a first-rate designer would accept such a job from an inexperienced student?"

"What if I saved up some money and—? Whoa?!"

A sharp jab came flying at my head. I reeled back, dodging the blow.

Leaning close enough for me to feel her breath, Io spoke with a deadpan expression.

"A costume's either ugly or beautiful, depending on the status of its wearer. You can save up all the money you want, but it won't help you... Even in the finest of costumes, if you don't have the style, you'll just look like a fool."

"...Yes, people who wear designer clothes to try to look cool often are a tad cringe."

"Precisely. Wow, you catch on quick."

"I have a finely honed radar for cringe."

Yes, I'd grasped what Io was getting at right away.

Clothes make the man, they say, but there's a limit to what you can hide just by dressing up nicely.

It's not about whether you're wearing good clothes, but whether you're

wearing clothes that suit you.

A first-class designer would probably be busy and would value their free time highly. A wad of cash probably wouldn't tempt them much. No doubt a really good designer would only provide haute couture to someone who could raise their own profile. At least, that's how I saw it.

"But in that case, wouldn't it be the same story if I tried to hire some talented student from the Fashion Department? Like, for example, the first-year Azusa Harajuku."

"Of course it would. But they've got their own end-of-term exam requirements to fulfill, too, you see. They're going to want to find the most talented students to dress. So if they were to collab with someone who was a perfect fit and help raise their reputation, then..."

"But how do you persuade someone of that level? With subscribers and views?"

"No way. Designers know how hollow those kinds of numbers are. Likes on social media don't get you recognition in Europe. It's about tangible results... The brand you create for yourself. The right model. The right face."

With a chuckle, Io sharply raised her right leg in a high kick.

I blocked it, guarding my face, but Io kept her leg stretched high and continued talking.

"And entertainers need the right staging of costumes to create their brand... Their face."

"Ah, right."

"Fashion designers are the mirror image of that. They need the right staging provided by an entertainer, someone to make their costumes really pop... To create their brand, their face."

"Then if we can show Azusa Harajuku that Shiika and the others are the kinds of entertainers she should work with...she'll want to collaborate with us?"

"Yes. Well, before that, though... Hah!"

Once again, Io's fist came flying toward my face.

“You need the right...attack!”

“...I see... I feel like I’ve learned a lot.”

Io’s fist stopped a few centimeters from the side of my face.

And my fist, too, stopped right in front of her’s.

An attempt at a cross counter. Io beamed, and I did, too, lured in by her smile.

“Consulting with older students... It really is invaluable. Thank you, Io.”

“This was a wonderful training experience. Thank you, Gakuto.”

We thanked each other and finally withdrew our fists.

Both Io and I were sweating, our breathing erratic.

I looked at my watch and saw that quite some time had passed. I also realized that I still felt rather energized, despite all the vigorous exercise and talking. In fact, I felt oddly purified and refreshed.

“Gakuto.”

I was just wiping my sweat with a towel, about to exit the room, when Io stopped me.

“Will you spar with me again?”

“Hmm, I don’t know...”

An ambiguous response. Honestly, it hadn’t been so bad. But I was only attending this school as an accessory to Shiika’s career. Right now, I was working alone to gather info, yes, but honestly, I’d rather stick close to Shiika’s side. I wanted to make it clear that this was just a one-off thing. Doing it regularly sounded exhausting.

After thinking about it for a while, I replied:

“Tit for tat. The next time there’s something you can do for me, I’ll spar with you again.”



After finishing my match with Io, I wondered what the members of the Shibuya Gang were doing, so I headed to the dance studio.

When I opened the door, the first thing I saw was a pile of dead corpses: Shiika, lying on the floor, not moving at all, while Akiba and Komae were in a state of exhaustion. Only Shibuya seemed like she was still alive, but she was sweating a lot and looked pretty out of breath.

“Oh, it looks like you worked hard.”

“Ah, Gakkun! 'Sup?!”

Ootsuka noticed me and came dashing over, in high spirits.

Ootsuka didn't look tired at all, naturally. She was business as usual, full of pep.

“*Gasp, gasp...* That woman. She's dangerous. A sporty demon...”

Akiba sounded hoarse, like someone about to bleed out.

“She's a monster! Grrr!”

“It's amazing that you have enough breath left to joke around with... I'm completely spent.”



“Eripon, you look like you’re holding up well! Shall we go for one more set?”

“I can’t!”

“Ah-ha-ha, only joking! ♪ But it’s almost time for the next group’s appointment, so hurry up and disperse, would ya?”

“Ugh... So exhausted.”

“Shi, wake up! Come on, come on!”

“Myam...” Shiika slowly got to her feet, moaning listlessly.

Her legs were wobbling. I couldn’t stand to see her so unsteady, so I hurried over to support her.

“Good job. You really did your best, didn’t you?”

“Nyeah. Praise me more.”

“You were great. Great!”

“...Heh.”

Shiika narrowed her eyes in satisfaction as I stroked her ego. She seemed more relaxed now, but her legs were still wobbling, and I wasn’t sure she’d be able to walk.

I was wondering what to do when I heard a noise by the door—the sound of voices.

Apparently, the next group who’d booked the studio had arrived.

“Hey, Haruka. Maybe we should ask someone from the Music Department to compose a song for us for the final exam?”

“Denied. They don’t understand our soul. Creating a soul-trembling beat and really making an audience excited. We need someone who can do that, and nothing else will do.”

“Hmm, that’s true, but...”

Three female students walked into the studio, talking away.

At the head of the group was a flashy-looking girl with dyed red hair who was about the same height as Ootsuka. Next was a girl with a ponytail, and another

one with a short bob. They all had toned bodies and beautiful features. By which I mean, even in this school, with its high number of good-looking faces, they were above the school average.

In particular, the red-haired girl in the middle, called Haruka, had a particularly good body and a presence that made her stand out.

The three of them stopped, noticing us for the first time.

“Oh...” Ootsuka suddenly yelped.

She dashed over to the girl in a friendly manner.

“It’s Harucchi! So you’re the one who booked this studio after us, huh, Harucchi?”

“Tatsuki...”

“The three of you are going to make a video together for the final exam, huh? The top three students in the Dance Department teaming up... You’ll be unstoppable. Well, I have no intention of losing, either, you know!”

Apparently, the trio were Dance Department students. Still, I had no real idea of the hierarchies in this school, so I had no concept of how amazing they really might be.

“Hey, Akiba. Are they famous?”

I sat down beside Akiba, who’d surreptitiously slid back onto the floor, and muttered to her in a low voice.

Akiba seemed to have caught her breath again. She sat up straighter and glanced over at the Dance Department students, who were deep in conversation.

“The one in the middle with the superstar aura is Haruka Gokokuji. Number two in the Dance Department. She’s Tatsuki Ootsuka’s best friend and rival. The other two are also in the top ten. Seeing these girls interact is the kinda situation that has those in the know snapping pics for posterity.”

“Gokokuji, huh?”

I looked them over as Akiba explained, and I immediately noticed a

discrepancy there.

Ootsuka was demonstrative, gesturing wildly as she spoke, but Haruka Gokokuji's expression didn't change at all.

Chalk and cheese, you might say. From where I was standing, it looked like Gokokuji was sort of standoffish.

Gokokuji's friends looked slightly awkward, too, staring at her and Ootsuka.

Ootsuka's energetic voice echoing in the studio felt somewhat hollow.

"Tatsuki, read the room. We're clearly here to practice."

"Oh... Oh, right. My bad! I was just so excited. We haven't spoken in ages, Harucchi! Ah-ha-ha..."

"You're wasting our time. Please leave at once."

"Uh, right. Of course... Guys! Come on! We're over our allotted time. Let's make way for the next group, okay?"

Ootsuka looked despondent for a moment. Then she was right back to her usual perky, cheerful self.

But her smile wasn't the natural one she'd worn before. It seemed sort of empty, sort of...pained.

"Hmm... Gak?"

"Don't watch, Shiika."

I covered Shiika's eyes with one hand.

The tense atmosphere you experience now and then in school. One of the many toxins that continue to plague Shiika's delicate mind.

"Come on, then, guys. Time to leave."

"Oh, right."

"Y-yeah. Okay."

"...I guess that would be for the best."

Akiba, Shibuya, and Komae sensed the awkwardness in the air and got ready to leave.

Everyone was very solemn now. What happened to all that joking from just before?

After we packed our things and were about to leave the studio...

“Tatsuki.”

...Gokokuji called out to Ootsuka’s back.

“Are they students from the Music Department?”

“Yep! The very best!” Ootsuka answered cheerfully, even though Gokokuji’s tone was harsh.

Gokokuji clicked her tongue.

“Such impudence. Making a mockery of hip-hop.”

“...Okay. Well, we’re off now! Bye-bye!”

Ootsuka must have heard Gokokuji’s spiteful words. But she made no response, almost as if Gokokuji hadn’t spoken at all. She just waved jauntily, then shoved me out of the studio ahead of her.

We walked a ways down the hallway, and once we were out of range of the sour trio— “Sorry for the awkwardness! Just Dance Department politics. Ah-ha-ha,” Ootsuka said with a strained smile.

“Well, I guess even you have various things to deal with, huh?”

“Oh yeah. It’s tough. Wah-ha-ha.”

I tried to show some sympathy, to which Ootsuka smiled and laughed it off.

Akiba sighed, then said, “You’re one to talk, Gakuto...”

“Ah, but it’s not like it matters to us. Our only interactions with Dance Department students will be limited to Ootsuka, after all.”

“Hmm. But it’s not totally irrelevant,” Akiba responded with a loaded grin.

“Don’t be cryptic. Say what you mean.”

“Haruka Gokokuji is Ryan Sengoku’s girlfriend.”

“...” Ootsuka gulped and looked away.

She was wearing her usual beaming smile, but she seemed to be hiding something.

It was impossible to read her inner thoughts, though.

She was the opposite of poker-faced. She wore a permanent smile that was impossible to see through.

I decided to leave Ootsuka alone for the time being and ask Akiba about my concerns instead.

“That information is irrelevant, isn’t it?”

“Ryan Sengoku is an enemy we must defeat. Sengoku matters to us a great deal.”

“Yeah, but... His relationships don’t matter to us. That Gokokuji girl is completely unrelated.”

“Idiot! What are you, a total amateur? You have zero social media savvy. You’re a failure of a self-proclaimed manager!”

“That’s harsh! Mind your tongue, you vulture!”

“Find a new insult, you dumbass!”

But Akiba continued anyway, and now she was getting really snarky.

“Everyone knows that Sengoku and Gokokuji are dating. That means as long as each of their videos is pretty good, they can pool their fan base! They’ll be rolling in likes!”

“That... That makes sense.”

“Right? Irrelevant? Don’t make me laugh!”

“But even with that knowledge, we can’t do anything to get ahead where Gokokuji’s any kind of factor.”

If we find a way to beat Ryan Sengoku, then we can beat Gokokuji, too. That would be best, rather than getting involved in personal relationships.

“Um, listen...!”

Ootsuka interrupted our conversation.

“I just remembered I have something I need to do! I’ll go home first!”

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” I said.

Ootsuka dashed off. I watched her as she retreated into the distance.

The pitch of her voice, her big smile... The same as ever. I’m guessing she split because she didn’t want to hear any more about Gokokuji and Sengoku, though...

“Tatsu...”Shiika muttered, staring at Ootsuka’s retreating figure.

What kind of color did Shiika’s eyes see, and what was she thinking about right now?

As an ordinary person, I couldn’t even speculate.

But it was clear that Shiika was picking up on something about how Ootsuka was currently feeling.

I’d picked up on something, too, but I’m terrible at communicating with others, so it wasn’t like I could help in any way. I was left feeling...useless.

But still, that was fine.

I had enough to worry about. What I needed to do was focus on the things that were within my ability to control.

Chapter 3:

The Woman Known as Azusa Harajuku

The following day.

Sorry to veer completely off topic here, but recently I've gotten really into pretending that I'm hypercompetent lately.

A true pro wakes with the dawn... That kind of thing.

I say *pretending*...but I don't really do anything. I just set some background music playing in my head and prepare myself for an elegant morning as if I'm playing the role of some hypercompetent manager in a TV drama.

I'm lazy by nature, so if I don't deceive myself like that, I can't bring myself to move my body early in the morning.

Anyway...

I played some pump-up background music in my head this morning as well, and after subjecting Shiika and Akiba to another demonic morning training session, I headed off to school.

On the train, I checked Azusa Harajuku's Impachi Live channel. Harajuku, a first-year student in the Fashion Department. Naturally, I was still keeping up my manifesting stuff. As I fiddled with my phone, I pretended I was some kind of elite office worker, off to an important job in the city.

But then my elite-worker face froze up, like time had suddenly stopped.

"Gak, what's wrong?"

“You look like some kind of ugly graphic novel character.”

Shiika and Akiba both noticed something was going on with me and looked at me with quizzical expressions.

Ah, Shiika, my little sister. Always so sweetly concerned.

As for you, Akiba...I'll never make the mistake of thinking you're kindhearted. Ever again!

“Ah, it's nothing. I was just looking at Azusa Harajuku's channel, for strategy purposes, you know...”

I kept my tone low, like I was telling a ghost story in the midst of a hot summer night.

Yes, I'd just seen horrifying things. On the screen of my phone, a horrific image, playing out in real time...



“Hello, everyone! Today, I’ve come to a specialty store in Tokyo to try my hand at blending perfume. Look at this. Isn’t this a cute little bottle? This is packed with a blend of scents I put together with my own hands! Isn’t that unusual?”

Azusa Harajuku picked up a small bottle with slim fingers and brought it close to the camera lens.

Her tone was soft and melodic, her hair fluffy and bouncy. Her makeup was neither too strong nor too little. It was just the right amount. And she wore elegant clothing that, from just a brief glance, looked to be of high quality.

Was she really a high school student? She was so feminine, so mature, I almost couldn't believe it.

But she was the same age as Shiika. Unbelievable.

She was the epitome of a full-fledged, gold-plated older-sister type... Like a rich, sophisticated girl from the Minato Ward of Tokyo.

Genius talent or ordinary person aside... Just looking at her, she seemed like some kind of foreigner, someone from a completely different place, who spoke a completely different language. And I was supposed to approach her with an offer of collaboration? The thought was enough to crack my mind right down

the middle.

“I can’t approach a woman like this!!!”

Bursting into the classroom, I cried out shamefully in front of all the members of the Shibuya Gang.

Akiba, Shibuya, and Komae stared at me with blank eyes.

Oh! The harsh gazes of my friends... So cruel...

I’d already communicated, via text with my friends, the plan to snag a collab with Azusa Harajuku from the Fashion Department. But I’d hidden the fact that the source of my info was Io Kanda, just because I didn’t want to answer any awkward questions.

Still, showing off the strategy as if it was my own brainchild... That ended up backfiring. My friends were clearly thinking, *What’s he doing freaking out now? Wasn’t this his idea?*

But! Even so! What else could I do but freak out?!

“A woman of this caliber is too scary! I just know she’ll look at me and think, *Eurgh, who is this creepy virgin and why is he talking to me? Oh well, if there’s money in it for me, I guess I’ll accept!!!*”

“Well, what do you expect? Dorky dudes don’t get a great reception in general, you know.”

“Akiba... Come with me to launch our attack on the Fashion Department! I’m just too intimidated to go by myself!”

“Oh, quit your whining. You’re an embarrassment.”

“I’m an embarrassment? Then what are you, cool as a cucumber? In that case, you can help me! Right?!”

“No way! I’m not going into that unfamiliar territory! Why do I have to go?!”

“See? See? You have the exact same qualms as me! Yet you call ME embarrassing?!”

“Shut up! I’ve been sweating my butt off from dance practice, you know! It’s basically your job to do the background work!”

“Don’t just stand there stating facts! Where’s your humanity?!”

“Stop spouting trash like a human garbage receptacle!”

“Yes! I AM trash! That’s the point!”

Akiba and I continued arguing fruitlessly.

At some point, I turned a hopeful eye on Shiika.

“Incidentally...what are the chances of you coming with me, Shiika?”

“Zero. I’m not good at...social spaces.”

“Right, right... Yes, I knew that...”

She and I are brother and sister, you see. Our trauma triggers are very much of the same type.

There was never any chance of me relying on Shiika anyway. My job as an accessory to Shiika’s talent was to foster an environment where she could focus fully on developing her gifts. What was I thinking, turning to Shiika for help? I was a failure of a manager.

“You know...”

When I was wondering what to do, Shibuya lightly raised her hand.

“...Do you want me to go with you?”

“...Real?”

For real, I wanted to say.

“Real,” Shibuya said, twisting her meticulously groomed hair around one finger. “Actually, I’ve been really keen to check out the Fashion Department classes. I heard they’re pretty impressive, even in a school like ours. I might catch a glimpse of some amazing new trends.”

“Oh, okay, then... Shibuya! You’re the best!”

I was so moved that I involuntarily grabbed Shibuya’s hand. A handshake of gratitude. Pumped it up and down to express my joy.

Shibuya’s cheeks turned faintly red.

“Don’t go overboard. And don’t just grab my hand like that, like it’s no big

deal.”



“Well, you saved me from a tough predicament. Unlike some supposed friends I could mention. Ah, you’re like a ministering angel!”

“I wasn’t asking for you to make your case for grabbing my hand... Oh, you know what, forget it. It’s too embarrassing to explain.”

Shibuya sighed.

“What’s with this guy? Acts like he’s useless around girls, but then starts getting all touchy-feely... Maybe he’s just an airhead...,” she muttered.

I didn’t really understand what Shibuya was trying to say, but I understood enough to tell that I was being dissed.

It sounded sorta like she was implying lower-class people were all too handsy.

It wasn’t nice to hear, but perhaps she did have a point. Recently, I felt like I have been acting kinda overly friendly with people.

It was hard to open up at first, due to the walls I’d built up around myself, but once we’d all started getting along, the distance between us just seemed to naturally close, and any lingering awkwardness on my part was the kind of thing I really hoped wouldn’t be a big deal. But Shibuya was under no obligation to play along with a guy who she felt was acting creepy, of course, so I decided to quietly let go of her hand.

Anyway, having Shibuya accompany me... That would be a huge help.

I had zero taste, so I was sure I’d be a fish out of water in the Fashion Department by myself. With Shibuya, though, I’d be able to sort of blend in.

At any rate, she’s the most fashionable girl in the Music Department. Just walking next to her would raise my apparent social status.

Or it might just emphasize my dorkiness, as if I was trailing along after her like goldfish poop. Oh well. Just let me live in denial.

These days, everyone wants data and evidence. But some people just need to rely on blind faith. Some can’t be saved by the truth. Like me.

“If Erio’s going, maybe I should go, too.”

Komae volunteered himself now.

Ah yes, another fashionable boy the whole Music Department could be proud of. That would be the ultimate form of reassurance! Or so I thought, but just as I was about to say he would be more than welcome to join, Shibuya interrupted me.

“Hold on. You can’t come, Nokia.”

“What?” Komae said, looking dumbfounded by the unexpected rejection.

I’m sure my face looked the same as his. I blinked at Shibuya. Why did she say no?

“There are a lot of girls in the Fashion Department. There’s no way we can bring a playboy cad like Nokia in there with us.”

“Hey. That’s a terrible thing to say, Erio. Do I look like the kind of guy who’d just start hitting on girls randomly?”

