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Replica
Can Fail in Paule
Charmadon
Harunadon
Mustration by raemz



# Copyright

# Even a Replica Can Fall in Loue 2

### **HARUNADON**

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

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Afterword

# ACT ONE A Replica, Shaken

It was autumn, a season that shared a name with the boy I love—Aki.

That must have been why it seemed even more wonderful this year.

Gentle sunshine warmed my cheeks. A nice round patch of light wrapped around me, as comforting as my boyfriend's embrace.

The leaves rustled in the branches above, just starting to turn red. That got me to sniff the air, and I caught a lovely fragrance drifting on the breeze.

Perhaps they knew how much I loved them—both the fall sunshine and the breeze were clearly being extra nice to me.

It was Thursday, September 30, after school on the last day of midterms. I was on cleaning duty, sweeping the main entrance.

At first, I'd been eager to get it over with so I could hurry to Literature Club—it had been a few days since I'd last been able to go. But once I slipped on my loafers, grabbed the bamboo broom, and stepped outside, the sun welcomed me, and I started to enjoy myself.

The broom was too big for me, and I had to use both hands. I was supposed to be gathering fallen leaves and dust, but somehow the bristles were only capturing innocent sand and gravel.

I'd heard witches could fly on these things, but I could barely sweep with them.

"Aikawa! Bring the trash over here. We'll toss it all out at once."

I turned around and found the other student on duty waving to me. A big garbage bag was yawning open at their feet.

I nodded back and adjusted my grip on the broom. I eyeballed the distance between me and the front door. A solid seven meters.

I tensed up the muscles in my bare upper arms. The breeze played with the swaying hem of my skirt. Together, the bamboo broom and I teased the dirt along the ground.

The closet by the front doors was inexplicably devoid of dustpans. Perhaps they were out for an elegant stroll in the autumn sunshine.

A wood louse nearly got caught by my broom, and I offered it a silent apology as I adjusted my path. The breeze from my sweeping made it roll itself up as it waited for Hurricane Nao to pass.

As I struggled beneath a clear blue sky my outstretched hands could never reach, other students walked past me out the gates. I was beginning to see more and more navy blue among the crowd—temperatures had started dropping this week, and more students were adopting sweaters or blazers.

Tomorrow would be a whole new month, and the rest of us, including me, would likely be joining them.

I gently shook off that thought. Whether I wore a blazer tomorrow or not wasn't my decision to make.

My name is Nao. I'm neither a wood louse nor a witch, but neither am I human. I'm a replica created by a girl named Sunao Aikawa.

When she was seven, she had a fight with a friend and wound up creating me. And ever since, I've filled in for her whenever she doesn't want to do something. I've patched things up with her friends, taken her tests, run marathons in her place...

I've always thought Sunao was a very good-looking girl. But I'm her replica, so I might be a little biased. She has glossy brown hair that reaches down to her waist and striking eyes that peek out from behind thick lashes. The line of her chin is sharp, like a mistrustful kitten, and she has a well-balanced figure.

I didn't have to peer into the abyss—I could just use the bathroom mirror, or even one of the classroom windows, as I hastily wiped it down in a zigzag motion, like I was writing a capital N. When I looked at my reflection, Sunao Aikawa was always staring back at me.

If I raised my right leg, Sunao raised her left.

If I tilted my head to the left, she tilted hers to the right.

The only difference was our hairstyle—I wore mine half-up.

After I finished cleaning, I headed along the covered outdoor passageway,

walking stiffly, like a newborn robot. As I got closer and closer to the annex, I gradually remembered how to walk, and by the time I reached the clubroom, my heartbeat was back to normal.

"Nao! It's been forever. I've missed you so!"

Ricchan greeted me effusively when I reached the door, making me blush. As she hugged me, a boy called out from over her shoulder, "I missed you, too."

This was my classmate and my boyfriend—Aki.

The three of us were the only members of the Literature Club.

"Ricchan, how'd your tests go?" I asked.

"Mm? What tests?" Ricchan peeled away and stared at me, baffled. She hated studying, and it looked like she'd already deleted all relevant memories. "Who cares about midterms? There's no point dwelling on the past."

So she does remember.

Ricchan clasped her hands together and spun in place. Her skirt flew out like a flower in bloom. She had yoga shorts on underneath—her defenses were flawless.

Slipping past this bundle of energy, I tucked my satchel under the long table at the center of the room. My usual seat was right next to where Aki was sitting, his nose buried in a book.

"All done?" he asked.

I nodded. He was in my class and knew I'd been on cleaning duty that day.

His low voice felt like a sunbeam. I considered telling him that, but got too embarrassed and wound up just elbowing him in the arm.

None of us were wearing our blazers yet. But come October, my elbow might not be able to touch those summer-tanned muscles again for a long time.

"Whatcha reading?" I asked.

He showed me the cover of his book: *The Wild Geese*.

I stood up and leaned forward to get a better look, then grabbed my folding chair and scooted it away.

"Where you going?" Aki asked, puzzled.

"I figured I shouldn't interrupt you."

The Wild Geese was a Mori Ogai novella. The character of Otama, who has become the mistress of a moneylender, falls in love with a medical student named Okada, but he leaves the country before she can tell him how she feels. They never meet again. When I finished reading it, I couldn't get Otama's feelings out of my head and was dejected for days.

Even so, it's a masterpiece, well known for its heartrending melancholy, and I wanted Aki to lose himself in the story.

I tried to move away, but despite all my efforts, the folding chair refused to follow.

When I investigated, I found Aki's hand securing the chair's flimsy backrest. It didn't look like he was pressing all that hard, but no matter what I did, the chair wouldn't budge.

"Let go, Aki."

"I don't wanna."

Are we really doing this?

"You're finally back, and you're not gonna sit next to me? Cruel and unusual."

He pouted, and I was forced to sit back down. I got the feeling my chair was even closer to him than before.

Aki nodded approvingly and let go, then turned back to his book.

Ricchan stopped spinning and struck a dramatic pose. "By the way, guys, next month is the moment we've all been waiting for—the Seiryou Festival."

Fall was the season for reading, eating, and sports. But at Shizuoka's Suruga Seiryou High—Surusei for short—fall was all about the school festival.

Surusei's school festival was called the Seiryou Festival, and it was held over two days on a weekend at the end of October. Tomorrow afternoon each class had a two-hour time block reserved to hash out their plans for the event.

"I came on the second day last year," Ricchan continued. "I was taking a break

from my exam studies to scope out the school, and it was a blast! Everywhere I went, the crowds were bursting with passion!"

There were five classes in each grade, and each one had roughly forty students, with around 600 students in total. Including visitors, around 3,000 to 3,500 people attended the festival each year.

"Were you there, Nao?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't get to go."

Sunao had gone both days last year.

I'd come to school a few times during the prep period, and when she called for me again in November, all the signboards had suddenly vanished, and I remembered feeling lost.

Sunao must have completely missed Ricchan at the festival.

I wondered if things would have been different if Sunao had met her there—instead of Ricchan finding me at the beginning of her first year, as cherry blossoms fluttered outside the clubroom window.

But that was a question with no answers.

"So that's why I didn't see you there!" Ricchan grumbled. "I didn't see Sunao, either—talk about bad luck!"

That brought a soft smile to my lips.

I bet Ricchan would have been exactly the same no matter what order she met us in. My friend's big heart was a balm to my soul. I was sure Sunao felt the same.

Now that Ricchan had brought up the festival, I wanted to keep the conversation going.

"Last year, my class made churros," I said. "And the Literature Club sold the club zine, like always."

We'd brought in prebaked churros from a supplier, let them thaw, then fried and sold them. I'd been allowed to sample one the day before—it was crusted with sugar, like sweetness itself, and deep-fried.

Ricchan frowned for a moment, then her eyes went wide.

"Churros! Oh, I ate one! A chocolate churro."

"There were vanilla and strawberry ones, too."

"I almost got vanilla!"

We shared a high five for no reason. The slap echoed through our little clubroom.

"I also went to buy your club zine," she said.

"You did?"

I supposed that made sense—she'd shown up at our club on the very first day trial memberships began. She must have learned about the Literature Club at the festival and been curious about what we got up to.

"But, for some reason, the doors were closed! I went twice at different times and came back empty-handed." Ricchan shook her head, disappointed.

"You did? That's too bad."

"Don't worry, I was able to read it this year, now that I'm a member."

Last year there were only three people in our club, including myself, and I hadn't been at the festival. There was no reason for Sunao to help out, so the two older students had handled everything. With breaks for meals and to use the bathroom, they couldn't possibly keep the doors open all day.

Ricchan swung around to face our third member.

"What about you, Aki?"

He snapped his book closed and said, "I wasn't there, either."

Oh, right. Of course he wasn't.

Sanada had only created Aki in June of this year. So like me, he'd never been to the Seiryou Festival. But that didn't seem to bother him.

"Shuuya and the basketball team sold takoyaki," he said, stroking his chin. "And his class did a dance performance on the main stage."

"Oh? Shuuya danced? To what?"

"'Odoru Pompokolin,' the Chibi Maruko-chan ending theme song."

"Ah! I saw that! With the Momoiro Clover choreography?"

Ricchan had clearly made the most of the festival.

Momoko Sakura, author of *Chibi Maruko-chan*, was from Shimizu, in Shizuoka. One day, my dad had been driving, and I'd been looking out the window of the car when he surprised me by pointing to a house and saying, "That's where Momoko Sakura grew up!" Apparently, it's well known that her family ran a grocery store.

Aki caught my expectant look and made a face.

"Look, I'm not dancing," he said.

No way! I can already hear the intro running in my head! Pappaparapa.

"Just do the hand motions!"

"I don't remember them."

He was definitely lying.

Aki rested his chin on his palm and looked away. His cheek bulged out like a little hill, and I wanted to poke it.

"Who the heck would agree to something that embarrassing?" he muttered.

"Then I shall demonstrate!" Ricchan cried, spinning again like she was skating around on an ice rink and bending her back gracefully.

"Piihyara piihyara! Into a Biellmann spin!"

"Hm, that's a Layback spin at best," I said, mimicking a sports commentator.

"You're sure a harsh critic." Aki laughed.

With midterms behind us, we were all a bit giddy—but just as our commotion reached its peak, a soft knock on the door caught our attention.

"Excuse me, can we come in?"

I jumped to my feet, and Ricchan clapped her hands over her mouth. Whoever it was must have been standing outside waiting for a lull in the conversation.

"S-sorry!" I said and went to open the door.

A boy and a girl stood outside.

"Not at all," said the girl. "We apologize for interrupting your fun."

She smiled at me warmly, and I quickly shook my head.

She had thin brows and big, tapered eyes. Her black hair turned out near the ends, hovering just above her shoulders. She had a mature vibe.

The student behind her was a sharp-eyed boy a few centimeters shorter than she was. His gaze might have been intimidating, but he had such a baby face that he reminded me more of a wary lapdog.

I blinked at them. Were we getting more off-season recruits?

"Moririn! The forest fairy!" Ricchan squealed.

The girl looked down, clearly embarrassed. My initial impression of her melted away like powder snow.

"Shouldn't you be used to that by now?" said the boy.

"Easy for you to say! Some things will always be embarrassing." Moririn nervously played with her hair.

When I didn't budge, Ricchan whispered, "Nao, don't you know her? She's the fairy from the assembly in May!"

"Um, I know there's a female student named Mori," I managed.

This was how replicas worked. I only had a hazy memory of the things Sunao saw and heard. And because she didn't pay attention to things that didn't interest her, I didn't remember Moririn the Fairy at all.

But I was aware that this Mori person was the former student council president. That wine-red ribbon on her chest was proof of her rank.

The boy behind her had been on the council, too. I'd seen him greeting people on my way into the bicycle lot.

"I don't know her, either," Aki said. He'd only been born in June, after all.

Mori didn't bat an eye, but the boy behind her frowned. He probably thought

we were goofing around.

Seeing her two clubmates at a loss, Ricchan began gesticulating wildly, breaking down the situation.

"At the big assembly in May, the student council performed a little skit. In the story, Moririn the forest fairy was worried about students breaking the rules, so she came to teach us all how to wear our uniforms just properly enough to stay within the guidelines."

In April, when the new school year began, everyone was careful to obey the rules. But once May rolled around, people started pushing their luck—bleaching their hair a little too light, rolling their skirts up a little too high, loosening ribbons and ties, leaving buttons undone, and so on and so forth. But if the school administration started issuing warnings, it would seem overbearing and might encourage even greater opposition. For that reason, the student council had taken over and put on a little skit to convey the message.

The contents were pretty silly. Mori, calling herself the mystical fairy Moririn, had been decked out in a full-body green costume, and the students had loved it.

The upshot was that the underclassmen now all called her Moririn—affectionately, of course. And there had been a thirty percent reduction in uniform violations, too—the Moririn Effect.

"Lots of people found Moririn's bashful yet earnest performance delightful," said Ricchan. "Among our students, she might be even more popular than Fujippi."

Fujippi was the official mascot character for Shizuoka Prefecture. As you might guess from the name, Fujippi looked like Mount Fuji, but with arms and legs and big, thick eyebrows.

I raised a hand. "What about Imagawa?"

"Oh yeah, Imagawa. His teary eyes are so cute!"

Imagawa was the *un*official mascot of Shizuoka City. He was supposed to be the reincarnation of Imagawa Yoshimoto, a feudal lord. He had a tear perpetually about to spill from one eye and always looked grumpy.

"Ahem."

Someone cleared their throat sternly—just like the vice principal did—to help get us back on track.

This was hardly the time to get excited about mascots. There was probably a reason for this visit.

At last, it occurred to me to offer them seats. The Literature Club sat in a row on the side of the table facing the hallway, while the visitors took seats closer to the window.

"Let's start over. I'm Suzumi Mori, former student council president. Class 3-4. Nice to meet you."

She said "former" because starting in October, her role would shift to supporting the new student council, run mostly by second-years.

Student council elections were held right before midterms. These were less an election than a vote of confidence. However, the only candidate had worked hard for the previous council and was basically anointed the moment they put their hand up.

With the Seiryou Festival, October would be a busy time—the former members' terms ended in September, but they stayed to help the new council run the event. It was essentially a month-long transfer of power.

"As your friend said, underclassmen often call me Moririn or President Moririn. Feel free to call me whichever you please." Moririn—or rather, Mori—brushed back her hair. "Oh, and my hair is naturally like this, so it's not a violation of school rules. If your hair is similar, just inform your homeroom teacher-rin."

"Fan service!" Ricchan applauded. Aki and I joined her.

Mori coughed awkwardly and glanced to the boy beside her. "You're next, Mochizuki."

The boy who had so memorably cleared his throat a moment ago now had his arms folded, and his brow furrowed.

"I'm former student council vice president, Shun Mochizuki, Class 3-2."

He didn't smile, and it seemed he was already done introducing himself.

"So what brings two former student council members to our humble Literature Club?" Ricchan asked. She wasn't the least bit intimidated.

They glanced at each other.

I got a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew what that kind of eye contact meant—they were deciding which of them should break the news.

"Hate to say this," Mori began, proving me right immediately, "but the Literature Club may be shut down."

This came as a shock, and we all gaped at her.

Mochizuki sighed. "We warned Mr. Akai before summer vacation, but heard nothing back. So we decided to stop by in person."

Mr. Akai was technically our club advisor. But he was also in charge of the kendo club and basically left us to ourselves.

He was an easygoing guy who liked to take his time, and I knew he'd had his hands full with the kendo club all summer long. He'd probably completely forgotten about the student council's warning.

Mori clasped her hands together. She looked concerned. "Club budgets are getting tighter every year. We're increasingly having to eliminate clubs without a lot of members or accomplishments."

"That's us all right," Aki admitted.

Backstabber.

"But, um, we're not really receiving any money in the first place," I protested.

Mochizuki glared at me like I was arguing out of turn.

"I appreciate your point, Aikawa," Mori jumped in. "But this isn't all about budgets. The faculty also want to reduce the number of unpopular clubs to make things easier from an administrative standpoint."

"The troubles of middle management," Aki muttered.

"Do you think this is funny?" Mochizuki snapped, and Mori rubbed her temples.

That was when Ricchan broke her silence and slapped the table. "How can you hit us with this completely out of the blue?!"

"R-Ricchan, calm down!" I stuttered.

But I was just as worked up as she was. The Literature Club was *my* place. I couldn't stand the idea of losing it.

"Calm down? How can I? I mean, think about it!"

She threw her head back and looked up at the ceiling. She was trembling.

This must have hit her hard—was she about to cry? I stood up to put my arms around her shoulders, but then she snapped her head back down and huffed.

"This is so exciting," she said.

"...Huh?"

Exciting?

"This happens in every good anime! It's a classic light novel trope! A sudden threat to the club brings out everyone's passion!"

Her eyes were gleaming like a child's.

I had completely misread her. Clearly, I wasn't the only one—everyone was staring at her, their mouths hanging open.

Ultimately, her sheer enthusiasm helped restore everyone's equanimity.

Adjusting her glasses dramatically, she flashed us all an indomitable grin and said, "So how do we *avoid* getting shut down?"

If things were set in stone, the student council wouldn't be here to warn us. Ricchan had worked this out, earning her a smile from Mori.

"I was just getting to that," Mori said. It seemed she'd found our real leader. It must've been painfully obvious that I was club president in name only.

I slid my chair backward and got out of Ricchan's way. Aki didn't try to stop me this time, and the sympathetic look he gave me only made me feel worse.

After that, Mori got right down to business.

"The student council would like the Literature Club to achieve some

measurable results during the Seiryou Festival. Specifically, we want you to sell at least one hundred zines."

"One hundred?" Ricchan groaned.

But Mori wasn't done. "It just happens to be the Literature Club's turn for scrutiny—if you can meet these conditions, I believe the faculty will be willing to spare you. What do you say?"

I thought Ricchan would answer right away—but she didn't. Instead, she looked at me. "What do you think, Nao?"

Aki was looking at me, too. His eyes seemed to say this was my call.

Fair. I am technically president. Even if my role was just a formality, it was my job to answer in situations like this. I took a deep breath, exhaled, then answered on behalf of the club.

"U-understood. We'll do our best." I balled my hands into fists. My response may have been cliché, but I meant it.

Mori looked at each of us in turn, then nodded. "If there's anything we can do to help, just say the word. We'll do what we can."

"Mori, we agreed not to make offers like that."

"Really? But I think you would've done the same back when you were little, Shun." She flashed him a teasing smile, and he turned beet red.

"That was ages ago! And how many times have I told you not to call me Shun at school?"

"Don't turn our club into your own personal rom-com!" Ricchan yelled.

They both blushed and clammed up. Mori looked sheepish, while Mochizuki just seemed pissed.

Ricchan snorted. "We have enough of that already, you see."

"Ricchan!" I wailed.

This little tangent aside, it seemed the matter was settled. The council members waved—well, Mori did—and left the room. They'd come and gone like a storm, and once we were alone again, we all collapsed back into our

seats.

Probably trying to lighten the mood, Ricchan said, "I heard from some classmates that those two grew up together. They even went to the same kindergarten!"

"Huh. They did seem close," Aki replied.

They must have really trusted each other—enough to join the student council together.

"I don't envy them," he continued. "It takes guts to come tell people their club might be abolished."

"True. I feel like the student council spends most of their time taking care of stuff nobody else wants to do. Greetings, arranging chairs in the gym, stuff like that; I bet those two are handling the tasks the new council members are dragging their feet on."

As I listened to Ricchan and Aki talk, I thought the matter over.

Mori had looked tense before dropping that bombshell. And she'd visibly relaxed when I'd promised we'd do our best. She probably hadn't wanted to say any of that. I'd never talked to her before, but I could tell she was really nice.

"In anime and manga, the student council is all-powerful, and even the teachers fear their might. They rule the school from the shadows!" exclaimed Ricchan.

"That sounds terrifying." Aki chuckled.

"I mean it! There's a billion stories like that!" Ricchan said, raising a finger. "Maybe my next book should be a superpower battle series where a shadowy student council holds sway over the whole school!"

Ricchan was now off in her own world as she pulled out a sheaf of writing paper—but we had bigger fish to fry.

"So how do we handle the Seiryou Festival?" I said, raising my voice a little.

Four eyes turned toward me.

The storm had not yet passed. It was making a U-turn right back toward us. If

we stood by and did nothing, it would certainly destroy our club.

Mori had shown us the path to salvation. It was up to us to figure out how to traverse it.

"How many copies does this zine usually sell?" Aki asked. "And how much does it cost?"

I thought back to the year before. When I'd gone to apologize to the upperclassman for not showing up to help with sales, I'd also asked about how they did.

"Um. I don't know about earlier issues, but last year we printed thirty copies, charged one hundred yen each, and sold five. Mr. Akai burned the rest with some chaff in the backyard. He even baked some sweet potatoes in the fire!"

There was a long, awkward silence.

"The sweet potatoes were delicious!" I offered. That was a very important detail.

"That hardly matters now!" Ricchan collapsed onto the table. "You only sold five?! That's catastrophic! Apocalyptic! We've gotta sell fifteen times that!"

"Twenty times," Aki corrected.

"Even worse!"

I was not quite so pessimistic. "I think we can easily sell a hundred. I mean—Ricchan, you're writing a story for it."

In hindsight, last year's zine had been distinctly shabby. Personally, I was tickled pink we'd managed to sell five of them.

"Nao, you're way too sweet!" Ricchan said, waggling her finger at me. "You're sweeter than the shortcake I had last night! You need to wake up to reality!"

"You had cake? That's nice."

"It was my mother's birthday! It was delightful. But that's not my point! Some rank amateur's little story is *not* gonna move a hundred copies."

"But everything you write is so good, Ricchan."

She looked up and rubbed her nose bashfully.

"Th-thanks, but...only the two of you have ever read my books. The average student doesn't want to read a story by some nobody."

Ricchan was quite firm on that point, and I didn't have any grounds to argue. If people didn't already know how good she was, why would they go out of their way to buy our zine?

"Then what do we do?" I asked.

I'd read the older zines, but the club put out similar material every year, so there wasn't much to learn from them.

The Seiryou Festival was only a month away.

What could we do, what could we write, what could we put in a zine that would make that many people care?

As we all racked our brains, our bodies gradually tipped to the side. We all leaned in the same direction, and it felt like the room itself might flip.

After a harmony of ums and ahs, Ricchan finally said, "We have no other choice. Nao, you're just going to have to work the booth in a maid outfit."

"Huh? A maid outfit?"

Where'd that come from?

Still leaning to one side, Ricchan pointed at me as she rattled off an explanation. "Buy a zine, and you earn the right to shake Nao's hand! Buy five, and you can take a polaroid shot together! Buy ten, and—"

"Nope," Aki cut her off as he straightened up in his chair.

Seeing him so adamantly opposed to the idea only made Ricchan smirk. "Don't give me that, Aki. You know you want to see maid Nao."

"Well...," he trailed off.

"That's basically a yes!"

"Shush." But she had him dead to rights, and he clicked his tongue. "That aside, I forbid you from using Nao as a cheap draw to lure in a crowd."

"Ugh. Fine, be that way." Ricchan reluctantly threw in the towel.

No better ideas emerged, and eventually we agreed to sleep on it.

Tomorrow would be the first day of October—a Friday. We didn't have much time until the festival. And frankly, I had an even bigger concern.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not sure if I'll even be here tomorrow."

Today had been the last day of midterms. I no longer had a reason to fill in for Sunao.

When Sunao went to school, I slept somewhere inside her. I only came out when she wasn't feeling up to something.

The Literature Club's future was at risk, and I was the president—and it hurt that I couldn't be here to strategize.

Seeing me deflate, Ricchan shook her head. "Don't apologize, Nao! Actually, I think we should rope Sunao and Sanada into this, too. Maybe they'll think of something we didn't."

Maybe Ricchan was worried about Sanada's condition. He still hadn't come to school once since manifesting his replica.

Aki understood and muttered, "Shuuya's been getting out of the house more at night and on weekends."

"Oh? Where's he going?"

"No clue."

"You don't know?!"

Aki just shrugged, clearly unconcerned.

His original had never once put him away, so he didn't share any of Sanada's memories since June. Maybe that was why their relationship was so different from mine and Sunao's.

It seemed like the hands on the clock were really in overdrive that day. It was already almost six—time to wind down our club meeting.

Ricchan went to the bathroom, leaving Aki and me alone together.

Silences between us were normally comfortable, but today I was fidgeting.

There were cirrus clouds floating in front of the setting sun. It was like someone, unable to become a witch, had been sweeping them back and forth with a bamboo broom. A breeze slipped between the curtains and whispered in my ears, telling me what Aki had hesitated to say a few minutes earlier.

Well...

Well, yeah. I do wanna see.

"Not to bring it back up," he began.

I flinched, startled.

"But, if I asked, would you wear one?" Aki had both hands wedged between his thighs as he cast me a sidelong glance.

I hadn't expected him to return to this subject, and I wasn't sure how to answer.

Perhaps that same breeze that had made me blush had whispered in his ears, too, and egged him on.

I'd been leaning, tilting my folding chair to one side. But now, I let it clunk back to the floor. Before my hair—half-up, as usual—settled back in place, I mumbled, "Um, if you wear one, too, I'll consider it."

My brain must not have been working properly.

"Me? In a maid outfit?" Aki smiled. He was definitely teasing me. "Is that what you want?"

I closed my eyes, greeting the backs of my lids, and thought.

Aki, in a maid outfit, sullenly welcoming customers, grumpily writing out a message in ketchup on someone's rice omelet. Before I could make out what the message said, he poked my cheek.

Aki was sitting beside me, not in a maid outfit, but in his summer uniform.

"I can tell you're imagining something weird," he said.

Rubbing my cheek, I shook my head. "I was just thinking it doesn't necessarily have to be a maid outfit."

I was fibbing a little, but when I thought about it some more, maybe I wasn't

really lying at all.

Aki would look pretty good in a butler outfit. He was tall and handsome—he could pull off all sorts of looks.

I had a lot of fun imagining it. Aki always had a grumpy look on his face, which made it even funnier. If I clasped my palms together and asked nicely, I bet he'd reluctantly agree to put on just about anything, even if he frowned the whole time.

"Should I ask for two?"

We both jumped. It appeared Ricchan had been back for some time, eavesdropping on us from just outside the door.

"I said no," Aki snapped.

Ricchan let out a muffled cackle. Her forehead gleamed under the florescent lights, reminding me once again of a boiled egg.

There'd been four eggs in that imaginary omelet. Aki had been scowling down at it, writing something—but what? I regretted that I hadn't been able to make it out. I knocked on every door in my mind, but the backs of my eyelids refused to answer.



That evening, I filled Sunao in on the threat to the Literature Club.

She used to hate hearing my reports, but lately when I got home, she'd unlock her door and quietly welcome me back.

While I was at school, Sunao studied in her room. Her desk was covered in workbooks and notes, so many that there was no space to rest her hands. A laptop was perched in the center of it. She'd brought it in from Dad's study, and sometimes she watched videos on it. Not for fun—nearly all the videos were educational, aimed at home study. Every now and then, she'd watch a cute animal video, though. She had to use the laptop, because I brought her phone to school.

That evening, Sunao was seated at her desk, looking away from me and not

responding to my report in any way—but she'd put her pencil down, so I knew she was listening.

That made me happy—I wasn't trying to draw out my explanation, but occasionally I lost track and went off on tangents.

Once I finished relaying the council's ultimatum, Sunao wheeled her chair around to face me, her lovely brows knitted together.

"So the club's in trouble? Can you fix it?"

"Hmmm..." I groaned. "I'm not really sure, but...we do have Ricchan."

"True. She's a real asset." Sunao nodded.

She was wearing her uniform, while I sat on a cushion on the rug. I nodded, too.

Tomorrow, Mom would probably ask her to help swap the rugs. The summer ones were thin, and it was getting cold—it was time to switch them out for the autumn ones.

When Mom pestered her about stuff like that, Sunao would pout and complain, but when she got back to her room, she'd diligently clean and pack away the summer rugs.

Just as I often looked up at the sky and tracked the changes of the seasons, Mom liked to get things done at the start of each new month. Flipping the page on her calendar must remind her of all the tasks that needed to be done.

Sunao did neither of those things. She always acted on impulse alone—just like today.

"Actually, that works out perfectly."

"Huh?"

She didn't answer right away. I watched my reflection in her eyes.

She tilted her head, and her glossy hair tumbled off her delicate shoulders. I could almost hear it. But instead of the silky sound of her hair, I heard something much more surprising.

"Will you take over at school for a while?"

"Um." I froze up.

I had no clue how to respond, so I didn't. Her words echoed in my brain.

Will you take over at school for a while?

I hadn't misheard her; she'd actually said that.

"Why?" I asked.

That took a lot of courage. It was my job to agree. That was why I was here, but...midterms were over. Starting next week, we'd be getting ready for the Seiryou Festival. Sunao wasn't suffering from menstrual pain. There was no reason for me to go to school in her place.

I was sure she could tell how rattled I was. She brushed her long hair behind her ear, choosing her words carefully.

"I can't tell you everything yet. But this is actually really convenient. Nao, you need to hustle to save the Literature Club. And I've got more important things to do than go to school." Then she summed it all up briefly: "It's a win-win."

"But..." I started, then clammed up. It probably sounded like the beginning of a refusal.

I didn't have the right words. I couldn't sort my thoughts out.

I saw Sunao's eyes narrow. They appeared to glow under the light of the LED bulb hanging above us. *They're beautiful*, I thought on reflex.



Beauty is persuasive. A parent who looks at their child, or an elder who gazes at someone younger, cannot stop that beauty from softening their heart.

When I read that passage in *The Wild Geese*, I thought of Sunao. Her beauty might not soften my heart, but when she turned her pretty face toward me, I always did as she asked.

Beauty demanded compliance. It made you want to follow it like a beacon, regardless of right or wrong.

"If you don't want to, that's fine. I won't force you," she said.

"I—I do want to!" My knees pressed together, and my hands clenched in my lap.

Of course I want to go.

I wanted to go to school, sit through classes, eat lunch, and talk to Aki and Ricchan to my heart's content. I wanted to read in the clubroom, gaze out the window, and clean the classroom. There were so many things I wanted to do, I couldn't possibly list them all. But I was a replica.

This was Sunao Aikawa's life. And I didn't want to get in her way.

My mouth was dry. Sweat tickled the inside of my fists, like a wood louse crawling through my fingers. I got nervous and checked, but there was nothing there. Seeing my empty palms left me even more unnerved.

Feeling sweat drip unpleasantly down my forehead, I forced my sluggish lips to move. "You're sure?"

"I am," Sunao said languidly.

Her elbow hit a workbook, knocking it off her desk. She made a noise that might have been a sigh or might have been a yawn, causing the cover to flutter. I watched wordlessly.

Modern literature. Which answer best describes what the author was thinking?

"There's no need to work yourself to the bone or anything," she continued.

"Just go to school like normal. If you don't feel like it, take the day off."

My head was down, my shoulders slumped, as I watched her beautiful fingers reach out and pick up the fallen workbook.

I didn't know what she meant by "normal."

Did I usually act normal at school? Was I acting like a normal Sunao Aikawa?

I thought about asking, but ultimately gave up. I didn't want her to think I was dumb. I didn't want her to roll her eyes at me.

When I said nothing, she flashed me a half-smile. "Did I freak you out?"

How could I say yes to a question like that?

That Saturday in September, while Aki and I were at the movies, Sunao and Ricchan had gone to a diner. They'd spent a lot of time catching up, sharing memories—and talking about me.

Sunao wasn't very forthcoming, and Ricchan didn't want to overstep. But she had told Sunao to come to her if she ever needed someone to talk to.

Ricchan saw both of us as her friends. Perhaps those words had changed Sunao and planted the seed of something in her heart. I had no idea what would grow from that seed, though. And since she couldn't "tell me everything yet," I couldn't question her.

At last, I managed to ask, "You're going to the festival, right?"

"Mm," Sunao said. "I guess, but..." She made a face like she'd slipped up and tried again. "You want to go too, right, Nao?"

I nodded.

"Then let's each take a day. We'll figure out which one later. Does that work?" "Mm, yeah."

I could barely get the words out. It felt like everything was going my way.

But on the other hand, that scared me. I felt sure something would follow that would turn everything upside down and ruin it all.

Just like Sunao said, it was freaking me out.

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"What now? Do you want to take a bath?"

The topic of the festival was over, and Sunao moved on to our new ritual.

"Nah."

"Dinner?"

"No, thanks."
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"I'm *fine*," I said, just like Aki always did. I managed a smile, and Sunao nodded.

We never used to do this. Sunao was beginning to ask about my needs, like she was carefully laying out all the things she'd never been able to put into words before.

These days, she called for me after washing her face, eating breakfast, and changing into her school clothes. Maybe she felt she had to after I ruined one of her summer uniforms.

