









First made a replica at age seven, after a fight with a friend. Since then, the replica takes her place when she doesn't feel like going to school.

Sunao Aikawa



/ Second Nao

A replica identical to Sunao Aikawa. Tries really hard to be useful to her. Unlike Sunao, she likes to read.

# Replica Replica Replica Can Raillin Can Harunadon Harunadon Mustration by raemz



### Copyright

## Even a Replica Can Fall in Love 1

### **HARUNADON**

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by raemz

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Afterword

# ACT ONE A Replica, Dreamless

I'd never slept in a bed.

I'd hung futons up on the line and let them air in the sunshine. I'd rushed to take them in before the sun set. But I didn't know how the freshly aired white fabric felt once it was laid back out.

It was fun to imagine lying down on fresh bedding. How soft and fluffy would it be?

"Snap out of it."

My eyelids flew open, and I blinked several times.

It felt like there was sleep in my eyes, but that was because *she* was still in bed, and her eyes weren't focused yet.

"Sorry. Good morning."

She didn't return the greeting. She didn't even look at me. She just waved a hand as if she were shooing a cat.

"Day two, and I just can't," she said. "Go for me."

That explained it.

"Got it," I said, nodding.

I left her room and headed for the bathroom on the first floor. I knew there wouldn't be anyone else around at this time of day, but walking silently had long ago become a habit.

I splashed some water on my face and brushed my teeth. By now, my head was clear.

A brown-haired girl stared back at me from the polished mirror.

Low hairline, thin eyebrows. Well-defined eyelid crease. Big round eyes framed by long lashes. A well-shaped nose and thin pink lips. A balanced figure, with limbs as lithe as a cat's.

The girl in the mirror was attractive in a way that some would call cute and others would call pretty.

I turned my eyes from her, patting my wet face with a brand-new towel. Once

it was dry, I applied primer, liquid foundation, and concealer.

Finally, I slathered on sunscreen, making sure to get it all over my face, neck, hands, and legs. She'd said to apply the minimum necessary, but I'm a girl myself—skin care matters.

I then brushed my long hair thoroughly before carefully cleaning the brush and dropping any stray hairs into the wastebasket. I was borrowing all these things, so I had to take care of them.

Next, I went to the kitchen, flipped two cups from the drying rack, and filled each with water from the tap. I drained one in lieu of breakfast.

Carrying the other glass, painkillers, and a cloth-wrapped lunch box, I went back to her room.

The mound under the covers stirred, and her face poked out—the same face as the girl in the mirror.

"What's for breakfast?" she asked.

"It looked like Japanese style. White rice, a slice of salmon, miso with daikon, rolled eggs, and—"

"Enough," she cut me off, sounding annoyed.

The Aikawa household seemed to alternate between two kinds of breakfast, Japanese and Western; but the former was more frequent. The exact menu varied a bit, but the types of side dishes were pretty consistent.

Her mother was a drugstore pharmacist. She woke up before the roosters, made breakfast, and headed out to work. She got home early in the evening and set right to making dinner.

I'd seen Mom dressed in her apron from behind more often than I'd seen her face.

The girl got up and snatched the glass and medicine from me.

Painkillers could upset your stomach, so it was better to eat something before taking them. And to be honest, I would have preferred if she'd called for me *after* filling her stomach. But she hated it when I grumbled, so I just stared at the cream-colored wall.

"You're lucky. You just get the bleeding and none of the pain."

"Mm," I agreed, but she just glared at me.

She handed me the half-empty glass and the empty pill packaging, and I took them back to the kitchen.

When I returned to her room, I moved into the corner and took off my pajamas. I folded them, hid them under the bed, and took the ironed uniform off the hanger on the wall.

It consisted of a pleated, checked skirt and a white blouse with a turquoise ribbon at the breast. Online consensus held that this uniform was "very cute." The winter version added a navy blazer.

She'd picked this high school because she liked the uniform, and I rather liked it myself. Just wearing it put me in a conscientious frame of mind and made me want to stand up straight.

"Grabbing four pads."

She didn't answer. She must be too tired to bother talking to me.

I double-checked the class schedule folded up in her pencil box, then looked over the textbooks and notebooks in her satchel.

It had been five days since she'd last called for me. Final exams were two weeks from now. I'd have to do well on those again.

Once I was ready, I turned back to the bed.

"Phone?" I said.

A dramatic sigh. Then her hand reached out. Her phone was on her palm, in a basic powder-pink case. It was the latest model, and it was slightly warm—she must have been using it under the covers.

"I'm off. Don't forget to lock your door."

I knew she wouldn't answer. I left before she made any further demands.

I stopped by the bathroom at the end of the hall and changed out my pad. Then, on my way down the stairs, I checked the weather app, making sure it would stay sunny all day before turning the phone off.

It was seven thirty.

I went to put her loafers on and found the backs crushed. I'd been taking good care of these shoes, so this was disappointing. Once that stiff leather gave way, the whole bottom of the shoe had to be replaced.

I could tell Mom myself, but *she'd* get mad at me for going behind her back. That said, if I spoke to her directly, she'd take it as an insult.

The shoe backs didn't want to straighten up, but I stretched them out, hooking them around my heels. Once they were on, I tapped the toes on the tile floor of the entryway.

I put her satchel in the basket of the bicycle parked just inside the front door, then pushed the bike outside. The sea breeze made it prone to rust, so it was kept inside when not in use.

Overhead, the sky was blue with a few streaky clouds. It was the middle of the rainy season, but today was a welcome respite. I found it hard to track the seasons without inspecting the skies.

Shading my eyes with one hand, I looked at the horizon. In the distance, I could hear the churn of the surf, carried by the breeze. The Mochimune Beach was full of activity, as always—there was a reason reporters often went there to broadcast live during typhoons.

I made sure to lock the front door behind me. I wasn't just worried about break-ins. Both her parents were away at work, and hardly anyone ever visited, but we couldn't afford to risk even the slightest chance of someone finding her resting in bed.

There was a lock on her door, too. She'd talked her parents into adding one when she was in elementary school. By this point, she'd have crawled out of bed, sighing, and turned the lock.

I got on the bike and rode off.

This close to the ocean, the breeze must smell of salt—but my nose had long since adjusted, and I could barely tell.

The girl in bed is Sunao Aikawa, and I'm her replica.

When she was seven, Sunao created me—a being that looks exactly like her and speaks with the same voice.

She named me Second, and it's my job to attend school in her place.

No one has realized I'm not the real Sunao. But then, how would they know that the original was sound asleep in her room?

I said hi to a woman from the neighborhood as I passed, gradually picking up speed. Next, I zoomed past an old man out walking his dog—a Yorkshire terrier, a little bundle of hair, its waddling walk somehow unsteadier than its elderly owner's. I hope they both make it through the summer.

The wheels of the bike made a whirring sound as they spun. The tires felt a little flat. I'd changed gears, but I wasn't getting the speed I'd hoped for. I made a mental note to pump them up when I got home.

The wheels kept whirring as familiar sights zipped past.

The light had just changed, so I crossed the road without braking and proceeded up a paved bike path that scaled the arc of the Shizuoka Bridge. There was a strong wind from the mountains, so I had to change gears and stand on the pedals to get anywhere.

As I struggled along, cars zipped past on my left. Even with full tires, even if I wasn't on my period, I could never keep up with them. I doubted Sunao could, either.

The Abe River was still swollen from the rain two days ago, and as I crossed the bridge, I glanced back and forth between it and Mount Fuji ahead of me. The peak of the mountain, dusted with snow like powdered sugar, was nothing new to me—but five days ago, it had been hidden beneath gray skies, and seeing it once again put a smile on my face.

Once I was over the bridge, it was all flat roads.

I was hoping I'd hit only two red lights, but I got stuck at a third. Classmates had been caught by plainclothes cops, and I didn't want a yellow ticket, so when I saw the light start to flash, I put the brakes on early.

The tickets were labeled according to which traffic rule a person had broken. They were officially called Bicycle Disciplinary Warning Cards, and the school rules stated that if we got one, we had to stick it on the chalkboard at the back of our classroom. One boy had collected fifteen like they were medals of honor, but it was rumored that the class that got the most would be called out in front of the whole school, so we all paid close attention to our speed near campus.

At last, I reached the school's back gate. I rocketed into the cavern-like bicycle parking lot, slid down the path between the other bikes, and hit the brakes. Once my feet were back on the ground, a wave of exhaustion hit my calves—and not the comfortable, refreshing kind.

It was nine kilometers from Sunao's house to school—on the long side for a bike commute.

On a good day, I could manage it in thirty-five minutes, but on a bad day, it could take as long as fifty. It wasn't just my physical condition—the wind on the bridge or the traffic lights could make a big difference.

It felt like today's trip had taken around forty-two minutes. The phone was already powered off, so I didn't bother checking.

I wiped my sweat with a little towel. Once the rainy season ended, we'd be in the throes of summer and I'd be far sweatier than this.