Komae, looking disgruntled, objected to Shibuya’s abrupt dismissal.

Shibuya just stared in response.

“So, then, if we bring you, you won’t try to hit on a single girl?” Shibuya asked.

“Of course not. I only have eyes for you of course, Erio. Well, and Shiika.”

You’re contradicting yourself.

“What would you do if a girl called out to you and said, ‘Hey, you’re cool. Could you be our composer, Nokia?’ ...?”

“Well, it would only be polite to respond by taking her out for coffee after school or maybe suggesting exchanging contact details, heh. ☆”

“And with that, you’re disqualified. Just stay behind and be good, you failure of a man.”

“Whaaat?!”

Komae was cut to the core by Shibuya’s relentlessly harsh judgment.

Either way was fine with me. I mean, it’d be more reassuring to have as many fashionable people with me as possible, but I certainly didn’t want to bring a source of potential trouble, as Shibuya said.

If we ended up upsetting Azusa Harajuku in any way, the collab might be in jeopardy.

“All right, it’s decided. Gakuto and I will go to Azusa Harajuku’s classroom during lunch!”

Shibuya grinned mischievously at Shiika.

“I’m going to borrow your brother, but don’t be jealous.”

“That depends. If you get too snuggly, I’ll get annoyed.”

“We won’t get snuggly!”

Bing, bong.

The morning bell rang, as if to compete with Shibuya’s loud protests.

Well, that seemed to be decided, then.

All that was left now was to get ready for lunch break. In order to find as many materials as possible with which to persuade Azusa Harajuku, I’d have to watch her streams thoroughly during the morning class.

I needed to acclimate myself to the sexy, wealthy-seeming Azusa Harajuku character!

...

...Acclimate. Yeah. Didn’t seem likely.



It was now lunch break.

Shibuya and I left the classroom after quickly eating the sandwiches we’d bought in advance for lunch.

We passed through the Music Department hallways and entered the part of the building where the Fashion Department classrooms were.

Even the corridor here felt like another world.

First off, the students’ clothes were different.

Their uniforms weren’t just customized—they’d been reworked to the extent that they no longer resembled uniforms at all. Novel color combinations and

avant-garde, incomprehensible designs. Ryouran High has a lot of stylish students across all its departments, but the fashion-savvy students here were on a whole other level. A layman like me can sort of appreciate the stylish outfits worn by the other students, but this...this kind of thing was beyond me.

It was like the Paris collection of everyday life. The hallway looked like a red carpet.

Feeling overwhelmed by the strange atmosphere, I headed to Azusa Harajuku's classroom.

The inside of the classroom was just as unique as the hallway:

Mannequins dressed in the latest stylish branded gear; walls bare of posters or calligraphy, and covered instead in simple black-and-white shelves, laden with perfumes and accessories.

In the middle of the classroom—almost dead center—was a large cluster of students.

The royalty of the Fashion Department's first-year students: Azusa Harajuku, and her entourage.

"Azu! I saw your stream yesterday. You'll be participating in an event in France next month, right?"

"By invitation only, right? That's amazing for a high school student to get an invite!"

"The end-of-term exam sounds like it's just a formality for you at this point! You're the best of the best!"

The schoolgirls were all praising Azusa Harajuku.

Harajuku smiled modestly as she was being showered with praise.

"Oh, come on. Don't make such a fuss! You're gonna make me blush, you know?"

It didn't seem like she was just saying it. Her cheeks really were red, and her hands were fluttering.

Despite the hot weather, she was wearing long sleeves and a long skirt, so my

first thought was that she was just suffering from heatstroke, but... Nope, that was definitely a blush of embarrassment.

The way she spoke, her clothes, and her long, flaxen-colored hair combined to create the atmosphere of a mature older-sister type, but the way she blushed so easily made her seem like a small child at the same time. An interesting contrast.

Was it natural? Or calculated? I'd prefer the latter. That way, it made more sense to me. To naturally be this good at deflecting praise... That made me suspicious. I'd never be able to trust a woman again. Although I don't really trust anyone to begin with, regardless of gender.

"Besides, I'm not underestimating the final exam. This school's full of rivals, and any one of them could give me a real run for my money."

She placed a hand on her full chest, her outfit showing off her curves even without exposing a lot of skin.

"Each design is like a precious child to me. Whether it's for the end-of-term exam or for an event, I'm going to pour my love into each piece equally."

"Oh! A goddess!"

"Bewitching and charming like a sorceress, and pure like a goddess. The Enchantress with Two Faces!"

"Oh, please, stop it... You're embarrassing me..."

Harajuku blushed and looked down, surrounded by the excited crowd of girls.

...Azusa Harajuku wasn't the sort of character I thought she was.

From the streams, I thought she was a sleazy Minato Ward-dwelling rich bitch, but in person, my impression of her was the exact opposite.

Modest, but with the level of talent to not even need modesty...

"She may be even more of a goddess than you, Shibuya."

"Huh? If you're trying to diss me, then speak up! Don't mumble!"

"Gah! Keep your voice down!"

"Huh? You're one to talk! You bellow as loud as Gian from *Doraemon*!"

“I wasn’t saying anything!”

Hmm, Komae often says the same thing to me when we argue. Like some kind of catchphrase.

Our loud, silly arguing seemed to have caught the attention of the other students, and before I knew what was happening, every eye had turned to look at us.

Having so many stylish girls staring at me made my pulse quicken.

It’s been a while since I’ve been in this type of social situation. I’ve only focused on Shiika since we entered this school. So I haven’t really been aware of it, but my social skills truly suck, second only to maybe Shiika’s.

“Wh-what now, Shibuya? Your loud bellowing has drawn attention to us!”

“Don’t go blaming it on me! Anyway, we came here to talk to Azusa Harajuku, so we have to make ourselves known at some point!”

“Your logic hurts! Can’t you try to spare my feelings a little bit more?”

“Oh, shut up. Look, let’s just go make our pitch. We’re causing a disturbance here.”

Shibuya peered into the classroom.

Harajuku, like the other students, was blinking her eyes at the strange visitors.

“Harajuku, can we have a minute?” Shibuya asked.

“Huh? Yes. Do you need something from me?”

Shibuya weaved through the throng of students to stand in front of Harajuku.

Harajuku looked dubious for a moment, confronted by this strange duo... But she soon recovered her gentle smile.

“We are students of the Music Department, and—”

“Erio Shibuya...isn’t it?”

“Er, yes... You know of me?”

“Of course. I know all the notable students from every department... But I don’t know who this boy is. I’m so sorry; it’s an embarrassing gap in my

knowledge.”

“...Ah, please don’t worry yourself on my account. I’m actually kind of an irregularity at this school. A black-suited figure behind the scenes. Please just forget I’m even here.”

“Okay... Not sure what that’s about, but anyway... If the top student in the Music Department has something to discuss with me, it’s got to be regarding... the final exam?”

“Good, good, we can cut to the chase. How about teaming up with us?”

A straight fireball. No beating around the bush.

Shibuya’s fighting technique was formidable. It cut straight through to her opponent’s chest, no hint of hesitation.

I was supposed to be the manager, pulling all the strings behind the scenes and setting things up. But I’d been carried, yet again, by the power of another. Of course, I wasn’t regretting it. If Shibuya could sweet-talk her way to the solution we wanted, it would be less trouble for me. After all, I’m here to live life on easy street.

“We’ve formed a team of me, Nokia Komae, Shiika Ikebukuro, and Mana Akihabara. And this guy here is Shiika’s older brother, Gakuto. Scouted by Tennouzu himself! He has no particular talent of his own, and he’s older than us, but since he’s Shiika’s manager, he also attends classes as a first-year student.”

“Scouted...?! By THE Tennouzu? I heard the rumors, but to think... Wow!”

Harajuku’s eyes opened wide. Her gaze was filled with respect and awe, and I felt myself shrink.

The surrounding female students began to squeal and gossip among themselves. This was the boy they’d all heard about? Their eyes were fixed on me with curiosity.

“Ah, no, the one who was scouted was my little sister.”

“Yes, I understand that, but being allowed to attend this school without a performing arts talent... That’s impressive! That either means Shiika’s talent

really is so very impressive, or it could mean that you yourself have something very special about you!”

“Oh, ha-ha...”

What could I do but laugh it off? What a thing to suggest. A baseless thing. Letting it slide didn’t feel great, though.

“Well, at any rate, it sounds like you’ve created an interesting team there.”

Now that the general mood was in our favor, Shibuya continued with the negotiations.

“The dance video for the final exam. We’d like you to design and make the costumes...”

“Whoa,” the crowd gasped.

Azusa Harajuku and Erio Shibuya. The two top stars of their respective departments... Them teaming up... It was tantalizing news.

“I see, so that’s what’s up...”

Harajuku tapped her cheek, nodding.

But then, she furrowed her brow, deep in thought.

“Ah, this is difficult. It’s a very attractive proposal, of course. There’s just one problem...”

“A problem?”

“Do you know a student named Ryan Sengoku?”

“Er... Uh, yes, of course. Wait, you mean...?”

“Yes. His group has also asked me to provide outfits.”

Hey, hey, was she serious?

The Sengoku camp must have approached Harajuku with the same idea as us. And they’d beat us to the punch. Ah, I really was useless.

“We haven’t talked face-to-face yet, but he seems to be friends with a girl in the Fashion Department. Kind of a friend-of-a-friend situation.”

“Darn it! Networking, of course!” I shouted.

One of the most unreasonable parts of the entertainment world.

The advantages of being a cool guy who can get along with a lot of girls... No, don't cry. Darn it.

"I mean, today. During lunch, they're going to come here."

Harajuku spoke as if she'd just remembered this arrangement.

"Hey, you're Azusa Harajuku, right?"

A wild sort of voice filled the heavily female-populated room with male pheromones.

A large, muscular guy stood there. He must have been well over five nine, but his build made him look even bigger. He wore a jet-black jacket in some shiny fabric, his broad chest seeming like it was about to burst out of it.

His hair was cut short, giving him an energetic vibe. His features were well-defined, and he had a dignified face, implying a strength of will.

"Ryan Sengoku...!" Shibuya muttered the man's name.

I'd seen videos and streams of him, of course, but the real Sengoku looked many times bigger in person than on a phone screen.

"Hmm? I thought there were some odd mismatches in this classroom... Music Department students, are they?"

"Just inconvenient timing, I guess. Besides, it hasn't been officially decided yet that I'll provide the costumes."

"Ha, I see. Well, you should have these two leave. You don't want to go getting mixed up with riffraff. Think how that will degrade your status as a designer."

Oh, yikes.

The moment I heard Sengoku's intimidating words, I had a bad feeling...and slowly looked to my side.

"..."

As expected, Shibuya was trembling with silent rage.

“Hey, none of that. There’s no need to get belligerent...,” I said.

“Riffraff?! You’ve got to be joking, you... You darn delinquent!”

I was too laaaaaate!

I was a hair too late to keep Shibuya from blowing up, and now she was doing that dinosaur roar that only a diva can produce.

Sengoku was two heads taller than her, but that didn’t scare her as she charged right at him.

“Oh, pipe down, you crazy, screeching woman. There was no lie in what I said, now, was there?”

“Don’t underestimate us. You can’t beat our numbers, you know. We’re headed right to the top of the Music Department! You’d better recognize!”

“Numbers? Have you no shame, Erio Shibuya? Aren’t you embarrassed to be crowing over mere numbers? And you call yourself an artiste?”

“Guh...”

Shibuya seemed to be at a loss for words.

Seeing her reaction, Sengoku grinned.

“You’ve entrenched yourself in the mindset of this shitty, numbers-obsessed school. How pathetic. Artists are supposed to express themselves. They must inspire themselves and their peers. Numbers? Mere popularity? I care nothing about that. I care nothing for the opinions of those who can’t appreciate true art. Right, Harajuku? Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, that’s right... It’s true that you need numbers to survive the examination...but you can’t forget what it is you truly need: your soul.”

This ain’t good, I thought.

Sengoku and Harajuku were totally on the same page here.

Viewed from the outside of the conversation...Shibuya’s inferiority was plain to see.

At this rate, Harajuku might end up favoring Sengoku.

Talking about his obsession with art, all the while wearing the face of a rebel, a delinquent... Quite a contrast.

I'd thought it'd be an easy enough victory if I just left everything to Shibuya, but now that she was getting herself all steamed up, I knew I couldn't just let her run loose.

"Um, Harajuku? As a designer...that means you want to show off the best possible designs, right?"

Harajuku gave me a natural-seeming smile just as I entered the conversation for the first time.

"I don't really have a particular idea of who I want to work with, or in what department. I just want to team up with someone who fits my vibe and who can benefit me. Someone who can complement my work."

"Well, that's not something that can be determined just by the superficial humanity of this place... Or at least, that's how I see it. What do you think?"

"Hmm, you're right. I guess it'll ultimately come down to the type of stream, the kind of dance that will be uploaded..."

"How long will it take to make your decision?"

"Hmm... Maybe a week or so."

"Then one week from now...how about having the two teams—Team Shibuya and Team Sengoku—make their case to you again?"

"Hmm. Yes, that would make it easier for me to decide."

"...So then. Shibuya, Sengoku."

I turned to the pair, who were shooting daggers at each other with their eyes.

"Fighting here will solve nothing. That's not how she's going to make her decision. We should all withdraw and wait for her to make her decision by herself."

"Gakuto..." Shibuya said.

"It's okay. We have a week, and we have both you and Shiika on our team. If Harajuku thinks we're the real deal, she'll choose us for sure."

I went for baseless confidence. The truth is, though, I just wanted out of this situation. And I wasn't above using some cheap words to get there.

Facing off against Sengoku with the look of a rabid dog, Shibuya retracted her fangs, though she did so with reluctance.

"All right. But there's no way I'm letting this guy beat me."

"Huh. You're just stalling for time, but the result will be the same either way. There's no way my team's gonna lose."

Sengoku's words oozed confidence. His gaze shifted from Shibuya to me, and he brought his bulk closer. His giant hand gripped my shoulder. I could feel my shoulder bones shrieking in protest against his formidable strength.

Sengoku brought his face close enough for me to see the vein on his forehead, and he spoke in a low, intimidating voice that only I could hear.

"It looks like you're doing well with Ryuzetsuran on your side, but it doesn't matter."

"..."

"She doesn't have soul. She's a prim girl who managed to impress the masses, but her dancing won't light any kind of fire in someone like Azusa Harajuku."

He was like a beast claiming its territory. Intimidation tactics, using both physical and mental force to get the other person to surrender. It was something I've never been able to do, and it brought back bad memories from my junior high school days.

But things are different from then.

I never wanted to be the target of this kind of thing, but since I am now anyway, I'll handle it. I girded my loins and clenched my fists.

Still meeting Sengoku's sharp glare, I spat the following words (only I didn't actually spit, of course): "Your breath stinks. Get out of my face."

"Huh? You jerk... You wanna fight?"

"Yeah, you're pissing me off. Guys like you...only understand aggression. Talking about art but resorting to violence. You wanna throw down? Rock and

roll. Right, Harajuku?”

“Guh!” Sengoku looked like he’d just been slapped.

He was staring at Azusa Harajuku, who was watching all this with a very calm expression.

At this very moment, she was deciding who was the right partner to entrust her work to.

If there was to be a fight in the Fashion Department classroom, well... She certainly wouldn’t be able to provide costuming for those responsible going forward.

No doubt realizing this, Sengoku clucked his tongue loudly and pulled away from me.

“I know what you look like now. Watch your back.”

“Good. I thrive on the attention of haters.”

I responded to Sengoku’s threat with some spicy words of my own.

For a moment, he looked utterly dumbfounded.

“...Shit!”

Then, with that final curse, he stomped angrily out of the classroom.



“Oh, I’m so annoyed! What the hell is that guy’s problem?!”

“Are you still talking about that? Anyway, we got the first step out of the way, so what else really matters?”

On the way back to the Music Department classroom, Shibuya exploded with anger as we walked along the hallway. She was so loud she actually shook the windows. I wondered how many decibels she was at.

This continued in our own classroom, with me trying to placate an irate Shibuya.

“Ah, the main character returns.”

Komae was the first to notice us.

Shiika and Akiba looked up then. The three of them seemed to have been chatting about nothing in particular at their usual seats. Shiika had her chin resting on the desk, and Akiba was fiddling with her phone, looking bored.

Shibuya and I sat, and Akiba put down her phone and leaned forward.

“What’s the result? Will the collaboration with Azusa Harajuku be going ahead?”

“I estimate our chances are fifty-fifty,” I said.

“Huh? What are you on about?”

“Ah, it’s a long story... Hmm? What is it, Shiika?”

Just as I was about to begin explaining, Shiika stood up and approached me.

Then she plonked herself down on my lap.

“Recharging.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Recently. Too much. Battery about to run out.”

“I know! I’m on the verge of a total breakdown myself!”

I was feeling battered and rattled, too, after my foray into the foreign country of the Fashion Department and that tense exchange.

The weight of Shiika, my cute and adorable little sister, had a soothing effect on my fractured mind.

“Oh, gah. As siblings, you two are WAY too close.”

Shibuya rolled her eyes at us, but she said it in a friendly, jokey tone with mild tolerance in her eyes.

“I think it’s beautiful. I’d love to get in on this recharging myself...”

“Don’t get too close, you idiot. There’s no seat for you here, Nokia.”

“Whoa! Ugh, you don’t have to kick me...”

Komae casually tried to get on Shibuya’s lap, but she kicked him away.

What was he thinking? You can’t reproduce the beautiful bond between

brother and sister by playacting with the nearest girl. Anyway, no girl would want that. Where was his common sense?

Anyway, putting this silly conversation aside...

I explained to my friends what had happened in the Fashion Department.

Akiba was the first to speak after hearing the story.

“So the Sengoku camp made an offer to Azusa Harajuku, too... Well, if they succeed, our chances of winning are toast, right?”

“Right. That’s why we have to keep that from happening at all costs.”

“But no matter what we do, it’s Azusa Harajuku who’ll be the one making the decision, right? Will we be able to come up with a video that will convince her within one week from now?”

“It’s not ‘Will we be able to do it?’ We MUST do it! Er, somehow.”

Saying it out loud myself made me want to puke.

But the reality is, we didn’t have much time. If we couldn’t impress Harajuku enough to convince her to make our costumes, she’d end up becoming a designer for the Sengoku camp. If that happened, we’d never be able to win.

“Komae, please compose a piece of dance music as soon as possible. I’ll have Tatsuki Ootsuka knuckle down and come up with the choreography. Then we’ll shoot a video of Shiika and Shibuya dancing... We don’t have much time, but... Think you can do it?”

“No problem. If you’re in a hurry, I’ll finish it in one day.”

“One day?! Hey now, are you serious? You can compose a song in just one day?!” Akiba shouted, looking utterly stunned by Komae’s confident statement.

“Dance music, no lyrics? I can handle that. Of course, if you need lyrics, I’ll need a little longer.”

“Wow... Amazing! No wonder they call you the Five-Staff Prince!”

Akiba’s mouth was wide open, and she looked deeply impressed. Oh yeah, she’s meant to be a composer, too.

Not that she actually composes anything, I thought darkly. A girl who hasn’t

even composed a single song can't possibly have any concept of how long it would take.

Shiika trembled on my lap.

"One week..."

"You're not confident?"

"So if we don't try hard...we lose?"

"Probably."

