

Kennoji

Illustration by Fly

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The Girl I Saved on the
Train Turned Out to Be
My Childhood Friend



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“Aren’t you glad you get to see the fireworks while surrounded by pretty girls, Bubby?”

“You have it rough, huh, Takamori?”

“What’s with that reaction?”

“Ryou, you meanie.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Name: Mana Takamori
Age: 15
School year: middle school, third year
Height: 5'5"
A gyaru kind of girl who cares deeply about her brother. Does all the cooking and chores in the Takamori home.

Name: Shizuka Torigoe
Age: 17
School year: high school, second year
Height: 4'10"
Hina's close friend and Ryou's lunchtime friend and classmate.

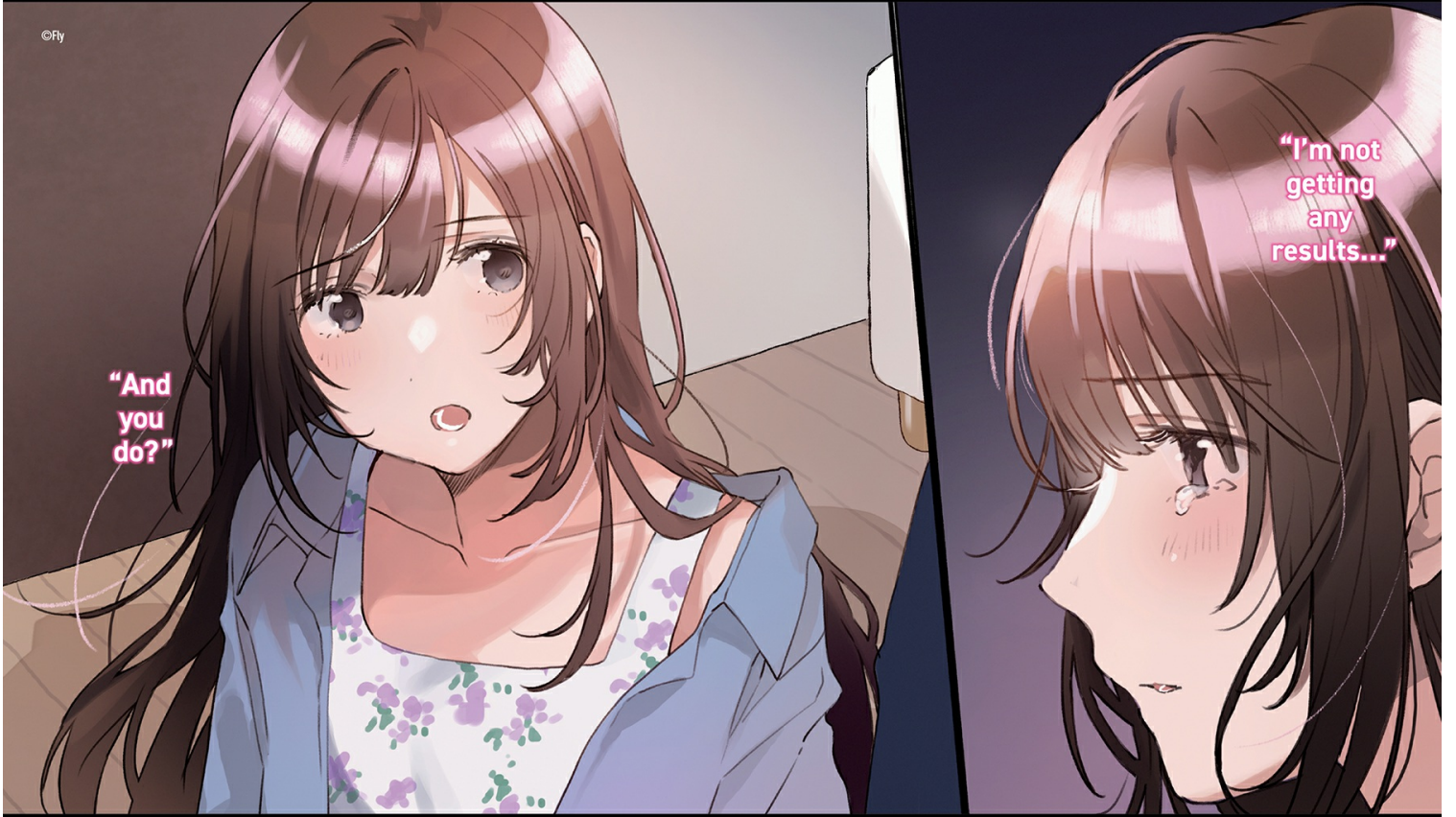
Name: Ai Himejima
Age: 16
School year: high school, second year
Height: 5'1"
Childhood friend of both Hina and Ryou. Transfer student and former idol.

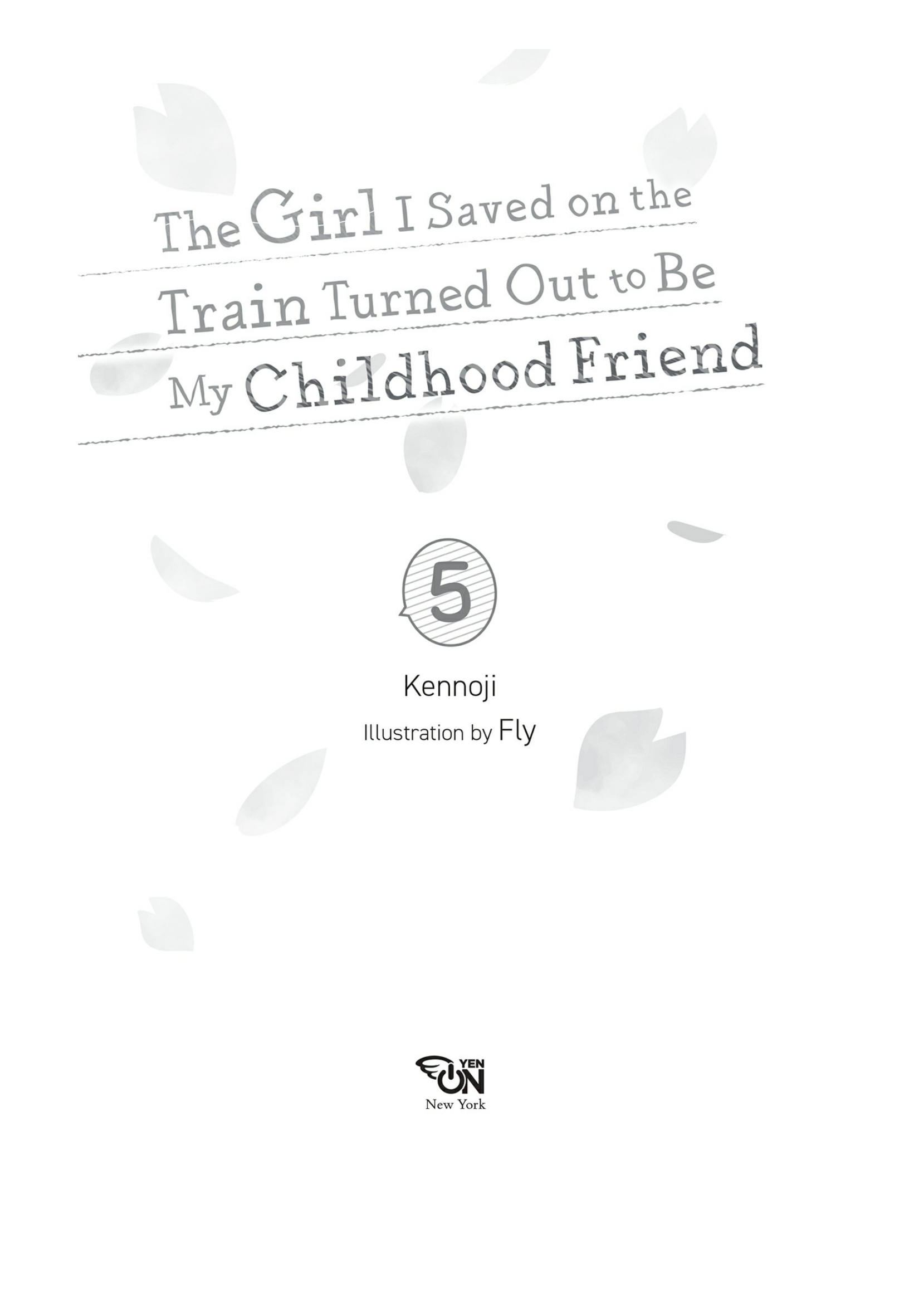
Name: Hina Fushimi
Age: 17
School year: high school, second year
Height: 5'3"
Ryou's childhood friend and immensely popular, gorgeous girl.

Name: Ryou Takamori
Age: 17
School year: high school, second year
Height: 5'9"
Self-proclaimed boring dude struggling to fit in.

"And
you
do?"

"I'm not
getting
any
results..."





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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend, Vol. 5

Kennoji

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CHIKAN SARESOU NI NATTEIRU S-KYU BISHOUJO WO TASUKETARA TONARI NO SEKI NO OSANANAJIMI DATTA volume 5

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Little by little, we were making progress on our film for the school festival.

It was already August, and the cries of the cicadas were getting louder. It was the season of the summer national baseball tournament at the Koshien Stadium and local fireworks festivals.

I was going over the scenes Torigoe had okayed.

The actors had fled the hot classroom for the cool library.

Torigoe held a mini handheld fan close to her face.

The usually silent girl was in charge of the film's screenplay, so I consulted her for anything and everything regarding the story.

"Hey, Fushimi changed her line a bit here. What d'you think?"

"I don't mind. Do you?"

"No, I think it's fine. I was just wondering if the nuance would get in the way of the story later down the line, but I don't think it does, does it?"

"Nope, it should be fine."

She showed no doubt when responding; I knew I could trust her judgment.

Although that brought us problems when we were shooting scenes at the beach.

I was surprised to find this side of her, since we had just been lunchtime buddies up until this spring.

"Ryou, Shii, Waka got us popsicles. She says to go grab one from the staff room."

My childhood friend and star of the movie, Fushimi, showed up.

Making a short film for the school festival was her idea.

She had recently taken a break from filming after failing the audition for a musical, but she seemed to be doing fine now.

“Seriously? How generous of Waka.”

Waka was our homeroom teacher: Miss Wakatabe.

“Let’s take a snack break, then.”

I took up Torigoe’s suggestion, and we both left the classroom with Fushimi.

“Himeji couldn’t come today?” Torigoe asked nonchalantly.

Himeji—Ai Himejima, my other childhood friend.

“Uh, yeah, she has practice.”

“How nice. Good for her.” Fushimi pouted.

Himeji had passed the same audition Fushimi had failed. Both of them got to the final stage, but only Himeji was casted.

Himeji was a former idol, so she had the looks and the singing chops. Her acting was a work in progress, though.

I’d heard she passed despite that last tidbit because the producers had something special in mind. But I thought Fushimi’s acting was way better.

And because there were sometimes sudden changes in Himeji’s schedule and she had to be absent from filming, our classmates already knew about it.

“Will we be able to finish shooting her parts?” Torigoe asked, sounding worried.

I nodded.

“We’re being careful about it and having her come in whenever she doesn’t have work. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Still, too bad for you, hmm, Hiina?”

“Right? Right?! I still think I was the best choice.” Fushimi huffed.

She openly talked about her rejection, too, which made me think she had sorted out her feelings on the matter.

“You know, maybe your overconfidence was the cause of your demise?”

“Don’t rub salt into the wound, Shii.”

Torigoe chuckled, and Fushimi’s expression softened.

We passed by some classmates holding popsicles, and finally entered the air-conditioned staff room.

I saw a few of our classmates over at the kitchenette, so we walked toward it. I noticed they had the fridge door open and were thinking about which popsicle to choose. There was a great variety of colors and flavors.

“You’re getting strawberry, right, Ryou?”

“Why?”

“You always get that flavor when we have shaved ice at the summer festivals.”

“I did?”

I did like strawberry, but I was also a big fan of lemon, melon, and blue Hawaii.

“Hey, don’t exclude me from the conversation within your CF Field,” Torigoe complained.

“That wasn’t my intention. What’s your favorite flavor, Shii?”

“Mine’s lemon.”

“Lemon’s good. I’m also getting that one.”

The lemonites shook hands in a fervent display of camaraderie.

“Aren’t they all the same flavor, anyway? They’re just different colors.”

I remembered hearing about that on TV.

“No way! It actually tastes like lemon.”



“I’m just telling you about what I heard.”

“...Takamori, you should know when to present us with trivia. This one’s only taking the fun away.”

“...Sorry.”

Hey, I’m only conveying what I heard...

Well, it wasn’t uncommon for Torigoe to make such spiteful comments toward me and Fushimi.

Our classmates left, and we finally got to grab ours. I went with grape.

There was strawberry, but I didn’t want Fushimi gloating about how she knew what I would choose.

“Lemon is the only choice!”

Fushimi yanked the popsicle out of the fridge as though pulling out the sword of legend.

“I’m getting melon.”

Torigoe grabbed hers with a contrasting lack of emotion. She took off the wrapper in one go and started nibbling on it immediately.

“You’re not getting lemon?!”

“What’s the problem? Let her be.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit close-minded to always go for your favorite, Hiina?”

“Grrr... Don’t badmouth me for my loyalty!”

She took it very personally. Torigoe, on the other hand, was enjoying her snack.

I unwrapped mine, too, and threw the wrapper in the trash can.

The iciness made me shiver as soon as I bit into the popsicle.

I took a big bite and enjoyed the tasty grape flavor.

“We’ve got three more scenes to shoot, so let’s go,” I said.

“Let’s go!” Fushimi repeated, while thrusting her popsicle up high in the air.

After filming, Fushimi and I ran into Himeji at the station in our neighborhood.

“Hey! Himeji,” I called out.

She turned around.

She was wearing an outfit that made her look older than her age; if you’d told me she was a college student, I wouldn’t have doubted it.

Up until halfway through grade school, when Himeji moved away, Fushimi, Mana, and I hung out with her all the time. And, while I was none the wiser, she became an idol until she had to stop because of health issues. It was then that she returned and transferred into our school in the middle of the school year.

“Isn’t that Ryou and Hina? You’re heading home now?”

“We just finished filming for the day,” Fushimi said, while glaring at Himeji from behind my back.

“What’s your problem, Hina? If you got something to say, then say it.” Himeji smirked, pointing at her.

“Gosh... How did you get the part? Your acting sucks.”

Not again.

“I’m sorry I’m not as good as you, Miss Amateur. But I have multiple other talents.”

“Ughhh.”

Fushimi looked like she wanted to bite into a handkerchief.

“Stop fighting the moment you come across each other.”

Himeji had avoided the topic at first out of consideration, but that only seemed to make Fushimi angrier.

She’d begun to half-jokingly (which means, half-seriously) say how unfair it was, and that she would’ve been the better choice. She’d say so to me, to Torigoe, and obviously to Himeji, too.

“Ai, you’re gonna be in trouble when our film is done.”

“Why?”

“Your terrible acting will stand out against my genius. The contrast is going to be stunning.”

“What did you just say?”

Their arguing was nothing unusual. It soon blew over, and we left the station.

We had a lot to talk about on our way home: how filming went today, checking when Himeji would be free to film her parts, what kinds of people she’d met at rehearsal, *etc.*

“My summer vacation is practically gone.”

“I could take over if you don’t want to be so busy.”

“No thanks.”

Seeing them say all this while smiling at each other only made it scarier.

Speaking of being busy, I’d been getting work, too. I was doing office work as an assistant to the manager at Himeji’s agency.

Oh right, Mr. Matsuda asked me to casually put in a good word for his agency to Fushimi.

He had also been giving me all sorts of advice for our short film, although he wasn’t a pro in filmmaking. *I should show him what we’ve finished so far.*

“See you tomorrow for filming, then, Ai.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Bye.”

We parted ways with Himeji.

“What about your job, Ryou? Getting busy?”

“Somewhat.”

“You really caught me by surprise, getting that job out of nowhere.”

Hey, it’s not strange for a high schooler to get a part-time job or two during summer break.

“I wish you’d told me sooner.” She looked down at her feet. “Ai introduced you to the job, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. They just so happened to be looking for someone.”

“And do you two happen to hang out after work?”

“No. It’s not like she’s always at the agency whenever I’m working there.”

“Hmmm.” Fushimi narrowed her eyes.

What’re you so suspicious about?

Though we did hang out once when I borrowed the equipment.

“Oh, could it be you want a job, too?”

It wasn’t unthinkable.

“No?” Fushimi puffed out her cheeks. “A-and it’s not like Ai’s a real celebrity already, right?!”

“I know. She’s not.”

“It’d be nice giving the idol thing a try, but anyway, she already quit that, remember?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And I’m a much better actress!”

“Yes. You are.”

Fushimi furrowed her brow, then she realized something.

“A-are you hanging out with Shii?”

“Torigoe? Nope.”

“O-oh. Okay.” She sighed.

What am I being interrogated for?

“...Oh, I haven’t done my homework.”

“Yeah, I’d figured,” she said. It seems she expected that answer.

Fushimi’s bad mood disappeared by the time we reached her house.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. See you.” I waved back.

I walked back home and got there in two minutes.

I was carefully placing the equipment by the entrance so I wouldn't forget it the next day, when my little sister heard me and showed up.

"Bubby, why don't you announce your return?"

"Uh."

"Less *uhs*, more *I'm backs*, okay?" Mana sighed.

The shorts she was wearing were extremely short. The hot weather had her exposing her legs and wearing only a camisole on top; it was barely any improvement over outright being in her underwear.

I headed straight for the living room and tried relaxing for a while, when I saw on TV the death of a celebrity Mana was a fan of.

"I can't believe this... Bubby, comfort me."

"It's gonna be okay."

"That's it?!" she replied before laughing out loud. "You're so bad at this that it's actually funny."

"I wasn't trying to make you laugh, but I'm glad to see you're okay now."

"I'm still in shock. You never know when someone's gonna go."

Yeah, especially when someone passes away due to an accident.

"So I'm gonna make sure I say everything I want to say while I still can."

While we can, huh? Yeah, we can't take our lives for granted.

Fushimi immediately came to mind.

There were many things I wanted to say: about our film, school, our friends... and about our promises.

"You can't always expect tomorrow to come, Bubby!" Mana said, striking a pose.

"Ooh, that shook me to the core."

"Doesn't sound like it! Don't play with me!"

She hit me playfully before heading to the kitchen.

I sat down on the sofa.

Because Fushimi was with us earlier, I wasn't able to ask Himeji about something that's been on my mind.

"For her own sake, I want you to be her boyfriend," Mr. Matsuda had asked of me the other day.

He was my boss, and I was indebted to him in many ways, but even then, I couldn't just say yes.

Was Himeji aware of this? Had she already accepted his idea?

I wanted to ask her directly, but she'd been too busy.

If she asked me herself, I might consider it. But knowing her, I doubt that would happen.

Mr. Matsuda said that experiencing romance would give her a wider emotional range to use for acting.

This had nothing to do with love or whatever—it was all pragmatic calculation. Right?

Maybe I was overthinking it?

What if I accepted his request and went into this pragmatically, but as our relationship deepened, I happened to fall in love with her?

Maybe that sort of love was also acceptable?

But then wouldn't I be going into this with the expectation of falling in love down the line?

Was this really for Himeji's sake? Or was it for his? Or mine?

Torigoe threw candy into the shopping basket I was holding.

"Now the drinks."

"Get small ones."

"Okay."

It was the afternoon, and we'd just finished filming.

We were at the supermarket closest to the school, buying props for our next shoot.

We'd be taking them back to school right after. We had already gotten permission to store them for a little while in the staff room's fridge.

Next to the refrigerated foods corner was a wide variety of cheap carbonated drinks, bottled water, and tea.

It was nice and cool near that section; it made you want to stay there forever around this season.

"Do I just take whatever?" Torigoe asked the moment she grabbed a bottle.

I nodded.

We were probably gonna drink them after the shoot was over.

We were already two-thirds through filming the whole thing.

Our classmates acting as extras got used to being filmed, so things were going much more smoothly compared to the beginning.

"Whoa! Takamori, c'mere!"

"Huh?"

"Hurry!"

"What is it?"

Torigoe pulled me over by the sleeve.

I raised an eyebrow in confusion when I saw a middle-aged woman with glasses walking straight toward us.

She shot me a menacing glare before looking over at Torigoe behind me.

“Shizuka, what are you doing here?”

“Shopping...what else?”

The bespectacled woman looked somewhat similar to Torigoe.

She was holding a shopping basket. I figured it was her mother, here for shopping, too.

“Don’t do anything weird, and get home by dinner, okay?”

“Yes, I know.”

I was certain of it after hearing their exchange.

However, it was strange that she’d get scolded like this just for buying snacks and drinks in the afternoon.

Also, that look in her mother’s eyes as she stared at me... It made me feel like an insect.

“L-let’s go, Takamori.”

“Huh? O-okay.”

She pulled me away, so I bowed to the woman and walked behind Torigoe.

“Was that your mom?”

“Yeah. She doesn’t usually come to this supermarket. I should’ve been more careful.”

This wasn’t the closest one to their home, but apparently, she’d go to other stores if they had special sales.

“Is she strict or something?”

Maybe she hadn’t told her about the filming, and she thought we were fooling around after school?

In that case, I wished she'd understand there was nothing wrong with high schoolers having a snack before going home.

"I'd say so, yes... She's particularly strict about my curfew."

My mom was the complete opposite.

Mom would sometimes tell me not to get home too late, but so long as I told her beforehand, she wouldn't scold me for going out doing whatever, wherever.

Probably because she was rarely home, due to work.

Also, whenever I forgot to call home, it'd be Mana who got mad.

Once Mrs. Torigoe was out of our sight, we went back to grabbing the drinks.

"Remember when I visited late at night to decide on the film?"

"Yeah. I remember."

"She found out."

"Seriously? She knows you got home late?"

"Yeah."

Oof. Now I know why she was looking at me like I was an annoying mosquito.

"I told her we were having a meeting for our project for the school festival, but she only got madder, saying I should've said so from the beginning. Despite knowing full well that she wouldn't let me stay out that late anyway."

"Does she think...you've turned into a delinquent from hanging out with a bad man?"

"Probably. She doesn't say it, but I think that's what she suspects."

She'd left home without saying anything and had gotten back at night between one and two AM.

I had no idea how her family saw her, but that's definitely not something I would expect, knowing Torigoe.

"Sorry for dragging you down the path of evil."

"Oh, don't worry. She's just a little neurotic," Torigoe responded.

We paid for items with the money from the manila envelope that had “Budget” written on it, then put everything in the shopping bag and left.

Under the relentless UV-rays, we walked back to school.

“You think I should apologize to her?”

“No, don’t worry about it.”