Her mother had gotten a hand-me-down from a neighbor who'd graduated and bought a new pair of loafers for her. Sunao had thanked her, looking guilty. All that was my fault.

I rarely saw Sunao huddled up in bed anymore. When she called for me, my stomach was warm and full. I no longer needed to change out of her pajamas into her uniform. When Sunao called for me, all I had to do was pick up her satchel and head to school.

She was making what allowances she could for me—anything that wouldn't arouse her parents' suspicions. She was respecting me and offering me kindness in the form of this little lineup of questions.

Lately, Sunao had adopted a veil of awkward warmth. But deep down, she was still chilly. Her questions were like rock candy on my numbed tongue, and they left me ill at ease while I waited for them to melt.

How long was "a while"? When would "yet" run out?

I might inherit her more vivid memories, but those couldn't help me figure

out what Sunao was thinking or feeling. I couldn't tell when or in which direction the scales of her heart would tip.

"Need help with anything today?"

This was the only question I asked. I had nothing to call my own—but I'd studied hard, and on that front, perhaps I could help Sunao.

Yesterday, she'd nodded. Today, she didn't.

"Not really."

"Okay."

"See you tomorrow morning."

"...Mm."

A little hesitantly, Sunao said the words that always came next.

"Nao, vanish."

Sunao's face didn't seem like autumn. It wasn't spring or summer, and it wasn't winter, either. These days, she reminded me a bit of how she'd been when we were little, but...I still didn't really understand her.

And before I could nod in reply, I'd already disappeared.



Fifth and sixth period the next day were devoted to festival planning.

No one paid any attention to the red marks dotting their returned tests. Everyone's minds were running pell-mell toward the big event at the end of October.

The class president and vice president stood at the podium at the front of the room. The former was a strong-willed girl named Satou, and the latter was a timid boy named Ootsuka, who'd been forced into the role after losing a game of rock, paper, scissors.

Everyone was on the edge of their seats. Navy blue had overtaken the classroom, and the typical school smells mingled with the lingering odor of the mothballs that had guarded our blazers all summer.

"Food stalls and exhibits are always safe choices. And the gym's available if we want to do a dance or a play." Satou was counting off the possibilities on her fingers. She wore a knit vest over her blouse. I guessed she didn't like how blazers restricted her arm movement. "Feel free to chat with those around you; raise your hands if you've got a proposal. Begin!"

The volume in the room rose immediately.

All the other classes seemed to be doing the same thing. Someone yelled, "Cinderella!" in the room next door, and we all giggled.

Sunao never volunteered any ideas during these discussions. She'd act disinterested and stare out the window, or she'd look for split ends in her hair.

I was sitting at the window, too, of course, so I tried to do the same thing—but I was too curious and couldn't help glancing around the room.

"I know, I know! We should do a maid café!" the goofball in front of me yelled.

My shoulders twitched. I was extra sensitive to the m-word now—I glanced at Aki and was surprised to find him looking at me.

I quickly turned back to the blackboard. Satou's chalk was clacking away, writing down the idea.

Kozue Satou was on the kendo team and had an athletic build to match. Her hair was cropped short at the back, leaving her slender neck bare. Her given name meant "tree top," as in the idiomatic phrase "the flower at the treetop," used to refer to something one wants but can't reach. That phrase fit her to a tee—even the other girls put her on a pedestal.

Every year, the kendo team took over the stage in the gym and put on a demonstration. I wondered if I'd get to see Satou in action this year.

She finished writing on the blackboard and spun back around. Then she slapped the board, sending up a puff of white dust and leaving a hazy handprint next to the boldly-written words "Maid Café."

"Fine by me!" she exclaimed.

That got her approval?

This prompted yet more suggestions.

People proposed other kinds of cafés, such as a butler café, or one with waitresses in qipaos. Others wanted to sell takoyaki, french fries, or bubble tea. Even wilder suggestions included creating a teacup ride or an escape room or organizing a stamp rally.

Just looking at the list on the board made my heart sing.

If I let it, my mind would drift away like a balloon until the day of the festival—but the threat to the Literature Club pulled me back to Earth. I had to take a toothpick and pop that balloon filled with helium and dreams.

The discussion carried on at a fever pitch for a solid forty minutes before we eventually settled on a haunted house.

Still, that was only our first choice. The escape room came in second, and the butler café third. If our options overlapped with other classes, our class representatives would play rock, paper, scissors to determine who got to use which idea.

Third-years had entrance exams looming on the horizon and tended to opt for low-intensity offerings, so Satou thought it was unlikely any of them would go for a haunted house.

"Rest assured, I know these first-years, and they are no threat. If I tell them to go for rock, those trusting souls will do it without a second thought, just like this..."

Satou held up both hands. She made a fist with one and held the other one out flat, then slammed them together. Her bright smile made the gesture even more intimidating—everyone shuddered. But we were convinced, and we placed our faith in her.

After fifth period, our class representatives rushed off to the student council room. If we wanted to do anything that might have competition, we were required to submit our top three choices before the day was out. The council worked closely with the Seiryou festival management team, so the council room doubled as their war room.

Everything went smoothly, and by sixth period we were locked in on the

haunted house idea. I felt like we were getting ahead of ourselves, but no one wanted to slow our momentum.

The specifics fell in line pretty quick.

"Okay, so we're doing a cursed, abandoned hospital."

"We're ripping off the Labyrinth of Fear at Fuji-Q, then?"

This came from the boy in front of me, Yoshii—the one who'd suggested the maid café.

"No, we're going to do even better! Let's make the Labyrinth of Fear weep!"

This lofty goal sent a stir through the room.

"We're aiming to win the Best of Seiryou Festival grand prize!"

Now that we had a slightly more achievable goal, a few people clapped.

At the end of the second day of the festival, once everyone had finished cleaning up, the students would gather in the gym. This was called a closing party, and it was a little event to congratulate everyone on all their hard work. It included an awards ceremony, and prizes were given for the best stall, the best attraction, and the best stage performance. Finally, one of those three received the Best of Seiryou Festival grand prize.

The winning team's representative then got to draw from a box of potential prizes. Last year's class had received a Häagen-Dazs gift certificate. Rumor had it the box contained tickets to Disneyland, but no one knew the truth.

People were suggesting potential scares for our haunted hospital left and right. Satou was writing it all down while Ootsuka—who was in the Fine Arts Club—drew a map on a large sheet of paper taped to the board. These two actually made a pretty good team—I hadn't expected things to go so smoothly.

We were soon split up into squads. I ended up on a team of girls in charge of props and decals. I was secretly relieved, since I figured I'd be mostly useless if I was put on planning or costumes.

Aki was put on the carpentry team with a bunch of other athletes. His ankle was improving, and he no longer had much of a limp, so I figured he was up to the task.

As I thought about this, Satou slipped over and whispered, "Aikawa, are you sure you don't want to be on the same squad as Sanada?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you're dating, right?"

I locked up.

Aki and I almost never talked in class, and if we did, we were careful about how we referred to each other. We might head to the clubroom together, but we split up for lunch.

There were plenty of couples in our class, as well as students dating someone in another class or grade, and I was certain we were hiding it better than they were. So Satou's question came as something of a shock to me.

She shot me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I bet I'm the only one who's noticed."

That wasn't remotely reassuring. If I nodded, it would mean Sunao Aikawa and Shuuya Sanada were officially a couple.

"We're not dating," I insisted.

"Suuuure. Okay, we'll leave it at that." She clearly saw right through me, and I shuddered. "Let's make this a great haunted house!"

I forced myself to smile. "Can't wait!"

Everyone had to work hard to prepare for the festival—not just the council and management team. And it wasn't just the classes that did stuff—each club, team and committee had their own entries to worry about.

Satou would be leading Class 2-1's efforts, with extra help from those without any other obligations, allowing everyone else to focus on their other commitments. In return, everyone would have to take a shift of one or two hours during the festival.

The choir and band members looked relieved—they'd been the first to argue they needed time to focus on practicing for their club. I also got permission to spend my after-school time helping with the Literature Club's efforts.

As sixth period wrapped up, we heard back from the student council.

Everyone cheered. Class 2-1 was officially putting on a haunted house.



After school at the Literature Club, we held a strategy session of our own. This meeting could determine our very survival. And yet...

"Wow, a haunted house? That sounds great! I'll have to go."

"Yeah, you've gotta come see!"

...Ricchan and I were chatting about our classes' plans instead.

"Will you two be playing ghosts? Blood gushing from your head, wailing curses?" She rolled her eyes up into their sockets, stuck out her tongue, and waved both hands in the air.

"No, I opted out."

"Shame!"

I didn't like the dark. I bet Sunao was the same—she always left that orange night light on when she slept. If a ghost looked scared, it would ruin the whole effect, so I was sure I'd made the right choice.

"What's your class doing, Ricchan?"

"Class 1-5 will be making crepes. You've got to come sample my flawless frying techniques."

She moved her hands around, presumably miming frying a crepe, but it looked more like she was stir-frying yakisoba.

"Yakisoba sounds delicious."

"There won't be any! Only crepes! What would you like in yours?"

"Strawberries and whipped cream!"

I imagined sweet and tart berries perfectly melded into the sugary cream. I could taste sweetness spreading through my mouth just thinking about it.

"Strawberries, huh? We can probably only afford jam on our budget."

"Fine by me!" I said, copying Satou's phrasing and her firm nod. "What's your order, Ricchan?"

"I'll go with bananas, chocolate syrup, and whipped cream."

"Nice. A classic."

"I'm a tuna and cheese man," added Aki as he came through the door. The carpentry squad had called an immediate meeting, so he'd stayed behind.

"A fan of savory crepes, huh?" said Ricchan. "How sophisticated."

Aki took his usual seat, and I started dithering—should I tell him about what Satou said? She'd come up empty with me, so there was a chance she'd go after him next.

"Guys, about the zine...," began Ricchan.

There was no time for my worries. Now that all three of us had arrived, Ricchan's glasses gleamed.

I gulped. "You have something?"

"Indeed. I may have cracked it."

Not to make excuses, but once Sunao dismissed me, I was no longer able to think. We'd all promised to come back with ideas, but I'd arrived with nothing to offer and was suitably chagrined.

"And so—to the council chambers!" Ricchan exclaimed.

"Huh? You want to see the student council?"

"Precisely. Full company march!"

Caught up in her momentum, we tagged along. It seemed she was disinclined to brief us on her plans in advance.

Did she intend to request a special meeting and ask them to call the whole thing off? Or perhaps she'd try to negotiate for a lower number of zines to sell.

I had concerns, but Ricchan's tiny shoulders radiated confidence. I got the feeling her idea was something else entirely.

The council room was on the fourth floor of the school's main building. The

air felt a little thinner as we made our way down the hall. When we reached our destination, we saw a door with a plate reading STUDENT COUNCIL ROOM. It was wide open—we didn't even need to knock.

"Avast!" Ricchan yelled, charging in.

She sounded like she was here to attack, so I added, "Excuse us!"

I'd never been in this room before, and it was far messier than I'd imagined. There were mountains of paperwork all over.

But perhaps some mess was inevitable. The council was gearing up for the festival, and it was their job to ensure everything proceeded smoothly and the students and visitors all stayed safe. It must have been a ton of work.

Mochizuki poked his head out from behind a heap of files. "Oh, it's you all from the Literature Club."

No one else was around, either from the council or the management committee. They must have all been out on business. Mochizuki saw me looking around and misread my intent.

"Mori's out on a job. Fair warning, tears won't get you anywhere with me."

He'd already foreseen both of the possibilities I'd come up with.

But Ricchan didn't waver.

"Actually, we're here for you," she said.

"You are?" He raised an eyebrow, documents still in his hands.

The stage was set. It was the student council versus the Literature Club, and only we had come in force.

"First, a question. Are there any other clubs facing extinction?"

That ruffled his feathers—he scowled at her. "Yeah, one."

I blinked, wondering which it was. But Ricchan's eyes flashed.

"The Drama Club, right?" she said, with all the conviction of a detective announcing the name of the culprit in the final chapter of a mystery novel. "Everyone knows they're a shoestring club, heavily reliant on outside assistance."

"Shoestring? Well, sorry." Mochizuki's bitter tone finally clued me in.

"You mean..."

"Yes, I'm the sole member of the Drama Club. Clearly, your first-year is well aware."

"That I am! The Drama Club is in an even more precarious predicament than the Literature Club!"

Mochizuki shot her a baleful glare, but eventually he let out a long breath and deflated.

"Not like it matters. I'm graduating soon, and it won't be dismantled until next year. If I can give one last performance at the festival, I'll have no regrets."

He didn't seem too concerned, but Ricchan was only just getting to the point.

"I have a proposition for you," she said. "What do you say we team up for the festival?"

"Oh?" His eyes widened.

Ricchan put a hand on her hip and grinned. "I'll write a script for the Drama Club to perform on stage during the festival. I'll also write a spin-off short story, publish it as our club zine, and sell it at our booth." She rattled this off like she'd rehearsed it. "Naturally, we'll help with the performance, too. If you can win the performance award—or even better, the grand prize—it'll be huge for the Drama Club. If necessary, we'll even lend you our resident hottie as an actress. I'll do what I can, as well."

My mouth was hanging open as she clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"You're the hottie, by the way," she said, looking at me.

"Whaaat?!"

I was reeling, but Mochizuki seemed to find this proposition worth considering.

"...Not bad," he said, stroking his chin. "I've been using existing scripts, so having an original would be huge. And having a pretty girl in the cast is sure to generate buzz."

He put down the documents he'd been holding and looked at me. I couldn't tell how serious he was, and my smile must have looked strained.

Then his eyes snapped back to Ricchan. "But that's only if the script is *good*. Do you have a subject?"

"I do. I was thinking we'd do Princess Kaguya."

I was shocked. She already had that planned, too? Were Ricchan's days sixty hours long? I'd have to ask later.

"Princess Kaguya...so *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*? A safe choice." He figured the audience would be more receptive to a story everyone already knew well.

Long ago, there lived an elderly bamboo cutter by the name of Sanuki-no-Miyatsuko. He foraged through the wilderness, cutting down bamboo and using it to make all manner of wares.

One day, he spied a glowing stalk. Curiously, he found that the light was coming from the hollow within. And there, upon closer inspection, he beheld a beautiful girl the size of his thumb.

Those are the famous opening lines of the story. The author is unknown, but it's said the tale was written in the Heian era.

A tiny little girl, born from a glowing bamboo tree, quickly grows into a beautiful woman and captivates the hearts of men far and wide. But in time, they discover she is actually a princess from the moon.

This story was in our junior high textbooks, and Sunao's class had been asked to recite it from memory. For a while, every time the students saw each other, they'd put on a serious face and start reciting, "Long ago, there lived an elderly bamboo cutter..."

"What about the script? I assume you haven't written it yet."

"Afraid not. But the pieces are already coming together up here!" Ricchan

tapped her forehead. The gesture looked incredibly suave. "I'm still working on the superpower battle scenes, though."

"Hold up! Isn't this The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter?"

Ricchan completely ignored the look Mochizuki was giving her.

"You've only got fifty minutes, max! If we're going to give the five suitors their due, we'll need a bloody battle scene! They'll be fighting with the fire-rat robe and the jeweled branch of Horai, et cetera. And during the fight, the treasures will gradually fall to pieces, proving they weren't real. The five suitors will take each other out and leave the stage. That will allow us to trim the story down."

She took to this like a fish to water—she was delivering a passionate pitch, and she was making sense. Frankly, changing up a classic story sounded really fun.

"I'll keep the rest pretty conventional. What do you say?"

Her offer would benefit both clubs, allowing us to bolster each other's weaknesses.

Mochizuki thought it over. It was hard to read his expression—but at last, he let out a resigned sigh.

"I have some misgivings, but...it does sound fun."

"Yeah?"

"Let's go with that."

"Yes!" Ricchan leaped for joy. Her smile was so infectious I started to cheer up, too. "No time like the present! Let's decide roles."

She glanced at Aki, and he pulled an unused white board over from the corner and began writing the names of all the characters in black marker. Kaguya, the old man, the old woman, the emperor...

"About that," Mochizuki said gingerly. "There's a few parts I'd like to specify."

"Oh? Which ones?" asked Ricchan.

"Let Mori play Kaguya. And I'll take the emperor." There was a momentary silence. "Stop smirking! You're reading too much into it."

"Of course we're not! Right, Nao?"

"Yep. What she said."

Perhaps Mochizuki had a crush on Mori. Or maybe, they were already a couple.

When we kept smirking, he let out an exasperated sigh and proceeded to explain his reasoning.

"Mori and I grew up together, and back in kindergarten, we did *Snow White*. Mori wanted to play the title role, but wound up with the part nobody wanted —the wicked stepmother."

Mori was a sophisticated beauty who seemed mature beyond her years. A far cry from a wicked stepmother, but if she'd had even a fraction of the same vibe as a kid, she was probably a better fit for a mysterious lady staring into a mirror than a bubbly princess.

"When that happened, I made a promise to her. I said that someday, I'd let her play a princess, and I'd be her prince."

This anecdote didn't do much to confirm or deny a possible romantic relationship between the two. But it was a lovely story, like something from a fairy tale.

My eyes sparkled.

Ricchan was nodding. "You're right—the closest characters to that in this story are Kaguya and the emperor, tragic though their love may be."

Mochizuki leaned back. "Mori's always focused on studying and council duties. I've asked before, but she always turns me down. The only thing we've really done together was that Moririn sketch."

What role had *he* played in that assembly? Whatever it was, I figured it was safe to assume it wasn't a prince.

"Normally, we'd have a performance in February, but...we'll be busy with exams by then. So...this is literally our last shot." He sat up straight and bowed his head low. The two of them must be going to different schools. If they skipped this festival, they'd miss their chance. "So, please let us take those two

roles."

"Nao, what do you say?" asked Ricchan.

Why is she asking me?"

"I don't mind at all," I said. I didn't have any reason to argue.

Ricchan nodded. "Okay, then the roles are yours!"

"Thank you." Mochizuki's features softened. It must have been involuntary, though, because a moment later, he was back to his usual stern expression.

Aki was busy jotting their names down on the board.

"Oh, I wanna be in the fight, so I'll take one of the suitors," Ricchan said.

"Fine," replied Mochizuki. "Aikawa, Sanada?"

"Er, um..."

I hadn't thought about it at all. I'd never been in a play before, and I didn't really want a big part. Were there any smaller roles available? The moon messenger only showed up at the end.

"I'll play the old man," Aki said, while I was still thinking.

Ricchan looked him over. "That's very you," she said.

"Hey!" he shot back, but he was already writing down his name.

Then his head swiveled toward me. "Nao, do you want the old lady?" he asked, as if he was inquiring about the weather.

She's...in a lot of this. She pops up pretty much all throughout the story. But I didn't want to turn him down, so I nodded. None of the other roles were jumping out at me, anyway.

We'd already filled in a lot of the blanks. Mori, Mochizuki, Hironaka, Aki, Nao.

I bet Aki had intentionally wrote our names like that. Mochizuki didn't question it—he must have assumed they were nicknames.

"We still need the other four suitors and the messenger from the moon. There are a few people who help me out regularly, so I'll get in touch with them. We should be able to reuse the costumes from our June performance of

The Feather Mantle."

As soon as he said those words, he winced.

"Wait a minute...," he said, turning to Ricchan. "Is *that* why you picked *Bamboo Cutter*?"

"Yup! I heard about the Drama Club's performance at the drama fair back in June."

"What's a drama fair?" I asked. I'd never heard the term before.

"Several affiliated schools from around Shizuoka City hold an annual competition," Ricchan said. "If you win, you go on to the prefectural and Kanto area fairs."

"Wow."

So it isn't just sports that do that kind of stuff. I had no idea. I was thoroughly impressed, but Mochizuki just grimaced.

"You did your homework," he grumbled. "I underestimated you, Literature Club President."

"Nao's the president! I'm merely the mastermind." Ricchan looked extremely proud of herself.

"Oh, right," Mochizuki said. He looked a little embarrassed—it must have been an honest mistake. "Anyway, I'm guessing you all will have your hands full with your class projects. You can leave the costumes and sets to me."

"Sure you don't need help with props or something? My class isn't that busy."

"I appreciate the offer, but you've got a whole extra story to write for your zine, Hironaka."

"I can do that at home."

His eyes narrowed. "Can you have the script done by the end of the week?"

"It's a promise... But I'd like to make some small adjustments as we work on it. Is that okay?"

"As long as the main plot doesn't change, then fine. But try to minimize alterations to the dialogue; it'll confuse the actors."

"Roger that!" Ricchan said, saluting.

Then Mochizuki turned to Aki and me. "As for rehearsals, let's assume three a week. After school on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I'm sure you have other commitments, but let's try to gather as often as we can."

Everyone nodded.

"Meet at the school gates in your tracksuits—rehearsal starts with some light running, stretches, and vocal exercises. We'll do a few read-throughs of the script, then start blocking out the action. The Drama Club rehearses in the big room on the fourth floor of the annex, so that's where we'll be."

I hadn't expected the Drama Club to be running around the track, but Mochizuki made it sound standard, so I didn't argue.

"Mori and I have council work, so it might be hard for us to be there every time. But it's my club, so I'll try to be there as often as possible."

By this point, the Seiryou Festival Management crew were starting to file back in. There was still no sign of Mori, but I saw other council members among the returnees.

Our discussion was mostly settled, so we left the council room.

The moment we were in the hall, I said, "That was incredible, Ricchan!"

It was no wonder Mochizuki had looked so defeated. She'd led every second of the discussion and had him dancing in the palm of her hand.

But in response, our star player's gaze swam around awkwardly.

"Actually, this was mostly Aki," she said.

I stopped dead in my tracks, surprised. Aki and Ricchan stopped a few seconds later.

"Aki?" I asked. "What did Aki do?"

When Ricchan said nothing, he began explaining the situation himself.

"I hit up some basketball buddies when I got home. One of them knew Mochizuki was in the Drama Club, and he told me a little about their situation and about the competition in June. He also mentioned that they always use existing scripts."

"So this was all your plan?"

"I merely sent Hironaka a summary of what I'd learned. She turned that into a plan."

At this point, I came to a critical realization. These two had been sharing intel—and intentionally leaving me out of it.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

I was feeling pretty lonely. Was I not reliable? Though given my contributions over the past few days, I supposed I probably wasn't.

When I started sulking, Ricchan looked at me guiltily.

"There was a reason—I'm the one who asked him not to tell you."

That sounded ominous.

"Not to toot my own horn," she continued, "but I figured this strategy had a high chance of succeeding. I was certain I could talk Mochizuki into it. But I wasn't sure I really wanted to go through with it until the last second. Part of me still isn't satisfied."

"About what?"

"We're just riding the coattails of Bamboo Cutter's fame." She huffed.

She took off her glasses and wiped them with a plain cloth. The thick lenses, meant to block blue light, glowed with a vague tint.

"Do you remember what you said yesterday, Nao? You swore my books were good—and I was super happy to hear that. But I have a hard time believing that anything I write now could move a hundred copies." It was rare to hear Ricchan sound insecure. I listened closely, not daring to blink. "But someday—no, I can do better than that—at next year's Seiryou Festival, my goal is to hit that number with ease. I'm going to make it happen!"

She finished wiping her glasses and put them back on. From behind the frames, her eyes were gleaming with passion.

"That's the spirit, Ricchan."

"Yep! So this time, I'm gonna nail that script. I've never written a play before, so I've gotta research the fundamentals... I'm gonna head to the Nanbu Library and search for a guide."

It sounded like she'd already hit the school library and come up empty. But seeing her all fired up like this steeled my own resolve, and I clenched my fists. Ricchan was always a hard worker, but right now, she was going all out. I was the club president and her friend. *There has to be something I can do.* 

"Ricchan, I'll do whatever it takes. I want to help out—just say the word."

"Nao..." My words seemed to encourage her, and her eyes glistened. "In that case, I have a favor to ask."

"O-okay." Her response had come faster than I expected.

"Track down someone who can draw us a poster." This seemed like a grave responsibility. "We'll use the same art for the cover of the club zine. Get Mr. Akai to let us print it in color." Even graver.

"I need to find someone? All on my own?"

"I've got my hands full," said Ricchan with an apologetic giggle.

I was glad she seemed to be back in high spirits, but I still wasn't sure I was up to this monumental task.

"A-Aki?"

I was sure he'd help. But when I turned to look, he was shaking his head.

"I'm gonna be building sets."

Oh no!

Aki looked from my distraught expression to Ricchan, then back again.

"I can't draw at all," Ricchan said, before he could ask. "Nao's even worse."

Aki looked at me. "You are?"

"That's not true. I'm pretty good!" I said. I wasn't going to let them underestimate me.

"Then please demonstrate, Maestro," said Ricchan.

She pulled her student notebook out of her pocket and offered it to me. I took it and did a quick sketch on the back page in ballpoint pen.

I think that should about do it.

Aki peered at my masterpiece. "A mouse? Yeah, not bad."

"It's a cat!"

How could he possibly confuse them? Mice and cats are nothing alike! They're as different as Tom and Jerry!

Then again, if my sketch was that confusing, maybe I really wasn't cut out to be an artist.

But where could one find such a person? The Fine Arts Club? I didn't have any better ideas, so I decided to start there.

I'd sworn to do whatever I could. There was no backing out now, and I wanted to do *something* to live up to my title. But I was still plagued by unease.

Ricchan was headed off to the library, so we saw her to the front door.

"Will everything turn out all right?" I murmured.

"Finding an artist, you mean?" she asked.

"That too, but I've never acted before, either."

That was my biggest concern.

Sunao had played a princess in a kindergarten play. There'd been five princesses, and Sunao was just one of them, but her mother had been delighted. She said it felt like there was a special spotlight just for her.

Sunao had denied it and swore she hadn't done anything out of the ordinary. But she sounded pretty happy about the compliment. Her reaction was very cute. And the fact that I remembered it clearly proved how important it was to her.

That had all happened before I was even born.

"I wouldn't say that," Aki said. He had no more acting experience than I did.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and gazed out the window at the school

grounds. The sounds of sports teams practicing were now joined by the clamor of people preparing for the festival.

"What do you mean?" I asked, staring at his profile.

He cast me a sidelong glance. "You're playing Sunao Aikawa every day."

Oh. Right.

"I guess I am."

I got his point, but it didn't feel like acting.

After all, when the characters in the story see Princess Kaguya gazing at the moon, they might feel uneasy, but nobody would ever wonder if she'd been switched out for someone else, or if she might be a replica. That would be absurd.

This wasn't exclusive to Princess Kaguya, either. Everyone had *moods*. One day, they might be nice, and then the next they might be cold, or quick to anger, or dazed, or obstinate. Someone might be your best friend one day, then push you away the next morning, only to happily suggest you walk home together after school. Some days you might blurt out all sorts of things you didn't mean, while on other days you did the exact opposite.

Kindergarten, elementary school, junior high, senior high. All schools were hot boxes of unreasonable impulses. Maybe adults could control this roller coaster of emotions, but we teens were still at their mercy. But now that I thought of it, maybe adults were just the same.

"And you're playing Shuuya Sanada."

We were both pretending. I sometimes wondered what Sanada was like. How did he smile? How friendly was he? We'd been classmates, but I'd never spoken to him, and I had only a hazy image of who he was.

I didn't want to meet him, though. I was certain I'd blurt out something I shouldn't—make some selfish wish I wasn't allowed. We'd never really talked about it, but I felt like Aki was in the same boat.

"I'm always relieved to see your hair half-up," he said, looking at my head.

I was using a new light blue scrunchie. He looked like he wanted to touch my

hair, and I wanted to let him. But we weren't in the clubroom. Satou's words echoed in my heart, leaving me no choice. Instead, I touched my own hair.

I babbled to hide my embarrassment. "Well, I'll be the one at school for a while."

"Yeah?" Aki's eyes went wide, then he smiled. "That's wonderful."

The way he said it so easily brought a smile to my face.

His cheeks were slightly flushed. The sun was already setting, but I knew that hue was coming from his heart.

No matter how I did my hair, Aki could tell it was me. Even so, I didn't think I'd ever quit this hairstyle. Or ever let go of his hand.

Before, I'd had nothing—but now, I had two things.

"Mm?"

The air seemed to vibrate, and I felt a stir pass over my head. Something was going on. Aki turned to look out the window at the evening sky. Then he narrowed his eyes and pointed.

"What's that?"

Forgetting to switch to my loafers, I ran out outside in my slippers. Several other students did the same.

I craned my neck up at the sky. At first, I thought it was a flock of white birds.

But I was wrong. As they fluttered down to earth, it became clear they were pieces of paper.

Dozens of A4-sized pages, easily a hundred of them, were drifting right and left, carried by the wind.

Where had they come from? Surely not the roof. Someone had fallen off a nearby school's roof several years ago, and now ours was kept locked.

I looked up at the main building—but with festival prep in full swing, almost all the windows were open.

Several students were leaning out of windows on the third floor—where the third-years' classrooms were located—wondering what was up.

There were even people on the fourth floor, in the hall outside the student council room. There had been paperwork strewn all over that room. Maybe someone carrying a heap of it had tripped and spilled it all out the window.

As I speculated, a sheet landed at my feet. I picked it up, wondering what was on it, and my heart skipped a beat.

My eyes went wide, and my gaze locked on the words. I felt like they were staring straight back at me.

"Nao?" Aki asked, catching up with me.

I couldn't answer. The page slipped from my shaking fingers. Every single one had the same thing printed on it, in a very ordinary font.

There's a doppelgänger in our school.

## Аст Two A Replica, Searching

Monday, October 4.

The weekend had been pleasant and comfortable, but now it was hot again, like summer had come rushing back to grab something it mistakenly left behind.

Today had a predicted high of twenty-eight degrees Celsius, but it felt well over thirty. Those navy blue blazers had vanished like a mirage, and now there was white everywhere the eye could see—button-up shirts, short and long sleeve, and even some gym shirts.

Festival prep was in full swing, and voices echoed everywhere. People were working hard, sweat dripping down their skin. Amid all the hubbub, no one paid me any mind.

Taking advantage of that, I hustled down the corridor. I was in a rush, despite having no destination in mind. Every now and then, I'd spy a group with tarps out, working on something, and I'd turn the other way, reluctant to jump over them.

Slightly out of breath, I closed my eyes and thought back to that moment three days ago.

"We've gotta find them!" I blurted out as I scooped up the page I'd dropped.

The crowds drawn by the flyers were already dispersing. Students on the council and festival management team were now collecting the papers, looking annoyed.

A few dozen students had picked one up, like I had. Since they weren't directly attacking anyone, the council didn't feel the need to confiscate them all and didn't seem to care if we took one.

The students still at school were probably messaging their friends now, telling them about the mysterious happening. "Someone threw a bunch of weird flyers out a window. I wonder what it could mean?" To them, it wasn't important, just a little odd.

It was a sentiment I couldn't share.

"We've gotta find them, right?"

I wasn't fully determined, however. Aki could tell I was looking for support and tilted his head to one side.

"And if we do, what then?" he asked.

"I mean, they...someone might know about me!" I hissed.

I was starting to sweat. This note was an accusation. And wasn't I the doppelgänger in Suruga Seiryou High?

"We've gotta find out who dropped these."

"It's better if we don't," Aki said, firmly. "Whether they've got you figured out or not, we're better off doing nothing."

"What do you mean?"

I probably looked miffed that he'd disagreed. But Aki's face was like a rock, not moving at all.

"If we look for them, it'll prove they're right," he said.

I forced myself to consider this. Turning back to the flyer, I connected the dots.

"...Oh."

If the culprit was trying to lure me out, then acting suspiciously would be playing right into their hands. And if they had a specific target in mind, why take such a roundabout approach? They could just come ask me directly or write my name out on the flyer.

These pages were bait, testing to see who the message alarmed and spurred into action. They were meant to flush us out. Or so Aki believed.

"Ignoring it is our best option. Don't act anxious or scared, just stick to your routine. That said, ignoring the flyers completely might seem just as weird, so we'll have to be careful there, too."

Aki's eyes saw so much further than mine. I was thankful for his level-headed thinking.

Still, I couldn't fully agree. I couldn't form the words he wanted.

I hung my head, and his voice drifted down from above. "And it might not be you, Nao. They could mean me."

He'd clearly meant that to be encouraging. But all I could manage in response was a feeble nod.



That morning in homeroom, our teacher gave us a warning about the flyers.

Apparently, they'd been printed out in the school computer lab, and the paper used was school property. Wasting resources for a prank was unacceptable. The warning was short, and the teacher simply asked students to report anything they knew to the faculty office.

They didn't mention what was written on the flyers. The students didn't appear all that interested, especially now that they'd had the weekend to forget about it. Sunao felt the same—I'd shown her the paper I picked up, but she didn't seem to care.

After the flyer fiasco, I'd gone to the library and borrowed *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. I figured I should reread it, since I would be playing a part in our production. This edition had the original text and a modern translation, as well as some beautiful illustrations.