"Hmm..."

From my position, I could only see the back of Shiika's head, so I had no idea what kind of expression she had on.

Nor could I guess at what she might be thinking.

After all, Shiika sees the world completely differently.

So I waited for her to speak next and didn't try to analyze her.

"Honestly...I'd like to run away."

"Because you don't like exercise?"

"Yes. But it looks like fun, to dance."

"Right."

"If I learn how to dance, it'll be fun. I know that, but I still want to run far away," Shiika said.

"I see."

I felt like I understood.

I don't know anything about singing or dancing, but if you apply it to other stuff, I can kinda see it.

For example, traveling abroad.

When I see beautiful scenery in videos and tourists having fun, I start thinking how fun it would be to travel. But if it actually came down to it, I would need a passport, English-language skills, and all sorts of other preparations... It would

be a major hassle.

Even if you can see the joy of the results, it's only natural to want to flee from the painful process.

"Then do you want to run away?"

"..."

Silence.

I had my own conclusion I'd like to draw.

But I held back my true feelings and waited for Shiika to voice her thoughts.

After spending a lot of time conversing silently with herself, Shiika slowly opened her mouth.

"...I'll do my best."

"Okay. Then we'll do our best, too."

"Yeah."

I patted Shiika's head. *Good job on putting your feelings into words, Sis.*

"Hmm!" Shibuya was watching us with a look of admiration.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it looked like she was also smirking.

"You're a good older brother at least, aren't you, Gakuto?"

"Guess you caught me. Well, you know, we all want to hide our light under a bushel. But I guess I just can't keep my good big-brother aura from showing through."

"Ah-ha-ha. Sure, sure, let's just go with that."

Shibuya smiled, looking like she was in high spirits.

I wasn't sure why, but it seemed my standing with her had just improved a little bit.

Normally, whenever I dote on Shiika, she snorts and talks about how inappropriate it is.

A woman's heart... Something I'll never learn to understand.

...Although, I don't really understand the minds of other people in general. It's not really limited to just women...



A few days later, on Saturday.

The private Ryouran High School, with its many special facets that set it apart from other institutions in the world, was the same as any regular high school in the fact that Saturdays and Sundays were holidays. A holiday for the whole country. Ah, I would like to express my deep gratitude for the precious rights that Japanese workers have earned.

...But on a day when everyone was shutting themselves inside, Shiika and I left the house before noon.

How weird, you may think, for a shut-in brother-and-sister duo like us.

If we were well-known artists, this unusual movement of ours might have drawn paparazzi.

...No, surely not, though. After all, it wasn't like we were doing anything odd or abnormal.

In any case, Shiika and I got on the train and headed to the urban area of town—the nearest station to Ryouran High School.

But our destination was not the campus itself.

It was the spacious park nearby.

The humid air of early summer mixed with the rich scent of flowers, with the smell of exhaust fumes some distance away. A forest, one that had suddenly appeared in the city. A negative space, like a donut hole, with no sign of man-made objects. And below the bridge, a muddy pond was visible.

"Sniff, sniff... Hmm."

Shiika, sniffing away, screwed up her face.

"Smells...raw."

"Well, we are in nature."

"Let me refresh my nasal palate by sniffing you, Gak."

“Nasal palate? Don’t just invent your own nonsense terms. We get enough of that.”

“But it’s a key skill for writing lyrics.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

Shiika, who had become accustomed to the greasy smells of the city, still seemed unfamiliar with nature smells like grass clippings and so on.

“Hey! Over here!”

After walking for a while, we saw a mixed group of teens in everyday clothes hanging out on benches all in a row under a big tree.

One of them, Tatsuki Ootsuka, was waving her hand and calling us over.

The others were, of course, the members of the Shibuya Gang.

In addition to Ootsuka, Akiba, Shibuya, and Komae were there.

“Uh, Gakkun, Shi, why are you wearing your school uniforms?”

Ootsuka let out a cry of surprise when she saw what we were wearing.

She had a point. Everyone except for Shiika and I wore their everyday clothes. Shiika and I were the only ones in our school uniforms.

“We don’t have any decent clothes. And we’ll change into training wear for dance practice anyway, so it didn’t seem like it mattered what we wore.”

“Well, that makes sense!”

Ootsuka agreed readily. She’s so straightforward. One of Ootsuka’s finest points.

“I didn’t expect the song AND the choreography to be completed by today. Both Komae and you did a great job, even though it was an unreasonable request,” I said to Ootsuka.

“Oh, it was easy! I love thinking up choreography, and I’ve got a whole catalog of moves to choose from!” Ootsuka replied.

“You were a huge help.”

Then Komae cut in, “Don’t worry about it, Gakuto, my man. After all, you

promised you'd give me permission to go out on a date with Shiika if I could compose the music in time."

"Oh, that's fine. If you reincarnate in another world, I'll approve your relationship."

"Are you telling me to die in a roundabout way?"

"I thought I was telling you to die in a straightforward way, but it doesn't seem like that came across?"

"Guh! You're harsh, Gak."

"Don't call me Gak, you scum. Only Shiika can call me that."

I smirked at the bothersome pest who always hung around Shiika... I mean, our dependable composer.

Then Shibuya lightly kicked Komae's behind.

"What?! Hey, you're picking on me, too, Erio?!"

"Things are stressful enough, so don't go hitting on Shiika on top of everything else."

"...Yes, miss. My bad."

It seemed that even playboy Komae wasn't able to stand up against his mad-dog partner of many years, Shibuya.

The guy acts like a flirtatious player, but I think it suits him better to be a sort of comic-relief character. Just watching him, I could tell there was a difference between the kind of guy he wanted to be seen as and the kind of guy he actually was.

"Keep your hands to yourself, and I won't ban you from being friendly. But if you want to take things a step further, you should deal with those creepy ulterior motives of yours first, Komae." I said, and looked at Shiika, who had been standing beside me and staring at the floor.

Shiika, the topic of conversation, said nothing. Noticing my gaze, she looked up quizzically at me.

A few days had passed since I asked Ootsuka to create the choreography and

Komae to compose the music.

There was no news that the Sengoku camp had released new dance music, and of course, there was no news that Azusa Harajuku had agreed to design their costumes. I was relieved that we'd managed to come up with the dance and song in time for the day of judgment.

But even then, I still felt uneasy.

Though today was a Saturday, each member of the Shibuya Gang was here.

Our purpose was to shoot a video of the actual dance.

"But you know... Is this really going to work? The song and choreography were done in time, sure, but honestly, we haven't had enough lessons, have we?" Akiba said, sounding dubious.

"It's okay, ManaMana! It's not a live event—it's a video, so I'll cover up any weak points in the dancing with some snappy video editing."

"Wow, that's pretty sly of you."

"I mean, the best thing would be for everyone to dance perfectly, but y'know. We don't have the time for that. Speed... Speed is what we need!"

"Hmm, I guess that's true."

Akiba nodded and backed down.

After that, we changed into training clothes in the park's public restroom and regrouped on the grass.

Shiika, Shibuya, Akiba, and Komae lined up in a row in front of Ootsuka, who would play the role of instructor.

"Okay then, let's do it!"

""""Yes!""""

Ootsuka's shout was the signal. I set the music playing on my phone.

A lively track began to flow from my phone's speaker.

We'd all listened to the dance music Komae composed beforehand. In my opinion, it was a quality track, very typical of Komae, who was known as the

Five-Staff Prince. That was a relief, and I was glad I'd entrusted the composition of the dance music to him. I'm not familiar with the dance world, so maybe my judgment wasn't the most informed, but it worked for me.

"I'll teach you the choreography piece by piece, so first try to imitate me."

""""Yes!""""

Ootsuka began to move to the beat of the song.

Shiika stared at her, moving her body little by little. Her movements were jerky, but I could tell as a spectator that she was taking care not to come in late, and to follow all the steps.

"All right, and TURN! Try not to fall, everyone!"

"We GET it ALREADY!" Gasping to the rhythm, Shibuya kicked off from the ground, dancing lightly.

Shibuya and Komae were sharp dancers. They had flow. And the ability to quickly pick up Ootsuka's unfamiliar choreography.

It was Shiika and Akiba I was worried about. But they were keeping up all right, even if they weren't doing as well as Shibuya and Komae.

It may have been the result of our recent morning workouts and Ootsuka's crash course on the fundamentals of dance.

"...Hmm! ♪" Shiika smiled, looking satisfied. She seemed to really enjoy moving her body.

A small smile meant a lot, when Shiika was usually so expressionless.

But no one other than me could have picked up on that tiny, brief smile.

It was a splendid moment, a moment that would be burned into my memory.

By the way, unlike the grounds of Ryouran High School, this park was a public place. In other words, a place where ordinary passersby walk, uh, by. A group of people dancing with music playing... That's bound to attract attention.

"——Hey, check that out."

"——I wonder if it's a street performance."

“——A high school dance club?”

“——So cute and cool!”

We could hear passersby commenting and glancing at us as they passed.

“And then JUMP! You’re landing late, Shi!”

“Mn... Hup...”

“Sharpen up those movements, ManaMana!”

“Gah! All right!”

“All right, and the last bit! Stick the landing!”

Almost exactly in time with the end of the music...

...Ootsuka and the four others struck a final pose.

“And we’re done! Good job, everyone!”

““““Gah!”””””

The four dancers sighed pitifully and collapsed onto the grass.

“Hah... Gah... Hah... Gah...”

Shiika was gazing up at the sky, shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath. Beneath her long bangs, her face was shining with sweat. Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell, seeking oxygen.

“Hah... Gah... Hah... Gah... Gak... Was I good?”

“Yes, yes, you were great! Here.”

I pressed a sports drink against Shiika’s cheek.

“Cool... Drink...”

She grabbed the plastic bottle and began chugging the drink. *Gulp, gulp...* Her throat bulged as she swallowed.

“Gakuto... Over here, too... Please...”

“All right. But just this one time. You’re supposed to be OUR maid, you know.”

“Me too, me too!”

“You’re fine, though, aren’t you, Shibuya? Well, all right. Here you go.”

“Thanks! *Gulp... Gulp...* AHHH!”

“Me too, man.”

“Go get your own drink, Komae.”

“The way you treat me just isn’t right, you know?!”

“I’m sorry. When I saw a handsome man sweating, I felt this murderous reflex take over me. Here, have a sports drink, as an olive branch.”

“Ah, thanks, Gakuto. You’re a real pal, I— Gah! Bleurgh! Hey! This is carbonated!”

“I thought a soda would be refreshing.”

“You were trying to choke me!”

“Whoops, you caught me.”

“Gakuto, you jerk!”

My jealous act had Komae half in tears. Ah, sweet satisfaction. Being mean to handsome guys helps me stay balanced. Forgive me, Komae. And if you want to blame someone...blame your own face.

“That wasn’t bad at all. To be honest, I thought Shiika and Akiba would be a lot worse.”

I gave my honest impressions to my pals who were recovering while relaxing on the grass with their drinks.

“Right? To be honest, I didn’t know I could move like this! It’s tough on my body, though.”

“Mana, you’ve gained a lot of strength, haven’t you? Did you do something special?”

“Ah, well, I wonder if running and doing muscle training every day was effective.”

“Seriously. It’s all thanks to me.”

“Grrr! I don’t want to admit it when you say it all boastfully like that!”

“Did Gakuto give you some special training?”

Shibuya’s eyes were wide with surprise. Come to think of it, I didn’t tell Shibuya and the others about the morning training.

I mean, it was just a slight change of morning habits; I didn’t think it needed announcing.

“Yeah. Well, just a little.”

“Gakuto, you’re quite the quiet strategist, aren’t you? You always seem so unmotivated, but maybe you could actually be a super manager after all!”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying out methods I found online.”

“And you used your quick wit at the Fashion Department, too...”

“I was scared of that delinquent guy and just wanted to lighten up the situation.”

“Hmm, well, if you say so.” Shibuya shrugged.

Despite Shibuya’s abrasive personality, she was oddly particular about small details. I didn’t want to be praised as some good guy. I’m mediocre, so far from being a genius like them. I can’t even do high-quality behind-the-scenes work.

To be honest, I don’t like having expectations placed on me. That’s why I avoid the burden whenever I can.

I turned to Ootsuka to hopefully change the subject.

Ootsuka was looking at her phone, which was set up on a tripod, and playing back the video she took. It looked like she was scrutinizing Shiika’s every move.

“How is it, Ootsuka? Does everyone’s dancing look good?”

“...”

Huh. Maybe she didn’t hear me.

Ootsuka stared solemnly at the screen without responding. She seemed to be deep in thought...and strangely serious.

“Ootsuka...? Was there something about it that bothered you?”

“Huh? Well...”

She seemed to finally notice me after I called out to her again, and her wide-open eyes shimmered.

She was clearly upset. I wondered why. Was there something wrong with the dance just then?

I was getting nervous.

But then Ootsuka gave me a big toothy grin and a thumbs-up, and in her usual perky voice, she said, “It’s okay! It’s the perfect dance routine!”

“Really? If there’s anything lacking, don’t hold back. Speak up, okay?”

I mean, it wasn’t me who was dancing. And it wasn’t me who was tired out.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Everyone followed my choreography perfectly! They were all brilliant!”

“I see. Well, I hope so...”

Ootsuka had on a strange expression. Her gaze was fixed on her phone screen. Or was it just my imagination?

I’m neither a psychologist nor the CIA. Unfortunately, I don’t have the special ability to know, just by looking at their eyes, when someone was telling the truth. If Ootsuka said it was okay, I had no choice but to believe her.

“Okay, let’s just go ahead and shoot the real take now!”

“““““Yeah!”“““““

In contrast to Ootsuka, who was full of energy, the voices of the members of the Shibuya Gang were already showing signs of fatigue.

What a sloppy bunch, I thought, smug in my position as a nondancer.

The recording of the dance video proceeded smoothly.

Under Ootsuka’s guidance, Shiika and the others danced to Komae’s music while we filmed from every angle.

The filming continued slowly and methodically, with us getting all the shots we needed for some cool editing. Thanks to everyone’s efforts, the finished video ended up being super high quality.

We posted a video centered around Shiika on Shiika's Impachi Live account, and a video centered around Shibuya on Shibuya's account.

In conclusion, the video was...a big success.

Compared to previous streams and uploads, our viewing figures had jumped.

We had almost twice as many likes as usual. I checked the comments, and saw that Shiika, despite her plain appearance and lack of exercise, had impressed the audience through her hard work and determination.

Even a perfect performance doesn't guarantee big numbers.

The viewers of Impachi Live are a tricky bunch, after all.

"La-la-la. ♪"

"You're in a good mood, Shiika."

"Dancing is fun. It was hard, but it's fun."

"You've learned not only music but also some new tricks. My splendid little sister."

"I can't do it live, though."

"That's okay."

Even with lots of breaks and sports drinks, Shiika barely made it through the video shoot.

Her dancing was still far from perfect, riddled with mistakes, in fact. Though the video was well received, you couldn't exactly call the response a true evaluation of one's dance skills. Shiika's viewers tended to be current fans, so that meant their impression of Shiika's efforts was colored by their fondness for her.

But that was all we really needed for the video.

We played within the allowed format and within the rules.

No one had any right to complain. The Shibuya Gang had put their all into this video, fair and square.

Now, to deliver this enthusiastic result to Azusa Harajuku!

All I could do was offer my prayers to the queen of the Fashion Department.



“I’ve decided to provide costumes for Sengoku’s group.”

“...HUH?!”

“Sorry,” Azusa Harajuku cooed, in a soft voice that seemed to melt my brain.

I just stared at her, my mouth hanging open.

The new week had begun. The fated day had arrived.

I spent the whole day keeping my palpitations in check, thinking about how the decision would no doubt be made today.

But Azusa Harajuku, when she arrived at the Music Department classroom, took one look at my face and said no.

“Uh... Are you serious? This isn’t some kind of prank?”

“The past few days, I’ve been checking out your channels and those of Sengoku’s team. I really thought hard about this decision, you know?”

Even in her soft, slow voice I could feel her professionalism.

She didn’t seem to be kidding.

“Well, what was it that swayed you in their direction?”

I knew it was probably awkward to ask this, but I had to know.

Harajuku put a hand to her cheek and smiled softly.

“It looks like you don’t know... Well, that’s the difference, you see.”

“...”

No one had anything to say in return.

Shiika, who usually never asserted herself, was silent of course. But even the strong-willed Shibuya bit her lip and said nothing. We must have failed to convince Harajuku. But Komae’s music was high quality, and Ootsuka’s choreography was top-notch. I’d been checking the Sengoku team’s videos every day, and they hadn’t uploaded anything new that stood out. So in other words, our very best efforts had been beaten by Sengoku’s regular uploads and

streams.

All right, our dancers weren't as skilled as Sengoku's team. But we all knew that going in. I mean, Sengoku was a dance specialist. Of course he'd be better than us. But wasn't this whole wager about seeing how well our team's video fared against theirs? But Sengoku's camp hadn't uploaded a new video. So how come they were chosen?

"Well then, good-bye. You've all got wonderful talent. ♪"

Harajuku smiled like a villainess toying with a naive man.

And with that sardonic remark, she walked away with her hair blowing gracefully in the wind.

In the end, the reason for our defeat remained unknown.

We were left with nothing but a feeling of intense frustration.

Chapter 4: Conservative Reformists

“It’s all over... Mana Akihabara has lost the option of easy street... Hee-hee-hee...”

“Is it...because I suck...at dancing?”

“Don’t blame yourself, Shiika. It must have been because my song didn’t grab her... Gah, I should have tried flirting with her harder...and won Azusa’s favor that way...”

“You’re focusing on the wrong thing here... And what about me? Even with all my talent, I couldn’t sway her... This sucks...” Shibuya mumbled.

After school, we’d gathered for the dance lesson, as was the daily routine these days.

In the studio, my friends were all in shock over being rejected by Harajuku.

And as for me? Well...

“I wanna die! Kill me! Someone kill me now!”

I was more despondent than any of them, sprawled starfish-style on the floor in the middle of the studio. A complete and total loser.

After all, asking Azusa Harajuku for a collab was my idea. This was the result of me actually being proactive as a manager for once. I made everyone run around like headless chickens for nothing. In the end, the failure had only demotivated the entire group.

Useless. Incompetent. A plague, that's what I was.

Oh, I wanted to die. For real. But killing myself would be a hassle, not to mention scary, so if possible, I'd really prefer it if someone else would take me out.

"Guhhhh!!! Nuhhhh!"

Writhing around on the floor, I let out a series of unintelligible groans and moans.

"..."

As soon as we had arrived at the studio, Tatsuki Ootsuka, who'd seen the failure in our eyes, instantly knew the result of our little challenge against Sengoku. She stood there dazed for some time.

But then she seemed to pull herself together, and she looked up, approaching where I lay on the floor.

"...I'm sorry! Gakkun, everyone, I'm really sorry!"

Then she got down on her knees and bowed low.

...Huh?

For a moment, I froze, unable to comprehend what had happened.

The other members seemed to feel the same. They stared at Ootsuka in puzzlement as she remained with her forehead on the floor.

"No, no, no, no, Ootsuka, you have nothing to apologize for, right?"

I jumped up in a hurry and tried to get her to raise her head.

But she didn't lift it even an inch, as if it had been glued to the floor.

"Hey, look up. You did nothing wrong, Ootsuka. Your choreography was great, and the lessons you gave us were a huge help."