“I could tell her that little Shizuka is in fact a very good girl...”

“What are you, my teacher?” she chuckled.

“Joking aside, she suspects you’re doing bad things, right?”

Sneaking out just before summer vacation. At night. With a man. And getting home past midnight. You couldn’t blame her for having such thoughts.

“I think I should apologize to her and explain there’s nothing between us.”

“...But there is.” She looked up at me.

“Huh? Well, there can’t be *nothing*, I guess. But what I mean is...”

Torigoe giggled, then sighed.

“Sorry, I’m just pulling your leg.”

“Torigoe...”

“I know what you mean. You want to tell her we’re not having sex, right?”

“There’s something weird about hearing it come from you...”

Not that it wouldn’t be weird coming from me.

“In any case, we should clear up her suspicions that you’re going to a bad man’s house—*my* house to do the nasty late at night.”

“Let her fantasize. She worries too much about me. She worries about my hobbies, about me not having friends... She’s overprotective.”

Your hobbies...?



“W-wait, does she know you’re into BL?”

“No,” she stated clearly. “It’s not about the genres. It’s the fact I’m always reading. She doesn’t think it’s normal.”

Her poor little daughter, a bookworm and a shut-in (with few friends, to boot), started staying out late in her second year of high school... Yeah, no wonder she’d worry.

“I really think we should say something. She’s only gonna be stricter with you at home, don’t you think?”

Having a record would only make her stricter and more wary.

“And what’s that have to do with you?”

“Hey, it’s my fault for not being mindful of when the last train was.”

“That’s also my fault.”

I had asked Torigoe to star in the film I was personally making.

She hadn’t said yes yet, but if her mother were to become stricter, then it might get in the way of her participating in either of the films.

But more than anything...

“I can’t stand seeing someone as upright and honest as you under such suspicion.”

Torigoe cast her gaze down.

“Th-thanks... I guess I should also say she got mad when we went to the beach. Because I got home late.”

If I remembered correctly, we said good-bye at the station around eight.

“You should’ve told her you were gonna be late... We went somewhere far.”

“If I did, then she’d set all sorts of conditions, and in the end, I wouldn’t get to go. That’s the thing.”

I’d messed up by not being mindful of the last train the first time. And, although it was Fushimi’s and Torigoe’s idea, it was also me who ultimately decided to shoot at a faraway beach.

Honestly, I felt responsible for all this. Even if it was Torigoe's fault for not notifying her mom beforehand.

After a lot of thinking, I proposed: "Torigoe, promise me one thing."

"What?"

"From now on, don't avoid it and tell your parents when you're going out."

Torigoe chuckled—was my serious expression that funny?

"It sounds weird coming from a professional truant."

"Well, sorry for that."

"Okay. I get it. Thank you for worrying about me. I'll do that from now on."

I knew I wasn't actually dragging her down the path of evil, but her mom had no idea what kind of person I was. It was only natural that she'd feel worried.

But anyway, we had no plans for filming or hanging out late at night in the near future, so it shouldn't be a problem.

"We are going to the summer festival, after all."

Oh. Right.

All the more reason we'd have to be careful. Otherwise, she'd be stuck with a curfew for grade-schoolers.

We got to school and placed the drinks in the fridge in the staff room. We dropped off the snacks inside the lockers. We left right away and walked over to the station.

"So, about my film. You know, the one not for the school festival. I'm telling you, you're the best fit for my protagonist."

Her response was a bit different from before.

"Hmm. Maybe I'll think about it."

Last time, she had clearly said *no*.

"Please. I'm begging you."

I bowed, and she grumbled with hesitation.

“I think you should polish the script first. Then maybe you’ll find out if I still fit your image.”

“You got a point.”

She was totally right. Forget polishing—I had no script to begin with. It was only a vague idea in my head still.

“S-so, uh... Would you like to meet at my house to talk about it?”

Torigoe gave me a fleeting glance as she walked beside me. She looked away the moment my eyes met hers.

“Huh? Your house?”

“Y-yeah.”

◆ Shizuka Torigoe ◆

Takamori and I went our separate ways at the station.

“I—I did it...”

Perhaps the strong summer sun got to me, and the heat made me delirious.

Takamori got on his train and waved at me from beyond the window. Just having his eyes on me, knowing I was on his mind, made my heart flutter.

Thinking about his reaction to my sudden suggestion had my knees shaking.

Asking him to come over to my house, saying I wanted to talk about his film? It’s like I was a Casanova trying to invite a girl over by using his pet as an excuse.

...I can’t deny I might have similar intentions...

And here I thought I’d never be that sort of person.

“Oof... Why did I do that?”

Self-hatred.

I sat on the station’s bench and held my head in my hands.

Takamori had said, *“Oh, you’re just being nice because we always use my*

place? If that's the case, then sure, I don't mind going over to yours."

He accepted my invitation, but only after interpreting it in a different way.

Sure, I did feel bad about always using his house for meetings and stuff, so I didn't correct him on that, and just went with it.

I thought he'd go, *Nah, let's just keep meeting at my place*, so leaving that aside, I was surprised he even accepted my invite.

I unlocked my phone and tapped on Shino's icon on my contacts list.

I pushed the button to call my friend, Minami Shinohara.

"Hello? What's up, Shii?"

"M-M-Mii!"

"Wha-what? Take a deep breath."

She noticed the panic in my voice and tried to calm me down.

"Y-you won't believe what I just did."

I told her the whole thing.

"...S-so you're finally ready to become a woman..."

"I-I'm not doing that. It's not that. We're not."

I denied it three times.

"Really, now? Who asks a guy over if it isn't for that?"

"Uh... True..."

Mii squealed loudly into my ear.

What am I talking about out loud in public?

My face was burning.

"S-s-s-s— S-so what's your plan?"

Now she was panicking.

"Th-that's what I wanted to ask. You've gone out with him before. Did he visit your house?"

"Y-yes. We, um... We were a bona fide couple."

A bona fide couple? What does that mean? Did they actually do...couple stuff?

"What did you do?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Yeah, they did nothing.

Mii cleared her throat before getting back on track: *"So he arrives at your house, and you let him in your room. You're all alone. Door locked. You're in your home base, literally... What else is there but to get freaky?"*

"F-freaky?! D-do I have no other choice?"

"No."

No hesitation.

"And also it's gotta be you making the move. Drill that into your head. You know Takaryou... He's like a grade-schooler."

Yes. No argument there.

"You must go on the offense. You're the lance."

"The what now?"

"It's a shogi reference. That piece can only move forward."

"So you're saying that's my only move?"

"Yes. You can't go sideways, much less backward."

Can't go sideways, much less backward... I repeated the words in my head. They fit me well, considering I'd been rejected once already.

"So what do I do?"

"I think you'll find better answers online. Get a general idea and use that as reference."

It took her no time to throw in the towel.

I knew that, even if she had gotten Takamori to visit her place, nothing would've happened in the end. Maybe she never even asked him over.

“Right. I’ll give it a try.”

“And don’t worry yourself with the proper procedures or who’s got priority or whatever! Got it?!”

It didn’t sound convincing coming from her.

“Listen, I consider Fushimi a friend, but if only one of you gets to be happy, I’ll choose you over her.”

“Thanks, Mii. I-I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah. Good luck on your house date. Bye.”

And she hung up.

House date... R-right. That’s what this is.

“House date...”

Saying it out loud made me feel even more squeamish.

I remained seated on the bench and looked things up on the Internet, just as she suggested.

WHEN A GUY COMES OVER FOR THE FIRST TIME

I found a few blogs with educational articles that were written pretty much like manuals.

It started with the most obvious things: Clean up your room. *Duh*. Then it said to get proper clothes and set the mood.

“Set the mood... C-can I really do that?”

Anyway. First, clothes.

The article said it didn’t have to be your absolute best outfit, but it had to be something nice that would still make sense to wear casually at home.

“Please be more specific.”

It said cute loungewear was okay if you were going on the offensive.

It even had links to some example outfits.

There was this fluffy hoodie and shorts set with a bunny theme—the hood had rabbit ears.

“Whoa. Th-that’s too much...”

I was getting dizzy just picturing myself wearing that.

“Hiina would probably look good in it.”

And just picturing her, I knew she’d look super cute.

Oof. I don’t think I can do this.

I was pulling at my hair when I received a message from Takamori.

Hey, since we’re not filming tomorrow, how about we meet up?

“Tomorrow?!” I yelped.

I realized I wasn’t actually ready when I asked him.

Shoot, but if I say no, who knows when I’ll get the chance again. What if he changes his mind? What if I change mine?

“I’m a lance... I’m a lance... I don’t go sideways, much less backward...,” I mumbled under my breath.

I typed my reply and hit the send button before my resolve wavered.

Sure. Let’s meet up in the morning. We can have lunch at my house.

N-now this is aggressive! I’m the sharpest lance there is!

Takamori’s reply came soon. My phone pinged again while I was still shaking from my lance move.

OK. I’ll text you back when I leave my house.

Takamori’s coming over tomorrow...

I looked through my wallet.

“L-let’s go buy some clothes right now...”

We had no filming scheduled for the day, so under the scorching sun, I went over to Torigoe's place.

It was late at night last time, so I wasn't able to tell, but it seemed like they had lived in that old single-family house for many years.

It was basically my first time at a girl's house, if we excluded Fushimi's and Himeji's.

And since Torigoe said we'd be having lunch there, it would also be the first time I'd ever eaten at somebody else's home (excluding my childhood friends').

I hope they like the sweet bean jelly I brought.

Gifts like these probably weren't needed with close friends, but considering how her mother seemed to hate me, I figured it'd be better to bring something.

I looked down at the sweets in the paper bag. They'd seemed perfect when I bought them, but looking at them now, they seemed...lacking.

"Man, I'm getting nervous."

I steeled myself and rang the doorbell. Immediately, I heard steps coming from beyond the door.

The door opened and...a little girl showed up.

"Uh, erm, I..."

What do I say? Should I introduce myself? Why am I overthinking this? It's a little girl! Where's Torigoe?!

I thought she'd be the one answering the door; I wasn't prepared for anything else.

"Where's Torigo—? Shizuka?"

"Shizuka's over there." She pointed inside the house.

“Argh! Why?! Hey, Kuu! Who told you to answer the door?!”

I sighed with relief as soon as I heard Torigoe’s voice.

Hurried steps followed before she finally appeared at the door.

“H-hey, Takamori.”

She fixed her hair after all that running.

“Sorry, did I get here too early?”

I gave the girl hugging Torigoe’s legs a strained smile.

Is that...what she usually wears at home?

My little sister wore shorts that were incredibly short to the point you could almost see her hip joints.

Meanwhile, Torigoe was wearing a pink flared skirt and a dark blue sleeveless blouse.

“Oh no. Sorry about my sister.”

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head.

Her sister looked up at her.

“Shizuka, where’re you going today?”

“Nowhere.”

“But you’re wearing outside clothes.”

“...No, I always wear this at home, remember?” She replied hurriedly in a low voice.

“Who’s this?”

“He’s my friend. Hey, did you say hi?”

“Yes.”

Don’t lie, kid.

It was then that I remembered Torigoe had three siblings.

I stood there in wonder until she finally introduced her.

Kurumi. Four years old. The youngest.

Little Kuu stared at me with big, round eyes.

I had no idea what to say, and before I could think of anything, she grinned and turned around and dashed away.

“C-come on in. Don’t mind the old house.”

“Okay.”

I borrowed a pair of guest slippers and followed her upstairs.

“Torigoe, were you thinking of going out today?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Those *are* outside clothes, aren’t they?”

“...No. Inside clothes they are.”

Why’re you speaking like an alien?

“By the way, the rest of my family won’t be back until the afternoon. It’s only Kurumi and my grandpa on the first floor, so make yourself at home.”

“Cool.”

I felt a bit at ease knowing her mother wasn’t around.

Despite Torigoe saying it wasn’t necessary, I still thought I should at least say hello.

“Also, since it’s an old house, it might get hot.”

“I don’t mind. It’s not that much different from mine.”

“Cool.”

I caught a glimpse of her pale legs as she went up the stairs.

Deguchi was right: They were thin. And they were really pale due to her tendency to stay indoors.

I looked down right away; I might see something else if I kept looking up.

“Did your mom say anything?”

Honestly, my main objective was to talk with her mother, rather than to hang

out with Torigoe.

“She was glad to hear I was having a friend over.”

“Ooh.”

Why would she be happy I'm coming, though? I mean, after how she looked at me yesterday...

Wait, did she not tell her who was coming?

Torigoe's room was the farthest back on the second floor.

It was a simple Japanese room, about one hundred square feet. She only had a bed, a big bookshelf, a desk, and a chair. Very Torigoe.

The Japanese-style interior really suited her.

Compared to the hot corridor, the air-conditioned room felt cool.

She seemed to have put everything in order before I arrived.

“D-don't stare too much.”

“Relax, I'm not gonna go looking for porn mags.”

“I don't have any.”

I figured this had to be the time. I handed her the sweet bean jelly.

“Here, uh, this is, y'know.”

“What? I don't know. A gift?”

“Y-yeah. Y'know, a token of appreciation, for inviting me over.”

“O-oh, you didn't have to.”

She seemed to appreciate the gesture. Now I just had to hope the actual contents wouldn't disappoint her.

Sweet bean jelly doesn't disappoint... Right? Man. I think I messed up! I should've gone for something more popular!

I felt like I was putting my lack of experience on full display.

Perhaps it was excessive of me to bring a gift just because I wasn't used to visiting people's houses.

I was getting more and more embarrassed by the second.

Torigoe glanced at the bag, and I couldn't take it anymore.

"I-it's sweet bean jelly."

"Wow. Fancy."

And that was it.

I sighed in relief at her typical reaction.

"You can sit wherever you like. I'll bring some tea... Oh, or do you prefer coffee?" She popped her head back inside the room for that last bit.

"Tea, please. Also, I want you to give that to your mom."

"Huh? Why?"

She shot me an icy glare.

"I told you it's meant as thanks for having me over."

"Oh."

She looked down as she left.

I hope her mom likes the jelly.

She said to sit wherever, but it didn't feel right sitting on her bed, or even on her chair.

Fushimi and Himeji usually sat on my bed, but I couldn't do that on my first time in Torigoe's room. So I sat on the floor.

"..."

I was restless.

I hadn't visited Fushimi's or Himeji's houses lately, so I wasn't sure how I'd feel there, but I was sure I wouldn't be as nervous as I was now.

The door slid open a bit, and Kuu peeked in from the other side.

...This is not a zoo, little lady.

I waved, and she waved back.

Cute.

“You’re Shizuka’s friend?”

“Y-yeah. I am.”

Mana was great with kids. She was always playing with our little cousins when the family got together. On the other hand, I stayed away. I had no idea what to do. The best I could do was answer her questions.

“Ah. Kuu, open the door.”

“Kay.”

The door opened all the way, and Torigoe came in, holding a tray with cookies and tea.

“Here you go. You could’ve sat on the chair or even the bed, you know?”

“I feel more at ease here.”

“Okay, weirdo.”

Kuu was still staring at me.

“I’m closing the door,” Torigoe said.

At those words, Kuu walked back toward the staircase.

I grabbed the tray while Torigoe took a folding table out from her closet.

I placed it on top of the table and took a sip of tea.

“Have some cookies, too, if you like.”

And so I did.

The flavor of butter spread throughout my mouth, enhancing the crisp texture and leaving behind a mildly sweet aftertaste.

“Oh, it’s good.”

“Glad to hear.” She smiled, then timidly raised her hand. “Actually, I baked them.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you could bake.”

“Y-y-yeah. I can. Mm-hmm. It’s not that hard...” She shook her hand, saying it was nothing.

Rather than doubting her skills, I just couldn't picture her being interested in cooking.

““ ...””

Torigoe stared at me as I ate the cookie.

...This is awkward.

“Oh right!” She got up and opened her closet again.

She reached up high.

Dainty shoulders and thin arms. The skin peeking out from her sleeveless blouse was as pale as her legs.

I got a peek of her armpit.

I'm not sure why, but I felt like I shouldn't have, and I looked away in a hurry.

Torigoe sat back down before me, a book in hand.

“Here. It's the one I told you about, the one they adapted into a movie.”

“Oh right, the suspense novel.”

“I have a lot more from this author, too. They write mystery, romance, and all sorts of genres...”

She stood up again and started looking for other novels on her bookshelf.

I got curious about what she had on her bookshelf, so I stood beside her.

I didn't know most of the titles. A lot of capital-L Literature.

I doubt she has the BL novels out here in the open.

Then our shoulders touched.

“Ah, sorry...”

“No, I'm sorry.”

And our eyes met.

I only noticed then, since I tried not to stare too much, but she was wearing makeup.

Her long eyelashes fluttered.

“T-Takamori...?”

“Oh, sorry. Was I too close?”

I tried taking a step back, but then she grabbed my arm.

“Takamori!”



“Yeah...?”

I waited for her to say something, but time just passed by.

Torigoe’s face was frozen in a serious expression, but her cheeks got redder and redder.

“There’s more cookies, so eat up.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

She let me go, so I went back to the table.

I heard her sigh.

“See, reading novels is all about picturing the scenes in your head. I think reading some might serve as reference for your movie.”

The table was full of books now.

Torigoe gave me an excited introduction to each and every one of them, but there were too many; I’d already forgotten about the previous novel the moment she began explaining the next.

“Hold on, Torigoe.”

“Hmm?”

“Just give me one for now. You can lend me another once I’m done with it.”

“Oh right. I’m sorry, yeah, I shouldn’t dump them all on you at once.”

She was visibly bummed out.

“No, no, it’s fine. Don’t worry. It’s just that I don’t read fast. I wanna take my time.”

“Okay, then take this one.”

She handed me the book she showed me first.

It was a hardcover. A thick boy. I wasn’t sure I could finish reading the whole thing.

What’s worse...the title had “Part I” in it.

"It's a bit long, but it's really good!"

Torigoe started excitedly talking about it again.

Wait...

I looked at the bookshelf. Parts II and III were just as thick.

Well, it's gotta be real good if she's pushing for this one.

I steeled myself to read the trilogy to the end.

"Come to think of it, Fushimi said she got into reading because of acting."

"She did?"

I nodded.

"Was there a reason why you got into reading, Torigoe?"

I asked out of pure curiosity. She thought about it for a while before hugging her knees.

"I've always been a bit of an outcast since I was in grade school. I was bullied, even..."

Things got heavy all of a sudden.

Her posture almost exposed the inside of her skirt, so I turned aside and leaned against the bed.

"I didn't know what to do during breaks, and by chance I read a children's book for a book review and really liked it, so I went to the library looking for something similar. That's how I got into reading."

I understood the feeling.

It just so happened that her way to forget about everything going on around her was through reading.

"So maybe you wouldn't be into reading if you had met us back then."

"Maybe."

I tried envisioning it. Fushimi would've probably gone to talk to her right away. And then she would've joined our little group.

“Gosh, what’re we talking about? We’re here to discuss your film.” She wore a wry smile.

“Right. I’ve had that in mind since you began talking about your books,” I said jokingly.

Torigoe frowned dramatically.

“Well, you should’ve said so.”

“Nah, you were having too much fun. I couldn’t.”

“...Yeah. I am,” she muttered, so quietly I could barely hear her, before burying her face in her knees.

Only the whirring of the AC remained.

I tried getting back on track and took out my literature notebook, where I’d taken notes for my own film.

“I’m thinking about making an even shorter film than the one we’re doing for the school festival.”

Torigoe raised her head.

“By the way, are you thinking of submitting it into a contest?”

“Huh? A contest?”

“Yeah, like an indie film contest for high schoolers.”

Like a film festival...? Huh, I hadn’t even considered it.

“You should aim for one of them; I think it’ll make you more motivated.”

“Torigoe... You always bring up a good point.”

“I don’t. I’m just saying.”

I tried looking it up on my phone and, sure enough, I found some.

There was a big one hosted by a newspaper company, one hosted by a film director, and one limited only to high school students. There was a huge variety.

“There’s this one with a deadline at the end of August. What do you think?”

Torigoe showed me her phone.

This one was sponsored by a big movie theater chain.

I read a bit of the details and saw they had multiple categories, including the one I was going for: short film.

"It has to be under twenty minutes, live-action, and any theme works. It fits."

"Well, I don't think I can win a prize."

"Don't get defensive. That much is obvious."

"You don't mince your words, huh?"

She was right, though.

"Anyway, let's get working on it. You gotta have something to submit before worrying about winning or losing."

"Right."

Actually making it came before any contest.

We did it like last time: I'd tell her my ideas, and she'd ask questions about anything that caught her interest.

Little by little, I could see it taking form.

"I'll go make lunch. You wait here."

We took a break. She told me where the bathroom was before leaving the room.

I never imagined I'd be submitting it for a competition, and now it was my goal.

I felt like my butt itched just from thinking about it.

Was this how Fushimi felt when auditioning?

I got up to head to the bathroom. I went downstairs and heard voices: "You should've told me you were coming home," Torigoe said.

"It's not just a friend, is it?" It was Torigoe's mom.

Her tone was dreadful; clearly, I wasn't welcome.

I knew it. She didn't say it was me.

"So what? It doesn't concern you."

"Why do you lie to me?"

Crap. It's my fault; I can't leave things like this.

I had to say hello and explain everything about her breaking curfew.

I steeled myself and peeked out, when I saw Kuu pointing a phone at me.

Is that your mom's? Please stop.

I took a deep breath and slowly approached the voices, then opened the door.

It was the dining room. Torigoe and her mom were glaring at each other from either side of the table.

"I'm sorry I didn't say hi earlier."

Both of them looked at me. I bowed to her mother and noticed the bag of sweet bean jelly was on the table.

"Th-thank you for having me over. My name is Ryou Takamori. U-um, that's... I brought you a little g-gift..." I timidly pointed at the bag.

"It's fine, Takamori. Don't worry. You can go upstairs," Torigoe said hurriedly, anxious about my sudden appearance.

You know I can't do that.

"So it's you who's been playing around with my Shizuka?"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am."

"D-don't apologize. It's my fault."

Torigoe tried to pull me out of the dining room.

I had to give a proper explanation, though.

I took her hand off my arm, showing I was serious.

"She's a nice, quiet girl. You shouldn't be dragging her around late at night... What if something happened to her?"

“Yes. I understand. I’m sorry.”

Then I realized how articulate I was when apologizing.

Probably thanks to Mana having me on such a short leash. Thank you, Mana.

“And you, too, Shizuka. Why did you lie, saying it was a friend?”

No word about the jelly, huh?

“I didn’t lie.”

“I specifically asked you if it was Takamori, and you said no.”

“I...”

You couldn’t just tell her the truth, huh?

No wonder her mom was suspicious.

Even if they were all small white lies, the more they piled up, the less she could trust you.

“Shizuka, I’m not mad about you having a boyfriend...”

“H-h-h-he-he-he’s not my b-b-boyfriend!”

Torigoe turned as red as a tomato.

“I’m worried because you don’t have any friends, and now you’re playing around at night... Isn’t that your fault, Takamori?”

Playing around... Would she even listen if I told her we weren’t doing anything she was imagining?

“If I may explain what we were doing...”

Even so, I told her everything. That we were making a short film for the school festival. That Torigoe was in charge of the story. And that she ended up staying till late because of the meeting.

You could cut the air with a knife, but all the while, Kuu was having fun on her mother’s phone.

“Kurumi, don’t play with my phone.”

“Kay.”

I felt a bit reassured by her cheerful voice.

“Now I understand you’ve done nothing wrong, Takamori. Sorry for shouting at you.”

“Please don’t worry about it.”

I shook my head, forcing a smile, as she shook her head.

“Why do you have to get in the way? I just want to hang out with my friends! I got him to come over and now you’ve gone and...”

“Get in the way?!”

Things were about to get heated once again, but then Torigoe turned around and ran away from her mother and the dining room.

I didn’t know what was the right thing to do, but I saw tears in Torigoe’s eyes. I gave a quick bow to her mother and ran after her.

“Torigoe, hold up,” I called out, her back facing me.

“I’m fine. Like always. All okay.”

Doesn’t sound like it. You never say that.

Even from behind I could tell she was wiping her tears away.

As soon as she got to her room, she grabbed a bag from her closet and started putting clothes, including underwear, inside it.

“Wait, what’re you doing?”

“...”

She checked she had her wallet and phone and picked up the full bag.

“Torigoe, don’t tell me...”

“I’m leaving. Don’t stop me.” She sniffed.

How is this all okay?

“Hey, Shizu! What’s up, Bubby? You two were hanging out?”

Mana asked us as soon as we entered the house.

“We were... So anyway, can she stay over?”

“What?” She widened her eyes and blinked repeatedly.

Her mother should’ve heard all the noise when Torigoe was packing and when we left, but she didn’t even bother to check.

At first, I thought Torigoe had someplace to go, but nope.

We had *udon* by the station, since the whole incident made us miss lunch, and we talked it out there. In the end, I decided to take in the runaway girl.

“She’s staying over?! That’s why she’s got that bag?!”

Mana seemed happy about this.

I still wasn’t sure of what was going on in Torigoe’s mind, so I waited for her to answer.

“Erm, yeah. And I would appreciate it if I could...stay over for a few days.”

“Ohh...I see, I see. You’ve got something going on, hmm, little lady?” Mana said theatrically, probably imitating some anime or manga.

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Okay! You can stay here as long as you want.”

Mana giggled and asked her to come on in.

I figured we didn’t need to go to my room, so we went to the air-conditioned living room. Mana was folding the laundry while watching drama reruns on TV. A true housewife.

“So...Torigoe, now what? What’re you gonna tell your mom?”

“I’ll think about it later.”

That was unlike her. Or perhaps I just didn’t know this side of her.

“Bubby, don’t drive her into a corner. She had nowhere else to go, right? She can’t count on anyone but you, right?”

“Not really.”

“What I’m saying is, you gotta give her the support she needs, even if the rest of the world is against her!” Mana puffed out her cheeks.

You sure come up with some ridiculous fantasies, huh?

“Let me help, ManaMana.”

“Aww! Really?! Thank you!”

Mana let her take one of the many messy mountains of laundry.

The laundry was mostly divided into Mana’s clothes, my mom’s, and mine. And she gave Torigoe my clothes.

“Heads up, Shizu! You’ll find Bubby’s underwear in there!”

“Huh?!”

Torigoe froze as she was folding a T-shirt.

I immediately took away the whole pile.

“Don’t give her mine!”

“No need to be so embarrassed about it, Bubby. You always get to see my bras and panties, too.”

Torigoe looked at me with dead eyes.

“I do not! Torigoe, believe me. I don’t.”

Please shut up, Mana.

“If Shizu’s gonna be living here, then this is something she’ll have to go through. Got it? Prepare yourself for Bubby to stare at your laundry.”

“Don’t listen to her, Torigoe... I don’t look at anybody’s laundry.”



“I brought the good ones, so you can look.”

Torigoe gave a peace sign. She was emotionless, though, so I had no idea what she was thinking.

...So I can look. Stop joking around.

“You heard her, Bubby. Lucky bastard.”

“I said I don’t do that.”

Before they could continue poking fun at me, I ran away and took my laundry upstairs to my room.

I turned on the AC and dumped the clothes onto my bed, then sat down beside it.

Mana welcomed Torigoe with open arms, and I was sure Mom would understand, too.

“But what’s *she* gonna do now?”

She totally broke her promise to explain things to her mother. Or rather, maybe she forgot entirely about it.

The reason behind her mother’s suspicions was because Torigoe had come over to talk about the movie and ended up returning home late. And she did all this without telling her mother, thinking that as long as her mom never found out, it’d be okay and she’d save herself from being nagged. But in the end, her mom did find out and ended up nagging.

I folded my laundry while thinking. I wasn’t used to doing this—the clothes ended up all crumpled. It made me appreciate how good Mana was at this.

After I finally got to talk to Torigoe’s mother, I found out she was actually a pretty reasonable person. There was no need for all this friction, if Torigoe would only talk to her.

The woman was overprotective, sure, but Torigoe was also at fault for lying, even if they were harmless lies.

I finished folding my clothes when I got a text from Mana.

Shizu and I are going shopping for dinner! I’ll tell Mama about the whole

thing.

Cool, I texted back.

Setting aside the issue with Torigoe and her mom, I was glad Mana was having fun. She sure liked sleepovers. She'd already stayed at her friends' houses a few times this summer vacation.

I sent Mom a text saying a friend would be staying over, too. Having Mana tell her was for the best, since she trusted her more, but I also had to give her a little heads-up of my own.

I turned to my desk and took out my notebook—the one with all the notes on the things we talked about.

Now that it was decided the film would be under twenty minutes, it'd definitely be shorter than the one for the school festival.

Thankfully, the short I had in mind only had one character. I just needed a few people in the background.

I took a look at the competition's website again.

The judges ranged from film and video directors to screenwriters, agency employees, and more.

Even if I didn't win, maybe I could leave an impression on just one of them.

The mere thought motivated me to work hard.

Mom came home at night and said, "I've heard all about it, Shizu. No worries," the moment she saw her. Torigoe was petrified, while Mom was super chill about it and lightly patted her on the shoulder as a greeting.

Then the four of us ate the dinner Mana made.

Given how well Mana and Mom received Torigoe, dinner went by without any real problems.

Torigoe slept in Mana's room, and the next morning, since we had filming, we went to school together.

"You take after your mom, huh?"

In what sense? I wondered.

“I mean, just the air around you two is pretty similar,” she added.

Fushimi joined us on the way. I told her about the situation without going into too much detail.

“Whaa?! Aww, how nice! You should’ve invited me, too!” She pouted and booed at me.

“I figured you’d be busy. And you’re usually asleep by ten, no?”

“Wha?! What’re you, an elementary schooler?!” Torigoe exclaimed.

“No! I can stay up later if it’s a sleepover!”

I doubt it.

“Come to my house today or tomorrow, Shii.”

“Huh? Um, are you sure...?”

“Yeah! It’s not fair that only he gets to have you.”

“You’re taking things far too lightly...”

I was about to say Torigoe wasn’t doing this for fun, but then Himeji joined us.

“Shizuka? What brought you here today?” she asked, confused.

And once again, I explained what happened.

“You’d only be bored staying at Hina’s house. Come over to mine.”

“Why do you have to diss me? I’m not boring!”

Torigoe laughed as she saw Fushimi puff out her cheeks.

“Okay, I’ll go to yours afterward, Himeji.”

“You’ll see. You’ll have way more fun over at my house than sleeping at ten o’clock with Hina.” She grinned.

“Can you ever speak without belittling me?!”

Fushimi made a weird sound as she gave a forced smile, as if she was grinding her teeth.

Himeji just quietly smirked.

“I am so sorry for telling the truth.”

“C’mon, the day just began. Stop fighting.”

I tried to placate their anger.

“Come to think of it...” I turned to Torigoe. “Why not go to Shinohara’s house? Wouldn’t you be more at ease with a girlfriend than with me?”

“No, I’ve never been to Mii’s house.”

Weren’t you friends in grade school?

“Oh, I guess there are some families like that. So her parents don’t let her bring friends over?” Fushimi asked.

“Nope.”

I see. So that’s why.

Either way, Torigoe may have few friends, but they were all good people. Mana, Fushimi, Himeji, Shinohara.

Her mother really had nothing to worry about.

◆ Shizuka Torigoe ◆

For the second night, I stayed over at Hiina’s house.

“You never bring friends other than Ryou over.”

Her dad welcomed me with wide eyes.

“Is that a problem? I’ll have you know, I have friends other than Ryou.”

Hiina pouted like a child.

“Um, my name is Shizuka Torigoe. Nice to meet you. Thank you for having me today.”

I bowed in a hurry.

“Please, make yourself at home.”

“Th-thank you.”

As soon as we finished exchanging greetings, Hiina cut in.

“Okay, you’ve had enough talk with the high school girl, old man. You’ll give her cooties.”

“Don’t be absurd...”

His troubled smile somewhat resembled Hiina’s.

“Let’s go, Shii.”

She walked upstairs, and I followed after her.

“Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

Hiina’s room was cute.

She had a study desk that looked like she’d been using it since grade school, bright green curtains, a box shelf full of DVDs, and another one full of paperbacks.

“You can borrow anything you want.”

“Thanks.”

I glanced at her lineup and noticed she had no blockbusters or bestsellers. Not many people would think this was a high school girl’s book collection just by looking at the spines.

“Did you call your parents?” Hiina asked as she sat down on her bed.

“Huh? Uhh...”

I didn’t even tell her I’d stayed at Takamori’s place. I only said I’d be spending the night somewhere else, and I hadn’t checked to see if she responded.

“Didn’t Ryou go over to your house?”

“Huh? Takamori? Ah...” *She must be talking about yesterday.* “Umm, he said he wants to make a film of his own, so he came over to talk about it.”

“Oh. I see.”

He hadn’t told her about the film?

Then she doesn’t know he wants me to star in it, either.

“So we basically switched roles from when we were planning the movie for the school festival. He wants me to help him out with it.”

“Mmm... I know about movies! Why don't you ask me?!” she exclaimed in a joking tone, puffing out her cheeks.

...Cute.

I think I should tell her.

“Actually, he wants me to star in it.”

“I...see.” Her voice became lower.

“He says I fit his image of the character perfectly. No idea what that is, though.” I chuckled self-deprecatingly.

I figured it wasn't a happy story; he was probably trying to go for something gloomy.

Nonetheless, the fact that she wasn't considered seemed to have shocked Hiina much more than I would've imagined.

“Ugh... I'm sure he chose you because I don't have the skills yet...” She grimaced.

After failing the audition, Hina had lost confidence in herself.

“But see, I told him he should figure out the script first, and maybe I won't fit his image anymore then.”

Would he ask Hiina to star in it instead, then?

He'd only need one main character for a short film under twenty minutes.

I felt a sharp pain in my chest at the idea.

He'd only be choosing the right person for the role... So why?

“First he gets a job out of nowhere, then he learns how to handle all this equipment, and now he wants to make his own film... I thought I knew all about him, but I guess I don't. It's a little sad.”

Hiina wore a lonely smile.

“It makes me realize how much he's grown... I don't want to bother him, so

let's pretend you never told me, okay?"

"Huh?"

"I'll only help him when he comes and asks me to. So meanwhile, you take care of him, okay?"

I never would've thought she'd say that.

She had to be frustrated about the fact he'd only told me about it, let alone that he wanted me to star in it, not her.

I realized she was able to say that because she trusted him. Trusted him to make his own decisions.

"...Okay. If you say so."

My bad side came out.

I felt like I had the upper hand now. It wasn't my intention to benefit from this, and yet the idea crossed my mind.

"I'll make sure it's the best short film ever."

"Oof... That'd be amazing, but now I'm really jealous!"

I was also jealous of her, of how easily she put her thoughts into words.

She was both a source of envy and inspiration for me.

We changed into more comfortable clothes, and by the time we were done talking, her dad texted her to say dinner was ready.

We went downstairs to her very clean dining room. There were four plates on the table, including mine. The other three belonged to Hiina, her dad, and her grandma, who had been doing housework up until then.

Her grandma looked to be in her fifties and was super pretty. She was probably older than she appeared.

No wonder Hiina has such good looks. It's in her blood.

It was then that I remembered I didn't know anything about her mom. Were her parents divorced?

I decided it'd be best not to ask. I was curious, but I didn't think I could handle

what could come next.

“Torigoe, I don’t mind you staying over, but I hope you’ve notified your parents,” her dad said.

“Ah, yes... I’ll send a text.”

“Don’t bring that up while we’re eating, Dad. Also, I’ll charge you a fee for every word you say to her.”

“Why are you so hung up on that?”

Despite Hiina’s harsh treatment toward her dad, dinner went by peacefully.

We went back to her room afterward, and I opened my messaging app.

I had unread texts from my mom. All from yesterday.

I didn’t reply to any of them and instead typed I’d be staying at a friend’s house again tonight.

Don’t cause them any trouble. Have fun.

It wasn’t the response I was expecting.

My mom was too much of a worrywart—I didn’t want to worry her or have to go through her lectures by telling her everything I did, or have her asking questions about every little thing, so I usually just kept quiet or told small white lies.

In the end, I only made her worry even more once she found out.

Perhaps this wouldn’t have happened if I just explained everything about my current relationships.

Maybe she wouldn’t have been so worried if I hadn’t been bullied in second grade.

I looked at the time; it was past eight.

“I’m sorry, Hiina. I think I should go home.”

She blinked a few times before smiling.

“Okay.”

I gotta apologize.

It's all my fault she's so worried.

She only suspects my friends because I don't tell her anything.

I can't have her thinking ill of them any longer.

Hiina's dad drove me home.

Hiina tagged along, too, so it wasn't an awkward car ride.

I said good-bye and waved as the car drove away. The bag full of clothes weighed on my shoulder.

I silently put the key in, but the door opened with a creak.

"Shizuka!" Kuu welcomed me at the entrance.

"Hi."

"And your friend?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah. I hung out with a friend today."

Kuu shook her head sharply.

...What?

Then I saw my mom's phone in her hand.

It looked bigger than it was in her tiny hands.

Kuu had discovered Internet videos recently, and she would watch them when Mom couldn't keep an eye on her. She'd even learned how to take pictures with it.

I peeked into the kitchen, and I saw Mom's back. She was doing the dishes.

There was only one plate left on the table: wrapped leftovers.

"...You didn't have to make my portion."

Why do it? I told you I was spending the night out.

"You could've come home on an empty stomach. I know you; I figured you wouldn't eat your fill at another person's house."

I bit my lip, as I tried to force down the lump in my throat.

She was right. I ate a third of what I usually did, both at Takamori's and at

Hiina's houses.

"I'll take it."

I grabbed my bowl and served myself rice.

I sat down and unwrapped the food.

"...Mom, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for lying to you, for not telling you about stuff, for everything."

I apologized repeatedly.

I felt terrible for worrying her. The fact that she welcomed me home like always had me tearing up.

"Takamori's a good kid. You can bring him here again."

"...Yeah." I sniffed.

"And not just him. All your friends... They're good people."

"I'm glad you know that."

The dinner wasn't anything special, and it was already cold. But it tasted of tears.

Kuu rubbed her eyes and left the phone on the table.

"Mom...", Kuu called out.

"Yes, I know."

It was her bedtime. Mom picked her up and left the dining room.

I hope she didn't take any pictures.

I grabbed the phone—she didn't have a passcode. I opened up the camera folder.

As expected, she'd taken a few photos.

"I know me saying this won't really ease your worries, but, um..."

I tapped on a video. I heard a familiar voice and saw a glimpse of Takamori.

"Huh?"

Then the camera showed only their legs.

Going by the furniture, he seemed to be sitting in the same chair I was.

I paused the video and checked the metadata—it was taken this afternoon.

I remembered what Hiina said.

“Didn’t Ryou go over to your house?”

I thought she was talking about how I asked him to come over yesterday, but...she meant this?

Maybe this was also what Kuu was asking about when I got back home.

...What did he come here for?

“We’ve been making a film for the school festival, and Torigoe...I mean, Shizuka came up with the story for it. You may think her excessive reading habits make her seem like a gloomy girl, but thanks to it, she’s become very good at storytelling.”

What’re you...taking about...? Geez...

“But people call kids like her nerds, no? Geeks.”

“...Yes, that’s true. But that’s not a bad thing, per se.”

“I wanted her to be more normal. After she got bullied because of that...”

“But you see, a nerd is simply someone who has a lot of knowledge about a certain topic. Torigoe... Shizuka is very normal. I mean, if you get down to it, all teachers are just nerds in their particular subject.”

He was talking about me with my mom.

The strange video immediately made me feel embarrassed, but my curiosity got the better of me.

“Normal is a hard thing to define. Honestly, there’s nothing I can really say with pride that I like this. I think it’s great that she even has something she’s so passionate about that she can completely immerse herself in it.”

“What’s he...saying...? I didn’t...ask him to do this...”

I could tell how serious he was from his tone alone.

There was a rustling noise, and now the camera properly had both of them in

frame.

“Also, I was worried the sweet bean jelly was an odd choice, so, um...I brought this.”

“My, thank you.”

How come he’s so mature in the weirdest ways?

“Shizuka really is as serious and hard-working as you believe her to be. I think she only kept quiet not to worry you... A-and also, if it’s any consolation, I am the class representative. Neither she nor I are friends with any delinquents, or anything like that.”

He even used his position. But why did he do all this? It was my fault. He didn’t have to do this.

I looked at the table and found a paper bag. The gift he brought this time was *dorayaki*.

Sticking with Japanese sweets, huh? I chuckled.

I sent the video to my phone.

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

“Aww... I wanted to go to Shii’s house, too!”

Fushimi, Himeji, Mana, and I were on our way to school. We had filming today.

“So in the end, what did she do?” Himeji asked.

“She didn’t sleep over and went back home.”

Probably not out of homesickness, I figured.

I’d gone to her house yesterday in secret to speak with her mother.

I knew it was quite presumptuous of me, but the misunderstandings were cleared up, and it seemed I got her mother to understand her hobbies.

“I’m her close friend, too... Closer than you, even, I would say,” said Fushimi.

“You’re telling me I should’ve known my place?”

“I think even *I’m* closer to her than you, Bubby.”

“I mean, probably. It just so happened I had business with her.”

Fushimi furrowed her brow in frustration as I was invited over before her.

Even Mana seemed disgruntled.

Girl, you’re not her classmate. You’re not even her age.

“I also believe myself to be quite close to her. So if Ryou can go, then I reckon all of us can, too.”

“What’s with that logic?”

Ask her first.

“I guess we should ask her.”

Fushimi took out her phone and texted Torigoe, despite the fact they’d be meeting in less than thirty minutes.

“Oh, she replied. She said yes!”

Fushimi showed us her phone screen with a giant grin.

“I knew she’d say yes!” Mana exclaimed.

I took a glance at the text and noticed she included everyone present.

“Wait, I’m going, too?”

“Well, since we’re at it, why not?”

I’m just an extra?

After a long walk in the heat, we arrived at school. And there she was.

“Shizu! Morning!”

“Morning, ManaMana. Everyone.”

We all greeted one another and entered the school.

It was a bit more tolerable inside, but still hot.

“We’re going to your house today once we’re done!”

“Okay. That’s cool.”

...Should Mana really be joining us?

I got worried all of a sudden. Her *gyaru*-ness could be too much for her mother.

“Don’t expect too much. My house is pretty small.”

“So long as you’ve got AC.”

“Of course I do.” Torigoe chuckled. “Oh, and I’ve got *dorayaki* for everyone.” She glanced at me.

I told her mother not to say anything, but it seemed she didn’t keep her promise...

“Mom said she got it as a gift.”

Okay, good. She did.

“Should we buy something else on the way?” Himeji suggested.

“Oh, nice idea,” Fushimi agreed.

“Yeah, let’s go buy some snacks at the supermarket!”

My childhood friends and little sister got all excited about the prospect of shopping.

“I’ll try to keep them quiet when we’re over,” I said.

Torigoe shook her head. “It’ll be fine.”

Will it? Have you heard how loud Mana can get?

Oh, wait. She’ll have fun with the kid. She’s the best person to get along with Kuu, actually.

I guess things always turn out okay for her... It might be because she’s pretty much perfect besides the whole gyaru thing.

I narrowed my eyes in dissatisfaction. Not fair.

Torigoe changed the subject. “So about your film. I’ve been thinking about it... And I’m sorry. The more I think about it, the more I feel like the protagonist shouldn’t be me.”

It was a very serious and Torigoe-like response.

“And I say this because you’re taking this so seriously. If you really want to make something good, then I don’t think I’m the best person for the job.”

She seemed to have thought really hard about it.

“I’m very grateful you told me about this first and asked me to help you. I would like to still support you in any way I can besides starring in it.”

I hadn’t even considered it, but I answered right away: “Thank you. I would really appreciate it if you could help me with the screenplay, then.”

She nodded.

“Really, it should be me thanking you... Thank you, Takamori.”

But you’re the one who’s gonna be helping me.

Now I was pretty sure she knew I was the one who brought the *dorayaki*.

I was afraid she’d say it was a bad choice; it didn’t feel like something a high school girl would love, that’s for sure.

“I don’t know what you’re worrying about, but I’m pretty sure you’ve got it wrong.”

“Are you a mind reader?”

“I’m shocked. You don’t seem like the type, but you sure have the guts at the weirdest times.”

The other three arrived at the classroom before us. They were waiting by the door.

“B-Bubby, were you flirting?!”

“No. We’re just talking.” I sighed.

Torigoe giggled, and with a smile, she whispered so only I could hear her: “I’ll introduce them to my mom. It’s time I tell her about my friends.”

Seeing her expression, I knew she wouldn’t run away from home anymore.

“So, did you think about it?”

It was break time at work.

I was sitting on the bench beside the vending machine, taking a sip of coffee from my paper cup.

“I already said no.”

“Geez. Don’t be so quick to answer.”

Mr. Matsuda had bought me the coffee, and he had just bought his own and sat down beside me.

“Himeji doesn’t know about this, does she?”

“Aika should be okay with it.”

“Should”? So you haven’t asked her.

“Well, she should say so herself, if that’s the case. I don’t think this is something someone else gets to decide.”

“Ohhh, youth...”

What’s with that reaction?

He crossed his legs.

“Oh, well. We’ll talk about this again later.”

“Please don’t.”

He had zero intention of yielding, almost as if he knew he could convince me somehow.

“Changing topics, what did you think of our short film? It’s not done yet, but what do you think of the progress so far?”

Mr. Matsuda had said he’d give me advice on our school festival movie, so I

showed him what we had.

“It’s like...you’re a little too into the idea of being a filmmaker, Ry.”

Ry was what he called me.

“Too into it?”

“Yes. I mean, it’s something all beginners go through. You should come back to it after you’ve built up more experience and you’ll see what I mean. It’s like you’ve got tunnel vision and aren’t really thinking about what you’re doing.”

He’s really being critical like it’s nothing...

Hearing that straight to my face... Kinda sucks...

“So I have tunnel vision, and I’m not thinking...”

“Hey, let me finish.”

He poked my shoulder.

That’s giving me the jitters, please don’t.

“It’s your first time making a film, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s pretty good for your first time.”

Huh? He’s praising me now?

“You look confused. See, all that talk about you having tunnel vision is something you’ll only realize after you’ve gotten better and reflected on your past self. Right now, it’s not an objective assessment of you.”

“So...what is?”

“It feels like you’ve been studying up quite a bit.”

I heaved a long and heavy sigh.

“Can’t you start with that?”

“It wouldn’t be fun if I just praised you, would it?”

Stop teasing me.

“It’s very well studied, despite the amateurishness.”

“Did you need to add that last bit?”

“See, Ry, I think you’re the type to grow through teasing.”

Am I?

Honestly, I wanna grow through praise.

He was a professional producer, after all. Perhaps he had a way of knowing the best method for making every one of his idols grow.

“By the way, did you watch the concert video I gave you?”

Oh right. He gave me that.

I’d just thrown it on my desk; the case was accumulating dust.

“Not yet. I haven’t found the time.”

“I see. Well, give it a watch whenever you can. Her performance is great.”

We finished our coffee at the same time. We threw the paper cups in the trash and went back into the building.

Back at the manager’s office, I opened my laptop and checked what new emails I’d received when Mr. Matsuda called me over.

“Ry, c’mere.”

“Yes?” I said as I stood up.

Why did he call me over to his desk? It’s only the two of us here, and we always chat about everything from our seats.

Once I got there, he handed me a bunch of documents.

“I’m thinking about doing this.”

Mr. Matsuda was terrible with computers—for that reason, the documents were all handwritten.

The project name: *Ai Himejima Backstage.*

“What’s this...?”

“I wanna do a documentary on Aika.”

“Huh.”

I'd seen shows like that before.

The document outlined plans for filming, written in very pretty handwriting.

"It's gonna be about her debut as an idol and rise to popularity, followed by her woeful retirement due to health issues, and her grand return to the limelight after her recovery."

It sounded like a good story for a documentary.

"And I want you to shoot it."

"Huh... Uh... Huh?"

"You don't wanna?"

"Oh, it's not that I don't want to, but... Are you okay with me doing it?"

"Why would I ask you otherwise?" He replied with a serious expression. "I don't want something overproduced; I want her true self on camera. So you're the best one for the job. In terms of cinematography technique, you know the bare minimum now, so really, it should be fine."

I didn't have a reason to say no.

And more than anything, I felt happy knowing my efforts up until now were being recognized.

"I'll do it. Please let me shoot it."

"Good. It's in your hands, then."

He didn't actually want me to film her 24/7 like some shows do; I just had to record some material on her daily life, her rehearsals, and her enthusiasm for her new role, all of which would go through editing later.

Then he would use the footage to create a reel to promote her.

"There's a list of questions for her on the second page. Ask all of them, okay?"

I flipped the page and saw the long list—about thirty questions.

"All of them?"

"We don't know which ones we'll use, so we need as many as we can get."

"I see... Got it."

Having parts that you won't use wasn't very common when making films, since you're supposed to have everything planned out from the beginning.

But for documentaries, you needed more shots than you expected in order to make sure there was enough usable footage to make a finished product.

The questions ranged from lighthearted topics like her favorite food, her favorite artist, and her favorite actor, to more personal stuff like her type of guy and her idea of a perfect date.

Will I be able to ask all this?

I felt like, even if I could, she'd say something like, *Why do I have to tell you this?*

It's gonna be tough...

"Oh, hello, Aika? Working hard as always, yeah? Hey, about that thing we talked about..."

Mr. Matsuda started speaking on the phone with Himeji.

"Ry's gonna be shooting it."

Then there was a loud noise. She was yelling so loudly, the sound was clipping.

"Gosh, keep it down. You gave me a heart attack."

Mr. Matsuda put the phone down on the desk and turned on speaker mode.

"Ryou?! Why?! H-h-h-h-he's gonna be following me around? How often and how close, exactly?!"

Himeji sounded like she was at her wits' end.

"Well, isn't that obvious? He's gotta film *everything*."

"Wh-whaaaaaaa? I can't do this!"

Mr. Matsuda was grinning the whole time, enjoying Himeji's reaction.

You didn't tell her it wasn't 24/7?

"He's here, by the way."

Now that he mentioned me, I spoke to her.

“Hey, Himeji. Relax. He told me I don’t actually have to follow you everywhere.”

“.....Ahem. So you’re in charge of filming, hmm? Just make sure not to drag me down.”

She feigned coolness after clearing her throat.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Y-yes. G-good. You better.”

“Aren’t you glad he’s the cameraman, Aika?”

“Not in the slightest! Why would I be?! He’s just my childhood friend who just so happens to be shooting amateurs! Why would I care who’s the cameraman?!”

“Geez. Your *tsundere* levels are off the charts.”

“Tsundere?! No! Freaking! Way!”

““Keep it down.””

The clipping was terrible; Himeji’s yells far surpassed the volume limits of the speakers.

“Anyway, I’ll check both of your schedules to set a filming day, and I’ll let you know later. Bye!”

Himeji was still shouting and shrieking, but Mr. Matsuda paid her no mind and hung up.

He sighed. “Looks like our princess is crazy happy about it.”

I hope so.

Perhaps she showed me her true self, but would she still do that on camera?

“So, good luck, Ry.”

And so the matter was settled.

“Where are you going today?”

I asked from behind the handycam.

“Rehearsal for my play.”

Himeji glanced at me before looking away.

“In that outfit?”

“I’m changing later.”

“Oh, I see...”

Himeji upped her pace, trying to get away from me.

“Stop asking me about every little thing.”

“Don’t say that. It’s my job.”

It was the first day of shooting the documentary.

Himeji acted terribly tough when on camera.

“Don’t get in the way, okay?”

“I won’t.”

We arrived at the studio where she had her rehearsals for the musical. She entered without hesitation.

She’s been in a terrible mood the whole time. Will this be okay?

They were going to edit what I was filming now to make a promotional video, but Mr. Matsuda told me not to tell her that, because then she wouldn’t show her true self.

“Good morning,” Himeji greeted the staff.

“Morning,” I said in low voice while following behind her.

“Hey, you. You can’t film in here,” a good-looking college-age guy warned me.

I showed him the badge I had hanging from my neck like an amulet: “Reiji PA Documentary.”

“Um, I’ve received permission. Is there any problem?”

Mr. Matsuda had told me he got permission. So there shouldn’t have been any issues.

The guy immediately understood.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure not to film during practice.” I bowed.

“Thank you.” Himeji bowed, too.

The guy in the tracksuit responded in the same manner and walked through the door.

“That’s the rehearsal hall.”

I took a peek inside. It was about the size of a classroom, with mirrors covering the walls. There were a few people already inside stretching and chatting.

“It’s dance practice today, so I’m not that nervous.”

“Because it’s your specialty?”

“Yes. They told me I was the best in this aspect during the audition, too.”

Himeji got visibly more confident.

“Right, it’s a musical. You need to know how to sing and dance.”

“This should be the perfect chance to show just how much better I am.”

Show who?

She walked past the rehearsal hall, farther down the hallway, and entered a smaller room.

“So are you going to follow me everywhere? Did Mr. Matsuda tell you to film me in my underwear?”

“He wouldn’t do that...”

She pointed behind me, and I saw the sign on the door: *Women’s Changing Room*.

“Whoa?! I’m not doing this on purpose.”

“How can you not realize...?” She sighed.

There were a few steel lockers, and bags and backpacks on the shelves. All clearly women’s items.

I hadn’t intended on following her here, so I stopped the camera and tried leaving, but then I heard a few girls approaching.

“Ryou, c’mere.” She pulled me by the collar before I could exit. “You can’t go out now.”

“Why...?” Then I realized where I was and what I was holding in my hand. “Oh, sh-shoot.”

I look like a Peeping Tom!

The voices were drawing closer and closer.

“No choice. Get in here. You’ll be fine in here.” Himeji opened a locker.

My whole life’s gonna be over if this goes wrong!

I was only reaping what I sowed, but I couldn’t let myself get arrested.

I entered the locker, and she softly closed the door.

I could see outside through the vents.

A girl my age and two most likely in college or maybe a bit older came in. All three of them were as pretty as Himeji and Fushimi.

Then Himeji stood right before the locker, blocking my view.

Right. They’re here to change.

“Himejima, do you mind?”

“Sorry, I’m using it today. Would you mind grabbing another locker?”

I couldn’t do anything but silently cheer on Himeji.

“What? I always use that one.” Her voice was harsh.

“Yes, but I’m already using it... I’m sorry.”

“You think you’re hot stuff just because you’re the lead?”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

It was entirely my fault for being here.

I’m sorry, Himeji.

Then another voice joined the conversation.

“Why are you even the lead in the first place? Your acting sucks ass.”

Himeji would usually say something to that, but this time, she was keeping quiet.

“This should be the perfect chance to show just how much better I am.”

I felt she was being too competitive, like always, for saying that...but she really was in the middle of a battlefield.

“Hey, don’t say that to the poor girl. It’s not her fault the higher-ups forced her into this.”

The words of the third one appeared to be in her defense, but her tone indicated otherwise.

I wanted to argue back, but I couldn’t come out now...

I know!

I took out my phone and played the video I’d taken the other day at Torigoe’s house.

“Friends! Let’s play!”

It showed Kuu smiling ear to ear.

“...Did you hear something just now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I...I think I heard it, too...”

Himeji moved her head a little, trying to look back at me, but she stopped herself and turned back to the front.

“Friends! Let’s play!”

I played it again, and silence fell.

“What? Is there...something here?”

“I—I heard it this time... It’s saying *let’s play*.”

“G-gosh, stop joking around.”

Then I kicked the locker. The clattering echoed louder than I expected, and Himeji jumped up in surprise and cowered. Thanks to that, I was able to see outside again.

The three girls were looking all around, pale in the face.

“Himeji, follow along,” I whispered, before playing the same video again.

“Friends! Let’s play!”

Himeji was at Torigoe’s house, so she should’ve recognized Kuu’s voice.

“...Oh, haven’t you heard? This room is haunted,” Himeji said.

Silence fell.

“But it’s a good ghost, so don’t worry. She just wants some friends to play with...”

They all gasped.

“Maybe she’ll choose one of us.”

That did it. One of them shrieked and ran away; another scurried right behind; and the third fell to her knees and crawled out of the room in tears.

“...Pfft. Ha-ha-ha.” Himeji laughed out loud.

“Hey, stop laughing and let me out.”

Himeji finally remembered I was locked in and opened the door.

“Sorry I made you go through that.”

“No, they’ve been like that from the beginning. They’ll take any chance to insult me. Serves them right! Ha-ha-ha.”

Himeji started cackling again just remembering how they looked.

After she had her fill of laughing, she put on a serious face again.

“I have to thank you. I don’t think that’ll change anything, but I feel better now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Still, how did you come up with that?”

“It’s summer.”

“Is that somehow related?”

“No, I just wanted to say it. It’s not like haunted houses are only open during

summer.”

“Right.” Himeji laughed again, finally relaxed.

“Don’t mind what they said. I think you’re good enough.”

“Huh?” She looked confused.

“Acting. That’s pretty much what you just did.”

“What do you know about acting?”

“Not much, but hey, if you were a terrible actress, they wouldn’t have been that spooked.”

Himeji broke into a smile.

“So, are you going to stay here forever? I want to change.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll go now.”

I made sure I didn’t forget anything, and that there was no one outside before leaving the changing room.

Oh right. I forgot to say.

“Good luck with your rehearsal. Show them you’re better than anyone else, Lady Aika.”

“What’s gotten into you, silly?”

Himeji waved with a bashful smile before closing the door.

I was borrowing a different camera for the documentary, so after completing the scheduled shooting for the day, I went back to the agency to return it.

I figured Mr. Matsuda gave me a different one so he could check what I filmed right away.

He wasn’t in the office, so I took a peek at the footage on my own before leaving.

I filmed stuff on our way to the rehearsal, just a bit inside the building, and I asked a few questions on our way back.

“I think with some editing, most of this is usable... Maybe.”

It totally lacked the feel of a promotional reel, but I suppose the pros would take care of that.

“Ah-ha-ha. What’s with that question?”

Himeji laughed after I asked about her favorite animal.

“I think it’s weird, too, but hey, it’s on the list.”

“Okay, okay... Cats, I guess.”

“Why?”

“They look really cute when they thrust their front paws out and streeetch all the way.”

“Hmm, yeah, I think I get it.”

These sorts of documentaries usually also interviewed people who are close to the star, but Mr. Matsuda didn’t ask me to do that, so I didn’t.

“Ryou, how much longer are you going to take?”

Himeji popped her head into the office.

“Oh, sorry. I’ll head out now.”

I turned off the camera and left it on the desk before leaving.

Her house was closer to the rehearsal hall, but instead of going straight home, she followed me to the agency.

The train back home was empty due to the late hour.

We sat quietly side by side for a while until she finally broke the silence.

“Don’t tell Mr. Matsuda about what happened in the changing room.”

“I won’t. I don’t report every little thing.”

I knew how important it was to her to keep up appearances; I understood she wouldn’t want that reported.

“And it’s not that rare.”

“Huh?”

“It happens all the time among girls.”

She made it sound like the same thing happened back when she was an idol.

“Weren’t they all older? Why were they acting like middle schoolers, then?”

“That’s women for ya.”

Is that really it?

Then I remembered Fushimi, too. Although they never confronted her like that, people talked behind her back.

“I guess it’s something all pretty girls go through?” I said nonchalantly.

Himeji stared at me. “Huh? What?”

“I mean I’ve noticed it happens to all the pretty girls.”

Her eyes opened wide.

She tried to say something, but then pressed her lips together gleefully.

“What?”

“So you’re saying that I’m pretty? Hee-hee.”

That’s it?

“Am I not just stating an objective fact? As in generally speaking?”

“I’m shocked you have the ability to judge correctly.”

“Oh, please.”

“And, generally speaking, wouldn’t you say guys tend to end up with their pretty childhood friends?”

She batted her eyelashes provocatively.

“Something being a tendency also means there are exceptions. And where did you even get that idea?”

“I’ve done my research.”

“I’m guessing you’re the only source.”

Himeji giggled and tapped her sandal against my feet.

“You’re a funny guy.”

“...Thanks.”

“What? You’re getting embarrassed?”

“No, I’m not.”

We arrived at our station and walked home.

“Wait, my house is this way, Ryou.” Himeji tilted her head as I walked past the spot where we always said good-bye. “Yours is that way.”

“I know. It’s only an extra five minutes, it’s not an issue.”

“Wow, so now you’re trying to rake in the Ai points?”

“The what?”

“You always say good-bye here when you’re with Hina.” She narrowed her eyes as she complained, then shrugged. “Oh, fine. It’s not too late to score points, I guess.”

“What are you talking about?”

We walked all the way to her house, and she turned around right before the entrance.

“Thank you for today. You know, for everything.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“We’re also close to finishing our short film, so let’s keep it up!”

She waved good-bye, then pranced her way inside.

As she just said, most of our classmates had already completed their parts, and we only had about ten or so scenes left to shoot.

I asked Mr. Matsuda for advice when we were about halfway through filming, and he didn’t have anything to say in particular.

It may not have been harsh criticism, but that made me worry in and of itself.

I got home and decided to check the footage and plan for tomorrow’s filming.

We were expecting the finished product to be thirty minutes long, but it might be a bit longer.

Then I noticed a case beside my computer. It was the disc containing a recording of Himeji's concert.

Mr. Matsuda had said she looked amazing, so I got curious and popped it into the computer.

I opened the video software and pressed play.

It didn't seem to be an official DVD—the video was filmed from one fixed spot in the venue.

I found Himeji right away. She was singing and dancing on stage, showing everyone a huge smile.

I couldn't believe she was the same person I had just been with.

The audience was clapping in time with the music. The excitement was at its peak—everyone was in sync.

Mr. Matsuda was right in pointing out how bright Himeji's expression was.

She'd sometimes simultaneously raise her right thumb and index finger and bring it close to the left side of her chest.

I recognized that pose.

The people in the audience made a similar gesture and raised their hands up high.

"Wait, this is..."

Himeji and I came up with that before she moved. It was our own variation of the trademark pose from a *sentai* superhero show we used to watch back then.

It was our own little secret sign.

Did she do that all the time at her concerts?

"Hey, Shinohara, I have a question about your Lady Aika."

I phoned the most knowledgeable person I knew.

"What? What do you wanna know?"

"You know that pose she does with her finger and thumb? Did she do that all the time?"

"She did. But...why don't you ask her? Why me?"

"It's easier if I ask you."

"O...kay."

"So, did she only do that during concerts?"

"Pretty much. You could also use it to expose posers, since only those who actually went to the sanctuary knew about the sign."

Wow, gatekeeping much?

And wait, did you just call the concert venue a "sanctuary"?

What's so wrong about being a casual fan anyway? I held back asking to save myself the long lecture.

I should've realized how knowledgeable she was about venues from the way she talked about the hall where Fushimi had her stage play.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Among fans..."

The long explanation ensued.

I couldn't stand it any longer. The moment she took the shortest pause, I said thanks and hung up.

"...I should've asked her directly."

Yeah, it was *that* long.

I had already forgotten her explanation of what it meant.

The only words that remained in my mind were that she began everything with "probably...", "a theory is...", and "maybe...", so it seemed like not even the biggest fans knew.

I figured Himeji just thought it looked cool enough to use for when her dancing called for it.

As I reached my conclusion, I got a phone call from Mr. Matsuda.

"Hello? How are you, sir?"

"I'm doing good! Thank you for the filming today, Ry. I just got back and checked the footage. It's great. This is just what I was looking for. I'm surprised she can even make expressions like these."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Keep up the good work!"

Oh, hey, maybe he knows about it.

"Actually, I was just watching one of her concerts."

"Oh, is that so? Isn't she great? It was one of the group's best concerts, in my opinion. The raw emotions had me in tears, like..."

Oh, no. It's happening again.

I cut to the chase before he kept going.

"I was wondering, the hand sign that she does, do you know what it means?"

"Oh, that? The finger gun?"

Finger gun... I guess it does look like that.

"She said it's like a variation of the V-sign... I believe it means I love you."

I got a text notification sound.

New blooper reel just dropped!

I uploaded a compilation of the scenes that were no good onto the class group chat.

The reactions came immediately: LMAO; Look at this guy's face; Put some emotion into it, man! Lol.

Not everybody was present during every shooting, and even when they were, there were only some funny expressions I got to see as the cameraman. I figured they'd get a kick out of these, and they really did.

We were behind schedule, but still making progress. There were only two days of shooting left.

Even with the delay in filming overall, we were actually ahead of schedule, so we should be done in time for the school festival.

The only issue seemed to be that the music team was having some trouble, so we had to take that into consideration.

In any case, the completion of this film was in sight. As for the other one...

Ryou, let's do our homework together!

I got a DM from Fushimi.

You don't doubt for a second I haven't done mine, do you?

And you're totally right.

Since we had no plans for tomorrow, we decided she'd be coming over.

The good thing about having a childhood friend was that they knew you very well.

Around this time, I should've had about two-thirds of my summer homework done, but I hadn't even started. And because she knew me well, she wasn't even surprised. Instead, she was even more motivated.

"I'll work out a schedule for you so you can finish all your homework without issue."

"I don't think that's possible at this stage."

"It's gonna be all right. We just have to set aside four hours a day!"

"That doesn't sound all right."

How can you say that with a smile?

"Don't worry about me, just start working on it."

"Yeah, yeah."

I took a sip of the barley tea Mana brought for us and grabbed my mechanical pencil.

Then I made some progress: I finished one problem in the workbook.

"Oh right. Fushimi, I'm thinking of making another movie after the one for the school festival. Would you like to act in it?"

Fushimi was furrowing her brow hard, coming up with the schedule. Then she put her pen down.

“Do you think I’ll say no?”

“No.”

“But look, you have to finish your homework before you can work on it.”

“Huh?”

“What are you so surprised about? This should be your priority.”

Fushimi slapped the pile of workbooks.

“Why do you have to be so strict?” I said.

“You should’ve done it earlier, then.” She looked away.

Dammit... But my strategy every year is waiting to be called into the staff room and hoping for the teacher to give me an extension...

“But I was thinking about entering it into a contest.”

“A contest...?” She turned back to look at me, clearly interested.

“Yeah. There’s this movie theater chain holding one for short films, and it’s limited to only high schoolers.”

I opened up the website; it’d be easier for her to just read the details directly.

“You should’ve said so sooner!”

“So...no homework?”

“I gotta rearrange the schedule!”

Phew, I’m saved?

“So, if it’s just a short film under twenty minutes, and you have the script, we should only need one day for filming.”

That’s true...

In comparison, she was in high spirits as she revised the schedule.

“You have to give it your all to finish this! I’ll help you out with your homework, too. Let’s do this!”

I begged her to let me focus on the film first, but she refused.

“...Fine. Fine. Okay, I’ll do it. Four hours just isn’t possible, though.”

“It’s totally possible. Two hours after waking up. Two hours before going to bed. There you go: four hours.”

No way. I don’t think I can even do thirty minutes.

Four hours of studying a day is simply beyond my limits.

“I’m so glad you’ve become more positive overall after you took up filmmaking.”

“Have I?”

“Yeah. At least it looks like that to me.”

She smiled ear to ear.

“And you need to get it into your head that four hours of studying over summer vacation will be absolutely nothing compared to next year when you’ll have to prepare for university entrance exams.”

I got chills.

Then I remembered that Mr. Matsuda had asked me to try to convince Fushimi to join his agency.

“By the way, Fushimi, Mr. Matsuda, from Himeji’s agency, said you could come to him if you’re looking for work.”

“Ai’s agency?” She blinked repeatedly, then shook her head. “I’m interested, but no, thank you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, it just seems a bit sus.”

I mean. The guy? Kinda.

“You think that, but he’s a decent guy.”

“I don’t have the same skills that Ai has yet, and I just want someone who values me for my acting skills.”

I guess that makes sense.

I was with the guy all the time at work, so I knew him. But that wasn’t the case for Fushimi.

He wasn't a judge at any audition, and he didn't really know her, either.

From Fushimi's point of view, Mr. Matsuda was just a shady guy in show business. Logically, it made sense why she wouldn't jump at the idea.

And there was also that thing about Himeji he brought up.

"Ryou?"

"Oh, never mind." I shook my head and looked down at the workbook.

The video of the concert crossed my mind the moment I lost focus.

According to Mr. Matsuda, Himeji's hand sign meant *I love you*.

It was a pretty normal message to convey to her fans, if you thought about it.

"When I asked her, she said it was a message." Mr. Matsuda said when we talked about it.

I guess I'll have to ask Himeji directly about it.

"Ryou, sorry to interrupt you," Fushimi said.

"What's up?"

"It says here the winner gets one hundred thousand yen. Did you know?"

"Yeah."

"Gosh, what should we do if we win? Let's go to a super-expensive restaurant, how does that sound?"

"I doubt we'll win."

"You never know. I'll do my best, and you'll do your best. It could happen!"

Where do you get all that optimism from?

"Okay, if we prioritize filming over homework, then maybe..."

"No, I'm not falling for that."

She wasn't gonna yield at all, huh?

I was being serious there, you know?

"There shouldn't be that big of a difference between you and other contestants. You're all high schoolers. And you will have the experience of

having completed a film very soon.”

“Stop getting my hopes up.”

I’m actually beginning to think I could win.

Fushimi finished working out my schedule, then grabbed my laptop and took it over to my bed to watch the footage for the school festival’s film.

“Ahh! I look like that?! Oh my gosh!”

She wriggled and floundered around on my bed and buried her face in my pillow. Then she looked at the screen again and repeated it all over.

“It’s really almost done, huh...? Okay, I’ll keep watching just a bit more...”

She kept on watching with a shy smile. It didn’t take her long to shriek and squirm again.

I was getting a little embarrassed, too, having her watch my work right in front of me.

But I was also glad to see her reactions.

Fushimi, red to her ears, squealed again and pounded my pillow.

I remembered it all of a sudden when my group mates were deciding on what poses to make when introducing themselves.

The group had just come together.

My sign consisted of bringing your right fist up to the left of your chest, then raising your thumb and index finger.

"How do you like this?"

Ryou put on a curious expression when I timidly suggested the idea.

"What's that?"

"It's a sign."

"For what?"

"For..."

I had been thinking about it ever since it was decided I'll be transferring schools. I was nervous when I brought it up. I said it was like a riff on the trademark pose of a superhero show we liked, and it immediately clicked with him.

Thinking about it now, it made no sense to come up with a sign when we weren't going to be seeing each other anymore. No wonder he found it strange at first.

"Sounds good. Let me try it."

Then he mimicked my pose.

I liked Ryou (back then, of course; I'm only talking about when we were kids), and he liked me—I just took it as a sign for expressing our feelings.

I should have realized that my leaving would mean we would have no real chance to see each other, let alone speak face-to-face. We exchanged letters

for a while, but the chance for us to show each other the sign never came up again.

But maybe, just maybe, he would know about my idol work and come see me. I only made the pose during our concerts.

The audience copied me, since it was such a simple sign.

My group mates asked me what it meant, but I said it didn't mean anything. I didn't care what other people thought of it.

I didn't care so long as he came across it and remembered it.

Yet...not only did he forget about that happening and the sign, he seemed to have forgotten all about me. He was leading a happy high school life with Hina. I was burning with jealousy and anger.

"Oh, I forgot to mention. I gave Ry one of your concert DVDs."

Mr. Matsuda brought it up in the car after he picked me up from voice training.

"One of my concerts? H-huh. I see. O-okay."

My heart skipped a beat, then raced at a thousand miles per hour.

Which means he...saw my sign?

"I gave it to him like a week ago, right after the audition. I wanted him to see what you were like onstage."

Mr. Matsuda giggled as he turned the steering wheel.

"Wh-who asked you to do that?"

"Oh, what's the harm? He's gotta see how good you are. Don't tell me you've never wanted to show him. You play it cool, but I know you do."

I knew he wasn't trying to make fun of me with the "play it cool" part; it was praise, really—I took it like he thought it was part of my charm.

Sure enough, I wanted to show him my performances. I always went out there with the cutest outfits and did my best singing and dancing.

But I didn't know what I'd do if he brought it up the next time we met.

“By the way, he’s pretty good at filming, yeah? The footage for the documentary is turning out great.”

You should tell him that.

I had no idea what happened, but when I came back, Ryou seemed to lack self-confidence.

“Wh-why are you doing all this? Giving him my DVD, having him follow me to shoot a documentary...? Isn’t he just a subordinate like any other for you?”

“Yes, I would say so. But he’s not just that for you, is he?”

The simultaneously handsome and feminine old guy turned back toward me and winked.

“Yes, I suppose he is my childhood friend. I’ve known him forever.”

“Yeah, yeah. Right, uh-huh.”

“What’s with that reaction?!” I yelled.

Mr. Matsuda giggled.

“I don’t think he thinks nothing of you, you know?”

“Huh...? H-huh? W-w-wait, wha-what do you...?! H-he thinks something of me...?”

“You’re burning red.”

“Argh!” I hid my face behind my hair. “D-d-did he say that? Wh-what makes you say that?”

I looked away, toward the window. I could see my red face reflected in the glass.

The day I showed him the sign came to mind.

“Mmm... That’s a secret.”

“...What? You’re making things up, aren’t you?”

“I am not.”

“Is that so?” I gave him a suspicious look.

“What was the other childhood friend’s name? Fushimi? She’s great, too, isn’t she?”

“...She is. Why?”

“Let me tell you one thing, Aika.”

What’s he gonna say now?

I stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

“If you really hold him dear, then you should grab on to him tightly.”

“...That’s your advice?”

“Just keep this pretty gal’s warning in mind.”

You’re calling yourself a pretty gal?

I thanked him for taking me all the way home and said good-bye.

I knew what he meant by that, really.

Honestly, I wanted him to leave me alone. Stop spurring me on. But he had a point.

Then I got a text from Ryou.

Is he going to bring that up? I was on edge.

Ready for filming tomorrow?

That was it.

“I should’ve expected that.”

I felt just as relieved as disappointed.

I took a deep breath to clear my head.

Yup! Just be careful with what you film, okay?

We used to send each other a letter every few months. But we haven’t called each other on the phone or hung out ever since I transferred away. Yet we could text each other now and get a response within minutes. We could meet up and tell each other *see you later* when going home.



I won't deny how happy that made me.

"I have singing practice today," I told Ryou.

"Right, it is a musical, after all," he muttered, while holding up the camera. "Isn't it a lot of work? Acting and singing and dancing."

"Is it? I like dancing and singing, so I'm enjoying it more than if it were just plain acting."

"Oh. Cool."

We arrived at a different studio from last time. I greeted the staff and went inside.

As I was changing my shoes, someone called my name.

"Morning, Aika!"

Yasuda came up to me from behind, showing off his shiny, white teeth.

The model was tall—his grandfather was from England or something.

"Good morning. I'm looking forward to our rehearsal today."

"Hey. G-good mornin'." Ryou awkwardly greeted him after me, camera in hand.

Yasuda narrowed his eyes after looking at Ryou's face and the filming permit hanging around his neck.

"You got the camera boy here today, too, huh? Wow, aren't you a superstar."

"Oh, it's nothing. My manager just wanted to do a little backstage shooting."

I waved it off with an awkward smile.

Another actor called for Yasuda, so he waved bye and walked off into the hallway.

"By the way, did I tell you? That guy is my partner in the play."

"Seriously? He's a pretty good-looking guy..." Ryou gave an ordinary response. "Come to think of it, you're using Aika Himejima as your stage name now, huh?"

That's all you have to say?

“Ahem. You know, we’ll be holding hands and hugging each other on stage.”

“Oh, is it a love story? I just realized I don’t know anything about the musical.”

“Yes, it is...”

That’s what caught your interest. Geez, you blockhead.

Mr. Matsuda said he thought *something* of me, but was he really right?

The studio was about the size of a classroom. I stood in a corner, looking through the lyrics and humming to the rhythm.

Being the lead role, I had the most parts out of the whole cast.

This was my second singing rehearsal for the musical. It was a bit different from just singing normally, so I also reviewed the notes I took of what they told me last time.

I glanced at the camera filming me.

“Don’t mind me.”

“I-I’m not! Why would I ever?!”

I noticed everyone in the studio looked at us.

I shrank out of embarrassment.

Ryou widened his eyes at my reaction and softly tapped the camera.

“I meant the camera.”

“I know.”

“Don’t mind the camera.”

“...I can’t just pretend it doesn’t exist.”

“What I mean is, when you were reading the lyrics, you put on a documentary-like face. Don’t do that.”

...How could you tell?

More and more people came in saying *good morning*. Everyone scheduled for rehearsal was beginning to gather at the studio.

“Hey, Himeji, did you hear anything about me from Mr. Matsuda?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“If you don’t know, then forget it.”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“He told me he gave you a DVD of one of my concerts. Did you watch it? What did you think of it?” I asked very casually. It’s not like I really cared, I was still focused on reading the lyrics and notes.

“Yeah, I did.”

“I—I see.”

“You looked really cool. Your performance and outfit were impressive.”

“A-anything else?”

“This, too.” He made the pose.

“Y-y-you remem...ber?”

“Yeah, I remembered. It’s that thing we made up before you transferred, right?”

“Y-yes! That’s it!”

I thought he had the memory of a goldfish, but it seemed even he could remember things after a little push.

“It works great for concerts. The audience seemed to be having a lot of fun by mimicking it.”

“Why do you think it works?”

“I mean, it means *I love you*, right?”

In a way...but I don’t think you’re getting the actual nuance here.

I didn’t know how to explain it, and then the teacher called us to begin rehearsal.

Ryou left the room after realizing it was time.

I worried he’d get bored while waiting, but he had brought his laptop and school workbooks with him. He was going to spend the time editing the school festival film and doing homework.

Hina mentioned watching the half-completed film yesterday and excitedly shared her thoughts. But she just kept repeating the words “cool,” “great,” and “amazing,” so I figured I had to watch it for myself to form a proper impression.

The teacher nitpicked...er, pointed out parts I needed to work on, so I took note of it.

“You’re so diligent, Aika,” Yasuda whispered in a joking tone.

“I simply do anything I must to improve. I need all the help I can get.”

“Don’t say that, you’re not bad.”

I shook my head. “Thank you, but I’m aware of my shortcomings.”

Ryou came in again once our break started.

“Hey! Camera boy! You’re shooting today, too?”

One of the actresses (I hadn’t remembered her name yet; she looked around college age) called out to Ryou.

“Yes, I came here with her today, too.”

“Oh, so you’ve already been filming?”

“Yes.”

“Make sure I look cute on camera. Ryou Takamori, was it?”

“Yes. Yoshinaga, right?”

He knows her name?

“Yup! You remembered my name already? I’m amazed you’re a cameraman for an agency at your age.”

“Oh, it’s nothing... I just happened to be at the right place at the right time...”

What’re you looking so happy about?

“Ahem.” I walked up to the camera. “We’re taking a break here. Don’t forget who that camera’s supposed to be filming,” I said.

Yoshinaga looked at me, then at Ryou, then back at me, before smirking.

“Oh, I get it. I get it, yeah. Wow. Sorry, Himejima. I didn’t mean to intrude.

Excuse me. Soz.” She apologized graciously, clasping her hands.

I immediately understood soz was her silly way of saying *sorry*.

I grabbed a couple of paper cups to serve ourselves barley tea.

“Why are you standing all the way over at the entrance? Wasn’t the point to film me up close?”

Ryou was following me only by tilting and panning the camera.

I sighed.

While I was drinking my tea, Yasuda came up to me.

“Hey, Aika!”

“Hi.”

“Oh, is this for me? Thank you!”

“Huh? No, I, um...”

He grabbed the paper cup in my other hand.

Yasuda was quite easygoing, which I imagined was part of his appeal, but it just felt superficial to me.

“You got any plans for after practice?”

“No...not really.”

“Let’s grab something to eat. My treat.”

“Oh, sorry, I just remembered I have plans later.”

“You just made that up! C’mon, we’re both the leads. Let’s get along.”

“We just need to *look* like we get along on stage...”

“You don’t get it. All of this reflects in your acting. Everyone will notice the awkwardness.”

R-really?

“Give me one hour. Just one.”

“Um...”

“Let’s get Italian food, I know a great... Uh, would you mind?” He noticed Ryou approaching, camera in hand.

When did he get here?

“Oh, don’t mind me. This is just part of the job. You’re getting Italian food? Sounds good.”

“What? You’re coming with us?”

“I would have to, yes. The idea is to film Himeji...ma’s daily life from up close.”

“...”

Yasuda sighed in resignation and left without saying anything else. Ryou put the camera down after seeing him go.

“You don’t need to film that.”

“I wasn’t filming. I was just holding the camera up.”

“He said if we had some alone time, it’ll help improve our acting...”

“So you wanted to go with him because of that?”

“Yes,” I said, knowing full well I didn’t want to.

I didn’t want to get close to people I didn’t like to begin with.

“Hmm. Look, I don’t know anything about acting...but you didn’t look like you wanted to be with him.”

Why do you notice...only those things?

“You can tell from my expression?”

“Well, I was looking at you through the camera the whole time. Soz if I was wrong.”

I noticed he used the word out of pure novelty, but it just reminded me of my exchange with Yoshinaga, and I blew a fuse.

“No ‘soz.’ Don’t you ever say ‘soz’!”

“Geez, I’m sorry. Relax.”

“Gosh! What if that just makes things more awkward between us?”

I didn't really care, but the words just came out of my mouth.

"I said I'm sorry."

"Here, I don't want it anymore."

I tried handing him my paper cup with barley tea still in it, but he refused.

"I'll get my own cup."

"You're declining my goodwill?"

"You call this goodwill? It's just a sip of tea... At least refill it before giving it to me."

"Whatever. Drink it quickly. Break time is almost over."

I poured him some tea and handed him the cup.

Ryou stared at one specific spot, before spinning the cup around.

"Oh, you're being very careful about choosing the spot where you could get an indirect kiss, aren't you?"

"I'm making sure I *don't* do that."

"What are you, in seventh grade?"

"Oh, shut up."

He gave up trying to find the spot and just gulped down the tea.

"Good luck with the rest of your rehearsal."

"I don't need luck."

I felt more motivated than before.

Perhaps I was simpler than I liked to think.

I wrapped up filming Himeji, and the editing part began.

And said work had been outsourced to a third party, but it seemed things weren't going as scheduled.

"I can't believe that guy! He's going on my blacklist!"

I rarely saw Mr. Matsuda angry, but even he couldn't stand the situation; he'd been tapping his foot the whole day.

I asked what happened, and it turned out the "unbelievable guy" was the freelancer he asked to edit the documentary.

"It won't be ready in time?"

"We're supposed to be sending the video out in three days...but we can't find anyone else to do it instead..." Mr. Matsuda sighed and dropped his shoulders.

It's that hard to find someone to do the job?

"The good ones are always in great demand in this industry. Yes, *the good ones*. It wouldn't be an issue if we had the time, but..." Then he glanced at me.

"Ry...wanna give it a try?"

"Huh?"

"You're the only one I can count on! Please do it!"

He was entirely serious.

"Whaaa?"

Just like that? Isn't this supposed to be for promoting Himeji? Should a novice be taking care of it?

"Isn't it too much of a responsibility for me?"

"I'll take responsibility if there's any issue."

“Wow. How manly.”

“Don’t use that word! Call me reliable instead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Wait, so I shouldn’t use that word in general or...?

“Think of it like a business card but in video form; the idea is simply to introduce her and show people the work she does.”

“Can’t you wait more than three days, then?”

“No. We’ve got an internal audition for a gravure shoot coming up.”

G-gravure?!

The image of Himeji when we went to the beach crossed my mind.

“...” I shook my head hard to get rid of the mental image. “Sh-she’s gonna be doing gravure?”

“It’ll be for like a weekly manga magazine cover. You know the ones.”

“Did she say she wants to do it?”

“Oh, silly. All the big actresses nowadays have that sort of background.”

He listed some examples, counting on his fingers.

They were famous enough that even I knew them.

“What we really want, though, is this Pilkis commercial. That’s coming up in three days.”

Pilkis! It was one of my favorite probiotic drinks.

I remembered a variety TV show talking about how Pilkis was seen as the career gateway for young actresses going for a pure and innocent image.

“That’s a lot of pressure...”

“We’re not going in with high expectations. It doesn’t matter if she doesn’t get it. We don’t tell her about internal auditions until she gets past the first stage, anyway.”

That put me more at ease.

“The important thing now is getting a foot through as many doors as possible. Applying doesn’t cost any money. Think of it like how you shoot sperm but only one gets through.”

“Please don’t hit me with gross imagery like that out of nowhere.”

“Back on topic, it’s not going to be as long as that film you’re making. It’s just a promotional video. It should be about five minutes.”

“Five minutes? In three days?”

“I know it’s hard, but I don’t have anyone else I can count on but you.”

“That’s nothing. I can do it.”

“OH. EM. GEE. You’re so cool!!”

“I don’t think I can produce something of the quality you’re expecting, though. I will do my best regardless, but please keep that in mind, okay?”

I reestablished the facts. He put on a serious expression and nodded.

“I’ll be reviewing it, and I’ll ask for any changes I deem necessary.”

“Got it. I’ll give it a try.”

And so it was decided that I’d make her promotional video.

He gave me a list of scenes he wanted included, and I took note of them.

He also showed me some videos he wanted me to use as reference for how it should look.

With all that in mind, and considering we had no time and changes were more than likely, I started working on it as soon as I got home.

I still had some time to finish up the film for the school festival, so I prioritized the PV.

“Bubby, what’re you doing? It’s almost midnight.”

Mana, already in her pajamas, popped her face into my room.

“I know. I’m working.”

She came in and peered at my laptop.

“Bubby... What is this? This is Ai, isn’t it?” Her voice was low, and she sounded grumpy.

I glanced up and saw she was glaring at me with contempt.

“Yeah, I’m making a video for her...”

“You’re stalking her?! Did you get her permission to film all this?! You pervert! Idiot! Virgin Peeping Tom!”

“Wait! Don’t get the wrong idea! Listen!”

“I’m telling her, and I’m telling Mom! A-a-and I’m telling the police!”

“Himeji already knows.”

“Ai... You’ve developed these fetishes while you were away...? You roped my Bubby into your perverted fantasies?”

“Listen, for crying out loud!”

I lost almost an hour trying to get her to calm down and listen.

“Oh, is that it? Sozzy soz.”

She really thought she could get away with calling me a virgin Peeping Tom just like that.

Sozzy? Is that, like, the evolved form of soz?

“Ahem. Nice job, Bubby!” She gave a huge smile to make up for her mistake.

She changed her attitude as soon as she heard about the big job I had. *After calling me all that...*

“So, like I said, I’m working on this...”

“Lemme see. How much do you have done?”

I showed her the thirty seconds I had finished.

“...She’s so cute, isn’t she?” she said.

I take it that means I’m doing a good job.

“Maybe it’s because you’re the one filming. So... this is how she looks to you.”

“Isn’t this how she looks all the time?”

“Her expression is a bit different from what she shows me or Hina.”

I figured I had no way of knowing or comparing; apparently, she didn’t show the same expressions to me.

I turned back to my laptop, and Mana said, “Keep at it, Bubby!” before leaving my room while throwing me a million kisses.

“She only looks at me like this...?”

Only at me...

I’m probably just overthinking it, but could that hand sign...be meant for me?

I finished Himeji’s PV just in time.

It didn’t take up too much of my time, really. I was still able to do homework in between.

Mr. Matsuda had asked me to adjust it a bit here and there, but he never asked for really big changes.

As for how it turned out? These were his words: “Oh, this is great! It’s fantastic!”

Mr. Matsuda exclaimed loudly while watching it in his office.

I wasn’t expecting that reaction.

“I can totally send this out. Thank you, Ry. You saved us.”

“Please, I should thank you. I wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity and experience otherwise.”

Then he rummaged through his bag and took out his big, long wallet.

“Here’s your pay for this. Sorry I don’t have an envelope for the bills.”

Five ten-thousand-yen bills.

“Huh? Should I be getting this much?”

“It’s the fair price. And I’d be paying a lot more if I’d gone with that stupid jerk. Really, you’re saving us some money.”

He’s never forgiving that guy, huh?

"I wasn't paying you extra for the filming, and fifty thousand yen is super cheap if you take into consideration transportation expenses."

"Is that so?"

"You should be asking for more with your skills, whether you're confident in them or not."

My skills...

Encouraged by those words, I accepted the pay.

"Thank you. It's the first time I've ever had this much money. What if I drop it on the way home?"

"Ha-ha. Kids." He giggled his way back to his desk.

He noticed I wasn't going back to my own and looked up.

"What's wrong?"

"Mr. Matsuda, were you telling the truth?"

"About what?"

"About Himeji's hand sign."

"The one that means *I love you*?"

"I asked her about it."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she didn't say that."

Why would you make up such a lousy lie?

I had vague memories of that hand sign. I couldn't entirely rely on them, though, so I was avoiding asking her about it, but after we finished filming, I did: "I love you? *What? Uh, no.*"

Himeji got in a really bad mood, thinking that was how I remembered it.

"It's not that I thought that. Mr. Matsuda told me that's what it meant."

"I've never told anyone what it meant."

Aika's official answer was that it has no special meaning.

Then when I told her what I remembered about it, her mood improved a little.

Mr. Matsuda kept on working while casually apologizing.

“It seems I remembered wrong. Sorry.”

“If you say so...”

I was aware I didn’t have the right to harshly criticize him, but I felt there was something else at work here, due to that thing he asked me not so long ago.

“I also want to firmly reject the suggestion of becoming her boyfriend.”

It wasn’t something a third party should ask of us in the first place.

“But it’s not like you think nothing of her, right?”

“I mean, I guess.”

“I’ll repeat myself: She’ll be happy if you said yes.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“She would never. But I can tell. It’s obvious from the way she looks in the video, too. If that ain’t love, then what is?”

Suddenly, I remembered Mana had pointed out Himeji only showed that side of her to me.

“Maybe...but I don’t think it’s right to discuss this behind her back. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, youth.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated.

“Even if you don’t feel that strongly now, don’t you think it would be a good thing if this kick-started a lovely relationship?”

“...”

He said she would like it, but I never received direct confirmation from her.

Mr. Matsuda sighed at my lack of reaction.

“It’s only now that you get to worry about how much you may or may not like her. With the way things are going for her, you don’t know when she’ll get too busy for all that.”

He placed one hand on top of the other and gave me an upturned glance.

“Oh, well. I won’t force you to do anything, don’t worry. It doesn’t seem like you’re entirely opposed to the idea anyway; just give it some thought.”

I tried picturing what she would be like as my girlfriend, but I couldn’t even conjure it vaguely in my mind.

“Sometimes love comes unannounced, but sometimes you nurture it little by little. Keep that in mind, Ry.”

...That sounds deep.

The workday came to an end, and I left the office.

Now that I had some extra pocket money, I decided to get something for Mana, as thanks for everything she did for me every day.

◆ Another side ◆

Matsuda sighed as Ryou left for the day.

Once again, he checked the PV Ryou made. The quality was incredible.

It was obvious from the video that Ryou had a keen eye for filmmaking. Although there was room for improvement, it was more than worthy of praise.

Though he didn’t have formal training yet, this allowed him to instill his personality directly into his films.

Despite his sharp eye for this, however, the kid had an obtuse side. He was particularly dense regarding other people’s affections for him.

He was the type to not easily believe it even when he received sincere compliments.

Most people like that lacked something deep inside. It would make sense if that was also the case with him.

“He’s totally got the nature of a creator,” Matsuda muttered, before making a phone call. “Hello? Aika, how’re you doing?”

“Fine, thank you. What’s the matter?” she asked, sounding wary.

Matsuda said the promotional video was ready and thanked her for her hard work.

"It turned out great, all thanks to Ry."

"I see. That's good to know."

"By the way, Aika, you can't hide it anymore."

"What do you mean?"

Gosh, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

"You like the guy, don't you? You're madly in love."

"Huh? N-n-no way!!"

Matsuda had already moved the phone away from his ear, knowing she'd start yelling.

The sound coming from the speaker clipped; clearly, he had hit the mark.

"Looks like we've got an eruption at Mount Tsundere."

"What are you talking about?! With whom?! You're imagining things! Lies!"

Ai did not hear Matsuda's whisper over her own yelling.

"Have you seen your expression in these shots? Geez, you try to hide your horniness, but you're not doing a good job, dear."

"Wh-who're you calling h-horny?!"

"Aika, please. Honestly, I would've loved for you and Ry to date, you know?"

"Wha...? Wh-why would I ever d-d-d-date Ryou?!"

Having someone else point out her feelings for him only made her respond more negatively.

She's not that much easier to deal with, huh...? Just go out already, you couple of tiresome weirdos.

"You'll regret it. This might be your last chance to enjoy your youth. Once that musical succeeds and you get more and more work, you won't get to take it as easy."

That seemed to have hit a nerve; she let out a bizarre groan: “Gwaww...”

“You should’ve gone along with that hand sign meaning *I love you*, y’know. What’s the harm? Why can’t you make good use of what you’ve got?”

“Please stop trying to put weird ideas into his head.”

“So, what does the sign mean, really?” Matsuda asked.

She replied clearly, and said with glee: *“It’s a secret.”*

“Okay, at least you’re having fun... Anyway, don’t take your current lifestyle for granted, Aika. Make your move while you still can, or you’ll regret it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I got it, I got it. Thank you for your concern!”

She hung up right after yelling that.

Matsuda leaned back in his chair and sighed with a wry smile.

“What a piece of work, geez.”

Although they say—the more defiant, the cuter the child.

We were at *the* shopping spot in town: the Hamaya Station area.

“Bubby, let’s go look at that store!”

Mana walked briskly in the direction she pointed; I hurried behind her.

“What’s the hurry? Also, stop calling me that in public.”

“Why? Don’t you think it sounds cute?”

Does it?

“C’mon!” She pulled me by the arm.

I was suffering under the violent UV rays for Mana, who forced me to go shopping with her.

I wanted to stay inside and work on the film. It was too hot outside, and there was nothing I wanted to buy.

Mana, though, was best friends with the sun—she was as energetic as ever even under its strong, bright rays.

“I’m too old for this.”

Going out shopping with my little sister was a bit embarrassing, to be honest.

Not that I ever really had the chance to go out with anyone else.

“C’mon. You’ll be more popular like this.”

“How?”

“Guys who are kind to their families are popular with girls... I think.”

“I don’t care about that, either way.”

“Gosh, don’t you have a shred of youth in you?”

People like me exist. We are real.

We entered the mall, and Mana took me straight to the escalators, and we headed up and up. The building was air-conditioned, thankfully, so I wasn't sweating anymore.

"Here it is!" Mana sang.

The store she was looking for sold clothing meant for *gyarus*. Even the clerk was a total *gyaru*, makeup and everything.

"Okay, I'll be resting over there." I pointed at a bench outside the store.

"No, you're coming with me." Mana hugged my arm, refusing to let me go.

"Please, I'd just get in the way."

The store wasn't that big, and it was full-on *gyaru* city in there. It was even more awkward to enter than any other shop she'd take me to.

"But my anniversary!"

"Ugh... Fine."

Crap, she knows how to pull my strings.

She'd already used those words three times with me.

Last night, Mana asked if I had any plans or filming scheduled. I said no, and she said she wanted me to go shopping with her.

Usually, I would never say yes to this, but then she dropped the bomb: "It's my birthday tomorrow."

"Congratulations," I said on reflex, without any emotion, I think.

"I said *tomorrow*. Which is why I want you to come shopping with me."

"...Don't you have any friends for that?"

"I do."

"Then go celebrate with them..."

"You won't celebrate my fifteenth birthday?" She gave me a sad look.

I raised my hands in defeat.



“Please let your bubby celebrate your birthday, my dear sister,” I said flatly.

The words made her happy despite the lack of emotion. She hopped in place.

“Yay! Yes, I’ll allow it. ♡ Where should we go...? Oh, Bubby, I love you!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

And so *today* was my little sister’s birthday.

Anytime something wasn’t going her way, she’d say the magic words and get me to comply.

I resigned myself to doing everything she wanted today. She always cooked for me, even during summer vacation, and woke me up when I had an early start to filming; I had to thank her for all the things she did for me every day. And I had extra money now, too.

Mana was having a friendly chat with the clerk, holding a hanger with a troubled expression.

“Oh! Mana, is this guy over here your BF?”

The clerk got the wrong idea the moment our eyes met.

“No, we’re...”

Mana interrupted me with a strong nod.

“Yup!”

No, no yup.

“He’s my bae.”

Bae?!

“I was just wondering what sort of guy you’d date! This isn’t what I was expecting, though, I’ll say.”

“Yeah, I don’t like the gaudy type.”

“For real? Yeah, Mr. BF over here isn’t gaudy at all.”

I could only nod like a bobblehead.

Yup. If you look up “gaudy” in the dictionary, it’ll say “the opposite of Ryou

Takamori.”

“Enjoy your date!”

“Thanks!” Mana giggled.

Then she went inside the fitting room to try on the clothes she grabbed.

Mana had only said she wanted me to accompany her. She didn’t ask me to buy her anything.

Considering how friendly she was with the clerk, I suppose she comes here often.

“Um, miss.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any accessories you think Mana would like?”

The clerk’s eyes lit up in realization. She broke into a smile and showed me to the accessories corner.

“If you want something that’ll go with what she wants to buy...”

She recommended a few items. I chose the silver bracelet, which she said would easily match with most outfits.

We made small talk when Mana came back, shopping bags in hand. She gave me an icy look.

“What’re you doing?”

“Just talking.”

“Hmmmmmm.”

She didn’t look convinced.

Having finished shopping, we walked outside, and the clerk followed us to the exit.

“Mr. BF, please take good care of her. She’s a good girl.”

“D-don’t say that!” Mana desperately tried to stop the clerk.

“Girl, you’re so cute and so popular, but I’ve never seen you with a man

before.”

“Th-that’s true, but... Anyway! Good-bye!” Mana ran away.

Then I told the clerk: “I know better than anyone else what a good girl she is. Don’t worry.”

“Ooh!”

Then someone slapped my shoulder. Mana’s face was red.

“What’re you saying, Bubby? Let’s go! C’mon!” She pulled me away like I was a dog.

Once on the down escalator, Mana turned around and looked at me from below.

“What was all that for?”

“I just thought it’d be better to not have her worry about you.”

“I guess.” She frowned. “Anyway! Don’t you go after any *gyaru* that’s not me, okay?!”

What a weird demand.

I sighed. *Oh, and before I forget...*

“Here, Mana.”

I took out the accessory I had bought and hidden in my backpack.

“Happy birthday.”

“Wha?! What’s this?!” She took the bag, opened it, and squealed. “Whoaaa! It’s super cute! This is super my style, it’s super amazing!”

Her eyes shone bright as she repeated *super* again and again.

Hats off to the clerk. *I’ll ask for her help next year, too, unless Mana stops being a gyaru.*

“I love you, Bubby!”

She excitedly wrapped her arms around my waist. I pushed her away.

“Stop. We’re in public.”

“Okay!” She replied happily, then put on the bracelet right away and stared at it with a grin.

Himeji's PV was done, and completion of the school festival's film was within sight. Now I had to throw myself completely into a battle I did not want to fight.

"So here, Ryou, you..."

Today, too, Fushimi was in my room, helping me with my homework.

Himeji was busy with rehearsals, and Torigoe ran away the moment she heard we were meeting up to do homework, so I had a one-to-one tutoring session with Professor Hina.

I had cleared up my study desk (which lately had become a mere dumping ground), and Fushimi had brought her own chair and workbook, too.

"Fushimi, don't you have anything else to do?"

"Like what?" Her hand stopped, and she looked at me.

"Like, say, Himeji's at rehearsal right now. That wasn't the only audition ever, was it?"

"No, there's a lot more. And if you go beyond acting, there are some for agencies and such."

Hearing the words from her mouth made me feel like the reality of her becoming a celebrity was approaching closer and closer.

Himeji was already one when we met again, so I didn't get to see how she went through the process.

Fushimi had declined Mr. Matsuda's invitation, but I felt like she would have an easier time working there, since she'd be with Himeji.

Perhaps she just wanted to avoid using Himeji's connections as she saw her as a rival, in a way.

"Buuut, it's not easy." Fushimi continued speaking nonchalantly while picking

her pen back up. “Auditions for agencies are pretty complicated—maybe even harder to get through than the last audition.”

“Is that so?”

So she is looking into things.

“Mm-hmm. I’m not a child actor, or a member of a troupe. I’m just taking acting lessons. There’s a lot of people like me, so breaking into the industry isn’t so simple.”

I’d thought she could do anything she put her mind to.

...But maybe this is how it’s always been: People like me could only see the results—her accomplishments—and give her praise. But we knew nothing about the process.

No one knew her failures or saw the effort that led to her successes. We only saw the surface.

Why did I ever think she was almighty—like a “protagonist”?

“Erm, Fushimi... Chin up!”

“Whoa, you’re worried about me!”

“I can’t just say nothing after hearing that.”

“It’s fine. Focus on your homework. We’ve got a festival tomorrow!”

“...Okay.”

Fushimi was very attentive in her teaching. Every time I got stuck, she’d give me a few hints to guide me in the right direction. Like Mana, she was good at taking care of people.

Speaking of Mana, she was at the pool with some friends, and had left early in the morning.

She came up in our conversation. She was in her third year of middle school and would be taking high school entrance exams this year.

Even though she was my sister, I had no idea what she wanted to do in the future since we never talked about it.

“She should come to our high school.”

“Yeah.” I nodded as I turned on the AC.

I had turned it off twenty minutes ago, since Fushimi said it was too cold.

“There you go again!”

“Just put on something. I’ll lend you some clothes.”

“Okay, then.”

I took a thin shirt that I wear a lot in spring from my closet.

Fushimi was wearing a T-shirt that looked like it was from a mass retailer, and a pair of denim shorts.

Of course you’d get cold baring your legs like that.

Her wardrobe was carefully picked on Mana’s watch, though. She wouldn’t let Hina go out in anything she didn’t approve of.

Honestly, it was better than letting Fushimi pick out her own clothes.

“Oh, you always wear this.”

“I’m amazed you remember.”

She put it on right away. The sleeves were too long for her, but she carefully rolled them up.

“It’s so big.”

“I guess.”

The size difference had a weirdly captivating effect on me.

“Okay, there we go!”

Seeing her in my clothes made me feel weird.

“Let’s continue,” she urged, sitting back on the chair. “There’s a proficiency test right after the break, Ryou. Waka said we could use that as a point of reference for our career paths...”

She was leaning forward as she talked about this serious topic, and her collarbone peeked out from the loose collar of her T-shirt. That wasn’t the only

thing being exposed; I had to look away...but my eyes kept going back.

It seemed she was following Mana's orders and was wearing it pretty much every day. The T-shirt was clearly worn out already, and the constant use only made the collar looser.

"Have you thought of which university you wanna go to, Ryou?"

"..."

She finally noticed my gaze. She pulled her shirt close and covered her chest.

"Y-you're staring at my b-b-boobies?!"

"No! I wasn't!"

"Didn't you like them bigger?" She narrowed her eyes and pouted.

"Who told you that?"

"You've been hanging out with Ai a lot lately, haven't you?"

"Just because we work at the same agency."

"Hmmmmmm." She wasn't convinced. "I know all about it already."

"About what?"

"That you've been making a video for her."

"Yeah, Mr. Matsuda asked me to."

I explained it was part of my job, and that I got properly paid for it, but she was still upset.

What did I do wrong?

"Who told you that, anyway?"

"Ai sent me the video, she was soooooooooo happy."

Himeji...

She must've wanted to brag, like always, because it turned out pretty decent.

"What'd you think of it?"

"She looked super cute."

“Is that so?”

“Argh! Why’re you smiliiiing?!”

“Hey, I’m just happy my work is being well-received.”

“She’s got huge boobs and a thin waist, and she’s so earnest about her job! You sure caught all of that perfectly on camera.”

“I did not show her boobs in the video.”

Not close up, at least. What do you think I was shooting?

“It’s not fair only she gets to be filmed. Film me, too.”

“We already said I am doing that, for my personal project, remember?”

“Yes, *your* personal project. Why don’t you ask what *I* want filmed?”

She looked about to explode with indignation.

“And what do you want?”

“Film me right now.”

“Uh, sure.” No reason to say no—I could get away from homework this way.

But then...

“...Why’re you in a swimsuit?”

...that’s what she came back wearing ten minutes after she said she’d go get ready.

I did hear the entrance door opening and closing. She must’ve gone home to change. To come back into my room in a swimsuit.

“F-film me already, I’m getting embarrassed.”

“You didn’t have to do this if you found it embarrassing,” I mumbled.

I didn’t know where to look. She was too close; the room was too small.

Still, I had said I’d do as she wanted, so I took out the camera and began recording.

“It’s rolling now.”

She nodded and switched to acting mode.

She brushed her hair away and lay down on the bed.

She softly swung her legs back and forth, then looked at the camera and smiled.

What is this?

What am I filming here?

“Um, Fushimi, I don’t think it looks good shooting this in my room.”

“Whaaa? Aw, you should’ve said so sooner.”

Sooner? I had no idea what you had in mind.

“Why did you want me to take a video of you in a swimsuit anyway?”

“To post it on social media.”

“...”

She grabbed her phone and showed me what she meant.

“Look. Look at those numbers.”

It was a five-second video of an idol in a swimsuit.

The pretty girl in a bikini frolicking had thousands of likes.

She’ll probably get mad at me, but I’ll ask...

“And why do you want these numbers?”

“Why? Well, so I could become famous?”

I didn’t expect to hear you saying such things.

She thought it strange that I found it strange; she tilted her head.

“Getting a following on social media is pretty important. And it’s summer right now, so it’s trending.”

“Important for what?”

“For the judges to see in an audition.”

No matter how Fushimi saw herself, in my eyes, she was a diligent, serious, earnest, Goody Two-Shoes.

Maybe she'd been taking other people's advice too much to heart.

"Having a lot of followers doesn't mean you'll pass the auditions, does it?"

"You don't know. You're not the one judging."

"I mean, no, I don't, but this isn't right, is it? Is this what you wanted to do?"

"It's not like I want to... I've been thinking a lot, you know..." Her voice trailed off.

This is what she always sounded like when she was about to cry.

Maybe I was being too blunt.

I stopped the camera and left it on the desk to give us some time to think.

"...Fushimi, you said you wanted to go somewhere where they'd appreciate your acting skills. That's why you're not joining Himeji's agency, right? I think this contradicts what you just said. But if this is really the path you want to take, then I'll support you all the way."

Even Mr. Matsuda said a lot of celebrities began doing gravure.

Considering how she had no standing in the industry, perhaps this was the way to go. But she hadn't even put her foot in the door yet—how effective could this really be?

Fushimi bit her lip and looked down.

"It's just... I'm not getting any results..." Her voice quavered, and her shoulders were trembling.

I put my shirt—the one she left behind when she went to change—around her.

"I want people to look at my acting, but everyone says that's not how it works. A lot of men tell me I should sing and dance... I've given it a try, but it doesn't feel right."

She had been working hard, pushing back against what other people said, and had gotten hurt in the process—all while I was none the wiser.

I patted her head, and she sniffed and leaned on me. I put my hand on her back.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry..."

"It's fine. Let it all out."

"Ai passed the audition and is rehearsing while I'm just..."

Right. Himeji.

Her rival was preparing for her breakout as an actress.

They were very different people to begin with; she shouldn't worry about what Himeji was doing. But I supposed she couldn't help but be conscious of it, because Himeji was her childhood friend.

Fushimi sniffed sharply and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye with her index finger.

"I tried five agencies. They all said no. It wasn't even close."

"I see."

"It must've been a fluke that I even reached the final stage of that audition with Ai. Now I realize I was in over my head."

"That's not it. They just don't realize what they're losing out on."

"And you do?"

She looked straight into my eyes. I couldn't look away.

"I know how great you are, and I'm sure you will prove it to them and me; that I'm not wrong."

Fushimi grinned ear to ear.

"You're just pushing the burden on me, aren't you?"

I grabbed my phone, looking for a way to cheer her up, and looked up this one actress.

"Look at her. This actress from the makeup commercials started out pretty late."

I remembered the actress talking about her history in a variety show right after her breakout.

Fushimi carefully read through the page detailing her upbringing and

appearances.

“She took a night bus to Tokyo for a troupe audition...while going to college.”

“See? You don’t have to rush it.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Ryou.”

She stood on her toes, and, like a vampire, she kissed my neck.

“Wha?”

“Hee-hee.”

I was glad to see she was back to normal.

“Well, since I’m wearing this already, how about we go to the pool?”

I had no reason to hesitate if it was between that or doing homework.

“It’s been a while since we’ve been to the municipal pool.”

“Yeah. Okay, let me get ready,” I said.

“Gotcha.”

Perhaps a couple of high schoolers at the municipal pool would stand out, but whatever. The attention was nothing if it meant cheering her up.

“Ah, Ryou, I didn’t bring my goggles!”

“Just go home and grab them.”

...You’re serious about going swimming, huh?

“Oh. Right.”

I grabbed my swim trunks, towel, phone, wallet, and keys.

All ready now (and Fushimi was wearing clothes on top, too), we left. We dropped by her house to grab her goggles and made our way under the shining sun to the municipal pool.



“Hey, let’s see who can swim eighty feet faster.”

“What are you, a grade-schooler? I’m not a good swimmer, so no thanks.”

I felt bad about turning down her suggestion, but I had to. I’d never won anything sports-related against her.

“Aww, but swimming’s no fun without competition.”

“Can’t you just chill at the pool?”

At least she’s in high spirits now.

“I just wanna do something big before summer’s over.”

“And you think this is it?”

The local summer festival was this Saturday, the week of Obon.

There were still two weeks of summer break left after that, so I could still take it easy with homework and wrapping up filming.

“Summer this year’s been so fun, thanks to you, Ryou.”

“I can say the same thing to you.”

Mana had gone somewhere else, so we wouldn’t bump into her at the municipal pool.

Fushimi urged me to hurry up.

We paid at the reception and changed. I waited for her by the pool. There were a lot of kids around, but no one who looked to be in high school or college.

“Yeah, who’d come here at our age?”

Actually, there was one girl, but she was swimming seriously. I figured she was here to train.

“Huh, isn’t that a middle school swimsuit?”

I turned toward the voice. Fushimi was right there, warming up.

“I think so.”

I remembered Fushimi used to wear the same one.

The boys always stared at her during swimming class. Some of the crazier ones used binoculars all the way from our classroom.

Wait!

I thought something was wrong and turned back to look at Fushimi.

“Did you do your warm-up exercises, Ryou?”

“Never mind about that. Why are you wearing your middle school swimsuit?”

Back at home just now, she’d worn the one she had on when we all went to the beach.

So why was she wearing that blue school swimsuit with her name etched on the chest now?

“I find this better suited for swimming.”

“Why’re you so serious about swimming, all of a sudden?”

And you sure haven’t changed a bit from back then, huh?

The way the school swimsuit hugged her body let me know she hadn’t grown at all.

My eyes drifted down to her pale, thin thighs. I had to force myself to look away.

“R-Ryou... Stop giving me lascivious looks.”

“I-I’m not!”

I escaped from my modest childhood friend and plunged into the pool.

“Gosh, I don’t even know what to say. You’ve never looked at me like that before...”

Just how bad was I? Geez.

“I was only wondering how you could be so thin.”

“Thinner than Ai?”

“I dunno.”

“This is where you say yes.” She pouted.

If I said yes, then I'd be implying I know Himeji's measurements. Wouldn't you find that weird?

Fushimi got into the pool, too, and we swam for a while.

We were resting by the poolside when the middle school girl wrapped up her own swimming session, too.

She took off her cap and goggles and wrung out her hair. I did not recognize her in the slightest. She looked quite developed for a middle schooler, so I looked away to avoid being accused of leering again.

Fushimi stopped talking all of a sudden. She stopped giggling the moment her eyes fell on the girl.

Hmm... I think I know what's going on here.

The contrast between their figures was striking, since they were wearing the same swimsuit.

"That's a m-middle schooler...?" She brought her knees up to her chest. "Ryou... Let's go home..."

Her excitement dropped like a sack of potatoes.

"There's still time. It's all uphill from here. Have hope." I tried to cheer her up.

Her head was down, eyes fixed on the water flowing down the drain.

We've got a code red here.

She couldn't bear the truth any longer, and so we left the pool not even one hour after we got there.

After changing clothes, I bought a can of juice and waited for her on the lobby sofa. She arrived with her hair just a bit wet.

"Your hair's still wet, Ryou."

"It's short; it'll dry in no time."

"Oh. That's nice," she said with jealousy, before noticing the can of juice by my side. "Can I have a sip?"

"Sure, but I already had some," I informed her, just in case.

She looked down shyly.

“It’s fine. We’ve already gone past an indirect kiss, haven’t we?”

She spoke quietly, but there was no one around. The memory flashed through my mind, and I felt my face turning red.

“R-right...”

I handed over the can, and she drank it without hesitation.

“It’s good.”

I took another sip myself after taking it back. It tasted different this time somehow.

10 Lost at the Summer Festival

It was a bit past noon when Mana barged into my room without knocking.

“Put this on today, Bubby.”

She shoved a *yukata* at me.

It was the day of the summer festival—it wasn’t the biggest one in the area, but big enough to have a fireworks show.

I hadn’t been in a few years and was finally going for the first time in a while.

“A *yukata*? Ugh, can’t I just go in regular clothes?”

“What? You’re missing your one chance a year to wear it?”

“I don’t really care.”

“Yikes! You’re gonna ruin the whole mood!”

“Whatever.”

Mana was already wearing her own *yukata*; she was meeting up with her friends today, too.

I was supposed to be meeting up with Fushimi, Himeji, and Torigoe later on.

“Here, I’ll tie the sash.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“But everyone’s gonna be wearing one.”

Better for Fushimi to wear one, I suppose.

“It’s just a local festival.”

“So what? It may be small in comparison, but it’s got fireworks. Now c’mere.”

She pushed me off the chair and made me put on the *yukata*. She spun me around to get the sash in place, and when she finished, she took a couple steps

back to take it all in.

“Beautiful.”

“Are you serious?”

“No cap.”

I couldn't even remember when the last time I wore a *yukata* was. Well, besides the sleepwear provided on field trips.

“Oh, it's astounding... I even fear you're gonna get hit on. Hold on,” she said, with an entirely serious expression, before hurrying downstairs and coming right back up, hair wax in hand. The one we used a lot during film shoots.

“Don't move,” she said as she used the wax to style my hair.

I worried for a second about what sort of bizarre hairdo she would come up with, but she looked too serious to be playing a prank on me.

“Do you like doing this, Mana?”

“Hmm? Why the question?”

“Cause when we film, the hair and makeup always look good. I was wondering if maybe you're interested in the field.”

“Oh. Yup, I love it. I love making people look cuter or cooler. Aaand, there we go.” She passed me a hand mirror. “Japanese clothing looks great on you, Bubby.”

“You think?”

“So I tried giving you a Nipponese hairdo.”

Nipponese...

I gotta say, though... It looks quite good...

I'm blushing just looking at myself.

“Aww, I wish I could hang out with you guys, but I'd already told my friends I'd be with them.”

Mana turned around and gave me a distant glance before brushing my hair softly and nodding.

“Perfect.”

“Now I know why Fushimi and Himeji get so excited after you do their makeup.”

“Hee-hee.” Mana left the room with a shy giggle.

I could’ve changed my hair back to normal and put on regular clothes, but I couldn’t let her efforts go to waste. I decided to keep it.

I finished my quota of homework for the day (as set by Fushimi), and I resumed work on the school festival film.

Time flew by as I was working, and in the blink of an eye, it was already time to meet up.

Someone rang the doorbell. I peered out the window and saw two girls in *yukata* by the entrance. Fushimi and Himeji.

I put my phone and wallet in the Japanese-style pouch Mana left for me and exited my room. I wondered where the *yukata* and the pouch even came from. Maybe it was Dad’s.

I think I remember Dad wearing something like this to the summer festivals.

I slipped on the wooden sandals by the entrance (I figured Mana put them there, too) and opened the door to my *yukata*-clad childhood friends with their hair tied up.

“Oh, Ryou...!” Fushimi’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Wow! You’re rocking that! What’s gotten into you? Why?” Himeji reacted in an even more exaggerated manner.

“Mana prepared the *yukata* and did my hair.”

“That’s our hairdresser for ya,” Himeji said, once again impressed by Mana’s skills.

“Uh... Oh... Ryou... Ah...” Fushimi was still in shock.

“Let’s go, Ryou.”

“Let’s go,” I replied, and we went on our merry way.

The clacking of our wooden sandals echoed on our way to the venue. The boulevard was closed to traffic, as was the custom every year, and tons of stalls were lined up along it for people to enjoy.

“How long has it been since I came here with you two?”

“When did you transfer schools, again?” I asked.

“Summer of fifth grade. So our last time was in the summer of fourth grade.”

Seven years, huh?

Maybe it was just me being forgetful, but I was amazed at how much Fushimi and Himeji remembered about grade school.

Torigoe let us know she’d arrived at the station, and we walked over there to meet her. Mana was right: She, too, was wearing a *yukata*.

“Takamori...you’re wearing a *yukata*...”

“Yeah. If not today, then when, right?”

“Y-you look good.”

“Thanks. You look good, too.”

“Huh?! U-um, thanks,” she whispered back.

Then Himeji pulled my sleeve.

“Ryou, don’t you have any compliments for me, too?”

“Yeah, I can’t believe you remember stuff in grade school so clearly.”

“That’s not what I meant...” She shot me an icy glare with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, you mean the *yukata*?”

She said nothing. But as they say, silence usually means yes.

Himeji’s *yukata* was blue, with a white floral pattern. The sash was white, too, so she stood out quite a bit.

“You look good, Himeji. You always look good, whether you’re in your stage outfits or *yukata*.”

“Not bad. You’re off the hook this time.”

You're grading my compliments?

"Um... Uh... Ryou..." Fushimi wanted to say something.

She beckoned Torigoe and whispered something into her ear.

"Takamori, Hiina wants you to compliment her on her *yukata*, too."

"Can't you word it better?!" Fushimi slapped Torigoe's shoulder.

Fushimi wrapped her arms tight around her interpreter.

"Say it yourself, then. How come you're so reserved about this, miss childhood friend?"

Fushimi's eyes met mine, and she looked away bashfully.

"Hina thought Ryou would be wearing a sloppy outfit, but then he showed up wearing this. I think her brain overloaded."

"I get that; he looks so different."

"It's shocking, I know."

Himeji and Torigoe solved the mystery.

"I get it, Hina. Really. He looks way cooler than usual."

"...Y-yeah. Very." Torigoe nodded in agreement.

"Please, ladies, you're making me blush."

I wasn't joking. I was not used to being told all this.

Fushimi's *yukata* was white with a muted morning glory pattern. I only noticed this now, but she was wearing a hair ornament, too.

"You look very mature, and that hair ornament suits you, too."

It most definitely wasn't hideous like her usual clothes, but I wasn't well-versed in *yukata* and accessories for women to say anything more.

"Aren't you glad, Hiina?"

Fushimi nodded and flapped her arms in delight.

The fireworks began at eight o'clock.

There was still time until then, so we walked around the stalls, buying

takoyaki and wieners and sharing it all. I wanted some shaved ice, too, but Torigoe wouldn't let me, saying it was still too early for that. Why?

The crowds got bigger and bigger, so we escaped to the gazebo at the outskirts of the park.

A group of middle schoolers and a couple seemed to have had the same idea.

"Shaved ice is supposed to be last," Torigoe said in between bites of leftover red pickled ginger from her *yakisoba*.

"Why can't I just have it whenever I want?"

"It's dessert. You can't start with dessert."

She had a point.

She kept eating the pickled ginger, little by little, one strip at a time.

"You're getting strawberry, aren't you, Ryou?"

Fushimi was back to normal; at last, she got used to seeing me in a *yukata*.

"Heh-heh. You haven't changed, have you, little boy?" Himeji added.

"Well, sorry I like strawberry."

I took my last bite of *yakitori*. I washed away the lingering taste of the sauce with a sip of my already tepid *ramune*.

Himeji grabbed another *takoyaki* with her chopsticks.

"Ryou, you should try these."

"Why're you using chopsticks? Didn't they come with a toothpick?"

"But you have to be very careful when stabbing them or they'll fall apart. I prefer using chopsticks; they're more convenient."

She picked up one and had her left hand under it.

Oh no, don't tell me she's gonna...

"Hurry, before it goes cold."

My brain froze, but then Fushimi leaned over and ate it.

"Yummy! Thanks, Ai."

“Hey, why are you eating it?”

“I’ll give you some of mine, too. Say *ah!*”

“No thanks.”

When we first started filming, I thought they were always arguing because of these kinds of exchanges, but now their whole dynamic has become normal. It only made Torigoe and me chuckle.

Despite her refusal, when Fushimi held out her own *takoyaki*, Himeji gladly accepted it.

“How is it?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Yummy. Got it.”

Fushimi knew very well how to handle her—no surprise, since they were childhood friends, after all.

“So, do we have a good spot for watching the fireworks?” Torigoe asked us three locals.

“Oh, there’s a good one.” I suggested the roof of an abandoned house.

“Ryou... Breaking and entering is against the law.”

“We did that all the time when we were kids.”

“Yes, when we were kids. And we were lucky no one found out.”

Miss honor student did not like the idea.

“Yeah, I don’t want the cops to ruin our night.”

“I agree.”

Torigoe and Himeji were on her side, too.

I felt like there was another place we’d used before, but I couldn’t remember.

Torigoe looked at her phone and said, “Oh, sorry.”

“What’s wrong, Shii?”

“My family came, too, and...it looks like Kuu...my sister Kurumi is lost. I need

to go look for her.”

The girl was very young; that was most certainly worrying.

Fushimi and Himeji had visited Torigoe’s house once already, so they knew Kuu. I looked over at them, and they seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“I’ll help you look for her,” I said.

“No, don’t worry about it. You enjoy the festival.” Torigoe shook her hands desperately.

“Shizuka, I want nothing else in life but for Kuu to look up to me, so let us help.”

You like her that much, Himeji?

“No, I can’t...”

Torigoe tried refusing again, but Fushimi interrupted her.

“Shii, please. We know the area better than you. We’ve been coming to this festival since we were kids, so we know places she could probably go to.”

Fushimi grinned, and I nodded.

“Thank you, guys.” She paused for a moment. “I thought things like this only happened in manga. I’m glad I’ve got friends to help me out.”

Even I felt moved by the very Torigoe-ish remark.

We threw away our trash and decided to split up to look for her.

First thing to do when a kid was lost was to notify the staff. I went over to the festival committee tent and asked the guy stationed there.

“Excuse me, we got separated from a girl about four years old. Have you seen a lost child?”

“You’ve got a lost kitty? Gah-ha-ha!”

Is that a beer in his hand? Oh, this isn’t looking good.

“Not a cat. A girl.”

“I heard about a molester, if that’s what you’re talking about!”

I froze for a second. Good thing we weren't around for that.

"Could you give me a call if a lost child comes here?"

"A'ight!"

I gave him my number and left.

It was getting closer to the fireworks show, and the place was getting more and more crowded.

I just hope they don't crush her...

I got even more worried. My eyes lit up at the sight of any kid, but none of them were Kuu. Every time I saw a child about her size, I immediately found their mother right beside them.

She wasn't at the goldfish scooping or toy stalls.

Where else would a kid go? Where did I like going back then?

I walked away from the road to think, when Torigoe called my name.

"Takamori."

"Did you find her?"

"No."

"I've got nothing here, either."

We told each other where we'd looked already and tried other spots.

"I might get lost, too... Can I hold on to you?"

"Huh? Oh, okay."

I was wondering what she would hold on to; she softly grabbed my sleeve.

"Erm... So, have you made any progress on your own film project?"

I figured Torigoe couldn't take the silence any longer as we looked for Kuu.

"About that, Fushimi's gonna star in it, but she won't let me begin shooting until I finish my homework."

"I see... So she's starring."

"She's too serious, but well, I knew that. My philosophy is that homework's

best not done.”

“What’re you saying? Where’s the logic in that?” Torigoe giggled. “Thank you, by the way. Not just for helping me look for Kuu, but for inviting me here today. I was wondering if it’d be just you three and ManaMana.”

Right, it was me who asked her to join us.

It happened in between filming. Fushimi asked me first, and Himeji heard about it and said she’d join. I thought Torigoe would do the same, but she didn’t, so I asked her if she was interested, too. Fushimi looked happy to see Torigoe nod in response.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” I gave an awkward smile.

Torigoe shook her head.

“No, it meant a lot to me.”

“By the way, the script for my film is starting to come together. Would you mind giving it a look? I want your opinion.”

She smiled.

“I’d be glad to. I’m good at it, apparently. I should live up to your trust.”

“Huh?”

I felt like I’d said something to that effect before, but not directly to her.

“You can call me anytime.”

“Yeah. I will.”

It started to get less crowded, but Torigoe still held on to my sleeve.

“I haven’t been to a summer festival since grade school,” she said.

“Same.”

“I could’ve bought a *yukata*, but I’m just borrowing my mom’s. Does it look weird?”

“Not at all. Besides, it’s the same for me.”

“Huh?”

“I’m borrowing my dad’s. Mana gave it to me.”

“Oh. So we’re the same.”

We found the staff tent over at a more open area, so I tried asking just in case, but it was in vain.

“Maybe we should split up again.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

We went our separate ways to look for Kuu again.

Then my phone rang.

It was from Fushimi.

Feeling hopeful, I answered the call.

“Did you find her?”

“Ah, um... No, sorry...”

“Oh. So what’s up?”

“R-Ryou...help me...”

I went over to Fushimi’s location, and I found her sitting on the sidewalk.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Oh, Ryou! Sorry.”

The strap of her sandal had snapped, just like she mentioned over the phone.

“Aw... I bought them as a set with the *yukata*. Guess this is what you get when buying cheap clothing.” She laughed apologetically.

“Yeah, I knew that wasn’t the *yukata* you used to wear.”

Naturally, she’d grown taller; the previous one couldn’t possibly fit her anymore.

“You remember?”

“I have vague memories of yours being more childish.” But anyway. “You should go home and change.”

I imagined that was why she called me.

“Yeah. Sorry to take time away from searching for Kuu.”

“We’d lose one more person who could help if we don’t fix this situation first. Better off losing a bit of time than that,” I said.

“Yeah, I thought the same.”

Now the problem was: How would she get home?

She had no bike, let alone a car.

Oh... I get why she called me now. I guess we’ve done this before.

“Okay, I’ll carry you there. Like last time.”

“How sharp. Unusually so.”

Did you have to point that out?

I lent her my shoulder, and, checking that no one was around, I carried her on my back.

“A-am I heavy?”

“No, you’re fine.”

“Actually, I’ve...put on some weight since last time.”

No need for the honesty, really.

Geez.

I chuckled, and she trembled in worry. “Wh-what?”

“I really can’t tell. Don’t worry.”

“Okay... But why are you laughing?”

“I just found it funny that you told me that. You didn’t have to.”

“I didn’t want you thinking, *Wait, is she heavier than before, or is that just me?*” she muttered.

“I would tell you if I thought so.”

“Don’t! Have you no tact?”

What do you want me to do, then?

“Okay, I won’t say anything, nor will I think anything regarding your weight. That okay now?”

“Yes. Please.”

“So, while we’re on the subject, how did you get fat?”

“Don’t you have any tact?”

“I’m joking!”

“I ate one too many snacks.”

“Wow, you’re answering?”

I heard her giggle behind me.

Our conversation got me chuckling, too.

I chose the emptiest streets on our way to her house, but I walked as fast as I could; we still had to find Kuu.

“Do you have another pair of sandals?”

“Not wooden ones like these, but that’s fine.”

Is it? Don’t come calling for help if the fashion police find you.

Fushimi had wrapped her arms around my neck so as to not fall off.

But even with her clinging to me...I didn’t feel anything particularly soft touch my back.

Well, I already saw the extent of her growth over at the pool...

She was beginning to slide off, due to my fast pace, so I pushed her back up.

And it seemed I touched somewhere I shouldn’t have in the process.

“Meowch?!”

She’s a cat now?

“Did you just feel my butt?!”

“I did not.”

So it was that.

I couldn't feel anything but the *yukata*.

"Look, if I wanted to do that, don't you think I'd be making better use of the current situation?"

"...I guess." She sounded convinced.



I finally saw her house under the streetlights.

I put her down by the entrance and turned around.

"I'll head back there ASAP!" Fushimi shouted.

"See you there."

"Thanks, Ryou."

"It's nothing. We'd be in trouble without an extra helping hand."

I took a step away, but I noticed she still wanted to say something. I turned around, and she awkwardly opened her mouth.

"Also, I don't mind you copping a feel so long as you don't go overboard! Okay, bye!"

She turned around and ran into her house.

"...I told you I wasn't doing that," I whispered.

I could still feel her warmth on my back. I shook my head to drive away any weird thoughts.

I hurried back to where I came from, when I got a call from Torigoe.

"Takamori, we just found Kuu."

"Thank goodness."

"Thanks for helping out. Unfortunately, she won't stop crying, and it seems they'll be going home now, so I'm gonna see them off at the station."

What a nice sister.

"All right. Call me once you come back."

"Yeah."

I imagined she'd already told them, too, but I texted Fushimi and Himeji about it as well.

Then my phone died.

"Oh, shoot."

I was so sure I still had enough battery.

I considered going back home, but I was already at the boulevard with all the stalls when it happened.

If only I could find Mana, I could get her to contact the rest, but I hadn't seen the *gyaru* all day.

"Hey, Ryou!"

Himeji found me just as she was coming out of the crowd and waved at me.

"Good thing they found Kuu. Shizuka must've been so worried."

"Yeah. She said the kid was crying."

"Poor Kuu... If only I could take all the misfortune that would befall her onto me instead..."

Just how much do you love Kuu, girl?

"I wish I had a little sister instead of a brother."

Himeji was eating shaved ice with a spoon straw.

"It's strawberry flavor. Here, have a bite." She casually scooped some of it and shoved the spoon into my mouth.

"Would you mind not force-feeding me?"

"You know, I should be charging you for this. A thousand yen a spoonful from a pretty girl would be too cheap, even."

"Don't call yourself a pretty girl."

"Huh? I thought you admitted I am one."

Yes... I said that.

Where do you get that self-confidence from anyway?

I guess it wouldn't be you without it, but geez.

I changed the subject and told her about Fushimi and my phone dying.

"So Hina should be coming back any moment."

"Could be now, could be later."

Maybe I should've waited for her if she was just changing her sandals.

In any case, Fushimi had to come along this street if she was walking back to the festival from her house.

Yet even after ten minutes of waiting, she didn't show up.

"Wasn't she just gonna grab a new pair of sandals?"

"Wait, wouldn't she change out of her *yukata*, too?" Himeji said.

"No, she only mentioned the sandals."

"So unladylike..." Himeji was in disbelief. "I suppose I shouldn't expect any proper fashion sense from her."

"Please don't call her out on it. She's actually hopeless."

Himeji checked the time; it was almost eight PM.

"Ryou."

She did the hand sign.

I did it back without much thought.

A huge smile bloomed across her face, and she hugged my arm and started walking.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a secret."

I could actually feel Himeji's chest. Unlike Fushimi's. Perhaps because *yukata* was thinner than regular clothing, you could feel it more.

"What secret?"

Summer festival.

Fireworks.

At night.

Secret place.

The key words brought back memories.

I got a peep of their backs from afar.

“...” I tried calling out to them, but my voice stuck in my throat.

I had come back after seeing my mom and Kuu off at the station and found Takamori and Himeji locking arms.

It was clear it was Himeji who was one-sidedly wrapping her arms around his, but anyway... They were walking off somewhere together.

I didn't have the courage to get in between them and stop her, like Hiina did when Himeji tried giving him *takoyaki*.

Someone bumped into me, and I felt as if the world was telling me I was in the way. I got away from the crowds and sat on the sidewalk.

“Hey! Shizu!” ManaMana waved at me.

I waved back, and she came over to me, along with her friends. All of them were *gyarus*, as one would expect.

“What're you doing? Where's Bubby?”

“We lost sight of each other.”

Let's go with that.

“You should call him. The fireworks show is coming up!”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

That's when ManaMana realized.

“What's up? You seem bummed out.”

“Yeah. Kinda, I guess.”

I felt tired.

I knew I'd end up alone if I didn't get in between them, but I still chose not to follow them.

I knew you couldn't objectively quantify love, but I didn't think I liked him less than Hiina or Himeji.

“Shizuuu... C'mon, have a french fry and cheer up.”

ManaMana sat down beside me and offered me some of her french fries. The saltiness of the crinkly potato reminded me of a bowl of miso soup in winter.

“I think I’ll watch the fireworks from here,” ManaMana said, before eating three fries in one go.

Her friends went somewhere else. She waved good-bye.

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.” She giggled.

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

The situation reminded me of back then.

We had come to the summer festival with the kids in the neighborhood, and Himeji and I got separated from the group.

She said she knew a good spot and pulled me by the hand through the crowds outside the boulevard.

“...”

I didn’t remember what we talked about then, but I remembered it being a good spot for watching the fireworks.

I think that was the last day I wore a *yukata*.

It wasn’t the plaza designated for watching the fireworks. It was somewhere higher, from which we thought it’d be easier to search for the rest of our friends, not realizing it would be too dark to identify anyone from up there. And as we tried looking for them, the fireworks began.

I remembered all that as the noise of the festival faded away in the distance.

We arrived at the entrance to a small mountain and walked up the simple steps nailed to the ground.

“Walking up in these sandals isn’t easy, is it?” Himeji giggled awkwardly.

I kept my arms crossed, since she really looked like she’d lose her balance at any moment.

We got to the top and saw a hiking trail. There was a gazebo and bench for resting midway. And the rusty metal trash can was full.

I felt like we had an easier time climbing up back then; now, I was short of breath.

The lights of the festival stalls looked smaller now, and the stars in the sky felt closer.

“What about Fushimi and Torigoe?”

“I told them.”

Oh. I guess they'll be here any moment, then.

Himeji sat down on the bench and patted the spot beside her.

I sat down, and the fireworks show began.

A flower bloomed in the night sky, leaving a trail of smoke as it vanished.

We stared at the fireworks in silence.

“I’m impressed you remembered that sign.”

“This, right?” I did it again.

She nodded.

“I’d forgotten it, but then I saw you do it at your concert, and it all came back to me.”

“So you got my message.”

“I’m not sure it counts...”

Aika’s official answer was that the sign didn’t mean anything, but she kept on using it every time.

“I won’t forget you.”

She made the sign up just before moving away; the meaning fit.

“I’m impressed you even remember the meaning of it.”

“Is it really that impressive?”

“Don’t you feel like fate is at work here?” she said, with a soft expression.

“...Fate?”

What's gotten into her?

I was clearly confused. She laughed in response.

“It’s such a funny phrase.”

“Huh?”

“I used it a few times when I was an idol, but no one liked it.” She chuckled.

Maybe your fans didn't like it...but I'll admit you had me there for a second.

“I’m half serious, though. I didn’t know you’d be at that high school. I just wondered when I saw your uniform when we met again at the station. I’m glad you received the message I repeated again and again.”

“Fate, huh?”

The word brought Shinohara to mind; it was hard holding back my laughter.

We watched the fireworks, sometimes in silence and sometimes saying what came to mind. We chatted about the film, about Mr. Matsuda, and about our mutual friends.

“Oh right,” she said, something coming to mind.

Then she pinched my cheek.

“Wh-what?”

“What were you talking about with Hina when we went to the beach?”

“The beach? With Fushimi?”

“You two were all by yourselves for a moment there, weren’t you?” She pulled my face close to hers. “Hina was so obviously happy when she came back, so what did you do?”

“Was she?”

“I doubt anyone but me noticed.” She sighed and dropped the topic. “Fine, not like you being dense and forgetful is anything new. I’ll let you off the hook for now.”

“What’re you, my boss?”

“Yes. I am your superior. At least... I deserve to be treated as such after how much your forgetfulness has hurt me.”

She pouted and looked away.

“Do you remember we came here before?”

“Yeah. Though I only realized once we arrived and I saw our surroundings.” I continued listing what I remembered. “We got lost and came here. We gave up on reuniting with everyone else and watched the fireworks from here.”

“Yes, yes. What else?”

I had nothing else.

“That’s all I remember at the moment... Sorry.”

I apologized sincerely, and thankfully, she didn’t sigh or pinch my cheeks.

Instead, she took off her wooden sandals and put her feet on the bench, resting her head on her knees as she looked at me.

“I proposed to you.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I asked you to marry me.”

I...think I remember that...

“I remember it like it was yesterday, but you... Men...”

“I’m sorry.”

I could do nothing but apologize.

Wait. Didn’t I promise the same thing to Fushimi?

“You said yes, by the way.” Himeji grabbed my sleeve. “And now here we are, years later, at the same place, watching the fireworks just like back then... And I’m of age now. Don’t you feel fate is at work, even if a little?”

The fireworks lit up Himeji’s face. I was captivated by the red, blue, white, and green reflected in her eyes.

Her cheeks turned red as she grabbed my hand. I glanced at her, and she kept her eyes averted, looking up at the fireworks.

Boom... Bang... Boom...

The fireworks stopped for a moment, and she tightly gripped my hand.

"I gave you the right to kiss me. So give me one if the musical goes well."

"Huh?"

"I'm giving you permission."

What about what I want?

I didn't know how to respond, and her face was turning redder by the second.

"A-actually...forget about it."

"Huh?"

"A-anyway!" She spoke louder to change the subject. "What I wanted to say is, please cheer me on. I'm putting all my effort into this." She spoke quickly, hiding her face behind her hand.

The fireworks stopped. The afterimage was still burned into my eyes as only smoke was left behind in the night sky.

I wondered if it was really over now. I looked at the flyer and saw it said there would be a fifteen-minute break in the middle of the show.

"Fushimi should be back now. Let's return to the venue."

"Okay."

Himeji grabbed my hand again. It really felt like we were back to being kids.

"Let's stay like this, so you don't get lost."

"So *I'm* the one getting lost now?"

Himeji expected the response; she giggled.

"Let's come see the fireworks again next year."

"The show isn't over yet."

"Right," she sang.

Though it's not like the latter half would be any different. It wasn't as exciting now.

We walked down the hill, and we found Fushimi on the way back.

She wasn't alone, though. Two adult men were talking to her.

"Ryou, d-do you think they're hitting on her?"

"Y-you think?"



“I can tell. She’s got her public face on.”

I remembered what happened during the field trip. When I went along with a guy trying to hit on her.

“I don’t think fireworks are the only show those two guys want.”

“Please don’t put it crudely like that,” I said.

I had overheard a popular guy mention once before how he did something similar. Apparently, they’d take the girls over behind the shrines or by the river.

I took a deep breath and strode over to Fushimi.

“Fushi-Fushimi. Sorry to make you wait.”

I fumbled it.

“Oh, Ryou. Where have you been?”

She looked the same as always. Not particularly worried or scared.

“Oh, Fushimi, is that your boyfriend?” the fashionable man with glasses said jokingly. He looked to be in his forties.

Fushimi shrank, and her face turned red.

“S-something like that.”

Are we? Is being childhood friends that similar?

“Takashiro, please. What if they’re not there yet?” The chubby man helped her out.

“Oh, then I’ve messed up. Sorry, us oldsters always jump to conclusions when we see a young couple.”

Takashiro, the fashionable guy, apologized.

I figured Fushimi knew them, since he knew her name.

Then I realized Himeji wasn’t with us. She was observing from afar.

“Ryou, the plump man over here is my teacher at the Thespian Academy—Mr. Hashimoto.”

Takashiro and Hashimoto. Got it.

“Nice to meet you.” I bowed.

“Sorry to get in the way of you two enjoying the festival, mister boyfriend,” Takashiro said.

“S-something like that,” Fushimi replied, neither denying nor confirming it, shrinking even more and getting redder.

Come to think of it, Mr. Matsuda also asked about my relationship with Himeji. I should probably clear up the misunderstanding now.

“I’m Takamori. We’re not really a couple. We’re childhood friends.”

Fushimi’s smile vanished. Her eyes were empty, like a doll’s.

I didn’t know what was going on, but Mr. Hashimoto promptly explained: “I wanted to introduce Takashiro to her. It didn’t have to be today, but since I heard he was around, I thought why not.”

“You can have one, too, mister childhood friend.” He gave me his business card.

“Thank you.”

I took a look at it. Souichirou Takashiro, representative of the Cast Stadium Office.

“Since you were giving me suspicious looks.”

...He noticed.

“Mr. Hashimoto just told me about him. He says he’s the president of a company that manages models, extras, and other celebrities,” Fushimi explained about Cast Stadium Office, after noticing I looked confused.

So...a talent agency?

That’s when I realized he had a similar air about him to Mr. Matsuda’s. He appeared, how should I put it? Otherworldly?

It seemed like they were already done talking, or perhaps they never intended to talk too long—they left and walked over to the stalls for some beers right away.

Himeji came back, and she glanced in the direction where the other two had

been. She probably hid after realizing she knew them.

“Oh, Ai! Where have you been? Why weren’t you answering my texts? You too, Ryou.”

“Sorry. I had it on silent, so I didn’t notice.”

Didn’t you say you were in contact with them? You never told them where we were?

“My phone’s dead. Sorry.”

“Geez.” She groaned.

Fushimi got a text from Mana saying she was with Torigoe, so we met up with them.

The five of us watched the latter half of the fireworks from the sidewalk.

Mana still wanted to hang out with her friends after the fireworks show ended, so she said good-bye to us and went to karaoke with the *gyarus*.

As for us, we saw Torigoe off at the station.

“Thank you for helping me look for Kurumi.”

“Don’t worry about it, Shii.”

“What’s important is that Kuu is safe and sound.”

“None of us found her in the end anyway,” I said.

Torigoe shook her head.

“I’m thanking you for the sentiment. The results don’t matter,” she replied timidly in a quiet voice.

Torigoe had told us what happened to Kuu on the way to the station.

Apparently, she got separated from her mom after she got distracted by the goldfish scooping stall. Another kind parent found her all alone and eventually took her to the staff tent.

She wouldn’t stop crying when they found her because she was surrounded by strange old men drinking like no tomorrow.

Maybe I’d gotten a call from the staff as I requested but wasn’t able to pick up because my phone died.

“Mom also said she wanted to thank you all.”

The train arrived, and we waved at her as it departed.

Continuing on with the farewells, Himeji turned in the direction of her home.

“I guess I’ll let you go for today.”

She walked away with a haughty smile.

“What did she mean by that?”

“Who knows.”

Fushimi and I tilted our heads and looked at each other.

The excitement from the festival was still palpable in the neighborhood. Fushimi walked off in a direction different from where her house was, and I followed her without asking any questions.

She didn't seem to have a destination in mind; we just sat on the bus stop bench. The last bus had already departed a long time ago.

“I had fun today. It was nice having Ai and Shii with us.”

“Yeah, it's not too bad once in a while.”

“Yeah.”

Fushimi took off her wooden sandals and swung her feet around.

“Oh, so you had another pair?”

“No, these are Mana's.”

“What?”

“Yeah, she noticed I had changed into regular sandals.”

“Oh... So you got detained by the fashion police.”

“Yup. She said she had an extra pair and told me to wear those instead.”

No wonder it took you so long.

Apparently, she only made things worse when she said no one would even look at her feet. The fashion cop took her away to the Takamori residence and had her wear a pair of sandals that matched her outfit before letting her go back to the venue.

“A bunch of girls were waiting for her when we came back. All of them *gyarus*. I couldn't believe my eyes.”

“I've never met Mana's friends, actually.”

“She must be keeping you away from them since you like *gyarus*.”

“How many times do I have to say I didn’t mean that?”

“Either way, she couldn’t allow one of her friends to take her precious Bubby away.” Fushimi giggled. “So anyway, I tried calling you but got no response, and then the fireworks show started, and Mr. Hashimoto came up to me.”

So she was talking with them up until I found her.

“So, that Mr. Takashiro... You’re going to join his agency?”

“No, it’s too soon. Mr. Hashimoto just wanted me to meet him.”

“I see. Hopefully something good comes out of this.”

“Yeah...”

She didn’t sound excited. That’s how delicate a topic this was for her.

“He did see my play back during Golden Week, though.” She swung her feet back and forth again.

“Oh, he went just to see you?”

“No way. Ah-ha-ha.” Her laughter sounded forced. “He didn’t even remember me. Guess I didn’t leave an impression.”

And she had a decent role.

“He probably just didn’t realize it was the same person. And he only saw you act once.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Lately, even the smallest things made Fushimi feel pessimistic.

I wanted to cheer her up, but I had no idea how.

“Want some juice?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Or should I buy you a snack, instead?”

“H-huh? Wha-wha-what? Why?”

I’m only confusing her.

“I’m just wondering if having a snack or a drink would cheer you up.”

She gave me a blank stare before she started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry, it’s just, we’re not grade-schoolers, you know? Ha-ha.”

“Well, sorry that treating you to something is the only way I know how to cheer you up.”

“It’s fine. Thank you. Okay then, let’s buy snacks and drinks and head over to my house.”

“Your house? I don’t mind, but it’s already so late.”

“It’s fine.”

And so we left the bus stop.

We dropped by the convenience store and bought drinks and snacks.

“Come on in,” she said as we arrived at her house.

I saw her off there all the time, but I hadn’t entered in a long while. Still, it wasn’t that different from what I remembered.

“Thanks for having me over!”

No one else seemed to answer.

“My grandma’s already asleep, I think. Dad said he’d be coming home late, due to the festival.”

He was part of the staff, she said.

They might be having an after-party right about now.

“You haven’t been to my room in a long time, have you?”

“I haven’t been in your house in a long time.”

We went upstairs, and she casually opened the door.

“Come on in. I’ll put on the ACeeaaagh?!”

She screeched before jumping on top of the folded laundry beside her bed.

“What’s up?”

“D-don’t worry about it.”

She picked up the laundry and kept her back to me as she walked like a crab over to her closet.

Then a bra strap peeked out from the bundle she was carrying. A pair of panties fell to the ground.

I looked away and took a step back outside.

“No! D-did you...? He didn’t see. G-good.”

I can hear you.

“Okay, it’s all good now. Come on in.”

Things I could have never believed last year kept happening: First, I visit Torigoe’s room; now, Fushimi’s.

Fushimi offered me a cushion, and I took it.

Then I worried about something I usually didn’t: my body odor.

“Maybe I should’ve dropped by after taking a shower.”

“I have some sweat wipes. Want some?”

I guess that’ll do.

Going back home now would be silly, and I’d only sweat more from all the walking.

Fushimi gave me a few wipes, and I cleaned myself off.

“Want me to wipe your back?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Oh, don’t be shy.”

I had no figure worth showing off, so I thought just my back wouldn’t be a big deal. And I didn’t want her to think I was overly sensitive by stubbornly refusing.

“...Okay. Please do.”

I loosened the sash and exposed my upper body, showing my back to Fushimi.

“You know, I thought the same thing when you carried me home, but...your back is quite broad, isn’t it?”

“Don’t stare.”

I felt her finger sliding across my back.

“What did I just write?”

“How am I supposed to tell?”

“I wrote down how I’m feeling right now. I knew you wouldn’t get it.”

“Just wipe the sweat off already, okay?”

“Geez, at least try to humor me a little.”

She giggled. Then I felt the cold sensation of the wipe.

“How does it feel, Ryou?”

“Embarrassing.”

It felt nice, too, but the embarrassment won out.

I sat there awkwardly as Fushimi peered at my face.

“Hee-hee, you’re blushing.”

“No, I’m not.” I looked the other way, feeling annoyed, while holding back a smile.

I felt entirely different now. I felt refreshed. I could bask in the cool air of the AC.

I put the *yukata* back on, and she stood up.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

“O-okay...”

I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious when she said that as we were all alone in her room.

“And I have a request for you once I get back. Will you say yes?”

“I’ll hear the request first.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a minute.”

She stood before her closet and gave me a quick glance before holding something up to her chest (her underwear, I supposed) and walking off like a

crab.

Then a piece of thin, white fabric fell to the floor.

“Eep?!”

Fushimi picked it up at the speed of light and left the room with her face red up to her ears.

I guess those were her panties again?

“I wonder what her request is.”

I could only think of lewd stuff, due to the situation. Even though I knew she wouldn't make such a request.

The promise we made at the last stop of the train the other day also felt like something that didn't need to be so formally established. Though perhaps it was only me who felt that way, and it was actually of the utmost importance to her.

I felt awkward just sitting on the cushion; I tried distracting myself by walking over to the shelves with her books and DVDs and looking at the spines.

She had a *lot* of DVDs, ranging from new releases to ancient stuff. She really was a big film buff.

None of them caught my attention, though, so my eyes wandered elsewhere.

Her desk was neat and tidy. It was the same one she had been using since grade school. She even had the same protective mat on it. She had a list of all the homework we got for summer break and had crossed out the ones she had finished...which was all of them.

Right, what about that picture?

“...Huh? It's not here.”

She used to have a picture of her parents and her grandparents carrying her at one year old.

Maybe she moved it to an album or something.

I remembered looking at that picture back in grade school and thinking, “So that's what her mother looks like.”

I never met the woman, but she was very beautiful.

Fushimi never told me about her, but even back then, I knew it wasn't something I should bring up. Maybe she had passed away like my dad, so I made sure to never show interest in the topic.

During preschool, my mom would come pick me up, but it was always either Fushimi's dad or her grandmother who came to get her. I supposed her mother was gone even back then.

There were a bunch of textbooks, workbooks, and notebooks on the shelves of her desk. It was all neatly organized, so you could tell where everything was.

I found one notebook that looked older than the rest. I pulled it out, and it even smelled dusty. It didn't look like something meant for school. There was a date and a few lines of writing. A diary?

It dated back from before I was born.

I skimmed through a few pages. The handwriting looked quite feminine; was it her mother's?

Something caught my eye. The characters for *good heart*, but used like a name. I remembered Mom taught me how to read it back in grade school: Shinra. And it wasn't a common one.

Sometimes, the writer would shorten the name to just Shin. This Shinra's hometown was the same as my dad's.

A lot of thoughts ran through my head, and I stopped flipping through the notebook.

I shouldn't be reading someone's diary without their permission.

I closed the notebook and put it back in its place.

"S-sorry to make you wait." Fushimi came back right after.

"Oh, it didn't take you long. Wait...you got the *yukata* all messed up." I immediately looked away.

"My grandma did it for me today, but she's asleep now...and I couldn't make you wait any longer..."

It seemed like she had trouble deciding what to do.

At the very least, it covered her underwear, but even then, the disheveled clothing exposed a lot of her skin.

There was a towel-type blanket right next to where I was standing, so I threw it at her to get her to cover up.

I sighed in relief after she did. Now I could speak to her.

“So, what’s the request?”

“Ah, um... Well...” She fidgeted for a moment before making up her mind. “I wanted us to do a summer classic...”

She took a DVD from her shelf.

...A horror movie.

“Please watch it with me!”

“I knew it wasn’t gonna be what I imagined, but that’s it?”

“What did you imagine?” She tilted her head.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“I always stop midway when I’m alone, but if you’re with me, maybe I can watch it till the end.”

I don’t like horror movies, either, you know?

I couldn’t let her down, though.

It took a lot of courage to watch a horror movie when it was almost midnight, but I accepted the challenge.

“V-very well. Let’s do it.”

“Yay!”

You have no TV in your room, though, so how...? Then she took out her dad’s laptop. She came prepared.

...Too prepared, even.

She set up the table and placed the laptop on top. She popped the disc in and

immediately grabbed a cushion, ready to block the screen at any moment, if needed.

“I’m gonna hide when it gets scary. Tell me when it’s safe to look again.”

“Is there any point in watching the movie like that?”

Isn’t getting scared the purpose of horror movies?

Though I also thought anyone was free to enjoy art the way they liked.

The menu screen showed up, and it showed an intense scene. Fushimi froze.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Already?”

Fushimi closed the distance between us and held my arm tightly.

“Maybe I can now. Your warmth will keep me safe.”

“What if I go cold all of a sudden?”

“Stop it!”

Why do you wanna watch a horror movie if this much is gonna scare you?

“I’m pushing play.”

“...D-do it.”

She was looking at the screen with her eyes half-closed. Ready to bail at any moment.

The movie’s story moved along, shrouded in a dark atmosphere at all times. There was a lot in terms of staging, cinematography, and editing that I would never think to use for my films, so from that point of view, it was an interesting watch.

Meanwhile, Fushimi would let out short screams, squeals, shrieks, and screeches every time something happened, and grip my arm tightly.

I got spooked, too. I dreaded when they slowly built up tension for a big scare, and some of the jump scares got me. They used all kinds of techniques.

Also, Fushimi seemed to have forgotten her *yukata* wasn’t on right, thinking the towel-type blanket would cover her at all times, but in reality, I got a few

peeks of her white underwear...

A horror movie on in front, and this at my side. I didn't know what to feel.

"I—I—I—I can't take it anymore, sorry."

I couldn't take a lot of things anymore, either.

With teary eyes, Fushimi pushed the pause button.

"You don't have to force yourself to watch it if you don't like it."

"I mean...yeah, but..."

She took out the DVD and put away the laptop. She opened the snacks we bought, and we wolfed them down; we had gotten hungry.

"These are my mom's DVDs, actually. Some of them I bought, but like eighty percent of it is hers."

"Wow."

Since she has her diary, does she know about her and my dad's relationship?

I felt guilty about having read the diary; there was no way I could bring it up.

"I don't know what she was like. I've just been watching all her movies, wondering how much I could figure out through her taste."

"I see. And this is one of them."

"Yeah."

It was only natural she'd be interested in it. I was also curious about what my dad was like when he was alive.

"When I was little, they'd only tell me she couldn't be with us; it wasn't until later that I found out they got divorced. I guess it was too hard to explain to a kid. My grandma doesn't seem to think well of her, either, so I couldn't ask for more details."

Apparently, her dad told her about it when she got into high school. He also mentioned they kept a few cardboard boxes with her mom's stuff inside, and that was where Fushimi found her DVDs and tapes.

...Was the diary also in one of those boxes?

Then we talked about my film while snacking.

“So I’ll be in all the films you make, right?” she said cheerfully.

After a while, we stopped chatting and realized we were getting sleepy. And so I went back home.

12 End Credits

I was back home from Fushimi's house.

The front door wasn't locked, and the lights of the dining room were on.

I looked at the shoes in the entrance and noticed Mom was back from work.

I popped my head into the dining room and saw her watching a TV show she had recorded, while drinking beer with the leftovers of what Mana cooked for lunch.

"There you are, you punk. What were you up to this late?"

"Does it matter?"

"You let loose just because it's a festival night? You didn't have your own personal fireworks celebration, if you know what I mean, did you?"

"Stop it with the double entendres."

The same one Himeji used?

I grabbed some barley tea from the fridge.

"You weren't on night shift tonight?"

"There are two types of night shifts, you know."

Then the diary crossed my mind.

"...By the way, where is Dad's hometown?"

"Why do you ask? You've been there before to visit your grandpa on New Year's and Obon."

...Yup. It really was there. I knew it.

Which meant the Shinra that came up in the diary *was* my dad.

"I went to the festival with Fushimi and the girls."

“You watched the fireworks with Hina?”

“Not just with her.”

“Phweee! Young Casanova!”

“Stop it with that already.”

You’re too old to be acting like you’re my classmate.

I sighed.

“She brought up her mom. Do you know anything about her? She didn’t say much.”

“Oh, Satomi? I don’t know a lot, except she’s really pretty. I heard she got too busy at work and left her home and family behind.”

Fushimi also mentioned her grandmother not liking her. She probably didn’t have a good reputation.

“I don’t know what the general public thinks of her, but no one in the neighborhood really liked her.”

“General public?”

“Yup. General public.”

“Was our family always close to hers?”

“Pretty much. Your dad and Satomi were old friends. And you two kids just so happened to be born in the same year, so we became mom friends.”

“They were old friends?”

“Childhood friends, like you and Hina.”

My dad and her mom?

So that’s why our families were close despite not living next to each other.

“Were they good friends?”

“That I don’t know.”

She was curt, entirely different from when she was pulling my leg just a moment ago.

She gulped down the rest of her beer and said, “This show’s boring.”

I wondered what was so boring about it and spent a few minutes watching.

The end credits scrolled by as the show went on.

Then, among the cast, I saw the name Satomi Ashihara.

Satomi...?

Mom pointed at the screen.

“That’s her. Satomi Ashihara is Hina’s mom.”

Afterword

Hello there, Kennoji here.

If I may speak about personal matters, I just moved. I should be settled in my new home by the time this volume comes out.

It is July as I write this, and I've thrown out a lot of clothing and stuff I no longer use. I showed no mercy.

I lived in my old apartment for a year and a half, and during that whole time, I had no wired Internet. I frequently got flyers advertising fiber-optic connections, but right around the time I moved in, I talked to everyone and tried everything to get a wired connection, and it ended up just being impossible. It was only *my* room that couldn't get it, too.

It was too stressful for a YouTube junkie such as myself to live there.

So as an alternative, I'd been using pocket Wi-Fi and gotten used to it. You can watch videos on that so long as you sacrifice video quality. And once you get used to low video and audio quality, you stop minding it.

I still couldn't play FPS or fighting games online, though.

So anyway, I'm really excited I'll get to watch videos in high quality again at my new home.

I just hope my new neighbors are nice... (I'll try to be nice myself!) So, *The Girl I Saved on the Train* finally got to Volume 5.

They say three volumes means a success, so I am very glad to have reached this point.

I have nothing but gratitude for Fly for the illustrations, and to my editor and everyone else involved in the making of this book.

And of course, it is all thanks to you, my dear readers, for buying this book.

I don't know how long I'll get to continue this series, but I will do my best on

the next volume as well.

I hope to see you there!

KENNOJI

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