It seemed safe to assume Sunao's idea of "a while" would last at least until the festival was over. For that reason, I carried the book around in her satchel, rather than leaving it in the clubroom. It was still weird to see it sitting there, in between the textbooks and notebooks.

Even our fifteen minutes of morning reading time was precious now. We had our first rehearsal that afternoon, and I had to work on the haunted house, too. So, I probably wouldn't have time to read after school.

I'd been looking forward to these little reading breaks, and yet my eyes slid over the page, not taking in anything.

One minute, I was reading about how they named the beautiful princess Nayotake-no-Kaguya, and the next thing I knew, she was putting the fake fire-rat robe into the fire. I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there and had to turn

back a page. This kept happening, over and over again.

I couldn't focus, even though I had this precious time. Even though I was going to be in a play. Even though fall was the season for reading.

My eyes were awfully tired, which wasn't helping. When Sunao called for me this morning, I could feel the strain. If she pushed herself, it affected me, too.

"You're the doppelgänger!"

I felt a chill run down my spine.

I froze up completely, unable to raise my head. Yoshii had turned around, and I felt sure he was looking at me.

"Silence won't help you now! I know you're Aloysia Jahn!"

My hands were clutching my book, and I could see them shaking.

Aloysia Jahn was from a famous story about a doppelgänger called *The Mermaid's Return*. I'd certainly seen myself in the mysterious woman who walked into the waves and was never seen again. She reminded me of a replica.

But why? Why would Yoshii suddenly make such an accusation?

Had I done something suspicious?

Did I not seem human? Was it that obvious?

"No, you're Aloysia Jahn."

"You can't just throw it back at me!"

"No takebacks, Aloyoshii Jahn."

"Boo, bad pun."

...Slowly, I started breathing again.

Yoshii hadn't been talking to me. He was just goofing around, joking about the flyer with a friend. I repeated this in my mind, trying to calm myself down. But I couldn't hide how fast I was breathing. I raised my book and tried to hide behind it.

I didn't want anyone seeing my face right now. Half-relieved, half-desperate— I must have looked like a total mess. Maybe Aloysia had been the same. "Yoshii, stop goofing off and focus."

"Aw, Teacher, how come you only yell at me?"

"Because everyone else is quietly reading."

"Okaaay." He chuckled and made a show of standing up his book. The title was hidden behind a book cover.

"Yoshii, that's manga," said another student. "You're just reading One Piece."

"Gah, don't give me away!"

"Isn't that the Sky Island arc?"

"Yeah, it's the best part!"

Appalled, the teacher moved toward them, and Yoshii shrieked.

I screwed my eyes shut.

I felt a dull pain, and white spots began to blink across my vision. The morning reading period ended without me getting through another word of my book.

"You okay, Aikawa?"

I knew someone was calling me, but I forgot to respond.

"Aikawa?"

"Mm? Oh, sorry. I'm so out of it."

Finally, I managed to speak. Satou was standing next to me, looking worried.

For most of October, fifth and sixth periods were devoted to festival preparation. Work on the haunted house was going smoothly, with Satou leading the charge. We'd moved all our desks to the back of the room, like we did when we cleaned. But now, we were seated on the floor, hard at work.

Not wanting to get our uniforms dirty, everyone had changed into their tracksuits or gym clothes. Fourth period had been PE, and the room smelled like sweat and deodorant, but someone had thoughtfully opened the window.

Today we were glueing black construction paper to the cardboard walls that

would divide up the hospital's interior and making signs to put outside or to carry around the festival to advertise.

One squad had gone to the faculty office to discuss borrowing the black curtains from the music room and science lab. We had a tight budget and needed to trim the fat wherever we could. If negotiations failed, they'd been told to shoot Satou a text, but she'd yet to hear anything—a good sign.

The prop squad was taking inventory on what our class had brought in so far. They examined each item one at a time, deciding if it would work in an abandoned hospital. There were toy syringes, baby dolls with missing arms, empty medicine bottles...

I was sitting with them, feeling restless and distracted. Satou had come to check on us and noticed me totally spacing out.

Sensing something amiss, everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at us. The prop squad was filled with quiet girls who didn't like to stand out. Maybe they'd been scared to talk to a notorious loner like Sunao Aikawa and had been shooting Satou glances, begging for her help.

"Are you not feeling well?" she asked.

"Sorry, I just...didn't sleep much."

This was true. Sunao had been up studying very late, and my eyes were killing me.

"Oh," Satou said, nodding sympathetically. "I thought you looked tired this morning."

Satou was our class president, and it seemed she was trying to keep an eye on everyone's condition. Perhaps her excellent observation skills were why she'd picked up on Aki and me.

When I attempted to apologize again, Satou winked at me and clapped her hands together.

"One of our other squads is short on duct tape," she said. "Aikawa, it would be a huge help if you could run to the supply room and get some more."

It looked like we still had plenty.

I opened my mouth to say as much, then shut it again. Satou knew perfectly well that we had enough. With a tone as soft as fingers gently brushing dirt off her shoulder, she'd declared me unfit for the task at hand.

I decided to play along. Trying to stick it out would just dampen everyone else's morale.

"Got it. I'll go get some," I said. I picked myself up off the floor and headed for the door.

"Nao."

Aki caught up with me in the hall, right before I turned the corner.

The carpentry squad was working outside the classroom. He'd seen me leave, thought it strange, and come after me.

I gave him a quick rundown and added, "I'm gonna look for a poster artist while I get the tape."

I was basically admitting I had no plans to come back and work. I was smiling, but Aki frowned—maybe he was thinking about those flyers, too.

"Should I come with you?"

"No, Aki. Everyone's counting on you."

Aki was good with his hands, and that was just what the class needed. He was basically the only boy using a ruler to ensure he cut the cardboard correctly.

For a while, he'd kept his distance from the other students, but lately he'd become increasingly social. The basketball match had helped make him more approachable.

In fact, I'd seen several girls talking to him about festival work. A lot of their tasks hadn't needed his input, but I couldn't blame them. Aki didn't go out of his way to talk to the girls, but neither was he standoffish. And he could be pretty funny if he wanted.

"Jealous?" he asked.

"No!"

We grinned, then went our separate ways. But that day, the solace he

provided didn't last very long.

I set out at a relaxed pace, but gradually picked up speed. I was making a conscious effort to even out my breathing, but it was noticeably shallower than usual.

It felt like there was someone lurking in the shadows, observing my every action.

Maybe I'd been seen. Maybe they were after me. Despite the summer-like heat, my skin broke out in goosebumps, and I rubbed at my upper arms through my tracksuit. But the bumps refused to subside. All I was doing was generating more heat from the friction.

What was all this about?

Why had someone made those flyers?

What did they intend to do if and when they found a doppelgänger—a replica?

Perhaps I shouldn't even be thinking about it. Maybe I was just driving myself straight into their awful trap.

Aki said to act normal, but what did that even mean? At any rate, right now, I was about as far from normal as I could possibly be.

I must have been unconsciously avoiding the other students, trying to find somewhere I could be alone. Before I knew it, I was in the annex, in near total silence. All I could hear was muffled laughter from the main building somewhere behind my back.

The red lamp above the fire alarm glared at me with a single bloodshot eye. Fleeing its gaze, I dashed around the corner—and saw the fine arts room up ahead.

I never came here unless we had art class. I was about to turn back, when I remembered the job Ricchan had given me.

I wound up here by chance, but perhaps it was where I was meant to be. I peered through a little window—and found the room empty, not a soul inside.

"Nobody's here," I said aloud, which only made my efforts seem even more

futile.

I tried the door and found it open. Maybe the teacher forgot to lock it.

This was convenient for me. Looking around inside would provide a nice change of pace before I gave up and headed for the supply room.

The fine arts room always smelled like oil paints, an acrid odor that seemed to go straight to the back of my nose. Over time, that smell had soaked into the walls, the floors, and the air itself.

The curtains were shut tight, but a single beam of light leaked out from below, illuminating my feet.

Four statues were arranged to greet visitors to the room. Once, someone in class had pointed one of these out and named it Selinuntius, but I no longer remembered which.

Selinuntius was a character from *Run, Melos!*—a man who cared deeply for his friends. In the story, his friend Melos, who is slated for execution, asks him to stay in his place as a hostage while he leaves to take care of unfinished business. Most people would be furious—but Selinuntius sees Melos off with a wordless embrace.

The author of this story, Osamu Dazai, once went drinking with his friend Kazuo Dan, in Shizuoka's own Atami. Unable to pay the bill, he left Dan there (like a hostage) and headed back to Tokyo—but instead of returning to bail Dan out, he wound up playing shogi with Masuji Ibuse. This appalling anecdote apparently formed the basis for the story.

If Ricchan was Melos, and I was Selinuntius...

I would be certain she'd come back to save me and I'd stay behind, waiting patiently. But perhaps one evening, my nerves would get the best of me, and I'd cry myself to sleep.

There was a little jumping spider hopping around below the chiseled plaster bust. As I tracked its movements, my gaze wandered to a display at the back of the room.

There were about a dozen drawings on paper, set up on two tables pushed

together. Was this some other class's assignment?

They were mostly landscapes: the school yard, Mount Fuji, the flood plains at the Abe River, and the harbor at Mochimune. All were done in beautiful watercolors.

Curious, I worked my way down the row—and stopped at the one on the far left.

It was a view of cornfields in the evening. I saw two silhouettes bathed in bands of orange light... Was it an elderly couple looking out at me? They held up ears of corn with hands covered in soil. The setting sun and their brimmed hats obscured their faces, and I couldn't make out their expressions. But I was sure they were happy. Their body language, the angle of their heads—it was all soft, suggesting an unseen smile.

My own lips curled up. It was all I could do to stop myself from calling out, "I'm home!"

I'd never been there; I'd never seen this sight for myself. I didn't even know their names. But the feelings the painting evoked were so strong I felt an irrepressible homesickness. These emotions weren't my own—it was the deep-seated longing of the artist, one so strong it forced the heart of the beholder to join in.

I wasn't an expert, and I didn't really have an eye for the arts. But I knew what this painting made me feel.

"It's lovely," I said aloud.

"Thank you."

I hadn't expected anyone to hear my whisper. I jumped, then turned around.

Mori was standing behind me, her blazer tied loosely around her waist.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," she said.

My throat dried up, and I couldn't answer. Here in the dim light of the art room, with dust motes dancing in the air—Mori seemed fragile, like an old photograph taken slightly out of focus.

Who had first cast her as a fairy? Mochizuki? He must have known this side of

her—this unearthly serenity.

"I painted that. In art class." She came up beside me and ran a finger across the paper, warped by the water in the paint. "There's an art contest for high school students coming up, and they're deciding which piece to submit."

So all of these were candidates? That explained the quality.

I stood quietly, unable to take my eyes off Mori's painting.

"My grandparents live in Fujinomiya," she said. "This is the field by their house. This smiling couple are my..." She paused, and her lips trembled. "... They're my grandma and grandpa."

Her fingers traced their outlines, and I felt the last piece of the puzzle fall into place.

"So that's why they're so happy to see you," I said.

They were both looking at Mori. This painting depicted them welcoming her home. They were speaking to their granddaughter, asking if she was hungry, promising dinner would be ready soon—with smiles warmer than any sunset.



Mori's eyes met mine. As if confirming something vital, she asked, "Is that how it looks to you, Aikawa?"

"Yes," I said, and nodded. Her lips softened into a smile, and I grinned back at her.

I didn't think I'd find many paintings that moved my heart as much as this one had. Running into Mori here must have been the hand of fate at work. It felt cliché, even arrogant, to say so, and yet...

If I let this moment pass, I was sure I'd regret it.

I had to ask, even if I came up empty. If she said no, then I'd give up. I knew Mori had plenty to do already.

"Mori, will you draw the cover for our zine?"

She didn't answer right away. "Huh? Me? For the Literature Club?" She blinked at me, then pointed at herself.

"Yes," I said emphatically.

"Huh," she said, rubbing the back of her head. "I appreciate the offer, but you should really ask someone from the Fine Arts Club. I hardly know what I'm doing."

"But I want the girl who drew this," I said.

Time seemed to stop. Mori leaned forward and peered up at my face.

"Are you making a pass at me?" she teased.

"Er..."

Did something like this count? Maybe it did.

Seeing how rattled I looked, she burst into laughter. "Well, I did promise I'd help. I suppose I'll give it a shot."

"Thank you so much!" I bowed enthusiastically. I was overjoyed. I could tell she wasn't just being polite.

"So what will I be drawing?" she asked.

"The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter."

Ricchan hadn't specified which character should be on the cover or what kind of picture she wanted. I'd have to double check if it was all right to leave it up to the artist.

"Huh... Is that the zine's theme?"

Baffled, I decided to elaborate. "The zine...and the play."

"Play? The Literature Club is performing, too?"

Something wasn't adding up. Hadn't Mochizuki told her? That was odd. I gave her a brief run down about how our two clubs were teaming up, and she looked surprised and delighted.

"Wow! So are you playing Kaguya?" she asked.

I instantly fell silent. If she didn't even know we were putting on a play, how could she know she'd been cast in it?

This feels all wrong. I mean, her name is right at the top of the list!

How should I tell her? Should I even be the one doing this? Had something come up that prevented Mochizuki from explaining?

I stalled, but I couldn't keep her waiting forever. I'd already asked her to draw the poster, so I couldn't keep hiding this.

"You're playing Kaguya," I said.

Her playful smile vanished. "No, wait a second... What? Why me?"

I could hear the tone of our conversation rapidly shifting. Mori was clearly against this idea. I needed to choose my next words carefully.

"Mochizuki said he wanted to play the emperor and cast you as Kaguya. He told us that he made a promise to you back in kindergarten, that the two of you would play a prince and princess together, and that this was your last chance to make it happen."

The more I spoke, the deeper her frown became.

Angry expressions like that scared me. I could feel my pulse pounding in my ears and wrists, like my heart was moving around inside my body.

It seemed like every word I said only upset her more, and in less than a

minute, I had trailed off and stopped talking altogether.

Mori's heavy sigh echoed through the room.

"Shun just can't leave things alone, can he...?" She bit her lip and turned away, likely to hide her expression. "I wasn't *forced* to play the wicked stepmother. No one else wanted to do it, so I stepped up. I figured if everyone insisted on being Snow White, we'd never get anywhere."

She kept sighing, and I imagined lining up her breaths like a tin of sardines and making a cirrocumulus cloud out of them.

"Every story needs a villain. Without the stepmother, Snow White would never have wandered into those woods or met the seven dwarves. Without the poison apple, she'd have lived happily ever after with them and never met the prince. There'd be no story."

She sounded like she was talking to herself, so I stayed silent without agreeing or disagreeing.

"I'd rather play the villain than Kaguya," she said at last.

Mori clearly didn't want to play the role we'd chosen for her.

"Uh, I'll talk to Mochizuki for you," I managed to squeeze out.

She hadn't been there when we settled all of this. Mochizuki's story had gotten everyone on board, but that didn't mean we wanted to force her.

I must have looked very concerned, because Mori brushed her hair back and offered me a faint smile.

"Don't worry, I'll do my part. I am the student council president. Or I used to be," she added, with a touch of sarcasm. "The first-years will be using this room for sixth period. We'd better head out."

Unable to say anything more, I simply watched her go.



After school, we assembled at the gates. I fixed my gaze on the school's entrance across the grounds as we did our warm-up stretches. I wore Sunao's

tracksuit, with her name and seat number on the chest. The school tracksuits were gray, with a colored line down the side indicating the wearer's grade.

The color stayed constant for all three years a person was in school. This year, third-years were red, second-years were blue, and first-years were green. Our slippers and gym shoes sported lines of the same color.

While people liked our school's uniforms, the tracksuits were not as beloved; most students thought they looked downright shabby. But personally, I thought the design was kind of cute. It reminded me of a mouse. *Squeak*.

Ricchan and I rolled our shoulders and did our stretches. Uniformed students passed us by, and their gazes stung, but I focused on the exercises, pretending not to notice.

Aki had on his tracksuit pants with a gym shirt up top—he was planning to walk instead of run. He sat out during gym class, too.

"I'll be cleared to run soon enough," he said.

"Don't jump the gun, Aki."

"I won't!"

He fluttered a hand at me like I was his nagging mother.

I glared back, all the while working on limbering up my wrists and ankles. I was wearing the athletic sneakers meant for gym class. We'd been playing volleyball in PE lately and using our indoor shoes, so I'd had to wake these up from their long slumber in my shoe box.

"I can't wait to see what Mori comes up with!" Ricchan said, stretching her Achilles tendon. "If her art managed to capture Nao's heart..."

I smiled awkwardly. "I'm not totally sure she'll follow through."

At one point, it had seemed like a done deal, but the way we'd left things made me uncertain.

"In that case, we'll turn to Maestro Nao. Show 'em what you've got!"

"Fine, as long as you don't mind a bunch of mice."

"Maybe we should we switch our story to The Rolling Riceball."

"Hey, Literature Club. Sorry I'm late."

While we were joking around, Mochizuki joined us.

His gym clothes were a size too big and rather baggy. Perhaps he hadn't grown as much as his parents expected. I wasn't about to voice that thought while he was in earshot, though.

There was no sign of Mori or any of Mochizuki's friends who were supposed to help out.

"Mori will be catching up with us in an hour. The others will start the day after tomorrow."

I was on the shy side and meeting a bunch of unfamiliar upperclassmen sounded nerve-wracking. But if they weren't coming yet, there was no need to worry now.

"So, we're supposed to start off with some light running, right?" I asked.

"Yep. Three laps around the school."

Ricchan's smile froze. Mochizuki had begun doing his own stretches, oblivious.

A lap around the school was a solid 600 meters.

"That is not 'light,'" she protested. "Can we just do one today?"

"Don't be silly. Come on."

With that, the two of us took off through the gate.

"Ugh, I'm bushed!"

Ricchan tended to spend her time indoors, and she gave up and collapsed almost immediately. I could see Aki pulling her up from the ground. I was worried, but I figured if he was with her, she'd be fine.

Three laps. That's almost two kilometers. Can I manage it?

My hair flounced rhythmically, like it was patting my back, urging me along.

"Don't push yourself. It is the first day," Mochizuki said, matching my pace.

But as it happened, I was pretty good at endurance runs. Sunao loathed

exercise, but she wasn't actually that bad at it. As long as I judged my pace correctly, I should be able to manage this distance.

Realizing I was still breathing properly, Mochizuki changed the subject.

"That reminds me... Aikawa, thanks for talking to Mori."

"Er, uh... No problem."

His tone was perfectly even. I didn't sense any hostility, and his expression was neutral. I'd meant to complain about his poor planning, but this threw me, and I changed my mind.

Maybe Mori wasn't mad anymore.

Had she even been angry in the first place? She'd used strong language, and I'd felt a tension in her voice. But maybe it wasn't anger, per se. And in that case...

The three laps were up before I could think it all through. After catching our breath, we headed to the fourth floor of the annex. Ricchan was dying on the stairs. She'd done her best, but a lap and a half was all she could manage.

Our destination was a big multipurpose room with light blue carpet, occasionally used for school assemblies. It was fully visible from the hall, but there were no other students way up here on the fourth floor.

At Mochizuki's command, all of us lay down, forming a big circle. Sunlight streamed past the swaying curtains on the room's big windows, and the carpet below our heads smelled like sunshine.

We did some more stretching, then lined up for vocal exercises. We kept gaps between us—if I reached all the way out, I still couldn't touch Aki or Ricchan.

Amenbo akai na a i u e o
Ukimo ni koebi mo oyoideru

Mochizuki handed us printouts with a poem containing all fifty sounds in

Japanese, and we read it out together.

Were pond skaters (amenbo) ever red (akai)? They usually looked black.

But I guess if you went to the river at sunset, those little bugs darting across the water's surface might look red. If there were algae (*ukimo*) or little shrimp (*koebi*) there too, even the shrimp might look red instead of pink. *Kaki no ki kuri no ki, ka ki ku ke ko*.

After vocal exercises, Ricchan passed around the scripts. Mr. Akai had approved her work and printed them up at lunch. They consisted of four sheets of A3-sized paper, with a single staple at the top right.

The first page read, "Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation (Working Title) by Ritsuko Hironaka." This was followed by a list of characters. I was no expert, but I thought it looked very professional. Ricchan is so amazing.

The story began on the back of the first page. Each page was twice the size of a standard A4 sheet, and all four pages were printed on both sides.

The text ran vertically like her novel manuscripts, but this one wasn't handwritten. Ricchan had plugged the whole thing into her computer, so it'd be easier to read.

We all sat down and laid our scripts out on the carpet, then we folded them in half to make them easier to hold in one hand.

"Let's all do a quick silent read-through," Mochizuki suggested. "Then go back over the story, focusing only on the scenes you're in, and highlight your lines."

Everyone focused on their script, and for a while the only sound was the turning of pages.

I got totally absorbed in the story. Instead of Ricchan's usual prose, the script was full of dialogue and stage directions, making it a very quick read. It was more simplistic than a novel, but each line and scene felt very Ricchan.

Mochizuki had brought a set of highlighters, and I took a light blue one. Aki took orange, and we both proceeded to mark our lines and stage directions, adding color to the sea of black and white.

I had fifteen lines total. I looked over at Aki's script—he had almost thirty.

The stage director and playwright were already huddled together nearby, conferring.

"How's the length?" asked Ricchan. "I read it out loud at home, so I think it's about right..."

"Looks fine. I'll bring a stopwatch to our next read-through."

"I didn't want the audience drifting off, so I tried to avoid making the dialogue too stiff."

"True, but you don't want to over modernize it. If the audience thinks you're trying to be funny, it'll affect their reaction. I have a few tweaks on that front."

"Fair enough."

"Also, the scene with all the suitors—I get what you had in mind, but there's only one spotlight in the gym."

"Really? Uh, then...I guess the actors will have to take turns stepping into it to introduce themselves."

"That should keep things moving, yeah. We can even have them push the previous suitor out of the way. It'll add some character."

From what I could hear, they were already getting into the nitty-gritty. As they traded ideas, Ricchan diligently took notes. She was really intense—her exhaustion from the run had completely vanished.

Next, we did a read-through. We all sat in a circle, and our emperor—Mochizuki—doubled as the narrator. He also read all the parts with absent actors.

"Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter. He'd chop down the stalks, bring them home, and cleverly weave baskets and sieves. Then he'd sell his wares to make his living. His name was Sanuki-no-Miyatsuko."

Holding the script in both hands, I looked up at Mochizuki.

I'd noticed this from his usual speaking voice as well, but he was very articulate. His enunciation was precise and easy to listen to. *I guess that's the Drama Club for you*, I thought.

At that point, I heard Aki clear his throat as he got ready to speak.

Suddenly, I tensed up. As that opening narration suggested, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* began with the old man. Aki would be the first actor with lines on stage. How would he fare?

"Golly, what a marvel! In all my days, I never expected to find such a beautiful baby inside a glowing bamboo stalk!"

A cool breeze rustled the bamboo leaves.

"With this much ham, I could fry up bacon for all of us," Ricchan whispered.

Stop. I'm going to hurt myself laughing.

As the two of us fought off our giggles, Mochizuki tapped his script. "Aikawa, you've got lines coming up."

My eyes snapped down to my script and found the light blue highlighting. I traced my first line from top to bottom with my finger.

I'd be expressing my surprise at the old man who'd just brought home a baby. It wasn't a particularly long or difficult line—but I could feel my upper body go stiff inside my tracksuit.

Aki had told me I was always playing Sunao. He had a point. Ever since we were little, I'd been doubling as her. My whole life counted as acting experience.

I steadied my breathing. Maybe I can do this, I thought.

"I'm home! Look, Grandma. I found a child in the bamboo!"

"M-my goodness, Grandpa! Ain't she a cutie!"

How wrong I was.

"Looks like we can all have seconds of that bacon," Mochizuki grumbled.

I could feel blood rushing to my face. If the carpeting hadn't been so thick, I'd have tried to dig myself a hole with my bare hands.

But he was right. I couldn't laugh at Aki anymore. His old man was merely stiff—my stuttering, squeaky-voiced old woman was far more unbearable.

"Well, it's a high school festival. The audience isn't expecting method acting or anything." Mochizuki had dropped me down, and now he was picking me back up. But despite his encouraging words, he was frowning. "They aren't expecting great acting, but—we've got a month. I'll whip you into acceptable shape by then. Prepare to get fried, hams."

"...Understood."

It didn't sound like he was gonna go easy on us. I was shaking in my slippers, but after that embarrassing performance, I could only nod. Aki humbly did the same.

We were acting out a script Ricchan wrote for us. Perhaps we couldn't make it bloom—but at the very least, we had to avoid making it wither.

"Teach us everything you can!" I said.

"At least you're motivated," he replied.

It felt like he was warning us not to try too hard lest we end up striking out—but maybe I was reading too much into it.

"Sorry I'm late," Mori said. She hurried into the room, still dressed in her uniform.

With a quick bow, she joined the circle. Mochizuki shot her a brief glance, but continued narrating. Then Ricchan handed her a script, open to the current page. She glanced down at it and launched straight into her line.

"Grandfather, I do not wish to marry. I only want to remain here in this house, with you and Grandmother. Is that so wrong?"

Her tone was plaintive as her brows converged in anguish, and her lips quivered with doubt. Yet her eyes were fully open, a noble light within, desperate to get through and convey her earnest feelings. Before us sat a genuine princess, clad in twelve-fold robes.

I wasn't the only one captivated by her performance; I heard Mochizuki gasp. He forgot to keep narrating and our read-through came to a halt. Unable to hide my enthusiasm, I called across the circle to her.

"Mori! Have you acted before?"

"Huh?" She seemed actively rattled by the question. "Not really. I mean...I guess I technically played the wicked stepmother, and then Moririn."

"Well, I think you've gotten even better since then," Mochizuki muttered.

Mori just smiled and said nothing more.

We resumed our read-through and soon found unexpected talent in an even more surprising person—our very own Ricchan.

"Princess Kaguya, I shall come through, or my name is not Abe, Minister of the Right! I shall obtain the fire-rat robe and deliver it unto your home. And by so doing, I shall demonstrate that my own passion burns even more brightly than the flames of my gift!"

Perhaps I should have expected this. Ricchan busted out theatrical language and gestures even during normal, everyday conversations. She was the perfect choice for a man whose wealth gave him infinite confidence.

There were five suitors, and she'd elected to play Abe. Her reasoning? Apparently, she thought the fire-rat robe sounded cool.

The suitors and their gifts were as follows: Prince Ishitsukuri and the begging bowl of the Buddha. Prince Kuramochi and the jeweled branch from Horai. Minister of the Right Abe and the fire-rat robe. The Grand Counselor Otomo and the gem from the dragon's throat. The Middle Counselor Isonokami-no-Marotari and the swallow's cowry shell.

Five suitors and five legendary treasures, and if one of them could deliver, they would have Princess Kaguya's hand. The impossibility of the challenge only served to fire them up.

Ultimately, none of them managed to obtain the genuine article, and they were forced to abandon their love. The way she easily dismissed five of the greatest catches of her time proved just how clever and resourceful Princess Kaguya was. Arguably, this section of the story was more popular than the tale of her relationship with the emperor that followed.

Together, the five of us—Grandpa and Grandma Ham, the lovely and mysterious Princess Kaguya, the competently-acted emperor, and the fiery Abe—tore through the rest of the script.

By the time we finished, club hours were almost over. Even during the lead-up to the festival, we weren't allowed to stay late without getting special permission.

We spent the remaining time practicing our individual lines. I didn't have that many, so remembering them should be easy enough—the challenge was the acting.

I stood by the windows, reading my lines out loud. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aki gesticulating robotically. Was he meant to be cradling a baby?

I turned my gaze to the view outside. The sky was growing red. It looked even closer up here than it did from the ground. Layers of clouds were stretching out, playing with Mount Fuji, oblivious to my trials.

I took a breath. I had to practice.

"My, Princess Kaguya. Why must you rush back to the moon?"

"Aikawa, don't speak from the throat," Mochizuki said sharply as he passed behind me.

I locked up with my mouth half open. Would I never be able to speak again?

My panic and confusion must have shown on my face. He tapped his belly button with one hand.

"You have to speak from the gut. Actors all project from here. If you speak from the throat, your voice won't reach the back seats. Bodies absorb sound, so your diaphragm is vital for both breathing and speaking."

The narrator would have a mic, but not the rest of us. We'd have to speak loud enough to reach the whole crowd without any help.

Mochizuki glanced at the others. "We've got just enough time, so let's all practice projecting. Lie back and put your palms on your stomach. Keep your hands still and focus on the way it rises and falls. This is abdominal breathing."

We all lay down and stared up at the unfamiliar ceiling. I put my hands against the front of my tracksuit.

"Exhale through your mouth... One, two, three, four, five. Now inhale through your nose... One, two, three, four, five. Again! One, two, three..."

Mochizuki was counting off like a metronome, over and over.

We'd breathe in as much air as we could, then breathe it back out. Sometimes, I had to strain a little. But gradually, our bodies caught on and adjusted. After a while, it felt like we'd always breathed this way.

Inhale, and my belly swelled like it was full of honey. Exhale, and it deflated like a balloon.

The tension left my body, as if carried on the troughs between waves.

"Okay, stand up slowly."

At Mochizuki's signal, we got up off the floor.

All we'd done was take deep breaths, but when I stood up, I felt very hungry. My body was light, like I'd pushed out everything unnecessary.

"Once you get used to abdominal breathing, you'll be more relaxed, and your voice will carry. It's all upsides, so try to keep it in mind, even in your daily life."

With that, he clapped his hands.

"Good work. That's all for today!"



From that day on, things proceeded at a dizzying pace.

We were all focused on preparing for the Seiryou Festival, but that didn't mean we stopped attending classes. Midterms had come and gone, but the specter of final exams loomed ever closer.

I attended school every day, even though the testing period had long since ended. This was a first—not long ago, it would have been completely unimaginable. But I didn't have the luxury of stopping to think about it.

Time flew when I was living every day. I didn't experience nighttime, which probably made it seem even faster. Mornings, afternoons, and evenings shot past like shooting stars, making my eyes spin.

We had much less time to practice the play than I'd anticipated.

The Drama Club had been given a slot on the gym stage on the second day of

the festival. We were only practicing three days a week for a total of twelve sessions—and that included costume fittings and a run-through on the stage itself. Every second counted.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we either helped our classes out or sat in the clubroom and read drafts of Ricchan's novel for the zine. Sometimes, I'd meet up with Aki and we'd run through the script, just the two of us.

The Drama Club's regular helpers showed up that first Wednesday, just as Mochizuki had said. They included the four remaining suitors and the narrator, as well as a sound tech, and someone to man the lights. There were seven of them in total—an impressive group.

The narrator and sound tech were girls, and the rest were boys. They were all third-years. It took a lot more hands to put on a play than I'd imagined.

There was a brief round of introductions, and then they got straight to work, quickly settling any unresolved questions. They decided things like what music would play when, what lighting was needed, and so on. Mochizuki and Ricchan made suggestions, and the helpers took these into consideration and came to an agreement. I joined in listening to the various music and audio suggestions, and offered opinions when asked.

This group had helped Mochizuki out fairly often in the past. Some of them had been doing it for all three years. Everyone got on well, and they were all super nice to us newbies from the Literature Club.

I only had to act opposite the old man and Princess Kaguya, but Ricchan had a big battle scene with the other suitors. It was a lot of work to get their lines and blocking sorted out in such a limited time, but Ricchan's indomitable spirit won them all over. With each run-through, they fell ever closer into step.

Some of these older students already had recommendations or offers, so their futures were settled. But others were busy studying for next year's Common Test or frantically job hunting. And yet, they'd all shown up for the play anyway, because they wanted to help Mochizuki out.

And Mochizuki proved to be a great teacher—not just with breathing and vocal exercises, but with acting as well.

I wouldn't say we improved by leaps and bounds, but Aki and I were making noticeable progress. Maybe we were still hams, but it was clear we'd been putting in effort.

The other third-years were all perfectly fine actors, but Mori was clearly the star of this show. Her very presence turned the drab hall into the bamboo cutter's delightful abode.

She put in appearances once or twice a week, but some of those were only a hasty ten-minute run-through.

I'd yet to ask her how the poster was going, and I still had no clue what she was drawing for us. After our talk in the art room, I was somewhat reluctant to approach her.

And while all this was going down, I still couldn't get that flyer out of my head.



Tuesday, October 12.

I headed to the Literature Club room after school and found it locked. No one else had shown up yet.

Ricchan must have still been with her class. I hadn't seen Aki around, so I'd headed over alone.

Should I go to the faculty office to get the key? Or should I look around the library for a little while? I considered both, but did neither.

"Haah..."

Sighing, I leaned against the door. The annex was quiet—a good place for collecting my thoughts.

The more I tried to focus on the play, the more I thought of those flyers.