"Y-you're wrong! I think it was probably my fault, y'know? So...," Ootsuka said.

"Just calm down. Can you explain what you mean, Ootsuka?"

"Y-yeah. Okay. Inhale... And exhale. Inhale..."

I gently touched the distraught Ootsuka's shoulder to soothe her, and she placed a hand on her chest and took several deep breaths.

Then, with her eyes cast awkwardly downward, she began to speak.

"Actually, I should have said something sooner...but I didn't want to throw cold water on you guys. You were dancing so happily, I just couldn't."

"...Say what?"

"Nokki's dance music... I felt it was a little off. But I didn't point it out. I just kinda...looked past it."

Specifically, Ootsuka confessed that it was the way the drums were implemented.

"Nokki, your composition was... Well, it was good. You muted the drums, put a break before the chorus and a lot of cool little tricks into it."

"Isn't that a good thing?" I asked.

"I think it's fine for a normal composition. But in dance music, it's a lot of repeating patterns of the same rhythm over and over. I prefer drums with a monotonous rhythm. You know, like, have you ever seen people in a club, all dancing to the same rhythm as you?"

"Uh... I think I can picture what you mean."

Of course, I've never experienced going to a club in my life, so there's no way I'd have seen what she was describing.

But I could vividly imagine the same kind of scene you see in movies and comics from all over the world, in all kinds of eras... I could see dancers and DJs, and a crowd all dancing excitedly as one.

"The thing that gets the crowd fired up... It's a simple, sustained drumbeat."

"In other words, Komae's music didn't demonstrate the right understanding of dance culture. Harajuku saw through that and decided to provide clothes for Sengoku instead of us...right?"

"Maybe... I don't know how much Azu-pie knows about the culture of hip-hop dance, but the moment I heard the track, I thought...'Oh, this isn't right.'"

I'd never heard anyone say *Azu-pie* before, but I was guessing it was a nickname for Harajuku (one that Ootsuka had just taken upon herself to start using, of course).

Ootsuka's shoulders slumped.

So she DID have an idea of what was wrong. Well, if she saw something, she could have SAID something. A part of me wanted to be like, *What the hell?*

But a part of me understood. She's a genius, like Shiika, only in a different field. She wouldn't have been so careless. There must have been some reason why she didn't explicitly point out the mistake.

"I'm sorry if it sounds like I'm blaming you. But can you explain? Why did you stay silent, all the while feeling uncomfortable with Komae's track?"

"..."

She looked down and bit her lip.

Then, with sadness in her eyes, Ootsuka spoke again.

"You may not believe me when I say this, but I thought Nokki's track was fresh, interesting, and just really good. Even if it didn't really seem quite right as a piece of dance music, it made me think it would be super cool to add choreography to it and create something amazing!"

"So you were trying to challenge yourself and do something avant-garde?"

"Yes, although it sounds a bit pretentious... I was... But we failed. That's so lame," Ootsuka said with a wry smile.

"Oh, I just remembered something!"

Suddenly Akiba, who'd been silent until then, piped up loudly.

"Ryuzetsuran! You're famous in the community for trying to destroy hip-hop!"

"What are you yelling about, Akiba? This isn't an anime, you know," I said.

"This isn't the time for jokes! Ryuzetsuran... Tatsuki Ootsuka! She's always trying to push the boundaries of hip-hop culture and explore new methods of expression! Of course, she'd want to utilize new styles incongruent with standardized dance music!"

Akiba spoke with confidence, backed up by her reputation as an info-gatherer.

I'd heard vaguely that Tatsuki Ootsuka was the top student in the Dance Department, but I had no idea she was some kind of pioneer of the discipline.

But at the same time, I had to face the realization that the cause of this failure lay not with anyone else but solely with me.

I'd sought out Ootsuka's help just because she was a big name in the school. I had no idea of her policy toward dance. I didn't even know anything about the culture of the dance world. What kind of factions existed. Even what kind of evaluation criteria there was.

Ootsuka made what she thought was good work, even though it wasn't the standard for the dance scene. And Harajuku evaluated that work based on standard dance criteria. This whole situation was caused by my lack of insight.

"Ryuzetsuran, huh... Still, I wonder if what I'm trying to do is the right thing..." Ootsuka muttered weakly as she sat cross-legged on the floor.

Shibuya raised an eyebrow.

"I'm surprised...to hear you sounding so negative, Tatsuki," Shibuya said.

"Well, what do you expect? I'm human, just like anyone else." Ootsuka puffed herself up indignantly.

But then she drew her knees to her chest and buried her face in them.

"This isn't the first time I tried something with the best of intentions and got shot down."

"Has something like this happened before?" I asked.

"Yeah... Remember those girls you encountered here in the studio the other day?"

"Ah, uh, yeah. Harlequin Godzilla or something, right?"

"It's Haruka Gokokuji. You're completely off," Akiba snarked at me, but I was just going by what I vaguely remembered.

Ootsuka nodded.

“That’s right. Harucchi. She’s also in the hip-hop subculture. In the past, we used to street dance and hang out together. Lately, though, we barely talk. I think maybe she’s...angry. With me and my activities.”

“Angry? I don’t really see why you pursuing something new and innovative would anger anyone,” I responded.

“She’s worried I’m trying to destroy the subculture. I mean, in media, being an innovator is painted as a good thing, but within the culture, it can feel like a threat.”

“Ootsuka...”

“I just wish I could find a way to express myself that would still be accepted in the subculture... While also reaching a new audience outside of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

I found myself speaking a little more harshly than I’d intended to.

Ootsuka’s dancing had a quality to it that made her stand out from the crowd. I may be an amateur who knows nothing about dance, but in my uneducated opinion, Ootsuka seemed to shine more brightly than any of the other dancers. I’m sure most observers would agree with me, too.

She was a genius. She had that X factor. No doubt about it.

But here she was, faltering, doubting herself. If she didn’t have the confidence it took to get ahead, what chance did us normies have?

“Maybe our effort this time around just didn’t suit Harajuku’s tastes. It was my fault, relying too heavily on your style, Ootsuka, and Harajuku’s judgment, without knowing the first thing about dance myself. Now I’ve gone and put a black mark on your record. I’m really sorry about that.”

“Huh? No, no, Gakkun! You shouldn’t be apologizing!”

Ootsuka gasped as I bowed and pressed my forehead to the ground.

Someone else approached, touched my shoulder, and tried to make me lift my head.

“That’s right, Gakuto. It wasn’t your fault.”

It was Nokia Komae.

“It’s my fault. I didn’t do my research.”

“Don’t say that, Nokki. Your track was great. It really was.”

“It’s okay. I don’t need consoling.”

Komae shook his head. Then he bowed, too.

“I’m really sorry. As for me composing a song for you... I don’t think I can fulfill that request anymore.”

“Huh...?”

“Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not trying to be petty or hit back after what you pointed out about my music, Tatsuki.”

Komae gazed earnestly at Ootsuka, who looked uneasy.

“I just realized that I still have a lot to learn if I want to make dance music that will really get people excited. I need to immerse myself in the culture, really entrench myself in it. But if I do that...I won’t have time to provide music for both the Shibuya Gang and for you, Tatsuki. After all, the final exam is right around the corner.”

To do one, he would have to give up the other.

In that case, Komae must have made the decision to prioritize his allies in the Shibuya Gang.

“It won’t be a fair trade, though. Ootsuka taught us to dance, but we’re not going to do anything for her in return?”

“No, it’s okay, Gakkun. It’s my fault that Azu-pie opted not to choose your group. I’ll help you guys out for free. I’ll do the choreography for the new song, and I’ll do it to the best of my ability.”

“We can’t accept that. We made a deal, a contract.”

I love a free lunch. An easy ride. Those are my values, but at the same time I know there’s no such thing as a free lunch.

Relationships that are all take and no give are as risky as those that are all give and no take.

I like to avoid taking unnecessary risks, to avoid trouble.

But I wasn't sure what to do now. With Komae stepping back from composing a track for Ootsuka, what else did we have to offer her? Shibuya was a singer, not a composer.

Could it be that it was finally time for *her* to step forward?

The eternal wannabe. Schrödinger's composer. The one who could be a genius or a complete failure, with equal likelihood, depending on the quality of the work she never actually begins.

Now, surely, was the time for Mana Akihabara's true talent to blossom...

"Nope. Nah. Not even a possibility."

"Hey, Gakuto. I read your mind just now. That wasn't very nice of you."

"I wasn't thinking anything bad! What kind of messed-up mind-reading abilities do you have anyway?"

"You looked at me! And you were smirking! Smirking!"

"I wasn't thinking anything negative. Just the truth."

"I'm gonna kill you!"

"Wait, wait. All right, then. So can you compose a track for Ootsuka instead of Komae?"

"Duh! Obviously not!!!"

"See, that's what I thought! So why are you reaming me out for thinking the truth, huh?!"

"Shut up! My muse hasn't come to me yet! What do you want me to do?!"

Akiba and I were at each other's throats. Ootsuka, looking worried, tried to intervene, while Shibuya and Komae just rolled their eyes, as they were used to our bickering by now.

Then, beneath the noise...

A small sound, like a drop of water.

A quiet yet clear voice.

“I’ll compose it. A song for Tatsu.”

Shiika, who hadn’t said a word or expressed her opinion until then, walked over to Ootsuka and gently took her hand.

“Tatsu, you taught me how to dance. You took the time to study my body’s limits, and you taught me how to dance in a way that suits me... You came up with the perfect choreography for me to dance to.”

“...! Oh, Shi, you noticed how hard I tried?”

“I don’t know anything about dance. But when you taught me the choreography, Tatsu, I could see them in your voice—the colors. And the colors showed me what to do.”

Shiika had no ability to comprehend Ootsuka’s skills and know-how. She didn’t even have the first idea about dance, after all.

But Shiika was able to understand without logic.

Shiika sees colors in sound.

Synesthesia isn’t just a fortunate, God-given ability.

Casual conversation, the chattering of the crowd. Shiika can pick up on intentions, emotions, in even trivial sounds. She can pick up on things the ordinary person wouldn’t even notice. All just by paying close attention to sound.

That is also the reason why Shiika suffers in a classroom environment, where all kinds of sounds clash and emotions swirl in the air.

But it was synesthesia that gave Shiika the ability to appreciate the compassion and guidance Ootsuka put into her dance instruction.

“Now it’s my turn. I’ll get to know you, Tatsu, and learn about your dance culture. I want to compose the perfect song for you to dance to.”

“Shi...”

“You don’t want me to?”

“It’s not that... It’s not that at all...”

Ootsuka shook her head.

“I’m...thrilled! And I can’t wait to hear the track you compose for me, Shiika!”

Ootsuka spread her hands wide.

She wore her usual, uncomplicated, bright smile.

Shiika’s expressionless face melted into a small smile. She probably found Ootsuka’s grin reassuring.

I felt a wrenching sensation in my chest that took me by surprise.

Well, can you blame me? Shiika, who’s timid, been tormented by the emotions of others, and is a former cowering shut-in... She was reaching out a hand to a friend.

Just like with her and Shibuya back when the midterm-exam stuff happened. Shiika was peering over the walls between her and the rest of the world... Peering with curiosity at the other side.

Back then, she was captivated by the talent of the diva known as Erio Shibuya. And she wanted to do something to help preserve that talent.

This time around...

Perhaps she sensed the danger, the risk faced by the experimental dancer known as Tatsuki Ootsuka.

And it was clear to me that Shiika had already made up her mind. So all I had to do, as her manager, as her older brother, was make a mild protest just for the sake of form.

“Are you sure about this, Shiika?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Though it might cause some trouble, Gak.”

“No, no, it’s fine. You’re allowed to compose.”

Shiika was not only talented in singing but also songwriting.

With her ability to perceive sounds as colors, she can create melodies that simply can’t be conceived of by those who experience sounds as mere sounds. And because Shiika sees the world in a different way, she’s able to compose songs that have many layers to them.

It comes at a cost, though. Each time Shiika composes a song, it consumes a

great deal of her mental energy.

The symptoms present at random. In mild cases, she may have a small maniac episode. But when it's severe, she gets lethargic, unable to move sometimes. She gets confused mentally. Sometimes she even commits acts of self-harm. I have to stick close to her and make sure she's not in any danger.

As a result, I took composing off the table, and we limited her activities as Seeker to just cover songs.

But that didn't mean I'd imposed a blanket ban on composing.

When it's really a special occasion... When Shiika herself has a strong desire to compose.

When it really matters... When she's ready to challenge herself...

I've been prepared for that. So I'm ready whenever.

"Go for it, then, Shiika."

"Mmn. Thank you, Gak."

I patted her head, giving my blessing, and Shiika nodded and smiled softly.

Then she turned to Ootsuka again.

"Tatsu. Do you have free time after this?"

"Huh? I don't have any plans, but..."

"I want to know more about you, Tatsu."

"Whoa?! Hey, hey, Shi?! You're close... Way too close!"

Ootsuka went bright red as Shiika brought her face close to hers, still clutching her hand.

Ootsuka was the type to get up close and personal with others, but being on the receiving end of it seemed to startle her somewhat.

Shiika continued, oblivious to Ootsuka's flustered state.

"Show me the culture...of hip-hop dance."



In the end, we decided to leave the studio and head home after school

without bothering with the dance lesson.

Although we didn't go home immediately.

We were following Ootsuka and headed somewhere special.

A few minutes' walk from Ryouran High School. Plunging into the middle of the hustle and bustle of the city, we entered a rather dim alley through a street full of young people who already smelled like alcohol, though it was a weekday evening.

There was graffiti in green, purple, orange, and black spray paint on the walls. The ground, guardrails, phone booths, and other public items were covered in obscene writing.

We reached an open area, like a sort of plaza.

A basketball court, surrounded by wire fencing. Darkly tanned men were making flashy dunk shots, and the air was heavy with the sound of pounding basketballs.

There were guys and girls riding skateboards, too. Doing fancy tricks using the stair railings, drawing loud applause.

Loud music played throughout the space.

R&B, reggae, and hip-hop—playing all at the same time, creating a chaotic atmosphere.

There were young people having dance-offs in tune to the discordant music.

They were predominantly male, but there were also quite a few ladies around. Maybe a seven-three split.

But regardless of gender, every individual here had a mean look about them.

In other words...they all looked like delinquents.

They were really scowling. Was that just their usual expression or were they purposely doing it? I didn't know.

Their hairstyles were eccentric and dyed odd colors.

Their fashion was wild and impactful. Summer was approaching, yes, a hot season, but there was a heck of a lot of skin exposed on both males and

females, and it was clear they had a lot of confidence in their bodies.

I didn't want to go near any of them. I was certain they were the type I couldn't get along with. A few girls from the delinquent group noticed us, and they called out to us.

"It's Tatsuki!"

"Wow, it's been a long time! Since you entered Ryouran, I guess. Long time no see."

The delinquent girls greeted us in a friendly manner.

I was taken aback, but Ootsuka answered them right away with a bright smile.

"Totally! I'm glad to see you guys all looking well."

"Oh yeah, we're good. 'Sup?"

"Sup?!"

They were laughing and giving high fives.

It didn't make sense. What were they all so jazzed about?

Why were they suddenly clapping their hands together? It was so out of nowhere that I couldn't hide my confusion.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I have to take my friends to the club right now."

"Ah, right. I see, I see. So no time to catch up."

"But I'm glad you seem good! I heard a rumor you'd fought with Harucchi. I was worried you'd be down in the dumps."

"Ah-ha-ha. It's cool, it's cool. We just settle our differences with dance battles! It's what we do, after all. No worries."

"Kya-ha-ha! For sure!"

I felt a sharp pain in my chest. After just learning about the strife between Ootsuka and Haruka Gokokuji, I realized that Ootsuka was putting on a brave front right now. Ootsuka's bright smile and her cheerful acting were all to avoid worrying her old friends... It made me kinda sad.

Being sentimental isn't like me, though.

After parting ways with the delinquent girls, Ootsuka once again advanced farther down the alley. Along the way, me, Shiika, Akiba, Shibuya, and Komae had all become as meek as kittens.

Well, I mean, it couldn't be helped. If we let our guards down on a street like this, we might end up being kidnapped by gang members.

"Are you taken aback? It's something else, this place, huh?"

Ootsuka fell into step alongside me and gave me a smile.

"Looks like the kind of place where they sell illegal drugs."

"Some people who hang out here do. But they don't sell it here, like, in the open."

"You could at least try to deny it!"

"Well, it's true! I'm not going to lie about it! Anyway, I never touch any of that stuff."

"So if they don't sell it here, where do they sell it?"

"Clubs and so on."

"Huh?! H-hold on. Aren't we headed to your favorite club right now, Ootsuka?" I screeched.

The reason we opted out of today's lesson and came here was to experience hip-hop culture firsthand. Through listening to authentic dance music and getting a taste of the atmosphere, we could surely create a track that had a deep understanding behind it.

But I didn't want to do anything illegal.

If there was any risk of being involved in a crime...then I wanted to run away, right now.

"It's okay! I wouldn't take you anywhere dangerous! The club's run by a reputable person. It's all totally aboveboard."

"Well, all right. If you say so."

But the idea of an aboveboard club in a dingy alley like this...

Ootsuka led us to a building with a flashy purple sign outside.

The steps down to the basement seemed shady, and with each step I took, I felt I was being sucked into a dark and dangerous world. My heart thumped with anxiety.

We descended the dark stairs... The heavy door opened, and...

We were thrown into a storm of lights and sounds.

Electronic bass. A beat you could feel in your stomach. The vibrations causing the capillaries to vibrate, and blood to boil.

For some reason, I had a vision of arriving at the campfire of an unknown tribe.

The audience, dressed in flashy clothes, danced all around the DJ booth and the dancers on the stage.

“Whoa. Talk about party people,” I said.

“Don’t judge based on looks. This is a den of zen and peace! You’re totally safe! ♪” Ootsuka responded.

“Gak... The colors... My head, it’s spinning...”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot your gear.”

“Wah... So dark now...”

“It’s a pair of sunglasses. It’ll mute the colors you see, so you can walk around without staggering.”

“Oh, good.”

Shiika, wearing the glasses, gave me a perky salute, humming to herself.

She looked oddly right at home amid all these hard-core partiers.

“I wonder if I could go and look around for a while.”

“You mean go hit on girls?”

Komae was looking around the club with great interest, while Shibuya rolled her eyes.

“You really think I’d go pick up girls after the harrowing events of today? Can’t

you try to have a little more faith in me?”

“Hmm. Well, fine. But I’ll go with you. Mana, what about you?”

“Eh-heh-heh! Clubs are the best place to network! If I can schmooze with some famous celebs and talented producers, it’ll be a one-way ticket to future success!”

You could almost see the yen currency symbol flashing in the pupils of her eyes as she dove into the crowd.

“It’s all about money with her, isn’t it?”

“That’s our Mana. What are your plans, Gakuto, Shiika?”

“Hmm, I guess I’ll stay here. It’d be dangerous for Shiika to walk around wearing sunglasses. We’ll stay seated at the bar and just observe.”

“I see. Then let’s meet up later.”

“Sure.”

“Have fun.”

Shiika and I waved as Komae and Shibuya quickly disappeared onto the dance floor.