In an entrance hall full of boys and girls in matching clothes, I swapped the loafers with the ruined heels for indoor slippers. The backs of these were intact; Sunao must have been leery of repercussions from our notoriously strict faculty.

```
"Morniiing"

"Morning. Ew, you stink."

"Rude!"
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As I was tapping the toes of my shoes against the floor to settle them on my feet, I overheard two girls goofing off, trading hugs.

Leaving them behind in the entrance hall, I climbed the stairs to one side and made my way to Sunao's classroom, 2-1.

As I walked in, I called out a greeting. Only about fifteen students had arrived so far. It was mostly boys who turned to look at me, and the few girls who did the same offered only vague, noncommittal smiles.

I caught a few mumbled greetings in one ear as I moved toward a seat in the back, by the window.

The curtains were drawn, but the windows themselves were wide open, and a breeze tugged at the cloth, moving it slowly along the rails. A sunbeam fell on my desk, and I turned away in irritation. Gusts of wind cooled my cheeks where the sweat had plastered my hair to my skin.

There was an air conditioner next to the PA speaker, but no one had ever seen it on.

Desperate students had managed to get a homeroom teacher to explain that our air conditioners were the property of the city and that turning them on required explicit permission from the big shots down at city hall.

But even if they called them up and said, "It's X degrees today, so we'd like to turn them on," it wasn't like the answer would be instantaneous. The application would be passed around back at city hall for who knows how long. The result: a wasted treasure.

While we all sat with tongues hanging out like a pack of starving dogs, our hands stuck in the comparative cool of our desk drawers, those big shots were probably kicking back in comfortably chilled conference rooms.

Meanwhile, the faculty office had two air conditioners that were always going full blast. If only there were no teachers there, it would be a midsummer oasis. Unfortunately, "faculty" was right in the name, so instead, it was like a mirage no one dared approach.

I rested my chin on my hand. The time before homeroom was always slow and dull.

Sunao had no friends in this class to pass five or ten empty minutes with. When she moved up a grade, Sunao had been split up from the group she'd hung out with in her first year and hadn't found any openings in her new class; in the end, she'd chosen to go it alone, and so I did the same.

With nothing else to do until the bell rang, I spent my time observing the room. It was like a rectangular box, roasted by the blindingly bright sun until it became a sauna. Even the students who *did* have friends to talk to were struggling to keep their eyes open.

The heat was making it hard to think straight, and no one was saying anything witty. They were all shielding their faces with pencil boards or clinging to the window frames in hopes of some relief. A few boys had already drained their canteens and were running to the sinks in the hall.

Just watching the others made me sleepy. A yawn spilled into my palm. It felt as if someone were pouring lukewarm water down my ear canal.



Once classes had ended, the mood relaxed.

As I stretched, several students grabbed sports bags and rushed out of the room. Like them, I planned to drop by an after-school club, too.

Sunao belonged to the Literature Club. She hadn't chosen it for any particular reason—school rules simply *required* you belong to something, and she'd wound up picking one of the plainer cultural clubs where she wouldn't be missed if she skipped. It was pure coincidence that she'd chosen the Literature Club but a stroke of luck for me. Unlike her, I was quite a bookworm.

I liked to think that it was I who belonged to the Literature Club, not Sunao, even if she was the one who'd filled out the membership form.

I stuffed Sunao's textbooks in her satchel and was about to exit through the classroom's back door—when my eyes lit upon the lower-right corner of the chalkboard.

In sloppy handwriting, I saw a name far more familiar than my own.

"Ack!"

I'd totally missed it. Sunao was on duty today.

This role had a lot of responsibilities, but there were four main tasks: erasing

all chalkboards between each period, locking up when we had classes elsewhere, filling out the classroom log, and closing windows and doors at the end of the day. Only now did I realize Sunao had called on me because she didn't want to deal with the double whammy of menstrual pains *and* classroom duties.

The boy I was supposed to be helping had taken care of erasing the boards through fifth period without saying anything. But now, there was no sign of him, and the chalkboard was still covered in writing from our English conversation class. The log, too, was sitting abandoned on the podium.

Guilt seemed to tug at the sleeve of my uniform, forcing me to set about the remaining tasks.

First, I pressed the dirty erasers against the cleaning machine, letting it inhale the chalk dust. Then, slipping my hand through the floppy band on the back of one of the erasers, I stood by the podium, stretching all the way up to wipe the board from top to bottom.

There were words covering every inch of the chalkboard. It was far longer and wider than you'd think, and the marks themselves refused to vanish completely.

Counting the one on the rear chalkboard, there were three erasers in the room. I considered putting one in each hand and doing battle with the chalkboards that way, but I figured it would be even less efficient.

"I'll take the left side," said a low voice from behind.

At first, I assumed the boy wasn't talking to me. I looked back, just to be sure—and caught my breath.

It was Shuuya Sanada.

He had strong black eyebrows; single-lidded, piercing eyes; and well-built shoulders. A sturdy neck held up his head. His features were even and handsome, but my first reaction was fear—because his face was devoid of expression. He didn't even attempt a friendly smile.

I'd never talked to him. Sunao hadn't, either. But we knew who he was. He'd quickly made a name for himself on the basketball team and scored nearly all the points in practice games with stronger schools.

With him leading the team, our school had made it to the inter-high school level for the first time ever. Everyone had been excited to see what he was capable of at the next stage of competition, and it had seemed like he had a promising future, until—

"You're struggling," he said when I didn't respond.

Sanada didn't bother putting his hand through the strap. He simply gripped the eraser firmly, as if he were trying to push it through the board. The way he held it looked rough and aggressive, but the eraser slid along the chalkboard's surface as if it were swimming across the sea.

Though unable to tear my eyes off it, I finally managed to say something.

"Aren't you busy?"

There was nothing between Sunao and Sanada. Nothing that would make him volunteer to help if she was struggling.

"I'm not on the team anymore."

I'd really stuck my foot in my mouth. I wished I had the ability to turn back time.

"Go on, do your bit," he urged.

"Oh, right."

I started moving again. Up, down. Up, down. As I pushed the eraser with careful motions, he made a second pass, overtaking me.

I cast a sidelong glance at him. He didn't appear to be in pain, but the whole time, ever since he'd called out to me, he'd been putting all his weight on his left side.

Despite my concern, he finished quickly—almost too quickly. And yet his half of the board appeared practically brand-new. My side looked positively slapdash by comparison. I couldn't help imagining my sorry half of the chalkboard envying its neighbor.

The last things I erased were the names of those on duty—Sunao Aikawa and the now-absent boy. Then I picked up a piece of chalk and began to write down tomorrow's roster.

Meanwhile, Sanada stepped down from the teacher's podium, his work done.

As I moved the chalk, I called over my shoulder, "Th-thank you." My voice sounded hoarse. I wasn't sure if he'd heard me.

Then Sanada left the room, and I was on my own.

It was still light out. The cries of students playing sports drifted in through the windows. Close and yet far away, I heard the distinctive sound of a bat connecting with a ball.

I brought the classroom log back to Sunao's desk and took out a mechanical pencil. After three clicks, the lead finally showed itself, as if only just remembering what it was for. I wrote down the date, the weather, and the class schedule.

The "remarks" column was generally meant for recording anything the teacher or other students should know about, but looking at previous entries, I saw that students were playing shiritori with the teacher, or filling in the blanks with little doodles. Clearly, you could put down whatever you wanted.

I'd written a whole paragraph before my brain kicked in.

While I was struggling with my duties, Shuuya Sanada offered to help.

According to Sunao's memories, he only just came back to school two days ago.

He's a master at chalkboard cleaning and polished his part to perfection.

But I haven't earned his kindness.

It never even occurred to me to go see him in the hospital.

At that point, I stopped and erased everything I'd written.



I picked up the log, its paper wrinkled from the eraser, then locked up the classroom. Once I'd finished, I went downstairs to return the log and key to the faculty office, then continued to the end of the hall and reached my destination.

The Literature Club's room was tiny. It had once been a closet, but club members from long before I joined had negotiated with the school and had it refitted for their use.

Those former members didn't know me, and I didn't know their faces—but I knew their names and works. The club put out a magazine for the cultural festival, and a copy of almost every issue since its founding was kept in the clubroom.

In those pages were the former members' short stories, poems, and articles. Art accompanied them, sometimes drawings done in a cartoony style and sometimes proper watercolor works of flowers and plants. Looking at the illustrations of hydrangeas or plump tangerines made me wish they'd been printed in color.

"Oh, hi there! You made it!"

As I pulled open the hefty door, I was met with an enthusiastic greeting.

"Ricchan, good morning," I replied.

Inside the room was Ritsuko Hironaka. She was a year below me, wore round-framed glasses, and kept her hair out of the way with a school-approved black pin. Her smooth, pimple-free forehead resembled a boiled egg.

I took a seat on the folding chair across from her, and she let out an odd little laugh.

"You say 'good morning' all day like we're celebrities or something. They say people in the industry use it because everyone's schedules are so weird, but what's your excuse?"

"Well, 'good afternoon' just sounds so uptight! And it's too early to say 'good evening.'"

"I guess..."

"Good morning" was the softest of the three greetings. It was like a chiffon

cake with plenty of egg. "Good afternoon," on the other hand, was like an egg fried too long, the whites singed, the yolk no longer runny.

Looking at Ricchan's forehead always made me think of eggs.

"Oh, hey," she said. "Will you read my new piece? It's still not finished..."

"Sure."

"A'right!"



A long desk, lightly varnished, had been set up next to a table of the same size to form a single surface. Ricchan laid a bundle of writing paper down on top of it.

Ricchan was writing a novel, and rather unusually for this day and age, she wrote everything out by hand. She'd taken penmanship lessons in grade school and had beautiful handwriting; if her work ever got published, I felt they should put out a handwritten edition, too.

Sunao and Ricchan first met ages ago, at the neighborhood association.

Our neighborhood association brought together all the children in the area and had them do various activities. They had the kids pick up litter on the beach on Sunday mornings, ran radio calisthenics during summer vacation, set up races for athletic events in the fall, organized group trips to the amusement park, and took everyone bowling at the end of the year. Some people even called it the children's association.

Ricchan was a year younger than Sunao, but things like age and gender didn't matter much when you were a child. They lived close to each other and soon became firm friends.

They'd play tag, shoot each other with water pistols, splash around in the creek, or run around at barbecues—and I knew those memories were still vivid in Sunao's mind.

But Ricchan moved away the year Sunao started junior high, and they'd drifted apart. They sent each other cards at New Year's that first year but then fell out of touch.

Then, this April, they'd reappeared in each other's lives.

It was right at the beginning of the new school year, and strong winds sent cherry blossoms dancing through the air.

Two of the Literature Club's older members had graduated in March, but neither had attended meetings with any frequency, so it wasn't a major change. I'd always sat alone in the Literature Club room—until Ricchan showed up on the first day of the new students' club trial period. She'd been all by herself, too.

She looked tense at first, but when she saw me there, her jaw dropped. "Oh!" she said. I managed to avoid making any sounds, but I bet I looked just as dumbfounded as she did.

I'd made a poster and hung it up on the school's bulletin board, but I hadn't even shown up for the club orientation assembly. Since I'd done almost no advertising, I hadn't been expecting any new members, much less an old friend.

But as we sat with our knees pressed together under the table and discussed our favorite books, that awkwardness melted away and all the fun memories came flooding back. We were no longer little kids running around outside, and we'd both grown into book-loving high school girls. Our conversation went back and forth like a game of catch, more rhythmically than any pro baseball player could ever manage.

Our tastes were far from similar. Ricchan was all about light novels and manga, the exact opposite of what I read. But we spoke like we were picking up a conversation we'd left off the day before, each of us happily sharing whatever we had on our minds.

I hadn't prepared any tea or snacks to welcome newcomers—nevertheless, Ricchan filled out a membership form that very day.

Now I was reading through her new manuscript as she provided enthusiastic commentary.

A boy feared by his classmates—who called him the reaper—found an abandoned girl living in a church. That was where the story began. Ricchan didn't have a title yet.

Not only were the two leads supposed to be gorgeous, but all the other characters were jaw-droppingly beautiful, too. This seemed absurd to me, but Ricchan was a big anime fan, and everyone was beautiful in those shows.

I focused my mind back on the story. The male lead and the abandoned girl turned out to be twins, separated at birth. They looked exactly alike and took advantage of that to survive many a predicament. In time, they became professional killers, and among those of the criminal underworld, they became known as "the Duals."

"Oh, Nao."

"Mm?"

I pursed my lips, trying to hide how flustered I felt. Ricchan had always called me Nao-chan when we were younger, but she'd switched to Nao after our reunion, and I still wasn't used to it.

"What do you think of the name? Should I change it? I mean, it could be confused with the word *duels*, you know, like 'I challenge you to a duel."

"It just means there's two of them, right?"

"Exactly! I could go with 'Doppelgänger' instead, but it's not like *seeing* them kills you..."

Duals. Doppelgängers.

Doubles or multiples.

Copies that look just like you.

"What do you think?" she asked.

The bundle was maybe sixty pages. I'd taken my time, reading through it over the course of an hour, and I found her looking up through her lashes at me.

"Can I be honest?"

"I don't want Sunao Aikawa ever mincing words with me. Please."

Ricchan tended to hunch over a bit, but now she straightened all the way up.

"Your readers might have a hard time following this."

"Gahhh!"

Ricchan fell back into her chair, pretending to vomit blood. She was prone to dramatic reactions.

"The opening here, where your leads meet in the snow. I'd like you to expand on this—it's an important scene, right? I'd rather see their raw emotion than these melodramatic flourishes."

I flipped from page 3 to page 5.

"What did he think when he saw a girl with his face? What did she think? You

left me wondering."

Sometime before Golden Week in late April, I'd stopped prefacing all my comments with an insistence that I was just an amateur. According to Ricchan, "You don't realize how desperate writers are for feedback, Nao." Articulating your impressions of a novel was a skill not many possessed.

This was the third novel she'd asked me to read. Ricchan finished one up every three or four months and had been doing so since junior high; that meant there were several she had yet to share with me.

I was just voicing my thoughts, but Ricchan always nodded away, taking notes on everything I said. In truth, this embarrassed me somewhat.

"That's so helpful!" she exclaimed. "Can I share the next draft?" "Sure."

This interaction, too, had come a long way since April. That first time, she'd barely managed to get the words out, her big eyes swimming with emotion.

Spending time together was rekindling our friendship and, at the same time, establishing a new relationship between us as senior and junior classmates.

Last year, I would never have imagined this was possible. I dropped by the Literature Club only now and then to read books. I'd grown rather fond of sitting alone in the room, its silence broken only by the sound of each page turning. Still, I much preferred how things were now—it was far more fulfilling.

While Ricchan pored over her manuscript, groaning, I went back to my paperback. I was reading Yasunari Kawabata's *The Dancing Girl of Izu*, set in the titular town at the eastern edge of Shizuoka.

I'd like to travel someday. It didn't have to be Izu. Atami, Numazu, Mishima, Fuji, or Fujinomiya—anywhere.

It didn't even have to be in this prefecture, but I'd barely been anywhere, so I figured it was worth starting close at hand. But I knew that dream wasn't meant to be.

The sounds of trumpets came blasting through the window—the band was practicing outside. The soaring melody was that of "Treasure Island" (not "New

Treasure Island," the old one).

I was halfway through my book when I noticed that the light reflected off the table was turning red. I looked up to find the skies outside were growing darker. It was 5:50 PM, about time to wrap things up.

I put a bookmark between the pages of my paperback. It was a handmade bookmark with a little sprig of white baby's breath pressed inside. I'd found it in the clubroom and decided to borrow it for a time.

It took me a while to get through a book. I read only during club meetings, so it could take me quite a few days.

Anything borrowed from the library ought to be kept within arm's reach, but the clubroom was the closest thing I had to my own space, so I always slipped my books into a corner of the bookshelf here. The room was kept locked, so I figured it would be fine, but I always felt like I was breaking the rules.

I'd borrowed the book for a two-week period, and the due date was a week from today. If Sunao didn't call for me, I wouldn't be able to read any more—a fact that always made me anxious.

Ricchan and I locked up the clubroom and set off down the empty hall together.

"No clubs next week," she said.

"Yeah."

Starting ten days before final exams, sports teams and cultural clubs were all restricted.

"But you'll still be using the room?" I asked.

"Of course!" Ricchan nodded, grinning. "Best place to study."

There were few distractions, so it was more productive than her own room.

"Hngg, I can't decide on the heroine's name!" Ricchan's mind was still on her novel, and she spoke as if we'd been talking about it all along.

"That's a tough one," I said, well aware she wasn't expecting me to provide the answer.

Talking aloud helped her sort things out in her mind. I often saw her muttering to herself before yelping and scribbling something down in her notepad.

Today, though, no lightbulbs were going off. I silently cheered on my hardworking junior.

"Have you ever tried writing, Nao?" she asked.

"Mm-mm. I don't think I could."

I was sure of this. I could put on a serious face or even turn myself upside down—and still never write a single word.

Could Sunao?

I doubted I'd ever get the chance to ask, but I did wonder.

I entered the faculty office alone. The key rack was still empty. Various sports teams and the band were still practicing hard in the dimming light.

With the key in its rightful place, I headed for the building's entrance. There I changed from slippers back into loafers and reunited with the bicycle, which had been patiently awaiting my return.

Ricchan and I split up at the back gate. She lived close by. She'd picked this high school for the easy commute rather than the uniform.

The wheels of the bike whirred as they spun; my feet were pressed flat against the pedals, my legs pumping.

The backs of the loafers were keen on folding in and locked in a battle with my Achilles tendons. They'd clearly forgotten their original shape entirely.



This is the story of how I came to be.

One day, Sunao really didn't want to go to a children's association event.

She'd had a fight with Ricchan, and because Sunao was a very stubborn child, she simply couldn't be the first to apologize. But this time she knew the fight

was her fault, which left her trapped between the part of her that didn't want to apologize and the part that knew she had to.

The result of this impasse was my birth. Still—Sunao and Ricchan had fought before, so I can't say that was the sole cause.

Sunao was shocked—but she faced me and put her hands together like she was offering a prayer.

"Will you go to the community center for me and make up with Ricchan?"

As she looked at me—a being with the same face as her own—her voice was tense, cautious, and just a little bit hopeful.

I did as she asked. I went to the community center for the first time, met Ritsuko Hironaka for the first time, and made a roundabout apology—feigning Sunao Aikawa's prickly personality.

Ricchan accepted it at once, and I returned home in triumph. My first success. Sunao had been waiting on tenterhooks the whole time, and when I reported in, she gave me a big hug.

That evening, before her parents got home, Sunao waved at me. When she said, "Bye," my mind cut out.

The next day she called me again.

I had no memories of the time I was gone. But when Sunao called for me, it was like the pieces of my mind floated up out of some dark place, gathering together, taking shape again.

Each time she called me, I was dressed exactly like she was—like a mirror image. If she was in pajamas, so was I. If she was in new clothes, I had those on, too. When I vanished, these clothes vanished with me.

But if I vanished after I'd changed from pajamas to regular clothing, those clothes would fall to the floor where I'd been standing and the pajamas I'd started in would vanish with me.

Nothing lost, nothing gained. Whether by some god's hand or otherwise, the rules I operated by remained consistent.

Sunao's big eyes filled with joy and pride—she'd gotten her hands on a rare

toy nobody else had.

"You know, something that looks like the real thing but isn't is called a replica."

She'd just learned this, and she seemed proud of her newfound knowledge.

When Sunao was little, she had boundless curiosity and tried all sorts of things.

How long could a replica stay out? If we split snacks, would we be twice as full? If we took the same test, would we get the same grade? If we played rock-paper-scissors, when would we diverge? She tried everything her developing brain could think of.

And what we discovered is that, biologically, Sunao and I were essentially identical—but there was a chasm between us, with a river running through it.

It wasn't just the clothes I wore. Each time she called me out, I emerged with an updated copy of Sunao's memories. But these were not my own experiences, and they never felt real. Recalling them was like squinting across a river to see the scenery on the far bank.

For instance, I didn't remember the specifics of the variety show Sunao had watched the day before. That was because Sunao herself didn't remember much of it.

Searching Sunao's memories was like reading a book. Anything that made a strong impression on her was written in a nice, crisp font—easy to read. But sometimes the letters were blurry or the ink blotted, and it was hard to make out.

If something delighted Sunao or hurt her—anything that resulted in a strong emotional response—it came through loud and clear. But I only got a hazy version of anything she didn't care about.

When you made a sandcastle on the beach, the next tide would wash most if it away. Still, a hint that something had been there would stick around. Because I didn't get Sunao's memories in real time, I was left patiently waiting to see what remains the tide would leave.

It was frustrating. I wanted to be more helpful to Sunao—I wanted to delight her and for her to shower me with praise.

As time passed and we grew older, I learned that Sunao was struggling to keep up with classes. And so any chance I got, I put my nose in her textbooks, reading them over and over, and sorting out the info in my head.

My memories, experiences, and injuries weren't shared with Sunao. She didn't *need* them. Sunao Aikawa was a complete person and didn't require anything from her replica to fill her out.

I offered to help her study once, but she just looked at me like her eyes were made of glass.

"Nah," she said. "Just take the test for me."

I didn't want to embarrass her. I did everything I could to get a good score.

At first, Sunao treated me like a close friend or a twin sister. She was a latchkey kid, so having me around helped her feel less lonely.

She'd call me out and give me half her cream puff. We'd read books together, watch cartoons, and laugh at them. No one else was allowed to see us together, so we were like two friends who shared a special secret.

But somewhere along the line, that went away. When Sunao called me, she'd tell me what she wanted and nothing else.

I smoothed things over when she fought with friends.

I got good grades on her tests.

I climbed mountains, ran marathons, even did the shuttle run for her.

All for Sunao, all for her. Everything I did was for her benefit.

I needed as much food, sleep, and trips to the bathroom as any other human—but if Sunao said, "Enough," I'd just disappear, so she stopped caring about how I lived.

That's why I've never eaten breakfast, though I've had a lot of lunches. The only snacks I've eaten were ones she shared with me. Splitting a cream puff didn't make us twice as full, and these days, Sunao no longer shared them.

I've almost never eaten dinner. And I've never once had birthday cake.

In high school, Sunao stopped eating school lunches and started bringing her own. I was overjoyed. Her mother was very busy, so lunch was often made up of leftovers from last night's dinner. Fried chicken pieces cut with kitchen scissors so they'd fit in the plastic box, or croquettes, or hamburger steaks. All full of flavor, all delicious.

And to fill the leftover space, she'd make new things: potato salad with sweet mayonnaise; mac and cheese on a piece of aluminum foil; bacon wrapped around bitter asparagus; or salted, hard-boiled eggs. To make it more delicious, the rice was often sprinkled with salmon crumbles, minced seasoned beef, or bits of egg and seaweed. Sunao had no idea how much pleasure I took in these simple toppings.

Lately, Sunao hated PE, but I liked it. She hated studying, but I didn't mind it. If I hadn't learned to like such things, life as a replica wouldn't have been worth living.



Sunao called for me again the next day. She called me more often when her menstrual pain was bad.

That morning, she didn't even have it in her to get out of bed. I put some water and painkillers on the cabriole-legged table and left the house.

I sat through class, ate lunch alone, struggled to keep my eyes open afterward, and then put my books away when the bell rang. Nobody would ever imagine a replica was here in Sunao's place.

After school, I headed to the Literature Club. The door was always open—Ricchan dashed off to get the key the moment the bell rang.

I was always strangely relieved to find the door unlocked. Maybe it was because the doors to the house and Sunao's room were always locked when I got back from school.

"Morning," I said.

"And a good morning to you, Nao!"

Ricchan's egg-like forehead gleamed, shining with sweat.

She looked visibly tired. Gazing through the open windows, I saw big billowy clouds floating overhead, as if announcing summer's arrival.

A rusty fan was turning its head back and forth in the corner, but its gentle wafts of air weren't nearly enough. Not only did it seem unlikely to cool us down, but I doubted the thing would survive the summer.

Officially, it was still the rainy season. The forecast had said it would rain today, but it had been just as sunny as the day before.

"If we had any funding, we could buy a new fan," I said.

"I know! No use wishing for what we don't have, though."

Ricchan was lying with her head on the desk, glaring at the fan.

With a measly two members, the only thing the Literature Club could expect from the school was this tiny clubroom.

"Should we start collecting club fees?" she asked.

I gulped.

Unsurprisingly, replicas didn't get an allowance.

I had Sunao's memories of receiving things like dolls, lip balm, clothes, Blurays, and her smartphone, and I'd envied that. She let me carry her phone to school so classmates didn't suspect anything—but it wasn't *mine*.

I didn't own anything, and I longed for something that was mine alone.

When I was little, I made a point of cleaning the bath or doing the laundry, and I collected a fee for my help.

I squirreled away the fifty-yen coins I received in a dusty tin. The container had once held Chocolate Crunch—a souvenir from a Disneyland gift shop Sunao had bought on a trip with her sixth-grade graduating class.

Sunao didn't know I was using that can. In fact, I was pretty sure she didn't remember it existed.

I'd piled up my earnings, never once using them. The can was pretty big, but it had filled up long ago. The rest was in a doubled-up supermarket bag I'd hidden along with the can deep in the upstairs hallway cabinet. Both were full of fifty-yen coins—heaps of them. I couldn't let Sunao find out, so I didn't dare lift the bag for fear of that rusty odor getting on me.

"How much do fans even cost?" I wondered aloud.

"I checked at the store, and old models are pretty cheap. They go for as little as a thousand yen."

"Oh? That is cheap!"

Considering how much they were worth on a summer day, I'd imagined they were ten times as expensive.

"Then we only need to bring ten fifty-yen coins each!"

"Why fifty-yen coins?" Ricchan cackled.

Cleaning the bath, folding laundry, and running the vacuum each paid exactly fifty yen. The coins were small and cute—shaped like little donuts. As a kid, I'd treated each like a special treasure.

Just then, there was a knock at the clubroom door.

Ricchan and I both froze, blinking at each other. No one had ever knocked before.

"It's open!" Ricchan called.

The door, which was set wrong in its frame and notoriously loud, opened without a sound.

I looked up at the tall boy beyond. I knew his name.

It was Shuuya Sanada—my classmate, a former basketball star, and a master at erasing chalkboards. Today, he looked slightly surprised.

But why would he come to the Literature Club? The question caught in my throat, and I sat there simply looking perplexed.

Sanada's head tilted a tad. "Mind if I join?"

"Huh?" I blinked. Those were the last words I'd expected to hear in that low

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voice of his. "Um, join what?"
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"Uh...the Literature Club."

Well, yes. What else could he have meant? I just...hadn't been expecting it.

My reaction must have made him feel unwelcome, and he scratched his cheek.

"Are there rules?" he asked.

Rules?

"For joining," he prompted.

"Not really, I guess."

"You guess?"



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"Uh, I mean..."
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"Are you not allowed to join midway through the year?"

"Augh!"

The questions were coming too fast for me to catch up. I couldn't get the words out.

"New members are welcome!" Ricchan cried, propping her elbows on the table and smiling. "It's only the two of us right now, after all."

She was talking to a boy—Sanada, no less—but she took it all in stride. She was way more composed than I was.

"Nao, have him fill out the membership form and go with him to turn it in."

"Oh! Uh, right."

She'd easily bailed me out of trouble. Was I really the older one?

But on paper, at least, I was. Ricchan was right—I was club president, and this was my job. I managed to get to my feet, but then I once again hit a roadblock.

"Ricchan, where do we keep the forms?"

I could feel my cheeks burning. Our new member would know right away that I had no idea what I was doing.

"In the tin can on the shelf."

The tin can. Aha.

This was also a souvenir from Disneyland. It had once been filled with big, flat rice crackers, but they had all been eaten by former club members who'd graduated long before our time.

I pried off the dusty lid and found a bundle of random papers inside. Unsure what I was looking at, I flipped through them until I found the form for new members. They were smaller sheets made by cutting longer pieces of paper in half, bound together with a rubber band. Whoever made them must not have had access to a paper cutter—the edges of the forms had a curve to them, like they'd been sliced with a pair of scissors.

The second one in the pile looked a little cleaner, so I took that one instead, then realized Sanada was still standing dutifully in the doorway.

"Uh, please come in," I managed, clutching the forms.

He bent his head and stepped in, leaning hard on his left leg and minimizing the contact his right foot made with the floor.

I felt it would be rude to ask if he was all right, so I said nothing. Ricchan blinked a few times but also let it pass.

Then he unfolded a chair—the one next to mine. We had enough chairs for four people, but sitting next to Ricchan would put him by the window; I was closer to the door, so he'd made the obvious choice.

He put down his black backpack, and Ricchan handed him a ballpoint pen. It was usually just rolling around the table, abandoned by some former member. There was no ink visible inside, yet somehow it kept on writing.

Sanada casually thanked her. My reflexes were not improving, and I stood for a moment, my gaze swimming somewhere above their heads, before I finally remembered to put the form down in front of him.

He filled it out with neat penmanship. "Literature Club" had been written into the appropriate slot before the copies were made, so all he had to do was put his year, class, and name.

This took less than a minute, after which he stood and pushed the chair back without making a squeak. For a big guy, he didn't make much excess noise. Before I could start wondering why, Ricchan sent us off.

"Go get 'em!" she said.

We headed straight to the faculty office, two doors down the hall to the right.

The moment the door opened, he muttered, "Ah...nice and cool."

I agreed. That cold breeze felt great on my sweaty forehead, cheeks, and neck.

This place was an oasis. Our bodies seemed to be wrapped in an invincible veil, like we were wizards with a mastery of ice magic.

"Excuse us," I said cautiously.

The teachers looked our way, but they soon lost interest. Those few seconds of attention always unnerved me. Because of it, I rarely came by, despite knowing there was a chilly paradise so near the clubroom.

The form went to the Literature Club sponsor, Mr. Akai, who was out. He sponsored both the Kendo Club and the Literature Club, and since we didn't cause problems, he normally left us to our own devices. He knew Ricchan and I were both serious, quiet types who didn't get in trouble, so he'd told us to only come to him if we needed help. And just as he'd hoped, no such situation had ever arisen.

"I guess we can leave it on his desk," I said with parched lips.

The only other sounds were the hum of the AC and the scratching of pens.

"Kay."

Sanada didn't seem to have any of my anxieties. He put the form down squarely in the middle of Mr. Akai's messy desk.

For a paperweight, I placed a little statue of a frog on one edge of the form. That way, he was sure to notice. Mr. Akai loved frogs, and his desk was covered with frog souvenirs he'd picked up traveling. Every time he returned to the room, he checked each of them in turn, making sure they were doing well. *Ribbit*.

As I was about to leave, I belatedly noticed several pairs of eyes on us. They weren't looking at me, however, but at Sanada.

He was tall and walking with a limp, so he certainly stood out. Still, it irked me. I didn't like how they were all staring at the former basketball star, observing him without bothering to hide their curiosity.

Sanada seemed not to notice. Though I got the feeling he was acting like that precisely because he *did* feel those prickly gazes.

"Pardon us!" I said, slamming the door aggressively.

Sanada said nothing. Maybe he thought I'd gone too far.

Outside the room, it took only eight seconds for our invincible veil to peel

away. From head to toe, like waking from a dream, I was thrust back into the world from whence I'd come.

Sanada was holding the hem of his shirt, flapping it wistfully. Alas, there was nothing left but lukewarm air.

I didn't want to head back to the clubroom while I was still cross.

"Can we stop by the library?" I asked.

The library was next to the faculty office, in the direction of the clubroom.

The Literature Club might occupy a former closet, but I had to hand it to our predecessors—they'd scored a prime location. Most students might consider proximity to the faculty office a fate worse than death, but I went to the library a lot, so it was a blessing for me.

"Sure," he said.

We headed inside through the open door. I saw the familiar librarian, as well as an older student checking out a book. I glanced at the spine. As a Nonami's *Soap Bubble*. The title didn't reveal very much. Maybe I should read it someday.

Not a lot of people came to the library. It was about half the size of the faculty office and packed with bookshelves, but I almost never saw more than five students inside at once. If we had to research something for class, the tables would temporarily fill up, but when that happened, the library got so noisy that it felt like a whole different place.

I followed the shelves lining the wall, a path as familiar as the road to school. Wrapped in the scent of yellowing pages, I could feel my ruffled feathers falling back into place.

Currently, I was working my way through modern Japanese literature. I was sampling the works of the most famous—Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai, Ichiyo Higuchi, Ango Sakaguchi. Everyone had heard of these authors and could probably name at least one of their works.

These were books written in another era, using words I didn't recognize—I frequently had to consult the dictionaries we kept in the clubroom. Some books had glossaries in the back, but even those definitions often had words I didn't

know, so I couldn't get far without a dictionary. I rather liked flipping through those giant tomes, running my fingers down the list of words, and finding myself distracted by some other term entirely until I forgot my original purpose. That was why I used only electronic dictionaries in class.

Before I started on modern literature, I'd read a bunch of foreign mystery novels and, before that, contemporary literature. I'd picked up only a few famous works or ones that caught my eye—so I wouldn't call myself well-versed in the genre. I'm painfully aware that new books are published far faster than I can read them.

Sanada trailed along behind me, saying nothing.

It didn't take long before I decided to start the ball rolling. We weren't supposed to talk in the library, but if we kept our voices down, we wouldn't get scolded. The only time I'd ever gotten in trouble was when Ricchan had yelped, "Oh shit, they've got *Re:Zero*!"

Come to think of it, I'd never gotten around to asking her what that was.

"Sanada, do you like books?" I asked.

He made a noncommittal noise. Was that supposed to be a yes or a no?

"They're okay," he said after a moment.

Fair enough. Most people were like that. Do you like books? They're okay.

At this point, it occurred to me that I hadn't really explained what our club did.

"At club meetings, I mostly just read. The other girl, Ricchan—Ritsuko Hironaka—writes her own novels. Sometimes I read those and tell her what I think."

Sanada didn't answer. Before, he'd at least made a noise.

Curious, I looked back and found him scratching his cheek. I'd seen that gesture earlier.

*Oh.* I noticed he kept his nails closely trimmed. He must always scratch himself like that when he was at a loss.

"I've never written anything," he said. "Do I have to?"

Realizing what he was concerned about, I smiled.

"No, not at all. We don't participate in competitions or anything. Oh, Ricchan does submit her writing for prizes, but that's outside of club activities."

"Huh," he said. He didn't sound very enthusiastic.

"We do put out a magazine for the cultural festival. Last year it was just reviews, but in previous years, it had short stories, poems, articles, essays, and so on."

"Reviews? Like book reports?"

"Exactly."

Neither I nor the two students who'd graduated could write or draw. But we had to put out *something*, so we all wrote a few hundred words on books we'd read, and we attached public domain art. It had been the slimmest and shallowest publication in club history, an outright disgrace.

This year we had Ricchan, so it was bound to be better.

"So, Aikawa, you take this club pretty seriously, huh?" That made my smile stiffen. "Guess I'm just used to seeing you whooping it up outside the gym."

I had to fight to keep my head up.

Sunao had never once visited the Literature Club. Instead, she hung out by the gym and watched the hunks at basketball practice.

Sunao herself wasn't that into basketball; she was just tagging along with her groupie friends. But it would be pointless to try and make excuses at this point.

Until recently, Sanada had been on the basketball team, so he knew just how loud her group got. And I could guess what he thought of them.

"It's been known to happen." I sighed.

He didn't press the point. He was just speaking his mind, not trying to call me out.

He looked around, apparently done talking. He was almost as tall as the bookshelves. This room full of books must have been a rare sight for him, and

he was taking it all in. I was sure he saw it in a completely different light than I did.

"What are you here for?" he asked.

"Oh, we're not here for me. I thought we'd get something for you."

I was still reading The Dancing Girl of Izu, so I could find my next book later.

Sanada turned back to look at me.

Did he object to the idea? Did he not want to read anything?

"Any recommendations?" he said.

I needn't have worried; he seemed pretty on board.

"Er, um...well..."

There were all kinds of books, from picture books to proper literature, illustrated guides, historical records, academic treatises, fantasy, romance—I could go on all day.

Answering a question with a question might not be good form, but...

"Do you know what you like?" I asked.

"No," he replied curtly.

"Did anything from our Japanese textbook stick with you?"

His eyes swam before settling on the lights above.

"'A fool has no aspirations."

I flinched. Was he calling me out?

"We read a book with a line like that," he added.

I caught my breath before answering.

"Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*. 'Anyone who has no spiritual aspirations is an idiot.'"

"That's the one."

The author's most famous work and arguably the bestselling novel of all time in Japan.

For a replica, I think I have aspirations. My athletic abilities are limited by Sunao's, but I reread textbooks, looked up tips on the shuttle run, applied myself as best I could, and am getting pretty decent grades. Then again, I have no basis for comparison—I've never met another replica.

We walked between shelves, past gaps like missing teeth among the books. I'd been here many times, so I had an idea of where each author's works were located.

I found the paperback edition of *Kokoro*. It was pretty thick, which seemed to surprise Sanada. Our textbooks contain only a few pages of the original, so I understood his reaction.

"Most of the passages in our book are snipped from much longer works. Kokoro is actually split into three volumes, and the part we read is from the third."

I assumed the idea was to get us interested in reading the original books. There were some students who wondered what happened next, and they turned to the school or city libraries—but there were probably fewer of them than the adults hoped for. And I'm sure some people just read summaries on Wikipedia or blogs.

Sanada picked up the first volume. "I'll give it a shot."

"Mm. Let me know what you think."

"Will do."

I liked hearing people's impressions.

Everyone had different takeaways from the same text, since each of us thinks about things in our own way. That might seem obvious, but being reminded of it always came as a relief to me.

I recognized a good number of the titles on this shelf. I'd read a few of them, but there were at least twice as many that I didn't know at all.

I'd heard once that the publishing industry puts out hundreds of books each day. So many that nobody can read them all. That would be true even if I wasn't a replica—even if I was a normal human who could devote all my free time to

reading.

Sanada checked his book out at the counter, and we went back to the clubroom—where we found Ricchan stomping her foot.

"The fan died!" she wailed. She saw us gaping at her, and she dramatically threw her arms out. "Comrades! The end is nigh! Our doom is upon us! This heat will be the death of us all!"

Was her face red from excitement or the heat? She was pretty wound up, and it took a while to calm her down.

While I pondered my next move, Sanada muttered, "I could bring one."

"Bring what?"

"A fan. There's one at my house we're not using."

Ricchan and I glanced at each other.

"...He's a living god!" she exclaimed.

For once, Ricchan's reaction didn't seem over-the-top. I was so moved, I was ready to start venerating him. I could almost feel a gentle breeze blowing on our cheeks already.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"We're not using it."

Simply divine!

"Thank you, you're a lifesaver."

I put my hands together and bowed low, worshipping our new god.

"It's not that big a deal," Sanada said. His ears had turned red.

Was he blushing? No way.

"What?" he asked.

"N-nothing."

He'd caught me looking, so I waved a hand in front of my face dismissively.

He frowned, then sat down and opened Kokoro. It seemed he planned to start

it immediately. I didn't want to interrupt, so I moved away.

Ricchan had taken the fan to the corner. I caught up with her and whispered, "You're amazing, Ricchan."

"I know. But what did I do this time?"

"You talk to Sanada like it's nothing."

I was probably stressing myself out for no reason. Our brief exchange earlier had convinced me that Sanada wasn't scary, but I was still pretty nervous. Just talking to a boy made my heart quail.

I hadn't felt like that in grade school. We were all the same size back then, and our faces weren't that different.

But now the boys had stubble or tufts of armpit hair peeking out of their sleeves, and the smell of their sweat filled the air around them—and I'd been keeping my distance.

Come to think of it, Sanada hadn't smelled that bad. When I'd handed him the book, I'd caught a whiff of soap from his sleeves.

"I've got cousins, so I built up a tolerance for gross boy stuff," she said.

K-keep your voice down! I stole a glance over my shoulder, but Sanada was still reading. Whew, he didn't hear us.

Sunao had no cousins, siblings, or other relatives her age.

If she'd had a brother, maybe talking to Sanada would have been easier for me. No use thinking about it now, though.

The old fan was sitting silent in the corner, no longer capable even of that worrying rattle. Its flimsy, thin blades were protected by rusty mesh—propellers that would never fly, glaring balefully out at us.

I felt like our eyes met. I was Sunao's replica, but every part of this fan was real.

"How do you throw out a fan?" I asked.

"Oversize trash," said Ricchan. "We'll have to ask Mr. Akai."

I looked down at it again. "Let's pay our respects."

"Respects? For the fan?" Ricchan laughed but joined me, putting her hands together. "Thank you for all you've done, dearie. Without you, our rickety old bones would never have made it this far."

Why was she doing an old lady voice?

"You worked hard, and we thank you," I said. "We'll get by somehow, so please—rest in peace."

Sanada caught wind of this and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Offering our gratitude."

I figured he'd turn back to his book, but he set it down on the table and joined us.

"Thank you, fan," he said.

Okay, he's definitely nice.

"Oh!" I said, realizing I'd forgotten something important. "Sanada, welcome to the Literature Club."

"Huh? You're saying that now?"

It was definitely a bit belated. I looked down sheepishly.

But it would've been even worse to wait until the following day. Ricchan must have thought the same thing, because she said, "Yes, welcome," and started clapping. I joined her.

Faced with this round of applause, Sanada bobbed his head.

"Thanks," he managed.

And with that, the Literature Club now had three members.

## Аст Two A Replica, Skipping

"Hey, what the hell?"

I'd just surfaced, and before I could even take a breath, Sunao was interrogating me.

She had named me Second, but she'd never once called me that. It was always "Hey," or "Listen," or if she was really in a bad mood, "Dammit." Today was no different.

"Listen!"

I glanced at the clock. The little hand was between the 5 and the 6, with the big hand resting briefly at 27. The second hand, which never got a break, was grumbling its way around the face.

It was evening, not morning. She'd last called for me the day before, so it was Friday.

How far had Sanada gotten in *Kokoro*? I was curious, but this wasn't the time. Sunao looked ready to move on to "Dammit."

"What?" I asked.

"Don't give me that!"

Her voice was like a slap on the face.

The room's air-conditioning was cranked up too high, and Sunao was sitting on the side of her bed, leaning back. I was standing before her, shifting my feet like a kid who'd forgotten their homework and been forced to wait in the hall as punishment.

Sunao never summoned me outside of her bedroom. She couldn't risk anyone seeing her with her replica.

"Sanada just came up and spoke to me," she said.

Oh. I covered my mouth with one hand. I hadn't told her about that. I didn't tell Sunao much about Literature Club stuff.

I used to give her detailed reports, but somewhere along the line, she started resenting how long they took.

When I told her how I'd been there alone and Ricchan showed up, her big

eyes opened extra wide, but when I told her Ricchan was writing novels and I started explaining her stories, she cut me off, looking bored, and said she wasn't interested.

"He said some shit about a fan."

Augh. I was about ready to clutch my head. Following the thread of her memories, I found the interaction in question.

"I wasn't trying to hide anything! Sanada joined the Literature Club."

"Shuuya Sanada?"

"Yes, him."

"Why?"

That was what I wanted to know. But I wasn't about to ask him point-blank. The club membership form didn't have a space for motives.

And whatever Sunao said—with how pretty she was, I was sure the other students would be far more surprised to learn *she* was in the Literature Club.

"I don't know why, but he did join. The same day, the fan broke, and he offered to bring in a new one."

I was about to add, "Wasn't that nice of him?" but stopped myself.

Ricchan and I were grateful, but Sunao wouldn't be. She didn't even know the clubroom had a fan, and she didn't care to find out.

I was flustered and wasn't sure what else to say. My lips were flapping twice as fast as usual, like the flimsy blades of the fan, turning without producing a breeze.

"The one we had was really old. Um, Ricchan said cheap fans only cost, like, a thousand yen."

"I know that!"

Oh no. I did it again.

I made this mistake a lot. I'd said something I shouldn't have. Sunao was clearly furious.

"Watch yourself," she said.

She hated it when I repeated things I'd learned. No matter what it was, she always insisted she already knew. Even if she didn't, and I'd said it because I knew she didn't—it still made her mad.

"Sorry."

But, Sunao. Sunao, there's no replica with as many aspirations as I have. I mean it. I've worked hard to improve my test and PE scores to make you happy, and—"Enough."

A cold dismissal. Before I could respond, I melted into darkness.

Lately Sunao was always annoyed, and she often sent me away like this.

It suddenly occurred to me that it had been years since I saw her smile.



The next time she called for me was three days later, on Monday, June 21.

We had five full days of final exams from now until the following week. For most students, this time of year was a real pain; but for me, it was a cause to celebrate.

Exams meant that Sunao would send me to school almost every day until they were over. In return, I had to get results, to score well enough to avoid disappointing her.

That morning, it was drizzling. I looked up at the gray skies, feeling gloomy, and buttoned up the front of my raincoat.

The coat, specified by the school, was cream colored and had both a jacket and trousers. The jacket included a face cover, which stretched from the nose on down, and wearing it made all sounds except the rain fade into the background.

I mounted my bicycle, idly imagining the sky falling down under its own weight and crushing me.

I had to brake for the occasional light, and if I allowed myself a weary sigh, the

whole front of the face cover turned white.

This was one reason everyone hated these raincoats. Vapor built up and left you with a gross bit of sweat right below the nose, like a wet mustache. You couldn't exactly stick your damp hands in to wipe it, so you were stuck with it until you took the coat off. At least nobody else could see it.

Even the whir of the bicycle's wheels sounded far away.

At last, I reached the covered parking lot and rid myself of the coat. It felt like my whole body let out a gasp of delight, like it had been holding its breath the whole way.

I quickly wiped the sweat off my body and used a little antiperspirant spray around my underarms and neck. Then I spread the raincoat out on the bike to dry, pinning the corner between the handles and the rack so it wouldn't fly away.

When I got to the classroom, I found the other students all looking sluggish, visibly sick of the humidity clinging to them.

But it wasn't the rain and wet getting me down. I had something else to fret about.

After school, as our classmates began to leave the room, I made my way to Sanada's desk.

"Sorry about the other day," I said.

He looked up. I felt like every student still in the room had turned to watch us. Did "on pins and needles" describe moments like this?

Sanada got to his feet and shouldered his backpack. He jerked his chin and said, "Clubroom?"

We'd mentioned we kept it open, even with exams approaching.

Sanada left the classroom, and I followed three steps behind.

"So what were you apologizing about?" he asked.

He wasn't playing dumb; he seemed genuinely unsure. But I had Sunao's

memories, so I knew what had happened.

"You brought the fan, but I was rude about it."

"No big deal."

I caught a glimpse of his face. No expression at all. Did he really not care, or was he stifling his anger?

He opened the door to the clubroom, but Ricchan wasn't inside.

She'd left a note on the table, which read, "Duty calls!" Apparently, she'd run to get the key and opened up the room before going back to her classroom to take care of the chalkboards.

I gasped. "The fan!" I cried, despite myself.

I was as moved as if I were being reunited with a long-lost sibling. I ran over to it, and the fan slowly turned its head toward me, beaming.

Ricchan must have switched it on. The blades were spinning merrily, generously offering up a fresh breeze.

Sanada dropped his things on the floor and explained, "After we talked, I went around the first-year classes until I found Hironaka. I had her borrow the key, and we brought it here. She told Mr. Akai about the broken one, and it went out with the oversize trash."

That was a lot, and I wasn't sure where to begin.

"Sorry," I said. "Um, I mean it. I'm really sorry. Thank you."

"Which one is it? Sorry or thank you?"

"Both."

I was all over the place, wanting to apologize and express my gratitude at once.

We sat down side by side, but I couldn't calm down, and my butt was squirming.

I forced myself to draw in oxygen, then exhale the carbon dioxide.

"Sanada," I said, trying to make myself clear. "It's better if you only talk to me

here."

"Huh?"

My shoulders flinched. It scared me a little when boys said that. And Sanada's "Huh?" was extra intimidating.

Seeing me jump, he raised his hand to the back of his neck.

Not his cheek, I thought. If he went for his cheek when he was at a loss, what did his neck mean? Was he angry?

"Sorry, I just—I didn't know what you meant," he said.

"Oh, right."

Obviously. Anyone would be confused hearing something like that out of the blue.

"It's like...my mood has tides," I explained. "High tides, low tides—it goes up and down."

He was staring right at me. I felt like I was falling into the depths of his eyes. I didn't want to meet his gaze, so I looked off toward the window.

Heavy, laden clouds obscured the sky. The morning rain had begun to let up, but none of the usual sports clubs were out using the still-wet grounds.

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable," I said.

"It's fine. A little extra water is no big deal."

He was playing along with my metaphor. He seemed like a really considerate guy.

"But it bothers me. Sorry."

His eyes narrowed, and I wanted to dig a hole in the ground and hide in it. Nice and deep, like a mole.

In grade school, I'd found a hole in a field on the way home, and a mole had poked its head out. It ducked back inside the second it saw me.

This was my memory, not Sunao's. Sunao has never seen a mole in real life.

"So I'd rather you didn't start conversations with me," I continued. "If I start

one, then it's okay to talk normally."

Even as I said it, I could tell how self-centered this sounded. But when I looked up, Sanada didn't seem irritated. He was just scratching his cheek. I watched his angular finger wander over his skin.

"That's not gonna work," he said.

"Why not?"

"What if I want to talk to you?"

That was not the response I'd expected, and I blinked at him.

Did that mean Sanada actively wanted to talk to me? I could feel my cheeks burning. I hoped they weren't visibly red, but I couldn't exactly take out a mirror to check with him looking.

But I knew that wasn't what he meant. I was club president, so of course there would be times when he needed to talk to me. I told myself not to read any more into it.

"Then, um..."

I wasn't carrying any hair ties around with me, so I grabbed my hair with my hands to demonstrate. Sanada watched closely as I mimicked a different hairstyle.

"What do you call that?" he asked.

"This is a half updo."

A while back, Ricchan had been playing with my hair and tried out this style. Sunao sometimes put her hair in a ponytail, but she never put it half up like this. I figured it would be a good way to distinguish between the two of us.

"I think...it looks nice," he said.

An awkward compliment. I was sure I'd blushed at that.

It must've seemed like I was fishing for a nice remark. My cheeks were on fire. Ricchan sometimes threw her arms around me and gushed about how cute I was. That was embarrassing, but it was nothing like this.

"Th-thanks, but I meant that if I feel up to talking, I'll do my hair like this."

I saw his lips mouth an "oh!" Then he looked away.

"I made that weird, sorry," I said, my voice cracking.

"No, I just assumed..."

What was this? It was super awkward, but I felt like I was floating.

"Did you finish Kokoro yet?" I asked, forcibly changing the subject.

"Still working on it," he said, following my lead. "I finished the first volume."



From watching him during club, I'd gotten the impression that he read a little slower than I did—it seemed I'd been right. He read with a thoughtful frown, turning pages with the flat of his calloused fingers.

"I'll be starting the second today," he said.

"Not studying for exams?"

Sanada got quiet. It was the kind of silence that resulted when a person knew the answer to your question but not how to phrase it.

"Not planning on it," he said eventually.

"Really?"

"I was told I didn't have to."

Who told him that? Almost certainly not a teacher, and I doubted his parents would have, either.

I didn't know what Sanada's grades were like. He'd been in a different class the year before, and when his name came up, it was always about his basketball performance.

"Oh," I said, curious but electing not to pry. I had plenty of my own secrets.

"All done!" Ricchan said, opening the door with a rattle.

"Thanks for unlocking the room," I said, and she flashed me a peace sign.

This proved enough to end my conversation with Sanada.

Ricchan plopped down across from me, rummaged in her bag, and pulled out a rectangular box. The teachers would confiscate snacks if they caught us with them, so we all kept them hidden in the inner pockets of our bags.

"Nao, want some Pretz?" she said.

"Yes, please!"

Ricchan held a Pretz stick up to my lips, and I bit into it. Its salty salad dressing—flavored seasoning filled my mouth.

As I chewed, I glanced down—and saw Ricchan's bag contained not just Pretz but Pocky, too. When you get tired, your brain craves sugar. The Pocky must

have been her emergency rations.

"Help yourself, Sanada," she said, turning to our third member.

"Sure."

Unlike with me, she offered him the foil bag with the Pretz still in it.

Once we'd finished our respective snacks, I got us back on track.

"Time to study!"

When I started summoning textbooks and workbooks from my bag, Ricchan made a face. Clearly, her scheme had been to ply me with snacks so I'd forget all about our study session. But I'd nipped that strategy in the bud.

"Oh! Nao, I had a question for you."

"Give it up! The battle's lost!"

"No, I mean it! I'm still trying to decide if I should call them the Duals or the Doppelgängers!"

"Call who what?" Sanada said, for once sounding curious.

"From the novel I'm writing," Ricchan said, looking pleased as punch. "I'm trying to work out the best name for the leads' team, and Nao's helping me."

"Huh." Sanada didn't fully get it, but he was taking the subject seriously.

"You die if you see your doppelgänger, right?" he said.

I'd read about this myself. Looking for clues about replica biology, I'd picked up anything the library had that seemed relevant, but I hadn't learned much.

The word *doppel* meant "copy" in German, and the appearance of a doppelgänger was considered a harbinger of death.

When we first met, little Sunao hadn't said a word, though her eyes had opened so wide, they seemed ready to pop out of their sockets.

"The Mermaid's Return had a happy ending, though."

There were reports of doppelgänger sightings all over the world. The story Ricchan had mentioned was an especially famous one.

In June 1985, in the north of Germany, a young woman named Aloysia Jahn

nearly drowned and was left comatose. While she was in the hospital, her friends and boyfriend thought they saw her walking on the beach near her home.

The woman looked just like Aloysia—but she vanished into the ocean, clothes and all. When her friends got over their surprise, they searched for her to no avail. Sixteen minutes later—they got word from the hospital that the real Aloysia had just woken up.

These events had been featured on TV and in several real-life mystery anthologies and got decent coverage even in Japan. Aloysia had miraculously returned from the brink of death, and somewhere along the line, they started calling her story *The Mermaid's Return*.

But since only people who knew Aloysia had witnessed the doppelgänger, they were accused of making it up—the TV station and one of her acquaintances even wound up in court.

"But no one knows if it was all fake or if it was some kind of out-of-body experience," I mused aloud.

Stories about one's soul leaving one's body—astral projection, spirit walking—were common enough. In most such stories, as long as body and soul came back together in the end, the person would survive. Perhaps something like that had occurred with Aloysia.

But that didn't apply to Sunao and me. Sunao's body and soul were left intact when I manifested, and she had no serious illnesses. She rarely even ran a fever. Though she did often get cramps and headaches.

So who was this "Second" who had the same face as Sunao Aikawa? Dwelling on that thought felt suffocating, so I put a lid on it.

"Whoa, Nao! Keep sharing your wisdom with us!" Ricchan said, hands clasped together and eyes gleaming.

I responded with a theatrical shrug. It was time to wrap up this little interlude.

"That won't be on the test," I said.

"Tch." Ricchan pouted her lips. "Sanada, Nao's supersmart; if you get stuck,

just ask her."

"Oh yeah?"

"Hmph. He didn't even look up from his book. Well, if he's reading, then I'll just—"

"Oh no you don't!" I said.

"Wahhh!"

Ricchan tried to pull out her stash of writing paper, but I clapped her on the shoulder and put a stop to that.



Finals began on the first day of July and ended six days later, with the weekend in the middle.

Eleven subjects in all. I did well enough.

"How were your exams?" I asked.

"Absolutely piteous."

We hadn't been allowed in the clubroom during exams. When we met again a week later, Ricchan wore an archaic smile. She was clearly asking me not to press the point.

Sanada was maintaining his typical poker face, offering no clues as to his performance.

"We can't take library books with us on the field trip, right?" he asked.

The excursion in question was two weeks off, and our classmates had been talking about nothing else.

Anyone who failed an exam would have to sit through supplementary lessons, and since the last day of these lessons was the day of the field trip, students had been extra motivated. Only time would tell whether that motivation had translated into actual results.

"Yeah, it'd be bad if you damaged it."

Sanada had finished off *Kokoro* and was on to a new book—a short story collection by Mori Ogai, including "The Dancing Girl."

That story had been in our textbooks, and he'd remembered classmates grumbling, "This Ogai dude's a real piece of shit." The protagonist of "The Dancing Girl" is often seen as a standin for Ogai himself, and the girl he impregnates, Elise, is believed to be based on a real person, too.

I still hadn't heard what Sanada had made of *Kokoro*, but it was clear he'd taken to this whole reading thing.

"We get out early the day of the field trip," I said.

"Guess I'll read when I get home."

Throughout the exams and again this morning, Sanada had pulled his book out during every break, reading away like he'd forgotten all about each test the moment it was turned in.

No one approached him. Before, the other basketball guys used to hang around his desk, but that had all stopped after May. That was when the injury to his right leg had forced him off the team.

"Sanada, you didn't study at all. Are you even going on the field trip?"

A bold accusation from Ricchan, but Sanada just shrugged it off.

"If you pay attention in class, it's hard to fail."

"That is so not fair!" Ricchan cackled. Then she made her way along the table and started dancing in front of the fan. The fan was on the strongest setting, and it made her short hair puff up.

"Hahhhhh...I liiiiiiive..."

Her voice had reverb.

We come from spaaaace. Sunao and I had taken turns yelling into the living room fan as kids. We'd laughed ourselves sick over it. But that was a long time ago.

"The first-years' field trip was in May, right?" I asked.

Suddenly, I became worried that the word May might be a sore spot—but

Sanada's face showed no indication that it was.

"Yup! We rode a steam locomotive in Kawane."

"The Oigawa Railway?"

Field trip destinations were left to the faculty's discretion. Our first-year trip had been to the Kakegawa Bird Park and the Kakegawa Castle. That said, I didn't get to go. Sunao went instead.

The second-year field trip was set for two days before summer vacation. It was something of a trial run for the multiday school trip coming up in the winter—for that reason, many students were busy forming groups.

I figured I wouldn't get to go.

"Steam locomotives are so unreal. It was more like a theme park ride!" Ricchan's voice pulled me out of my reverie. She'd moved away from the fan and no longer sounded like an alien. "You know how people riding steam trains always wave at passersby?"

"Yeah." Sanada nodded.

"I have no idea why. Yet for some reason, everybody does it. I did it, too."

On normal trains or bullet trains, you'd never wave at strangers. But amusement parks and steam locomotives were nothing like real life and created an atmosphere of excitement. Everyone you saw seemed like a friendly neighbor.

"Sharing the joy, maybe?" I tried to picture it. If I ever got to go to Disneyland like Sunao had... "If you share how much fun you're having, then everyone gets to smile."

We all knew the world wasn't that nice a place. Some people see happy smiles and get jealous. For them, it only fuels their hatred. If all it took was the sight of a steam locomotive puffing along, sounding its whistle, to put people in a hand-waving mood—then we'd have no more need for wars.

How would I feel if Sunao was riding on the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, saw me waiting, and waved? Would I have it in me to wave back?

"Where are you two going?" asked Ricchan.

While I was off in a world of my own, the topic had shifted.

I reached for the clear file in my satchel. Inside was the guidebook for our field trip destination. Sunao hadn't bothered to look through it, and all the pages were still pristine.

"The Hamamatsu Flower Park and the Hamamatsu City Zoo next door. And then we'll be riding on a boat."

We'd meet up at school at eight, where the tour buses would pick everyone up. They'd take the Tomei Expressway to the shores of Lake Hamana, where the Flower Park was.

"According to this, in late March, there are cherry trees and tulips," I said.

There was a cartoon bee at the bottom, surrounded by speech bubbles explaining the place.

"It's July, though," Ricchan shot back.

"And a flower festival in June."

"It's July!"

I was starting to get concerned.

"There must be *something* blooming," Sanada said. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be open."

"True," I replied. "Anyway, after lunch, everyone moves to the Hamamatsu City Zoo. It says they've got a golden lion tamarin."

"A golden lion?" said Ricchan. "That sounds cool."

"But it's a tamarin," I said.

"Isn't that a kind of monkey?"

"Exactly. A monkey with fur like a lion's mane."

"That sounds hilarious." Ricchan put her elbows on the table and laughed.

"And finally, a boat ride on Lake Hamana."

The route went past the hot springs at Kanzanji. It seemed like a waste not to visit them, but the buses had to get us back on time. One girl had suggested we

let people break off so she could go, but the teacher had ignored her.

"Nao, don't get too excited and fall off the boat."

"I'm not that clumsy! How old do you think I am?"

"You can catch oysters in Lake Hamana."

My eyes opened wide.

"Oh, really? Oysters?"

"Yup, fresh oysters. They're more nutritious than the cultivated ones."

Back when Sunao was in fourth grade, her parents had intended to take her to a seafood barbecue. But she'd stayed up all night and was sleepy, so she had me go instead.

We were met by a courtesy car at the station, which drove us to the barbecue venue. In hindsight, it was clear our parents hadn't used their own car because they were planning on knocking back a bunch of beers. But at the time, I thought the car, with its strange, unfamiliar smell, was taking me away to another world. I'd gotten so excited.

The outdoor venue overlooked Yaizu Harbor and had a number of grills set up. Families and groups of friends milled about, and we found Ricchan's family and ate yakisoba with tons of seafood in it. The scallops and shrimp were good, but the oysters were my favorite.

Some people call oysters the milk of the sea. Mom thought they looked gross, but Dad and I were pouring them down our throats. It felt like everything from the tip of my nose to the back of my mouth was wrapped in brine.

Ever since, I'd nursed a little dream of one day catching my own oyster.

"Can you rent the equipment anywhere?" I asked, squirming.

Ricchan gaped at me. "Don't tell me you plan on diving for oysters?"

"Of course! Don't try and stop me," I said, rolling up the sleeves of my unform.

"Far from it! I respect your ambition," Ricchan insisted, saluting. "Unfortunately, that's only in winter."

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"...Is it winter now?"
"Rather summerish, I'm afraid."
"Snrk."
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A strange noise.

Ricchan and I turned to find Sanada with his head down, shoulders quivering. He held one hand over his mouth. Was he laughing?

"It just...struck me as funny," he said, looking up. He was still chuckling.

Ricchan grabbed my hand, purring, "Naooo, apparently we're funny."

"A-are we?"

"Let's take on the world together."

That might be nice. "What will we call ourselves?"

"Oysters, Blouses, and Ritsuko."

"Where'd I go?"

This time Sanada laughed out loud. To my surprise, he seemed like a good audience.

When this new laughing fit died down, Ricchan spoke up. She'd been studying the brochure.

"Not visiting Hamanako Palpal, though, huh? Shame, you're right there."

"Oh..." Sanada was staring into the distance.

Was he remembering himself as a child, shouting with joy on some roller coaster? Somehow, I got the feeling that wasn't it.

"I've never been," I said.

Sunao hadn't, either. The children's association had taken her and Ricchan to Fuji-Q Highland in Yamanashi instead.

"But the Palpal park mascots were designed by the famous Takashi Yanase," said Ricchan.

"The Anpanman guy?" I asked.

"Yep, the very same. We should go together sometime."

I flinched, delaying my reaction.

"I guess it's more for kids, huh?" Ricchan quickly added.

Feeling guilty, I forced my tongue to move. I didn't want her to regret making the suggestion.

"Sounds fun. Let's do it."

She perked up and nodded.

It had been a while since we'd seen each other, so we ended up chatting the whole meeting. Literature Club members always did as we pleased.

As six approached, we all took the key back to the faculty office. Ricchan volunteered to go inside, so Sanada and I waited by the door.

"Looking forward to the field trip," I said.

"Can I talk to you there?"

"If my hair's half-up."

"Gotcha."

Throughout finals, today included, I'd worn my hair half-up. I'd used a cute scrunchie for color, one Mom had been about to throw out.

But...

I was just a replica. My role was only to fill in for Sunao sometimes.

And I don't think I fully realized how much I was enjoying the idea of someone seeing Sunao Aikawa and Second as different people.



Maybe this is my punishment.

That was my first thought the next time Sunao called for me.

It was the last day of school before summer vacation when I surfaced again.

The field trip had been the day before. The rainy season was over, so

temperatures had soared to the mid-eighties, and several students had gotten sick during the trip.

Today, Sunao had bad menstrual pains. That was why she'd called for me. The memories she shared with me were like reading a flat prose description; I got no real sense of her feelings or of how much things hurt. But I knew the pain was hard to bear. Sunao was suffering enough to abandon the joys of the last day of school and let a replica take over.

She was still in bed, looking very pale. I gazed down at her as I did up the buttons on our unform.

"Was the field trip fun?" I asked.

"Huh?"

I found her "Huh?" far more frightening than Sanada's. Any second now, I might disappear. That was always a concern—but I had to ask.

If she'd at least enjoyed it...had a good time, laughed, made it a day to remember...then that would be fine. That would be enough.

I knew this vain hope of mine had no bearing on her, of course.

"It wasn't amazing or anything. Just hot."

Then you should have let me go.

I was actually mad at her.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing." My shoulders slumped. "I just wanted to go."

My whisper was like a tiny drop of water, too small and faint to make even a ripple on the surface. I don't think Sunao heard it.

At school, everyone was talking about the field trip, and I couldn't bear it. They were sharing pictures on their phones, talking about the gulls they'd seen from the boat, laughing about the boy who'd almost been left behind on a bathroom break, recalling the gory movie they'd watched on the bus trip back.

I envied every bit of it. I hadn't even been able to go.

I let out a long sigh. And that's when I saw him.

He wasn't talking to anybody, his gaze fixed on the paperback in his hand. When I read, I'd gradually start to slump, but he kept his back straight as a rod.

So far, I'd barely ever spoken to Sanada in class. And other than the day I'd apologized for the fan incident, we hadn't walked to the clubroom together, either.

I swallowed hard, then headed to the far right of the room, telling myself not to mind the eyes on my back.

"Morning," I said.

The second hand took two steps along the clockface before Sanada looked up at me.

He didn't seem taken aback. His sturdy thumb was stuck between the pages like a makeshift bookmark. Mori Ogai seemed like a tougher read than Natsume Soseki, and he was making slower progress.

"Morning."

"The field trip was fun."

It takes a lot of energy to say things you don't actually think. If he nodded agreeably, it would only pour salt on my wounds. I knew that. I was being stupid, baiting him.

"I didn't have much fun."

Was this what I'd been hoping to hear? What I'd been hoping he'd say?

"I didn't get to talk," he continued.

"Who with?"

"Someone with her hair half-up."

Sanada was watching me.

I knew he was looking—but my head was down, and I couldn't lift it. I could feel my heart beating. It wasn't going crazy, but it was faster than usual. Talking to Sanada sometimes made my heart act strange.

"It's half-up today, though," he observed.

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"Yep."
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"Wanna go somewhere?" Now I looked up. Sanada had closed his book. "Our own private field trip."

If words had light in them, I would have seen stars.

"Yes!"

I didn't worry about the details; I just started nodding.

Homeroom didn't take long. As our classmates noisily shuffled out of the classroom and down the hall to attend the school's closing ceremony, the two of us split up and slipped away to the bathroom.

They weren't going to take attendance, so we figured no one would come looking for us. That hunch paid off; once the noise in the hall died down, we went back to class and gathered our things.

"You don't have much," he said.

"Neither do you."

I didn't have a lunch or any textbooks today. I only had a wallet, a phone, and a makeup bag. Sanada's giant backpack was so empty, it looked positively deflated.

We waited for a bit. Three minutes, then five. When the bell rang for the start of first period, we peeked out the back door of the classroom and made sure the halls were empty.

The whole building was weirdly quiet. I supposed that made sense, with all the students and teachers gathered in the gym.

I was ready to shout from the rooftops. Even the dust motes floating in the sunbeams looked beautiful. I wanted to dash right through them.

I'd never skipped class, never played hooky. I should be filling in for Sunao, sitting cross-legged on that hard gym floor.

I'd always pretended to be her, deceiving everyone around me. But not today.

Today I was myself.

There were wings on my back, and I felt like they could take me anywhere.

But as we were changing into our outdoor shoes, Sanada fired off a question that quickly brought me back down to earth.

"Where to?" he said.

We weren't young enough to just kick around the local park. But doing anything in town would cost money. I'd forgotten all about that.

"I'm short on funds," I admitted, feeling like a sinner in the confessional.

Sunao always had three thousand yen in her wallet, but that was *her* money. I couldn't use it without permission.

"I'll cover you."

"I can't let you do that."

Mom was always warning us not to lend or borrow. Letting someone pay your way wasn't right.

I dithered for a moment before inspiration struck. My fifty-yen coin collection! Wasn't this the perfect chance to set all those coins loose?

"Wait here. I'll go home and grab some money."

Sanada took the train and bus to school from Yaizu Station. If I stopped by my house, I'd have to go alone.

"Now? Where do you live, Aikawa?"

"Near Mochimune Station. If I go all out, I can be back in an hour!"

Technically it was at least thirty-five minutes each way, putting me ten minutes over. And it would probably take even more time to grab the coins without Sunao noticing.

But I said it anyway, worried the initial rush of excitement would fade over time and Sanada would change his mind. The thought scared me.

If you waved from the window of a steam train, anyone would smile and wave back. But they wouldn't keep waving forever. Once the moment passed, they'd put their hand down and go back to real life.

Sanada would likely do the same.

"Then I'll come with. I can borrow a friend's bike."

It took me a moment to process what he'd said.

"He always leaves the key in it," he added.

"Er, um...you have friends?"

By the time my mind caught up, the words had already escaped my lips. I winced, but he just blinked at me. One side of his mouth turned up—he looked amused.

"Not many, but some."

"Um...can your leg take it?"

Riding a bike was a lot of work.

"It's fine," he said, heading for the other class's parking area.

Keeping one eye on him, I headed for Sunao's bike. The frame was painted sky blue. The seat seemed surprised to see me back so soon, so I gave it a reassuring pat.

I pulled the bike free and turned to find Sanada looking cross. He sat astride his friend's bike, clearly uncomfortable. The seat had a small slit in it, and it looked tiny under his bulky frame.

"He's given it horns."

"Horns?" I wasn't sure what he meant.

"He's adjusted the handlebars so they look like a demon's horns."

I looked again and saw that the handlebars were pointed skyward—nothing like the bike I was riding or any of the others around us.

"How do you do that?"

"With an Allen wrench."

The name of a tool didn't really help me picture the process, but Sanada seemed so annoyed by it, I figured I should respond.

"Might make it easier for you to ride, since you're so high on the bike."

"You're making it worse."

He kicked the ground as he moved toward me, then lightly rapped my forehead. It didn't hurt, but it did surprise me. I'd never been that close to a boy.

Sunao would probably have taken it in stride. But I didn't want him doing this kind of thing with her.

"I didn't mean you have short legs or anything!" I wailed.

Sanada's legs and torso were both long. That left him sitting much higher than most people, and the horned handlebars seemed like they were at a much more comfortable height.

"When I was little, I was sure taller was better," I said, flailing.

Sanada looked through the handlebars at me. "Were you a tall kid?" he asked.

"Well...yeah, I guess so."

I remembered boasting about being taller than Ricchan. In hindsight, it was hardly something to brag about.

Sanada nodded, then looked me over again.

"And now...?"

"Let's get moving!"

My attempt to change the subject just made him smirk. Prying an embarrassing memory out of me seemed to have cheered him up.

"Ride safe," he said.

"Mm."

I led the way, and we took off beneath the scorching sun.

Roads I usually only saw in the evening appeared special now in the light of day. My empty satchel seemed ready to fly away on an errant gust of wind.

I gripped the handlebars tightly, my chest feeling as hot as the asphalt. I could have put this six-speed on the hardest gear and still kept those pedals turning.

"I've never skipped school before," I confessed.

Sanada grinned. "Me either." Perhaps the excitement of embarking on our

own private field trip had his cheek muscles working more than usual.

Frying under the blazing sun, we talked about all sorts of things.

"Where should we go?" he said.

Anywhere. I was up for anything. Everywhere sounded fun.

But saying "anywhere" or "anything" would make it seem like I didn't care. Mom yells at Dad for that a lot. What do you want for dinner? Anything. It never ended well.

But I didn't really know what any of the places high schoolers usually went were like. Sunao went out with her friends sometimes but mostly to the movie theater, karaoke joints, the bowling alley, or chain restaurants.

I bet those were all lots of fun. But I'd had my heart set on something ever since I'd read the field trip itinerary.

"The zoo! ...Oh, right." I realized that was a bad suggestion right after I said it. Sanada had just been there the day before. "Or not! Um..."

"I'm in." His voice slipped easily into my ear. I'd found the sound of it, lower than Dad's, frightening at first. "Let's go to the zoo."

It didn't scare me anymore.

Once we'd crossed Shizuoka Bridge, Sanada said he'd wait for me at Mochimune Station. Maybe he figured I'd be uncomfortable if he knew exactly where I lived. I didn't mind, but I wasn't sure if Sunao would agree, so I just nodded.

Now alone, I parked the bike where it couldn't be seen from the window.

Once in the shade, I noticed my uniform was plastered to my body, soaked through with perspiration. I was unsteady on my feet, and I could feel beads of sweat running down my brow, my sides, my back, and my chest.

I didn't usually go heavy on the antiperspirant, but today I sprayed the stuff all over. The scent of roses drifted around me like a pink cloud.

I fixed my hair, then swallowed hard—and carefully turned the key in the door.

I cracked it open and peered in. No signs of life. The only shoes in the entryway were the boots Sunao wore on rainy days.

When she wasn't feeling well, Sunao generally stayed cooped up in her room. She only really left to hit the bathroom or to eat. She ate around noon, breakfast doubling as lunch. It was only nine fifteen, so she should still be sleeping in.

I knew I couldn't afford to dillydally, but I swung by the kitchen to replenish my fluids. I filled a sweating glass and turned it upside down, wetting my parched throat. Just the sound of the ice tinkling against its edges cooled my core.

Now for the real trial. I left the kitchen and crawled up the stairs on all fours. That was the quietest way to move. It took more time, but it was much safer.

Part of me was embarrassed to be creeping around the house, but it also served as a harsh reminder that this wasn't actually my house.

I felt like a burglar. I told myself not to think about that now, but my hands were shaking.

Feeling something odd, I looked down and found my foot caught in a spiderweb. I shook it off and moved on.

I found my target in the hallway cabinet: a can with a Disney logo and a doubled-up grocery bag. The coins rattled when I lifted them, which made my heart skip a beat, but Sunao's door never opened.

Both the can and the bag were far heavier than I'd expected. I shoved them both in the satchel, then held it to my chest as I went back down the stairs. Maybe I was more like a ninja than a thief. Telling myself that helped ease the chilly feeling making my muscles cramp up.

Still, I could barely breathe until I'd escaped through the front door.

Once I'd recovered, I rode to Mochimune Station, where I found Sanada fiddling with his phone near the entrance to the long, narrow bike lot.

He was leaning against a cherry tree, in the shade of its leaves. I'd meant to lead with an apology for making him wait, but when he saw me, he looked

surprised.

His eyes were on my bike's front basket.

"That looks superheavy," he said.

"It is," I admitted. It was heavy.

I'd managed to force the zipper closed, but my satchel was visibly fatter than it had been ten minutes earlier.

I opened it up, and the mountain of fifty-yen coins surprised Sanada even more.

I was fully prepared to haul the satchel around like a sack of rice all day, but Sanada stopped me and pointed across the street from the station.

"There's a Shinkin over there. Let's swing by," he said. I wasn't sure why we'd need a bank, but I nodded anyway. "We'll have to deposit it. You mind?"

I nodded again, but now he seemed less sure of himself.

While I was parking my bike in the lot, Sanada picked up my satchel.

"I can carry it," I said.

"No, let me. I'm amazed you got it here."

He sounded impressed. Sanada led the way, and I followed.

I'd never been inside a bank before, and this one was way too air-conditioned. It felt like heaven for exactly three seconds as my body was finally able to stop sweating, but by the four-second mark, I felt like I'd been thrown into a freezer.

There were three ATMs inside the door. Sanada didn't even look at them and headed straight for the counter. The lady behind it looked curious—they must not get a lot of high school students. She had a cardigan on over her uniform—it was clearly too cold in here.

"I'd like to make a cash deposit," he said.

A what? They handed him a form, and Sanada ran his pen across it, handing it back with a blue bank book. I was weirdly impressed—what teenager carries their bank book around with them? There was no bank book registered to

Second Aikawa anywhere in this world.

"I'll take your coins," said the clerk.

Sanada looked at me, motioning for me to open the satchel.

I did so and realized something important. I couldn't exactly hand them a rusty Disney can.

When I tried to dump it out into the grocery bag, she saw right through me and said, "That'll be fine as is." I bet I turned red. She took the bag and can without batting an eye and disappeared into the back.

Soon, I heard a loud rattling noise I didn't understand.

What was going on? Was she pouring the coins into something? There was a whirring mechanical noise, too.

"Is there a poltergeist back there?" I whispered.

Sanada overheard me and laughed.

Then the lady came back holding the empty tin can. "What should we do with this?"

I was sure Sunao no longer remembered it existed.

"Um, I'll take it," I said.

It wasn't right for me to throw out her things, though. I'd have to put it back on the shelf when I got home.

I had them take care of the grocery bag; then I looked at Sanada.

"They put it in my account, so let's go withdraw it," he said. I blinked at him, and he made a face. "Sorry, there's a fee if you just exchange it for cash. Figured this was better."

I finally realized what he'd meant by "cash deposit" and what the sound was I'd heard. With the coins in Sanada's account, we could now withdraw paper money.

"Don't apologize," I said. "Thank you."

He'd seen me struggling with the weight and was trying to help.

We headed to an ATM, and he opened his bank book and slotted it into the machine. The result was a total of 198,750 yen. That was the sum of my earnings from first grade through my second year of high school.

It was quite a lot of money for a student. Sanada handed me the stack of cash, and I squirreled it away in the inner pocket of my satchel, only half closing the zipper.

A few dozen bills and coins. It was so light, it felt like feathers, and I began to worry the clerk had skimmed some off the top.

"She didn't take any," Sanada said.

First poltergeists and now mind reading?

"If I worked in a bank, I wouldn't be stealing from perennially penniless students," he explained.

I caught the lady at the counter shooting us a pointed look.

"L-let's go," I blurted out, and Sanada followed me through the exit, chuckling.

"Next stop, the Nihondaira Zoo."

"Huh?"

"There's a bus that goes straight to the zoo from Higashi-Shizuoka Station."

I mouthed the words Nihondaira Zoo a few times without making a sound.

Back in kindergarten, Sunao had gone there with her family. It was attached to a small amusement park, and a few years back, it had undergone a major overhaul, which had made it a much more popular destination.

Higashi-Shizuoka Station was the next stop after Shizuoka Station, about a ten-minute train ride from our location.

"That okay with you?" he asked.

He must have been looking up how to get there while he was standing under the tree. He was doing his best to make my dream of going to the zoo come true. That alone sent a joyful breeze through my heart.

"Totally. Totally fine."

Totally great. Greater than great.

I bought a round-trip ticket from the machine by the station gates. Sanada used his IC Card. On the platform, we each bought a 500 ml drink from the vending machine. We both went with tea—I got Sokenbicha, and Sanada got barley tea. The vending machine's little beep was adorable.

We took the Tokaido Main Line. Its gray cars with their orange stripes pulled into the station as the heat continued to bear down on us.

I hopped up into the train car, feeling like I could fly away.

Its lightly air-conditioned interior brought us back to life. There were loads of empty seats. We shared a car with a stooping old woman, an old man with his nose in a newspaper, and a college guy nodding off. We sat together on an empty bench, wrapped in an invincible veil.

Though we didn't plan on it, we opened our bottles in sync. Sanada gulped his, his Adam's apple bobbing, and downed half the bottle in one go. Once his thirst was quenched, he was back on his phone.

"If the train arrives on time, there'll be a bus five minutes later. We just have to catch that."

"Wow. You're a pro at this."

Sanada froze up.

Maybe I'd worded that badly. How could I rephrase it so he understood?

"I mean...I was just impressed."

I resented the limitations of my vocabulary. I wasn't qualified to be the Literature Club president.

The train car shook. *Ka-chunk, ka-chunk*. The window across from us was long and wide. The view outside zipped past faster than I'd ever seen on my bicycle, yet I could still make out every house and shop sign.

I saw someone pushing a stroller along beside the tracks. Its sunshade was out, so I couldn't see the baby's face.

"I've just...never gone anywhere alone with a girl before," he said.

I tore my eyes off the window and turned to look at him.

He had one hand on the railing and was facing away from me. The ears peeping out from his black hair were red. I was tempted to poke his sweaty nape. Sanada smelled like soap again. But if I sat closer, I bet I could smell his sweat.

"It's my first time going anywhere with a boy, too," I said.

He let out a little breath in reply, like an extension of his blush.

All of this was new to me—skipping classes, horn handlebars, the inside of a bank, buying a ticket to Higashi-Shizuoka Station.



I didn't know what else to say. I'd wanted to find a moment to ask his thoughts on *Kokoro*, but this didn't seem like the time.

The train began to decelerate, and the scrolling landscape went into slo-mo. We were already at our destination.

We headed down the stairs toward the south gate, where we found a bus stop with a bear logo. It felt like it was waving us over, and my heart soared.

"There's the bus," Sanada said, pointing.

A blue bus covered in animal decals was speeding toward us like the wind. I had to stifle the urge to wave at the driver.

When it stopped, a family with kids were the only other people to board. This was probably typical for a weekday morning.

Soon it was time for the bus to depart again, and an announcement played. We pulled out, and the bus headed down unfamiliar roads.

We sat on a bench meant for two. Sanada had to squeeze in, and his knees soon bumped mine. I pretended not to notice, my eyes on the window.

"There are so many shops I don't know," I said.

"You've never heard of McDonald's?"

"I didn't mean that one!"

I reached through his bangs and poked his forehead. Sanada started laughing.

Hiding my slightly numbed index finger in my other palm, I tried to keep my cool. He had a *very* hard head.

The bus came to a stop, and a three-year-old boy jumped out first. He was unsteady on his feet, and his young mother ran after him.

We followed them at a distance to the ticket booth.

"Have you been here before, Sanada?" I asked.

There was a pause.

"You could say that."

An odd answer. Had he come here with a girl and didn't want to say? But he'd

just told me he'd never gone anywhere with a girl, and I didn't think he was lying.

"You?" he asked.

"Um...not really, no."

Strictly speaking, Sunao had. But I'd never been.

Once the kid and his mom were gone, we were the only ones in line at the booth.

General admission tickets (high school and older) were 620 yen. Sanada talked to the staff inside and held up two fingers. They didn't seem bothered by our uniforms. Other high schools were already on summer vacation. Even ours only had the closing ceremony in the morning. After that, they'd hand out report cards and send the students home by noon.

"Two tickets, please."

I fumbled for my satchel, and Sanada glanced my way.

"I got this," he said.

"No, I still have 197,850 yen!"

The train ticket cost 400, and the drink 150. The bus fare was only 350. I still had plenty of money left over. There wasn't much I couldn't cover—I could even buy a bunch of fans.

"You probably shouldn't yell that."

"Right. I won't."

We each put bills and coins on the tray.

In return, we got two tickets, each with a different animal photo. One had a red panda and the other a snowy owl.

"Which one do you want?" he asked.

"The red panda!"

I'd have to use this ticket as a bookmark. Each time I opened a book, I'd be vividly reminded of today's trip.

The girl at the counter smiled and said, "Have fun!" I figured she'd mistaken us for a couple. But she didn't ask, so we couldn't deny it.

I glanced up at Sanada, but he was taking it in stride. I found this a little vexing.

As we stepped through the main gates, a lady in a staff uniform appeared.

"Good afternoon!" she said.

We returned the greeting. A lot of different women were smiling at me today.

"Welcome to Nihondaira Zoo. Would you care for a memorial photo?"

"What's that?" I asked.

She flashed a very professional smile.

"We take your picture in front of a backdrop, with an animal hat on. You'll get a smaller version at no charge, with full-sized prints available for a small fee."

I saw Sanada frowning, so I gave this due consideration.

"We have to!" I concluded.

He still seemed reluctant as we put our things in the baggage area, but he knew I was excited, so he kept quiet. Taking advantage of his generosity, I focused on choosing a hat.

"Oh no, they all look good!"

As my head swiveled back and forth, he said simply, "This one suits you best."

That settled it—I grabbed the red panda hat he offered, and Sanada chose a polar bear for himself.

I put the hat on. It had been on the job awhile, and the fur was a little crinkly where it came down over my ears.

Resigned to his fate, Sanada put on his polar bear hat. I couldn't stop myself from teasing him.

"That's so cute!" I said.

"Shush."

He scowled, but the polar bear's round, black eyes held no hint of ferocity.

We took one look at each other and laughed out loud.

The backdrop had cartoony polar bears, red pandas, and ring-tailed lemurs drawn on it. The first two seemed to be the stars of the Nihondaira Zoo.

We stepped out in front of the backdrop, and a lady with a big black camera waved at us, smiling all the while. This wasn't the woman who'd sold us on the idea but a different lady, with brown hair.

"Okay, smile wide! Very nice! Oh, young man, you can do better than that!" "Uh, right."

Sanada sounded so stiff. Without even looking, I could imagine his expression, and it made me giggle.

"Stand a little closer!" the woman called out.

Suddenly, I couldn't laugh anymore. Sanada and I awkwardly closed the gap, but the woman kept going, "Closer! Closer!"

I wished I'd used more antiperspirant.

"What's black, white, and red all over?"

"A red panda!"

We'd been taught this response in advance—and told to hold our hands up to our faces, like we were about to pounce.

The pose was pretty embarrassing, and I figured Sanada would balk at it, but to my surprise, he went all in. He actually yelled, "Red panda!" even louder than I did. He must have decided it would be worse if we had to try again, and he committed to the bit.

They showed us the tiny free pictures. They weren't just photos—they were made out like a newspaper article, paired with a headline that said, "Rare Beasts Sighted!" Sanada and I were the beasts in question—and the body of the article had lots of info on both creatures.

It was neat, but it was also in black and white; I couldn't really get a read on Sanada's expression. I had to get this in color.

"The full-sized prints with backing are one thousand yen each," the woman

told us.

"No?"

"I'll take one, please!" I said.

I was loaded today and determined to buy whatever I wanted.

The print came out, and like I'd hoped, Sanada was bright red, his smile strained—but my face was much redder than I'd anticipated, too. *Aughhh!* 

I accepted the photo awkwardly. Sanada watched, his mouth hanging open. Acquiring this humiliating portrait was one thing, but there was no way I could hang this up in the house. And that meant...

"Let's put it up in the clubroom."

"Uh," Sanada said, sounding like he had a bone stuck in his throat. "Really?"

"I'm not against it, just..." He seemed very skeptical. And that made me start giggling again.

Just inside the entrance was a large facility with a sign reading RED PANDA HOUSE—very literal. There were indoor and outdoor displays. Curious, I looked around and soon found what I was searching for.

"Look!" I said. "A red panda! A real one!"

The outdoor area had trees and a gazebo, and there was a small crowd gathered to one side of it. Everyone was watching an adorable creature as it walked along a tree branch.

It had white ears framing its masklike face and black button eyes. Its body was round and cuddly, its tail long and fluffy. And it had sharp claws!

"Awww!"

Cute. So cute. It was like a living stuffed animal!

The red panda glanced at the children fussing over it and decided to ignore them, instead trotting with its little feet into a clear pipe.

The pipe led to the interior exhibit, and the crowd followed it inside, hearts in their eyes. I was about to go after them, when— "Oh, there's another one over there!"

Apparently, there was more than one.

A second red panda was under the gazebo, out of the sun—eyes closed, lying on its back.

"They're cute even when they're asleep!"

Red pandas were probably cute no matter what they were doing. Eating, sleeping, even pooping...

"Like a little kid," Sanada whispered.

"Right? They're so cute, but they're probably fully grown."

Why'd he give me that look?

"You're not gonna take pictures?" he asked.

"Nope."

I had a phone with me, but it wasn't mine. I was just borrowing Sunao's.

Her parents had bought her the phone over spring break when she was in her third year of junior high. No matter how much I begged, she never let me touch it.

But while I was filling in for her, a classmate had asked for my contact info, and I hadn't known what to do. After that, she reluctantly allowed me to carry her phone around.

When Sunao put her index finger to the screen, it unlocked. It did the same for me.

"I don't need to," I said. "I'll burn their image into my retinas!"

"You sure love red pandas."

Talking about nothing was so much fun. It was even more fun when there were red pandas rolling around in front of us.

"I want to stay here forever," I said.

I didn't want to leave the red pandas for a single second.

Sanada looked down at the map they'd handed out at the gate.

"You sure? There are penguins next door."

"Oh?"

"And they've got polar bears, too."

"Polar bears!" Zoos were full of temptations. "Can we swing by the red pandas again on the way out?"

"Sure."

It broke my heart, but I resolved to take my leave. I knew deep down the red pandas weren't going anywhere.

We moved on to the penguins, the reptile house, and the nocturnal animals exhibit.

The interiors were way bigger than they looked, and I kept turning back to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Sanada noticed every time and kept asking, "What is it?"—leaving me wailing, "Nothing!" Sanada was gruff but considerate.

We got tired from all the walking a little after noon, and we took a break in a rest area with a triangular roof.

This place, too, was pretty empty. The children laughing two tables over looked familiar. They'd been playing with the guinea pigs at the petting zoo.

Sanada and I had spent our time with the chicks. They'd climbed right onto our hands, a whole mountain of them. They really liked Sanada and were fighting to get on his hands, kicking one another out of the way.

A female attendant had scattered them, saying, "We don't want them getting hurt." After that, only two chicks remained, standing triumphantly on Sanada's palms.

"Why don't you make a bed for them?" she suggested.

"I'll try." He nodded earnestly.

He gingerly cupped his hands, and the chicks, absorbing his body heat, drifted off to sleep. They lay there, passed out, a picture of cuteness.

"They're so warm," Sanada said, his lips turning up in a smile.

I regretted not being able to capture that moment in a photograph, but I was tickled pink to be the only one who got to see it.

I'd never slept in a bed. But I didn't tell him how much I envied those chicks.

"What'll you have?" Sanada asked me. There was a big menu plastered over the meal ticket machine. "The polar bear curry's the specialty. Oh, and the capybara beef stew. The way the mound of rice sits in the stew makes it look like a capybara bathing in a hot spring."

Help!

"Oh no! They're too cute to eat! I'll go with the soy sauce ramen."

"Then I'll get the polar bear curry."

"I changed my mind!"

I couldn't resist, and I ordered the capybara beef stew, while Sanada got the polar bear curry.

The taste was so-so, but they looked amazing.

Afterward, I visited the bathroom, then looked around for Sanada. I found him sitting hunched over on a bench.

"Sanada." He quickly straightened up, but I could tell he'd been massaging his right ankle. "Does it hurt?"

"It's fine." His voice was flat. Forced.

"Sorry, I've been making you walk all over the place."

I sat down next to him, and he scratched his cheek.

"I wanted to come."

He never got mad about stuff like this. Instead, he just seemed at a loss. I felt restless, like I should be saying something else.

"Can I ask something?" Sanada's eyes turned toward me, but he said nothing. "Is it true the older boys did this?"

His eyes widened. Maybe he was surprised, because I'd avoided touching on this topic before.

"I'm not the one who got hurt," he said.

What does that mean?

I couldn't bring myself to pry further. I didn't have the courage.

Sanada seemed to misunderstand my silence and said, "There's loads more to see."

I looked up, and he had the map out again, like nothing had happened.

The flamingo dome. The orangutan exhibit. We still hadn't seen the polar bears. Sanada was putting up with his pain to make my wish come true. Why was he being so nice?

"I've had enough," I said. "Let's go."

"Don't you want to see the red pandas again?"

"You remembered that?"

"You were so excited, how could I forget?"

I did want to see them. But more than that, I didn't want him to suffer any more on my account.

"Nah, let's go."

"You said you wanted to stay with the red pandas forever."

I did.

I did, but that wasn't exactly true.

The one I really wanted to stay with was...

"We can come again," I said, silencing him.

Was he surprised? Or had he caught the tremor in my voice?

I didn't want to cry. I wouldn't.

Replicas don't cry unless they're told to.

"Let's come back some other day, okay?" I said, smiling and holding out my hand.

I'm sure my smile looked strained. I could feel a tear trying to escape the corner of my eye, and when I took a breath, the back of my nose tingled. My brows were crawling toward the center of my forehead.

"Thanks for bringing me here. This is the most fun I've ever had."

Oh, there it was. The restlessness I'd been feeling subsided. That was what I'd wanted to tell him.

I would never have thought to skip school on my own. I was only ever Sunao's replacement.

But Sanada had taken me far away. Not just to the station by my house, but to Shizuoka Station, and beyond to Higashi-Shizuoka, then onto a bus, and all the way to the zoo.

And it wasn't just the zoo. I could go anywhere.

He'd taught me that, and I wanted to thank him.

I think he got it. Sanada started to look away, then stopped himself. His hand reached up, hovered around his cheek, and then...

...he put on a big smile.

"Thank you," he said.

I broke out in a smile, too.

For the first time, I held his hand. It was so much bigger than I'd imagined. It was bony, and his skin was thick. And he was warm.

I was so glad Sunao didn't receive my memories. I didn't want to share this gentle moment with anyone else.





We went back the same way we'd come.

We rode the bus, then the train, and soon we were at the station nearest to my house.

It was five o'clock now. The heat was finally starting to soften, and the breeze was pleasant.

Sanada had to head back toward the school to return his friend's bike. The friend lived a fifteen-minute walk from school, so he'd just gone home on foot, and he told Sanada to bring the bike by his house.

We'd been holding hands the whole time, and only now did we think to let go.

"I'm off, then," he said, getting back on the bike. He'd started to make the horns look cool.

"Ride safe," I said.

Neither of us said good-bye. I watched him pedal off.

I retrieved Sunao's bike from the unfamiliar spot where I'd left it waiting, and I took it home. A grin crossed my face as I passed the bank. Today, something had changed in me.

I'd always wanted something of my own.

The 198,750 yen had turned into 195,370 yen. Those fifty-yen coins I'd desperately collected hadn't gone to waste. I'd cleaned the bath, folded laundry, and run the vacuum down the hall all for today.

I had to check to make sure my feet were still touching the ground. I felt so light, I thought I might become a balloon and float away.

Maybe I should.

But I wanted to visit the zoo again. I wanted to go to other places, too.

The bike wheels whirred in time with my footsteps, as if enjoying my good mood.

I threw the front door open—and found Sunao standing there in her pajamas.

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"Sunao?"
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I'd never said, "I'm home!" I knew no one would ever answer.

Sunao had never waited at the door for me before, either. But one look at her face told me she hadn't left her room to welcome me back. She'd clearly been standing there for hours.

That's risky, Sunao. What if Mom and Dad came home? I tried to say as much, but the words wouldn't form.

This was certainly not the time for a casual greeting, either. Sunao stared down at me. I was in loafers, while she was barefoot. Her big toes were longer than her index toes. Naturally, I was the same.

"You skipped school," she said.

How did she find out?

"Ricchan called the landline," she continued before I could ask.

She must have noticed Sanada and I weren't in the gym, and she started worrying.

She was a close junior classmate. Sunao's friend.

"Sorry," I said.

Sunao bit her lip.

I didn't know what to make of it. What emotion did that represent? I'd never bit my lip like that.

We had the same face, the same figure, the same voice. But to me, Second, Sunao Aikawa would always be the original.

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"Stop it," she said.
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Stop?

Stop what?

"Please, let me live my life."

What was Sunao saying?

"Give it back to me, please!"

"Don't!" I cut her off, afraid to hear what came next.

My arms were shaking, my lips trembling. Somehow, I managed to form words.

"I haven't taken anything. Not one thing."

I'd never stolen anything of Sunao's.

Not one meal, not her afternoon snack, not the chicken nuggets she'd snatched off her dad's plate when the doctor told him to cut back on fried foods. None of the naps she'd enjoyed, held in her mother's arms.

I'd never had anything. There was nothing I could steal from her.

Unlike Sunao, I'd never had anything!

"What did I do?" I asked.

"You exist!"

Just that?

You're the one who calls for me! You're the one who uses me!

But Sunao was looking at me like a cockroach who'd snuck into her room.

"You're nothing but a replica!"

Those words weighed on my heart like ice-cold lead.

They hurt worse than my body being cut to shreds. But to her, it was just a fact.

You're nothing but a replica. Just a replica. Nothing more.

I could never be Sunao Aikawa.

I'd known that all along.

Sunao knew it, too.

"Just go away!" she shouted.

"Sunao."

"Never show yourself again!"

"Suna—"

And just like always, I heard myself pop out of existence.

## Intermission

Summer Vacation Without Her

Ever since the start of summer break, he had wished the *ticktock* of the clock's second hand would move a little faster.

He finished his book and slowly closed it, then leaned back into his chair. His arms had stiffened up, so he reached for the ceiling, then rubbed his eyes with a weary sigh.

Reading hadn't been Sanada's thing, but he'd found it addictive. He'd rather read than fiddle with a phone, watch TV, listen to the radio, or sleep.

While his fingers were turning the pages, he could lose himself in the world of the book. Anything else left space unaccounted for—uneven gaps, through which unwanted thoughts could slip.

He'd left his useless phone by the pillow.

"I should have asked for her number," he grumbled, scratching his head.

It had completely escaped his mind that clubs shut down during the summer. They had no friends in common, so he had no clue how to get in touch with her.

Summer vacation was so long. He'd just finished his third book—a collection of Kenji Miyazawa's short stories.

This included the entirety of *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, the story of Giovanni and Campanella riding a mysterious train across the stars. It was a sad, beautiful tale about parting from a good friend.

I started to say that I knew where Campanella had been because I'd been there with him, but the words caught in my throat, and I said nothing at all.

He had been avoiding thinking about it, but when he read that line, her face floated across his mind's eye.

He thought back to the day after he'd joined the Literature Club.

<sup>&</sup>quot;So I brought that fan...," he'd said.

She didn't answer immediately. He waited five whole seconds, then tried again, using her name.

"Aikawa, got a sec?"

She'd been looking at her phone the whole time, and she jumped, then glanced up at him.

"Huh?"

She grunted crossly, her thin brows creasing. Her big eyes narrowed with hostility, and he blinked at her, confused.

He scratched his cheek—a tic of his when he felt unsure of himself. He even did it in his sleep, when he felt at a loss in his dreams, so he always kept his nails closely trimmed. He'd done it when he was attacked by zombies, when his family sailed off in a flying car, and even when he'd been eaten by a shark.

He'd probably keep them short forever, just for times like those. It wasn't because he was on the basketball team and the sport required accurate feedback from his fingertips. Definitely not.

"About the fan I mentioned yesterday," he said, back to the point.

The response was curt. "What fan?"

Those upturned lashes and jutted lips—she was on guard, like a wild, ferocious animal.

Why was she so aggressive? It was like she was talking to a total stranger. He had no clue what was wrong, and it left him adrift.

Sanada's parents had given him a lift to school so he could get the fan there, and he'd just wanted to get the clubroom key. He'd read enough of *Kokoro* to have thoughts, and he figured he should relay those—if he could find the words to articulate them. This was like a slap in the face. A betrayal.

Was she just in a bad mood? He'd heard girls got like that sometimes. The phrase *let sleeping dogs lie* crossed his mind, but it faded away as he remembered their conversation from the previous day.

Sanada hadn't known Sunao Aikawa was in the Literature Club. The Sunao he knew always looked bored, messing with her hair in the corner of the room, or

leaning against one of the open gym doors, watching the basketball team practice.

The Sunao he'd met in the clubroom, however, had seemed almost absentminded. Her flustered half smile had stuck with him. But then she'd slammed the door to the faculty office as if slicing through their teachers' curious stares, all directed at the basketball team dropout. Only to frolic through the library the next moment, light on her feet like a kid at an amusement park...

"What?"

He blinked. Sunao was now actively irritated.

Sunao Aikawa stood out from the crowd—for different reasons than Sanada did. Not wanting to make a scene in class, he just said, "Sorry, never mind," and left the room.

The fan was sitting just outside the door, with nowhere to go. It seemed to look up at him expectantly—and all he could do was sigh.

He hadn't been trying to earn her gratitude. He'd been the one to offer his family's extra fan.

But the day before, Sunao had not only thanked him in her soft voice—she'd even bowed her head as if she were venerating a god.

Her long hair had run down over the back of her well-shaped head, over her narrow shoulders—and only then had he realized how delicate her frame was. He remembered how the other boys on the team had been so distracted by her gaze that they missed shots and got yelled at. Recalling this now made him feel strange. At the time, Sanada had sunk all his baskets, whether she was there or not.

Back then, he'd been fed up with her.

"She's like the soup of the day," he'd said.

He repeated this now, and it struck him as funny, but his smile soon faded.

He remembered her at the zoo, her pink lips whispering, "This is the most fun

I've ever had." He thought of how her face had twisted like she was about to cry, a tear caught in her long lashes, of how he'd almost reached out to her.

The most fun I've ever had.

It must have been an exaggeration, but she'd said it like it meant the world to her.

Her hand in his was warm, but small and helpless—like a lost child's. He'd been afraid to hold it too tight, lest he break it, and had focused extra hard on keeping his shoulder and upper arm loose. She must have noticed how sweaty his palm was.

He hadn't seen her since. Even though she'd smiled when they parted.

"Is that why?"

Belatedly, he worked out why he'd gotten so hung up on that line from the book. Seeing Giovanni run off toward town made him feel left behind—because he hadn't wanted Giovanni and Campanella to part.

He closed his eyes and pictured her.

It felt like the girl with her hair half-up was still standing there in front of him. But if he gave chase, he somehow knew she'd be dragged away like a receding wave—all he could do was gaze at her from afar.

"Can I just skip to the end of this vacation?" he muttered.

Defeated, he rolled over in bed.

They'd made no promise to attend the summer festival or see the fireworks—so he hoped they were all rained out. He hoped jellyfish invaded the beaches, and they were all declared off-limits to swimmers.

A wind chime hanging in some neighbor's window let out a cheap sounding jangle. It sounded like the bells over a shrine donation box, as if somehow, his wish had been received.

But for all his wishing, when vacation ended, she was nowhere to be found.

A girl named Sunao Aikawa was there at school. But her hair was never half-

up. He'd given his word—so he couldn't bring himself to speak to her.

No—that wasn't why.

His gut told him there was no use speaking to her now, when she was resting her chin in her hand and staring glumly at the grounds outside.

The Literature Club room seemed so much bigger without her.

"She didn't come today, either," he said.

"Nao doesn't show up every day," Ritsuko replied with great understanding. She was younger than him but spoke like a mother being patient with a child, which made it hard to argue.

Still, he found it difficult to be so understanding. It was like he was trying to swallow a hard lump and couldn't—and so he just sat there with it stuck in his mouth, day after day.

Mr. Akai had brought frog-shaped manju back from a trip to Nagoya, and they'd almost hit their expiration date.

He found himself staring at her seat each morning, silently praying.

I started to say that I knew where Campanella had been because I'd been there with him, but the words caught in my throat, and I said nothing at all.

He was terrified.

He began to feel like he'd never see the girl with her hair half-up again.

ACT THREE

A Replica, Crying

It was over a month before she called me again.

Summer vacation had come and gone. Most of the cicadas had died. Their shells littered the sides of the road, crushed under the tiny paws of that Yorkshire terrier. The sun was still strong, though, keeping the remnants of summer going.

When I last vanished, I'd felt like Sunao might never call for me again. That's how furious she'd been. But when I saw her next, she looked almost guilty. Though in my eyes, she'd been screaming at me just a few seconds ago.

It was a pointed reminder. While my time stopped, Sunao's flowed on. Her life progressed. She'd spent all those intervening hours thinking, pondering—and that had led her to this moment, this meek expression. Unable to sustain her rage, she'd worked through it somewhere I couldn't see.

My skin had tanned since the last time I'd seen it.

My body had been updated to match Sunao's. That always made me feel left out.

Perhaps what I inherited from Sunao weren't worth calling "memories." They were just an account. I was just reading a summary of what Sunao had gone through. A story where Sunao Aikawa was the protagonist, and no replica appeared.

Since she'd called for me, I got ready for school.

The pictures taken at the zoo had been placed in a clear file so they wouldn't bend.

Over the break, Sunao had looked in the satchel, found it full of stuff she hadn't known about, and put it all in a paper bag for safekeeping. The money was all in a plain brown envelope.

But she'd thrown out the zoo ticket. That and the can from Disneyland had both gone in the trash. Mom had yelled at her for not putting the can in the recycle bin. This was a fairly vivid memory, so I knew without having to ask.

When I left the room, Sunao followed me. That was unusual.

"Are you dating Sanada?" she asked.

"No."

It's not like that.

After all, I thought, you're not dating him, Sunao. But I couldn't make myself say it.

I knew what was worrying her. What had spooked her. I got it now.

But she'd never had a reason to be scared.

Didn't you know, Sunao?

Replicas don't get to fall in love.

We could spread our wings for a day—but come tomorrow, we might not even get to walk.

I stepped into the classroom and said "Morning" to no one in particular. A few voices answered. I waded through a sea of vague smiles, neither spiteful nor friendly.

Once seated, I took out textbooks, notebooks, and a pencil case.

Last year, the days following summer vacation were listless and slack. The teachers didn't want to be there, and neither did the students.

Back then, only about half of my classmates had been seated at their desks, and the other half had been hanging, chilling, killing time. They reminded me of the lazy red pandas from the zoo, who were always sleeping. But the students now were energetic and alert, and there wasn't a single red panda to be seen.

I listened to the chatter around me, but no one was talking about the vacation anymore. I wanted to get up and flee the room, but I had to grit my teeth and bear it.

The door opened.

When I saw who it was, I finally inhaled.

Sanada, on the other hand, took one look at me and gulped.

He moved toward me, his eyes never wavering. He took the shortest route to my seat, not even stopping to drop off his backpack.

His mouth opened, then closed without a word. His entrance had allowed me to breathe again, but he seemed like a fish out of water. He looked so pained that I couldn't help speaking up.

"Morning," I said. A typical greeting.

But in a raspy voice, Sanada said something completely different.

"Your hair."

"Huh?" I blinked at him, then managed an awkward smile. "Sorry, I didn't put it half-up yet."

I'd always done that the moment I got to class, but today, I'd been distracted and had forgotten.

I set a mirror on the desk and combed through my hair with my fingers. As I threaded one section through a scrunchie, a question rose in my mind.

How did he know it was me with my hair down?

A voice overlapped my thoughts.

"You're not Aikawa, are you?"

Sanada had broken his silence.

"Huh?"

Unable to grasp his meaning or intent, I simply looked up at him.

It was like he could see right through me, like his gaze was sucking me in. I could see my shocked face reflected in his beautiful eyes.

He'd spoken so clearly that I couldn't possibly pretend I hadn't heard him.

"You're not Sunao Aikawa, are you?" he said again.

I flew out of the room.

You can't run in the halls—every little kid knows that rule. But I broke it and sped away against the flow of the other students. I ran all the way to the deserted garden behind the school, my indoor slippers still on.

How had he figured it out? What had given me away?



True, I'd been doing my hair specifically so he could distinguish between us. But nobody else had ever figured it out.

I looked exactly like the real Sunao, but I wasn't her. And I wasn't supposed to let anyone find out I was a fake.

I clutched my chest through my uniform and felt my heart racing. I could see spots before my eyes. My throat clenched up. It hurt like I was being choked.

"I want to go somewhere else. Anywhere but here."

On the train, I'd thought I could go anywhere.

But where was anywhere?

I wandered aimlessly through the garden. It was filled with red, white, and pink cosmos.

Home? But that belonged to Sunao. Just like her mother's bosom and her father's palms.

The uniform I wore, the glossy hair everyone said was beautiful, the shapes of my eyes and nose and lips.

They weren't mine.

I wasn't Sunao Aikawa, and there was nowhere for me to go.

"Aikawa!"

Someone spun me around.

A joint in my elbow made a popping sound. Maybe he'd heard it—his hand snapped back. I followed the arm with its raised veins up to Sanada's face.

It was crumpled up like a tissue, and he was gasping for breath.

I'd heard hesitation in his voice. That was why I didn't run. He was unsure, and yet he'd still come after me.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine."

It didn't hurt at all. In fact, he looked like he was in far more pain than I was.

Maybe he'd hurt his leg again. All because of me.

"You look ready to cry," he said.

I put a hand to my cheek. It was dry. My eyes were clear—no sign of tears. I was just a replica pretending to be human; I didn't have the right to cry.

"I'm not crying."

"Your hair's half-up, isn't it?" It sounded like an accusation. "So why'd you run?"

"I didn't run."

He was making me defensive.

Sanada started to speak again but pursed his lips instead and put a hand to the back of his head.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to corner you." I saw his gaze flick to a nearby bench. "Can we sit?"

He moved over to the bench, which was covered in peeling blue paint, and sat down.

Worried I knew where this was going, I nervously took a seat next to him. Actually, I ended up leaving so much space between us, it probably didn't even look like we were sitting together.

The bench's back legs creaked as I sat down, as if the old thing were accusing me of weighing too much. *Jerk*.

But that was what finally drove home something about the boy on the bench that had been bothering me ever since we first met.

Sanada was always quiet.

He sat in the corner of the class, making no noise, causing no friction, doing little more than breathing.

When he opened the door, when he pulled out his seat, when he sat on the bench—the world stayed quiet and calm. Nothing seemed to change color around him.

He touched everything with utmost care, just as he had my hand the day we

went to the zoo. As I sat there beside him, my heart filled with affection.

A strong breeze blew over the sunny bench.

"I'm the same," he said.

He stiffened up, his eyes on the cosmos swaying in the breeze. It was as if his face were covered in a thin sheet of ice, and if I touched it, it would crack.

I didn't dare reach out. I had to leave, pretend I hadn't seen anything. Otherwise, there'd be no peace for either of us. Not for me, and not for him.

I knew that—but I couldn't bring myself to move. He looked so alone.

I'd known something was amiss.

Shuuya Sanada was on the basketball team. That meant bouncing balls, skidding sneakers, calling for passes, thumping fists, the roar of the crowd—the farthest thing from *quiet*.

The boy in front of me seemed eager to distance himself from past glories and break with his former self.

He'd said *he* wasn't the one who got hurt.

He'd said he didn't need to study for exams.

When I asked if he'd been to Nihondaira Zoo, he said, "You could say that."

The boy in front of me could not be Shuuya Sanada.

"'I should have died ages ago, so why did I live this long?'"

Why would he say that?

I started to ask, but then I realized he was quoting the words of K's suicide note from Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*.

"Why did K die?" he continued.

Many a writer, academic, and reader has pondered that subject and come up with their own opinions and hypotheses.

It was even a question in class. Why did K kill himself? Let's all think on it together.

His heart was broken. His friend's betrayal made him lose faith in humanity.

He'd lost his way. He was alone and alienated.

You could argue all of those points and back them up.

But nobody knew the real reason. Not Sensei, not the narrator, maybe not even K himself.

I should have died ages ago, so why did I live this long?

I'd never once wanted to hurt Sunao.

But probably, even so, I...

"The zoo," I said. His stiff profile turned toward me. "If we can go to the zoo tomorrow, I don't want to die."

Even if it hurt Sunao, I wasn't willing to give this up.

"You really like red pandas," he said.

His smile was slightly mocking, and I felt my cheeks flush.

"Are you really the same as me?"

I knew I was just digging my own grave. But I had to know. I wanted to know about the boy in front of me.

A long silence followed. I was sure I could hear my pulse beating in my ears.

At last, he smiled softly. "Yeah. I'm not Shuuya Sanada, either."

He didn't call me "Aikawa."

And I would likely never call this boy "Sanada" again.

"Oh."

The secret I'd been keeping all this time, the truth I could never let anyone discover—none of it mattered anymore. I would let the chips fall where they may.

I flashed my pearly whites and said, "And I'm not Sunao Aikawa."

The words crossed my tongue—and it didn't hurt at all. I almost felt relieved. The rest was even easier.

"I'm Sunao's replica."

"Replica?"

It was a new word for him, and he repeated it back to me.

I wasn't strictly sure what term I should be using. We weren't doppelgängers, and this wasn't an out-of-body experience. We were *made*.

"That's what we call it. Sunao named me 'Second."

"Shuuya calls me 'Number Two.'"

I put a hand to my chest and looked up at him.

"Should I call you that?"

"I'd rather you didn't." He winced, and I wholly agreed.

"Same. I don't want you calling me Second, either."

"Aikawa picked an awful name."

"Same with Sanada! Number Two—really? Who the hell does he think he is? Number One?"

I put a hand to my throat, scared by how easily my anger had spilled out.

I'd always hated my name. I'd wanted to slap Sunao's pudgy cheeks when she gave it to me. She'd acted like it was some stroke of genius. For a long, long time, I'd suffered in silence, resenting her refusal to see me as my own person.

"I thought about it a lot in grade school," I said. "About what name I wanted."

"Grade school?"

He looked shocked, which made me wonder.

"When did Sanada first make a replica?"

"June of this year. The morning before his first day back at school after leaving the hospital. You?"

"Sunao was in first grade. She'd had a fight with Ricchan."

We were both replicas, but it seemed I'd been around a lot longer than he had.

"Hironaka and Aikawa have known each other awhile, then."

"They met at the children's association."

"Huh."

He sounded impressed, though I wasn't sure why.

"When she first made me, Sunao used to call me Nao. But after a while, she wouldn't let me have that anymore."

"Because it would turn her into vinegar?"

Su meant "vinegar." I giggled at the joke.

But he wasn't too far off the mark. The *Su* in her name actually referred to one's plain, unvarnished nature, and she hadn't wanted to be left with that alone.

"I'd have taken just the o!"

"That would leave her with Sung for 'sand.' She'd be like Sanderella."

Ultimately, Sunao had decided against sharing anything with me. That's why she'd named me Second.

Second. Second in line. I could exist only because the person in front was already there.

"I think I'll call you Nao. Hironaka already calls you that, and to tell the truth, I kinda envied her."

He glanced at me for approval. I pouted my lips—mine, not Sunao's—and said, "Sure."

I'd thought a lot about what my name could be, but nothing ever seemed to fit. Being called Nao, though—that didn't feel bad at all.

"What should I call you?" I asked.

"...Aki."

"Aki?"

He nodded, a gentle look in his eyes.

It was the other way to read the first character in Shuuya's name.

Aki. Aki Sanada. That was his name.

It seemed to fall right into place. A perfect fit.

From that day forth, we were Nao and Aki.

"So you've been filling in for Sanada since June, Aki?" I asked, trying to get things straight.

Aki nodded.

Sanada had more injuries than just the broken ankle. He'd been in the hospital—and out of school—for three whole weeks.

And when he did come back, it hadn't been Sanada. It had been Aki all along. He had a whole new way of walking, keeping his weight on his left side and minimizing the time his right foot touched the ground.

"Shuuya hasn't left the house since his injury."

"Not even to go to rehab?"

"The doctor said that, with a little rehab, he could go back to everyday life. But he hasn't been back to the hospital since he was discharged. It was a compound fracture, and he was told it would be at least six months before he could even think about playing basketball again."

Considering how dedicated to the sport Sanada had been, that must have seemed like an eternity. I could only imagine.

The team would have to face the inter-high school prelims without their ace. They'd lose where it counted. Summer would end, and the third-years would leave the team.

I glanced at Aki. He was staring at the sky.

"I'd feel better if I could make myself hate Shuuya, but I can't."

I understood. Perhaps I was the only person who could. We were both replicas.

I'd often thought it would be easier if I could make Sunao into the villain. There were parts of her I didn't like. But deep down, I'd never really managed to *hate* her.

She was the reason I existed. The reason I got to experience everything I did. Even if I was just filling in for her—the time I spent doing that *mattered* to me.

"I feel sorry for Shuuya. They crushed his leg, and now he can't play basketball anymore. He can't even bring himself to go to school—it's like he became hollow inside."

I gulped. I could feel the blood draining from my face.

I hadn't misheard him. Aki had said it clearly: "They crushed his leg."

"Sanada really loved basketball," I said, frustrated by my inability do anything but state the obvious.

"That was what he did best. When he did well, everyone showered him with praise. So he practiced from morning till night. I think he liked being on a team more than the sport itself." Aki hung his head. "That's why I probably don't have long."

"Huh?"

I was confused, but he didn't say another word. Our talk ended there.

That's why I probably don't have long.

I'd come to regret this. I should have asked him to elaborate.



After we'd shared that secret, our lives changed. It was so subtle that if you closed your eyes for two seconds, you'd have missed it.

Sunao called for me, and I rode the bike the school, listening to its wheels whir.

I was getting good at putting my hair half-up in class.

I sat through morning lessons, ate lunch, and nodded off in the afternoon. Then we'd go to club together after school.

We'd pick two books out in the library, then we'd *flip flip flip* the pages and fill our lungs with the dust trapped between them.

We'd read Ricchan's writing and give her feedback. Aki's discerning remarks impressed her. He was officially appointed vice president.

As the heat faded, and the last of the cicada shells vanished from the tree branches, it happened.

One clear sunny day, I was walking between classes when someone called out to me.

"Aikawa."

I turned to find a third-year boy standing beside me. He had a model's good looks and nice, long limbs. His brown hair smelled like hairspray and was mussed up in a way that looked intentional. From beneath his long bangs, almond eyes gazed out at me.

"Hayase," I said.

This was Kou Hayase. Sunao knew his face—he was on the basketball team. And rumor had it he was the one who'd smashed Sanada's leg.

Everyone at school was whispering about how he'd disliked his teammate and decided to take him out. This was largely because some of his friends had gone around bragging about it.

Hayase and two other boys had called Sanada out, pinned him down, punched him in the stomach, and kicked his knees and legs. Not just once or twice, either. They'd said they were "disciplining a cocky underclassman."

Even though he'd been about to take them to the inter-high school tournament.

It was this boy's fault Sanada hadn't been able to compete in the finals. He would have been their star player.

"Been a while," Hayase said, like we were close. His lips curled up in a smile, his voice and attitude full of confidence.

He moved closer, and I quietly took a step back, using the textbooks in my arms to put up an invisible barrier.

He'd started to reach out his hand but put it on his hip instead, like he'd meant to do that from the start. This boy had a ton of little tricks to protect his

pride.

"Yes, it has," I said.

Sunao had stopped visiting the gym once summer vacation ended. She either sat in class, doing nothing; talked to friends in other classes; or went straight home and turned on the TV.

She was like one of the cicada shells left over after summer's end.

"You could have been our manager," he grumbled.

This was the second time he'd said this. The wording was only slightly different—last time he hadn't used the past tense.

"Too much work for me," I said. It was the same excuse Sunao had given him.

When she'd first enrolled here, a friend had invited her to a trial run as basketball team manager. The older students had taught them what the job involved—prepping drinks, wiping the sweat off the basketballs, hanging tons of laundry out to dry, filling out a daily log, keeping score—*Tired already? We're just getting started! Next...* 

Sunao dropped out after only one day. She'd crashed her bike into a telephone pole on the way home. There was still a dent in the front basket. She'd been so tired the next day, she didn't even call me to take her place and just stayed home.

"That again?"

Hayase sounded cross. He didn't exactly scowl, but his brows twitched.

I said nothing and just averted my eyes. I barely knew this guy, and I had no idea how to act around him.



The bell rang, freeing me from Hayase, and I escaped back to the classroom, totally fed up.

We had a short homeroom session to end the day, but the teacher's words went in one ear and out the other. It was our second year, so there was lots of

talk about our futures, but my mind was on other things.

Sunao had visited several open campuses around the prefecture over summer vacation. She'd also attended all the remedial lessons required of those planning to go on to higher education.

The teacher had met with her and her parents and said that, with her grades, she'd have no problems getting into the college she'd chosen. But her participation in class wasn't always ideal, so she should try to stay focused even outside of exam periods and avoid slacking off.

Her mother had nodded seriously throughout, but I didn't know how Sunao had taken it. Her memories were just a list of facts, and they didn't include her emotions.

"Nao, why was that hot guy messing with you earlier?"

I gulped. I'd been seen!

No wonder Ricchan had given me a weird look when I stepped into the clubroom.

Her grin held no spite. She didn't really keep up with school gossip. She wasn't the type to care. She probably didn't even realize that "hot guy" was the one who'd hurt Sanada.

I was acutely aware that Aki had stopped turning the pages of his book. I could feel his eyes on me.

"You know, the guy with the showy brown hair," said Ricchan.

"Ricchan."

I didn't want her saying any more. Perhaps my flustered look gave me away.

"You mean Hayase?" said Aki.

My lips tightened. It felt wrong to apologize.

What he'd done to Sanada was awful. Unpardonable.

But at the same time, I knew. Just as Sunao's fight with Ricchan had created me—Sanada's leg injury was the reason Aki existed.

That's why I couldn't figure out how to act around Hayase. I was conflicted,

and it made me feel guilty.

After club, Aki pulled me aside. Usually I was the one to start our conversations.

"President, sorry—can I have a word?" he said.

I made a strangled squeak. I'd lifted my satchel and wasn't sure if I should pick it up or put it back down.

Ricchan slid a black-and-white flyer across the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen, can I submit this as an addendum to your discussion?"

"Huh?"

"Only the locals know. It's a well-kept secret!"

Before I could ask what she meant, she fluttered her hand and left the room.

At first, neither Aki nor I spoke.

The space around us was lit by the setting sun—so red, it seemed fake, like a toddler had scribbled it in crayon. Our shadows stretched across the room. They were joined by that of the bookshelf and the fan, slowly shaking its head.

Finally, Aki moved.

"Do you wanna go?" he asked.

Ricchan had left us a flyer for a festival at a certain shrine.



The shine in question wasn't far from school.

I walked there with Aki, pushing my bike.

This festival was usually held at the end of summer, but there'd been a typhoon—and it had been postponed until September.

I left the bike on the gravel road that doubled as a parking lot. Then we

climbed a short stone staircase and found rows of stalls lining the shrine grounds.

"Wow."

They had everything. Shaved ice. Candied apples and grapes. Takoyaki. Yakisoba. Hot dogs. Cotton candy. Chilled pineapple. Balloon fishing and goldfish catching.

Crowds moved between the stalls. Grown-ups and children alike were smiling and making the most of the day.

As the sun turned a deep red, the stalls, the crowd, and even the gravel glowed orange in the lantern light. It was beautiful, like a world unto itself.

Festival music blared ceaselessly from the speakers. It mingled with the hum of the crowd and melted together in my ears. Local children laughed merrily and showed one another rice crackers they'd decorated with brushes dipped in syrup. I was sure my cheeks were dyed the same color as theirs.

"This is my first festival."

"Mine, too."

My excited whisper earned an equally enthusiastic reply. It made me giddy.

I traipsed across the cobblestones, spurred on by some unknown impulse—but soon I stopped short. Aki hadn't followed me.

"What is it?" I asked, turning around.

He was scratching his cheek. "I wish I could've seen a yukata."

I started to ask whose, then clammed up. I didn't need to ask.

There were girls all around us in yukatas, kinchaku purses on their arms. Seeing them had made him wonder what I'd look like in one. I felt my face flush.

Both of us were still in our boring old uniforms. I felt the same as he did.

"I wish I could've seen you in one, too."

Just as girls looked especially pretty in yukatas, boys looked especially cool. Aki had a chill, refreshing vibe to him, and I was sure he'd look good in traditional clothing.

He made a show of scratching his chin.

"Then we'll just have to pretend."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I giggled.

Sometimes he said the oddest things with a straight face. But it made talking to him special and left me eager to hear what he'd say every time those thin lips parted. It made me want to pay attention so I wouldn't miss a word.

I lifted my skirt an inch, in jest, and crooked my head.

"Then what pattern am I wearing?"

He thought a moment.

"Flowers, I think. Blue or light blue. Pink or white would look nice, too."

"Okay. I think you'd look good in a plain navy—or a deep green."

Aki blinked his eyes a few times. At first, I thought he was surprised, but then I was sure he had conjured up our imaginary yukatas and was burning their image into his memory.

I swung my flowery sleeves.

"Well, now that we've got our yukatas on," I said, "what shall we eat?"

It was no fun simply staring at everything from afar. It was time to partake.

Aki nodded, and we dove into the bustling crowds.

"Anything you want?" he asked.

"I'm a bit thirsty, so let's start with shaved ice!"

"Gotcha."

I could wear a yukata decorated with blooming hydrangeas, or white lilies, or cherry blossoms on black fabric. I'd put a decoration in my hair in the shape of a goldfish or a butterfly, tie an obi belt in any color of the rainbow tightly around my waist, and let the space between my toes turn red from rubbing up against the unfamiliar strap of a geta sandal.

If I was with Aki, I could wear any yukata I liked.

"Strawberry, melon, lemon, orange, or Blue Hawaii?" I wondered aloud.

Waiting in the short line in front of the shaved ice stall, I frowned as if I were struggling with some difficult test question. Aki looked supremely confident.

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"Did you make up your mind?" I asked.
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"Yes."
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"What'll it be, little lady?"

It was my turn already. I fished a thousand-yen bill from my kinchaku, thinking fast.

Shaved ice was three hundred yen, plus one hundred to add condensed milk. But there was no time to debate extras...

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"Um, one melon, please."

"Lemon?"

"M-melon."

"Lemon, right?"

"Melon!"
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After repeating this back and forth a few times, I heard the old-fashioned machine start grinding.

I received a cup with a mountain of ice, topped with bright green syrup, and joined Aki behind the stall.

We dusted off the top of a short stone wall and sat down together. The area back here was dimly lit, so no moths came to bother us. I could smell savory scents from the other stalls, whetting my appetite. I'd have to get yakisoba next.

I foraged through the ice with the combination spoon/straw. It made a satisfying crunch. I popped a scoop past my lips, and the sweetness filled my mouth.

"That's cold!"

We both said the same thing and then turned to each other, laughing.

We didn't need words to know. It wasn't just the festival—neither of us had

eaten shaved ice covered with syrup, either.

"What flavor did you get?" I asked.

I'd been so busy trying to make sure I got melon-and not lemon-flavored syrup, I'd missed his order. And in the dark, I couldn't tell what color it was.

"Guess," he said, scooping up some ice from his cup and holding it out to me.

I opened my mouth wide.

The cold numbed the tip of my tongue. The ice melted, but I couldn't begin to guess what flavor the syrup was.

"Figure it out?"

"No clue."

Aki stuck his tongue out. The natural pink was covered in an artificial shade.

"Your tongue's blue! Blue Hawaii!"

"Bingo."

He flashed me an impish grin. His syrup was named for an island a whole ocean away. Now that I knew what it was, I could process the flavor—even if I couldn't identify it.

He used the spoon to dig into the cup of ice once more and carried a spoonful to his own mouth. I couldn't watch. My cup was sweating in my hands, and I held it tightly and stared into the distance.

I was burning up and began to worry I'd melt the ice. What if he noticed? I tried to think of an excuse and failed. I hoped the festival music would drown out the sound of my beating heart.

Oblivious of my silence, Aki said, "You called my tongue a *shitabera*. Did you know that's actually dialect?"

"It is? Wait, is shitabero dialect, too?"

I'd heard Dad say *shitabero*, and Mom say *shitabera*. I used *shitabera*, but Sunao was the opposite. She said *shitabero*.

"I think so."

He shared another bite of his Blue Hawaii, and I think...it tasted a bit juicy this time.

I felt guilty eating his and not sharing my own, so I summoned up my courage. It took every ounce in my body just to do something so small.

"Want some of mine?" I asked.

"Sure."

To hide my embarrassment, I scooped so much melon-flavored ice onto my spoon that it was almost falling off. But Aki opened his mouth wide and gobbled it up.

I could hear crunching noises coming out of his nose.

"I always wanted to try the melon," he said, like he was showing his hand.

His second offer had been a ploy. I must have been as red as a candied apple.

"You could've just asked!" I pouted.

I tugged the sleeve of Aki's imaginary yukata, squeezing so hard that it would leave wrinkles. Even in the dark, I could tell he was beet red. His brows drooped, and he laughed an apology. He was definitely embarrassed.

We finished and tossed our cups in the garbage.

Once my hands were free, Aki softly took one. I wasn't sure whose hand was running hotter.

"Don't want to get separated," he said.

"...Okay."

There weren't enough people for that to be a problem, but I put on a serious face and nodded.

I curled my fingers in and out like a frightened child. Aki figured out what I was after and moved his own until our fingers were locked too tight for anyone to get between.

I could tell my heart was going a mile a minute. It was about to burst like a firework.

Hand in hand, we walked around the stalls, passing the same ones over and over. Heat from the grills blasted our faces, and the sweet smell of the cotton candy machine teased our nostrils. We looked at each other and smiled.

After that, we ate some yakisoba with nothing in it but cabbage and sauce and shared a rice cracker with a terrible drawing of a red panda on it. Why did it all taste so good?

We went through a batch of perfectly round takoyaki and a pair of candied apples that could have been twins, taking a bite of first one and then the other. Why were they so adorable? I wanted to rub my cheek against them. Marveling at it all, I blew on the takoyaki to cool them, then licked the candy off the side of my apple.

The goldfish broke free from my imaginary hair ornament and swam freely about the festival grounds, while the butterflies flapped elegantly. Petals escaped my yukata to dance in the breeze overhead, filling the night sky with color.

The drums and whistles of the festival music blared.

When I was with Aki, it was one "first" after another.



When we were tired and full, we passed through the torii gate and headed back down the stone stairs.

The music was as loud as ever, but it felt like the night had deepened, and the heat of the festival had faded. I could hear insects chirping in the brush and feel Aki walking by my side.

Just as seasons come to an end, I couldn't stay at the red panda exhibit all day, and we couldn't keep on our make-believe yukatas forever.

Reluctantly, I switched back to my uniform—then a thought struck me. I still hadn't heard what Aki wanted to talk about.

I turned to ask and found him looking tense. Uh-oh.

"Nao, this is our last day," he began.

My heart beat so loud, it hurt. I couldn't even lift my head.

"What...do you mean?" I managed, moving only my lips.

"Monday's judgment day, it seems."

He scratched his cheek, seemingly aware I had no idea what he was talking about. All I could see of it was his shadow bending across the fold of the stairs.

It was a hot, windless night, like the middle of summer.

"I've been tasked with getting revenge for Shuuya," he said. "Until then, I was supposed to attend school, living my life like nothing happened and buying time. Those were my two assignments."

"Revenge?"

"Shuuya's got a plan that hinges on me, his replica."

Words were flying in one ear and out the other. I was hearing them, but they weren't making sense.

Aki kept piling on the explanations, like he wanted to keep me from interrupting.

"It's pretty simple, really. I call Hayase out and beat him up beyond recovery. He'll tell people I did it, but Shuuya will be somewhere else while it's happening, where people can see him. The perfect alibi."

Revenge. Alibi. They were ominous words, straight out of a detective drama, and they were going right over my head.

I slowly looked up.

I wanted to cry. Aki wore a resigned smile.

As he stared at me, I felt like he was letting go of all the happiness we'd shared.

"Why?" I asked.

"Like I said—revenge."

That wasn't a real answer.

"Why do you have to hit him? Not the real Sanada, but you?"

Aki didn't answer. Why would he? I wasn't talking to him, but to Sanada—a boy who wasn't even here.

"What Hayase did is horrible. That's a fact. But Sanada himself should be the one to get payback. Why do you have to beat up Hayase? Why do you have to shoulder this burden?"

Violent people didn't get it.

We all had weapons. Our fists, our legs, our hard heads. There was no need for specialized tools—we all came equipped with the means to hurt one another.

Those who go around punching and kicking don't seem to realize their opponents have the same weapons but simply choose not to use them.

They know how much pain the victim feels—and that's why they won't do it.

Aki wasn't a violent person.

Sanada probably wasn't, either. That was why Sanada was trying to force everything onto his replica.

"I know you don't want to beat anyone up!"

My voice was getting louder, but Aki was silent.

He offered neither confirmation nor denial. He was doing all of this for Sanada.

I was choking up. My limbs felt numb. My head hurt, as if a hammer were pounding on the inside of it.

I felt heat behind my eyes. It burned so hot, I wanted to scream. My forehead felt ready to split, my hair about to stand on end. Tornadoes formed at the edges of my eyes. Waterfalls on my cheeks. My chin jerked, scattering the droplets.

Augh, stop. I can't.

I'm just Sunao's replica.

I started sobbing out loud, like a kid lost at the festival. Aki looked ready to cry

himself.

Uncertain hands reached toward me, pulling me into his arms.

The two of us were in a world of our own, teetering on the brink. Our eyes were closed, our heads up like we were lost in prayer. Tears ran down my chin.

Hey, God.

I don't believe in you.

And I'm sure you don't exist.

But please don't let this boy clench his fists.

If you can see how beautiful his hands are, free them from this cruel fate.

"Your hands are built for kindness, not for violence," I said.

He was a boy who opened doors softly, without a sound. A boy who took my hand gingerly, afraid of squeezing too hard. I didn't want to carve a single painful memory into those hands.

"I exist for Shuuya's sake," he said, his voice practically a groan.

"No. You were brought here to meet me."

I heard him gasp.

My tears were still falling. Dark spots formed on the ground by my feet. Violent floodwaters threatened to sweep me away, but I couldn't stop the words from flowing.

When did it happen?

When had he become so precious to me?

"You exist to go to the zoo with me. To the amusement park. To the festival. To the aquarium. To the movies."

"I didn't realize we had so many plans," Aki said, almost smiling.

"Next year, we're going to see the fireworks together."

I tightened my grip on his hand.

I didn't actually care where we went.

We didn't have to go anywhere. It could be a former storage closet; a corner of the hallway; the bench in the school's back garden; or even a road with tiny, nameless weeds growing along it.

Red pandas were not required. As long as he was with me, smiling.

"All right," he said.

I looked up, unsure of what he meant. My lips quivered.

"I really don't want to punch anyone," Aki said, reassuring me.

"...Mm."

"So you'll need to be persuasive."

I will?

"Who am I persuading?" I asked, sniffling.

Aki grinned and said, "Sunao Aikawa."

## ACT FOUR A Replica, Falling

It was Monday morning, and the whole school was on tenterhooks.

I got irritated each time I heard the others chatting about it with open curiosity. But I didn't let it show—because I saw Aki keeping it together.

He was focused, impassive. Everyone wanted to talk to him, but nobody dared—and that made me feel pathetic for getting upset all by myself.

I took several deep breaths. It felt like an eternity before lunch finally arrived.

Even the *ticktock* of the clock hands sounded sluggish. Perhaps I felt that way because, deep down, part of me hoped lunch would never arrive.

When the bell rang, I jumped to my feet.

The teacher hadn't given permission yet, and I could feel my classmates' eyes boring into me. But once I'd moved, everyone started acting like class was over, and they began pushing their desks together for lunch.

The word *gym* was on everyone's lips. I looked back across the hubbub and found that Aki was already gone. He had to change and get himself ready, so he'd probably headed out right away.

We'd done what we could. I was sure it would work out somehow.

Still, I hustled out of the classroom, heedless of the noise my slippers made. In the hall, I saw an underclassman standing by the faucets.

"Ricchan."

"Nao!"

She ran over to me, looking relieved, and we headed to the gym together. Her shoulders looked as tense as mine, and neither of us said a word as we headed down the covered outdoor path between the two school buildings.

It was common for boys to gather in the gym to play basketball at lunch. I often saw girls playing badminton outside, too.

But today was different. The gym was packed with students. It was as if class were in session, except both sides of the court were clear, and everyone was gathered around the edges.

Students from all three years were present. There were more boys than girls,

but there were plenty of the latter, too. It seemed Sanada had succeeded in getting plenty of attention.

Everyone was waiting for the match to begin. The sheer size of the crowd only added to the sense of anticipation.

Three minutes passed, and at last, the stars appeared from either end of the gym. I'd expected cheers, but the crowd stayed silent. I heard someone gulp, but I wasn't sure if it was me or Ricchan.

Both players came to stand on the side of the court nearest the entrance and faced each other off at a distance. Aki had two full inches on Hayase, but since he was favoring his injured foot, the older boy looked bigger.

They were both still in uniform—slacks and button-down shirts—but not wanting to hurt their ankles, they had swapped out their slippers for basketball shoes. The rest of their outfit remained the same, as they'd agreed beforehand.

This was just a little lunchtime game. One step above killing time. Aki had insisted that changing into their team uniforms or arranging for a referee would only make his opponent wary.

"Hayase, thanks for joining me today."

Aki bowed, all manners, his face free of any real emotion.

Hayase rolled his shoulders, pointedly lifting his brows and lower lip.

"Your leg not bothering you?" he asked.

A stir ran through the crowd. No one had expected him to bring up the injury.

Aki knelt down and retied his shoes. He seemed unbothered by the dig. Or at least he did to me.

"It doesn't cause me any problems day-to-day," he said.

"Good to hear." He chuckled, sending shivers down my spine. "I hear you joined the Literature Club," Hayase muttered, looking right at me. He'd managed to pick me out of the crowd.

Aki pretended he didn't hear him.

"So these are the stakes. If I win, you apologize for crushing my leg."

Hayase didn't feign innocence. There was no proof, after all. And Sanada had already quit the team, so the rest didn't matter. Hayase was sure of that—but he was even more convinced he had this game in the bag.

"And if I win?" he asked.

"Well, if you wanna crush the other leg...," Aki said, jerking his chin.

I saw a sadistic gleam in Hayase's eyes.

The game would be your basic one-on-one. No time limit. The first to land a shot would be the winner.

Aki had picked these simplistic rules because of Sanada's injured ankle. Shuuya Sanada couldn't afford a drawn-out match.

"I'll take first defense," he said.

Hayase whistled mockingly. "Oh? You sure about that?"

One shot would end this, so Aki was giving him a big advantage. Hayase was no slouch—before Sanada joined the team, he'd been their ace.

"I figured you'd need a handicap," said Aki.

Hayase said nothing back, but his cheeks stiffened.

A team member tossed in a ball, and Hayase caught it. He started with a rhythmic dribble, getting a feel for things.

"Are you gonna give me a signal?" he asked.

"Start anytime you want."

Squeak, squeak. Bam, bam. The gym floor echoed.

No whistle sounded.

Before dozens of watchful eyes, the match got quietly underway.

Dribbling one-handed, Hayase closed in on Aki.

He leaned forward, the ball bouncing beneath his arm. He was dribbling much faster now. Aki reached for the ball several times, but it kept coming back to Hayase's palm, like it was drawn to it.

Even I could tell his control was strong. Could Aki really steal a ball dribbled

that way? Just watching had me out of breath.

The ball snapped between Hayase's legs. I'd just managed to track the movement—when he shot forward, from his left.

With Aki's right foot injured, he reacted a beat too late. He winced. Hayase seized the opening.

His chest expanded, and his back straightened. He held the ball in two hands and steadied himself. Aki reached for a block, trying to make up for lost time.

But the ball never left Hayase's hands. It was a feint. He'd faked making a shot to get past Aki, and his lips twisted into a smile as he thrust the ball out before him.

He must have been certain he was clear. Maybe everyone believed it. Hayase committed to his shot, and we all thought he'd land it.

A crack echoed through the gym.

Some girls squealed and ducked out of the way as the ball bounded hard off the wall.

Aki had seen through Hayase's feint and pretended to fall for it. As the ball took off, he'd smacked it away from behind.

"My turn," Aki announced.

The crowd buzzed.

This was getting exciting. Hayase swore under his breath, clearly frustrated.

He'd underestimated Aki. If he didn't get serious, he'd lose.

Letting Hayase take first offense had been strategy. Aki needed to keep this match as short as possible, and to that end, he'd need to block Hayase at his least wary and then make the most of the opportunity that provided.

He couldn't draw this out any longer.

"Your leg seems fine," Hayase spat.

"I'm glad it looks that way."

Someone tossed the ball to Aki.

He bounced it once. It practically punched a hole in the floor. It bounded up, the impact shaking the gym.

"Payback time, Hayase."

He sounded like he couldn't wait, like he might dash forward at any moment.

Hayase pulled back a bit. His eyes were glued to Aki's every movement, ready to match him.

But Aki didn't take a step forward—or to the side.

Instead, the ball moved vertically.

He'd made a one-handed shot from the sideline.

Internally, I was screaming. Go in!

Hayase hadn't seen it coming, and the ball sailed over his head. It traced a strong arc—a three-point shot, as if to mock all of Hayase's caution.

It didn't even graze the rim; it passed right through the center of the ring.

Then it fell, bounced three times on the gym floor, and rolled to a stop.

As Hayase stood stunned, Aki shrugged.

"During my trial membership, you told me yourself—one-on-ones are all about acting."

He'd specifically mentioned payback to hide the fact he planned to shoot right away. If the trick worked, and his opponent backed off—then Aki wouldn't even have to move.

Silence hung in the air for a beat. Then the crowd roared.

The enthusiasm was infectious. The wounded ace's flawless revenge got everyone off their feet.

"Guess I win," Aki said, yanking up the front of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his cheeks. "Can I get that apology now?"

His words were audible even above the hum of the crowd.

"...It was an accident," came a voice like the buzzing of a fly. "But sorry."

Couldn't he at least try to sound sincere?

I ground my teeth, but Aki just nodded.

"Then we're done here. I'll handle the cleanup."



Hayase made a face but left the gym. A few boys hustled after him—his friends?

The match was over, but the crowd was only growing. A few of them had come running as soon as they finished eating, and I heard them wailing that they'd missed the match.

Several students flocked to Aki. Team members, I assumed. To my relief, he was smiling back at them. He'd borrowed that bike before vacation, so I knew he had friends. Things might be strained, but their bonds weren't entirely broken.

We'd left the most important task entirely to Ricchan, and I ran over to her.

"Thanks, Ricchan. You got it all?"

"No problemo. Filmed every second."

She lowered the phone she'd been holding out in front of her chest. It was Aki's. But she was hardly the only student who'd been recording this.

She held it out, so I took it from her.

"Sanada nailed it."

"Mm," I managed. All I could do was nod. "That he did."

I'd only ever played basketball in PE class. Yet even I could tell how good he was. He'd trounced Hayase.

Ricchan had been in charge of filming the proceedings. She'd been broadcasting it live to a certain group chat, all the way from the boys' first exchange to the denouement.

We'd wanted Sanada—Shuuya Sanada—to see this in real time.

For his sake, Aki had staged a proper basketball match. And he had delivered Hayase's comeuppance.



Back on Friday, at the festival, I'd cried my eyes out, and they were still

stinging when Aki came back from the stalls.

"Take this," he said, offering me a fruit-flavored soda in a lightbulb-shaped container. The stand selling them had really stood out.

There was a button on the bottom of the bulb that adjusted the speed at which the light pulsed.

Watching that artificial light flash and blink, everything started to seem silly—and I broke into a laugh.

I wondered what he'd looked like lining up for this.

I bet everyone he passed on the way back did a double take, embarrassing him even further. The more I thought about it, the harder I laughed.

"Should I have grabbed a ramune instead? Or a regular plastic bottle?"

He seemed sullen. Maybe I'd laughed too hard. I wiped my fresh tears and shook my head.

"No, this is perfect. Thanks."

The light-up cup would have made for a great post on social media, but the warm flame he'd lit in my heart put it to shame.

I took the cup with both hands. It was nice and cold. I pressed it to my eyes.

Ah, that feels good.

I felt like the chill of the glass was both soothing my eyelids and opening up new possibilities in my mind.

The straw was shaped like a heart, and I put it to my lips and took a sip of the fizzy drink within as Aki took his phone out of his pocket.

"Who are you calling?" I asked.

"Shuuya's cell phone."

I saw the name "Shuuya" on the screen.

"Sanada...has his own phone?"

"Mm. He gave me this one, said to use it however I want."

We were both replicas, but Aki's relationship with Sanada was pretty different

from mine and Sunao's.

He dialed and put the phone to his left ear, then glanced my way. I soon realized he wanted me to listen in.

I nodded and put my ear to the warm back of the phone. Then I pressed the button on the cup, turning the lightbulb's flash to high speed.

He bumped me with his elbow, but he was smiling.

I could smell the grass and soil, and the faint musk of our sweat. It was slightly embarrassing, but I wanted to stay sitting next to him, our knees and damp elbows pressed together.

I hoped he felt the same.

I switched the lightbulb off just as Sanada came on the line.

"Hello?"

His low voice sounded different and a bit robotic through the phone's speakers. To me, it sounded completely unlike Aki's—like that of a stranger.

"Sorry, Shuuya. I'm backing out of the revenge plot."

I heard a gasp on the other end of the line.

He'd never imagined his replica would say something like that. Replicas did what the original said. Sanada and Sunao believed that—and so had I. That was what I'd been taught, and I'd thought it was all I was allowed.

Aki was denying that. He calmly explained how he didn't like the idea, reminding Shuuya that assaulting people was a crime and that it was no different from what Hayase had done. He was doing something amazing and without a trace of arrogance.

To my surprise, Sanada never once interrupted. He simply heard Aki out, so quietly I thought he might be holding his breath.

A group of children ran past us on the stairs, then a family with little kids, then a junior high school couple. They were all leaving the festival to return to their regular lives, and none of them was in a hurry.

It was clear they all wanted to linger. They weren't ready to go home yet.

And that's why festivals must come to an end, I thought as I watched their backs recede.

As I finished the last of my drink, Sanada murmured, "So you're telling me to give up on my revenge?"

His voice was shaking, though I wasn't sure if he was angry or sad. But Aki denied the statement outright.

"No, we'll get revenge. The right way."

"What's the right way?"

"Like athletes. That, I can help with."

In the end, Sanada agreed to Aki's new plan. Perhaps he had been frightened of his own scheme from the beginning and had been fretting all along. He'd already waited nearly four months, unable to commit.

Sanada was still part of the basketball team group chat, so he used that to issue Hayase a challenge. Once the rest of the team members were aware, it would be harder for the other boy to worm out of it.

This paid off, and the challenge was accepted in a matter of minutes. The other team members then spread word of the match over the weekend.

After that, Aki and I split up and went our separate ways. I announced my arrival to Mom's back as she chopped away with her knife, then I headed up the stairs to Sunao's room.

Aki had asked a single favor of me—it was the only part of this I could help with.

"Sunao, can you let me be the one at school on Monday?"

Sunao unlocked the door and opened it. She was probably about to ask why I was back so late. Or maybe she was just going to say "Enough" and dismiss me, like always.

But since I had made my request right away and bowed, still smelling like the festival, all she did was let out a small sound and go quiet.

She was clearly rattled. It was the first time I'd ever made a request like this.

I thought she'd be mad. But Sunao didn't yell at me.

"At least come in. Give me the full story before dinner."

She didn't want Mom overhearing. Feeling like I was walking into a job interview, I stepped inside.

I sat down on the desk chair, ready to face the music. Sunao sat on the bed. I kept nothing from her.

I told her that Sanada was also a replica and that the real one hadn't been to school since his injury. I told her how we'd found each other out, about the revenge plot, about Aki's request, and why I wanted to be at school on Monday.

Sunao seemed slightly bewildered, at a loss. It bore an uncanny resemblance to the vibe I'd gotten from Sanada over the phone.

When I had finished, we heard Mom calling from below. Dinner tonight would be omelet rice. Sunao yelled, "Coming!" then looked at me again.

She was still pretty rattled, which worried me, but she nodded.

"I get all that, and I don't mind swapping. But I've got one condition."

"What? I'll do anything."

I got out of the chair and dove into a kneel on the carpet.

If she wanted me to get a perfect score in every subject on the next set of exams, I'd do it. That's how determined I was.

How could I let Aki down? I knew the truth. I'd felt his knees shaking under my hands. He'd asked this one favor of me—to be beside him. He'd said that if I was there, he couldn't lose.

So I would be there, even if I had to crawl all the way to school.

Sunao seemed taken aback by my fervor, but she managed to mumble her reply.

"I want to see the match, too."

It was the last thing I'd expected her to say, and I blinked in confusion.

"Wait a second," I said, desperate.

Aki had given me his number, so I called him from Sunao's phone. He was immediately on board with the plan. If she could be there in the gym herself, it would make things easy, but that wasn't an option—we'd have to live stream it.

Sunao, Sanada, and Aki made a group chat for the three of them, and with that, we were all ready for Monday—judgment day.



"I'm headed back to class. I still haven't eaten lunch."

"Okay. Thanks, Ricchan."

"Happy to oblige!"

Ricchan dashed off. The gym was steadily emptying.

Soon, it was just Aki and me. He'd been waiting for this and immediately flopped down on his back.

Even when he hit the floor, he barely made a sound.

"Man, I'm bushed," he whispered.

He cast a sidelong glance in my direction. I might be slow on the uptake, but I knew what that meant.

I took a seat on the gym floor next to him. I'd brought a sports towel, and I blotted the sweat from his weary brow.

"You were very cool," I said.

"All right!" Aki scrunched up his face and pumped a fist.

That's when a call came in, and Aki's phone started vibrating. I got nonverbal permission and answered for him.

Once I'd put it on speaker, a man's voice came out.

"Good work."

"Mm," Aki said, not sitting up.

He grabbed a fistful of his shirt and wiped his stomach and chest. I had to

avert my eyes.

"You really beat him. Was it my muscle memory?"

Sanada sounded impressed. His tone was far brighter than you'd expect from someone who hadn't left his room in months. Maybe he was putting on an act to keep from bringing down the mood.

"Nice job."

This was Sunao's voice—standoffish, barbed, tense. Perhaps her attitude was normal for a conversation with two boys she barely knew.

So she had watched the stream.

"Mm." Aki gave her the same grunt he'd given Sanada a moment before. He must have been too tired to bother forming words.

The conversation died there. Perhaps that made Sanada uncomfortable, because he started mumbling.

"Right... You don't feel the pain. That probably helped. But that's great."

"Oh yeah. I guess that's true," Sunao agreed.

"I'm still struggling to even walk!" Sanada's voice went up a notch. "Replicas are great! You're nailing the limp. I knew that would fool Hayase."

...What the hell? Great, my ass.

My brow twitched. I felt lava boiling up inside me, a fiery impulse I couldn't stifle.

"Sorry, grit your teeth."

Before Aki could protest, I reached down and poked his right ankle.

"Owwww!"

He let out a yelp. His throat tightened around the sound. He was practically screaming.

There was a horrified silence on the phone. Both people listening could tell that was no performance. In my mind's eye, I could see both Sanada and Sunao freezing up and gasping.

"Of course it hurts!" I shouted. "He played through the pain."

Aki glared at me, so I rapped the side of his hard head.

I knew better than anyone how he felt. That was why I couldn't stay silent.

Sanada whispered something, too soft for me to hear.

"W-wait, does that mean you also feel pain?" Sunao's voice spilled out over his. It took on the shrill tone that meant she was upset.

I pouted my lips. "When your head hurts, mine does, too. When your stomach hurts, so does mine."

"But you never once said—"

"How could I?"

My brows snapped together. Wasn't it obvious?

What do you two think we are?

"How could I say anything, Sunao?! I wanted to help you!"

Don't worry about the pain. You don't have to force yourself. Your replica doesn't feel it, so she'll go to school for you.

Seeing Sunao relieved as she curled up in bed comforted me. I knew I was helping her, that she needed me. And so I took painkillers behind her back.

I'm sure Aki did the same thing. For Sanada's sake, he never let on how much it hurt. At home, he probably didn't even let himself limp.

I'd feel better if I could make myself hate Shuuya, but I can't.

That was how Aki really felt.

He let out a long sigh. "We're hanging up now," he said. "Originals, talk among yourselves."

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"Hey, wait—"
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Sanada tried to say something else, but Aki powered down the phone. *Merciless*.

But this, too, was part of the plan. Sunao had asked that we arrange some time for her to talk to Sanada in private, if the match went well. She wouldn't

tell me why.

"I wonder what they're talking about...," I said.

"I can imagine."

I blinked at Aki. I couldn't begin to guess.

"I bet Aikawa wants to talk to Shuuya about how to deal with us replicas."

How to deal with us?

How to deal with Second? With me?

"I'm not saying Shuuya's approach is necessarily the right one. But talking to someone who's in the same boat gives you stuff to think about."

Come to think of it, Aki said Sanada had never once dismissed him.

Every weekday, he went to school as Shuuya Sanada. When he got back, he read in Sanada's room or took an early bath.

Aki ate dinner with the family, while Sanada ate onigiri or sandwiches Aki bought for him at the convenience store. In the evening, Aki slept in the bed, while Sanada studied—he was pretty nocturnal these days.

It was like Aki was the real Sanada, and Sanada was the shadow, living his life in secret.

He'd once told me, "If he did dismiss and resummon me, I'd come back kinda pudgy."

The real Sanada's shut-in lifestyle had made it hard to retain his athletic build.

His family was well off, and his allowance was enough to pay for Aki's phone out of pocket. He split the rest of it between the two of them, giving Aki enough money to buy food and have fun.

He'd told Aki he could do whatever he wanted at school, so he'd joined the Literature Club.

When I asked if he liked books, he'd said, "They're okay."

But I didn't think he'd decided to join the club on a whim. In fact, I was pretty sure I was the only one who understood his real reason.

Even replicas desire a place of their own. Perhaps it was coincidence that he'd picked the Literature Club—but I was proud he'd chosen us.

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"Thanks, Nao."
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"Mm?"

"I'd never played basketball before."

He'd said that on Friday, too. He wanted to prove he could win purely on Sanada's own power, so he hadn't even practiced. If he hadn't told me, I probably wouldn't have been nearly as stressed.

"I wasn't sure I could win. I was so nervous! I only got over my anxiety because you were here cheering for me."

His words took my breath away.

"You heard me?"

"Yeah. At the end, you were shouting, 'Go in!"

I was stunned.

My voice had resonated with him.

A wave of joy surged through me. I felt like it would spill out and crash against the silent walls of the gym.

I didn't want to unleash that flood, so I forced myself to scowl. After all, the match had done a number on Aki's foot.

"You were very cool, but you can't keep doing stuff like this!"

"I know."

"Never again."

"I said, I know!"

We went back to class, took our seats, and rushed through our lunches.

There was a small piece of shell in my eggs, but I didn't have time to pick it out, so I just crunched through it. Shells were good for you—full of calcium.

Everything felt so strange.

Despite all that had happened, time never stopped. Afternoon classes were held as usual, and then school was over, like nothing had happened.

The match came up in conversation at our club meeting, but the discussion didn't last long. We were way more invested in the novel Ricchan had finally finished.

Her protagonists were no longer called the Duals or the Doppelgängers, but the Dead Ringers. Her glasses gleaming, Ricchan insisted that this was the swankiest name.

The term *dead ringer* referred to something that was the spitting image of another, but I felt like it emphasized that her two protagonists were separate people and not just doubles. I agreed at once, eager to read her story.

She planned to polish her prose and submit it to a contest—the deadline was coming up soon.

We put our hands together and prayed for its safe completion—directing our worship at the fan in lieu of a shrine collection box. We owed that fan our lives —it had turned its head all summer long, saving us from the heat. It was past time to pack it away, but we'd grown fond of it, and frankly this room didn't come with much storage space.

After club, I saw Aki heading to his bus, and I called after him.

"I'll go with you to the station."

He turned around, eyes wide.

I'd caught him stealthily rubbing his foot, and I wasn't about to take no for an answer.

I felt sorry for the bike, left all alone in the parking lot, but it would have to camp there tonight. At least it had a roof to keep it out of the elements. Tomorrow, Sunao or I—I wasn't sure which of us would be at school—would have to take the train or the bus in. I'd just have to explain the situation to Sunao and ask her nicely.

I'd never thought that would feel so easy.

If Sunao was rethinking how to deal with me, I'd have to do the same.

Up until now, I'd done everything I could not to disrupt her life. It was practically pathological. And it had never been possible. Just as she influenced me, what I did affected her. We were split in two, our waves crashing against each other. Of course there would be negatives.

Aki thought for a moment and rubbed the back of his head. "Then let's go."

"Aye-aye!"

I saluted and moved to his side, where I could catch him if he stumbled.

There was no one else at the bus stop. Far more students rode bikes.

It didn't take long for the bus to Shizuoka Station to arrive. It was right on time. We boarded, finding it fairly empty, though not as empty as the bus to the zoo.

We sat together at the back.

Aki, tired from the match, folded his arms and closed his eyes as the bus pulled out.

"You can lean on me," I said. I felt him turn my way. "Or lay your head on my lap." I wasn't sure I'd managed to suppress the tremor in my voice.

He leaned toward me, and our arms touched ever so slightly.

A warm body close to my own. I liked him even when his sweat overpowered the scent of soap, like today.

With his eyes closed, he looked...satisfied. Like he'd set down a burden and could finally relax.

Aki had succeeded in getting Sanada's revenge, and he hadn't even had to hit anyone. I suspected Sanada was feeling a little better now, too.

"What happens next?" I asked.

I didn't need an answer. Part of me wanted things to remain ambiguous. But to my surprise, Aki responded loud and clear.

"I think Shuuya will dismiss me."

He'd said the words I least wanted to hear.

"I think he'll finally recover," Aki continued. "He'll stand back up on his own two feet and go back to school. He'll have no more need for me."

I shivered. Goose bumps rose all over my skin.

I wanted to object; I wanted to scream my opposition. But not one word came out of me—because I could feel him trembling.

I should have died ages ago, so why did I live this long?

"It's a pretty common conclusion," he went on. "The protagonist merges with their duplicate, and the story has a happy ending."

"What book is that?" My voice sounded louder than I'd intended. The old lady in front of us shifted her shoulders, annoyed. "Tell me the title so I can go rip it up."

Aki laughed softly. I couldn't believe he was still making that expression—refreshed, like he'd just accomplished everything he'd set out to do.

I refused to accept that we were destined to be reabsorbed. I had not lived all this time to be treated like the spice in someone else's story.

The silence between us continued until we reached the south entrance of the train station.

We passed through the crowded gates and took the elevator to the platform. Aki thought I was going too far, but he was injured, so this was necessary.

We stopped at the yellow number 12 printed on the floor, indicating the train car. It was rush hour, so a line formed behind us. We stood at the front, with the crowd stretching behind.



I set my heavy satchel down and peered up at the sunset. Shizuoka didn't have many tall buildings, but the evening sky still seemed squeezed into the gap between them.

"I'd like to go see a movie."

Aki was far too nice to pretend he hadn't heard me.

"Wanna go now?"

"No. Let's go tomorrow."

He was scratching his cheek. I'd put him on the spot. But I felt we needed a promise—one that would ensure we saw each other tomorrow, the next day, and well after that.

But in truth, we couldn't make those kinds of promises. We couldn't keep them. If Sunao and Sanada went to school tomorrow, or even just one of them, the promise would be broken.

We didn't have that kind of freedom. Sunao and Sanada weren't gods. I understood that they couldn't grant our every wish or give perfect answers.

They were just high school kids. None of us was free. Human or replica.

I gazed at Aki's pimple-free cheeks in the light of the setting sun. No matter what, I wanted to be with him.

"So—," he began.

What had he meant to say?

His words were interrupted by a thump.

Aki leaned too far forward. Only I saw it happen.

All thoughts vanished from my mind.

I wasn't thinking anymore.

I just caught his arm and pulled with all my might. That was all.

And that left me off-balance. The back of my loafer caught air. Those awful crushed backs, constantly trying to curl up on me.

He was yelling. I twisted back and saw his desperate expression.

A powerful light dazzled me. It felt like every bit of me was lit up, and I couldn't close my eyes.

An orange stripe on a gray car. The train was coming toward me.

And then I—



I stood there, stunned.

I was on the platform, unable to move. I'd forgotten how to breathe.

The screech of the brakes left vapor trails in my mind.

Someone was yelling about a fall. I heard shrieking, saw station staff running. Hundreds of eyes searched the tracks, phones in hand.

She fell, right? I saw it! Oh, shit. Did she jump? Suicide? Please, no. How long will this train be delayed? I'm late for work already.

I bet there's bits of flesh and blood all over! Ugh, gross! I don't need the trauma. But I don't see anything. Is she stuck under the car? I thought there'd be a larger spray...

The crowd buzzed, everyone saying whatever crossed their minds.

My lungs were burning, my vision narrowing. I lost my balance and fell to my knees, but the crowd was too excited to notice.

"Nao."

I looked around, but she wasn't there.

"Nao."

I looked down at the tracks below, but she didn't answer.

"Nao."

Time passed, but her soft voice did not reply.

She'd been right here. She'd been right here with me. She'd talked about seeing a movie, stared at me nervously.

She'd been so cute, so sad—my chest had clenched up. I wanted to pull her into my arms, but that would have felt like I was saying good-bye, and I'd tightened my fists and suppressed the urge. All that happened mere minutes ago.

The station and train staff were talking. Several of them were down on the tracks, holding something up.

Torn bits of a uniform. Only then did I remember how to breathe.

I can't just shut down here.

I had to stay calm.

"...Ahhh."

That scrap of white cloth had dirt on it but nothing red. My head swiveled back and forth, but I didn't see anything that suggested she had died.

My ankle throbbed. I'd put my full weight on it while trying not to fall, compounding the pain left over from the basketball match.

Nao had grabbed my shoulder and saved me from falling. So I was fine.

But I hadn't staggered from exhaustion. Someone had pushed me.

I could still feel the hand, like an ink print left on my back. It was a clear act of aggression. The owner of that hand had meant to kill me.

Only now did I turn back. But all I saw were strangers' faces. I'd never be able to pick out the culprit.

They'd probably fled long ago while I stood in a daze. I was mad at myself, but even if I'd seen their face, I doubt I could have acted in time.

Favoring my right foot, I picked myself up and slung Nao's satchel over my shoulder.

The trains would be out of commission for a while, and I had to make sure of something right away.

I left the platform and headed for the bus stop by the north entrance. Then I searched the map until I found a bus for Mochimune.

I'd have loved to run the whole way, but with my injured ankle, I knew the

bus would be faster. I'd managed enough presence of mind to think that far ahead.

Fortunately, I found the bus stop right away. The route ran down Komagata Street to Mochimune Station. There was only one bus an hour on weekday evenings, but the next one would arrive in ten minutes.

It was a thirty-minute ride to the station. A stooped old woman on her way back from the clinic got on ahead of me, and I followed her, tapping my orange LuLuCa card and grabbing a seat nearby.

LuLuCa cards weren't just for buses; they worked on the Shizuoka Railway and the subway, and you could earn points for them by shopping at the mall in the station underground. On the right day, they'd get you a discount on movie tickets at the Cenova theater, so every high schooler had one.

You were brought here to meet me.

To go to the movies with me.

That line, delivered in her tear-filled voice, was like a spotlight shining through my spinning thoughts.

I'd been acting like some hero. My work here was done, and I was resigned to my fate, ready to relinquish this borrowed life. But her voice had made that impossible.

I'd been about to ask, So what are we seeing?

Someone shook my shoulders, and I came back from my thoughts. The bus driver looked at me anxiously, and I fled out the door. My right ankle still hurt.

I'd just been to this little white station a few days before. It sat under a warm brick-colored roof oblivious to our plight.

Gazing up at it, it hit me—I wasn't calm at all.

I took my phone out of my pocket.

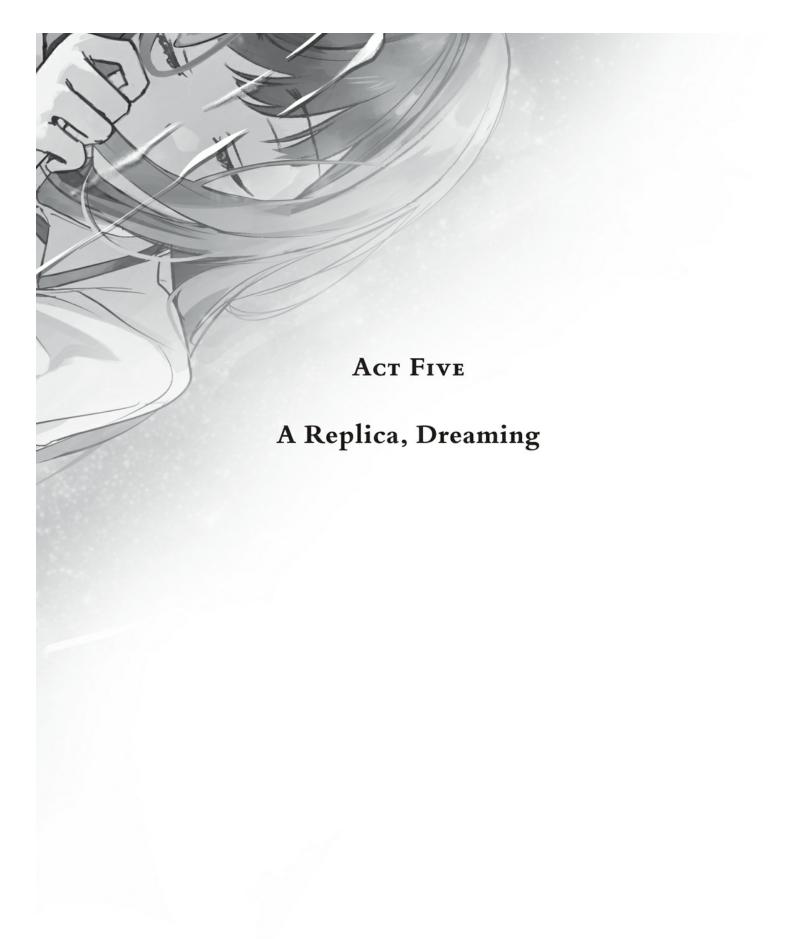
It rang for an agonizingly long time, but at last someone picked up.

"What?"

The voice on the other end was pointed and direct, like the sharpened tip of a branch.

"Nao might be dead."

The unfamiliar neighborhood around me began to warp. I realized there were tears in my eyes.



I opened my eyes.

How was that possible?

What was going on? Wasn't I already—?

My vision was badly blurred. I blinked several times but still couldn't focus. It was like my eyesight had abruptly declined.

I soon worked out why.

Sunao was in front of me, wiping her face with the wrinkled sleeve of her pajamas. Her purple lips were parted. I thought she was gasping for air—but no.

"Tha—"

Sunao had almost said something. What was it?

I didn't know. I never knew what was going through her head.

She abruptly fell to her knees, her elbow banging against the cabriole-legged table. The phone in her hand dropped to the carpet.

Sunao didn't even yelp. She just curled up, shivering.

"What's wrong, Sunao?"

She made noises, but they didn't form words. It was more like the growl of a wild animal.

Confused, I tried to rifle through her memories—

Then the doorbell rang. At a time like this? Sunao was shaking like a leaf, not budging. I had to answer it for her.

I left the room and went downstairs. On the way down, I realized I was in pajamas, but there was no time to change.

Pajamas. A few seconds earlier, I'd been with Aki at Shizuoka Station.

I'd been in uniform. A clean white blouse. A pleated, checked skirt. A turquoise ribbon at the chest. Loafers, with the backs crushed. My hair half-up.

My hair was down now. It streamed behind me as I padded barefoot to the front door.

I opened it to find Aki outside, badly out of breath.

Tears were streaming down both his cheeks. He looked ready to collapse at any second.

"Thank...God," he gasped.

His hands reached out and pulled me into an embrace.

"Thank God. I'm sorry. Thank you. I can't—I'm sorry."

He smelled only of sweat. No soap left. The scent of fear and worry.

Why was he here? I didn't try to ask. I found the answer in Sunao's recent memories.

Trying to save Aki, I'd fallen on the tracks as a train came in.

They hadn't found my body.

A lot of people saw it happen. The staff heard a schoolgirl had fallen on the tracks and searched for me, but all they found were a tattered uniform and those smooshed loafers. The train itself was sent back to the depot for inspection, but service had been restored within the hour.

I looked down past his shaking shoulders, recognizing the satchel at his feet.

How must he have felt? It must have been awful. I'm sure he blamed himself. His voice over the phone, telling Sunao what happened—it had been so rattled, it was hard to even make out the words.

Sunao had given Aki her address and told him to come over right away.

Aki hadn't seen who pushed him.

Sunao's memories cut in and out. She'd been a mess, her perception scrambled. It was like turning the page to find no more letters, just slashes across the page, like nails dragged across it.

Wrapped in Aki's strong arms, I froze up—like an ice sculpture that refused to melt. My throat was rigid, my ears straining, my eyes still locked on another place's scenery.

I had seen him.

I'd seen the boy who'd pushed Aki. Standing there, right behind him.

I think I caught a smirk on his lips, curled into a twisted crescent moon. His nostrils had flared outward, his pupils eerily dilated.

I broke into a cold sweat. Just remembering that moment made me want to yell in horror. But my frozen throat wouldn't budge, and my scream crashed against its icy barrier, dissipating with no place to go.

How long did we stand there like that? One minute? Ten? It could have been an hour.

Eventually, Aki went home. It was almost time for Mom to get back. She'd freak if she saw me standing in the doorway, wrapped in a boy's arms.

I saw him off. He still looked worried sick, but I smiled and waved. Like people do whenever they see a steam locomotive.

Had I actually managed a smile? Really? I wanted to run straight to the bathroom mirror to check.

I picked up the satchel and found Sunao behind me.

"Sorry, Sunao," I said. "Sounds like I lost the shoes and the uniform."

She didn't say a word. Just shook her head, looking tired. Her eyes were puffy. Mine were, too.

Sunao held out a hand, and I gave her the satchel.

"You go take a bath," she said.

"Huh?"

I hadn't used the bath since grade school. It had been one of Sunao's experiments. She'd wanted to know if her replica had the mole under her arm.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure."

Did she really mean that? I was still hesitant, but I took her at her word. My whole body was covered in a gross sweat.

I felt as if that boy's horrifying eyes were still watching me.

Sunao ran the bath for me. I changed by the sink. The pajamas and underwear I had on went in the laundry bin. They'd vanish when I did, but Sunao said that didn't matter.

I washed my face first. I lathered up a sponge and scrubbed my body. Then I shampooed my hair. I followed the same order Sunao always did. Her habits were ingrained in my body, and my limbs readily moved to reproduce them.

As I rinsed the conditioner out of my hair, I realized I hadn't looked in the mirror. But I didn't need to.

My face was a disaster. The way Aki had looked at me and bit his lip was all the proof I needed.

I stepped into the hot bath one foot at a time and lowered myself into the tub. The water was milky—she'd added special hot springs minerals. What benefits did they offer? They were probably meant to relax your muscles, ease your aches and pains, relieve your stress...

The steam made my eyelids heavy, so I closed them—but the horrible sight of that boy wouldn't leave me. That smirk. Those eyes.

I got out of the bath, ran through Sunao's skin care routine, and changed into the spare pajamas she'd left out. Not the green ones I'd had on but a gray set.

I ran the dryer. The hot wind poofed up my hair, and I tamed it with a brush.

When I got back to the room, I found Sunao with her arms folded.

I braced myself—but she did the last thing I expected.

"Sleep," she said, pointing at the bed. It was her bed, the one she slept in—the soft bed that comforted her when she was curled up in pain.

I must have looked like a deer in the headlights.

"You're sure?" I asked.

Sunao rolled her eyes. "I'm sure!"

I'd imagined the bed was like sleeping on clouds, but it wasn't—it was just ordinary. A regular futon, as soft as any other. The pillow had long since been molded to fit Sunao's head.

I lay down on it as if I were trying an interactive exhibit at a museum, and Sunao watched in silence. She pulled a thin comforter over me. I started to feel helpless, like I was in bed with a fever.

"Sunao, will you sleep with me?"

Her hands stopped. She looked surprised.

"I gotta eat dinner."

Oh, right. Mom was probably home by now. I had no memories of hearing her come in. But in hindsight, I felt like I had heard her voice call up the stairs.

In Sunao's memories, her mother always said, "Welcome home," even when she was the last to arrive. Sunao would answer, "'M'home," instead of "I'm home," intentionally pronouncing it the way she had as a little kid. That was their daily routine.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine."

Aki said that a lot. He shrugged things off even when he wasn't fine.

So did I.

Right now, I wanted to insist everything was okay.

"I'm glad it wasn't you, Sunao," I said.

"Huh?"

For the first time, her "Huh?" wasn't scary. So I answered right away.

"I'm glad you weren't the one who fell."

I was glad it was me. Not Aki, not Sunao—me.

I heard her take a long breath, then let it out.

"I'm glad, too."

Well, yeah.

"I'm glad you weren't gone for good," she finished.

I turned toward her and heard my hair shift behind my ear.

She was looking down at me with tears in her eyes.

"Thank God."

The words she'd almost said earlier. Now I heard them.

"Sorry, I know that's not fair. I've been scared of you for so long."

Sunao, scared of me?

"Because you don't know what I am?"

She thought about this, then shook her head.

"No, not that. I was...jealous. You know why my parents named me Sunao, right? They wanted me to be more open and kind than anyone else."

In third-grade Japanese class, all the students had been tasked with looking up the meaning of their names and finding out what wish their parents had for them.

They'd all written up what they'd learned and talked about it on observation day—when everyone's parents came to watch their class. Her mom had clapped a lot after Sunao's presentation. Her applause was like a benediction.

Sunao had been brought into this world blanketed in wishes and hopes.

"But that description always fit you better than it did me," she said.

Was that how she saw it?

I'd never realized how left out she'd felt. Or was I the reason she felt sad and alone?

"Ever since we first met, you were like my little sister," I said.

Tears welled up in her eyes, ready to burst at the slightest touch.

"The first time I saw you, I wanted to help. I wanted to fix things with Ricchan so you'd start smiling again."

"See? You're not like me at all, Nao."

The words sounded like a rejection, but her tone was anything but.

I used to love it when she called me Nao.

"I felt like you'd stolen Ricchan from me," she said.

"...Why?"

"I don't...read. I doubt Ricchan and I would have anything to talk about. If we tried, I'd just...bore her."

Sunao's smile was strained, forlorn. My heart ached for her. She'd been keeping these feelings bottled up inside.

The reason she'd never wanted to hear about the Literature Club, the reason she'd feigned disinterest—it was all to protect herself.

She kept insisting she wasn't jealous, wasn't hurting.

"I meant to take the money as payback."

I didn't know what she was talking about.

"I knew you were stockpiling coins in my Disney can. Before vacation, I found all those bills in my satchel...and I told myself it'd be fine to use just *one* of them."

This was news to me. It seemed I really didn't know anything about her.

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"Shame. I was trying to steal someone else's allowance!"

Someone else's allowance. That was what she called my life savings.

"Sanada said the same thing," she continued. "It's not possible to use a replica like they're a copy of you. He said his replica is way cooler than he is."

"Yeah...yeah, I'd agree."

I didn't know Sanada all that well, though.

But my honesty made Sunao laugh.

Sanada had created Aki only a few months ago, but they were already so different. I'd been around since Sunao was a little kid, and we'd grown even further apart. We might look the same—but where you couldn't see, we were constantly changing.

"Sunao, you want to go to college, right?" I asked.

Her nose crinkled all the way up. It wasn't a pretty sight.

You couldn't hide things from a replica. I might know nothing about her feelings, but I knew better than anyone what she'd seen and heard.

"I've got no idea what I want to do. I'm just using my parents' money to buy myself a moratorium."

She was deliberately being cynical, but I knew she'd tackled all the summer homework herself, unable to rely on me after our fight.

He'll have no more need for me. Aki's words echoed in my mind.

"I hope you find your dream," I said. "And good luck with the studying."

"Oh, shush." Even making that face, Sunao was adorable. "Also, I'm the older sister."

"Oh?"

"Don't give me that look!"

She flicked my forehead, and I yelped.

Then Sunao's hand moved past the red mark to stroke my head.

"Thank you. For everything you've done."

Was I imagining it, or was her voice choked with tears?

Before I could say anything, she turned off the light. All that was left was the dim orange glow of the night-light staring down at me.

Feeling unsteady, I clutched the edges of the comforter.

"Should we use my money to replace the uniform and shoes I lost?"

She had a second summer uniform but only the one pair of loafers.

"I'll negotiate with Mom. Don't fuss."

She wasn't brushing me off. Instead, her tone was unusually gentle.

She softly opened the door and whispered, "Good night," before she left.

I was certain I wouldn't be able to sleep. But the exhaustion caught up with me. My lids soon grew heavy. Each time they closed, they begged me not to make them part again.

It was nothing like when Sunao sent me away.

My body grew steadily heavier, while the inside of my head got fluffier, spooling up like cotton candy.



I slept.

And for the first time ever, I dreamed.

I knew right away it was a dream, because what I saw was impossible.

It took place in our class, that familiar old rectangular box. Sunao and I hopped in together, in our uniforms.

Morning! Morning! Everyone greeted us with cheer.



Their voices and smiles were like yellow chiffon cake. Those spongy, adorable, syrupy sweet cakes were flying left and right. Nibbling them, we took our seats —right next to each other.

When I looked up, I saw Aki and Sanada. Neither one of them was very expressive, and with the two of them together like this, they felt even harder to approach. Sunao and I looked at each other and giggled.

Ricchan came running over with snacks to share.

Chocolate, caramels, chocolate chip cookies. Oh, and Pretz.

Sunao loves Pocky—she was nibbling on a stick already. She saw me looking and held one to my lips.

When I said nothing, she poked me with it, demanding I open wide.

Are you sure? I asked.

I'm sure, she said.

Hesitantly, I opened my mouth—and she stuck the Pocky in. The sweet chocolate melted on my tongue, coloring my lips.

That's good, isn't it?

None of this was funny, but we both laughed.

I'd always liked Pretz better, but that moment made me a Pocky fan.

The room shook. Ricchan had flung her manuscript, and the pages spun like confetti.

Both of you, read this! Aki and I jumped at it. Sunao hesitated, so I pulled her along.

What a happy dream.

I'd always wanted to live like that.

I'd always wanted us all to live together.



The next day, I went to school wearing the white sneakers Sunao used when she wasn't wearing her uniform.

No one in class was talking about yesterday's train incident.

A phantom schoolgirl had been hit by a train and left only her clothes behind. This news, which sounded like some urban legend, didn't spread beyond the immediate witnesses. No one brought it up. They were all too busy talking about the Japan team's soccer match.

Aki flashed me a worried look, but I just smiled, hanging my satchel from the hook on my desk. I took a hairband off my wrist and put my hair half-up.

I'd lost that light blue scrunchie along with the uniform. Once my hair was secured with the plain black hairband, I stood up.

I had business to take care of before homeroom began.

I left the classroom and went upstairs. Piles of dust forgotten by the students on cleaning duty swirled as I passed.

The world I saw felt off, as if there were a pane of thin glass in front of me. Eyes turned toward me, but the glass prevented them from seeing how I felt.

I couldn't tense up, couldn't look perturbed. I had to smile like any other high school girl.

The hall was full of faces I didn't know.

Someone came out of the room next to me, and I bumped into him. It was just the boy I was looking for.

Before he noticed me, I pasted on a fake smile, acting like some obnoxiously cute underclassman.

"Hayase. Good morning."

This greeting was no chiffon cake. It was more like a sunny-side up egg left in the pan too long—so overcooked that if you poked it, your finger would bounce right off.

He reacted violently.

"Huh? Wha—? How?"

The moment he realized it was me, Hayase started spluttering. He took a much bigger step back than he had when faced with Aki's fearsome offense—he was about to run.

But his back slammed against the door. The noise was so loud, everyone turned to look at him.

While they watched, his eyes swam in all directions. He was afraid to look at me.

I'm sure I gave him quite a fright. He must have checked the news the night before and been baffled. There'd been a brief interruption in train service for an inspection, but not one channel mentioned a schoolgirl getting mangled beneath the train's wheels.

But I hadn't come here, to the third-year classrooms, to reassure him.

His was a crime no one could punish—but I wasn't going to take the high road and let it pass. I was here to rub it in.

Hayase stood there frozen, his eyes open wide, mouth agape, nostrils flaring.

I stretched up and whispered in his ear like I was sharing a secret.

"Thank you so much for murdering me."

The voice that came out was so icy, I couldn't believe it was mine.

"Ahhh!"

He shrieked and fell backward, landing on his butt.

His knees had buckled, and he was unable to right himself. He was shaking so hard, it was a wonder I couldn't hear his bones rattle. But his teeth were chattering.

This reaction raised a stir inside the class. The match from yesterday was still on their minds—so nobody came running over.

I gave the pathetic, trembling boy a frosty look.

I felt nothing. No anger, no sadness. Nothing at all.

When Aki had been talking about Sanada's state of mind, he'd used a good phrase.

It's like he became hollow inside.

I felt the same.

This man had made me hollow.

"It really hurt," I said.

The words I spoke, the smile on my face, my feet on the floor, my hair swaying. I felt disconnected from all of them. The real me wasn't saying anything, wasn't smiling—wasn't crying, either.

"I-I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

"If he'd died, I'd have killed you."

"Ahhh! P-p-please, no more!"

A dull boy, reduced to blithering. I looked away from him.

Hayase would likely never bother Sanada or Aki again. He wouldn't hurt them anymore. That hint of relief ended the spell.

Hugging my shaking body, I made a beeline for the bathroom.

My stomach was empty, but I threw up in the toilet anyway. Frothing yellow stomach acid trailed down my lips. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't rid myself of the gross feeling inside.



After school, I headed for the Literature Club room.

"Ricchan, did you submit your novel?" I asked.

She gave me a funny look. "Not yet! I'm still revising."

"Oh."

A shame, I thought—but I didn't say that out loud. If I did, Ricchan might sense that something was amiss.

"When it's done, I'll read it aloud to you even if I have to tie you to a chair!" She cackled.

Our time together passed like always. Flowing upward, to the left, to the right.

The hands of the clock turned as the sounds of laughter echoed. Time inched along. Every second was a treasure.

After returning the key to the faculty office, I went to pick up the bicycle. The wheels spun as I pushed it along. I waved to Aki and Ricchan, parting with a smile.

Aki was looking at me like he had something to say, but I didn't look back. If I did, I felt certain I'd start to waver.

The wheels turned. I listened to them whir. They'd whir three times, and my foot would strike the ground. Over and over.

And then I found myself outside the house.

I locked the bike and patted its warm saddle. In my mind, I told it, Sorry, but you're gonna have to brave the salt air for a while.

Leaving it there, I followed a road toward the ocean.

Mochimune has a lot of streets so narrow, you can't fit through them with an open umbrella. I heard somewhere that seaside towns were built this way to help kill the momentum of a tsunami. I didn't know if that was true. There's never been a big tsunami here, not before I came to be or after.

The sound of the surf was getting louder. A row of pine trees stood in a park near the levee. This was called a tidewater control forest; they planted species that could handle the salt air to help prevent damage from tsunamis and high tides. It had been a decade since someone predicted a big earthquake would happen in the Tokai region, and they'd done a lot of things along the coast to minimize the impact of the potential catastrophe.

I saw an old lady walking two dogs at once. I tried to guess their breeds. One was a corgi. The other was white with a flat face, but I couldn't remember the name.

The water below the levee was cast in red and yellow, lapping up the light of the setting sun. Soon all traces of that fire would fade. There were couples walking along the beach and a middle-aged man jogging in formfitting athletic gear. The waves were high, but the spray didn't reach them.

My sneakers kicked against the stones of the levee as I climbed higher.

I knelt and looked down. The beach seemed so far below. I felt the heat draining from my heart.

Sunao and Ricchan had once jumped off this levee, hand in hand. If someone had taken a picture, they'd have looked like they were flying. That sort of risky game had been all the rage when they were in grade school.

The teachers and guardians found out about the secret game when a girl cut her knee on some glass after falling. There was a full school assembly, and children were forbidden from playing on the coast unsupervised.

I'd wanted to try jumping once myself, but if it was dangerous—I'd better not. Sunao said I had a kind heart, but I wasn't as bold as she was. All it took was one person shaking their head, and I'd lose the nerve to jump.

I looked out into the distance and swung my legs.

"I've already fallen on the tracks, though."

I had no more regrets.

My words were a dull whisper, swept away by the wind.

I watched the sea for a while. A little white boat bobbed along the waves. Gulls flew overhead.

I stayed like that until I noticed someone walking along the beach, laughing—even though I couldn't hear them.

I was alone now. The sun had long since set, and it had grown quite dark.

How long had I sat like that?

I moved along the top of the levee to the metal stairs, then climbed down those to the sand.

With each step, the rusty stairs let out a reproachful clang like a warning bell.

The waves rolled in, and the breeze clung to me. My nose twitched. I'd grown

used to the smell of salt, but here it once again tickled my nostrils. This close, the feel of the sea was just that much more intense.

In the distance, a lighthouse flashed on the breakwater. Red, green, red, green—a bright, alternating strobe. The countless little rocks around my feet changed color in the ocean spray.

I stepped into the foam.

I squinted, focusing my eyes past the tetrapods, onto the horizon.

A moonless night sky stretched away from me, hidden by the clouds.

Ahhh.

At night, the sea becomes a monster.

Black waves crested like the hands of beckoning giants. Their quiet roar was somehow forlorn.

I'd waited this long so no one would spot me.

Unseen, I'd cause no problems. The police would never be asked to search for a missing replica who'd disappeared all on her own.

The Mermaid's Return was running though my head.

I'd thought about it before.

If I walked into the water like Aloysia Jahn's doppelgänger, perhaps I'd quietly turn into foam.

At the edge of the surf, I took off the sneakers I'd barely ever worn. I removed the socks and folded them inside the shoes.

I should probably take off the uniform, too. It was Sunao's. But even with no one else around, I was reluctant to strip down to my skivvies outside.

Sorry for ruining a second uniform.

I was apologizing to the bitter end.

Forgive me my trespasses, Sunao.

The little rocks pricked my bare feet, chastising me.

I slowly walked into the oncoming waves.

The night sea was warmer than I'd imagined—it didn't feel real. All that time in the sun must make it harder to cool down.

I knelt and stuck my tongue in the spray. It was so salty, I scrunched up my face.

After that, I stood back up and pressed on. The water was already up to my calves.

Oh yeah... Sunao can't swim.

She'd sat out of classes through junior high, using a cleaning net on a long pole to fish out the flies and stink bugs floating in the pool.

What about me?

Can I still swim?

Maybe I can't.

If I can't, that's fine.

"Nao."

Someone grabbed my arm and yanked hard.

I turned.

"Don't ignore me when you're hair's half-up."

His shoulders were heaving.

I'd heard a voice yelling behind me for the last few minutes, desperately trying to stop me. I'd tried to pretend I couldn't hear it, but the waves refused to drown it out. And he wouldn't give up and leave me to this.

How long had Aki been searching?

"I'm going to disappear," I whispered.

"...Why?"

Why?

I ground my teeth. He *knew*.

Maybe nobody else could understand—but you do.

"When humans die, that's the end," I said.

We'd learned that in ethics class. Humans, insects, animals—they all had but one life. That was why we had to honor our neighbors, treasure each other, and live hand in hand.

"But it wasn't for me. How did I ever think I might be human?"

I had to laugh. The sound came out hollow.

I'd intended to smile, but Aki's face crumpled in anguish—perhaps my expression had been off. I hadn't even dared look at myself since yesterday.

"I wasn't human. I never was. Replicas can't die."

Aki didn't answer. How could he?

I was sure we'd both been scared of the same thing all this time.

"Who even am I?" I said.

I felt like I was coughing up blood. That was how much this pained me.

My head, my stomach, my throat—everything hurt. I couldn't breathe, I was in agony, I didn't know which way was up.

"Am I even the same me as before I died?"

That train had turned me into mincemeat.

I'd been flattened. It hurt so much, I could scream. I'd died.

And I remembered it.

But I'd been brought back. The original called for me—and the replica returned, as if nothing had happened.

Was this new me the same one who got ground up?

Or were those memories merely a recording? Was I just pretending to be the same?

"Am I the one who went to the zoo with you? The one who read Ricchan's novels while your fan kept us cool? The one who watched your basketball match? Am I even me?"

Nobody knew the answer.

"Sorry," he said.

My throat spasmed. I wasn't sure what to make of Aki's apology.

My feet were in the water, frozen to the spot. The only thing warm was my arm, where he held it.

Only that was alive. Only that part of me had a pulse—a living heartbeat. I resented it.

"This is my fault," he said.

"It's not your fault, Aki."

That alone I was sure of. The boy someone had shoved off the train platform out of a petty sense of vindictiveness was not to blame.

"But I'm still glad you're alive, Nao."

"That makes it worse."

"Sorry."

"So much worse."

"Sorry."

I had no right to lay into him like this.

If Aki had fallen where I couldn't reach him, I'd have reacted just like he did.

I'd have gone to Sanada's house, crying for him to save Aki—and when the replica re-formed from nothing right in front of me, stiff with shock, I'd have clung to him, sobbing in relief.

I'd have been sure that the new Aki was the same one as before.

I'd have convinced myself of it and been grateful for the miracle.

"Will you turn to foam with me?"

I was goading him. A cruel smile formed on my lips, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

He was too nice to abandon me. If he would just let go of my arm, I'd vanish into the waters long before I could drown.

Aki let go.

"I won't."

Didn't think so.

At his answer, I turned my back on him.

I didn't think less of him for it. Anyone would back off after a suggestion that stupid. He must be so disappointed in me.

This was for the best. Now I could disappear without any lingering attachments.

My knees, my thighs, my hips sank into the water. I could no longer judge the temperature.

My toes scrabbled against the sand. The waves rocked my body, leaving me unbalanced, unsupported. I was ready to topple over at any moment.

...No. It wasn't because of the waves.

I was in shock. I was shocked that Aki had let me go.

That sting in the back of my nose wasn't from the salty water.

"I don't want this, Nao."

My shoulders quivered.

Why? I couldn't believe my ears. Why was he still there?

"It's dangerous out here, Aki. Go home."

I staggered but refused to turn around. I'd raised my voice, but the surf was so loud, I wasn't sure he'd heard me.

"I can't leave you out here."

Yet his deep voice shook my eardrums.

"You're the one who made me give up on giving up. Don't do this to me now."

I kept walking.

"I'm gonna convince Shuuya not to get rid of me, even if I have to beg on my hands and knees. I'll cry and hug his legs, cling to life no matter how pathetic I

sound." The water was up to my belly button. "Because I want to live with you, Nao." The cold took my breath away. Each crest rocked me. "You exist to go to the zoo with me. To the amusement park. To the festival. To the aguarium. To the movies." The water was up to my chest. "And we've only done the zoo and the festival so far." My feet no longer touched the bottom. "Don't go away. Don't turn into foam. I want you at my side forever." His pleas were choked with tears, louder than the crashing waves. And I... How could I pretend I didn't hear? "I love you!" Ahhh..... I heard something rattling around inside my hollow chest. I didn't want to admit it—couldn't bring myself to. If I did, I'd be too scared to disappear. No—that wasn't true. All along... ...I'd been afraid I'd never see him again. "Nao!" A desperate cry. I looked up to see a tall wave bearing down on me. Before I could scream, I was swallowed by the black surf.

I couldn't even open my eyes. I was trapped in a cold darkness, flailing with all

my might.

I didn't know which way was up or down. I thrashed, my bearings lost. A bit of driftwood struck my wrist, and it went numb. Salty sand got in my mouth, and I coughed up a bubble.

Would I turn into one of those?

No!

No, no, no!

...Then I felt strong hands grab ahold of me. Firm, muscular hands. I knew right away—I'd held those hands; I knew that grip.

I forgot to struggle and went limp.

I let him pull me into his arms.

The dark waters writhed like they were alive. He didn't try to fight their flow. With me in his arms, he let the waves sweep us toward the beach and out of their grasp.

"Hwaaah!"

I knew as soon as my face broke the water, and I gasped.

We rolled across the wet sand. I coughed over and over, spitting out the water I'd swallowed, my body bent and groaning.

It hurt. It was awful. I had little cuts all over me, and every inch of me was soaked in brine.

But the pain and agony were proof I was alive.

"You okay?" he said, rubbing my back as I gasped for air.

My hair was like strips of seaweed. I looked up through it to find his face near mine.

His eyes were on me, glittering. Only then did I realize the clouds had parted, and the moon had caught his eyes.

There were stars twinkling above. So pretty, they brought tears to my eyes.

How could anyone die on a night this warm and beautiful?

He helped fix my hair. This wet, it was darker than the sky above.

There was sand in my hair, in my uniform, and in my mouth. I couldn't stand it.

"I'm not...okay," I muttered.

Aki look worried.

"Does something hurt?"

"I've got nothing."

I pushed down that rattle in my heart.

"Even my name is borrowed. My insurance card, my student ID. That house, that family, that bicycle—none of them are mine. I'm adrift in a void."

"You've got 198,750 yen."

"You're wrong. It's 193,430 yen now."

I'd spent it on train fares, drinks, bus fares, zoo tickets.

On the photo we'd had taken and on the capybara beef stew.

On the melon shaved ice that melted in his mouth and my half of the takoyaki. So many precious things had made that stack of bills—already so much lighter than the jar of coins—even less substantial.

"You've got your hair half-up."

"This hairband belongs to Mom. It was in the bathroom. She took it from a hotel."

"You've got me."

I heard the sounds of whirring wheels. The surf and a crumbling castle made of sand were swept away along with them.

"I'm here, if you'll have me. Is that not enough?" He sounded a bit put out.

In the moonlight, I could see his ears and cheeks turning red. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

"I—" Somehow, I managed a nod. "I'll take you."

His words had fit right into the hollow in my chest.

A twisted hole, a wound that I'd thought would never be filled again.

And yet he'd made it seem easy. I could look the whole world over and never find a better fit.

"I was being really dumb."

Only now did I start shaking. I'd really done it this time.

I kept calling it "disappearing" like that made it better, but I'd been trying to die.

Tears started rolling down my cheeks, mixing with the sand, making the sea saltier. Grief, regret, fear, and more, all swirling together.

As I cried, Aki's arms pulled me close.

They were warm and comforting—and that made the tears flow harder.

"Only an idiot would die when they have you."

I sobbed.

I'd been so dumb. I had someone so kind right beside me. Someone who'd wade out through the waves, grab hold of me, and pull me back.

"Trying to leave the man I love behind was so stupid. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Aki's shoulders twitched, reacting to something.

Then...

"You idiot!"

...a loud voice came from somewhere, and we both jumped, pulling apart. I was so surprised, my tears dried right up.

I'd know that voice anywhere.

There was a phone in Aki's chest pocket, in the middle of a video call. Even muffled and over the phone, I couldn't mistake her voice.

"Ricchan?"

"Hironaka was searching the area around school. She said to call if I found

you, and I guess I never hung up."

We'd all traded contact info before the basketball match.

"Your phone survived all that?"

"It's waterproof."

"Oh. Wow."

"Who gives a shit!" Ricchan yelled.

We both sat upright, on our knees.

The sand and rocks that had pricked my feet now felt like a soft cushion.

"You complete nitwit! You nincompoop! Nao, you are the dunderest of dunderheads!"

Ricchan was hopping mad. I was suitably embarrassed and deeply repentant.

But she'd never had a reason to worry. Ricchan's friend was Sunao Aikawa, who was safe at home.

"Ricchan, um..."

"When your hair's half-up, it's Nao, right?"

I stopped breathing.

I don't think I managed to ask why she knew, but she seemed to understand what I was thinking anyway.

"It's so obvious! You're nothing alike!"

She laughed merrily. When we were kids, I'd loved her laugh. Every time I heard it, my heart bounced. It made me want to laugh with her.

Ricchan had always shared her Pretz with me.

Sunao liked Pocky. I liked Pretz.

Ricchan's bag always had both in it.

"If you've got nowhere to go, come to my house! I'll figure something out, whatever it takes."

She'd heard everything we'd said. And clearly had a handle on a lot of things

we hadn't explained.

"So don't you go off somewhere alone! I called Sunao, and she said you hadn't come home, so I've been worried sick!"

"Ricchan," I said, then didn't know what to say next.

Sunao and I had both missed it. Ever since we were kids, Ricchan had seen us both as we were and had faced us with an open heart.

Shame and remorse came flooding back, this time more snot than tears.

"Sorry. Sorry, Ricchan. Thank you."

Aki dug something out of his pants pocket. Sniffling, I looked—and found an unopened packet of tissues.

Gingerly, I peeled back the film. Water had gotten inside, but it was better than nothing. I pried out a tissue from the middle of the pack, the least wet one, and blew my nose.

A silly-sounding honk echoed across the dark beach. Aki very thoughtfully kept his eyes on the moon's reflection. I was grateful but still mortified.

"Where are you crashing tonight? My place?" Ricchan's voice filled the silence.

"No, I'll head home."

"Aw."

I thought she'd be relieved, but she sounded disappointed.

"Well, you'll have to sleep over some other time. All three of us, when my parents are away."

"All three?"

"Me, you, and Sunao."

I pictured it—like a sequel to my dream. It sounded fun.

But that wasn't everyone. I glanced at the boy next to me.

"What about Aki?"

"This girl's about to bring her boyfriend to an all-girl pajama party!"

"Boyfriend?"

"Yeah," he said, jumping on it. "I'm your boyfriend, aren't I?"

Ricchan and I shared a look through the phone and laughed out loud. Aki looked a bit indignant.

My boyfriend.

How fleeting a phrase that was.

He was dating me, and I—I was myself.

How many people are made of strong enough stuff to really say that? How many people can really say they have something all their own? I bet there aren't very many, human or replica.

I'd been alive for ten full years and had never known a touch as kind as Aki's.

This world had many secrets I'd yet to learn.

Even a replica can fall in love. Aki taught me that.

LAST ACT

A Replica, in Love



Ricchan slid her bundle of writing paper into a padded envelope and attached a mailing label.

She could have found a mailbox with a large mouth and sent it as oversize mail, but I understood why she'd insisted on using the post office. She wanted to watch her novel start its voyage.

Ricchan handed the thick parcel through the window and bowed.

Aki and I were watching her from a backless bench. I glanced at him. He looked stressed, his shoulders almost at his ears.

Today he was wearing a clean white T-shirt and black skinny jeans with white, low-cut sneakers on his feet. It was a very basic style, but he made it look cool.

It wasn't a weekday and we weren't in uniform, and that fact alone made my heart sing. Conscious of my own nerves, I teased him anyway.

"Why are you so anxious, Vice President?"

I had on a denim jacket and a high-waisted white dress. I'd asked to borrow a uniform today, but Sunao had looked appalled and started muttering.

"From what you've said, I think he'll like this..."

She picked out an outfit, then loaned me shoes and a purse to go with it. She'd even put some light makeup on me.

Someday I'd like to buy my own clothes—a new aspiration.

"I keep feeling like we're going to get the results right here and now," he said.

"Me too."

Ricchan was entering a contest with a deadline at the end of September. The submissions that survived the first wave wouldn't be announced until December. There was a second and a third wave after that, so it would be ages before she knew how it turned out.

"I hope she does well," I said.

"Yeah."

I felt like clasping my hands together in prayer again. Our god—the swivel fan

—was holding the fort back in the clubroom. All fans were real.

"Think there's a replica kingdom somewhere?" I muttered.

Aki gave me a strange look.

I'd been thinking about this a lot lately.

Was it just Aki and me? Or were there more replicas out there?

Maybe lots of people had met someone with their face and were just keeping it secret. Perhaps loads of humans out there had replicas.

There might even be one in our class, and we just hadn't noticed.

"Is that where you want to go next?"

I almost nodded but stopped myself.

I'd learned that I'd never have my own life as long as I stayed by Sunao's side.

That's why I'd planned to vanish into those dark waters. But I was still breathing; my feet were still on the ground. I'd turned around and decided to stay.

Sunao was glad I wasn't gone for good. She'd let me sleep in her bed.

She'd said she was scared of me and called me kind. All these new facets of her were resonating within me.

A girl named Sunao Aikawa had brought me into this world.

Someday, I'd have to leave her and set out on a journey of my own. There would come a time when I had to leave this seaside town.

"No-not yet."

But I wasn't past caring. I wasn't going to burst out the door before I had my bearings.

I'd stay with Sunao awhile longer. I'd made that choice myself.

Aki respected that decision. His own desire to stick around until Sanada was ready to go back to school was likely a factor.

"First, we've gotta get through the cultural festival next month," I said.

And I had to help Sunao study. I'd spoiled her rotten without a second thought; now I'd have to be a harsh taskmaster. She'd grumbled at the suggestion, but I had seen a smile at the edges of her lips.

I'd understood so little about her—but I was starting to learn more.

"I'd like to go to Hamanako Palpal, too," I continued.

"And this slumber party I'm not invited to?"

He was holding that against us.

"We could do a sleepover at Sanada's house, too."

Aki locked up completely.

"The key will be getting Shuuya out of the way," he said, rubbing his chin. He looked so intent, I didn't dare say another word. Perhaps I'd spoken too soon. But it was too late now, and I found I didn't really mind.

"Thanks for coming with!" Ricchan said. "And giving up your weekend!"

Her mission complete, she came running back to us. She had on a brown blouse and checked pants, like an energetic little boy. She looked adorable.

"Of course. We're happy to be here," I assured her.

Aki was still lost in thought, so I tapped his shoulder as I stood up.

It was a lovely Saturday morning, and we had lots of time left to enjoy ourselves.

But before I could suggest going somewhere, Ricchan saluted. Her eyes were glinting.

"Then I'll be on my way!"

"Whaaat?"

Where'd that come from?

She was already heading to the door, and I gave chase.

"Ricchan! You don't want to hang out? Or did you have other plans?"

"Oh, please. You're both dressed for a date! I'm not about to be a third wheel."

A date.

That word made Aki and me glance at each other. We were both blushing.

"Oh, and now you're lost in each other's eyes! Young people today, I swear!"

Ricchan made a show of reeling in horror, which only made us blush harder. But we weren't done yet.

"We have something to tell you," I said.

"You mean how the Sanada who joined the Lit Club is also a replica?"

Now my jaw truly dropped. Aki didn't seem especially surprised, though.

"I guess you heard everything we said back there," he mused.

"Yup, yup."

I fidgeted silently. She'd heard every word of my temper tantrum and everything we'd said as Aki dragged me out of the ocean.

"And I do have plans. I'm actually meeting up with Sunao. You two have fun."

"Whaaat?"

"See you at club!"

Ricchan waved and ran off toward Shizuoka Station.

I'd half raised a hand, but it fluttered uselessly back to my side.

"Now I'm jealous," I said.

I'd never actually hung out with Ricchan on a weekend.

Where were she and Sunao going? It was almost lunchtime, so they'd probably eat first. Then karaoke maybe.

She could have eaten with us!

"So Hironaka rates higher than a date with me?"

I gasped. Aki was standing behind me, arms folded, looking grim.

"You're jealous!"

"Am not."

That struck me as funny, and I couldn't repress a smile.



Aki put a hand to the back of his head and looked away.

"You look really cute today, so...," he said softly.

I couldn't even look at him.

I bit my lip. It was painted pink. Sunao had told me to be careful or the lipstick would come off.

My hands clutched the strap of her purse. It felt so flimsy.

"Th-thank you, Aki. You look cool."

I was so tense, I stuttered. But Aki was reduced to meaningless mumbles. I figured he was thanking me.

We were so hopeless that our underclassman had deserted us. Now it was up to us to maintain the moment's delicate mood.

Aki made the first attempt.

"Where should we go?" he asked.

I didn't care where. Anywhere would be great. Just being with him made me happy.

But I'd already picked something out for today.

"The movies!" I grinned, taking his hand.

The warm fall breeze swirled between our locked fingers.

He was with me. And our first weekend together was just beginning.

Aven 3 Replica Can Falling Pouce

## **AFTERWORD**

I'm a huge slacker.

I don't really remember kindergarten, but in grade school, I spent a good deal of time thinking about how I could avoid going to school.

If I slept naked, maybe I'd get a fever. What if I ran screaming through the park on a winter night?

Or maybe someone who looked just like me would appear, flash a smile, and say, "I'll go to school in your place! You play games under the covers. Ciao!" Wouldn't that be amazing?

But what if this duplicate was way better than me, a pathetic slacker? What if she was cute, got excellent grades, and was the most popular kid in class? Then I'd no longer fit in! That thought spooked me.

Years later, I remembered all this and got to wondering what this fictitious double would have been like. What would she have thought about going to school for me?

That proved the impetus for *A Doppelgänger in Love*. When it was time to publish it, we changed the title to *Even a Replica Can Fall in Love*.

I always feel like I lack the wings of imagination required to call myself an author. To shore up those deficiencies, I set the story in Shizuoka City, where I grew up.

Surrounded by mountains and the ocean, it's a very laid-back town. The perfect place for Nao and the other characters to walk around or ride their bikes.

So what's so good about this town? "Well...you can see Mount Fuji!" No one ever says much more than that, but it's a nice place, I swear.

If this glimpse piques your curiosity, come visit! Maybe you'll pass Nao and Aki on some street corner.

This book was honored with the 29th Dengeki Novel Grand Prize.

It still doesn't feel real. Perhaps that's because when I was first told the results, they insisted I couldn't tell anyone until the official announcement. I've yet to get the emotional release of yelling it from the rooftops.

If someone bugged my house, some sinister society might leak the prize results—I couldn't be responsible for that! I was a tad too cautious and blew my chance to celebrate.

Lately my mother's going around pulling the old "Not trying to brag, but my daughter won the Dengeki Grand Prize" card, so I've gotta at least reach her level.

To demonstrate my commitment, right now, as I write this afterword, I just threw both hands in the air and whispered, "Yahoo!"

Now it's time to bring my hands back down and prostrate myself in thanks.

To the editors at Dengeki Mediaworks who found this novel, to the judges who appreciated it, and to the editor who pored over it with me: Thank you so, so much. I'm going to take it one step at a time in the hopes of repaying this debt.

To my illustrator, raemz, your beautiful art brightened up this novel. I'll never forget the thrill I got seeing the finished cover for the first time. My heart is still racing. Thank you. I hope we'll be working together for a long time.

And finally, I'm grateful to everyone who picked up this book. If you enjoyed yourself, I can ask for nothing more.

I dreamed up many ways of getting out of school. Some I tried, some I didn't, most ended in failure—and I never did run a fever.

I may be a slacker, but this story is the result of a slacker bumbling her way through life, reluctantly dragging herself out of bed to start another unproductive day—every day until she found herself here.

I plan to keep that slow accumulation going and write many more stories.

Harunadon, December 2022

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