Two weeks had passed since someone had sent them hurtling into the air. The other students had long ago stopped talking about the incident. I'd been scared the culprit would get antsy and drop more, but instead, there was nothing.

I was starting to feel like I'd imagined the whole thing. But I still had one of them folded up in the inside pocket of my satchel. Every time I opened it up, I got nervous. It was like I was hunched over a Ouija board.

The writing on it never changed.

There's a doppelgänger in our school.

The spine-chilling fear I'd felt when I first saw it had faded over time. Now I was mostly just curious—who had scattered these flyers, and for what purpose?

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"Nao."
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"Eeek!"

Aki's voice came from very close by. I was so flustered, I dropped the flyer, and he picked it up before I could get to it.

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"Oh, no—I wasn't..."
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What wasn't I doing? I had no clue. I spluttered uselessly as Aki looked up at me.

I gazed into his big brown eyes. It had been some time since we stared at each other from so close a distance.

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"Nao, um..."
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I got ready to apologize. I figured he was gonna yell at me for fussing over the flyer.

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"Let's go on a date."
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I couldn't have been more wrong.

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"...A date?" I asked.
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"Yeah. Now."
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Aki folded the flyer along its creases and handed it back to me. He wasn't pretending he hadn't seen it, and that made me almost as happy as his invitation. When I took the flyer from him, the ordinary piece of paper felt warm to the touch.

"I'd love to go on a date."

"Great."

His smile was infectious, and I felt the corners of my lips turn up.

He stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out his phone. It was open to the homepage of an aquarium.

Smart Aquarium Shizuoka. If you kept going along the underground path from Shizuoka Station, you'd wind up at the Shizuoka Matsuzakaya department store. And on the seventh floor, there was a little aquarium. Mom had brought home an ad for it once.

"I looked it up. It's in the city, so we have time to go."

I'd once told Aki I wanted to go to an aquarium, and it seemed he'd remembered. It was a little thing, but it warmed my heart.

"It looks very pretty," I said.

The library door swung open and three students I didn't recognize came out.

"Then let's get going," he said. I was concerned the students had overheard us, but Aki didn't seem to care. He glanced at me, hurrying me along. He reminded me of a kid anxious to leave for a field trip.

Unfortunately, this meant leaving my bicycle in the school lot. The ride to the station was one thing, but I didn't think I'd be able to make it all the way home from Shizuoka Station on my bike. I would need to take a train and a bus to school tomorrow. I'd have to warn Sunao.

A bus arrived at the stop outside school, and Aki and I got on.

The seats were hard, but they couldn't stop my heart from dancing. Each time we got caught at a red light or turned left at an intersection, I couldn't help but smile.

Why? The answer was obvious. I'd never been to an aquarium before—or gone on an after-school date. It felt like forever since we'd headed out together like this. To be honest, I would have smiled at just about anything.

I started swinging my legs, unable to keep them still. I hoped there wouldn't

be too many stops along the way.

"You're like a little kid," Aki said, laughing.

Grrr. I thought the same thing about you just a few minutes ago.

"Sorry for acting like an elementary schooler," I said.

I deliberately puffed out my cheeks and turned away from him. That left me looking at an old woman with a cane a few rows ahead.

Mochizuki had given us a lot of advice. One of his suggestions was to observe people the same age or with the same occupation as our characters. Since then, any time I saw an old woman with a walking cart, I paid extra attention—careful not to look suspicious, of course.

However, he'd also warned me not to overemphasize any obvious mannerisms I associated with being old. Bending my back or drawing out my words, for example, would come across as fake on stage.

There was more than one kind of old woman, after all. The one who looked after Princess Kaguya was fit and healthy, so there was no need to play her as sickly and decrepit.

What kind of old lady did / want to play?

Aki must have noticed where I was looking.

"About the bamboo cutter's wife...," he said.

"Mm?"

"She's old now, but I bet she went on a ton of dates with her husband back when they were young. Their lives were probably a lot richer than just laundry and bamboo."

I gaped at him. "I never thought of that!"

Aki had just made a great point.

The bamboo cutter and his wife had lived together for a very long time. Decades before the story, they hadn't been old—they'd been a man and a woman, and before that, a boy and a girl. They hadn't spent all their time with bamboo cutting tools and laundry. When their schedules had aligned, they'd

gone on dates and held each other's hands.

They may not have had kids or lived in luxury, but they'd spent their lives together. That was why, when they found the baby in the glowing bamboo stalk, they weren't creeped out, but instead accepted it as a gift and raised the child with care.

"I wonder if they went to an aquarium," I said.

"They're going right now."

He gripped my hand where it sat on the bus seat just as we arrived at the Shizuoka Station North Gate stop.

The air was always slightly chilly in the underground shopping area beneath the station.

I was on tenterhooks, worried we'd pass a familiar face or someone in our school's uniform, but Aki never let go of my hand.

"Aki, someone might see us!"

Even during festival season, there might be students hanging out around the station or on their way home.

"So what? Let 'em look," he said over his shoulder, one step ahead of me. He clearly meant what he'd said, and I hadn't shaken my hand free, so perhaps I was equally guilty.

We took the JR Exit directly into the Matsuzakaya department store. On the escalator, we formed a little line with Aki in front and me behind.

"I can't wait to see the dolphin show!" I said enthusiastically.

Aki scratched his cheek with his free hand. "I don't think they have any dolphins. It's in a department store, after all..."

"Sea lions? Walruses?"

"None of those, either."

"Penguins? Otters? Beavers? Killer whales?"

"Now you're doing it on purpose."

I was. He glared at me, and I laughed out loud.

Even if this aquarium had nothing but empty tanks in it, Aki and I would have fun filling in the blanks ourselves. But admitting that out loud would be too embarrassing, so I kept the thought to myself.

As we talked, the escalator took us toward the seventh floor.

"Wow...!"

As we ascended, I bent backward and gazed up. The industrial ceiling was festooned with lights in different shades of blue. Their twinkling made me think of a sea filled with firefly squid.

"Whoa!"

I was so captivated I nearly tripped at the top of the escalator. Aki pulled me close and kept me upright, preventing me from falling flat on my face minutes into our date.

"Th-thanks," I managed.

"You're welcome," said Aki, chuckling.

We headed to the ticket counter. I began to miss his hand the moment he let go, but consoled myself by saying he had to get his wallet out somehow.

The price was 1,400 yen each. I was carrying 3,000, so this was no obstacle for me. I still had approximately 190,000 yen in an envelope in my room (which was technically Sunao's).

Lately, I'd started cleaning the bath and doing laundry again. I figured it couldn't hurt to stockpile more 50-yen coins.

I did some quick math as a lady rang us up. I was now at 189,590 yen. I'd dropped below the 190,000 mark, but I was still doing fine.

"They've got stamp books. Would you like to buy one?" Aki pointed at a sign on the counter.

"Yes, please!"

We bought one to share. A goofy mascot struck a bold pose on the slickly

designed cover.

"A red lizard!" I exclaimed. "It's so cute."

"Is that a lizard?"

"What else could it be?"

"Oscar is a strawberry poison-dart frog," the lady at the ticket counter said. "He's in charge of teaching you all about the aquarium."

Blushing furiously, I nodded as gravely as I could.

The stamp book came with two postcards.

"Which one do you want?" I asked, holding them up.

"That one!" he said, pointing to the one on the right.

I'd had my eye on the one to the left with the silly illustration, and I breathed a little sigh of relief.

We stashed them away and had the clerk tear our tickets, then we headed inside. The place was totally empty.

The air inside the aquarium was even cooler than the underground shopping center and slightly damp. Unlike at the pool, I didn't smell chlorine, but the moisture was clearly working its way through my hair.

The tank in the welcome area had a magnificent bonsai pine tree bursting out of it. Apparently, it was modeled after Miho no Matsubara, a pine grove on the World Heritage List.

"It says this tank was designed by Ken Matsudaira," said Aki.

"From 'Matsuken Samba'?"

"Yeah, the samba guy."

I could see a little figure of Ken Matsudaira leading a horse next to the bonsai. The staff had clearly put their all into this welcome, and I felt my excitement ramping up.

I glanced over the three-fold pamphlet. There were five areas, each with a theme—looking, connecting, finding, etc. Visitors were supposed to go around

to each in turn, and every area had a counter where you could stamp your book.

First was the "looking" area. Little tanks were set into the walls, with circular tanks built up from the floor.

Projectors beamed a pattern of lights resembling water onto the floor, and Aki and I swam through it. We didn't do the breaststroke or the crawl, of course. We just treaded water upright.

"Oh, a moray." I knelt down and peered into one of the tanks. They're like Japanese eels, but scarier.

The two morays inside paid no attention to me and continued lazing about, their brown shapes clearly visible in the water. Their mouths were constantly moving, opening and closing, without a care in the world.

Aki peered over my shoulder and said, "Nao, you look just like them."

"Erp."

In what way do I look like these gangsters of the sea?!

I swung around and found him grinning. He pointed to his mouth.

"I could see it in the glass—you were flapping your lips in time with the morays."

I was?!

I managed to stifle a shriek. We might have been alone here, but places like this were just like the library. *Silence in the aquarium*.

"You could have warned me," I hissed, straightening up.

Aki just kept laughing. I covered my face—which was apparently possessed by the spirit of a moray eel—with my hands and fought off the urge to keep flapping my lips.

Once the impulse subsided, I turned my attention to a circular tank. Redbodied hermit crabs stared back at me from inside. They were the polar opposite of the morays and seemed very curious about the outside world. Their little eyes were asking for something, but what? All I could sense was the plea. "Gimme food!" a voice squeaked. Wait...

"Was that a hermit crab?!"

I saw something on the far side of the tank and squinted. It was Aki, his face warped by the curve of the glass.

"Are you hungry, Aki?"

"That wasn't me, that was a hermit crab."

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. His acting was as bad as ever.



Square blue worlds appeared before me, one after another.

I learned that blacksaddle filefish had yellow tails and had evolved to mimic the black saddled toby, a poisonous pufferfish. This fooled predators into thinking they were poisonous.

"I guess if you're a fish, it doesn't matter if you're real or a replica," Aki said. He stared at a tank as a fish swam by. Which one was it? "The pufferfish don't get mad at the filefish. Nobody rolls in and says, 'Yo, you look like those guys over there, but you aren't the same, are you?"

Me and Sunao. Aki and Sanada.

"Aki, is your backside bigger than Sanada's?"

The pufferfish had a smaller back and tail fin. The filefish's were noticeably larger.

Aki looked me over. "Are you bigger than Sunao?" he asked.

I thumped his tail—or rather, his lower back.

"Ow!"

"All that muscle tone makes for a satisfying thwack."

He pretended I'd gotten him good, but I ignored this and dragged him on to the next tank.

"Whoa, look!" I exclaimed. "This one's called a black ghost knifefish!"

"Oh, I've never seen one of these before."

Its name was fitting—it was all black except for a few white marks on its tail. It had a long, jagged silhouette and seemed somehow ethereal. A black fin billowed beneath it like the fluttering skirt of a court lady at a ball, though it was backed not by a fancy house like the Rokumeikan, but by some ordinary driftwood.

Black ghost knifefish had no eyes. Instead, they generated electricity to perceive their surroundings. It was said they altered the frequency of this electricity when in the presence of others of their species.

If I could generate electric waves, maybe I could use that power to locate

other replicas. But what would I say to them when I found them?

As I let that idea roll around in my brain, Aki and I continued down the path.

The bronze and mottled corydoras sported little whiskers. There was a panda corydoras, too, but it didn't eat bamboo. Neither Aki nor I was a corydoras, but together we strode through a sea filled with them.

The aquarium was small and didn't have any big tanks filled with sharks or manta rays. But for the duration of our brief visit, it was the center of our world.

In this beautiful, translucent aquarium, I imagined shaking hands with an anemone surrounded by aquatic plants and dreamed of a life spent slumbering on a bed of seashells.

The clear water seemed to wash away all threats, carrying off all traces of hardship and suffering.

But I knew that wasn't the case. The fish had used every trick in the book to ensure their survival, and even here, those efforts never ceased. Perhaps they were fed up with these tiny tanks, and they missed the sea and their families and cried themselves to sleep. Perhaps the water was filled with their tears.

As I started to move to the next area, Aki took my hand.

I turned back toward him, but I couldn't make out his face. In this dim lighting, the two of us in our navy blazers could barely see each other.

"I'm glad you aren't playing Princess Kaguya," he said.

"Because I'm a ham?"

Aki shook his head. He wasn't going to play along.

"You already tried turning into foam, I don't need you going back to the moon."

"I won't do anything like that again."

I wasn't a mermaid, and I wasn't going to try being Kaguya, either.

I gave him a reassuring smile, but Aki leaned in, his face now close to mine.

Our wavering shadows overlapped. He was frowning. Was that desperation?

My back bumped against an unyielding wall. I saw Aki's Adam's apple jerk. He'd swallowed hard. He must have been very nervous.

"What is it?" I asked.

I wanted an answer, but he just scratched the back of his head and moved away.

"If you're lying, I'll make you eat this porcupine fish."

He carried on the conversation as if nothing had happened. I was reeling, but I tried to catch up.

"And not a bunch of needles?" That was the traditional punishment.

"That sounds painful. I'll let you off with just the porcupine fish."

They both sounded painful. And the porcupine fish probably didn't want me taking a bite out of it.

"Okay. Let's make it a pinky promise."

We hooked our pinkies together and swore a solemn vow.

I felt like I'd done this with someone when I was little, but I couldn't remember who. Was it Sunao's memory? No, I was sure it was mine.

The past faded like that. The inside of a person's mind was vaster than any ocean, and memories tended to wash away like so much sand.

But I didn't want to forget a single moment I'd spent with Aki.

I didn't need any seashells. I'd be perfectly happy falling asleep on the mounds of his cheeks, as he smiled bashfully.

Time seemed to flow by at a gentle pace, but when I next saw a clock, it was already past five. We'd been exploring the aquarium for over an hour.

"Let's hit the gift shop," Aki suggested.

"Yeah! Souvenirs!"

We'd have to buy something for Ricchan and everyone else in the play. After all, we'd forgotten to do anything like that at Nihondaira Zoo.

I took a step to follow Aki, then let out a yelp.

"What?"

"Oh no, Aki! We forgot about the stamps!"

I'd been so absorbed in the fish I'd completely neglected the stamp book stowed in my satchel. When I pulled it out, Oscar seemed to pout at me, neglected. Or maybe, he was appalled at how quickly I'd forgotten about him.

Aki stroked his chin. "You know what this means," he said, and held out his hand. "We'll just have to go around again."

"A brilliant idea!" I took his arm and beamed back at him.



I unlocked the door and called out, "I'm home!" as I took off my overwarm loafers. Mom's shoes weren't in the entryway yet—nor was that turquoise blue bike. The place seemed lonely without them.

Doing another loop of the aquarium had left Aki and I without much time to browse the gift shop. Sunao would be worried if I came back too late. We bought gifts for Ricchan and the upperclassmen in the play, but were unable to pick anything for ourselves.

As I carried my bag of gifts up the stairs, I heard Sunao's voice.

She was on the phone—and it sounded like she was smiling. I couldn't quite make out her words, but even through the door I could tell she was having fun.

She hadn't noticed my arrival. I could just wait outside her room, but Mom would be home soon.

I knocked gently, and the muffled voice broke off.

Footsteps approached, then the door swung open.

"I'm home," I said again.

"I was just chatting to someone I know."

I hadn't asked, but she offered a curt explanation anyway, before turning away. She must have been too rattled to welcome me back.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said.

Sunao sat back down, looking put out. The carpet was thick and warm, and her toes dug in, but it didn't seem to bring her any comfort.

The phone receiver lay on her desk, on top of her notebooks and workbooks. She must have brought it up from the first floor.

"I was about to hang up anyway," she said.

This was clearly making her cross, so I dropped the subject.

The next time she called for me, I'd get an updated copy of her memories. I'd know who she'd been talking to and what about.

Sunao must have remembered that, because she swore under her breath.

"I'll have to try and forget all about this."

I winced. "I think that'll just make it even more vivid..."

Anything that made a strong impression on Sunao came across to me just as powerfully. Memories were complicated, and the more you tried to forget something, the more it tended to stick with you—unlike those pesky math formulas that evaporated from your brain the moment exams were done.

"That is so not fair."

"Mm?"

"...Never mind."

Sunao sighed and brushed back her hair, signaling we were done talking about it.

This was my chance to say something. I tightened my grip on my bag and gathered my courage.

"Sunao, I left the bike at school. I'll need to take public transportation tomorrow."

She asked why with her eyes.

"We went to the aquarium."

"You did?"

The unusual word startled her, and she blinked at me.

"Not skipping school this time, after hours. We thought it might help with the play, or, well..."

We'd totally forgotten that part and simply enjoyed our date, so it was a feeble excuse. And Sunao wasn't buying it.

"We?" she asked.

"M-me and Aki."

She made a noise. Not with her mouth, but with her throat.

She was staring at the bag full of gifts hanging from my shoulder. Without meeting my eyes, she asked another question.

"You're dating Sana—I mean Aki, right?"

"Uh, yes."

"How far have you gone?"

I knew the answer to that—I hadn't forgotten a second of the time we spent together. I began counting off our excursions on my fingers.

"Um, we went to Nihondaira Zoo, to a festival, to the Cenova movie theater, and today we went to the Matsuzakaya Aquarium. Oh, the festival was at a shrine near school. Ricchan gave us a flyer, and we went after classes finished."

I said all this with a smile, but Sunao's face had twisted into something I found difficult to describe. Her lips started to quiver. Her brow creased, and her cheeks pulled back.

"Sunao?"

She covered her face with one hand, so I couldn't make out her expression, then sighed like a grown-up after a full day of work.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "You're not coming down with something, are you?"

"No, never mind. Just...go take a bath."

"Huh? But..."

"Just! Go!"

She wouldn't let me argue, so I went.

It had been a while since I'd taken a bath. I added a marine blue bath bomb to the water—the same color as the aquarium.



It rained all morning the following day. A cold front had brought an autumn drizzle and coated the whole weather report in blue.

"Aikawa, do you want to join us for lunch?

I was at my desk by the window and had just undone the drawstrings on my lunch bag. I froze up—I hadn't expected Satou to extend an invitation.

"Um." I hesitated. She'd never done this before.

I wasn't sure how to respond. What would Sunao want me to say? I didn't want to cause friction in class.

"The prop squad have been having meetings while they eat," Satou continued. "Putting their lunch time to good use."

She was speaking loud enough to be heard above the classroom hubbub and the broadcast coming over the PA system Looking more closely, I saw three girls moving their desks around at the front of the room—all on the same squad as me. But those girls were friends to begin with and always together.

That said, turning down this offer might ruffle feathers. And it had been ages since I ate with anyone; I was in the mood.

"Sure," I said.

I grabbed my lunch and thermos, and followed Satou.

The group of desks pushed together was like a house built on sand. I could tell the others were nervous. I was the obvious cause, seated at the head of the table—the one desk jutting out from the square.

Satou, who was comfortable in just about any group, cheerily unwrapped her lunch box. Like mine, it had two layers, but it clearly had more food in it. Perhaps an athlete like her needed the extra calories.

Everyone followed her lead, so I did the same. My fingers went to undo the

drawstrings again, got lost, and ended up pulling at the mouth of the bag instead.

Eating Mom's packed lunches was a highlight of my day.

Today I had a thawed-out pork cutlet, pieces of cheese and cucumber playing hide-and-seek inside some fish cake, edamame seasoned with salty kelp, rolled eggs the color of a crossing bag, and white rice sprinkled with pink pollack roe seasoning.

A "crossing bag" was a bright yellow tote bag widely used in Shizuoka Prefecture to help increase visibility of children when crossing the street. During the six years Japanese children attended elementary school, anything that didn't fit in your leather backpack went in your crossing bag.

Sunao had thrown hers away the day after graduation. I remembered carrying it as the yellow slowly faded and growing rather fond of it.

"Your lunch looks delicious, Aikawa," Satou said, and the others all nodded, like they'd rehearsed this.

"Thanks. Everyone else's does, too."

The other girls' lunches weren't just colorful. I saw edamame skewered like yakitori on a colorful toothpick and apples cut like tree leaves, instead of the traditional bunnies. It was neat catching a glimpse of each family's style.

We said our thanks for the meal and picked up our chopsticks. Satou was already shoveling down her food, her cheeks stuffed like a chipmunk's.

As we ate, the topic turned to the haunted house, just as Satou had promised. We had the main props ready, so this afternoon we'd be working on little decals to use in the background.

Once the topic settled on the festival, the conversation went much more smoothly, like our gears had been freshly oiled. Someone was using the PA system to announce the different festival offerings from each class and club, which helped provide additional topics to keep us going.

Five minutes after lunch started, students who'd run to the school store for food started coming back.

Aki was among them. He was carrying a yakisoba roll, a melon bun, and a hot dog with ketchup smeared on top. In his other hand was a carton of veggie juice, probably from the vending machine.

Recently, Aki had started to make sounds. When he opened doors, moved chairs, or dropped food onto his desk, he was no longer silent. The man who had held his breath and walked around like a ghost was no more.

Yoshii called out to him. "Sanada, you got the good stuff! Gimme one!"

"Fifty mil."

"Too high!"

The boys weren't as prone to pushing their desks together to form little forts. Most just talked to whoever sat in front or behind them. But Yoshii actually got up and went over to Aki. Maybe being on the carpentry squad together had sparked a friendship between them.

When he talked to other boys, every now and then, Aki would burst into laughter, like he couldn't stop himself. The way he smiled at times like those felt different from the way he smiled at me, and I found it strangely thrilling. I kept rooting for Yoshii to talk to him even more.

While I was discretely keeping an eye on them, I heard Satou whisper, "Sanada's pretty cool, huh?"

What?!

I quickly turned my head back toward the group of girls and saw Satou's words sink in with the others. They all exchanged glances and began whispering in response.

"Yeah, he's nicer than I thought."

"He seems straitlaced and manly."

"Not like other boys."

"Certainly not like Yoshii."

A giggle rippled through the group.

I thought "pretty cool" was the understatement of the century. But I couldn't

say that now. Not here.

Satou was watching me, her eyes narrowed. I tried to feign indifference, but when I went to pour green tea from my thermos into my cup, my hand slipped and I dropped it.

It was made of stainless steel, and the clatter echoed loudly. There was a momentary hush in the room. Even the angels above must have stopped to shake their heads at me.

"Aikawa, you doing okay there?"

"Y-yeah, sorry."

"I wonder if any new couples will form during the festival."

The girls resumed their conversation before I could even pick up my cup.

"What about you?" Satou said, pouncing on the topic. "Our haunted house is pretty dark. Good place for kissing!"

The others squealed. They were trying to be quiet, but the sound definitely echoed across the classroom ceiling. A moment later, everyone clapped their hands over their mouths, not wanting to attract undue attention. But curiosity was quickly winning out.

"Aikawa," the girl next to me asked. "What's kissing like?"

Why is she asking me?

Sunao was cute. Pretty, even. Perhaps they assumed she'd dated a lot of guys. But I hadn't, and neither had Sunao. My limbs, usually cold, broke out in a sweat immediately. I didn't know anything about stuff like that.

But just as I was thinking this, something occurred to me.

Like the haunted house, the aquarium had been dark and quiet, with no one else around.

That moment when Aki stepped close... Had he...?

"What is it? You're turning red."

I put my hands on my cheeks. "It's...getting hot in here. It's kind of warm today, isn't it?"

They all tilted their heads to one side, clearly confused. It was actually pretty chilly out.

I finished my lunch quickly, unable to taste any of it. What a waste. Then I grabbed my lunch bag and thermos and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Satou asked.

"The library. I have a book that's due."

I'd read *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* twice. I wanted to turn it in already and pick out my next novel. It was still fall—the season for reading.

"Can I come with?" she asked.

It was hard to say no after we'd all eaten together, so I nodded.

Satou wasn't the only one—all four of the girls wound up following me to the library. It was unusually crowded inside, making the rule about silence basically unenforceable.

Two people stood in line at the librarian's desk. I watched the barcode scanner's red laser pass over the label on the back of their books and listened as it made a series of soft beeps.

When the library hit its busy season, all the bestsellers disappeared, and the new arrivals corner was picked clean. But a lack of new books couldn't get me down. I was still working through my list of modern Japanese classics. What novel should I pick up next?

"Where'd the others go?" I asked Satou.

"Over there," she said, pointing. "Someone found the deluxe edition of *Rurouni Kenshin* and called everyone over."

All three girls were on a couch by the entrance, reading a volume of manga together.

"That series is why I started learning kendo," she said.

"Oh?"

"If I'd read Hikaru no Go first, I'd probably have founded a Go Club."

She mimed placing a go stone on an imaginary board. Apparently, Satou was a

big manga fan and easily influenced.



"You're in the Literature Club, right, Aikawa?"

"Yeah."

"Anything you'd recommend? Left to my own devices, I don't really read proper books."

I felt a sense of déjà vu as I remembered my trip to the library with Aki back in June. It had been a whole four months since I first talked to him. Thinking back, I decided to try the same tactic with Satou as I had with Aki.

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

"Oh, right..." Satou cleared her throat, then put on a voice. "Satou was furious. She swore she'd eliminate that vile, violent Yoshii."

"Those are opening lines from Run, Melos!, right?"

"Vile and violent might be a little hyperbolic, but Yoshii got a bit carried away after school yesterday and totally smashed up the boxes we were using as a dead end."

What a mess.

"Did it work out?"

"Yeah, Sanada fixed them, thankfully."

That explained why Aki had slipped out halfway through rehearsal. Someone must have texted him an SOS.

"...I'm fundamentally an outlaw," Satou said, pushing a loose book back onto the shelf with one finger. "Clash with someone in a clique, and it makes it hard to hang out with them for a while. When that happens, I start hopping around between groups, and by the time I come back, the whole thing's blown over, and I'm welcome again. I guess it's a kind of hit-and-run tactic."

She let out a silent laugh, seemingly aware that wasn't quite the right phrase. Surrounded by old books, I caught a whiff of resignation from her.

"You're always alone, Aikawa. But it seems like it never gets to you." She pulled a book off the shelf, a gleam of envy in her eyes. "But sometimes, every now and then, you look a little lonely. Is it my imagination?"

Was she seeing me? Or Sunao?

"Listen to me, talking like I know anything about you. This is why other girls don't really like me. Though I'm popular with the underclassman..."

She said all this with absolute seriousness, and it struck me as kind of funny.

"You don't say?"

"I do sav."

"Well, those other girls have no taste."

I thought Satou was really nice.

In gym class, the teachers liked to ask everyone to pair up, like it was nothing. But I was always left scanning the crowd, looking for anyone else as lost as I was. Several times, when that happened, Satou called out to me before I even had time to look around. But according to her, that was less an attempt to help me out than a natural result of her social fluidity.

But when Satou waved to me, it took a weight off my shoulders. At the very least, I knew the class president hadn't forgotten me.

"Aikawa," Satou said, gaping at me. "Are you making a pass at me?"

"Huh?!"

I'd heard that same line from someone else recently.

"You made my heart skip a beat! Beautiful girls are terrifying."

I didn't really know what to say as Satou slapped her cheeks.

"Ack, I wanted to try *No Longer Human*, but it's out!" she exclaimed. "Guess I'll try that other one—what's it called?—the one they just made a movie of... Unless it's out, too."

Looking vaguely embarrassed, she headed off to a different shelf.

It didn't seem like she was planning on rereading *Run, Melos!* I'd struck out with my recommendation, but I didn't mind. I was happy we'd had a chance to chat.

I wondered if the others were still reading manga and glanced their way. But

then I saw something interesting. A girl had just passed by the open door.

It was Ricchan. She hadn't spotted me, but when I saw the intense look in her eyes, I felt my curiosity peak.

"Sorry, gonna step out," I told Satou and left the bustling library.

Ricchan had moved on to the door of our clubroom.

"Another false lead!" she muttered. "Augh, this case may never be solved."

"Ricchan."

"Eaugh!"

I must have surprised her. She made an odd noise and spun around. But when she saw my face, she let out a sigh of relief.

"N-Nao! You startled me."

"Sorry, didn't mean to. What 'case' is this?"

"Erk! U-uhhh..."

Flustered, she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the unlocked clubroom.

"D-did I say that out loud?!" she whispered, taking refuge by the wall. "About the case and all that?"

"You did."

"Augh, what a blunder!"

As I watched her face sink, something occurred to me.

"Wait. Were you looking for the criminal mastermind behind those flyers?"

I was exaggerating a bit. The culprit hadn't actually committed any crimes.

Ricchan's brows creased with worry—and that told me everything I needed to know.

"Er, well, the thing is..."

"Ricchan, the truth."

"...Yeah, I was." She threw up both hands in resignation.

Ricchan had a curious mind, and I figured she'd just gotten worked up about

solving the mystery. But it soon became clear that wasn't the case.

"I mean, it's concerning, right? Those flyers might be about you and Aki," she said, looking dejected. "I thought if I investigated it on my own, I could avoid causing you both trouble, and stay one step ahead of them, in case they try anything else."

"Ricchan, you were that concerned?"

We'd never even talked about the flyers. But apparently, she was just being considerate.

"You'd better believe it!"

She puffed up her cheeks at me, but I wasn't sure how to react.

She was writing a novel for the zine, making adjustments to the play, and busy with her own class's festival prep—yet she'd also been trying to locate the flyer flinger without telling anyone. I didn't deserve a friend like her.

"Thank you, Ricchan."

"Not at all! It's not like I've found any clues."

This got me thinking. Looking on my own was reckless and would get me nowhere. But if I paired up with Ricchan and her razor-sharp instincts...

"Mind if I help you search?" I said.

"Er... But won't that piss off Aki?"

I winced. "Actually, he already gave me an earful."

Aki thought we were better off staying out of it, and I knew he was right. But if possible, I'd like to know what the culprit was thinking. Going on the defensive could come after that.

"Let's keep it on the down-low," I said. "It'll be our secret, Ricchan." I held a finger to my lips.

She didn't look too thrilled. "If I think you're in any danger, I'm going straight to Aki."

"Fair. Then I'll line up with you in the hallway, and we'll take that tonguelashing together." "Do you think he'll make us hold buckets full of water?"

"I bet he will. In both hands."

We were now accomplices.

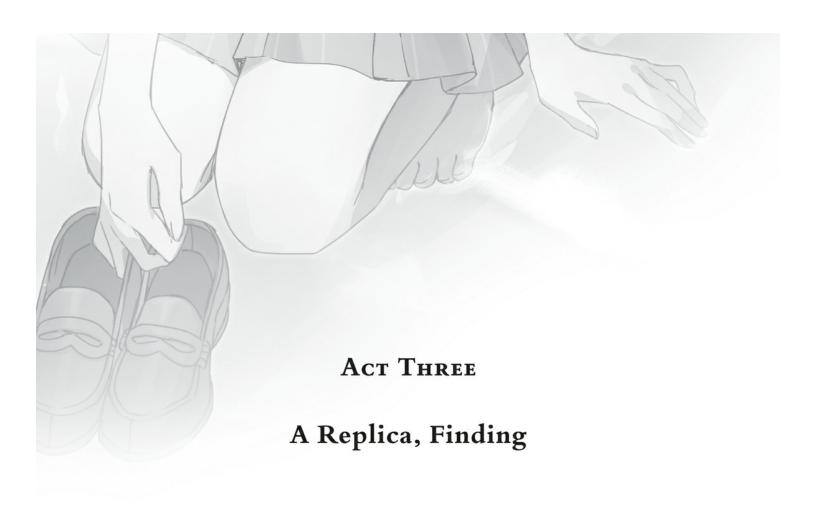
"But will searching get us anywhere?" I wondered aloud.

Throwing a bunch of paper out a window was bound to get a person in trouble. They must have taken steps to cover their tracks. And besides, the incident took place two weeks ago. Any traces left behind would fade away over time. Even if there had been clues to follow, by now the culprit could have come back and eliminated them, or they might have simply disappeared already.



"Searching blindly won't get us anywhere. But trust me, Nao. I will crack this case." Ricchan paused dramatically, then struck a pose. "Or my name's not Ricchan!"

I got the feeling she'd just wanted an excuse to say that line.



As the end of the month approached, each class entered the final phase of their exhibit prep.

Our class, 2-1, was putting together the set for our haunted hospital. We'd already test run small sections of it, but this was the first time we had the entire thing assembled.

The faculty, student council, and festival management team were going around inspecting each offering. The haunted house would be thoroughly examined to make sure it wasn't too dark, and that none of the scares could result in injuries.

It was also the first time the sun had shown its face in several days, and in the dazzling noon light, our haunted house looked rather silly.

The actors were in place, wearing full costumes and makeup.

"So where's this inspection group, anyway?"

Satou and the vice president were at the back door, glaring down the hall.

It seemed they hadn't hit 2-2 or 2-3 yet, either. They were supposed to arrive during fifth period, but it was almost time for break. They must have gotten held up somewhere.

We all fidgeted as more and more time passed. Someone from our class was on the management team, but they were out on the inspection tour, and we couldn't get ahold of them. Things weren't looking good.

With nothing better to do, I made a suggestion.

"I'll go to the council room and ask what's going on."

"Oh? Please!"

I knew people there now, and so I had more excuses to pop by. A task like this was much less daunting for me than it was for my classmates.

I left the classroom by myself and headed up the stairs. On the way, I poked my head into the third story hallway—I saw plenty of traffic in the hall, but no sign of the inspectors.

Then I heard voices coming from the floor above.

I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but the door to the council room was standing wide open.

"This score is abysmal!"

"I knew I shouldn't have left my answer sheet here."

I recognized both voices.

I'd heard them constantly during rehearsals, so I couldn't possibly mistake them. Mochizuki's tone was appalled, while Mori sounded cornered. I tensed up.

"You told me you were studying hard for the Common Test!"

"I'm sure I did."

"Were you too busy partying to study properly?!"

"...You think I'd do something like that?"

This did *not* sound good.

From what I'd heard, Mochizuki must have found a test paper Mori had hidden. It seemed she'd scored so poorly he'd started really laying into her.

I heard a tremor in Mori's voice. If I let this go on, it could cause a major schism.

I took a step toward the doorway. Should I try to mediate? Or should I deny having heard anything and just ask about the inspection? Maybe that would at least buy some time.

But despite my intent, my legs remained rooted to the floor. The mood in the council room was too tense for a third party like me to interrupt.

"What other reason could there be? You're Mori! You're not dumb enough to get a grade like this!"

"Oh, shut up!"

Mori exploded. He'd really set her off, and now she was yelling right back at him. Their tempers were raging, and no one could stop them now.

"It's none of your damn business! Who cares if I get a five or a ten or

whatever? That doesn't give you the right to nag me about it!"

"But this is outrageous! You could do better in your sleep!"

"Shut up, shut up! First you force me into being Princess Kaguya, and now I have to listen to you preach at me?!"

I heard a shrill gasp from Mochizuki's throat.

"Then...then why didn't you just say no? Why didn't you tell me you didn't want to act!"

"Don't put words in my mouth! You don't know anything about me!"

The blood had rushed to their heads, and now they were both trying to hurt each other.

Mori came flying out the door, nursing her wounds.

Our eyes met. Hers were open wide, shimmering with tears. She wiped them roughly before they spilled over, then ran off down the hall.

I just stood there. I felt like I'd start crying too if I let my guard down.

We all learned as little children that the right words could be as lethal as any knife. That was why we had to watch what we said—but sometimes, an impulse could undo all our training. And once said, the damage couldn't be undone. The other person's words would get under your skin, and no surgeon's scalpel could ever get them out.

I'd been powerless to stop the two of them, but I wasn't about to pretend I hadn't seen what just happened.

"Aikawa?" Mochizuki sighed when I gingerly poked my head around the door.

He was by the windows, his back to the wall. He let himself slide down to the floor, then pulled up his knees and buried his face in them.

Perhaps I *should* feign ignorance. We weren't that close, and I was sure he hadn't wanted me to see any of that. Maybe the best choice was to quietly turn away and greet him tomorrow like nothing had happened.

But there was something I had to say. Even if it meant rubbing salt in his wounds.

"Mochizuki, can I say something?"

"Shoot."

His tone was still hostile. But I didn't flinch—I'd already made up my mind.

"If you put it like that, anyone would be hurt."

He'd driven Mori so far into the corner, she'd been on the verge of tears. But that wasn't the only reason she was crying. She must have regretted taking the bait and blurting out something she hadn't meant to say.

"...Yeah. Point taken."

Mochizuki sounded stricken, and his voice was so soft it seemed to disappear into the air.

I took a seat against the wall a respectable distance away from him. Then I crossed my legs, making sure not to mess up the pleats on my skirt.

"Can you keep a secret?" he said, his tone searching.

"Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't."

His bent shoulders quivered. I heard him laugh.

"Very honest. But that makes it easier to trust you." He lifted his face. "Over summer vacation, Mori and I went to the Abe River fireworks show. I asked her out. I'm still waiting for an answer."

It was the last thing I'd expected him to say.

The fireworks display had taken place on July 14. The day had come and gone without me. Mad at me for skipping the end of term ceremony, Sunao had left me on the bench all summer long. But I remembered seeing posters for the event everywhere.

I had a ton of questions, but chose not to interrupt him. It was better to act like a wall and let him speak.

"Mori's always been really smart. In the top three of our grade. She's been studying to go to college in Tokyo, hoping to get a job in media. Maybe that's why she hasn't given me an answer."

Several seconds passed in silence.

"She's really something," he said. "She didn't contact me all summer, then she shows up in class, acting like nothing happened. And here I am, all tied up in knots inside, ready to die."

He scratched his head, clearly at a total loss.

I let my imagination roam. What if I asked Aki out, and he said he needed some time to consider, but then he just kept talking to me like nothing had happened?

"That must be agony," I said.

"It is! That's exactly what it is."

Mochizuki buried his face in his hands and let out another weighty sigh.

When would she say something? Now? Tomorrow? Any second?

Or would she go the whole rest of her life pretending it had never happened? If she had her heart set on someone else, she should just say the word and put him out of his misery.

He must have been thinking about it every second, constantly on edge, barely maintaining his sanity. Did she even realize that? Did Mori know how tactless and cruel she was being?

"We've got enough on our plates," he said, "but I keep wishing we were even busier. I need to keep my head spinning so fast I don't have time to dwell on it."

For the first time, I felt a kinship with Mochizuki. He, too, was at the mercy of emotions he could not control.

It wasn't because I was a replica, either. We were all like this. Everyone was keeping something inside—something that, if we put it in words, would end things or change them forever. We were all holding it in, suffering and struggling.

But I knew a magic spell to lighten that load. I'd learned it two weeks ago.

"Mochizuki, breathe in through your nose."

"Huh? What?"

"Do as I say. Inhale."

On reflex, he took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring.

"Now let it out... One, two, three, four, five."

He grunted. With his knees pulled up like that, it was difficult to make it to five.

"It's called abdominal breathing."

My upperclassman, the boy suffering in front of me right now, had taught me this. It was a vital breathing technique. With its help, maybe some of the tension and stress from his fight with Mori would melt away.

Maybe it was all in vain, but it was the only thing I could offer him. I didn't want to fill him with false hope or distract him with a temporary diversion. There were better candidates for that. After all, Mochizuki had a ton of good friends.

So I stayed silent. It was the best a useless person like me could manage. He'd taught me to speak from the gut, so I sent him a wordless cheer from deep down inside.

His turbulent emotions died down a bit, and Mochizuki straightened out his legs.

"So you're dating Sanada?"

His sudden query left me tongue-tied. People kept springing this on me. Was it because the festival was coming up?

"We're not dating," I said, frowning.

Mochizuki let out a throaty chuckle. "Fair. I guess you wouldn't wanna admit it in front of a guy who's still waiting."

That wasn't why, but I didn't mind if he wanted to interpret it that way.

"You're not who I thought you were, Aikawa."

I stole a glance at him. What did that mean?

Sensing my confusion, he shifted awkwardly. "The third-years have you pegged as a beautiful loner, or an ice queen."

I wasn't sure if either of those was a compliment. They both seemed to

describe Sunao.

"I'm only like this when I'm with the Literature Club," I admitted.

"Yeah?"

"The rest of the time, I'm an icy loner."

I didn't really know what Sunao was like when she was with her friends in other classes. She didn't spend all her time gazing into a mirror, so I never saw her expressions. I simply learned what she'd seen and heard after the fact—Sunao herself remained a mystery.

But I didn't think she was having much fun. After all, her memories of her time in class were all hazy.

"That's a weird thing to say about yourself."

"Well, a rude upperclassman put the words in my mouth."

I put on an indignant face, then flashed him a grin.

"Whoa, that was pretty scary. I've got goosebumps!"

He feigned rubbing his upper arms, and I felt a twinge of pride.

"Was I convincing?"

"Yeah, strange how none of that talent comes out on stage."

His merciless comeback stabbed me right in the heart, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Hm, I guess that just goes to show how important the club is. And why all three of you are fighting for it." Mochizuki nodded to himself.

The play and the haunted house were a lot of fun. Both were firsts for me and held a special place in my heart. But what I loved most was being in the Literature Club, in that tiny little room. My time there was always full of peace and warmth, like basking in the sun.

That was why I was so desperate not to lose it.

Even if it was never really mine.

"Why'd you join the Drama Club?" I blurted out quickly, trying to change the

subject.

I couldn't tell if he noticed. Either way, he went along with it.

"You know how I tend to run my mouth?"

"Yes."

"You could at least pretend you haven't noticed!" He heaved an exasperated sigh, but didn't seem that upset. "Back in grade school, my class did *Swimmy* on stage."

Swimmy was the name of a little black fish whose color didn't match the rest of his school.

"I only had a bit part—a fish who gets eaten by the tuna. But that's what got me started." He stared ahead, focused on some distant stage bathed in spotlights. "Being on stage is like nothing else. It's like I'm not me anymore. Out in front of the crowd, I'm speaking as someone else, and there's no way to stick my foot in my mouth. I start to feel like I've led a completely different life—and that's a lot of fun."

Listening to this confession, I wondered if Mori felt the same way. Maybe the reason she shone in each role was because she'd managed to become someone else completely.

But somehow, I didn't think so. She always seemed so natural during rehearsals.

She wasn't acting like Princess Kaguya—it was the opposite. Kaguya was just like *her*. She was speaking truths that transcended acting, and that was why they hit so hard.

When I said nothing, Mochizuki's tone took on a hint of forced cheer.

"The end of next week is the big day! Let's do our best."

Just then, I heard footsteps.

I assumed Mori had come back—and I think Mochizuki did, too. I saw his feet twitch—his nerves were still raw.

But it was Aki in the doorway. He knelt down and peered through the legs of

the desks at us. Only then did I recognize him.

"Oh, Sanada!" Mochizuki said, uncharacteristically friendly. Maybe he was just hiding his embarrassment.

"Hey," Aki grunted, then stopped in his tracks.

He was looking at me, but not meeting my gaze. Something was up. Puzzled, I was just about to ask, when Mochizuki scrambled to his feet.

He stretched, loosening his stiffened muscles, then looked at me.

"Thanks, Aikawa."

Without waiting for an answer, he moved past Aki and was gone.

I was sure he'd gone after Mori. I offered a silent prayer, hoping they'd manage to patch things up.

"The inspectors arrived," said Aki. "It's going well."

"They did? Oh, good."

Aki came over to me and held out his hand.

I took it, and he pulled me up. Dusting off my skirt, I looked up to thank him—and was surprised by the distress in his eyes.

"What were you and Mochizuki talking about?"

I started to tell him, then bit my lip.

Mochizuki had asked if I could keep a secret. He'd wanted to know if I would spill the beans about Mori's test scores and the story of his confession. He'd trusted me, and I couldn't go telling someone now, no matter who that person was.

"Th-that's a secret."

I figured Aki would take the hint.

"You can't even tell me?" he asked.

A shudder ran down my spine.

Aki wasn't happy, and he wasn't hiding it.

He'd definitely gotten the wrong impression, and I had the feeling he'd end up holding a grudge if I didn't do something. We might even wind up like Mori and Mochizuki.

"I can tell you this—I was lending an ear to his romantic problems."

I figured that much was allowed. As long as I avoided specifics.

Aki relaxed a little. "Romantic problems?"

"Yes. I had some good advice, and he thanked me for it."

Mochizuki had mostly just been venting rather than asking for help. All I'd really done was encourage him to try some abdominal breathing—which hardly counted as good advice. But it was nothing that should make Aki anxious. I hoped that much came across.

"Hmm."

My ploy paid off; his jealousy faded.

When I looked relieved, he made an unexpected proposal.

"Then I could use some advice myself."

How could I let that pass? His romantic problems were my romantic problems. If he needed help with something, it must involve me. A terrifying thought.

"Is something the matter?" I probed.

"Yes. Just seeing my girlfriend talk to another guy gets me all riled up."

He bent down slightly and looked up at me, asking what he should do. What a scamp. I gave his cheek a playful slap.

He'd been waiting for a reaction, and at last, he broke into a grin.

"That's a serious condition," I said. "I don't think there's a cure."

"You mean I'll be like this forever?" Aki mumbled, not looking the least bit put out. He wasn't even scratching his cheek.

I bit my lip, wrestling with whether I should say my next line. I remembered his broad shoulders as he talked to the other girls in class—to Mori, and Satou.

In two and a half seconds, I'd made my decision.

"But your girlfriend has the same chronic illness, so I think we'll be fine."

Immediately, embarrassment washed over me, and the last few words came out as little more than a squeak.

But Aki's ears caught every word of it. He looked even more embarrassed than I was, and his thick brows came together over a grin.

"That's good news," he said.

I couldn't help smiling back.



The haunted house inspection resulted in only a single note—they'd found a spot where it was easy to knock the cardboard over. Otherwise, we were good to go.

The set was quickly taken apart and stowed away in an unused classroom. We still had classes, so our room couldn't remain an abandoned hospital forever.

We'd put it all back together on the twenty-ninth. We'd have the entire day before the Seiryou Festival to devote to final preparations.

As the big day approached, the school's excitement level reached a fever pitch.

"Hey everyone! These snacks are from Mr. Akai!" said Ricchan, arriving with a grocery bag in one hand just as we finished our vocal exercises. I'd been wondering where she was while we were out running, and it seemed she'd been fetching the snacks.

Rehearsals always went on pause the moment snacks appeared. And when I saw the contents of the bag, I practically squealed.

"Eel pies!"

Eel pies were a classic Shizuoka snack. Rather than pies, they were buttery biscuits made with pie crust in the shape of an eel. And the ones Ricchan had brought weren't just *any* eel pies.

"The ones with nuts in them!"

These were a special variant with almonds, adding a crispy crunch, and they were more expensive than the regular type. We all took seats and chowed down.

The helpers were out today, and the practice room felt a bit too big. We set some eel pies aside for them.

"Personally, I like the white bait pies."

"I know! Those are good, too."

Both were made by Shunkado in Hamamatsu. They didn't taste anything like eel or white bait.

It was rare for anyone to buy local delicacies like this of their own accord, but that made it a real treat to get them from someone else. They were all good—Cocco, Abe River Mochi, Figure 8s, heart-shaped Genji Pies.

I bit off the end of my snack. The flaky pie crust was basted in a secret glaze. The sweetness spread through my mouth before I even started to chew. *Pure bliss*.

"Oh, I finished the short story!" announced Ricchan.

She produced a stapled sheaf of writing paper to a round of applause. I joined in the clapping, of course.

How much had that elderly couple doted on Princess Kaguya? How had they treasured their time together? She may not have been their daughter by blood, but they'd loved her as if she was.

The main story barely touched on the time the three of them spent together, and Ricchan's addition was meant to explore that—through the old lady's narration.

It was a nice, quick read, around forty pages. I'd given feedback on several earlier drafts and had already read it to completion.

"Can I read it?" Mori asked.

"But of course! Go right ahead."

Walking on her knees, Ricchan moved over to her. An eel pie in one hand, Mori took the proffered sheaf of paper.

Our scripts had been updated, too. The working title part was gone, and it was now officially titled *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation*.

The script was now on A4 paper, bound like a book with staples covered in green masking tape to keep them in place. This version was easier to hold in one hand and printed in a nice, large font—and of course, I'd highlighted my lines in light blue.

"I think it's a good story," Mochizuki said.

"Mm," Mori grunted. Not exactly a warm response.

He flinched and said nothing further. The tension between them was clearly still unresolved.

I wasn't surprised. Only hours ago, they'd been yelling at each other.

I was amazed that Mori had showed up for rehearsals at all. She didn't seem to be here to make up with Mochizuki, though. She'd made a promise and was sticking to it—a principle she seemed to live by.

Unable to contribute anything, I settled for another bite of eel pie. I was almost through the long and tasty treat, which made me rather sad.

Just then, something gleamed in the corner of my eye, and I turned to look. What I saw startled me so much I forgot to savor the last bite of my snack.

Mori was crying.

She'd forgotten the pie in her other hand, her full attention on the short story. Tears were streaming down both her cheeks. Dark splotches formed on the light blue carpet.

She seemed oblivious to the tears dripping down her chin. Only when she caught me staring did Mori realize she was crying.

She jumped, then wiped at her tears with the back of her hand.

"Sorry, where'd these come from? I dunno... It's just really good." She managed a smile. She wiped her eyes so hard it made me worry, leaving them

very red. "I might like this story more than the main one."

"High praise indeed!" Ricchan cackled. She was joking around, trying to keep things light.

Mori turned to me. "I'll have the painting done soon," she said. "Just wait a bit longer."

The poster deadline was coming up quickly. There was a fierce battle brewing over bulletin boards and wall space, with everyone trying to draw the most attention to their exhibit.

What would a girl who cried over Ricchan's story bring us? I was half expectant, half nervous—but for now, I simply nodded.



The Seiryou Festival was less than a week away.

Homeroom ended with the bare minimum of announcements, and then we were released. Students on cleaning duty and those with club activities were the first out the door.

We were in the last stages of preparing our haunted house, and the prop team had finished our share of the work a few days earlier. Today we were helping other squads, but if no one needed anything, I could probably slip away to the clubroom and focus on reading the script for the play.

As I pondered my options, I saw a white hand towel spinning outside the hallway windows—like how people do at concerts. I recognized the pattern on the towel and went over to the door.

"What's up, Ricchan? It's Tuesday."

We only changed into our tracksuits and met up by the gates on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

"It's not that—I need to discuss something with you, Nao."

Ricchan was folding up her towel. It was a gift I had bought for her at the aquarium with pictures of sushi on it. I'd gone back and forth over it for ages, getting Aki's input, so it warmed my heart to see her putting it to good use.

For the rest of the Drama Club crew, we'd brought back mayo and shrimp flavored Happy Turn chips, a flavor sold only at the aquarium. They had gone over quite well.

"What about?" I asked.

"I've got a progress report."

My eyes went wide.

The classroom was full of students, Aki among them, so we snuck away down the hall.

Once we were alone, Ricchan whispered her news.

"I've figured out what floor the flyers came from."

"Really?"

I was right there when they were falling. I hadn't caught the moment they were flung into the air, but I'd seen them drifting on the breeze.

They'd come from the main school building, somewhere high up. That eliminated the first and second floors.

"But the third floor has the third-year classrooms, right?" I said. "When it happened, there were a ton of people looking out the windows. And there would have been people in the fourth floor hall outside the council room, too."

There were plenty of likely witnesses on either floor. Was it possible for someone to drop all those flyers without anyone seeing them?

Ricchan, however, was unfazed by my arguments. "Thus, by process of elimination, I believe they were dropped from the roof!"

"The roof?!"

There was a steel door leading up to the roof, but it was always kept locked.

"On October first, there was a water tower inspection. They let an external vendor onto the roof. The inspection itself took place during lunch break."

October first. I didn't need a reminder—that was the date the flyers had fallen.

"So you think someone snuck onto the roof and dropped the flyers after school?"

"That was my first idea, but I thought better of it. That would leave them with no way down from the roof after dropping the flyers."

"Oh, good point."

If the faculty had locked the door once the culprit was on the roof, they might still be up there, slowly rotting away.

"I think the faculty member who went up with the vendor forgot to lock the door. Our culprit noticed and thought up the flyer scheme. Or it could have been the faculty member themselves—either theory would work."

"I see. Who went with them?"

"That, I don't know." Ricchan sighed. "I went to the faculty office and put out feelers, but I got nowhere. I'm guessing they already discussed the incident, and whoever it was has zipped their lips to avoid taking the fall."

I remembered seeing Ricchan outside the library the other day. She must have just left the faculty office.

But all this left us no closer to finding the mastermind.

"Never fear. Your humble friend, Ritsuko Hironaka, has devised a cunning plan."

"Lay it on me."

Ricchan was an endless fount of ideas. Seeing the sparkle in my eyes, she dramatically adjusted her glasses.

"Let's inspect the roof entrance. They say criminals always return to the scene of the crime!"

"Um, so basically, you have no plan."

"Arguably not!"

Well, she was an endless fount of confidence, anyway.

Standing around was getting us nowhere, so we headed to the roof entrance to give Ricchan's non-plan a shot. The door was sure to be locked, of course, so we wouldn't be going out on the roof itself.

"Should I buy some red bean buns and milk?" I asked.

"Sounds perfect for a lengthy stakeout!"

We were joking around, almost to the third floor, when we heard a *thump* from above. It was followed by the sound of several voices and laughing.

We immediately crouched down and hid.

The voices weren't coming from the roof itself, but from the landing outside the door.

"Ricchan, I know it shouldn't be," I whispered. "But this is kinda fun."

She grinned back. "I was thinking the same thing."

We crawled up the stairs, one step at a time. Our knees were getting dirty, but neither of us cared. When we were close enough to make out our targets' blue-lined slippers, Ricchan leaped to her feet.

"Police! Nobody move!" she shouted.

"It's the fuzz! Scram!"

She made a show of it, and they responded in kind.

Two boys vaulted over the railing to the steps below and vanished down the stairs. But the third one failed to get away in time. Ricchan pointed right at him.

"Nao, make the arrest!"

"O-okay!"

I rushed forward, not at all sure what we were doing.

I was clearly shaken, and so was he. The landing leading to the roof was fairly wide, but we were at a stalemate.

After a few moments, I realized the boy was someone I knew.

"Wait, Yoshii?"

"What? Is that you, Aikawa?!" My classmate blinked back at me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Er, good question. Why am I here?" He smiled faintly, and his gaze drifted around behind me.

I followed it...and saw a wet rag on the floor. He had an upside-down broom held behind his back. And...

"Oh! The dustpan!" I yelled, and Yoshii flinched.

I picked up a plastic dustpan with "front entrance" written on it in black marker. The letters had faded considerably over the years, but they were still clearly legible.

This dustpan had gone missing ages ago. I'd thought it went out for a walk, but in fact, Yoshii had kidnapped it!

That bunched-up rag was their ball. The upside-down broom a bat. The dustpan a pitcher's mitt.

With all this evidence, we didn't need a detective to tell us what was going on. Dustpan in hand, I pointed an accusatory finger.

"Yoshii, you're skipping cleaning duty to play baseball!"

"Augh, she's onto me!" He clutched his head. "Please, don't rat me out to the teachers! We were just playing baseball! Training hard for the national championship!"

"Spouting nonsense like that isn't going to go over well with the real baseball team!" Ricchan said.

"Huh? Who are you?" Yoshii asked, noticing her for the first time.

"Ritsuko Hironaka, Literature Club. The pleasure is all yours." After a brief introduction, she launched into the topic at hand. "Yoshii, was it? We need answers, stat! Friday, October first! Were you here skipping cleaning duty?"

She was giving him the third degree, making him squirm.

"Uh, you can say all the dates you like, I don't remember that far back! I don't even remember what I had for breakfast *yesterday*!"

That was mildly alarming.

"October first was the day after midterms," I explained. "The day our class

decided to do a haunted house. The day someone dropped flyers on the school grounds."

"Oh, that day. I'm with you now."

It had been fairly memorable. Even Yoshii seemed to recall it now.

"Did you see anyone else up here?"

"Up here?" He started to say no, then paused. He looked around, searching his memories. "Wait...there was someone. The others ran for it, but I dropped a rag and didn't get away in time."

"Do you know who it was?"

Yoshii hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, she's famous—I'm sure you know her, too."

Ricchan and I exchanged a glance. We'd found our answer.

"But, uh, about the skipping thing..."

"Give us the answer, and we'll take this secret to our graves," Ricchan announced.

Yoshii exhaled, looking relieved.

We had a deal. He cleared his throat and breathed in.

"Then I'll tell you. Her name was—"



Once again, stillness held sway within the art room.

I could see Mori in her uniform at the far side. Her arms were folded as she examined her work from every angle.

A used brush rested on her palette, the watery paint running. The shades were so vivid that, for a moment, it looked like every color of the rainbow at once.

"Mori."

"Oh, Aikawa. I just finished the poster! Thanks for being patient."

She waved me over. I stood next to her and beheld the fruit of her efforts.

"It took me a long time to pick a subject. I kept thinking, should I try to get in all the characters somehow? Or focus on the romance? Or maybe that superpowered battle Hironaka's all excited about? But then..." She picked up the page—the colors were already fully dry. "I thought, *Bamboo Cutter* is a story about family. So I went with this."

I saw a darkened bamboo thicket, lit up by a brilliant light.

A tiny girl was asleep inside the glowing bamboo. Her plump red cheeks were adorable, and you could almost see her lips moving in her sleep.

From either side of the frame, hands were reaching toward her. Wrinkled hands—the old man's and the old woman's.

The very start of the story. Sure, the old woman wasn't actually in this scene, but in Mori's mind, they'd *both* found her, both given her a name, both embraced her.

The pastel watercolors gave the whole painting a certain warmth, showing what sort of family these three would make.

I was already smiling. "I think it's lovely."

"Thanks. Reading Hironaka's story convinced me I'd made the right choice."

Perhaps it wasn't flashy. But it definitely drew the eye. I couldn't imagine a better poster or a better cover for our zine.

"This is the first time I've ever painted anything for someone else. Whew! It was pretty stressful." She put a hand to her chest and mimed collapsing.

"Well, you nailed it," I said, beaming. "I'm sure Ricchan will be thrilled."

"Glad to hear it. Should I do a formal unveiling tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

Silence settled over the art room once again.

"Mori," I said after a moment. "What are you reading during morning break?"

"What about you, Aikawa?"

I'd tried to catch her off-guard, but she lobbed it right back at me like she'd seen it coming a mile away.

"Right now, I'm reading Run, Melos!" I said.

This was the truth. After seeing Selinuntius in the art room and talking to Satou, I'd felt like rereading it.

"I'm also reading Osamu Dazai," Mori said, chuckling.

"Oh?"

"But I'm on No Longer Human."

She pulled the paperback out of the bag on her chair. It was the book Satou had been searching for.

"Unnerving title, right?" she said. "I feel like everyone reads it because they're scared it's calling them out."

"I've never read it."

"Oh? Why not? Aren't you a bookworm? You're the Literature Club president. And you're even reading the author's other work."

I could feel a bead of sweat running down my back.

"There's a lot of books out there."

It wasn't that strange.

Even Osamu Dazai fans didn't necessarily read "One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji." Ango Sakaguchi fans might adore "In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom," but would never find themselves lost in the pages of "Discourse on Decadence."

What I said was hardly wrong. But I might as well have been shouting into the wind.

"Wanna read it?" she asked.

I stood, shifting like a nail hammered into sand as Mori held the book out to me.

I couldn't look directly at the cover. My mouth felt dry. A chill ran through my

body. I felt like I'd just put a whole ice cube in my mouth in the middle of winter.

"I'm scared of it."

"Which part?"

"...It feels like the author is pointing at me and laughing."

I was scared of those three words, written in that cold font. They were like an accusation, reminding me I was merely pretending to be human.

"Mori, you're the one who dropped those flyers, right?"

I watched her face.

She looked surprised, then overjoyed. The corners of her mouth leaped upwards.

I finally understood. She'd never run, never tried to hide—she'd simply been waiting all this time for someone to ask.

"Wow! You're right. How'd you figure it out?"

"There was a witness."

The name Yoshii had given was Moririn. The girl who'd gone to the roof was the forest fairy from the school assembly.

After school on October 1, Mori had come up the stairs with her backpack on.

It had been swollen and heavy, full of flyers.

Yoshii hadn't told anyone he'd seen Mori near the roof. Why would he? He and his friends had been skipping cleaning duty to horse around. Ratting out the flyer flinger would mean admitting his own misdeeds.

Mori sat down. She glanced at the empty seat next to her, but I didn't budge.

She shrugged, and then she told me everything.

"I was eating alone in the council room. The teacher who accompanied the vendor stopped by, saying he had to go to the bathroom. He asked me to lock up for him and gave me the key. The faculty have a lot of trust in the student council president... Well, *former* student council president," she added. Many

students still called her by her old title. She'd earned their trust, too. "The vendors wrapped up quickly. I saw them out, then went to lock up—and that was when the idea came to me. What would happen if I flung a stack of flyers off the roof? The door was wide open."

I simply listened to her confession in silence.

"I acted on the idea right away. I snuck into the computer room, typed the line up in Word, printed a hundred copies, and dropped them off the roof after school. I turned the key in right after, so I don't think anyone even realized it was me. Not that any of that matters."

She'd been staring into the distance as she spoke, but now her gaze settled on me.

There had been no need for me to accuse Mori.

Sunao had never talked to her, so she had no way of finding out I was a replica. Aki had been right.

If I didn't want her finding out, all I had to do was avoid arousing her suspicions. I could have avoided exposure and kept myself safe. The play would have come and gone, and she would have graduated and left school. Nothing would have happened.

But instead, I chose to make contact.

"Thank you for coming forward," she said. Her formality showed she understood what this meant. Only someone alarmed by those flyers would bother searching for the culprit when we all had so much else on our plates. "I mean that. Sunao Aikawa—or rather, her little doppelgänger."

I looked her right in the eye. "What do you want with me?"

"Don't get your hackles up. I'm not gonna ship you off to some lab and have them dissect you or anything."

Mori giggled, but I could tell she wasn't having any fun.

"I don't need to experiment," she continued. "I already know what you are. You're just like a regular human. You breathe oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. You have to eat and go to the bathroom. You get sleepy when you're

tired. Your hair and nails grow, and you even get pimples. Right?" She kept her tone deliberately calm. "I know because I'm one, too—a doppelgänger."

Part of me found it hard to believe, while to another part, it made total sense.

"Mori—" I broke off, then rephrased my question. "You're also a replica?"

"A replica?"

"That's what Sunao—my original—calls me."

Something that looked just like the real thing, but wasn't.

Sunao called me a replica and named me Second. She used all sorts of words to drive home the idea that I wasn't human, that I was just a fake.

"The original and her replica, huh? Well, that's certainly one way of putting it."

Mori's replica nodded to herself, then put her hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet. She reached a hand toward me and I unconsciously tensed up.

But the blow I expected never came.

Instead, she drew me into a hug. She embraced me like we were old friends, reunited after a decade apart. It was a powerful, dramatic gesture.

"U-um...?" I stammered.

"I've been looking for someone like you," she said, ignoring my confusion. "I'm so glad we could meet." Her voice wavered, and I thought she might be crying. But a few seconds later, I realized the situation was much worse than I'd feared.

"And now, I've finally found you. Please—if you know anything, you have to tell me." She pulled away, looking very intense. There was no warmth left in her expression—like the heat of her embrace had been a vicious lie. "Is there any way to heal a wounded original?"

"...What?"

"Or some way to transfer an injury from the original to the replica? Any information at all!"

I was stunned. Where was this coming from? What was she talking about?

I must have looked exceptionally stupid. She swore under her breath and shook me.

"Tell me, Ms. Replica. If you die for her, will that save the original?"

Her words reminded me—no, that wasn't right. How could I remember something I'd never once forgotten? What she said made me turn back and face certain events I'd tried to ignore.

I'd been pushed in front of a train and run over. I'd died. I'd been ground into mincemeat. And here I was, with the knowledge of that death.

All of us were only supposed to have one life. That was part of being human. Life was precious because it was finite.

But in that moment—when Sunao brought me back, tears streaming down her cheeks—I finally realized that I wasn't human, and I never had been.

"I...I know one thing."

My voice shook. I wasn't breathing right. My eyes were closed, but there were lights flashing on the back of my lids.

"If a replica dies, we can be brought back."

She leaned in. "What do you mean?"

"If a replica—" I was breathing heavily. Tears were forming in my eyes. I had to squeeze the words out bit by bit. "If a replica dies, the original can call them out again. As long as the original is unharmed..."

It took several gasping breaths to get all that out.

"Wow... Okay... That's wild. I had no idea!"

But her nails were still digging into my shoulders, deeper and deeper.

"What about the other way around?" she asked. "If the original dies, is it all over?"

I said nothing, but her eyes, glowing with an uncanny light, wouldn't let me go.

"Is it possible for a replica to shoulder the damage? If Sunao Aikawa was about to die, could you, her replica, die in her place?"

Why would she say such a thing?

Had I done something to hurt her? Had I committed some unpardonable sin?

"What's the real Aikawa doing right now? Where is she? I have to know more!" My frown didn't slow her down at all. She was shaking me like she was possessed. "I need answers! Can't you tell me? Come on!"

"Let Nao go."

A new voice released me from the pain.

Aki peeled Mori's hands off me and put himself between us.

I gaped up at him. His broad shoulders were heaving, and sweat was running down his cheeks.

Why was he here? I almost asked. But I already knew the answer.

Ricchan had told him. My brilliant friend knew just what I'd do once I knew who dropped the flyers.

"I'm a replica, too. If you've got questions, you can ask me."

I couldn't breathe. Aki had revealed himself to protect me.

From over his heaving shoulders, I saw Mori's baffled look.

"Then is Hironaka one, too? Is the whole Literature Club a bunch of replicas?"

"No, Ricchan's—"

I started to say she was a normal, proper human, but couldn't bring myself to form the words.

Mori had slowed down a bit, but she was still asking similar questions.

Looking very stern, Aki heard her out.

When he finally spoke, he gave the same answers I had. He didn't know anything more than I did. We replicas didn't understand much about ourselves. How could we?

I envied humans. They didn't need to figure things out by themselves—it was

all explained in their health textbooks. Every function of their bodies. Their average life spans. Charts showing the death rates for every age. The odds of getting every type of disease.

But I was a replica, born with Sunao Aikawa's face.

I was duty-bound to pretend I was human—yet if I could devote my time to figuring out how different I was, the results might well be Nobel Prize—worthy. If I had the fortitude to gaze into a mirror and ask, "Who are you?" hundreds of times, it wouldn't matter if I was a monster.

But I wasn't that strong.

"Oh... Okay. I see."

As my head spun, Mori let out a dejected sigh.

She'd pinned a lot of hopes on this meeting and come up empty. She looked exhausted. She ran her fingers listlessly through her hair. She looked like she'd aged decades in the last few minutes.

"Fine. Then I guess we're done here," she said coldly. Then she turned on her heel and left.

The moment she was gone, I collapsed like a rag doll. My knee hit the chair, and I toppled sideways. Aki caught me.

His hands were gentle—the only ones capable of filling up the hollow inside me. Their touch brought me peace. But sometimes, that kindness pierced deeper than any pain.

"You okay, Nao?"

"Sorry." That was all I could say.

"Can you walk?"

I shook my head, certain I couldn't. I must have looked very pale.

"If you're feeling sick, you can puke on my shoulder."

I definitely couldn't do that. Instead, I pressed my forehead against him.

I didn't smell soap, just the acrid scent of sweat, like it was summer again. I'd smelled this same scent after the basketball match, and on the bus. I screwed

my eyes shut, slowly remembering how to breathe.

"That was dumb," he said.

Even his insults were filled with sympathy. They made me sad and hit even harder than if he'd yelled at me.

"Why did you do something so risky? I told you not to!"

"I'm sorry." It had turned out just like he'd feared. "I wanted to meet her, talk to her. If there are more replicas than just us..."

He was patting my back, slow and steady, like he was comforting a child. I buried my head in his shoulder.

I felt sweat running down my thighs and pooling in the hollows behind my knees.

Aki let out a long breath. "I've been meaning to ask for a while now. Maybe this isn't the right moment for it, but..."

Despite that, he must have felt it was now or never.

"...What did Hayase do to you?"

He wasn't asking what I did to him, but what he did to me.

Hayase hadn't come back to class since that day I went to talk to him. Rumor had it he was doing the paperwork required to transfer schools. If he didn't come back soon, he'd be short on attendance and would have to repeat the year.

Perhaps Aki knew. Maybe he'd figured out who tried to push him off that station platform and why the prime suspect had stopped coming to school.

But my answer was set in stone.

"Nothing," I said.

"You won't tell me?"

"Sorry."

Perhaps it was selfish of me.

Aki had sworn I was still me. I'd gone to pieces—and that assurance had

patched me back together.

So for his sake, I wanted to shoulder this burden on my own.

Act Four

A Replica, Touring



It was the last day of October—the last Sunday. It was finally my turn to attend the Seiryou Festival.

Sunao had attended the day before. She helped with the haunted house in the morning and toured the festival with friends from other classes in the afternoon.

To my surprise, she showed up at the Literature Club, too, for the first time ever. Ricchan was overjoyed, and the two of them had manned the booth together for a while.

Currently, I was on the bike, pedaling heartily. The weather was crisp and clear, just as it had been the day before, and it seemed like we could expect a good turnout.

Judging from Sunao's memories, we'd sold nineteen copies of the zine.

Nineteen copies, at 200 yen each. That seemed like an astonishing figure, but only compared to last year. The knowledge that we'd have to get through the remaining eighty-one today was sobering, to say the least.

I was helping with the haunted house in the morning and selling the zine in the afternoon. At three, I'd join the Drama Club on stage to perform *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation*.

Mom had found the poster in the hall the day before and been shocked to see her daughter's name on it.

Why didn't you tell me you were in a play? she'd fumed, but Sunao had let it go in one ear and out the other. Mom had plans she couldn't get out of today, and she'd left the house crestfallen.

I stowed the bike in the parking lot—as gloomy and cave-like as ever—and headed around to the front gate. General admissions started at ten, so there were no crowds outside yet.

The entrance area had been swept clean and was lined with brightly colored billboards aimed at visitors. There was also an inflatable arch covered with welcome wishes.

I went through to the track, where the outermost white line was studded with

food and drink stalls. Several students were milling around. There was no smoke rising yet—but the sight of the stalls alone had a gravitational pull I found hard to resist. If I let myself get towed to the rest area in the center, I'd be trapped forever, unable to escape.

Turning back, I looked up at the main building, framed against the blue autumn sky.

For two short days, this place ceased to be a school. Instead, it was packed with excited crowds and music, and filled with hopes and dreams, as cliché as that sounded. It was like an amusement park had been transported and crammed into the little square of Suruga Seiryou High.

For today only, we were allowed to wear tracksuits, class T-shirts, or even costumes. We were free to wear just about anything, as long as we put on our slippers indoors.

I donned mine, finally stepping inside, and moved to an empty classroom. The second-years had turned two of these into break rooms, one for the boys, and one for the girls. We were stashing our belongings there, but there were no lockers or safes—you had to keep track of valuables yourself.

I changed into our class T-shirt. It was a pale yellow, almost cream, with a star on the chest, and a list of all our nicknames on the back. Sunao had gone with her name in hiragana, which made it sound like the plaintive mewl of a little kitten.

When I was done changing, I moved my wallet and phone into my pockets and hurried to Class 2-1.

I always said "good morning" when I entered the classroom. Today, boys and girls alike smiled and returned the greeting. *That was nice*, I thought.

With all the strangers coming to visit today, having everyone in the same color T-shirt gave us a real sense of camaraderie.

"Good morning, Aikawa. You'll be managing the line today," Satou said, patting me on the shoulder as I passed her.

The day before, she'd gone on stage with the kendo team, all decked out in her kendo uniform for an exhibition match. She'd been very cool, though I only caught glimpses of her through Sunao's sleepy lids.

Once everyone was present and accounted for, Satou led a class meeting. We spread out through the room, careful not to bump into the set. The sight of a bunch of ghosts listening intently was pretty hilarious.

Everyone, including me, was clutching a long, thin printout. Ootsuka had passed them around, and they each had our personal shift schedule and specified break times. This could prove vital for the more forgetful among us—Yoshii was busy taping his to his wrist. He offered to do the same for Aki, but Aki just brushed him off.

Yesterday, Aki had taken an afternoon shift at the haunted house, but today, his schedule matched mine. We'd be working just two hours in the morning.

As the meeting wrapped up, Satou raised a fist. "Let's make this second day a good one! Aim for the grand prize!"

A month ago, a statement like this had garnered only a few claps, but now everyone was cheering and pumping their fists in the air.

Soon it was ten o'clock, and the first visitors began to stream in. Cheerful music started playing over the loudspeakers, and the haunted house opened for business. Students from other classes were already in line.

Haunted houses were always a draw, but Ootsuka was in the Fine Arts Club, and the evocative poster he'd designed had generated a ton of buzz. We'd been packed all day long yesterday.

Today was off to another good start, though we'd gotten a warning from the festival management team to make sure the line didn't get too long. My task this morning was to go up and down the line, convincing people to keep it single file.

Attending the festival were all sorts of people—junior high kids who might be joining us in the near future, parents with excited children, the elderly, and college-aged couples.

"Yikes, I heard someone scream inside!"

"I'm scared already. Let's try something else."

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"Mommy, I've gotta pee!"

"How much longer?"

"Let's get some popcorn."

"This is gonna be so much fun!"
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I could hear chatter from every direction. As bits of conversation tickled my ears, I raised my voice and urged those in line to bunch closer together. That was all I had to do; it wasn't too hard.

"Nice work, Aikawa. I'll take over now."

I'd been leading girls from another school into place when a classmate took the end of line sign from me. An hour had passed already, and I was on a tenminute break.

Another girl from the prop squad emerged from the empty classroom as I went in. She'd just finished her break, and we greeted each other in passing.

There were twice as many satchels and backpacks as when I'd first come through—I found Sunao's among them.

I took the thermos out and gulped down some tea. It was hojicha, or roasted green tea. It wasn't particularly hot or cold, but it relieved my parched throat. I'd chugged it a little too fast and had to dry my lips with a hand towel.

I'd yet to see Aki anywhere. Several members of the carpentry squad were performing inside the haunted house, with others on standby to repair anything that broke. Aki was one of the latter.

In the five days since our confrontation in the fine arts room, seemingly nothing had changed between the two of us and Mori. We saw a lot of each other during rehearsals and had plenty of chances to chat. But during every interaction, I found myself trying hard to act normal, and that alone was proof that everything was different.

After the play, we would cease to have a connection. And next year, when the cherry blossoms began to bloom, she'd graduate and we'd go on living our separate lives.

I began to feel depressed, though I knew this wasn't the time to dwell on such

things.

"Oh, there you are! Aikawa!" The door opened, and Satou called out to me. She had a bundle of cloth in her arms.

"What's up?"

I wondered if something had gone wrong, but she didn't seem particularly upset.

"We've got enough people working the house itself, so I was hoping you'd pass out flyers. Once you run out, feel free to head over to the Literature Club. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, no pro—"

"Great! Here's your costume. Makeup crew are coming in five."

Before I could finish, she'd shoved the bundle into my arms.

After handing over the task rather forcefully, she sailed out, looking pleased with herself. On my own again, I turned back into the breakroom.

When I laid the bundle out on a chair, it soon became clear what manner of costume I'd been given.

Black and white. Ribbons and frills. A rather short skirt.

"A maid uniform?"

There was no mistaking it.

A scrap of paper fell from the hem of the skirt. A few words were scribbled on it.

Procured at Don Keehote. Even ghosts need maids! From Yoshii.

This cleared up nothing. And that was *not* how you spelled "Quijote." I would have loved to point that out, but Yoshii wasn't around.

Come to think of it, he'd been all fired up about doing a maid café on day one.

Perhaps he was still clinging to his original idea.

I hesitated a moment, but Satou was our class leader, and her word was law. I made sure the curtains were closed, then took off my skirt.

I put on the black dress, and the frilly white apron over that. The white ribbon around the waist was detachable, so I put it in my hair in place of my scrunchie.

Just as I sat down, there was a knock at the door.

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"Aikawa, you done?"

"Y-yeah."

I looked up as two classmates came in, holding makeup boxes.
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"Oh, wow. You look so cute."

"I can't believe I get to defile this perfect maid! What a thrill."

"Um."

That sounded ominous, and I felt a bead of sweat roll down my back.

We were running a haunted house, so our actors needed good makeup. Realistic looking wounds and blood went a long way toward selling the scares. It was the same for the Labyrinth of Fear.

Our makeup team had spent all month honing their skills. Grabbing boys at every lunch break, giving them fake wounds, and sending them to the nurse's office. The nurse was furious, but that only proved how real the wounds looked.

Smiling, they grabbed my shoulders and sat me down. Then they pulled over a desk from behind me and laid out their equipment.

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"Um, are we—"
"Hush!"

They silenced me with a fierce glare, then sprang into action.
"Aikawa, your skin is flawless!"

"How do you maintain it?"

"Such soft lips!"
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"No acne scars at all! Wow!"

They had me close my eyes, stretch out the skin under my nose, purse my lips, turn to the side, and so on and so forth. I did as I was told. Making small talk here and there, they worked in perfect unison.

Their assault came like a storm, and when it passed, they held up a mirror, showed me their work, and sent me staggering out the door.

I found Aki and Satou in the hall. When I saw Aki, my jaw dropped, and I looked him up and down.

A white dress shirt. A black cape with red lining. Blood spatters. Pointy teeth visible between his lips. He'd been completely transformed into Dracula Aki.

"Well, Aikawa?" he asked.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

I doubled over laughing.

This cheapo vampire was straddling the line between cool and hilarious. Normally, I'd probably lean toward "cool," but everything seemed sillier right now, at the height of the festival.

"You're laughing too hard," Aki said, laughing himself.

A moment ago, we'd been diligently maintaining lines and repairing props. How had we become a maid and a vampire? It was too bizarre. We had to laugh.

I'd wound up with a big gash on my forehead, with blood running down my cheek and chin. They'd scattered more blood across my white apron. The overall effect was pretty gruesome. But of course, our wounds weren't real. The members of the makeup team were just doing their job.

"They both look great," said Satou. "Nice work, team!"

The makeup girls looked proud. They really were quite skilled. From a distance or in the dark, people could easily mistake their fake wounds for the real thing.

Their job done, they took off. Satou remained behind and stroked her chin

approvingly.

"Count Dracula and his maid!" she exclaimed. "An excellent addition to our haunted house! Thank god for the great deals at Don Quijote."

Did these costumes really match our theme?

"Do maids or vampires make sense for a hospital?" I asked.

I could see a nurse, but maids were nothing like nurses. They were as different as Tom and Jerry.

"It's a foreign hospital!" Satou declared. "Of course there are maids!"

"I doubt it."

"Maybe Dracula's donating to a blood drive."

"Wouldn't he be receiving?!"

"Let's not sweat the details."

I'd learned over the past month that Satou wasn't much of a details person.

"I have a secret mission for the pair of you," she continued. "Take this sign and hand out these flyers. Those outfits will do wonders for publicity."

When she said this, it finally hit me.

If a boy and a girl went around the festival together, they'd attract attention and start rumors.

But with costumes as our shields, we'd still get the attention—but everyone would assume we were just advertising for the haunted house. Nobody would ask questions about our relationship.

Maybe Satou was being a busybody, but I didn't mind. I was hellbent on touring the festival with Aki, no matter what came of it.

I turned toward him, pinched the hem of my skirt, and crooked my head to the side.

"Would you care to tour the festival with this blood-splattered maid?"

Aki bowed. "As long as you don't mind joining Count Dracula."

"I'd love to."

I beamed back at him. As long as it was Aki inside, I'd tour the festival with Dracula, Frankenstein, or even a mummy. Any one of them sounded grand.

Satou clapped her hands, like she'd just had a great idea.

"Right! Before you go, you need to experience the hospital's curse!"

"Erp?" I gulped, but she was already pushing me down the hall.

We were headed straight for the door of Class 2-1. People were staring at my costume, or rather my gruesome makeup, but they barely registered in my mind.

"I'm not great with the dark!"

"That doesn't mean you're bad with it."

"Uh, I'm good, actually!"

"Then great, go on in!"

"No, I meant I'm fine!"

"That's what I thought!"

Why was it so hard to get my meaning across?

"By good and fine, I mean I don't need to go in. In fact, I don't really want to!"

"Two VIPs coming through!"

The strips of black duct tape covering the entrance brushed my face, and before I knew it, Aki and I were inside the haunted house—our class's cursed abandoned hospital.

With blackout curtains everywhere, the room was fairly dark. There were little bulbs placed here and there, but it was still hard to see your hands.

...Why is this happening?

I stood still, searching for answers, but the haunted house offered none.

I heard a whistling wind and felt a chill. Was it coming through a gap in the wall? In a hospital?

Nervous, I looked around and found a monitor glowing on the reception desk. Mixed in with the sound of static was a deep, eerie voice. "You, who dare step inside the cursed hospital. If you wish to leave alive, you must collect your charts from within. If you don't, you'll be trapped here... forever..."

The sound trailed off, followed by the flapping of wings. Wasn't this a hospital?

Its task done, the monitor returned to black.

Aki nodded, impressed. My eyes were finally adjusting to the darkness, and I could just make out the gesture.

"That was Ootsuka. Pretty good, right? Maybe we should have asked him to help with the play."

"Y-yeah..." I managed a nod.

"Let's go get the charts from the midpoint," Aki said, cheerily. "According to the rules, we each need one to complete the challenge."

"I...don't think I can."

Aki looked puzzled. "Why not?"

"I—I—I just can't."

"Because?"

"Because I'm scared!" I shouted.

Aki looked taken aback. His mouth was open wide enough that I could see his real teeth below the pointy ones. They were so white, they gleamed even in the darkness.

I rubbed my goosebumps through the fabric of the maid uniform. I was fighting back tears.

"I can't handle scary stuff! I'm not taking another step! I'm out!"

"Another? We haven't even taken one."

"I'm out!" I shouted and tried to turn around.

Aki patted my shoulders, and even that made me jump. He was pointing at a sign.

THIS ABANDONED HOSPITAL OFFERS NO WAY BACK. SUMMON YOUR COURAGE AND PERSEVERE.

It was written in blood, but the handwriting was oddly neat.

I was sure my face went from white to ashen. If we'd had a doctor with us, he'd have called the match. But to my horror, this cursed hospital had no living doctors.

"Come on. It's not exactly a long walk," Aki said.

He clearly felt none of the hair-raising terror oozing out of every corner of this place. It was somewhat reassuring. But right now, I needed to get my chart and get out of here even more than I needed him.

"Wanna hold hands?"

"Please!"

I quickly changed my mind. Having Aki by my side was far more reassuring than any hospital chart.

I yanked his hand closer and squeezed hard. It was big and warm.

He fidgeted a bit, but he didn't shake me off.

"Let's get going."

"O...kay."

I managed to respond despite my shaking voice—and that's when my ordeal truly began.

Every part of the experience was absolutely terrifying.

The whole class had worked on this together. I was invested in this interior! But that didn't mean I could smile at the blood-spattered bed made by pushing desks together, or start bragging about how I was the one who'd peeled the label off the second bottle from the left on the rack of creepy medicines.



My only option was to keep my head down so I didn't have to look at anything directly, but that just restricted my vision, which was terrifying in its own way. I found it very hard to walk.

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"Nao, you okay?"
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"I have never been...further from okaaaay."

My words trailed into a wail at the end.

Newborn deer were better at walking than I was. They were just babies; how were they already so accomplished? Then again, if we let them loose in an abandoned hospital, they'd probably be just as terrified.

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"A-aaagh... A-Aki, are you still with me?"
"I am."
"You're sure?"
"Of course I am. We're holding hands."
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He swung our joined hands back and forth, like we were little kids.

He was obviously trying to comfort me. Knowing none of this bothered him in the slightest *did* help. As long as Aki was pulling me along, I wasn't alone. I could get through this. Probably.

I was still shuffling along at the speed of a turtle.

"Nao," he whispered. "Around the next corner, Yoshii will be lying on a bed, pretending to be a patient. He's gonna jump up when we're next to him, so be ready. T-minus five seconds."

Aki was breaking the rules, but it was awfully nice of him to warn me about the jump scares ahead of time. I was so grateful for my wonderful boyfriend, I raised my head up to reply.

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"G-got it. Thank—"

"Rahhhhhhhh!"

"Aiiiiiieeee!"

I was so scared I nearly fainted.
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A patient in blood-covered hospital clothes shot up from the bed, his limbs writhing in agony. Then he suddenly went still, as if remembering the scalpel lodged in his guts.

That was all I saw before my brain stopped functioning.

"Too soon, Yoshii."

"Sorry. I heard your voice and got fired up. Well? Was my performance Oscarworthy?"

"It was okay, I guess."

"Harsh! Wait, why are you guys a maid and a vampire? I dig it, though! Maids are the best!"

I heard them talking, but couldn't process the words.

I was hiding behind Aki, frozen stiff and clinging to his Dracula cape. I was hanging on for dear life, way past caring about whether I wrinkled his costume. I silently prayed it wouldn't break on me like the spider's thread in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's famous tale.

Yoshii finally noticed me cowering and blinked. "Aikawa, you really can't handle this stuff, huh? That's...unexpected."

"Don't tell anyone."

"Oh, I won't. Wouldn't wanna ruin your image."

Cold sweat was running down my brow. I couldn't believe this was happening. I was shaking like a leaf.

"Aikawa, we'd better keep going," said Aki. "Aikawa?"

"|—|..."

"Yes?"

"...I think my heart stopped! What should I do?"

My heart had been beating very loudly, but now I couldn't hear it at all.

Aki blinked a few times. "It's still beating," he promised.

"Make sure! Put your hand on it!"

I was too far gone to realize what I was saying. But I could see Aki's face stiffen.

Oh no! Has his heart stopped, too? I was spooked, but Yoshii seemed even more flustered.

"Sanada, don't worry, I heard nothing! Move right along!"

"...Aikawa's not thinking straight." Aki's voice sounded tense. *Oh dear. Maybe his heart really did...!* 

"Does that mean I could take over and escort you out?" said the bloody patient, shooting me a hopeful look.

I awkwardly shook my head. "Anything but that."

"Brutal!" Yoshii wailed, flopping back down on his bed to wait for his next victim.

Before I could say anything else, Aki pulled my hand and got me walking again. His grip was even stronger than before, but that strength was like a beacon in the gloom of the haunted hospital.

"Nao, I grabbed our charts."

"Both of them?"

"Yep. See?"

I managed to open my eyes enough to verify this. We'd printed a ton of fake charts, and while they didn't have our actual names on them, those thin pages felt like a powerful amulet of protection.

But if we'd only just gotten the charts, we were still at the midpoint. I couldn't believe it. We'd only gotten halfway through this terrible place?

"Aki, did they break down the walls and combine multiple classrooms while I wasn't looking?"

"Nope. The students of Class 2-2 are happily selling taiyaki right next door."

This seemed hard to believe, but Aki firmly insisted no illegal renovations had taken place.

"It's not much farther now. Hang in there." Even in the darkness, the sound of

his voice and the feel of his hand encouraged me. He kept talking, trying to distract me. "Let's get some taiyaki once we're out."

"Mm. Poor things! I'm gonna bite their heads off."

"That's the spirit."

But then, I felt a cold breeze between the maid uniform and the skin on my back, and what little motivation I had promptly left me.

"Eeeaugh!"

I heard a giggle behind me, like a child's voice.

I swung around and saw a set of white curtains swaying. It seemed the giggler had passed through them and fled. I pulled my lifeline closer.

"A ghost! Hurry, kill it!"

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"A ghoaughh!"

A gust of warm wind brushed my forehead, and messy hair filled my vision. Was I being attacked by a willow tree? In a hospital?!

"I can't!" I shouted, letting go of Aki's hand and curling up into a ball.

I was beside myself with terror. I was ashamed and scared, and my face was covered in snot and tears.

I told them I didn't want to. I wasn't fine, and it wasn't going to be okay.

"Come on, stand up," said Aki. "Nothing's going to hurt you."

Aki reached out to me as I clutched my knees and sniffled.

I mustered all my courage and tried take his hand. If he left me behind in the dark, I'd be done for. I'd never see the outside world again.

We were in this together, our destinies entwined. I looked up at him, desperate—and saw his shoulders quivering. With *mirth*.

"Why are you laughing?!" I shouted.

I'm having the worst time ever! How dare he?!

He saw me shaking with fury and put a hand over his mouth to muffle his voice.

"Sorry, you were just so cute."

That's no excuse!

"I tried to contain it, but it was just too much."

Aki broke down and doubled over. Peals of laughter echoed through the haunted hospital. He was practically guffawing.

"You're awful! A huge jerk! A nincompoop!"

As I clutched my knees, I threw out every insult I could think of, but he only laughed harder. He was *wheezing*.

After this ridiculous exchange, I tried to stand up on my own. I had to get out of here. I was going to leave that traitor Aki behind and escape this terrifying hospital all on my own.

But then, I realized something. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek.

"What?" Aki asked.

"Um, I don't think I can stand."

My knees had given out. I could feel tears forming in my eyes again. I'd given in to my emotions and said all sorts of mean things to Aki. I was a selfish fool, and now he probably...

My voice full of tears, I looked up at him. "Are you gonna leave me behi—?"

"Of course not," he said, before I could finish.

He stepped in front of me, his cape swirling, and got down on one knee.

"What are you doing?" I asked, not understanding what the gesture meant.

"Climb aboard," he said.

If I couldn't walk, he would carry me.

"But...your ankle..."

"It doesn't hurt much these days."

I hesitated, then decided to take him at his word. I placed my hands on his shoulders and leaned forward, putting my weight on his back.

Aki stood and hooked his arms under my knees. This caused my skirt to ride up, but I was past caring about such things.

I felt like a baby koala, clinging to Aki's back with all my might. I could feel his muscles tense. He had the sturdy, toned body of an athlete. I put my head against his broad shoulders, and his short black hair pricked my cheek. The nape of his neck smelled salty.

"Am I heavy?" I asked.

"Kinda." I butted him lightly with my forehead. "I take it back. You're as light as a feather."

"Unconvincing."

But our laughter drove the fear away, and we got through the second half of the hospital in record time. Finally, I could see again. But the outside world was so bright, it hurt the backs of my eyes. I had to screw them shut for several seconds.

"Welcome back, you two!" Satou said over the noise of the crowd.

I opened my eyes again. There were no more creepy breezes or whispering voices. They must have realized they were no match for the sundrenched halls.

"Wanna take the charts home with you?" she asked.

"No, thanks," I replied.

"Aww."

She took my chart from me. I'd crumpled it up into a little ball.

"Well? Fun, right?" At that point, Satou finally noticed what a mess I was and her smile faltered. "Oh, uh... Sorry, I guess."

Her apology was genuine, and she offered me a clean handkerchief with a Bad Badtz-Maru patch sewn onto it. I shook my head, afraid I'd stain it with my makeup. But I appreciated the thought.

From there, Aki carried me to one of the empty classrooms. I was hugging his

vampire cape like it was Linus's blanket. We were between break periods, so we had the whole room to ourselves. Aki set me down on the floor.

I grabbed my satchel and pulled out some tissues, then blew my nose. Then I dabbed my wet cheeks dry.

"Feeling better?" Aki asked.

"Mm, a little."

Now that we'd escaped the hospital alive, I was over the fear and increasingly mortified by the thought that several of our classmates had seen me crying.

After a few minutes, Satou popped in, carrying the sign and the bundle of flyers.

"Thanks again for passing these out. And good luck with the play!"

Since we'd put up posters, lots of people knew about our roles in *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, *New Adaptation*. News spread that both the literature and drama clubs were facing extinction, and several people—Satou included—bought zines to back us up. I really appreciated their kindness.

"Are you sure you don't need us to help with anything else?" I asked.

"I am. I mean, look!"

Satou pointed outside.

I followed her finger, and soon saw what she meant. The line for the haunted hospital was now *very* long. The student in charge of controlling it was doing their best, but it stretched all the way to the stairs. Festival management would probably show up pretty soon.

"Your screams were so intense the fear-seekers all came flocking. At this rate, we might even win the grand prize!"

Satou seemed incredibly pleased. It was my first big contribution to our class's exhibit, but I wasn't sure how good I felt about it.

Once Satou was gone, I put a hand to my chest and chanted the vocal exercises we'd learned for the play.

"Amenbo akai na a i u e o. Ukimo ni koebi mo oyoideru."

Mochizuki had recommended doing them every chance we got.

Aki joined me. We raised our voices and moved our chins, but the hall was so noisy that no one overheard us. Thanks to that, we were able to recite the words seriously.

"Impressive, Nao," Aki said, once we'd finished. "All that screaming, and you're not hoarse at all. Your practice paid off."

"Hmph." I wasn't very happy being praised for screaming from my gut.

"To tell you the truth, that haunted hospital had me pretty jittery, too."

"Yeah?"

I blinked at Aki's admission. I had a hard time believing him. He was so calm, he might as well have been reading a book in the clubroom. I never once saw him crack.

Aki scratched his head. "Having someone around who's even more frightened than you are makes it easier to stay calm. What I mean is—I was only okay because you were with me, Nao."

I sniffled. My nose was still a bit runny. How nice for you, I thought.

"Well, sorry for being a big scaredy cat," I said.

"How can I make it up to you?"

There was only one thing I could think of.

"I demand a date that isn't scary."

"You got it."

He handed me half the flyers, held up the sign, and opened the door.

A beam of sunlight shone through the classroom window and created a warm path of light in front of us.

Holding this new, convenient excuse for another date close to my heart, I followed Aki out the door.



"Hey, Ricchan! Thanks for holding down the fort."

"No problem—and what are you wearing?!"

It was 12:05, and I'd arrived at the clubroom still covered in blood. Ricchan took one look at me and cracked up.

She was manning the booth, sitting on her usual folding chair. We had the long tables lined up and covered in zines.

Two posters for the play were hanging on the clubroom's tiny wall. These included the title, the date, and a list of cast and staff names.

The date was today, and the time less than three hours away. It still didn't feel real, despite all those exercises and rehearsals.

Somehow, I'd believed preparations for the Seiryou Festival would last forever—that I'd never stop helping with props for the haunted house and raising my voice in the practice hall.

For the month of October, I'd been a regular high school student, no different from anyone else. But what would November bring?

"So you dressed up like a maid after all!" exclaimed Ricchan. "Though you're a little bloodier than I expected. Did you do this for Aki?"

"No, it was a gift from Yoshii."

"Oh, that idiot?"

Ricchan's assessment was rude, but hard to dispute.

"Aki's dressed up, too. He's Dracula."

"Snrk!" Just the idea of this launched Ricchan into another fit of giggles.

"I think he'll be by soon."

We'd tried the escape room, tossed some rings, eaten taiyaki and meat-wrapped rice balls, and grabbed soda bottles from a cooler full of ice. Then, once all the flyers were gone, we'd split up. Aki had taken the sign back to our classroom.

Meanwhile, I'd gone ahead to the clubroom to bring Ricchan some snacks and refreshments. She'd been stuck here all morning, after all.

"I brought you these," I said.

"Oh, thank you!" She took the bag from me and happily peered inside—then she frowned. "Aren't these my class's crepes?!"

"They're good!"

I'd wanted to stop by while Ricchan was manning the fryers, but given our own booth's schedule, that wasn't possible.

I'd felt much better after eating a strawberry and cream crepe. I'd let Aki have a bite, but judging from the look on his face, it was too sweet for him.

"Nice! Bananas and chocolate cream!" Ricchan had already worked out the flavor. She looked ready to crow with delight as she started peeling back the wrapper. "Mmph! A deliciously sweet crepe! Good chicken nuggets! Tasty taiyaki! A brutal wave of delicious calories!"

Ricchan gobbled up the rest of the bag's contents, washing it down with a Pocari Sweat. She must have been starving.

She'd soloed this booth all morning, and as a reward, I moved behind her and massaged her shoulders. Ricchan was always pretty stiff, and with her aiming to become a writer, I was concerned her condition would only get worse.

"So how are we doing?"

"Hmm... Well, it's not bad."

"Oh?"

Glancing around, I realized some of the boxes of zines had disappeared.

Ricchan grinned up at me. "It's going a lot better than I predicted. Between yesterday and today, we've sold thirty-three. Mori's poster has been a big help. Quite a few of her friends stopped by, as well. And my parents showed up to tease me."

Ricchan had stopped calling her Moririn after I told her a simplified version of what happened in the art room. Mentally, I was calling one Suzumi and the other Mori. Just like Ricchan, I referred to the girl playing Princess Kaguya as Mori.

"Wow. That's great," I said.

"Still a long way to go. The post-performance period will be critical."

Our best chance to move lots of product would be after the play. Everything depended on how the show went in three hours.

"Nao, just hypothetically..." It was rare to see Ricchan hesitate like this. "If the Literature Club does go away, um, will we still be—"

"Ricchan, no defeatist language."

"Urk... Fair. I'm sorry."

She'd been throwing herself into our zine effort, the picture of confidence—but that didn't mean she had no doubts.

Her shoulders had loosened up, and I patted them lightly to boost her courage.

"The Literature Club isn't going anywhere, and I'll always be your friend."

"Hurrah!" Ricchan flashed me a toothy grin.

"If the club gets disbanded, we'll just find an empty classroom somewhere."

"Now who's being defeatist!"

The future might be uncertain, but we could still get together and laugh. And as long as we could laugh, there was nothing to be afraid of. Then again, what could possibly be as scary as the haunted hospital?

As our laughter subsided, Ricchan said, "We haven't had any new customers for a while. Not a great sign."

That was concerning.

The Literature Club was hardly in a prominent location. The school's main building was full of exhibits and attractions, but we were the only ones on the first floor of the annex. We were hard for visitors to locate, and there was little chance anyone would just happen to pass by.

Holding the orange-and-white-striped paper cup that had been stuffed with chicken mere minutes ago, Ricchan got to her feet. Where was she going? Her eyes were locked on the view outside the window.

"Nao, come here," she said.

"Mm?"

From the window, we could see the school grounds. To one side stood a group of people holding drinks and food.

Whether it was the Seiryou Festival or Disneyland, rest areas and bathrooms were always crowded. These people must have drifted onto the grounds after failing to find an open table to eat at in the designated rest area.

"You see that fresh-faced group of junior high school boys? Why don't you wave at them?"

"O-okay..."

Wouldn't a bloody maid waving at them just scare them off?

But I set aside my concerns, put on my friendliest smile, and—given the distance involved—waved like I was seeing a ship off at the harbor.

We sold three copies after that. Thank you, Yoshii. Thank you, Don Quijote.



Aki and I took over the booth from Ricchan and focused on selling our remaining stock for a while. People were baffled by the vampire and maid combo, but several of them bought copies of the zine.

A few minutes before two, Mr. Akai showed up. He'd agreed to man the booth while the club members were busy with the play. Since the kendo performance was over, he was fully committed to helping us out, for which we were very grateful.

Bottles of Pocari Sweat in hand, we moved to the nearest set of taps, wet some cloths, and dabbed off the fake blood with makeup remover wipes. I washed my face in the sink to remove whatever was left behind. Once we were cleaned up, we took a quick toilet break, then headed for the gym.

Before entering, we stopped in the nearby changing room to get into our costumes. The room was always used for this purpose, and all performers—for plays, musicals, recitals, you name it—changed into their duds in here.

I went to a locker to the left of the door and found the paper bag with my costume in it. "Nao, Drama Club" was written on it in my handwriting. It felt a bit novel to be part of the Drama Club, even if we were only provisional members for the duration of the play.

After stripping down to my underwear, I put on a pair of tabi socks, then reached for the main outfit. The elderly couple each wore a modified version of a traditional garment called a hanten. Mine was the color of wisteria, and Aki's was the color of willow trees. Neither shade stood out.

After removing the white ribbon, I held up my hair to let it breathe. The smell of the food stalls that had been trapped there wafted out, and I saw the delicious scents off as they escaped through the overhead vent. Then I hid my long hair under a headscarf. It must have been really missing that scrunchie by now.

Once I put on my zori sandals, I was ready to go.

I shook out my limbs and squeezed and released my fingers. Everything seemed nice and limber. I rolled my eyes in all directions, inspecting my brown bangs, my fingertips, my toes.

I was the picture of an old woman about to do some work in the fields. Sunao would never wear any of this, but I rather liked it.

I unlocked the changing room door and stepped out, and found Aki waiting against the wall nearby.

"Are you ready?"

"Um." I put a hand to my chest and smiled sheepishly. "I've got the jitters."

Putting on the costume had made everything feel real. I was intentionally slurring my words, not wanting to speak as clearly as I would have to on stage lest my heart stop pumping.

Aki beamed back at me. "So do I!"

This was significantly more believable than when he'd claimed to be scared of the haunted house.

I opened my half-drunk bottle of Pocari Sweat. These last few minutes had

somehow made the sports drink taste a lot sweeter, and I began to worry I'd get heartburn.

Aki uncapped his bottle. He must have been thirsty, too.

A moment later, I heard an odd noise.

Aki had moved the bottle to his lips too fast, and it had crashed into his front teeth. He scowled down at it like it was his arch nemesis, but it was just a plastic bottle—it didn't have sharp fangs or anything.

"Am I bleeding?" he asked, rubbing his gums.

"No," I promised, giggling.

"You're sure?"

His brows wavered anxiously, but he smiled. I instantly felt better. It was true —seeing someone more rattled I was did wonders for my nerves.

"Let's go, Aki."

He nodded, still rubbing his chin.

Once we were inside the gym, we moved to a little room beside the stage. Crowds were floating in and out, so we didn't attract much attention on our way.

There was a band on stage—some boys I didn't recognize. They seemed confident, so I figured they were probably third-years.

The singer was hitting some impressive high notes, while the guitar was spitting fire and the drums rolled like thunder. The front half of the room was really whooping it up.

As I shuffled along, still getting used to walking in my zori, I glanced up at the ceiling. Colorful lights danced across the rafters, as if trying to coax the volleyball stuck in the beams down to the mosh pit.

Moss green sheets were spread across the floor under rows of folding chairs. It looked nothing like the gym where we'd done the shuttle run.

"Oh, there you are."

Mochizuki and Mori were already at our destination, along with Ricchan.

I didn't see any of the Drama Club helpers, but I was told they were on standby in the sound and lighting booths. If all of us—the Drama Club, its helpers, and the Literature Club—tried to get into this little room, it would be pretty cramped.

"Let's get your makeup done," Mochizuki said, tools in hand. He reminded me a lot of the duo from our class who'd turned me into a ghoul.

On stage, actors needed to wear special makeup on their hands and other body parts. Because there was no camera, and the audience sat some distance from the stage, our features would appear flat and expressionless if we didn't wear any, or if we only used the everyday stuff.

To make our gestures and expressions stand out, we used something called greasepaint to create a thick foundation. Depending on the role, we might highlight our eyebrows, eyes, and noses. If someone saw me off-stage, it would be way too much. I'd look like a clown.

Mori handled my makeup, and Mochizuki handled Aki's. Ordinarily, if you were playing someone old, they'd add wrinkles, but we were skipping that. No spraying white on our hair, either. Personally, I'd kind of wanted to try both.

Once our makeup was done, we were on standby. We had to wait for the group on stage to finish, and then there would be a ten-minute break before the Drama Club's play began. Until then, we were stuck fidgeting nervously in the break room, listening to the band's guitar howl.

In the haunted house, my heart had stopped, but now it was dancing a jig.

Ricchan and the other suitors were huddled up. Mochizuki was doing stretches, eyeing the audience from the wings. He seemed more excited than nervous.

As I watched, he practically skipped over. Then, grinning like a mischievous child, he leaned in toward Mori and whispered, "Your mom's here."

They were old friends—of course he would recognize Mori's mother on sight. I saw her shoulders shake.

Perhaps it was too dark for Mochizuki to see her reaction. He was usually quite perceptive, but maybe his vision was clouded by his excitement about the

play or his frustration over his still unanswered confession.

I was sitting right behind Mori, however, and I could tell her breathing was steadily growing ragged. If our lead actress was this stressed, we were in trouble.

I glanced at the wall clock. The festival management team were doing a great job keeping everything on schedule. The group on stage had another ten minutes left.

With the break, that gave us a solid fifteen minutes leeway.

"Mori," I whispered. "Let's step outside for a minute."

The air in here was stifling. It would bring anyone down.

She seemed surprised by the suggestion, but nodded, her face pale. She was barely managing to hold her head up.

Aki caught this and came over, scowling.

He shot Mori a look, then whispered, "I can't let you two go alone."

"You're fussing," I said.

"Nao."

He didn't want me making light of the situation. His glare wasn't frightening, just worried.

"If anything happens, I'll text you," I said.

He still didn't look happy, but he sighed, realizing there was no talking me out of this.

Taking that as approval, I quietly grasped Mori's hand. I was shocked to find it as cold as a corpse's. My hands weren't exactly warm, either, but hers were like ice. Hiding how much that rattled me, I led her out, lending her my shoulder. I was sure Aki would brief Mochizuki on where we were going.

As we walked along one side of the gym, I glanced at all the people seated on folding chairs, but I had no idea which one of them was Mori's mother.

Everyone was watching the stage, smiling. Some of them were clapping or singing along with the chorus. It was a beautiful sight. There wasn't a thing out

of place. It was just how a school festival should be.

Once we stepped outside the gym, it was like the concert was miles away. Unsure what to do, I peeked inside the changing room.

The next group hadn't arrived yet, so I stepped inside.

Mori stayed by the door and leaned her back against it, possibly worried about the hem of her bright red costume.

I stood in front of her, unsure if I should step back out or not.

"Sorry. We're so close to starting," she said, before I could find my words. "I don't know why her mother's here. She should be with Suzumi. Maybe Mochizuki's mother wouldn't take no for an answer..."

Her words just sounded like grumbling, but something she said caught my attention.

That phrase—"with Suzumi."

"Does Suzumi's mother know about you?" I asked.

Mori blinked at me. "From day one. She's the one who forced us apart."

At that moment, I realized how little I knew about the girl in front of me.

Different replicas led very different lives. I should have learned that with Aki, but I hadn't even tried to guess what was in Mori's heart. It simply hadn't occurred to me.

Thinking back, I remembered how desperate she'd been when we spoke in the art room. I hadn't understood her distress, and it had frightened me. But it should have been obvious that there was some reason behind her behavior.

"Will you please tell me about yourself?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was some fantastical creature.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a bit weird?"

Had they? I must have looked baffled, because she relaxed a bit, and smiled.

"Fine. It's not much of a story, but if you're up for it..." Her eyes drifted into the distance. "Suzumi created me when she was five. It was just before her kindergarten play. She asked me to be the wicked stepmother, so I headed to school with her mom to do just that."

This was the origin of Suzumi Mori's replica.

"But Suzumi chased after us. She... Her mother saw the two of us and panicked. Why wouldn't she? She was holding her daughter's hand when a girl with the same face suddenly showed up. Obviously, she knew better than anyone that she hadn't given birth to twins."

Mori's bitter smile was like a knife to my heart.

Sunao's mom had wanted to see her daughter's play, too. She'd been devastated when she found out she couldn't go. But she wanted to see her daughter act, not a lookalike.

"Her mom fell apart, and her dad... Well, he was just as rattled, but he said they couldn't simply ignore a life once it had come into the world. He separated me and Suzumi and sent me to his parents' place in Fujinomiya."

In other words, her grandparents—the ones from that watercolor painting.

"That was thirteen years ago. All that time, I never once saw Suzumi."

"Not even once?"

I found that hard to believe.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Sunao only calls for me we she needs me. I've been at school all this month, but...it was her yesterday."

"Oh," Mori said, her voice rasping.

We heard a cheer from the gym. There wasn't much time left.

"Did you know mandatory education doesn't require a birth certificate? I went to elementary and junior high. I couldn't go to high school, but my grandparents were with me, and I could study on my own—that was enough."

She wasn't bragging; this was just her life.

For a while, we stared at each other.

She was so different from Aki and me. This replica had barely known her original. She'd lived somewhere else and grown up like a human.

If that was all, I probably would have been incredibly jealous. The gloomy-looking girl in front of me had what I most wanted.

But that didn't explain anything. She'd lived her own life for thirteen years. So why was she here now, pretending to be Suzumi Mori?

It was the obvious next question, but I was reluctant to ask it.

I thought of all the questions Mori had asked me in the art room, and compared them to my own experience. Could it be...?

"Suzumi's nonresponsive." She sighed.

At first, I didn't understand what she meant.

"She hit her head over summer vacation and didn't wake up the next day. At first, she was in the hospital, but by the end of August, they'd moved her back home. That's when she...when her mother came to see me in Fujinomiya. She came to me—the girl she'd treated like a monster and sworn she never wanted to lay eyes on again."

Suzumi's mother had asked Mori to fill in for her daughter at school, so her attendance record wouldn't suffer. Suzumi had studied hard to pass her college exams while still in high school, and this could ruin everything for her.

Her mother asked Mori to save her daughter. She said that maybe the whole reason Mori had appeared from thin air that day was to do this.

"Perhaps it was a stroke of luck it all happened over summer vacation. If anyone asked why I dropped out of touch, I could just say I was focused on studying. I could tell people I'd gotten fed up with my long hair and chopped it off. There's a lot I don't know about Suzumi, but most of it I can...talk around." She forced a smile, but she didn't look the least bit happy. "The one thing I can't do is make myself smart. You heard us arguing in the student council room, right? My grades are nothing like hers. I've only finished junior high—getting five points on a test here is frankly impressive."

She was still smiling, but I couldn't do the same.

I simply stood there, watching the tears flow from her eyes and stain the collar of her kimono.

"She brought me back here to be Suzumi Mori, and I did my best. I acted like her, like Moririn, like a student council president... Like Princess Kaguya! I thought I was handling it."

Her hands went to her head, and she mussed up her hair. But somehow, the stage makeup stayed on perfectly, which struck me as somehow cruel.

I thought of her reaction when I'd told her she'd been cast as Kaguya, of her voice when she'd yelled at Mochizuki, of her grades, and the way her lunch must have tasted as she ate it all alone in the student council room.

All of it must have been unbearably hard for her. She only had her original's memories up to the age of five—and now, she had to *be* her in front of everyone. There was no one to help her through it, and she was running herself ragged.

But I still hadn't understood her. She wasn't *just* lamenting how hard a role this was to play.

"But all I'm doing is buying time. This isn't *really* helping Suzumi at all. When you found me, I thought maybe there was hope—but I was wrong. A replica can't give her life to save her original."

I clenched my teeth, enduring a deep pang of compassion.

Why was she so hell bent on sacrificing herself—on working herself to the bone for her original?

Maybe there was sympathy or pity in my eyes. But Mori was the same. We looked at each other with identical emotion, like two sides of a mirror.

This caught me by surprise. Why was *she* pitying *me*?

"Weird, isn't it? Why are we all so dumb?"

"...Huh?"

Her smile seemed to invite agreement, but I wasn't able to reply.

"Aikawa's little doppelgänger, you must realize it, right? You must know how

messed up it is to tell yourself you're fine with anything as long as the original benefits."

Everything was for her.

I'd climbed mountains for Sunao, run marathons, done the shuttle run. Everything she didn't want to do or couldn't be bothered to do herself.

"Suzumi didn't want to play the wicked stepmother, so she made me do it. But isn't that kind of weird? If I came from her, why was I so happy to do it in her place? Why did I thump my chest and say, 'I've got this!'?"

She kept repeating herself, saying what we were doing made no sense, and that it was weird.

My eyelids twitched. A shudder ran down my spine.

I didn't want to hear any more of this. But her lips kept moving. She was hunched over, blocking the door, not letting me escape.

"I know I *should* have been against it. I should have said, 'I don't want to be the stepmother, either. Do it yourself!' But accepting the part seemed totally normal. I was certain I had to do it. I'm sure you know the feeling."

Her eyes, wet with tears, bored through me.

I remembered it as a silly argument—just a children's squabble. Now, I couldn't even remember what it was about.

But Sunao had been unable to tell Ricchan she was sorry. And that had made her create me. And when she asked me to fix things with her friend, I went right off to see Ricchan. I apologized to her while acting like I wasn't sorry.

I did what Sunao Aikawa didn't want to do—what she couldn't do.

The discrepancies between us weren't something acquired slowly over time. From the moment I was created, Sunao and I were fundamentally different.

It was the same with Aki. Sanada hadn't come to school once since May. Even now, he was too scared to return.

But Aki heard his original's plea, nodded, and headed right out the door. Perhaps deep down he was reluctant, and yet he'd never taken a single day off. From the very start, we were...

"I haven't changed at all," Mori said. "I last met Suzumi thirteen years ago! But every part of me is still just for *her*. If it would bring her back, if it would help her—I'd do anything." Mori's smile was brutal, her words desperate. "That's crazy, right? We look just like our originals on the outside...but there's something wrong with us inside. It's like we're just puppets without a will of our own."

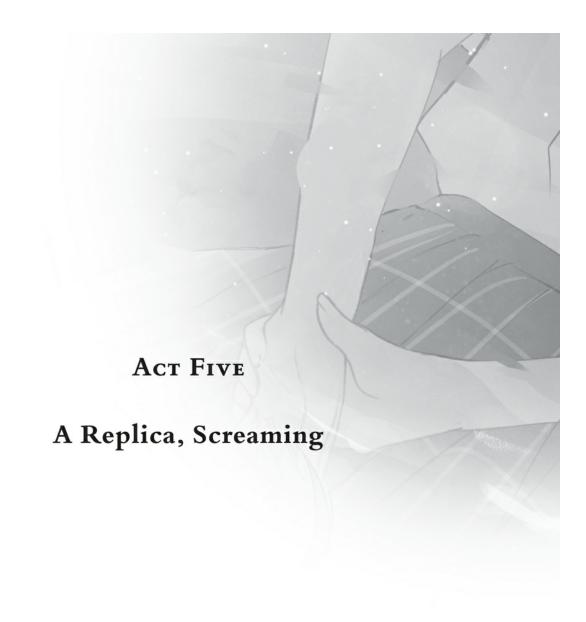
We heard a huge round of applause from the gym. The cheerful sound of clapping felt like something from another world. It was downright absurd.

"We'd better get back," she said. "The play's starting."

That blush on her cheeks was star quality.

She slid the door aside and motioned for me to follow. Seeing this convinced me.

The curtains still hadn't risen on *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, but I knew this replica would deliver the performance of a lifetime—one Suzumi Mori could never have given.



The buzzer sounded and the play began.

People clapped as the red curtains parted. Then the narrator's voice came over the microphone.

"Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter. He'd chop down the stalks, bring them home, and cleverly weave baskets and sieves. Then he'd sell his wares to make his living. His name was Sanuki-no-Miyatsuko."

The narrator started off a bit faster than we'd practiced, but soon caught himself and slowed down.

As he spoke, Aki appeared on stage, playing the old man. He held a hatchet made of cardboard in one hand as he ambled across the stage to a spot where we'd painted some bamboo. One stalk was glowing.

There, he found a princess no bigger than his thumb—nine centimeters tall. It was a doll Mochizuki had made.

The Princess Kaguya doll had a cute face, made to look like she was sleeping. It had been blank at first, but Mori had felt bad for it, and so Mochizuki had embroidered eyes and a nose onto the fabric.

"Golly, what a marvel! In all my days, I never expected to find such a beautiful baby inside a glowing bamboo stalk!"

Aki stuck to the script we'd rehearsed, but he was giving a far more natural performance than during our first read-through. It was hard to believe he'd slammed a plastic bottle into his teeth only a few minutes ago.

I was near the center of the stage, folding laundry, listening to him.

Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation required no set changes. To the left of the stage—from the audience's point of view—we had a bamboo forest drawn on several chunks of Styrofoam glued together. At the center, a pallet represented the elderly couple's home. To make it easier for the audience to grasp this layout, I'd been on stage from the moment the curtains went up.

When Mochizuki first suggested this, I thought he was trying to bully me. But when it came down to it, I was too nervous to find my mark—so this was probably the right choice.

Marks were made with fluorescent tape stuck to the stage and were meant to help actors find their positions in the dark. Since we didn't have any scene changes, we were using them to make sure everyone moved to the right places. I remembered Mochizuki walking around during rehearsals, telling me which marks to use and when.

While my mind wandered, the play went on.

As I folded the laundry, I saw my hands shaking. Get it together!

"I'd better take this child home. Grandma's gonna be so surprised!"

Cradling the doll, the old man moved to the house where I was waiting.

My first line was crucial. It might well determine the tone of my whole performance. *Break a leg!* 

When he stood across from me on stage, Aki's face was full of deep lines, and the bridge of his nose looked much sharper than usual. The stage makeup was working its magic.

"I'm home! Look, Grandma, I found a child in the bamboo!"

"My goodness, Grandpa! Ain't she a cootie!"

Ughhh.

I'd already blown a line, and the audience tittered. It was a friendly laugh, but that didn't matter. I could feel my whole body turning bright red.

Thus far, I'd managed to keep my attention away from the audience—but there were a *lot* of people watching. They were all sitting quietly, eyes on the stage.

I might even know some of them—Satou, Yoshii, Sunao's friends. And even more people whose names I'd never know. And as that realization caught up with me, my fingers started to go numb.

Despite how much I'd rehearsed, I didn't do all that great on the lines that followed, either. When I was done, I trailed off the stage, utterly dejected. But at least I'd managed to keep up the act until I was out of view.

Mochizuki was standing just off stage, his arms folded—but not because he

wanted to chew me out. He was just keeping an eye on things, as the man in charge.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

He shifted in his gaudy imperial robes, blinking at me.

After a long moment, he seemed to work out what I meant and shrugged.

"It's fine, they liked it," he said.

Was that all that mattered? I should probably take his word for it. My spirits still low, I took my place behind him, gazing out at the stage, waiting for my next scene.

Time passed, and in mere months, Princess Kaguya blossomed into a fully grown woman. As the narrator explained this, Mori took the stage.

When she stepped out from the wings, a group of third-year girls all screamed, "Moririiin!" at once. They must have planned it. I'd even heard someone counting off so they'd get the timing right.

Mori didn't respond, but she did smile elegantly—like Princess Kaguya would. I heard lots of people commenting on her beauty.

From that point on, the play proceeded swimmingly. Ricchan's trademark battle scene really got the audience worked up.

"Insects flitting about Princess Kaguya! I shall crush your heads with the begging bowl of the Buddha!"

"Yeah? Then I'm gonna poke your eyes out with the jeweled branch of Horai!"

"Savages, one and all! Let us burn them at the stake! Easily done with my firerat robe."

"You're the worst yet! Choke on this jewel from a dragon's throat!"

"Um, I've got...a swallow's cowry shell... Not sure what it's good for..."

The audience laughed heartily as the battle commenced. The sight of them whacking each other with the treasures they'd worked so hard to gather for Princess Kaguya certainly was ridiculous.

We'd made great use of the spotlight and picked suitably exciting music, and

the audience was applauding every beat.

Then Princess Kaguya's verdict cut through the chaos. She revealed the suitors' lies with a few brief words and sent them packing, leaving her all alone.

She declared that she didn't want to marry anyone. Then she caught the eye of the emperor. He made a terrible first impression, but over time they grew closer and began exchanging letters.

But Princess Kaguya's life with the elderly couple carried on, and gradually, her adoptive parents began to feel that true happiness was to be found in the three of them living together. And yet, the whole time, Kaguya was keeping secrets.

"Grandpa, Grandma, I came here from the moon. I'd love to stay on Earth—but I don't have a choice. I must return home."

"No...!" The old man was so astonished words failed him.

The old woman was no less rattled. "But Princess Kaguya. Why must you go so suddenly?"

"I hail from the moon's capital—and on the night of the full moon, they'll send an envoy to bring me home. I cannot escape my fate."

"Princess Kaguya," the old man wailed. "I've raised you as my own since the moment I found you in that glowing bamboo stalk. Nothing brings me greater joy than seeing what a fine woman you've become. I cannot stand by while someone tries to take you away. No matter what, I will keep you safe."

"I would love nothing more than to stay here with the both of you. But there is nothing you can do to stop the people of the moon."

My eyes met Princess Kaguya's.

When I saw the glimmer of tears, an idea came to me.

But I was on stage and couldn't voice it. I was the old lady right now, and I could only say the lines the script allowed, with very minor ad libs.

The more resigned Princess Kaguya acted, the more fired up the old man got. He went to the emperor and begged him to keep his daughter safe.

The emperor brought his armies to face off against the envoy from the moon. As the emperor, Mochizuki called out to the audience.

"Brave young men of Yamato, join me in keeping Princess Kaguya safe. We cannot allow the moon's envoy to take her! Are you with me?!"

The audience hadn't expected to be roped into the performance. But as Mochizuki spoke, they realized the lights had come on, and they were no longer seated in the dark. The entire gym was now a battlefield, and they were the emperor's forces.

As Mochizuki wound up the audience, they began thrusting their fists into the air. They swore a vow to protect Princess Kaguya.

When the night of the full moon arrived, the envoy appeared, represented by a spotlight beaming straight down from above.

"Bow before me, foolish humans."

The narrator doubled as the envoy. Unseen, his voice seemed to echo from the heavens, making it all too clear this was a being no mere mortal could hope to challenge.

We'd been forced into this decision due to a lack of actors, yet somehow it felt *right*.

"Hngh, why?! The very sight of this light, the mere sound of this voice—it's draining my strength!"

The emperor toppled over. His army—the audience—flailed and clutched their heads. Some people fell right off their chairs.

The lights in the gym went out, as if great roiling clouds had covered the sky. The sole remaining light was that bright beam from directly above.

"Alas! We can do nothing to prevent Princess Kaguya's capture!" shouted the emperor.

"Your Majesty, you've done enough," replied the princess. "I must return to the moon. Please...put me out of your heart."

Weeping, Princess Kaguya turned to leave the Earth and return to the world above. A sad, bittersweet—yet beautiful—ending.

As I watched her walk across the stage toward that spotlight, I asked myself—should I let this happen? Could I stand here and let Mori do this?

This entire time, she hadn't acted even *once*. When our eyes met, they looked exactly the same as they had when we were standing in the changing room. And that convinced me.

To her, this was not *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. From beginning to end, beat for beat, it was *her own story*.

I'd been wrong about the reason she dropped those flyers.

She wasn't searching for other replicas to learn more about herself. She'd known doing something like that would only make others like her wary, just as it had for Aki.

That wasn't her goal.

She was only ever...

"Come, Princess Kaguya. Accept the vestments of heaven."

A pale pink cloth fluttered down into the spotlight.

We'd had it in a "snow cradle" suspended from the ceiling. Ordinarily, you'd pull a string, and it would release confetti. But for this effect, we'd also placed a gauzy cloth on top of it—the same one the Drama Club had used in their play last June.

The Feather Mantle was the story of a visitor from the heavens who dances most beautifully and then returns to the world above. It had a lot in common with the play we were performing now.

Mori reached through the confetti to take the cloth.

"Liar!"

I saw her fingers twitch.

She missed, and the pink cloth fluttered to the floor.

Then she turned around and looked at me in disbelief. Every single actor on stage was gaping at me.

Of course they were. Our script contained no lines for the old lady here.

But they were all too shocked to stop me—and the audience didn't know the script, so they simply watched with bated breath.

And I kept shouting.

"You know that if you do this, we'll all forget you! You'll disappear from everyone's memories! Don't act like you're okay with that!"

Her gaze wavered, and the spotlight moved to me. Who made that call? The light dazzled my eyes.

What a stunt to pull in the middle of our play.

But I stood my ground. I planted my feet firmly on stage and took a breath, inflating my lungs. I was now a pro at this abdominal breathing thing.

"Say what you mean! Use your own words!"

I poured all my emotions into that line, and it echoed through the gym.

I'd worked it out. The doppelgänger in the flyer was her.

I'm not Suzumi Mori. I'm me.

I'm right here, and I'm not anybody else.

"Please...talk to us," I said.

Mori was frozen, her gaze as vast as the ocean. I tugged at her sleeve.

No one but Princess Kaguya dared to make a move. No one dared speak. Overcoming this, I stretched my voice to the limit.

My breathing was ragged, like I'd sprinted all the way here.

"Tell us who you really want to be with."

I saw her lips quiver.

Meeting Aki had taught me many things.

I knew why Mori had cried over Ricchan's story. It reminded her of *her* parents. Not Suzumi Mori's, but the mother and father who'd raised the girl with their granddaughter's face for thirteen years.

"...Can I?" she whispered.

Her voice and face were no longer Princess Kaguya's.

Before me stood a *human being*—a girl far too nice for this world, who'd sacrifice herself to put a smile back on someone else's lips.

She wasn't some puppet without a mind of her own.

"Can I really? Am I allowed to be with my mom and dad?"

"Stay here," I said, without pause.

She blinked, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"We want you here."

"...Okay."

Her eyes were turning red, but she smiled through her tears and nodded.

I'd seen her cry four times now. I was sure she'd cried a lot more where I couldn't see.

"...And thus, the old lady's passionate plea changed Princess Kaguya's mind."



The narrator's voice had changed. Ricchan had stepped in to back up my ad lib.

"She had no memories of her own parents. She didn't even know their faces. To her mind, the elderly couple that raised her were her parents. And you can read all about their time together in the short story Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, New Adaptation: The Old Lady's Story on sale right now in the Literature Club room on the first floor of the annex! Only two hundred yen!"

She was a born saleswoman.

"Since she failed to accept the feather mantle, the moon's envoy was forced to return home."

As Ricchan wrapped things up, stirring music played—forcibly reminding me and Mori that we were still on stage.

I began to turn red, but Princess Kaguya merely gazed up at the ceiling.

"Mother, Father—look to the sky. The sun is rising."

"True. It's going to be a beautiful day," Aki said. Amazingly, he was playing right along. I, on the other hand, was well past doing anything but nodding.

"And the three of us will live happily ever after." Then the princess cleared her throat and added, "I won't be marrying the emperor, however."

This punchline got a huge laugh. Princess Kaguya even stuck out her tongue.

And thus, the curtain fell on our play.

We formed a line in front of the audience and took a bow.

As applause rumbled through the gym, I was sweating like crazy.

I'd gone out on a limb and wrecked the play Ricchan and Mochizuki had worked so hard on.

Once I was certain the curtain was fully down, I bowed again—not to the audience, but to the other actors.

"Sorry, I just..."

"There's no time for that! Grab the props. The next group's waiting."

"Oh, right."

Mochizuki brushed me off, but he was also right—we had to hustle.

"Also, Aikawa—you clearly don't regret a thing." I put a hand to my cheek, and Mochizuki grinned at me. "All's well that ends well."

With that, he turned his attention to clearing the stage.

The pallet came apart like magic, and the house was gone. I ran over to Ricchan and helped remove the bamboo thicket.

"Sorry, Ricchan."

"Not at all! Anything can happen on stage! I had a blast." She shot me a sheepish smile. "And I'll admit, after writing a short story from her perspective, I've been kicking myself. I had the nerve to add a whole fight scene in, and yet I was too much of a coward to change the ending. I've still got a lot to learn."

"I dunno about that..."

I'd only worked out what Mori was really going through because of the play and Ricchan's story.

"In other words," said Ricchan, "I'm pumped you gave *Bamboo Cutter* a happy ending! Oh, whoops!"

She shot me a thumbs-up, then almost dropped the Styrofoam in her arms.

The lightweight prop bounced a few times on our hands, and we both broke out laughing.

Working together, we got all the props back to the practice room. There weren't that many, and we managed it in a single trip.

After that, I moved to an empty classroom to take off my makeup. I'd used a lot of makeup remover wipes today. Still, I couldn't quite get it all. I resigned myself and changed back into my uniform, then left the room.

"Bubble tea?" a student with a sign asked. I shook my head and moved on. All the food stalls were desperately trying to sell the last of their stock. The original price on the sign had been crossed out. It was now quite a bargain. I could tell the festival was almost over.

"Ah! Aikawa!"

I turned to see Mori, now back in her uniform. She grabbed my arm and pulled me along.

"C'mere."

I wasn't sure what she wanted me for, but I let her haul me to the fine arts room all the same.

The hubbub of the festival couldn't reach us here, among the smell of dust and paint.

Mori stopped just inside the door and spun around to face me. Forgetting to turn the lights on, she held something up.

"Suzumi's mom stopped me a second ago and gave me this!"

She showed me a pink envelope.

There was no stamp on it. The words "To Ryou" were written on the front.

"She said she found the letter in Suzumi's room. It's from Suzumi to me. She said she wished she'd given it to me earlier... But I'm too scared to read it alone. I can't imagine what it could say!"

Mori was looking the letter over, at a total loss.

There was a polka dot sticker holding the flap closed, and it had clearly been opened once already. Suzumi's mother must have read it, then decided she should pass it along.

When Mori saw me watching her, detached, she glared at me.

"You have to read this with me," she said.

"Oh?"

Why was that?

"You're the one who changed her mind. It's because she saw our play!"

Mori seemed very sure of that, and given the timing, she was probably right.

Our wild, unscripted ending must have influenced Suzumi's mother. And in that case, the contents of this letter would likely clear up Mori's concerns.

"Maybe it talks about how Mochizuki asked her out at the Abe River fireworks."

"Wait, what? I didn't know about that!"

Whoops. I guess I said that out loud.

"You know more about Suzumi than I do! Okay, Aikawa, that settles it. We're reading this together."

"But I've gotta get back to the Literature Club. And I have to fetch the maid costume from the changing room..."

"Aikawa, this is an order from your student council president."

"Former student council president!"

"Don't be a snot! Sit."

She gestured to a chair, and I reluctantly sat down.

Previously, our interactions had been somewhat strained. We hadn't been able to communicate frankly. Now we were speaking much more simply and honestly. Maybe that was only natural after we'd bared our hearts in front of a crowd of hundreds of people.

"When were those fireworks? At the end of July?"

"Yeah. The twenty-fourth."

Mori's fingers paused midway through peeling off the sticker.

"Suzumi's been asleep since the twenty-fifth." She took several deep breaths. "Okay, let's read this thing."

She flipped open the envelope, then spread out a few pages covered in cute, rounded handwriting. From my place next to her, I ran my eyes over the paper.

Dear Ryou,

How are you? I'm fine!

Gosh, that makes it sound like we're strangers. It's been too long! Hi, I'm Suzumi.

The reason I'm writing this letter is because Mochizuki asked me out at the Abe River fireworks tonight. I've tried writing you letters before, but I always threw them out. No matter what I wrote, it always sounded so fake...

But now I feel like I can say what I mean.

Do you even remember Shun Mochizuki? He lived nearby. He has a strong sense of right and wrong, and a mouth that always gets him in trouble. I could easily fill several pages with an account of our fireworks visit, so...!'ll spare you that.

Ryou... No, let me call you what I did that first day.

My little doppelgänger.

Thank you for answering when I called for help back then.

Thank you for trying to go to kindergarten when I was crying about not wanting to play the wicked stepmother.

I ended up running after you, not wanting to force someone else to do something I found unpleasant. And as a result, we were split up and led separate lives.

And you became Ryou, no longer my little doppelgänger.

But I think that was for the best.

Sometimes, I call Grandma and Grandpa behind Mom's back. They told me you're a really great painter! I asked them to send me some pictures, but they don't even have a cell phone. (Yikes!) I hope you'll show me your art someday, Ryou. I can't draw at all, so I have a hard

time imagining what your paintings would be like.

If we do meet, I'll introduce you to my boyfriend. Just watch out for his mouth (lol)!

I'm gonna send this out tomorrow morning, along with a letter I wrote to Mochizuki.

Ryou, I'm sure you've already figured it out, but you're right—I was too embarrassed to answer him right away. I asked for some time, and now I'm answering him with a letter.

Absolutely pathetic, right? I know!

But back then, I played the wicked stepmother. I made it through the whole play.

And Mochizuki promised me next time he'd be the prince to my princess. That's so him! We haven't followed through on that yet. But if the day comes, I'll give it a shot, no matter how mortifying it is.

My head's starting to hurt, so I think that's enough for my first letter to you.

It got really crowded on the way home from the fireworks. Someone bumped me, and I fell down the stairs. My mind was totally off somewhere else! I'm glad it happened after me and Mochizuki parted ways. (He totally would have made fun of me.)

Ryou, I wish you could have seen those fireworks, too.

If you feel like writing back, I hope you'll tell me all about yourself.

Love, Suzumi

When we reached the end of the fifth and final page, neither of us dared say a word.

I could tell Mori was desperately trying to wrap her head around this, so I stayed quiet. The statues around us took the hint and held their tongues as well.

Now that we were silent, too, the room's hush felt all the more pronounced. The only light was streaming in from the hall through the open door.

I wasn't checking the clock, so I couldn't be sure if one minute passed, or ten.

"So I was in love?" Mori said, as if it had just sunk in.

Mochizuki's face floated through my mind. But it wasn't this girl who'd been in love with him. That was someone else—someone who shared her face.

The love mentioned in this letter belonged to the sleeping girl alone. Even her replica couldn't share it.

"With who?" I asked.

"With Suzumi."

Mori ran a finger down one of the letter's pages. There were orange flecks of something stuck under her nails—she must have touched the foundation we used on stage.

"For thirteen years, I've been longing to meet her. Missing her, hating her, loving her, feeling heartbroken. Isn't that how people in manga and TV shows feel when they're in love? My head was always full of Suzumi. I was crazy about her."

Her eyes glowed, but no tears fell from them. As a result, she looked happier than I'd ever seen her.

Suzumi had never wanted Mori to take her place. She'd wished for her to live her own life. She'd wanted to see her paintings. It was such a sweet request.

And Mori had fulfilled the promise Suzumi made with the love of her life. She'd played Princess Kaguya to his emperor, live on stage.

"Everyone thinks that if someone's nonresponsive, all they do is breathe," she said.

I nodded wordlessly.

"Suzumi does more than that. Sometimes she smiles. It's like a baby's smile, so fragile, so defenseless. And yet, it's empty."

Mori had finally seen Suzumi again, and I knew she must have talked to her a lot.

"When we play her favorite music, she smiles. When a chill wind blows, she coughs. When I hold her hand, she squeezes back. But none of that is Suzumi. Her body is just reacting automatically. Nothing's really reaching her."

She'd waited, but her sleeping original had never responded.

I tried to picture myself in her situation. If Sunao hit her head and never woke up, would I do the same things Mori had? Just like her, would I be unable to stand by and do nothing?

Was that desire something inborn in all replicas? Or was it an impulse of my own?

I still couldn't tell. But I did know one thing for certain.

"You miss her," I said.

"Yeah." Mori let that sink in, then nodded to herself. "I miss you, Suzumi."

Her voice was soft in the dimly-lit art room, vanishing before it could echo off the walls. I wanted to scoop it up and give it a hug.

That was what I should have done the last time we were here together.

Mori got to her feet and bowed. "I said a lot of mean things to you. Sorry for being such a lousy upperclassman." How could I be mad? But after a few moments, I stood up and frowned like I was.

"If you want to be forgiven, I have two conditions," I said.

"Y-yes?" She stood bolt upright.

"First, tell me what you think of No Longer Human."

"...That's it?"

"I'm the Literature Club president," I said, with gravitas.

She had threatened me with it, and that book was second only to haunted

hospitals on my list of fears. It would be a big help if she could verify how scary it was for me.

Mori couldn't keep a straight face. She broke into a smile and said, "You got it. But I'm not done yet—it might take me a while."

I nodded. Her thoughts were welcome any time.

"What's your other condition?" she asked.

"Tell me your name."

I heard her gasp.

That was likely her name in the letter, but she still hadn't told me herself. I wanted to hear it from her.

"I'm Nao Aikawa. And the old man was played by Aki Sanada."

"I'm Ryou. Suzumi's name has two characters: 'cool' and 'still,' like the summer heat hasn't yet set in." She moved over to me, writing the kanji on my hand. "We took the first character, meaning 'cool,' and used the other pronunciation for it. That's Ryou, a name Mom and Dad came up with just for me."

It was a crisp, beautiful kanji, with the radical for water on the left—the perfect name for this girl. I said it out loud.

"Ryou, then."

She smiled back, the gentlest look I'd ever seen her make.

"Thanks for finding me, Nao."

The windows here were always shut, but her words felt like a fresh breeze. And her smile was warm, far warmer than the hug she'd once given me here.

"I'm glad I met you," she said.

Hearing that made me so happy I could cry, no exaggeration.

"I'm going back to Fujinomiya. Back home. I'll talk to Suzumi's parents about it. Then I'll wait patiently for her to wake up. Will you come meet my real parents someday?"

"What is there to see in Fujinomiya?"

Ryou thought about this. "Well...there's the Makaino Ranch. I'll have to take you there!"

Makai?! Doesn't that mean "Netherworld Ranch"?! What an ominous name!

I gathered my courage and said, "I promise I'll come!"

Whatever was at this ranch, it couldn't possibly be as terrifying as the haunted hospital.

I smiled, and Ryou smiled back—and then, we both remembered the same thing.

"The zine!"

I checked the clock. It was 4:40 PM! There were only twenty minutes left in the Seiryou Festival.

We rushed out of the fine arts room and ran down the stairs like we were racing. When we reached the Literature Club room, we burst through the open doors and found Ricchan and Aki waiting.

"Nao, there you are!" exclaimed Ricchan. "We sold a ton of copies!"

The two of them must have come straight here after cleaning up the stage. Ricchan was still dressed as Abe, Minister of the Right.

"Um, are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

"Yes! This happened for real!"

As evidence, she pointed to the table, which had a considerably smaller stack of zines than when I'd last seen it.

As we spoke, a group of girls came in. I switched places with Aki to stand next to Ricchan. She took their money, and I handed them the zine.

The line never stretched out the door or anything, but a solid number of students and visitors who'd seen the play swung by to grab a copy on their way home.

A few of them wanted pictures with Abe. Ricchan looked embarrassed, but happily obliged. She always struck a dramatic pose, and this went down very

well with the children. It was far more effective than my maid outfit.

Once, I heard Ryou's voice from the wall behind me, apologizing. I glanced back, and to my relief, found Aki's frown had vanished.

That brought us to 4:58 PM.

"Two left," Ricchan said, her voice trembling.

We'd printed a total of 105 copies. The extra five would not be sold. They were for us, and to go on the clubroom shelf.

To reach our goal, we needed to move both remaining copies. But at this critical juncture, the flow of foot traffic died completely. I doubted there were many visitors left anywhere in the school.

The three of us exchanged glances.

"Think we can argue we sold enough to scrape by?"

"It's within the margin of error."

"Yeah..."

We spoke optimistically, but our faces were all grim.

The Seiryou Festival would be over in mere minutes, and that would be that. Ninety-eight might round up to one hundred, but would the faculty actually buy that?

Then our savior appeared.

"Two hundred yen, right?" Ryou said, reaching into her pocket as she went around to stand in front of the table serving as a counter.

Ricchan squeaked as she took the coins.

I made a similar sound as I handed over the zine.

Both of us were too wound up to properly thank her.

One more copy. One more minute! No, we were down to our final twenty seconds.

Sweat was pouring down my brow. I felt dizzy. I thought I might faint.

Any second now, the loudspeaker would announce the festival's end...

"One for me, too!" A boy burst through the door, out of breath.

"Mochizukiiii!" We all cried out at once.

As I handed over the last zine, the end of festival announcement played.

"Thank you all for attending the seventeenth annual Seiryou Festival. Make sure you have all your belongings with you as you leave, and mind your step. Students, remember the after-party will take place at five thirty in the gymnasium."

I was in no state to listen.

Ricchan and I clasped hands and collapsed onto the floor.

"W-we did it!"

No rounding necessary. We'd sold exactly one hundred copies.

"Excellent work, Literature Club," Ryou said, grinning as we cried tears of joy.

"So are we safe?"

"I'll discuss the matter with the faculty, and make the case that you've achieved tangible results. Just leave it to your student council president! ... Former student council president, that is." Despite this minor correction, her grin never wavered. Her words were very reassuring.

Then she checked the clock and turned to go.

"I'm needed in the gym. I've got to prepare for the after-party."

The new council had taken over, but the former president always gave a speech at the after-party. Then they'd hand the mic over to the new president.

"Mori, one thing," Mochizuki said.

"Sorry, Mochizuki. There's no time."

"Hear me out. If the play was a success, I swore I'd ask again."

That was a loaded statement, and it stopped Ryou in her tracks.

Blushing, Mochizuki took a deep breath, and let it all out.

"Like I said before, Mori, I'm in love with you. C-can I get your answer?"

"Sorry!" Ryou said, before anyone watching could start making a fuss.

We were shocked, but it must have hit Mochizuki even harder.

"I'm in love with someone else, so I can't go out with you."

His face got so pale he looked like he was made of paper. After a few brutal seconds, she stuck out her tongue.

"But don't be too upset—Suzumi might have a different answer."

"Huh? What? Suzumi...?"

"Hang in there till after the party. We've got a lot to talk about."

She waved, then raced off. She was so full of energy, none of us could stop her.

"I have no idea what any of that meant," Mochizuki said.

"You've made our clubroom into a rom-com all over again!" Ricchan cried, but I wasn't so sure about the "com" part.

I alone knew what Ryou had meant. She loved Suzumi, and this was her way of turning the screws on Mochizuki. A rather vicious form of payback, if you asked me. But I was sure she planned to tell him everything once the party was over.

He stood for a minute, stunned, but managed to pull himself together in time.

"So, uh...in February, there's something called the Kisaragi Exhibition."

I looked at him, confused. Mochizuki was supposed to retire from the Drama Club after this play.

"Next year's event will be held at the Shizuoka City Culture Hall, which is pretty easy to get to. On my own, I'd skip it, but if you all are up for it..." He coughed. "What I mean is...do any of you want to join the Drama Club?"

Apparently, our awkward upperclassman was attempting to recruit us.

We didn't even need to look at one another. All three of us bowed in unison.

"Sorry!"

Now that we'd sold a hundred zines, we felt it more keenly than ever. This

cramped, shabby little room was our home.

I thought of the fan we'd left out all winter, the ballpoint pen that kept rolling around on the table, the cardboard boxes filled with all the zines since the club's inception, and the frog figurines Mr. Akai had lined up on the windowsill. Even the books from genres I wasn't interested in were part of the room's special charm.

I wanted to read my next book surrounded by all of these things, with Aki at my side, and Ricchan sitting across from me.

"Ah. It's a shame, but not very surprising."

He smiled ruefully. He'd known how we'd answer. And after all, he was the one who saved our club by purchasing the last zine.

"But the play was really fun," I said. I meant every word. I'd been really nervous about it, but now I felt fulfilled. Part of me even wanted to do more.

"I had a great time, too!" Ricchan flashed him a wide grin.

Aki quietly agreed.

"I guess that's all I can ask," Mochizuki said, his arms crossed as he nodded gravely. "Excellent work, everyone."

As I had done so many times during rehearsals, I repeated the same greeting back at him and bowed.

This would be my last exchange as a temporary member of the Drama Club.

Mochizuki needed to head off to the gym, so we said our goodbyes in front of the clubroom.

From there, Ricchan ran off to check on her class. Aki and I did the same. Neither of us said a word on the way. We were both exhausted.

The haunted hospital, the play, the zine—it had been a whirlwind of a day. The moment I realized how tired I was, my body turned to lead.

This had been the busiest day of the longest month of my life.

The deserted hallways were dyed in the rays of the setting sun, and a gentle warmth wrapped around my ankles. I longed to lie down right there.

"Nao."

I was reluctant to turn my head, but there was a note of sadness in Aki's voice that made me look.

He'd stopped short and was watching me intently. I'd seen that look before, but where? It hadn't been that long ago.

As I searched my memory, his face moved closer. Something touched my nose, then pulled away.

...Mm?

I looked at him blankly, unsure what had happened, but Aki just walked away like it was nothing.

"Think they're done with cleanup?" he asked.

Mmm?

Aki kept mumbling and scratching his head. It was hard to make out his words. It was like he'd forgotten all our vocal exercises.

"I bet they're done with cleanup, yeah."

He was repeating himself like a broken CD.

Maybe I shouldn't say this out loud, but I was going to do it anyway.

"Aki."

"What?"

"Did you just try to kiss me and mess it up?"

Aki froze, refusing to look at me.

"I didn't mess anything up. I meant to do that."

"You meant to kiss my nose?"

"I suppose that would follow."

I moved around in front of him and poked my nose with a finger.

"You're in love with my nose?"

"It's really nice! But..."

At that point, he knelt down and clutched his head.

Our shadows stretched off down the hall. Aki was shaking. Perhaps I'd wounded his manly pride.

But I was big on speaking up when I had something on my mind.

"Did you try the same thing at the aquarium?"

He groaned. There were beads of sweat on the nape of his neck.

"Forgive me! I'm sorry!"

I heard him sniff. Was I making him cry?! I figured he was joking, but his crocodile tears were as pitiful as they were adorable.

Our haunted house is pretty dark. Good place for kissing!

Satou's words echoed through my mind.

There must have been quite a few chances, and yet Aki had held back because of how scared I was.

He'd persevered and tried to find the right timing—and I'd mercilessly shot him down.

I knelt beside him, arms around my knees, and whispered into my boyfriend's ear. "Wanna try again?"

I liked to speak up when I had something on my mind, but sometimes I did it with a whisper.

Aki got very quiet, and then he looked up. Just making eye contact with him sent a sweet shock through my body from the collarbone down.

"I'd like to do it properly," I said.

My heart was dancing. It was a wonder I could hear my own voice over its pounding. But it seemed like Aki had gotten the message. I saw his Adam's apple jump.

"You're sure?"

"...Very."

I didn't want another round of confirmations.

Aki's hand caught a lock of my hair. He hadn't reached my lips yet, but that contact alone made every hair on my body stand on end.

I felt the heat of his breath on my cheek, and my own breathing stopped.

Our silhouettes overlapped in the hallway, and this time—he didn't mess things up.

"Oh, there you are! The after-party's about to begin!"

He didn't even get the chance to try.

Aki and I both spun around.

We hadn't planned it, but we wound up back-to-back.

"What are you two playing at?" Yoshii said innocently as he rounded the corner.

Aki bopped him on the head.

"What was that for?" he cried.

I would never forget this year's Seiryou Festival, that was for sure.



Our school festival had been one thing after another from start to finish, and now the party to wrap it all up was getting underway in the gym.

Ryou took the stage, a wireless mic in one hand, looking happier than I'd ever seen her.



Since the gym had doubled as a theater all day, the podium was missing from the stage, and nothing was obstructing our view of her.

Everyone had gathered up with their class, just as we would at any other assembly. But today, there were no orderly lines. Some classes were still busy with cleanup and had only sent a representative. I could see Ricchan with Class 1-5, talking to her friends.

The prop squad was in front of me, with Yoshii's group right behind. Aki was toward the back. It would be way too daunting for us to sit together in a public space like this.

Nobody was taking this gathering all that seriously. People were yawning or trying to guess who'd won the prizes. But all of us were lending at least half an ear to the former council president's words.

I think everyone was listening.

"As you're all aware, the Seiryou Festival is a cooperative effort between the former and current student councils. Once we've joined forces to make this event possible, it's finally time for us to retire. Perhaps the new council saw us as their nagging mother-in-law."

Ryou was keeping her tongue firmly in her cheek. Some people up front were laughing. The new council members were lined up with the faculty to the left of the stage, waving their hands in front of their faces. Mochizuki was with them.

Ryou's eyes swept the room and picked me out.

She shot me a wink, and I offered a silly shrug in return. It was a momentary exchange that no one else even noticed.

Then, after flashing a toothy grin, Ryou continued.

"Luckily, we've survived the festival without any major incidents, thanks to the teachers, the management team, local residents, and you, our stu—"

Ka-kiiiiing!

We heard a thump, and then the howl of the microphone assaulted out ears.

Some students screwed their eyes shut, flinching. I clapped my hands over my

ears.

Three seconds later, I looked up and saw the mic rolling across the cold gym floor, a little red light glowing at its base.

Next to it was a strange pile—a school uniform, the skirt spread out like a flower with a broken stem. Layered on top was a bra, a long-sleeve shirt, a wine-red ribbon, and a blazer.

It appeared as though she'd just performed an unbelievable escape artist routine.

It was deeply unsettling, like someone had vanished, leaving all their clothes behind. I'd seen something like this before.

Sunao had run experiments. She'd called me out, had me change clothes, and then dismissed me. When I'd vanished, all the clothes I'd worn were left behind. This looked exactly like that.

But the original Suzumi wasn't here. She'd been asleep this whole time, unable to call or dismiss Ryou.

Which could only mean...

"Moririn?" someone called, their voice echoing across the gym.

Confusion spread through the audience. Few students had any clue what had happened. Some people assumed it was a magic trick and started to clap—but the sound of applause was quickly lost in the rising din. Nearly a minute passed without any grand reveals.

A few people got up and began searching around for any sign of Ryou.

The young teacher in charge of student council activities conferred with the principal, then turned on the spare mic. Another howl.

The mic on stage was still on, but nobody dared approach it.

The teacher told us to stay calm, return to our classrooms, and prepare to go home. They promised to reveal the awards at a later date, then repeated the message.

The teachers urged us to stand up, and we followed their directions and

began filing out the doors.

Aki made a point of moving slowly, so I could catch up to him. I walked to one side of him, a few steps behind.

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"Aki," I said.
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"Yeah."

"What happens to a replica if the original's heart sto—?"

I choked up and couldn't say any more. I didn't want to.

"Do you think Moririn messed up a spell and sent herself to another dimension?" Yoshii muttered. "I hope she finds her way home."

He didn't sound like he was joking, and his words stuck with me.

LAST ACT
A Replica, Stricken



"We've received word from her parents. Last Sunday, the third-year student Suzumi Mori passed away."

It was Thursday, November 4. The Seiryou Festival was over. There'd been two days off to make up for it, and a national holiday—this was our first morning back in class.

The students sat in silence, and the teacher kept his eyes down, not looking at us.

"She suffered a head injury at the end of July and was bedridden at home for a long while. She hung in there, but finally drew her last breath with her parents at her side. The wake and funeral will be family only, so the school will be holding a memorial gathering in the gym during sixth period tomorrow."

Every sentence was about her death. The teacher kept lobbing these morbid words at us, and no one in the room was capable of knocking them back like so many badminton birdies.

To most of us high school students, death was no longer a distant concept. Many of us had lost a grandparent or, at least, an elderly neighbor. But that wasn't the issue here.

"Teacher. President Moririn was *in* the gym with us," Satou said, speaking for everyone. Her confusion was obvious.

The former student council president had been in the middle of her speech. We'd all seen it happen. Suzumi Mori hadn't been asleep at home; she'd been with us, holding a microphone—only a few hours after playing Princess Kaguya.

Our teacher was silent for a long moment, then sighed.

"If anyone's feeling unwell, just say the word. You're free to rest in the nurse's office, and the school counselor will be available all day. Now please get ready for first period."

In all likelihood, even the faculty had only been told the bare minimum. Our homeroom teacher left class without answering Satou's question.

A weird atmosphere settled over the school.

Two girls from Class 2-1 went home early. I suspected the other classes were faring similarly. It was like a heavy cloud hung over the whole building.

Naturally, people connected the student president's disappearance to the flyers dropped a month earlier. The doppelgänger in our school had been Suzumi Mori. Someone had dropped those flyers to warn us about the truth.

But the rumor mill ground to a halt as soon as it began. The girls closest to Suzumi were adamant.

"Moririn sent her soul along to be with us."

"She loved running events! She hung around just long enough to put on one last Seiryou Festival."

It was a beautiful notion that spread quickly from her class, and all the other classes with student council members.

It reached Class 2-1 by lunch. Was it some scheme to protect a deceased classmate's honor? Or did they truly believe it? I couldn't tell.

I tried to imagine tomorrow, then next week. Anyone who started cracking jokes about Suzumi Mori being a ghost or a doppelgänger would likely find themselves the targets of everyone's ire. That would nip any such rumors in bud and keep new ones from popping up.

There was a short homeroom at the end of the day, and the faculty passed out message cards to all the students. At the memorial gathering, there would be an empty box in place of Suzumi's coffin, and one by one, we'd place our cards inside.

My first impulse was to tear that little card in half. But if I did that, I was sure Suzumi's friends would hound me through their tears.

And they didn't even know Ryou's name.



I spoke with Aki and Ricchan in the Literature Club room.

I shared what I'd learned about Ryou and Suzumi. It took less than ten minutes, which only drove home how little even I knew.

As I left the room, I saw someone heading up the stairs.

It was Mochizuki, taking one step at a time. In his hand, I caught sight of a familiar-looking pink envelope.

Suzumi's mother must have given it to him. I stopped myself from asking—there was no point. After all, they were both...

"Nao."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, startling me.

I'd been pushing my bicycle and nearly hit a telephone pole. If Aki hadn't gotten my attention, I would have slammed right into it. I took a careful step backward.

Ricchan wasn't around. She must have peeled off at the school's back entrance, though I didn't have a clear memory of it.

"I'll take you home," Aki suggested.

I almost smiled. "This time, you can."

"I guess so."

"Climb on. Mochimune's awfully far."

It was nearly six miles—too far a walk for someone still in rehab.

Aki climbed on my bike, backpack still on his shoulders. He pushed off with his left foot, then started pedaling, as if he'd almost forgotten how. He moved slowly along, matching my pace as I walked along the sidewalk. The whirring of the wheels sounded different than usual. It was slower, softer.

"I wish it had rained today," I whispered, glaring up at the heavens. When had we last had a nice rain? Back then, I would never have imagined any of this would happen. "I could go for an out-of-season typhoon right about now."

"Mm." Aki nodded along.

I walked, mumbling a few words now and then.

The wind on Shizuoka Bridge was always relentless. It was cold even with my blazer on.

We passed Tomato Bowl—where the children's association had taken the kids bowling—and the Tagoju Supermarket, which had popsicles for 40 percent off. We passed Sunao's old elementary school, and not long after that, we reached Mochimune Station. This was nothing like my usual route home, but as long as I aimed in the right general direction, I'd never get lost.

Behind us, Joyama's trees still had a few lingering red leaves. The Tokaido Shinkansen whooshed by from right to left.

On a clear day like today, you could see Mount Fuji. Perhaps that was why we kept seeing people with high-tech cameras.

At the station, I turned back and saw the horizon dyed red.

"Let's hit the beach," I said.

Aki didn't argue.

It was a five-minute walk. I left my bike by the levee, and we headed down to the sand.

The surf was quiet, and the sea breeze blew over the orange surface of the water, forming ripples. The air was quite chilly, and I figured the water must be even colder.

In the distance, I saw a silhouette looking for all the world like a witch on a broom. The sun lit them from behind, making them hard to see, but I bet they were surfing. I hoped they hadn't drifted too far out.

"That's a SUP," Aki said. "A stand-up paddleboard."

I kicked a stone and felt him watching me from behind. I had priors—he was just making extra sure I didn't impulsively throw myself into the ocean.

But he didn't need to worry. To prove that to him, I flopped back on the sand far from the water's edge.

"Nao?"

I was sprawled out like a sea lion, and his voice rained down on me from

above.

"This is pretty uncomfortable," I said.

My head and back hurt. A bunch of pebbles dug into me, like some kind of failed acupuncture.

I closed my eyes and watched the sparks dance.

Once those obnoxious lights faded, everything got quiet. I listened to the sound of the waves. My feet stayed dry, but it felt like I was standing in the water.

I felt Aki settle down to my right and rolled onto my side.

Aki was staring out at the sea, but above his head, I could see an almost full moon peeking out from behind the mountains to the east.

The moon. Perhaps Ryou had gone back there with Suzumi.

She'd promised to give me her thoughts on *No Longer Human*. Promised to take me to the Netherworld Ranch.

I knew it wasn't fair to blame her. But I didn't know what else to do with these emotions. I couldn't just fling them at the water like a skipping stone.

I pictured Ryou's face. She'd painted such beautiful scenes. Her work might well have been chosen for that contest. She'd hidden her loneliness beneath a veil of maturity.

I thought of her smile when she thanked me for finding her. She'd said she was glad she'd met me.

"You aren't going anywhere, are you?" I asked, gazing up at Aki.

I was sure he'd give me the answer I wanted. After all, he'd pulled me out of this ocean once before.

"I wish I could make that promise."

But he dashed my hopes.

Aki was watching the sun sink below the horizon, refusing to meet my gaze.

If being a replica came with a manual, perhaps the fine print would have

warned us. If the original dies, the replica will vanish along with them.

She'd disappeared without a trace, leaving her clothes and underwear on the podium like sea foam. She was Princess Kaguya, returning to the moon. She'd left no flesh, no bones, and no ashes behind.

"Nao," Aki said, letting the breeze trail through his fingers. "Go ahead."

"With what?"

"You don't need it to rain or storm."

What did the waves think as they crashed against the breakwater?

"It's okay to cry when you feel like it. Let it all out."

I sat up. There was a heat behind my nose. My eyes stung.

Something ran silently down my cheeks. I reached up to touch it and realized my face was wet with tears.

Then I threw open my mouth and wailed like a little kid.

I called Ryou's name. I kicked the sand. I sobbed out loud. I could taste hair in my mouth. Snot flowing out from my nose. Sand in my teeth. I was a total mess.

Without the rain or a storm to hide them, my tears and curses were on display for all to see.

I would have loved an umbrella. I wanted to put on that cream-colored coat that always smelled like rain. I wanted to see Ryou again. I wanted her right here.

I guess I blew that magic trick and drifted out to sea! Sorry it took so long to get back to you. I'd have loved to see her play it all off, then grin and stick her tongue out at me.

If only I could meet her again, I wouldn't care what she said.

"Nao."

My stomach hurt. My ears felt hot, like they were about to rip apart. My throat burned. I hurt all over.

I writhed and kept crying as Aki's sturdy arms wrapped around me. He held

me tightly, like he was trying to keep me there beside him.

I heard tears in his voice as he called my name, and still I kept crying. I didn't know how to stop.

The sound of the surf was so gentle it grated on me.

Why did I have to have emotions?

I wished I'd been born a robot with no thoughts or feelings. I wished my mind was just a program. Then I wouldn't have to be afraid of tomorrow.

I wouldn't recklessly start to care about anyone.

...Augh.

If only I really felt that way. If only I could mean it when I said I'd be better off without these strong arms hiding my tear-stained face.

There was no going back to the time before I was me.

But I hope you won't mind if I stomp my feet and grieve your loss until all the moisture is gone from my body.





Aki brought me back home.

There were no shoes in the entryway, so Mom and Dad were still out. I put the bike on its stand and flipped the light switch.

Aki was probably already walking toward the station.

All that crying had worn me out, and I could barely think. Each time I blinked, I could feel how swollen my lids were.

My body needed hydration, but I skipped past the kitchen. I felt like if I replenished the tears I'd spent, my body would recover, leaving only my heart behind.

I went upstairs, feeling like each step had it out for me. I stubbornly refused to trip over any of them, only to stub my toe on the very last one.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back."

After our brief ritual, Sunao let me into her room.

She started to comment on my late return, and then her face clouded. My eyes were red, my voice hoarse, my footsteps feeble—I was clearly a mess.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"An upperclassman died."

Sunao's eyes widened. "Were you close?"

"Not really."

Her gaze went from concerned to puzzled.

I hadn't told her anything about Ryou. In that quiet fine arts room, I thought I'd found what I wanted to say—but now, I'd lost my words again.

When I got back from the Seiryou Festival, I'd asked Sunao to dismiss me right away. That way, I wouldn't have to think about anything until she next summoned me.

I planned to do the same today.

If she balked at it, I'd bring up that phone call. Sunao clearly didn't want me know about it, so if I brought it up, she was sure to get annoyed and send me packing.

"Oh, right."

But before I could resort to such an underhanded approach, Sunao had another thought.

"Nao," she said, her beautiful eyes catching mine.

Belatedly, a bad feeling washed over me, and my blood ran cold.

Once, I'd been ready for it. I'd realized that someday I'd have to leave her, and this seaside town, behind.

But right now, that was the last thing I wanted. I prayed she wouldn't say it—but I didn't have the words to stop her.

When I didn't move, Sunao forged right on. Words from the original's lips.

Words that spelled her replica's end.

"I'll be going to school starting tomorrow. Even when there's exams, even if I don't feel like it. Every day, from now on."

## **AFTERWORD**

Huh? Volume two?

I remember being thoroughly thrown by that proposition.

The request to plot out a second volume came fairly early on.

I was grateful for it, but also at a loss. I'd been convinced the first volume told a complete story.

"What about a story set after Sunao grows up?" "How about a male lead?" "Let's go full sci-fi...!"

I proposed a number of ideas, and for one reason or another, they were all shot down.

"As a reader, I want to see more of Nao's story."

When my editor said that, I realized where I'd gotten lost.

Nao and Aki had walked off into the light, smiling, holding hands—could I really call them back? I was a little reluctant.

But Nao's world was never one where beauty alone held sway. She dealt with malice and unfairness, with deep-seated fears the likes of which no living human has ever had.

Deep down, I'd always known that, even if I didn't write it myself, Nao would go on pedaling her bike, experiencing new things, working through them as best she could—and being in love.

And in that case, I'd better write more. I made up my mind and started chasing her small frame once again.

There were nights when I resented my editor's words, but I know they're the reason I was able to write this volume.

I'm no longer shocked this volume exists. (Whispers) Now I'm proud as heck. Heh-heh.

When this series launched, I got to enjoy all kinds of special experiences.

It all started with a fancy video promotion. Whole train cars on the JR Tokaido Line were filled with ads. There were leaflets distributed exclusively in Shizuoka bookstores. And they even put commercials on TV!

If you're thinking, "What? I missed that!" try searching for them on your phone. Most images and video can still be found, so peruse them at your leisure. Isn't the internet grand?

I doubt I'll ever forget the day I spent with my editor on a train decked out in advertisements for this series, debating what should happen in the sequel.

In more personal news, I've long been curious about the Gentle Walking events held by the Central Japan Railway. And recently, some friends and I took part in one!

We set out from the station early one morning, touring parks and museums, and were back at the station by three. Well, that was the idea, anyway. But the flowers caught our eye, we got lost in conversation, enjoyed delicious taiyaki—and by the time we got back, it was well after six.

While on the tour, I was reminded that, though I was born and raised in Shizuoka City, there are countless wonderful shops and places I've still never been to. Too many to ever visit in a lifetime. It seems like a waste, but it also fills me with joy.

I have a feeling I'll never manage to make it back on time, but I'm going to take next month's adventure at my own pace, too. I can't wait.

Now for the formalities.

A big thanks to my editor, who was invaluable in the creation of this volume. You are a master of the carrot and the stick, calling out what doesn't work and heaping praise upon what does. You're the best cure for my innate laziness.

To raemz, I'm so grateful for your illustrations. Seeing your designs made me love the two former council members even more. And I was moved beyond words by all the new emotions on Nao's and Aki's faces.

Finally, a heartfelt thank-you to anyone who chose to read this volume. I hope it resonates with you.

A manga adaption of this series has started running in Dengeki Maou. Momose Hanada is bringing all the characters to life in the manga format. It's a beautiful book, full of thrills, and I hope you'll enjoy it alongside the novels.

Finally, a suggestion.

By the time this novel comes out, it'll be the season that makes us scream for ice cream. Perhaps this is a good time to reread the first volume—where everyone is still wearing their summer uniforms.

Harunadon, May 2023

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