Ootsuka was chatting to the bartender. He had the look of a former soldier about him, a shaved head and bulging muscles. He was using a cocktail shaker, making a drink for a customer. He was probably the club owner. If you’ll excuse my prejudiced view, no guy who looked like that would be working a part-time job.

Shiika and I took seats next to Ootsuka.

“...Looks yummy.”

Shiika stared at what Ootsuka was holding.

A glass filled with an oddly colored drink, a mix of blue and red.

Noticing Shiika’s wistful gaze, Ootsuka grinned.

“You two should order something, too! The owner’s cocktails are exquisite!”

“Hey, hold on! Don’t pressure my underage sister to drink!”

“Hey yourself. You think this is alcohol I’m drinking? It’s not. It’s nonalcoholic. NONalcoholic. This club is all aboveboard, I told you.”

“Nonalcoholic cocktails. What should I order?”

“Um. Well, what kind of soft drinks do you like?”

“Cola.”

“Great! Excuse me! Could we have a fruity drink with a cola base?” Ootsuka ordered smoothly, as if nothing could be more exciting.

The owner didn’t give much of an answer, just nodded and grunted, “Yup.” He started pouring different liquids into a shaker, then shook it. He must have been a real pro, to go straight into making a complicated drink from just a simple order.

“What about Shi?”

“Same as Gak.”

“Sure! Another one, over here!”

“Tatsuki, you’re so uncouth, girl. Hey, I’ll give you your drinks for free, as long as you get up on the stage later. It’s been a while,” said the owner.

“Ooh, really? Can I?”

“Sure. A surprise appearance by Ryuzetsuran will really get the crowd pumped. And loosen up their purse strings.”

“All right. Let’s do it!”

Zero thinking time. Ootsuka agreed without hesitating, then downed her cocktail.

“I’m off,” she said breezily, and headed quickly over to the stage.

The audience, dancers, and DJs noticed Ootsuka and broke out cheering.

““““Yeeeeahhhh!”””” they yelled, like a tribe welcoming back a decorated warrior huntress.

The electricity in the venue’s air suddenly doubled. The DJ scratched at the decks. A song started playing, and from the audience’s reaction, I guessed it was

a popular banger within the subculture.

The sight of Ootsuka dancing onstage was truly spectacular—like a whirlwind. Coming onstage with comical movements like a joking clown, she quickly stirred up the audience with her facial expressions and gestures as she danced back and forth on the stage.

But then suddenly her movements grew sharp and intense, her hips shaking this way and that.

Inspired by Ootsuka's movements, the audience bobbed their heads and shook their bodies, all of them immersed in the world she was creating.

"Like a conductor..."

I heard a small whisper beside me and looked down.

I could see Shiika's profile, her face rapt as she admired Ootsuka's performance.

Slowly, she removed her sunglasses.

"Oh, hey, are you sure you want to do that?"

"Tatsu is a conductor," Shiika muttered again, without responding to my question. "The performers are the audience. With Tatsu, the audience is united."

"Are their colors aligned?"

"Yes. All the colors are in harmony now. I don't need the sunglasses."

Reassured, I returned my attention to the stage.

True, beforehand the crowd had been moving with excitement, with body-shaking heat, but it had been discordant. There was no unity there.

But now, an enchanting dancer in the middle of the stage—Ootsuka—had brought together a large crowd of spectators, and the entire space seemed to be in beautiful harmony, as if it were a painting drawn by an old master.

Perhaps it was the grown-up atmosphere?

At school, Ootsuka had a fresh and youthful vibe to her, but now, if you agree not to misconstrue my words, I would say her movements were somewhat...

erotic. It wasn't that she was lewd, but that she radiated a faint sexuality. Even though her dancing wasn't outright intended to titillate, it had that effect.

"Is this your first time seeing Ryuzetsuran dance at a club?"

"Oh... Yeah."

The club's owner, the ex-military member (I'm assuming) with a shaved head, spoke to me unexpectedly, and I couldn't stop myself from sitting up straight in mild alarm.

"She's sexy, huh?"

"I thought this club was supposed to be aboveboard."

"This is freedom of artistic expression. That unique sex appeal is part of her talent. It's inimitable."

"Because she's pretty, right? It's all about the face. Or maybe it's because of her body."

"No, no, it's her face."

I was a little disappointed that the owner didn't try to deny it.

But it made sense. Talent only matters so far as the face, whether it's ugly or beautiful. Having that cynical worldview confirmed so... Cynically, I was left with an empty feeling inside.

"Clubs and dancing are both symbols of...dark and underworld things, wouldn't ya say?"

"Huh? Well. I'm not sure about that."

"Ha-ha-ha. Don't hold back your opinions just 'cause I'm the club owner. I'm talking about the impression held by the general public."

"Well, to be honest, you might be right."

"Actually, in clubs in previous times, it was much more common than it is today to just pretend to dance while getting physical, ya know? Find someone of the opposite sex, see if there's chemistry, and have a one-night stand with them. Or even find a lady of the night to hire. Although dance has become one of the most respected subcultures around today, I really don't think it'd be an

exaggeration to say it was originally about the simulation of sex. And unfortunately, that reputation pervades to this day, and some clubs still operate like that and continue to perpetuate the old stereotypes. Although with the changing of the times, their numbers have certainly dwindled.”

“Right... But Ootsuka doesn’t seem to be dancing with any of that in mind.”

“Right. She’s dancing for the pure enjoyment of it. And she loves this club atmosphere. You can see it in her image, in the face she wears as an entertainer as well. She’s not thinking about looking sexy to either guys or gals, no; that image is all about the pure joy of dancing. Even though that face of hers has enough erotic firepower behind it that you’d think this place was a den of sin, dripping with voyeuristic intent.”

“So you’re saying that’s the key to Ootsuka’s sexiness—I mean, her sensual movements?”

“Yeah. A flower that blooms proud and healthy in the mud... That’s one of the lewdest creatures that exists in this world.”

A lot of the male clubbers were watching Ryuzetsuran dance with hungry looks in their eyes. Their gazes traveled all over Ootsuka’s exposed skin, her belly, her thighs. But she didn’t even seem to be aware of them. She devoted herself only to her artistic expression. And that eternal performer mindset seemed, to me, to be the crux of Ootsuka’s charm.

“We’ve just met; why are you telling me all this?”

The owner guy narrowed his eyes sadly.

“Because I want you to stay Ryuzetsuran—to stay Tatsuki’s friend.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s been clashing with some of her peers in the dance scene these days.”

“Right... Like with the Gokokuji girl.”

“It’s not just Haruka. She’s being targeted by those who don’t want the local scene to change, who don’t want it altered. Those who want it to stay the way it is.”

“You mean people want to keep its seedy image of drugs and prostitution?”

Who'd want to preserve an image like that? And to what end?"

"It's not about what they stand to gain. It's about havin' a place to belong. It's about their identity. Threaten someone's identity, and they'll retaliate. It's human nature, ain't it?"

"I think I get it."

I was like that myself, after all. Desperate to protect the space that Shiika and I occupied for ourselves.

"There's a lower barrier to entry now to Ryuzetsuran's hip-hop world, thanks to the influence of manga and anime. But it originally came about as a way for those without means to have fun without spending a lot of money. Those who didn't have the cash to go to real clubs. It's got ties to gang activity, of course, and some of the general public think of it as a scary, deviant sort of culture—one connected to seedy places. And that prejudice...well, it's half-right. Some in the subculture belong to the bad sort or are in gangs. The ones who fall through the cracks of society. Kind of an anachronism, no?"

"You mean guys like Ryan Sengoku."

"Oh, you know Sengoku, too? Well, good. That saves time on explaining."

"Well, there's been some stuff going down lately."

My only info came from Akiba, really, so it wasn't like I had cause to be smug.

A problem kid expelled due to his gang connections. Even though he was the most talented of the BRAVE school students. I'd only heard rumors, but judging from the club owner's reaction, it must have all been true.

"Haruka's a lot like Sengoku. If she hadn't gotten involved and fallen for him, she never would have gone down the wrong path... Whoops. I think I just said too much."

The owner hastily changed the subject.

"Well, this world's got a bad rep, make no mistake. In order to be recognized and accepted by the wider world, we have to change. That's what Tatsuki believes, and that's what she's working toward. She's trying all kinds of things to improve the image of the club, like dancing at collab events with the

Metropolitan Police Department...using the money she earns on Impachi Live to put on performances that the general public can come to without concerns of violence. She's working hard to clean up the neighborhood."

"And that's why she's getting backlash from the gang members and the old-school hip-hop fans."

"It's ironic, isn't it? Hip-hop was born as a counterculture. It was supposed to be innovative, to be about breaking the mold. Now it's so rigid—'This is hip-hop, as it should be...'—and as a result, it's getting left behind by the times..."

Conservative reformists.

Those who define themselves as outlaws but are unable to break free from the stereotypes of their rigid societies.

In the past, people who had no choice but to do bad things found a way to express themselves on their own terms, and thus, the subculture was born. But people are now in comfortable positions and don't need to do bad stuff to get by. All they have to do is ride the rails someone else set up for them. It's kind of a reverse phenomenon. Ironic, how that turned out.

"EDM, R&B, hip-hop. These days, genres of different origins get mixed together. Modern clubs are flexible. But some people don't realize their culture is a mix of different influences. They want to fight against the establishment, to protect what they think is cool... Honestly, kids these days are beyond helping."

The owner sighed and shook his head.

His scary face only added to the persuasive power of his words.

"But one or two rogues ain't a problem. What I'm worried about is Haruka gettin' included in that number."

"What's the problem, though, if Gokokuji is aligned with a gang?"

"What I'm worried about is whether Ryuzetsuran will break. The innocence in her dancing... I'm worried about what'll happen if that gets lost."

"Right..."

I could understand that concern.

“Talent” is a nebulous thing. No one can put their finger exactly on what makes a person’s X factor.

Even great talents in history have fallen into slumps over petty matters and lost their brilliance in the blink of an eye.

Take Shiika, for instance. We still have no idea where her synesthesia power comes from. Or why exactly it is that she’s able to use it to sing songs that captivate people’s hearts.

Talent is just the end result. And those we call talented are merely skimming along on the surface of some very thin ice.

Conflict with her friend Haruka Gokokuji, the pressure from a community that believes what’s bad is what’s good... Those things could combine to chip away at Ootsuka’s brilliance and drag her down into the swamps, never to emerge again... And who could say with any certainty that this awful sort of nightmare wouldn’t one day become reality?

“I’d like you all to stay friends with Tatsuki.”

“ ...”

I didn’t respond and just looked at Shiika.

I’m just a bystander in this story. Me being friends with Ootsuka won’t amount to much, after all.

Only Shiika, who’s also struggled with her own genius and with peer relationships and fitting in...only Shiika can do it.

Shiika, who had been staring the whole time at Ootsuka continuing to shine onstage with her dancing, turned to the owner.

“Mmn. All right.”

“Thank you, miss. You can have another drink on the house.”

“Two drinks, right?” Shiika asked.

“Oh, you’re a shrewd negotiator, huh? All right, anything for the kids.”

“Sure.”

Shiika gave him an expressionless thumbs-up. The sunglasses propped up on

her head actually kinda suited her as she spoke with an unusual confidence.

“I understand Tatsu now. I’ll make the ultimate dance song, just for her.”

A groundless statement.

But either way, it was fine.

The only way to prove talent is through results.

Maybe one day, for whatever reason, Shiika might lose that talent, or she might stop being able to produce results. Until that day, though, her genius would remain beyond question.



Out on the roof of the club building, it was already pitch black. Night had fallen before I even knew it.

Shiika sighed heavily as she gazed through the wire mesh at the glittering city lights.

“Ahhh... Fresh air. Yummy.”

“It was so crowded in there. It’s much nicer out here.”

A nice breather for brother and sister... Not.

There was someone else here.

“Ah-ha-ha! Are you drunk?”

Ootsuka caressed Shiika’s back with a genuine smile. She’d been dancing until just a few minutes ago, and it looked like she was still on a high.

“It’s not alcohol. It’s all the people.”

“Your first time at a club, after all! How was it? Did you have fun?”

“Yeah. An unknown world. I was able to see a lot of new colors. Thanks.”

“No, no, no, no! Thank you! I’m so happy you came just to see what exactly it is I do!”

Ootsuka looked bashful.

Though she may have been used to the adulation of a crowd, she might not have gotten many compliments from people outside the hip-hop scene. Maybe

she was pleased at the thought that she'd been able to bring hip-hop one step closer to the general public.

Perhaps out of embarrassment, Ootsuka changed the subject.

"More importantly, Shi... You said you wanted to talk to me on the rooftop... You don't want a battle, do you?"

"No."

"Why'd your brain immediately leap to expecting a battle, huh?!" I shouted.

"Then...you want to confess your feelings for me?!"

"No," Shiika replied.

"The lily of girl-on-girl love, suddenly blooming... Nope, not gonna happen," I said.

"Then what did you summon me here for?!"

"I want to know more about you, Tatsu. Why did you start hip-hop dancing?"

That was Shiika's question.

Ootsuka was dumbfounded for a moment. Clearly, the question had taken her aback.

She scratched her cheek a little, then smiled wryly, saying, "You know, I've never really talked about my past." As Ootsuka turned her gaze toward the night city and grasped the wire netting, her eyes took on a faraway look, as if she was filled with nostalgia.

"I used to get sick a lot when I was little. I had a weak constitution."

"Huh?" I grunted in surprise.

Looking at Ootsuka as she was now, I found it hard to even imagine.

"When I was in elementary school, I spent most of my time in the hospital. I went to school about once every two weeks. By the time I entered junior high school, I got sick less often, and by the time I entered Ryouran, I had become so sturdy that I barely ever caught a cold anymore."

She stopped talking and laughed self-deprecatingly.

“But by that time, people had already started thinking of me as some delinquent.”

“Delinquent...”

“You really don’t want people to know you’re sick, right? You don’t want to make people worry about you, so you hide it. People just assume you’re a delinquent who’s always skipping school. I couldn’t seem to make any friends.”

Ootsuka’s eyes were filled with sadness, as if she was reliving those days.

“The only people I had to talk to were the older girl I met at the hospital and the boyfriend who came to visit her. That’s where I learned about dance, music, and hip-hop culture.”

“At the hospital?”

“But having said that, it’s not like they taught me how to dance or did anything special. They’d just come to my hospital room and start ranting. ‘Young people in Japan today are no good’ and ‘The problem with the youth these days is...’ And so on. Honestly, it was a little annoying.”

“...Yeah, doesn’t sound like much of a teacher.”

“Well, not at first. At first, I just nodded along. But then I started to get curious about the older girl. And I asked why she was in the hospital. And...”

Then Ootsuka trailed off.

“And?”

“She said, ‘I was a dancer when I was younger.’”

“A dancer...”

“The legendary female hip-hop dancer Kikyo. That was her name. And her boyfriend was the legendary rapper J-Bozu. Kind of a crazy coincidence, huh? To be hospitalized with someone so amazing.”

“I bet if their fans in the subculture knew about it, they’d die of jealousy. Maybe some of them would even intentionally injure themselves, just to get admitted to the same hospital.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Yeah, if there were actually people like that, I’d have been so

mad! I'd be like, sure, let's trade places! Gladly!"

It was easy to imagine. Being hospitalized must have been tough for Ootsuka.

"Every day, Kikyo talked to me about hip-hop. How fun it is dancing with friends, how hard she trained to refine her own technique. How she'd pushed herself to the limit and could no longer dance. We talked about all kinds of things."

I looked up HIP-HOP DANCE + KIKYO, and sure enough, I found an article saying she'd retired at the age of thirty-eight and hadn't appeared onstage again since. For a while, she was the top dancer in the world of hip-hop, but a member of the group that her boyfriend, the rapper J-Bozu, belonged to was arrested for violating the cannabis control law. After that, the whole group went up in flames, and they started getting hate mail and death threats. Officially, J-Bozu announced that he was retiring to focus on his private life, but there were rumors that he actually suffered from some kind of mental illness.

Put that together with Ootsuka's story, and I'm guessing the stress of it all contributed to the hospitalization. A sad story. Brought down by the actions of others.

"I indulged her by listening, and she started showing me old videos of her performances. Through that, my interest gradually grew... And then on the day I was discharged from the hospital, I suddenly announced, 'I want to be a hip-hop dancer, too!'"

I could picture young Ootsuka mustering up her courage.

"'Who cares if I've got a frail constitution? I'll show you how cool I can be!' ... Ah-ha-ha. ♪ Like some cheesy manga heroine."

"So your physical ability... It's not some innate talent."

"Nope. It's a form of revenge against my weak childhood! I swore I'd never let my weak constitution hold me back!"

A genius who'd gotten there purely by effort. That was the true identity of Tatsuki Ootsuka—Ryuzetsuran.

Man. Who wouldn't want to support an underdog like that?

“I think it was Kikyo who saved me. Even after my hospital days were over, I was treated like a delinquent and couldn’t make friends. But Kikyo introduced me to the owner of this club, and I joined the hip-hop world, so it wasn’t so bad at all. And I started to feel like this world was where I belonged.”

As a result of being treated like a delinquent, though she wasn’t one, she found a place for herself in a community that included many delinquents. In the end, Ootsuka turned out to be the kind of person the uninformed thought she already was. It was a strange turn of events, I thought.

“But hip-hop culture is getting smaller and smaller every year. At this rate, it might disappear altogether someday.”

“Well, it won’t disappear entirely, will it? The culture will exist to some extent, on a smaller scale.”

“Underground, you mean. Unknown by most. Can you really call that existing?”

“...It’s a complex issue, huh?”

Hard to pin down, yeah. That’s what I felt.

Even during our time as recluses, Shiika and I still sought some form of social connection.

Me, making friends online through playing the battle-royale FPS game *EPEX*.

Shiika, with her activities as the Vsinger known as Seeker.

If no one knew about us...if we had totally shut ourselves off at home, would we really feel alive? The answer is probably...no.

But a subculture, no matter how it declines, can’t be totally cut off from the larger society unless the number of people in that subculture reaches zero. Still, it’s only natural to feel uneasy when that day of destruction seems like it might be on the horizon.

“I want the subculture that Kikyo loved so much to last forever. It gave me a place to belong. So in order for it to remain, it needs to evolve... Hmm. You know, I’m not usually the type to be so gloom and doom about stuff...”

Smiling, Ootsuka looked down at the street near the club building.

A few drunken young men were hanging out in a dark alleyway. Another man sneaked in from the far end of the alley, gave the young men some money, and received a paper bag in return. I didn't even want to imagine what could be inside.

"When people like that exist, normal people get scared. Most people are great. But some of them... Well... Someone has to tell them that doing that kind of thing is no good."

"So... You said something like that to Ryan Sengoku and Haruka Gokokuji."

"Oh! Gakkun, you talked to the club owner about me?"

"No, he just told me all this stuff—I didn't ask anything. It seems a shame for the whole subculture of this area to be dragged down just because of Sengoku and Gokokuji's delinquency."

"Well, people love to make snap judgments like that. It happened to Kikyo and J-Bozu. The backlash."

"Hmm, for sure."

"I think things are still okay. Sengoku's an ex-member of the BRAVE school, so his activities aren't widely known by the general public. But one day, if Ry-Ry hits it big-time, his connections to dodgy individuals might come to light. The face of hip-hop will be destroyed, and we'll be forever associated with nothing but delinquency."

Ry-Ry. That must be her nickname for Sengoku. Sounds like they used to be on good terms, but I wouldn't put it past Ootsuka to make up cutesy nicknames for her enemies, too.

On the other hand, her use of the names Kikyo and J-Bozu, without any silly nicknames, conveyed a sense of deep respect.

"So, Gakkun, Shi... You mustn't let Ry-Ry beat you. I don't want him to have any success until he reflects on himself and his behavior and cuts his ties with the bad guys he hangs out with. I don't want him to perform on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival."

Wishing not for your own success but for someone else's lack of success.

Ootsuka was always so positive; it was a shock to hear her say something so cynical.

But at the same time...it spoke to me.

To be honest, I've never been able to connect very well with Ootsuka, since she's always smiling. It's like there's a barrier between us.

But everyone has negative emotions. Beyond Ootsuka's wall constructed of smiles and positivity, there lurked the darker aspects of the human soul... Knowing that, I thought it made Ootsuka suddenly seem so much more real and genuine.

Perhaps Shiika felt it, too. She gazed at Ootsuka after hearing her confession, her eyes clear.

Ootsuka's impassioned tone and its color. What did Shiika see through her eyes?

Shiika's small mouth moved.

"We'll win."

Just a simple statement.

A strongly worded affirmation, coming from Shiika, who was usually such a ball of laziness, evasiveness, and shyness.

Knowing Shiika as I do, having spent more time with her than anyone else has...I was still shocked as I looked at her.

Shiika nodded, her face impassive.

"Seeing this club, I understand now. What matters most to you, Tatsu. Your beloved subculture. How you differ from us. I think I get it now."

"Oh, Shi..."

"In a song, the singer is the main character. They have to construct their image... Their performer's face. But for dancers, it's the opposite. It's important to see the audience's face. The thing I had to be aware of... It was completely different than what I thought."

An artist needs to nurture the muse within.

The consumer need only experience the art that has been produced. It's passive.

For a singer, it's all on them when it comes to drawing the audience into the song, immersing them in it. That's what makes an excellent singer.

But dance is different. A dancer is, so to speak, a leader. The audience is led by the dancer, and they, too, begin to dance, creating a sense of excitement that goes both directions.

Captivating the public with dance, bringing the stage to a climax, getting the audience's bodies moving... That's what makes an excellent dancer.

Both are connected to the music culture, so it's easy to conflate the two, but the very roots are fundamentally different. And that small misjudgment was the reason why our Music Department group couldn't produce a performance worthy of standing out in the dance world.

But Shiika seemed to understand that now.

"The subculture you love, Tatsu. The music I love. I must mix the two elements and make something greater than the sum of its parts."

"Shi...! Thank you. Really, I just... Thank you...!"

A big smile spread across Ootsuka's face. It was different, somehow, than her usual one.

It wasn't a performative smile, intended to make others smile back at any cost.

It was a natural smile, one deep from the heart, born from the pure joy of being understood.



Now that our genius, Shiika, had found the way forward, turning in a quality video for the final exam was all but guaranteed.

If I heard any voices saying, *Wait, that still doesn't make sense!* Then to them I'd say, with all sincerity, *Pipe down, dumbass!*

It's not my place to be involved in the creative process. If Shiika says she can do it, I'm not going to be a naysayer. After all, I'm just trailing after her like

poop from a goldfish's butt.

Doubting Shiika was never an option.

As for the video, it was out of my hands. From now on, I'd focus all my efforts on my work behind the scenes.

That way, Shiika could demonstrate her talent to the fullest. And that way, we could get some solid results.

In my capacity as a normie, I'd set up some clever, subtle tricks.

Ryan Sengoku had Azusa Harajuku, a first-year student in the Fashion Department, on his side. With her skills, he could dominate the competition using that huge advantage as leverage. It wasn't his raw ability that he was planning to beat us with.

"So I'd like to have you two cooperate."

Late night. In my room.

In front of my PC, I spoke into my headset mic.

On-screen, I had the Wizcode group-call app open. A remote meeting was underway.

The other members of the call were Zeke, my gaming buddy, and Mana Akihabara, my school buddy.

"Ah, to think, me, swapping contact info with a high school girl, at my age! B-but do not fear, fair maiden Akihabara! I believe in the philosophy of the 'YES! Lolita! NO! Touch' movement..."

"Yes, Lolita? Huh? What is that, some kind of internet slang?"

"Egads! A sudden generation gap!!!"

"Ah-ha-ha. I still don't really get it, but, mister, you sure are funny."

It was Zeke and Akihabara's first time meeting (although not really "meeting," since this was all online...), but the two seemed to get along surprisingly well. There seemed to be some communication issues, but at least they were getting along.

That was good.

I needed them both to carry out this very important plan, so it was vital that they got along.

“Well then, let me explain—”

Then I told Zeke and Akiba about my strategy for the final exam.

I needed a conspiracy of three to pull off...a certain plan.

“Mwah-ha-ha. An interesting little plot here, Gakuto.”

“Hee-hee-hee. Gaku-Gaku, you sly dog, you.”

Upon hearing the plan, the two of them grinned like villains almost at the same time.

Or at least I assumed they were grinning. This was a voice-only chat. Still, it was clear they were both delighted by my devious plan. With voices like that, they had to be grinning. If not, that would mean they both had formidable poker faces. Only a trained spy could pull it off.

So I broke into an evil grin to match theirs, as well.

“Thank you both for your cooperation. Let us conquer evil with evil. Through our devious doings, we shall ensure their enlightenment...”

Chapter 5:

The Chasm Between Reformation and Respect

Finally, on July 14, it was the first day of the final examination period.

Late afternoon. After school.

Today was a weekday, so usually I'd still be in class at this time, but I was laying idly in my room on my phone instead. Shiika was no doubt shut up in her own room.

Yes, we were skipping school.

Unlike ordinary high schools, Ryouran High School has a special method of acquiring credits. The grading criteria was based on the amount of views and likes you get on Impachi Live. Attendance doesn't matter. Conversely, no matter how seriously you attend, if you don't get results on Impachi Live, you fail. So we could skip school without any repercussions at all.

But it wasn't out of laziness that we were chilling at home today.

Shiika had finally finished composing last night.

Right now, she was passed out in her room, sleeping off the exhaustion. But even after she woke, I would need to give her some close care and attention.

I wondered what the side effects would be this time...

Just then, my phone pinged with a bright *ding*. ♪

"I'LL BE THERE SOON! (a bunch of emojis) (a bunch of message app stamps)"

It was from Tatsuki Ootsuka. Apparently, she was already near our house.

Right. I'd called Ootsuka over today so she could listen to Shiika's new song. I had thought that sending her an MP3 file would be enough, but Shiika said she really wanted to see Ootsuka's reaction when she heard the song for the first time.

When I asked why it mattered so much, Shiika said that her goal from the start was to compose a song that would truly delight Ootsuka. Simply communicating via text would cause Shiika to miss out on seeing Ootsuka's facial expressions and hearing her voice. She wanted to make sure that, no matter what Ootsuka thought of the piece, she wouldn't be able to plaster on a smile and hide her true opinion.

Right. Shiika didn't want that to happen at any cost.

But after she completed the song, she was in no state to head to school, so she'd asked Ootsuka to come here instead.

Was it her natural offbeat nature, or was she just being humble? Though she's my little sister, I couldn't say.

"All right..."

Getting to my feet, I texted Ootsuka back that I'd meet her at the front door.

"..."

When I put on my shoes and went outside, Ootsuka was just walking across the street.

When she saw me, her face lit up, and she dashed over, shouting, "Gakkun! Thanks for inviting me! How are you?!"

"Good. How are you?"

"I'm in great shape. I've finished my body training. All ready for the completion of the song! My body feels light as a feather! ♪"

"Don't suddenly start breakdancing on the side of the road. Your clothes will get dirty."

"Oh please, I breakdance everywhere."

Ootsuka continued to spin upside down on the asphalt as she spoke.

Y-yikes. How was she so flexible?

“Don’t get all dirty right when you’re about to enter our apartment.”

“Ah! Oops! I didn’t think of that!”

“Oh, never mind... I can just have the place cleaned later.”

By Akiba, no doubt.

“Come on, just come in.”

“Okay!”

I invited her into our place.

In the living room, Ootsuka sat down cross-legged in front of the low table, and bopped back and forth.

“So you finished the new song? Gimme, gimme!”

“All right. Shiika hasn’t woken up yet, but I guess you can hear it now.”

I turned on the speakers, got out my phone, and loaded the WAVE data.

Shiika also wanted Ootsuka to listen to the song with speakers instead of through headphones. No doubt this request was born from Shiika’s new appreciation of dance. She wanted Ootsuka to hear it in the form that was closest to how it’d be during an actual dance performance.

“Wait, this song...”

Ootsuka looked puzzled.

“Is it inspired by ‘GETDOWN NO FEEL’?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask Shiika; I have nothing to do with any of it.”

“I see... But this isn’t a coincidence, is it?”

“Is that song famous?”

“It’s a J-Bozu track. He rarely released new songs, but once in a while, he wrote one and it really blew up. Kikyo used to love dancing to that track. This just reminded me of that... Wow, Shi must have really done her homework...”

“Maybe. She said she wanted to write a song that would really delight you.”

“Eh-heh-heh. I’m so happy.”

Embarrassed and shy, Ootsuka closed her eyes and began to listen seriously to the music.

Eventually, the song ended, and when I looked up, Ootsuka was crying quietly.

“...”

“Hey... Whoa. Don’t go getting all emotional...”

Shiika’s track was, indeed, beautiful.

But this was ostensibly a dance track. Not a ballad. It shouldn’t have been making anyone cry.

Despite this, tears continued to flow from Ootsuka’s round eyes.

“Is it...a sad song, somehow? I don’t really get music, so I...,” I mumbled.

“No, it’s not that. Somehow, I feel...so reassured.”

“Reassured?”

“It’s okay for me to stay the way I am. There’s a place for me. It’s like—I don’t know—like having my mom pat me on my back. The things I don’t want to change, the things I HAVE to change... All kinds of things will no doubt get in the way, and there’ll be times when I want to doubt myself, but I have to keep moving forward. I have to use the work Kikyo and others have done as a base to bring forward a new era by myself...”

Ootsuka wiped away her tears as she spoke, smiling.

“Shi made this song to encourage me. That’s why... That’s why I feel so reassured. And why I cried. Hee-hee, it’s odd, right?”

“No, I don’t think so. My sister is, after all, a genius.”

“Thank you, Gakkun. Ah, but what should I do now? I don’t even know how to begin thanking Shi. I don’t want her to see me like this...”

“Don’t worry. It’s too late.”

“Huh?”

Ootsuka looked taken aback.

I pointed over to Shiika's bedroom door, and Ootsuka glanced over.

There she stood, with bedhead, dark circles under her eyes, and disheveled pajamas. For the past few days, she'd avoided bathing and smelled like a hamster that's been sitting in the hot sun for three hours. Not exactly a foul odor, but sort of like the smell of a cute, wild animal.

Anyway, Shiika stood there, looking like a total mess and not fit for public appearances.

She stared at Ootsuka for a few seconds, then scrabbled across the floor, hamster-like, and approached her.

"Did you listen to it?"

"Uh, yeah, I did."

Ootsuka flinched. Usually, I'm the one taking over when it's time for straight-talking. Confronted by Shiika, Ootsuka seemed unsure as to how to react.

"How was it? Was it a good song? Can you dance well to it?"

"Y-yeah. I really like it. For me, it might actually be the best song I've ever heard in my life."

"Really? Good. I'm so glad. I love you, Tatsu."

With a small but happy smile, Shiika embraced Ootsuka.

Ootsuka yelped in surprise and looked at me.

"Er... Has Shi's character changed somewhat?!"

"After composing a song, she tends to have a slight mental breakdown. But it looks like this time around it's only a light case. To be frank, I'm actually relieved."

"I... I see. Well, I feel bad now. It sounds like it was quite tough, but she still did it for me..."

"Don't worry. This time Shiika didn't have to dig deep into herself to find the song. Instead, she dug deep into her feelings for you. I think that's why the symptoms aren't so bad."

“How can we help Shi return to normal?”

“She’ll recover gradually in her own time. But I think this time we might be able to use Shiika’s tendencies to help her.”

“What do you mean?”

Ootsuka blinked in wonderment.

When I opened my mouth to explain, Shiika slipped away from Ootsuka and stumbled toward the kitchen.

“Donuts, instant ramen, donuts, instant ramen.”

We could hear her rummaging through the drawers and chanting those words as if they were a spell. She returned, arms overflowing with packaged donuts and instant noodles. I narrowed my eyes.

“Hey, you can’t eat too much.”

“Go away. Gonna eat.”

“It’s fine if you have one donut and one instant ramen. I won’t let you have any more.”

“Go away. *Nom!*”

She turned her back on me and crouched down, clutching her goodies to her stomach.

Then with a rip and a crinkle, she tore open the package of donuts and began scarfing down the contents, making gross gobbling noises. Like a rodent gorging on cheese. Not only did she smell like a hamster, but she also ate like one, too.

“Give me strength,” I muttered.

I scratched my head, then dashed over to stop Shiika.

“Come on. I said no.”

“Guh!”

“If you eat that much, you’ll get fat. I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’ve noticed lately that you’ve grown a little squishier.”

“*Nom! Groo! Chomp!*”

“Ouch! Hey, don’t bite! Stop!”

Shiika clung to my arm as I tried to snatch the food away.

She was on a rampage, like a wild animal whose territory had been intruded upon.

“Go ’way! Go ’way!”

“Okay! Okay! I give up! You can eat whatever you want!”

“Guhhh!”

Shiika grunted in satisfaction at being allowed to indulge in her gluttony.

With a sigh, I looked at Ootsuka.

“Strong, isn’t she? I’ve been training hard to handle her all these years, but even I have to throw in the towel sometimes.”

“Seriously. It’s so different from how she usually acts...”

“Yes. But this is something Shiika needs. This urge to binge eat, it’s a kind of self-destruction. It’s uncontrollable, like people who are addicted to smoking cigarettes, or like bad guys who get addicted to drugs.”

“Yikes! That sounds terrible!”

“That’s why composing is so dangerous. Still, binge eating is fairly mild. She can overeat every now and then, and get it out of her system that way. But if it ever got really bad, her life could even be in danger.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Shiika, not even for a moment.

But on the flip side, Shiika’s foibles could be used as a kind of weapon.

“Right now, Shiika’s psyche wants to destroy her. It wants to override the natural urge to rest when she gets tired, or to give up when things get tough. It’s a way of overcoming the limits of the human body.”

I paused, and Ootsuka suddenly widened her eyes.

Having understood the meaning of my words at the same time, we shared matching grins.

““Perfect for dancing!!!””



“Now then, it’s finally the day to shoot the video for the exam—”

After school the next day.

I and the members of the Shibuya Gang were assembled at the dance studio at school.

Lined up in front of the mirrored wall were four people: Shiika, Shibuya, Akiba, and Komae.

Komae’s composition and Ootsuka’s choreography had been completed last week, and the various lessons had all been done as well.

Everyone ought to have memorized the choreography by now.

The preparations were all complete. All that was left was to film the video.

I opened the cardboard box at my feet and unfolded the costumes inside.

“First, everyone, I want you to wear these.”

The first impression: black.

The motif: evil.

The girls were to be dressed as bad girls, and Komae as a sketchy sort of joker. The design was meant to call to mind the villains of some kind of tale.

“Those... Those costumes! When did you find time to prepare those?”

“I just went for what I thought would work based on my own taste. It should fit the song, though.”

“Dressed all in black! Ooh! That’s gonna get the boys!” Akiba shouted.

“Cool.”

Akiba’s eyes shone, and Shiika gave an indifferent response. A total disparity in enthusiasm levels, but neither one seemed to be reluctant. That was good.

I had the four of them change into their outfits in the changing room.

Five minutes later, when they all returned after changing their clothes, I couldn’t help but say “Whoa...” when I saw each of them.

First, Shiika.

She wore a black leather bustier dress, fishnet tights, and long boots. Not as much skin exposure as you'd see with true bondage wear, but it was the same sort of basic principle... A costume with impact.

"My skin...exposed. Everything on show."

"It's okay! It's not actually all that sexy."

There was no way I was going to dress up my little sister in a revealing way, you know. The costume pushed the limits but basically toed the line of decency. Don't underestimate me, here. I'm not only a brother. I am also a gentleman.

Next, Shibuya.

Basically the same concept as with Shiika. But her costume showed a bit more of her skin—her white thighs peeking boldly through a gaping slit in the material. And her chest was slightly exposed, too, to emphasize her bountiful cleavage.

"Hey, don't stare! This is kinda embarrassing, you know..."

"Your normal clothes show about the same amount of skin, don't they? Don't go acting bashful now when we all know you're the flashy type."

"I've never worn anything this risqué before! And don't go discriminating against flashy types!"

After I ignored Shibuya's complaints, next up was Akiba.

Compared to Shiika's and Shibuya's, her costume had a stronger gothic-Lolita flair to it, a little bit devilish. For Akiba, with her baby face, slim body, and short stature, it was actually a perfect match.

But you know, this costume reminded me a little of...

"You dressed me as a freaking maid! Hey! Gakuto! Are you making fun of me here? Are you trying to imply I'm some kind of subservient maid who exists to carry out your orders, huh?!"

"Don't talk nonsense! You know how highly I value you!"

"G-Gakuto? Wh-why do you look so serious right now? Wait, does this mean you actually...?"

“Of course I do. Akiba, you’re absolutely vital in my life.”

“Oh, Gakuto...” Akiba gulped, her cheeks red, her eyes brimming with tears.

Seeing the light of expectation in her eyes, I gave a dashing smile and said,
“Yes, to me, you’re the maid I can’t do without!”

“Die, you scum!”



“Ouch! Stop! Stop it! Don’t break my thumb off!”

She’d grabbed my thumb with incredible strength.

Where was she hiding all that power in such a puny body? Perhaps this was a result of all the vigorous dance training.

“And last up is me, hee-hee! See how cool I look in this villain suit! The girls will go wild!”

“All right, everyone, let’s get on with the filming.”

“You’re not going to comment on my costume?!”

“Nobody cares about your costume, you jerk. Wake up.”

“How mean! After I worked so hard to compose such a great track! I won’t stand for this shabby treatment!”

“The track’s awesome. Super cool. I’ve had it on repeat on my phone.”

“Oh. Er... Well, thanks, I guess?”

My praise for the song was genuine, and Komae’s scowl disappeared.

I hated having to compliment him... This jerk who kept sniffing around after my beloved sister, Shiika. But I was deeply impressed by Komae’s composition. And as the older brother of a genius like Shiika, I know what it means to be tolerant of those who have ability, despite their...quirks.

“No doubt about it, it’s a work of genius. No wonder they call you the Five-Staff Prince.”

“S-stop it. You’re embarrassing me. Don’t start suddenly complimenting me now.”

“I’ll acknowledge your talent, but nothing else. I won’t give you my sister, and just to be clear, I don’t like your face.”

And I wasn’t going to even mention his costume.

“Guh. You’re a tough one, Big Brother...”

“I’m not your bro... But never mind. Everyone, it seems preparations are complete.”

I looked everyone over and nodded in satisfaction.

“All right, then. Let’s get this show on the road.”



“Okay? Let’s go! Three, two, one...”

Shiika and the others got into position on Shibuya’s count. Their backs to the camera, their faces half-turned toward it. With their all-black outfits, it was a pretty stylish sort of intro.

Komae’s track began to play.

Monotonous drum and synthesizer sounds. A deep bass that travels through the eardrum. Multiple melodies mixing, making the internal organs tremble.

Beautifully arranged sounds, then suddenly, a distorted cacophony, like the molecular particles of ore bonding together.

The rapidly altering sounds began to trickle through to my brain, and I felt the good vibes beginning to percolate inside me. It was like having electrodes connected directly from my brain to my ear, then having electronic drugs injected straight to my brain cells.

It was a cool sound, a tough sound, a sound that brought to mind the harsh breathing of outlaws running through the city streets at night.

Shiika and everyone else in their black outfits were in perfect harmony.

And their dancing was...stunning.

Pliant fingers, flexible limbs, intense moves, and gracefulness. Each movement flowed in perfect elegance.

Matching the tempo of the track, they never slowed.

A bewitching performance by a bunch of bad girls. Fascinating the populace, boasting of their great evil.

As the song reached its final crescendo, they all spun around in tune with their steps, kicking their legs high with the momentum, so high you could see right up their skirts.

A little different, perhaps, from the crowd-pumping dance routines I’d

witnessed at the club.

But their movements were designed to draw in the audience and work with them...demonstrating a deep understanding of the form.

All the while, projecting the image—the face, if you will—of true artistry.

A fusion of subcultures. A quality that spoke of an ability to ascend to even greater heights.

Shiika had been uneasy about this, but her movements were sharp—her current state of mental confusion was actually working in her favor. Just a little psychic manipulation, and she could move her feet like that. Who knew? I realized once again how important the psychology of the individual is.

Akiba was also dancing well. It may not be at the same level as a pro, but she was nimble.

As for Shibuya and Komae... No surprises there. They had good physiques to begin with, and the kind of coolness to attract admirers of either gender. Their well-honed bodies spoke of a robustness, a competence that showed in their dance.

“Amazing...”

The word spilled from my lips.

Honestly, I was a bit surprised by all this myself.

Up until now, I’d always thought I had a good grasp on Shiika’s talents as a singer. But that perspective was only one-sided, when actually she was probably more like a die with a hundred unseen sides.

I knew only one part of her.

There was so much more depth to Shiika.

So much untapped potential.

And finally, the Shibuya Gang’s dance video was done recording.

This time, our response was solid, and we could feel the satisfaction of a job well done.



“Nervous. Nervous. Nervous. NERVOUS!”

“Nokia, you worry too much. We gave the best performance we could possibly give. Get a grip on yourself.”

“Wh-what’s wrong with being nervous? Anyway, Erio, I see your hand shaking as you clutch that glass of cola.”

“Wh-what? No, this is the tremble of a true warrior!”

After school, Shiika and I returned to our apartment with Shibuya and Komae in tow.

I’d edited the dance video we shot at school on my PC and, with a quick prayer, uploaded it onto Impachi Live. Right now, the four of us were waiting for the initial reaction to the video, for our long-awaited results.

Akiba wasn’t present. She had left before this, saying she had something to do.

I wanted to reassure Shibuya and Komae, who both looked nervous.

“Don’t worry. With the video we shot, we should be fine.”

“I’m confident in the quality of our performance, but... Sengoku’s team has Azusa Harajuku working with them, right? We might lose out on pure hype alone...”

“Even the confident diva seems to be humble when it comes to dancing.”

“I’m not a confident diva. I’m just being honest, here. But it’s true that my songs are the best.”

“Well, don’t worry. The master plan will be set in motion soon.”

“What master plan?”

“Look, it’s starting.”

I launched the Impachi Live app on my phone and opened a live stream that just started five seconds ago.

“Welcome to ManaMana’s Channel for all things Ryouran High! I have big news for you today!”

“Mana?!”

“Live streaming right after shooting the dance... Wow, Mana’s intense.”

Shibuya and Komae were surprised by the familiar face on the screen.

But me? I was gloating inside.

Now, now, you two. It’s too soon for the real surprise.

“And today we have a collab between the Music Department and Azusa Harajuku, the top first-year student in the Fashion Department!”

“Hello, everyone. I’m Azusa Harajuku!”

“...HUH?”

Komae froze as another girl’s face popped into view from the side of the screen. A soft, smiling face.

Shibuya froze as well. For a few seconds, no one seemed capable of commenting on this new, unexpected development.

“Azusa Harajuku?! Whaaat?!”

“Hey, Erio! Don’t scream right in my ear!”

“Who made you the noise police? Don’t treat me like Gian from *Doraemon*! You know what, it doesn’t matter!”

Bellowing, Shibuya grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me close.

“What’s going on?! Why is Azusa Harajuku collaborating with Mana?”

“No, it’s not a collaboration with Akiba.”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you hear her? Mana said it’s a collaboration with the Music Department.”

“Now, as for the dance video that just got uploaded for the final exam... the costumes used were actually designed by none other than Azusa Harajuku! I’ve put the URL in the description, so please head over and check out the video right now! I’ll also put a link in the chat!”

“Hee-hee, I’ve seen it already, of course. Killer video! And these costumes are

some of my favorites from all the ones I've designed so far. I was so excited to see them being showcased in such an excellent performance!"

"Ohhh, that's so kind of you! Even though I was dressed as a maid for some odd reason."

"Well, you were cute as a maid! Totally adorable, Mana!"

"Y-you think so? Well, th-thanks... But more importantly! HERE is the costume in question!"

Akiba, blushing and stumbling over her words due to receiving the kind of praise she wasn't used to, held up a black outfit to the camera.

It was, of course, the costume she'd worn for the video shoot.

"W-wait, our costumes were designed by Azusa Harajuku?! HUH?! But she said she was going to make costumes for Sengoku's team instead!"

"Right. The new costumes are for Sengoku's team. There's no mistake there."

Shibuya looked completely flabbergasted, so I explained.

"I asked Harajuku to go through her clothing archives of everything she's designed since she entered Ryouran and choose whatever fit best with Komae's music and Ootsuka's choreography."

"Her clothing...archives? But will viewers be interested if we're reusing old costumes? I mean, she designed brand-new ones for Sengoku's team, so in terms of hype..."

"You don't get it. Only hard-core fashionistas will care that our costumes are her old pieces."

"Huh?"

"I mean, how many ordinary people know about runway fashion? Most don't know about a new design until it's distributed in stores or it makes the news. In other words, it's basically the same thing as if these costumes were being shown for the first time."

"Right... You're right!"

Finally, Shibuya seemed to get it.

Cognitive lag.

Once a fashion trend becomes a template in the industry, THAT is when you start seeing it on TV and so on.

Timelines in the fashion world are totally different from mainstream fashion timelines for the general public.

The pieces unveiled at fashion festivals are unknown to most ordinary people. If we present old pieces as new work, we can compete in the same arena as Sengoku's team.

What's more, this collaboration also benefits Harajuku. She's well-regarded in the industry, but she isn't a household name yet. So the demand for her clothing still isn't there. But this way, she can make use of her old work even without it being widely available in stores.

As I predicted, the comment section was awash with positivity.

"HERE WE GO! THE SHIBUYA GANG DOMINATES!"

"A COLLAB WITH AZUSA HARAJUKU... GODLIKE!"

"AZU'S NEW DESIGNS?! OMG! COOL AF!"

"I SAW THE DANCE VIDEO! NOKIA LOOKED AMAZING AS A VILLAIN! I'D CRACK HIM LIKE A GLOW STICK!"

"ERIO SHIBUYA AND SHIIKA IKEBUKURO LOOKED SUPER SEXY AND COOL. THOSE COSTUMES TRANSFORMED THEM. SO EROTIC."

"I DON'T REALLY KNOW WHO THIS MANA AKIHABARA GIRL IS, BUT SHE'S KINDA CUTE HUH? LOL!"

"SUPER LAME OF YOU TO COME ON SOMEONE'S CHANNEL AND BE LIKE 'I DON'T KNOW THEM.' WHAT, ARE YOU JUST HERE FOR AZU?"

Witnessing a major collab between the Music Department and Fashion Department...the audience was buzzing.

And the buzz went up the chain, until we were trending on the home page of Impachi Live.

The number of real-time playbacks on the video analytics I had open on my PC

was steadily increasing, as were the number of likes.

“Amazing, it keeps growing! Wow, look, Nokia!”

“Y-yeah. I’ve never seen growth this rapid before... And look, we’ve already got uploads of people trying to do their own versions of our dance!”

Seeing the explosive buzz, Shibuya and Komae were buzzing, too.

I quickly looked away so no one would catch my smug grin of satisfaction. My plan had worked perfectly.

That’s when I noticed it.

Even Shiika, who was watching Impachi Live on her own phone, wore a happy smile, her eyes narrowed with pleasure.

Ah, that was the kind of face I wanted to see. It made this whole project worth it, at least for me.

But this whole thing was only possible thanks to Shiika and Komae trying to really understand hip-hop culture.

Harajuku had refused to collab with us at first, but she changed her mind after we put some real work into studying hip-hop culture and upping our game. And Azusa Harajuku had this to say about supplying the outfits:

“Students in the Fashion Department are evaluated by the number of views and likes received on the video that we provide the costumes for...but there’s no particular rule that says we can only provide costumes for one video.”

In other words, the more outfits the Fashion Department students supplied across multiple videos, the better for them. As part of her personal policy, Harajuku only wanted to give her costumes to those she judged to be worthy, but she never had any intention of giving Ryan Sengoku an exclusive collab.

She’s a shrewd one, that Azusa Harajuku.

“Ah! But wait! Sengoku’s team also uploaded a video! This could be bad!” Shibuya suddenly yelped.

“That’s true. Their video showcases Azusa Harajuku’s new designs. They could try to promote their video with that!”

The music video by Sengoku's team was playing on Komae's phone. On-screen, burly guys with edgy hairstyles and broad shoulders wore wild costumes as they performed high-level dance steps.

Sengoku wasn't just resting on his laurels as a former member of the BRAVE school. His moves were designed to impress.

Azusa Harajuku's costumes were also top-notch, with strong designs that complemented the masculine appeal of their dance steps and backing track.

However, despite this, the reaction to the Sengoku team's video was lackluster.

"IT WAS JUST A REHASH OF WHAT THE SHIBUYA GANG DID."

"SO DID THE ENTIRE FASHION DEPARTMENT COLLABORATE WITH EACH VID, LIKE AZUSA HARAJUKU DID? I DON'T GET IT."

There were a lot of wishy-washy comments—no real spark of excitement.

All according to plan. I grinned evilly.

"Hee-hee-hee. I knew it. I knew it would turn out this way!"

"What's that, Gakuto?" Shibuya asked.

"The Sengoku team messed up. They didn't wait long enough to release their video. They saw Akiba's stream and panicked. I heard their original strategy was to wait three days, until the flood of final-exam vids started to taper off, then post theirs. They never dreamed that we'd secure a collab with Azusa Harajuku and beat them to the post! Ah, I can just picture their shell-shocked faces!"

"R-really? But how did you know when the Sengoku team planned to post their video?"

"A trade secret. ♪"

"Huh?!!!"

After all, what I'd done was dastardly. I'd had Zeke hack into Sengoku's account and find out his posting schedule. This kind of intrusion falls under the umbrella of cybercrime. I could get arrested for this. So of course, I'd never tell anyone the truth.

And so, thanks to Shiika's efforts and my behind-the-scenes machinations, the number of likes and views we got shot up, and it looked like the Shibuya Gang's spot on the special stage at the Ryouran Summer Festival was secured.



You can only ever enter an entirely new world once. The second time, you see, it's no longer new to you.

I'd grown accustomed to the dimly lit interior with its flickering blue and purple lights, the feel of the bass reverberating across the floor, and the crowd of excitable party people.

We were back at the underground club Ootsuka had taken us to once before.

Shiika and I took seats at the bar and greeted the owner, who by now was a familiar face.

Yes, we were here to get totally wasted and celebrate our victory in the final exam... NOPE. Never gonna happen. Shiika and I were more comfortable in the club now, yes, but our personalities were still the polar opposite of club-going party people. We'd rather bask in victory, lolling around in our own rooms at home.

We were only here at the club on Ootsuka's invite.

Just then, the club went silent.

The blaring music ceased, and the dancers onstage hurried backstage.

"It's about time."

"Yes. I can hardly wait."

Drinking our (nonalcoholic) cocktails, courtesy of the club owner, we gazed up at the stage.

Today's main event, the shooting of Ryuzetsuran's new dance video, was about to commence.

The video Ootsuka would post on Impachi Live as her entry for the final exam.

She decided to shoot it in this club, which you might even call her second home, as a way of giving back to the community that raised her.

And she wanted us to see her shine, so she'd invited Shiika and I to watch, too.

And we weren't the only guests.

"You guys are in the Music Department! Why are you here?!"

A flamboyant, red-haired female grabbed my shoulder.

First-year Dance Department, Haruka Gokokuji.

She had on an angry, hateful expression as she closed in on us.

"This isn't a place for lame jerks like you. Get lost!"

"Now, now, that's not nice. Your boyfriend lost to us 'lame jerks,' or have you somehow managed to forget about that already?"

"Guh!"

"I believe our final scores were, yes, DOUBLE theirs! Were they not, hmm?"

"Th-that's because you jerks ruined their collab with Azusa Harajuku! You cowards!"

"We're cowards?! We merely operated within the rules! It's Sengoku's fault for not signing an exclusive contract with Harajuku. Blaming others for your lack of artistic ability... Now, where's the soul in that, hmm?"

"You... You... You...!"

Unable to find the right words to respond to my taunts, Gokokuji bit her lip in frustration.

Then she glared at me with sharp, determined eyes.

"Don't get carried away, you insignificant little blob of frog spawn. Ryan's gang will pay you back for this. Don't go thinking you can disrespect us and get away with it!"

"Oh, I'm scared. You're nothing but a thug. Guess there really is a nasty side to this culture."

"Sh-shut your mouth! We live as outlaws. Adults are the ones who put labels on us. We have the right to our own space!"

“Your own space...,” Shiika muttered Gokokuji’s angry words.

Her eyes glowed with a strange light as she glared at Gokokuji.

Normally, when confronted with an aggressive person like Gokokuji, Shiika would shrink and hide her eyes behind her long bangs.

But today, due to the aftereffects of her post-composition altered state, Shiika seemed much bolder than usual.

Now she was fearless, willing to take on an angry yakuza like Gokokuji. See, this is why I have to constantly monitor Shiika when she gets like this.

Shiika stared Gokokuji in the eyes and said, “Are you scared?”

“Huh?!”

“The color of your voice... It’s inconsistent. You try to look strong, but you’re actually weak. And because you’re weak, you seek community. But unless you appear to be strong, you feel that you won’t be accepted. So you pretend to be and continue to push forward.”

Shiika’s voice was soft, but its intonation and rhythm were unique. Using her special ability to see the colors in sound, she was able to paint an accurate picture of the mentality of others. Her ability to paint pictures with sounds wasn’t just limited to her singing.

Entering the psyche of another, digging deep, stirring up the existent colors as if swirling a paintbrush around...

A ruthless method of true communication.

Shiika almost never does this during everyday conversations, since she’d feel too guilty messing with someone’s mind. But in her post-composition altered state, she seemed to be lacking her usual sense of consideration.

Gokokuji just stood there dazed. She looked taken aback by Shiika’s overwhelming presence.

“You talk about the pride in hip-hop, about soul, about what’s cool. But really, you’re just afraid to lose your place, your community. In order to preserve it, you try to protect yourself.”

Gokokuji was being backed into a corner. A clear voice was digging down deep into her true colors.

“Do you want to live like a gang member?”

“...Don’t be stupid. Of course I don’t.”

“But your voice is weak. You’re prepared to go down a dark path.”

“I just want...! I just want to live a cool life as a dancer!”

“You wanted to be like Tatsu.”

“Wh-what? Darn it, the club owner told you that?!”

Gokokuji glared reproachfully at the owner, who was wiping glasses behind the counter.

But the big man just tilted his head as if to say, *Hmm? What are we talking about?*

The owner had told us that Ootsuka and Gokokuji used to be friends. No one said anything about Gokokuji wanting to emulate Ootsuka, so it seemed like Shiika had just taken a shot in the dark with that one. Judging by Gokokuji’s response, though, it seemed like she’d hit the mark.

Shiika’s clear eyes seemed to see through everything. Gokokuji must have sensed it, too. So she clucked her tongue angrily and sighed, as if she’d given up resisting.

“Tatsuki’s the best dancer in our generation. Everyone wants to emulate her. Everyone hones their skills hoping they’ll beat her one day. Everybody wants to get onstage at this club and put on an unforgettable performance.”

“But Tatsu... Ryuzetsuran... She’s changed.”

“Yeah. She ruined her original dance style. She’s influenced by too many things that are outside hip-hop culture. Now, she’s talking about wanting to get more media exposure, cleaning up the neighborhood... She’s trying to curry favor with the public. I wouldn’t expect normies like you to understand, but from a hip-hop perspective...Tatsu’s dancing has become crap! It’s completely lame!”

“I think Tatsu is aware of that as well.”

“...Huh?”

Gokokuji’s mouth fell open, and it appeared that Shiika’s words had taken her aback.

“Hip-hop will die out if it doesn’t evolve. But Tatsu hasn’t been able to find the right answer as to how best to make it evolve. She’s been searching for the best way to get hip-hop accepted by the mainstream, to create that compromise, without disrespecting the origins that made it come to be in the first place.”

“Compromise... That will just result in something totally lackluster!”

“You’re wrong.”

Shiika shook her head.

“It’s going to be difficult. It’s hard to forge a new path while maintaining the spirit of the original. Just like how it was hard for a singer like me to learn how to dance. So Tatsu’s been struggling. She hasn’t been able to focus on staying cool, the way you want her to be.”

This meant even more coming from Shiika, an uncoordinated girl who hated the very thought of exercise.

I think the students at Ryouran High School expected a certain kind of charisma from Shiika, who made a name for herself as a singer. But her appearance, at least until the video was posted, was pathetic enough to disillusion them.

Well, it makes sense. She was trying new things. You can’t hope to succeed on your first try.

“Gosh, you’re annoying! Anyway, pandering to the general public always leads to a loss of the original spark! It’s the same for everyone who goes from the indie scene to the big leagues! They all become scammers, abandoning their artistic souls! Don’t think you can sway me with slick words!”

“Which one is the scammer, though?”

“Huh?”

Gokokuji looked over her shoulder at me when I interrupted.

I didn't want to get in the way of Shiika's roll, but there was something that bothered me, too.

"Wasn't it Sengoku who said all that stuff about the BRAVE unit being a soulless cash grab aimed at gaining mass appeal?"

"Wh-what's with you people? You got psychic powers or something?!"

Afraid not. Shiika's ability may be considered close to supernatural, sure. But as for me...I'm just a regular normie.

I had Zeke hack into Ryan Sengoku's account, and I dug through his message history.

About 80 percent of Sengoku's business conversations were just him capitalizing on his position as a former BRAVE student.

And this might get hairy, but the truth is that he only told people he quit the BRAVE school because it was a soulless cash grab aimed at mass appeal and that it went against everything hip-hop stood for. But rumor has it that he was kicked out due to his problematic behavior. He had to lie to everyone about the real reason.

"Sengoku was able to explain why Ootsuka's actions seemed so annoying to you. So you started to have faith in Sengoku, and you sought to get closer to him. But can you really say that the guy truly loves the hip-hop world? Do you really think he's cool, when he's just making excuses, pretending he can't get by in the industry without the crutch of sex, violence, and drugs?"

Okay, I'm preaching here. But it's okay, because unlike some people, I have no delusions that I'm cool.

The important thing now was to break down Haruka Gokokuji's illusions.

Although my words were more of a side dish, like the pickled ginger served with a plate of curry, or the garnish on top of a beef bowl. I had spoken up in the hopes of giving her a final push, but honestly, I didn't expect my words to have much impact.

The event that would truly move Haruka Gokokuji was just about to happen.

Whoaaaaa! The club erupted in cheers.

Gokokuji turned to the stage, startled.

It was Ootsuka. Ootsuka taking the stage and addressing the audience, telling everyone about the filming that was about to begin and the safety precautions that needed to be followed.

“It’s starting,” Shiika said. “Forging a new path without losing one’s true soul... Watch Tatsu. See how she accomplishes it.”

“...”

Gokokuji held her breath, and the lights went out. The club was awash with silence and darkness.

And...

...Ootsuka’s silhouette appeared beneath a single spotlight.

“Welcome to the cesspool of the night! I’m so happy to see everyone here tonight! This video is not just a final-exam assignment. For me, this is deeply significant. This is a video that will express my love and gratitude to those who raised me as a dancer: Kikyo and J-Bozu, and everyone in this club. Let’s do it!”

As the music began to fill the space, the crowd responded with bewilderment.

The intro was low, quiet, and slow, and Ootsuka’s dance movements were slow, too—completely different from her usual energy.

Tatsuki Ootsuka, aka Ryuzetsuran, always danced with vigor to soulful, powerful, and energetic songs.

But now, she stumbled around on the stage to Shiika’s monotonous, languid music, eyes blank like a drug addict prowling the night streets for a fix. But her movements weren’t just slow. They were also hypnotic. Everyone in the club had their eyes glued to her body. Ootsuka’s innate skill and the otherworldly nature of her movements were what made this possible.

But then, we reached the heart of the song.

A sudden change in key and a complete change from the gloomy atmosphere. The tempo suddenly quickened, becoming faster.

“Whoa...!”

Gokokuji’s eyes widened.

As the song’s tempo increased, it was clear it was now a sort of homage to J-Bozu’s music.

This symbolized Ootsuka herself, who previously had no goals or dreams and had all but given up on life.

Then a mentor came to her, and she began to incorporate more of the steps she was known for today. The whole vibe of the track had become bright, positive, and up-tempo.

Using the colors in sounds, Shiika had painted a story that unfolded almost like a picture book.

The story of Tatsuki Ootsuka.

A dancer rescued from the quagmire of everyday life by hip-hop, a girl who discovered new challenges, who encountered new people, and decided to aim higher.

No doubt Haruka Gokokuji realized that she, too, had been a part of Ootsuka’s story, and her eyes brimmed with tears as she gazed up at the stage.



*

"My dance was always just an imitation of someone else...

"But I finally found my own style of dancing...

"I won't mourn for lost friends now. I just want to convey my feelings.

"It's thanks to you all that I can continue to live.

"So I'll preserve this precious night through my dancing.

"I won't ask for your understanding. Words have no meaning here.

"You may hate me, but I'll always love you.

"I can't prove it with words. But I can prove it with my dancing.

"Like the way you all inspired me... I'll set an example for you all."

Her dancing was more persuasive than a million words could have ever been.

By layering the kind of music created by artists belonging to different fields with the foundations of a culture that's been unbroken for generations, Tatsuki Ootsuka had finally arrived.

An alternative cross between light and darkness.

Ah, I really am a lucky guy, I thought, to be able to follow the journey of these amazingly talented girls.

I was certain this was the moment a new culture was born. The first page of a new era.

And I was there. Not everyone can say that.

"Shall we head home, Shiika?"

"Will Tatsu and Haru be okay?"

"Yeah. No doubt they'll have a lot to talk about after this."

"Hmm. Okay."

Shiika and I quietly left without anyone noticing.

Later, I got a message saying that Ootsuka and Gokokuji had reconciled, but

that's their story. No need for a guy like me to serve as a spectator. I'm just glad that everything came together in the end.



But alas, there was still one thing that needed to be dealt with.

After taking Shiika home and putting her to bed, I sneaked out of the house.

My destination was a block of expensive apartments in a place a little way out from the city center.

Since there were almost no convenience stores or restaurants that operated until late at night around, there was no late-night traffic. It was the exact opposite of the saying "the city that never sleeps."

A girl with silver-blond hair looked up from where she was standing under a streetlight.

Io Kanda. An upperclassman in the TV Talent Department of Ryouran High. A famous actress who boasts being the most popular and having achieved the most out of any student in the school.

"Good evening, Gakuto. Nice night, isn't it? ♪"

"You're early. It's only five minutes past when we planned to meet."

So I'm five minutes late, but that aside.

"I was looking forward to our late-night date, Gakuto. I actually got here half an hour early."

"I told you what this was about, right? It's nothing to get excited over."

"Yes, I understood you perfectly. We're paying a visit to Azusa Harajuku's atelier, right?"

As she spoke, Io glanced at the building across the road.

A three-story luxury apartment. The building had a luxurious floor plan, with one household per floor. The color scheme and architecture were quite unusual. The tasteful exterior made it seem like a famous movie director or Hollywood actor might live there.

Azusa Harajuku rents the entire building, from the first floor to the third, and

uses it as her home and her fashion atelier.

While she attends Ryouran High School, she employs several students as staff members, and while they handle various orders, she creates designs for contests.

The lights in the windows indicated that work wasn't quite finished yet. For a lazy guy like me, it's hard to imagine working this late.

But it's not like we'd come to Azusa Harajuku's atelier just to hang out.

"Right. There's no mistake. But, lo..."

"Hmm?"

"You're not going to mention that we're here to fight?"

"I felt like that part goes without saying."

"You're so strange..."

"Hee-hee. Thanks. That means I'm not like everyone else at least. To me, that's a compliment."

"Yes, yes."

Despite the seriousness of what we were about to do, we were having a very relaxed conversation.

It's true that Azusa Harajuku had provided costumes for the Shibuya Gang and, as a result, undermined the value of Sengoku's collaboration.

As Gokokuji had said, Sengoku and the others would no doubt retaliate out of anger. With that in mind, I got Zeke to hack into Sengoku's messages again, and I stumbled across a conversation indicating they were plotting revenge against Azusa Harajuku.

I contacted the police, but they said, "Well, technically no crime has been committed yet," and they didn't take me seriously at all. Evidence obtained by illegal means can't be used as evidence, so I couldn't just show them the conversations I'd discovered through our little hacking operation.

If Sengoku and his group would have been satisfied with just exacting their revenge on Azusa Harajuku, I would have left them to it. But I doubt they'd be

satisfied with just that. They would come after the members of the Shibuya Gang... And they would come after Shiika.

I wanted to deal with these low-down delinquents right here, right now.

“I’m sorry I got you involved. But if a poor guy like me was spotted in such a stylish part of town, I’d get arrested. Discrimination sucks, but if I’m seen in the company of someone like you, Io, no one will bat an eye at me.”

“Because I’ve got the right face for it, you mean? Heh.”

“And the fighting skills. You’re definitely the girl for the job.”

“And you don’t often get the opportunity to practice real hand-to-hand combat and knife-fighting like this. Only...,” Io said, trailing off. “It’s a terrible idea to use a woman—a top-notch actress like me—as a pawn in battle.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. I guess I was only thinking about my own convenience,” I said.

“Heh. Well, at least you’re an honest jerk. ♪”

“Well, never mind me. You’re kind of the strange one here, you... Ah.”

I stopped talking when I saw in the distance, several men walking our way.

I could tell who they were, even from here. Ryan Sengoku and his hard-faced gang of delinquent cronies.

“Here they come. Shall we strike?”

“Yes. Let’s have a wonderful night, Gakuto. ♪”

We put on balaclavas to hide our faces, and Io and I started walking toward the gangsters.

This was to tidy up the loose ends.

Dirty work behind the scenes—that has nothing to do with the stories of Shiika, Shibuya, Ootsuka, Harajuku, and the other talented students. Yes, okay, one genius, Io, had somehow gotten involved. But she’s sort of an odd duck, so let’s just put her aside.

This was a means to an end. So that Shiika and the others could live in peace, honing their talents and moving forward along their own paths to glory.

Justice... Delivered with an iron fist.

Epilogue

“A fight broke out late last night at a high-end residential area on the outskirts of the city. Six teens and three men in their twenties were arrested. They all had various injuries, including broken arms and legs, and they made incomprehensible statements such as: ‘It’s all that couple’s fault!’ and ‘We were attacked by that kung-fu couple!’ The men belonged to gangs based in urban areas, and police are currently investigating the possibility that the incident was some sort of gang war.”

The sound of a news report playing on WayTube floated into Shiika’s room.

I was sitting on the floor when Shiika, who had been staring at her phone while lying on the floor, rolled around to look at me.

“Did you do it again, Gak?” she muttered.

“Whatever could you be referring to?”

“A couple... So who were you with?”

“These days robbery play, gang play, it’s popular, right? Though it’s not the kind of world someone like me with zero girl experience would know about, huh?”

I laughed it off as Shiika glared at me.

“More importantly, Shiika, how are you doing?”

“Mmn. Yeah. I feel better now.”

“Well, that’s good. But don’t let your guard down.”

I was in Shiika’s room to monitor her for signs of ongoing mental instability.

But it seemed like I wouldn't have to constantly keep watch over her soon. The thought of that made this older brother feel a little sad.

"Still... Although the symptoms seemed mild this time, it lasted longer than I thought it would. After the manic period passed, you couldn't get out of bed for days."

"...No, that's not right."

"Huh?"

"My mental faculties came back right away."

"Seriously? Then these past few days you've just been slobbing around for the fun of it?"

"It wasn't that."

Shiika shook her head, her face solemn.

"...I was half-dead from muscle pains."

"Ah."

That made sense.

"I was somehow able to dance well, but... My body was left in shambles."

"That's because you're a recluse who doesn't get enough exercise."

"Hmph."

Shiika, lying around as limp as a housecat with heatstroke, had none of the charisma she showed in the dance video.

But I still found the sight of her adorable, and I couldn't help reaching out to caress her head.

Shiika sighed happily, as if she was enjoying the sensation.

I was just enjoying the soothing nature of her reaction when the doorbell rang.

Ah, she's here.

I'd already gotten a message saying that she was coming to our place.

I heard the front door being opened, then loud, clumping footsteps. And Shiika's door was thrown open.

"Shi, are you feeling better? I bought a melon. Let's eat it together."

Tatsuki Ootsuka leaped into the room. Today, she didn't have on a hat, and her long hair was down. She wore her usual outfit that exposed her shoulders and midriff, with an extremely short miniskirt.

Her dance video, the one Shiika had composed the song for, was a great success, and her spot on the Ryouran Summer Festival special stage was all but assured. She'd come to the Music Department to express her thanks, but when she found out that Shiika was absent, sick at home, she'd texted me right away to say that she'd come and visit.

Looking at the melon in her hand, I sighed and clutched my head.

"Ootsuka... Don't bring a melon to someone's house."

"Huh? Was that wrong? I thought it was standard to bring fruit when someone's sick! What is it, an allergy or something?"

"No, it's just that cutting it up is such a pain. I'd rather you bring that sort of thing when Akiba's here."

"Oh, whoops. Okay!"

Ootsuka agreed with me, without making any kind of retort or counterargument. She's always so nice and straightforward.

"Well, let's just keep it here. We can eat it the next time Akiba's around."

"Yeah! Let's do that."

Pressing the heavy melon into my hands, Ootsuka looked back at Shiika.

"Shi! I did it! Thanks to you, I got more likes and views than ever before! I feel like I've finally got my breakout! I love you! I love you so much! Hey, hey, can I kiss you?"

"Th-thanks... But before that, I need a bath..."

Shiika weakly pushed away Ootsuka, who was trying to kiss her.

Shiika shakily got to her feet and stumbled out of the room.

Ootsuka watched her go, then looked at me. She puffed her cheeks out in disappointment.

“Oh, why does she have to take a bath while I’m here?”

“Because you’re too touchy-feely. You tend to get overly close to people. So Shiika’s worried if she doesn’t take a bath, you’ll notice her smell.”

“Oh, but Shi wasn’t like this before...”

“I mean, she was in a state of emotional disturbance then. It’s hard to tell from the outside, but it’s the small things like this that show the difference.”

“Hmm. I see, I see.”

There’s still so much about Shiika that Ootsuka didn’t know. Right. They haven’t even known each other for long. And Shiika and I, we don’t know everything about Ootsuka yet, either.

“How was Gokokuji after that?”

“Hee-hee. We made up. She apologized for being so cold lately.”

“I see. Good for you.”

“Yeah! And apparently, she decided to break up with Ry-Ry. Although he got arrested before she could bring it up.”

“Just saw that online. They didn’t include any names in the report, but when I heard the words *gang war*, I immediately thought of Sengoku’s group.”

“I see. Well, I really wish he could have gone straight before something like this happened. Luckily, it did before he made a name for himself as a performer, though. At least this way hip-hop’s image won’t be damaged. It’s still a shame I wasn’t able to do anything to help him.”

“Don’t worry about it too much. Life is long and filled with new encounters and final partings. Just cherish the friends you have right now. There’s nothing more you can do.”

“Gakkun...”

I suddenly sounded all philosophical. Ootsuka gazed at me with her big eyes, and I felt a little embarrassed. Maybe I tried to act a little too cool there. Ugh,

the shame. Negative thoughts began to swirl in my mind. What right did I, an ex-recluse, have to talk all big like that?

Suddenly, she grabbed my face and placed her forehead against mine.

“Huh?”

So warm, so soft... And a little damp from sweat. And she smelled...like a girl. Her long lashes, so close to mine... They made my heart beat faster... No, no, this didn't make any sense. We were close enough to kiss. Why was she suddenly this close? I mean, I knew she was usually touchy-feely and had no sense of distance, but it was never to this extent!

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

“You've got a nice face, Gakkun.”

“Wh-what? Somehow that rings hollow, coming from a genuine beauty like you.”

“Ha-ha, I don't know much about beauty, but I know the face of a man with depth when I see it.”

Ootsuka laughed, then moved her face away. I was relieved, yes, but the loss of her scent made me feel a little melancholy. Wait, what was I getting so disappointed for?

“Shi, Eripon, ManaMana, Nokki... Everyone in the Shibuya Gang has an amazing face. I just know everyone's going to go on to do great things... I'm suuuper envious!”

Expressing her emotions through her whole body, Ootsuka lowered her eyes as she gently toyed with the red highlights in her black hair. Then she mumbled and stumbled over her words, as if she was having trouble introducing some sort of difficult topic.

“Um, you know... There's something I wanted to ask of you, Gakkun...”

“What?”

“Could you... Could you let me join the Shibuya Gang?”

She blushed like a little kid as she spoke.

To be honest, I had kinda predicted this.

The collab between Shiika and Ootsuka had greatly helped them both in terms of viewers.

There was a lot of buzz and expectations for the future and for future collabs.

Although they'd gotten amazing results in the final exam and secured spots on the Ryouran Summer Festival's stage, that was just a waypoint on the road to stardom for Shiika and the others.

To make a name for themselves, and eventually emerge into the spotlight as first-class entertainers and stun the world.

To get close to that lofty goal, you needed as many talented friends as you could get.

"Actually, I've already consulted with them."

"Huh? Whaaat? But I've never mentioned this before now!"

"To be precise, I asked if you could be welcomed into the fold. And it was a unanimous yes."

"...! Well, Gakkun... I..."

"Right. Let's continue working together, Ootsuka. That cool with you, Shiika?"
I called out toward the hallway.

Shiika nodded. She had opened the door halfway and was peeking through the gap. Her pale shoulders were visible. I assumed after she got undressed, she'd grown curious about my conversation with Ootsuka and sneaked back to listen. But without going out into the hallway, I couldn't tell if she was naked.

Shiika, presumably naked, spoke up in a soft voice.

"I'm happy, too. Glad to have you, Tatsu."

"Oh, Shi! Thank you! Can I hug you? Hug!"

"No, don't..."

"Hey, you fool, don't try to open the door! Can't you see she's naked?!"

"It's fine, it's fine! We're all friends here! In fact, why don't we have a bath

together?”

“Even friends don’t do that! Hey! DON’T OPEN THAT DOOR!”

“G-Gak. I’m gonna run. Restrain Tatsu.”

“Wait. Shi!”

I tried to restrain Ootsuka, who, in her innocence, was about to get a full-frontal view. Shiika fled to the bathroom. Although I was already growing a little tired of dealing with a hard-core partier like Ootsuka, who had no sense of boundaries, I also found myself grinning and thinking about how fun this all was.



Just like how Ootsuka combined hip-hop culture with other cultures to pave the way to greater heights.

For Shiika, this kind of encounter could be the catalyst for a huge professional leap forward.

I couldn't help but expect big things.

Even though I had no real grounds for thinking so. But life is like that, huh?

Team Name: The Shibuya Gang (Temporary)

Members

Gakuto Ikebukuro.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 0 (No account registered.)

Shiika Ikebukuro.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 228,400

Mana Akihabara.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 56,000

Erio Shibuya.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 630,900

Nokia Komae.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 312,000

Tatsuki Ootsuka.

Impachi Live Subscribers: 887,100

Afterword

Hello, I'm the writer, Ghost Mikawa. Thank you for reading *Looks Are All You Need*, Volume 2. There are no words that can express my gratitude to those who have read not only the first volume but now the second volume, too.

Instead of discussing the story, I'd rather you read it for yourself. And since this time I have only one page for the Afterword, I think I'll just go straight to the acknowledgments.

necömi, the illustrator. Thank you again for the wonderful illustrations! On the cover and on the colored insert pages, the cool drawings of Tatsuki Ootsuka brought her subculture to life perfectly. I hope to continue working with you.

Continuing from Volume 1, M has reported on various aspects of entertainment culture, such as music and dance. Thank you again for letting me hear all about this unfamiliar world. Thanks to you, I was able to write a high-quality story. I'd be pleased if I could continue to interview you in the future.

S, the editor in charge. This time, the progress of the manuscript didn't go smoothly, and I'm sorry for only just making it in time. Still, I think we were able to release high-quality work in the end. What do you think? I hope you think it's a good manuscript. That said, I know I can't be forgiven like this every time, so next time I'll do my best to write faster.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the publication of this work. I am grateful for your help. I am able to continue writing today because of your efforts to reach a wider audience. Thank you for your continued support.

And finally, to you, the readers. Thank you for reading until the end! You might look at someone like me, with various series being serialized, and worry

or wonder, *Which one are they really serious about?* But I give my full effort to everything I work on, so please don't worry. I've heard that depending on its popularity and sales, *Looks Are All You Need* will continue, so if you'd like to keep reading the series for a long time, please recommend it to your friends, discuss it online, vote for it in popularity polls, and so on. I would appreciate your support. I think the good development of an individual project depends on the power of each and every person's support.

It's my hope that more and more people will come to support Gakuto and Shiika's story.

Well, that's all from me, Ghost Mikawa.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink