



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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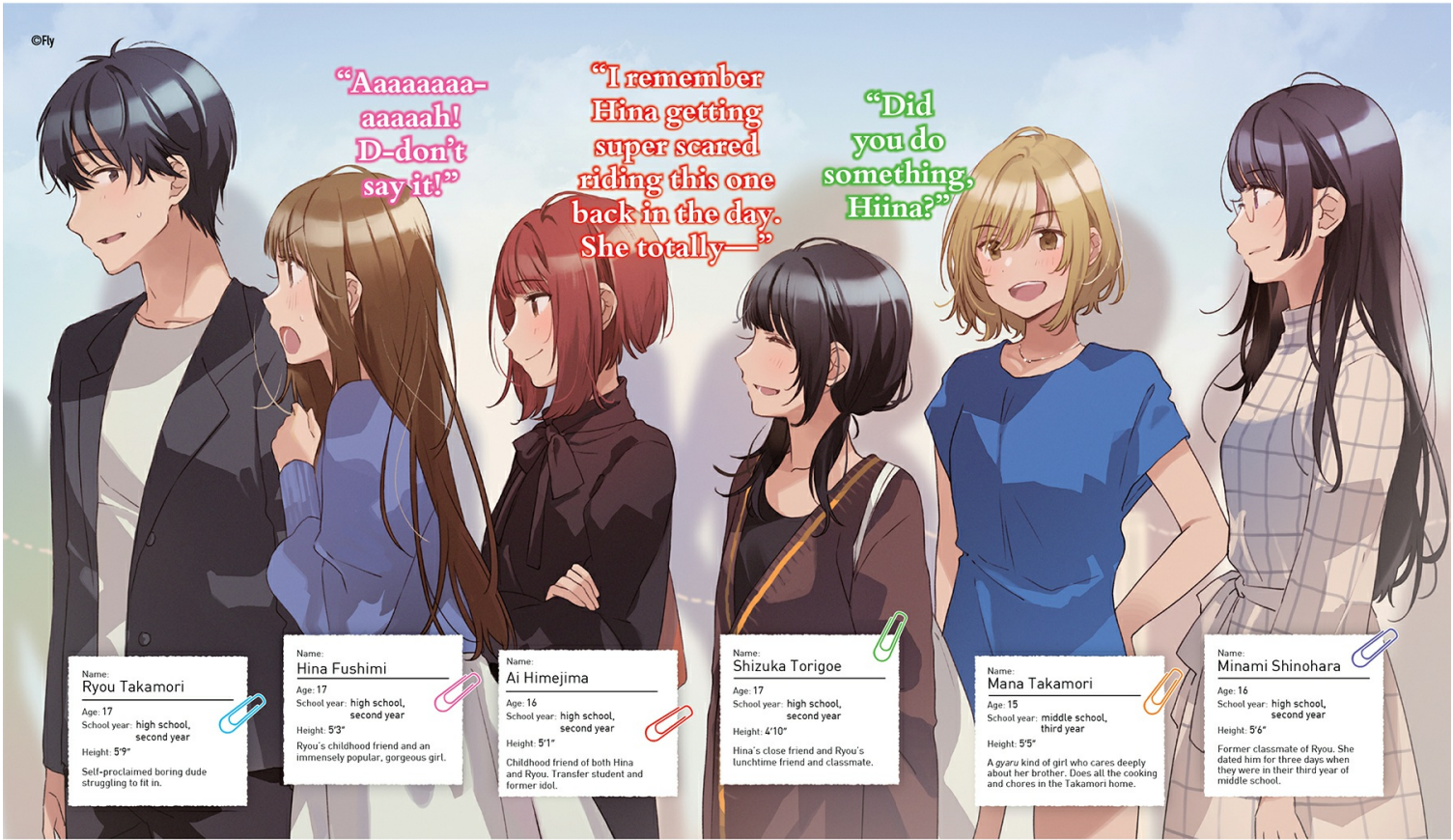
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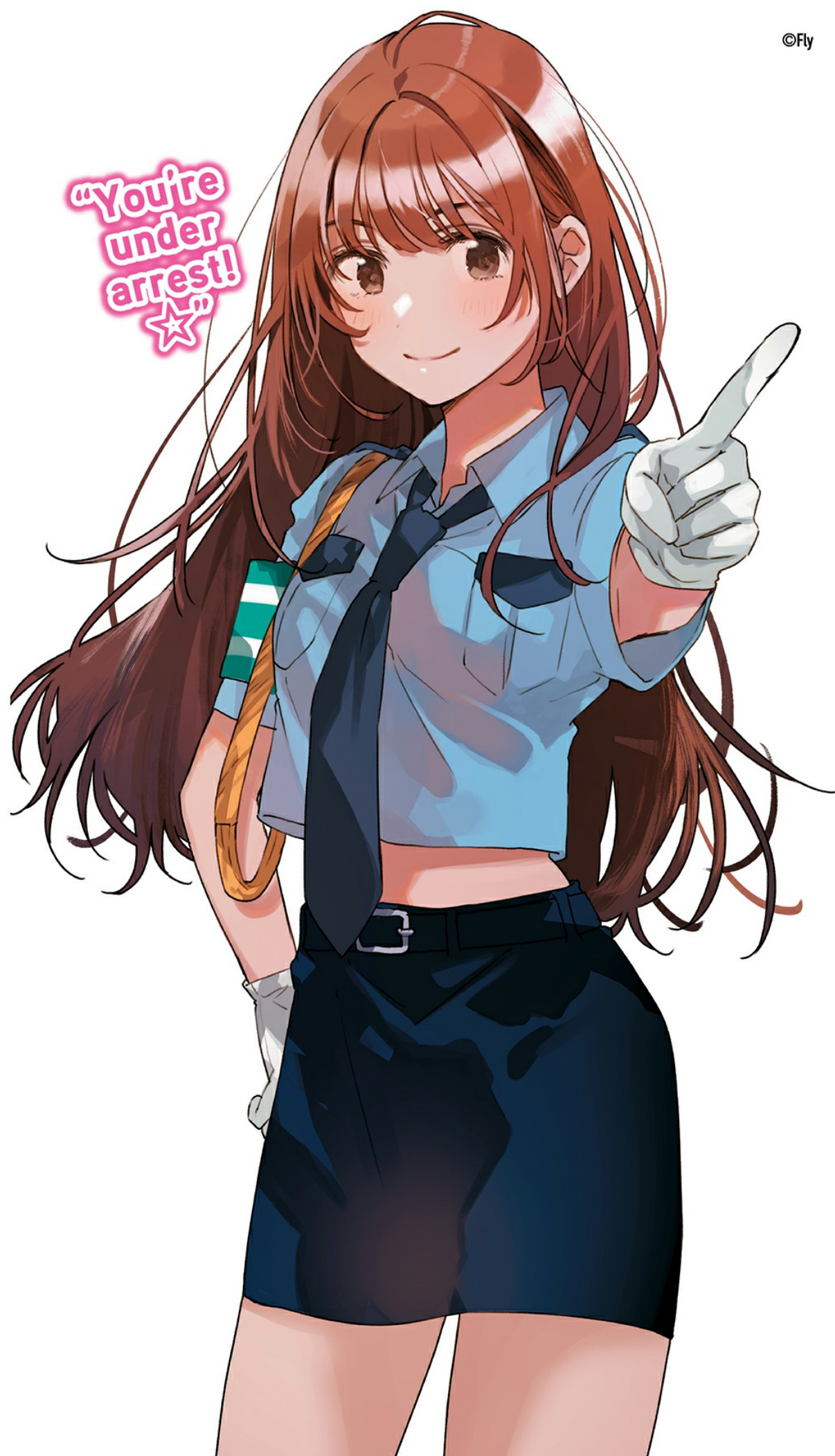


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With the sports festival over, the only remaining big event was the school festival.

While the rest of the school was beginning preparations, our class was mostly done. Around the time we started hearing about the other classes' haunted mansions and themed cafés, we'd just wrapped up our independent film.

At last, it was time for a preview screening.

"I-it's finally here..." Fushimi gulped beside me.

Fushimi was my childhood friend. Not only was she the star of our movie, but she was also the one who originally suggested we submit a short film.

Someone closed the curtains, and the classroom went dark.

I noticed her shapely face contort in anxiety. She was the star actress and the project's planner—if no one liked it, she was the one they'd hold accountable.

"I'm sure it'll be good, right?" she said.

"I don't know..." I wasn't very confident, either.

The film I'd made on my own had ended up winning a prize, thanks to Fushimi's star power, but that wasn't enough to make me believe this one would go over well, too.

"C'mon, you're supposed to say 'of course!'" Fushimi slapped my back.

"What can I say? I did what I could, but whether people like it or not isn't up to me."

"I mean, you're right, but still..."

Fushimi pouted and held on to my sleeve. She was awfully nervous.

"Oh, what's the big deal?" Himeji said easily from my other side. "It's a short film made by students for their high school festival. Of course it's not going to

be good.”

Ai Himejima was my other childhood friend and a former minor idol. Currently, she was focusing her efforts on musical stage plays. I also happened to work at her talent agency.

She was a pretty girl, though her beauty was of a different sort than Fushimi’s. That said, her charm was held back by the cockiness that came from her career experience.

“No one’s expecting that much,” she concluded.

“Hey now,” I began.

But Fushimi, her eyes narrowed, bit back first. “You don’t have any friends, do you, Ai?”

“What? I do, too.” Himeji retorted, clearly angry.

You realize you’re the one in the wrong here, right, Himeji?

“I simply meant to say you don’t need to set the bar so high,” she continued. “In any case, I’m sure it won’t be boring, considering I’m on-screen.”

“Where does that confidence of yours come from...?” I said.

“I wish you’d share even ten percent of it with me,” added Fushimi.

Meanwhile, Waka was readying the projector. She already had the video file, so it was only a matter of playing it back on her laptop.

The whole classroom was restless.

It seemed everyone was thinking of their own scenes. The room was full of chatter about the filming and self-deprecating jokes about being forgettable background characters.

Just as Fushimi initially proposed, everyone had gotten a turn to be on camera. It wasn’t just the two of us on edge.

What about Torigoe?

I turned around casually and saw her with a stern look on her face. She was as stiff as a military commander, but with her hands held together in prayer.

Looks like she's nervous, too.

Torigoe was the film's screenwriter. She'd come up with the story and all the lines. She used to be just a lunchtime friend I didn't speak to much, but now she was one of the few classmates I could be myself around. She was also a close friend of Fushimi's.

The projector began to display the laptop's screen, and Waka clicked on a folder on the desktop.

"Is it this file, Takamori?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the one."

"All right. It's showtime!"

The class went quiet in an instant, and the click of the computer's mouse sounded strangely loud.

The intro began to play. I'd seen it countless times by now.

Fushimi's character was in love with a boy who didn't show up in the story. Himeji was her rival.

Though I'd already watched the film many times, it still surprised me how different Himeji's acting was between the start and the end of the film.

At first, her delivery was stiff and monotonous. But once she auditioned for the musical and began studying and practicing over the summer, she'd gradually worked her way up to a decent level. She almost seemed like a different actor by the end of the film.

"Nnnh!!" Himeji's face had gone completely red.

It was only natural that she would feel embarrassed. I had no idea how good she was now, but it was true that she'd been quite bad in the beginning.

"Stay strong, Ai," said Fushimi, already joking.

"Don't fan the flames," I said, cutting her off.

Fushimi smirked. She didn't mince her words when it came to Himeji, and the same was true in reverse.

There were a few chuckles during scenes where background characters

appeared and said their one line. But other than that, everyone watched the film seriously.

After thirty minutes and some change, Waka clapped, and everyone else followed suit.

“So that’s it,” said Waka casually as she put away the projector at the front of the classroom. “What did you think?”

Fushimi, Himeji, and I shook with nerves.

“Pretty cool, I think,” someone said. This got the rest of the class started.

“Yeah, it’s better than I expected.”

“Short and sweet.”

“Hina’s acting was great!”

I glanced at Fushimi and saw her beaming.

Himeji, however, frowned at the lack of mention of her own name. She seemed dissatisfied.

A few more people gave their impressions, and most of them were good.

“What did you think, miss?” I asked Waka after everyone else finished.

“I was moved to see everyone come together as one. It seems like all of you did your part and cooperated well.”

I wasn’t asking for your thoughts as our teacher... But fine.

We spent the rest of our time in class discussing shifts for the day of the festival and how we’d go about setting up the classroom as a theater.

“Takayan, Takayan, that was awesome!” Deguchi, my only male friend in class, grabbed his stuff and got ready to head home, then came over to my desk.

“Thanks,” I said. “It seems like everyone liked it more than I expected. I’m glad.”

“All of us read the screenplay, so we knew how it would go, but I was honestly impressed to see how it came together.”

“Don’t lay on the praise too thick. You’re embarrassing me.”

“But that’s an award-winning director for ya!” Deguchi whistled and poked my shoulder.

“Everyone around my seat felt the same,” said Torigoe, joining us. “Since everyone helped with the filming, they all feel like it’s their baby.”

I guess that means no one can judge it objectively, huh?

The first person I showed the film to was my little sister, Mana.

“Mana said, ‘It’s a story about young love, but it’s a little different from the usual, huh?’ I think your unique style must have shown through in a good way, Torigoe.”

“I wonder.” Torigoe looked away shyly.

I’d focused on doing what I wanted for my independent film, but the school festival film was mainly Torigoe’s. Mana seemed to have caught on to the difference.

“I’m just happy everyone seemed to like it,” said Fushimi. “I’m glad I suggested making a film.”

Fushimi, who our classmates had showered with praise, appeared suitably satisfied, but the same was clearly not true of Himeji.

“Ryou. You think I’m cute...right?” she asked.

“Where is this coming from?” I replied.

“Why didn’t anyone mention how cute I was?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“I think it’s a director’s job to make the protagonist *and* the supporting actors shine.”

“Everyone was probably too distracted by your lifeless acting to notice how you looked. And considering how you are, I bet they didn’t want to say anything.”

Himeji’s face twisted in pain as I went for the jugular.

“B-but...I’m good now,” she said.

“Yes, you’re good now. But you weren’t back then.”

“I demand a reshoot.”

“It’s too late.”

“You *are* cute, Himeji,” said Torigoe, cutting in to answer the other girl’s original question.

“Shizuka...!” Himeji turned to her as if she’d found her savior.

“It’s really cute how, even though you’ve got loads of confidence and it seems like you’d be able to do anything, you’re a super-bad actor. It’s kind of charming.”

“Take that back! I’m not bad. Not anymore.”

Now even Torigoe was trash-talking Himeji.

...The two of them have become pretty close, huh?

“Hey, let’s throw a party to celebrate!” Deguchi suggested.

All of us agreed, and when he made the suggestion in the group chat for the film, a lot of people reacted right away. The chat progressed, and possible ideas were whittled down until we eventually landed on a group karaoke session over the weekend.

“Can you go, Ai?” he asked.

“Yes, I don’t have any appointments that day.”

“Good. I wish everyone could make it.”

Some people had club activities or part-time jobs and would have to leave early or arrive late, but at least half of the class was able to go.

“Karaoke...” All emotion vanished from Torigoe’s face. She looked at me, her eyes glassy.

“I know. I’m the same...,” I replied.

That said, karaoke was the best option for such a big group. If we all went to a restaurant together, the resulting noise would be a nuisance to the other

diners.

“Do I have to sing?”

“Torigoe, it doesn’t matter if you’re bad. Just put your soul into it,” Deguchi said, trying to cheer her up.

I knew what he was getting at. No one would think any less of Torigoe even if she was a bad singer.

“Do I have to sing?” I asked.

“Most definitely,” Deguchi replied.

“Why?”

“You’re the director. If you sing, everyone will get fired up. Probably.”

“I doubt anyone would care.”

I thought back to the time I went to karaoke with Fushimi and a few others. Would I pick a bad song and get laughed at behind my back?

“Despite what you think, Ryou, you’re a pretty decent singer,” Himeji said.

“Yeah. You’re just shy,” Fushimi added.

I remembered Himeji’s casual praise the one time we’d gone to karaoke together.

“Two pretty girls have given you their approval. You’ll be fine. And if you’re still anxious...why don’t we sing a duet?”

Deguchi pointed at himself with his thumb, an exceedingly hammy expression on his face. I could immediately tell he was joking.

“No, thank you. That’d be even worse.” I turned him down with a smile.

“...”

Torigoe’s eyes darted between me and Deguchi. Her gaze was intense.

“Torigoe,” I said, “may I ask what’s going through your mind right now?”

“Huh? N-nothing.”

Liar.

“Just that, hey, you two are pretty good friends, huh?” She looked at me as if to say, *You get it, right?*

Of course I don't get it, Torigoe. I'm not into BL, okay?

“Ai, Ai! Let's make this a contest!” said Fushimi.

“You'd challenge me? To a singing competition? Laughable!” Himeji puffed out her chest theatrically. “Very well. I'll show you the difference between an ignorant frog stuck in a well and a killer whale swimming freely in the deep blue sea.”

Fushimi sounded like she wanted a casual match, while Himeji was out for blood.

Those two never change, huh?

With that, we wrapped up the party planning session and got ready to head home.

“Hiina, I have library duty today,” said Torigoe.

“Oh yeah?” Fushimi replied. “I guess I'll come keep you company.”

“Thanks.”

Torigoe had mentioned before that she found library duty boring. But she'd also said it didn't really matter since it gave her more time to read. She was probably between novels. She and Fushimi followed Himeji and me about halfway down the hallway before they split off and headed for the school library.

“I shall see you home,” Himeji said.

“No, I shall see *you* home,” I said. “Not like it matters. Our houses are practically right next to each other.”

Himeji smirked. “Who do you think you are, Ryou?”

“Listen to yourself. You'd have more friends if you stopped talking like that.”

Torigoe was right—Himeji was a pretty girl with one huge failing. Though it suited her, in a way. Perhaps it was part of her charm.

“Like what?”

“Forget it.”

I got my sneakers out of the shoe locker in the entrance hall, put them on, and waited for Himeji to do the same. But when she moved to put on her shoes, she stumbled. I grabbed her arm and helped support her.

“...What are you...?” She looked up at me, cheeks red.

Our eyes met, and I recalled how she’d kissed me the other day. But I was jolted back to reality by the voices of other students behind us and quickly let her go.

“Nothing.”

Later, as we made our way to the train station, a thought came to me.

“Himeji, did you know Fushimi’s mom was an actress?”

“Yeah. Ms. Ashihara, right? I always knew. But as a kid, I didn’t think much more of it than ‘Wow, Hina’s mom is on TV.’”

So she’d known all this time.

“Why ask about that, all of a sudden?” she asked.

“I just found out recently. I was shocked.”

“Do you remember anything about her? About Ms. Ashihara...about Hina’s mom.”

Do I remember anything about her?

.....?

I tried thinking back, but I couldn’t recall her mother’s face.

“My mom says we met,” I said, “but I don’t remember her at all.”

“I see.”

“I have this impression she’s scary, though. I don’t remember if she scolded me once, or if I saw her scolding Fushimi or what.”

“Scary, huh?” Himeji nodded like a detective questioning a witness.

“Yeah. You often hear people complain about celebrities being awful in real life, right?”

“Indeed. I can think of many such cases.”

“Maybe Fushimi’s mom was like that.”

“I wonder. I don’t really have a particular impression of her.”

As we spoke, we reached the train station and returned home.

That Saturday, we arrived at the karaoke place to celebrate the completion of our short film.

Fushimi, Himeji, Torigoe, and Mana came along with me, and we met up with Deguchi and around ten or so other guys and girls who formed the core of the class. As the evening progressed, our number would go up and down as more people showed up and others left.

“A wrap party, huh? Man, you’re such grown-ups,” Mana said. She’d been excited ever since I invited her.

“It’s common sense to hold a gathering like this at the end of a big job,” Himeji said proudly.

“Wow.” Mana sounded impressed.

“It’s been a while since either of us went to karaoke, huh, Ryou?” Fushimi said.

“Huh?” I replied, confused for a moment. “Oh, I went one more time after that.”

“You did? With whom?”

With Himeji. I didn’t want to say that, though, because I’d told Fushimi we’d go again together, but wound up going with Himeji instead. It felt like I’d broken my promise.

“He went with me, actually,” Himeji responded.

“Oh... I see.” Fushimi shot me a cold, dead-eyed glance.

“Uh, erm... Yeah,” I said weakly.

I couldn’t deny it. I felt so awkward, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong. *Oh, that’s right.*

“You see, we were trying to take shelter from the rain, and the only place nearby was a karaoke parlor,” I said hurriedly, excusing myself. “And since Himeji’s scared of thunder, the soundproof room was perfect.”

“So you went into a private room and flirted.”

“Why would you think that?!”

“I showed Ryou all of myself in that room,” Himeji said.

“Don’t give people the wrong idea,” I shot back. “You just sang your go-to song, complete with choreography.”

Fushimi narrowed her eyes in disgust. “You’re such a perv, Ryou...”

“How?!”

I tried turning the conversation to Torigoe, who’d been quiet up to this point.

“Torigoe, do you like karaoke?”

“When I do go, I usually go alone. This is the first time I’ll be at a place like this with so many people.”

“It’s been a while since I came with such a huge group, too!” said Mana. “Let’s sing together, Shizu.”

“As you wish, ManaMana.”

“Yaaay!”

Mana was so cheery, she seemed like a totally different person.

“I got us a room, guys! Let’s gooo!” Deguchi turned and called out to us, then followed a clerk away from the lobby.

We were shown to a large room upstairs, meant for about twenty people. It had a bigger screen than those in other rooms I’d been to, and even had a little stage up front.

Torigoe immediately went for the maracas and began shaking them.

Noticing my glance, she said, “When you go with a big group, you need at least one person on maracas, right?”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“Oh, okay.”

I had never seen anyone use them. But maybe it depended on the kind of people you went with.

Since Torigoe always came by herself, she seemed like a fish out of water. She had no idea what was normal.

Soon, everyone had taken a seat wherever they pleased, and the karaoke session got underway.

Two girls sang a trendy pop song everyone knew, while Torigoe, sitting beside me, shook her maracas in sync.

“So this is what a wrap party is like,” I mumbled to no one in particular.

“The ones I’ve been to are usually a little fancier,” Himeji replied.

“Okay, miss professional celebrity.”

Torigoe heard us in between verses and joined the conversation. “I never took an active role in the school festival, so I always ignored party invitations.”

I was the same.

“You’ve led a pretty boring school life, haven’t you, Shizuka?” said Himeji.

“No need to say it out loud. I know.”

I got the feeling Himeji had stopped holding herself back around Torigoe. They must have gotten a lot closer.

“Ai, don’t forget. We’re having a competition here,” Fushimi declared, grabbing one of the mics.

Himeji sighed and grabbed the other. “Very well. Though we already know who will lose.”

Everyone got fired up as the transfer student and former idol faced off against the school’s current idol.

Fushimi grabbed the portable touch screen and turned on the karaoke machine’s score-keeping function. Then she sang the same song she had sung once before.

“What should I sing?” said Mana. “Bubby, what do you want me to sing?”

“Just pick whatever you want,” I replied.

“‘Auld Lang Syne’?”

“This isn’t choir practice... You’re gonna freak everyone out.”

“What about Schubert’s ‘Erlkönig’?”

“You here for karaoke or opera?”

Mana grumbled as she glared at the tablet.

I looked at Himeji. She had a stern expression.

“...Looks like I can’t afford to hold back,” she muttered.

I knew Fushimi was good, but if Himeji, who was more or less a professional, felt a legitimate challenge, she must be even better than I’d thought.

I got a text from Torigoe, who was sitting two seats away.

Hiina’s good.

So Torigoe didn’t know.

Yeah, I found out the other day, I texted back.

Oh no. What should I sing?

I suggest keeping to yourself until someone tries to make you sing.

You’re a genius.

While I was texting, Mana elbowed me in the side.

“Keep off your phone, Bubby.”

“Oh, I was just...”

“It’s rude. Look at Hina. She’s disappointed because you’re not listening to her song.”

No way... I turned to look, and she was staring at me blankly, just as Mana had said.

She’d seemed so cheerful just a moment ago. I immediately put away my phone and began shaking the maracas Mana handed me.

A glow returned to Fushimi's face, like a wilted flower bursting back into bloom.

Well, that was simple. I guess this is the power of the maracas.

When her song came to an end, applause rang out.

"Hina, you're so talented!"

"You're the cutest, Fushimi!"

"You really can do anything!"

Fushimi blushed under our classmates' praise.

The karaoke machine gave her a score of 95.

"Oh, I forgot to say," Deguchi called out. "Since there's so many of us, I got another room next door. If anyone gets overwhelmed, you're welcome to go over there."

"It is time to put this amateurish frog in her place...!" Himeji tightened her grip on her mic and marched to the stage.

"Oh, wait, Himeji..."



I tried to stop her, but it was too late.

“Sorry, Himejima. I’m next,” Deguchi said as he moved toward the stage.

Himeji returned to her seat, her face burning.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she fumed. “You just wanted me to embarrass myself, didn’t you?!”

“I tried, but you were too fast.”

“Gosh!” Himeji huffed, then took a sip of her juice.

Torigoe pulled my sleeve. “Takamori, wanna go to the room next door?”

“Uh, I don’t mind, but why?”

“I wanna practice...”

“Oh, okay.”

I understood exactly how she felt, so I followed her and left the room. There was only one other door next to ours, so we didn’t get lost.

It was a small room—the complete opposite of the one we’d just left. When we sat down on the tiny sofa, our shoulders touched. It must have been meant for a single person, or maybe a couple.

Just then, our shoulders crashed together.

“...!”

“Ah, sorry,” I said. I wasn’t used to being so close to a girl, no matter who it was.

“N-no... It’s okay.” Torigoe shook her head and grabbed the portable touch screen. “Everyone else is so brave. They don’t have any problem singing in front of the group.”

“Yeah. I don’t know how they do it.”

“I know, right?”

Torigoe used the attached stylus to navigate the touch screen. I glanced over and saw she was looking through anime songs.

“I’m not good like Hiina or Himeji, but there’s levels to badness, y’know? There’s funny bad.”

“Uh-huh.” I knew what she meant. “It also depends on the person’s character.”

“I think it’d make things easier if people would crack a joke or two about my singing, but...”

“Yeah, I’m not the joker type, either. So everyone politely tries to avoid mentioning it, which only makes things more awkward.”

“Right?!”

Torigoe selected a song and entered it into the machine. It was the theme song of a popular anime from the previous year. I’d watched it all the way through. She must have remembered that. What’s more...it was a girl and boy duet.

Torigoe grabbed a second mic, turned it on, and handed it to me. “You do the guy’s part.”

“Okay. We’re just practicing anyway, right?”

Footage from the anime played on the screen. But when the song began, Torigoe panicked.

“D-don’t pretend like it was fine if I’m really bad, okay? Oh, but don’t just diss me outright, either.”

“You’re making things really complicated...” Still, I agreed with a smile. “Do the same for me, too, okay?”

“If you turn out to be really good, I’m gonna hit you.”

“Why would you hit me?!”

Torigoe chuckled as the lyrics for the girl’s part appeared on-screen.

She wasn’t nearly as bad as she’d feared. She wasn’t good, per se, but it wasn’t painful to listen to.

Come to think of it, Himeji had said singing well was all about practice... Torigoe must have practiced this song a fair bit.

The guy part began, and I joined in. I tried playing the song back in my mind and replicating it with my voice. I glanced to the side and saw Torigoe softly bopping her head as she mouthed the lyrics.

Watching her, I understood what Deguchi meant about just putting your soul into it.

Torigoe glanced over at me, her profile lit up by the screen's glow.

Ah, this is the part where we sing together.

Soon, the song was over, and Torigoe seemed refreshed, like she'd accomplished something.

"Takamori, may I speak?" she asked.

"Just don't slam me," I replied.

"That was...pretty nice."

I sighed, relieved. "Thank goodness."

"Singing that on my own is cool and all, but doing it with someone else is... Well, yeah."

Torigoe nodded excitedly. It seemed she was satisfied with her performance.

"You've sung that song a lot, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't sound weird. Or bad."

"...Good." She smiled in relief.

"You should come here with Fushimi and Himeji, too, once in a while."

"The thing is, I don't think it'd be fun for the others. I tend to like singing songs other people don't know and can't join in on."

Right. Considering Torigoe's interests, it's probably more comfortable for her to go by herself.

Her response was logical—very much like her.

I glanced at the door, which had a small window in it, and saw Mana staring at us so intently, it felt like her eyes were burning a hole right through the glass.

“Whoa, what the heck?!” I exclaimed.

“...?! ManaMana...!”

She opened the door and came inside. “So you pulled him away from the big room to get cozy in here... Bad girl, Shizu.”

“We were just practicing,” Torigoe protested.

“But you said you’d sing with me! Why take Bubby with you?”

That’s your issue?

“I just figured it wouldn’t be fun to sing with you, since we have such different tastes.”

Isn’t that being kind of harsh?!

“Isn’t that being kind of harsh?! Try to have a little consideration, okay?!”

We really are brother and sister, huh?

Mana sat on the sofa and snuggled up to Torigoe, then reached around her back.

“I gotta teach you a lesson, you naughty girl,” she said.

“Wha?! Hey, don’t...!”

Torigoe tried to twist out of Mana’s grasp.

At first, I thought Mana was just tickling her, but she was clearly groping the other girl. Did she think I wouldn’t notice in the dark?

“I’m going to get mad for real, ManaMana.”

“Stop hiding these huge melons!”

Unable to stop myself, I glanced at Torigoe’s chest, then quickly looked away.
I hope she didn’t notice.

“Wah! No! Ahh... Please.”

“Stop it, moron,” I said, unleashing a karate chop onto Mana’s head.

Torigoe was blushing as she struggled to escape her.

“What’re you doing?!” Mana exclaimed.

“Right back at ya.”

“I was teaching her a lesson and checking on her development.”

Who asked you to do that, exactly?!

“Wanna see for yourself?” she said.

“ManaMana!”

My eyes met Torigoe’s as she shouted back, and she quickly put some distance between us.

“No!” I shouted back. “What’d you even come here for?”

“I was gonna tell you Ai’s turn is coming up... And then I found you two singing together, and I felt like you had stolen her away from me. I got mad and... Oh... Hmm?”



She cocked her head as if trying to put her thoughts in order. Then she looked up.

“Oh, crap! I’m getting in the way here!”

“We already finished singing, so not reall—”

“Shut it,” she interrupted me. “...I’m gonna tell everyone to stay in the big room!”

“No! Please! There’s no need!” Torigoe shouted, pulling Mana back down as she tried to stand up. She wound up yanking so hard that Mana fell on top of me.

“Bwegh?!”

Fushimi arrived at the door right on time to stare at us.

“What are you three doing?” She blinked, watching us in a daze.

“It’s all Bubby’s fault...,” Mana said, her eyes practically spinning.

“ManaMana, you’re so heavy...,” Torigoe said. She, too, was crushed beneath the other girl.

“Ah, uh... Nothing...,” I said, pushing Mana away in an attempt to smooth things over. “What’s up?”

“I was going to fill everyone’s drinks,” Fushimi replied.

“I’ll help you out.”

Apparently, she was planning to carry everyone’s drinks all by herself.

“Thanks, Ryou.”

We left the room and walked to the end of the hallway.

“I’m going to make swamp water for Ai.” Fushimi snickered.

“How old are you?”

You mean you’re going to mix everything in the fountain, right? Himeji’s just gonna make fun of you for being childish.

“Ryou, I want to request a song from you.”

“Me? Is it something I’d be able to sing?”

“I’m sure you know it.”

She told me the title, and I immediately recognized it. It was a mellow love song that was popular back when we were in middle school. It was pretty easy to sing.

“That’s the one that goes like, ‘Hey Rina, I needed nothing else but you,’ right?”

“Yes, yes. And I want you to secretly change the name ‘Rina’ to ‘Hina,’ okay?” Her eyes lit up as she made the request.

“Isn’t that something couples do?”

“Will you do it when we’re a couple, then?”

It seemed like she was half joking, and I wasn’t sure how to respond.

Fushimi blinked her round eyes, fluttering her long lashes and grinning at my confusion.

“Uh... W-well, I guess so,” I said at last.

“Yay!” She pumped her fist in the air a couple times.

“Back on topic,” I said. “What drinks should we get for everyone?”

“Oh, crap. I forgot.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Should we go back and ask them?”

“Yes, sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Fushimi locked arms with me as we walked down the short hallway. When I looked over at her, she had a huge smile on her face.

◆ Shizuka Torigoe ◆

All of a sudden, Hiina and Takamori were gone.

ManaMana told me they went to grab drinks for everyone.

“How was Bubby’s singing?” she asked.

“All right. Not particularly good or bad.”

“Oh, I see,” she replied, sounding deeply interested.

I asked why she wanted to know, and she told me the two of them had never gone to karaoke together. This wasn’t too surprising, though. It’d be weirder if they had. A brother and sister going to karaoke all by themselves seemed a little suspicious.

Himeji showed up at the small room’s door and called in, “Mana, you’re next.”

“All right!”

ManaMana stood up and left, and Himeji came in to take her place.

“You couple of rascals.” Himeji narrowed her eyes and pinched my cheek.

“Ow.”

“He didn’t even listen to my song, and then he ran off with Hina. I swear, that boy...” She sighed.

I rubbed my smarting cheek. *You just wanted him to hear you sing!*

“I asked Ryou, and apparently he doesn’t remember anything about Hina’s mom,” she continued.

“I see.”

The diary on Hiina’s desk talked a lot about the Takamoris.

I’d told Himeji everything I could remember about it, including my conclusion that Takamori’s incredible romantic ineptitude likely stemmed from trauma involving Hiina and her mother.

After that, we’d formed a temporary alliance. We hadn’t made any detailed plans, though. We’d simply decided to see how things played out, and when one of us got the chance, they’d lead Hiina away while the other stayed by Takamori’s side.

“...That woman went way too far, don’t you think?” Himeji said. “Why lash out against a child like that?”

Hiina’s mother, Satomi Ashihara, had been childhood friends with Takamori’s father.

They were once a couple but ended up separating after Ms. Ashihara’s work as a celebrity increased and they began to grow apart.

Though she still had feelings for him after they broke up, Takamori’s father wound up marrying his mother.

Ms. Ashihara must’ve hated Takamori. She must’ve thought he was the reason she couldn’t rekindle her relationship with his father.

She’d married and had Hiina out of spite, then divorced. According to Himeji, she had almost zero involvement in raising her child.

“*Hina doesn’t really like you.*” That was what Ms. Ashihara had told a young Takamori.

Going by the diary, it seemed she later regretted her actions. But that didn’t change the fact that she’d unfairly lashed out at her ex’s son.

“If what you said is true, Takamori and Hiina were super close back then,” I said. “Obviously, he’d be shocked to hear something like that from her mom.”

“And that caused his weird feelings about women,” Himeji added.

I nodded. “If he says he doesn’t remember, it must be subconscious.”

“So he has a subconscious distrust of women?”

“To put it simply, he has no problems being friends with us, but the moment he senses the tiniest shred of romance...”

...he’d gently steer the situation in a different direction so as to not wreck our friendship.

Takamori wasn’t dense—he was *too sensitive*.

“We had feelings for each other back in middle school, though, so I don’t think it was that big a deal at the time. The trauma must’ve gotten worse as he grew up.”

“Admittedly, it *does* make a bit of sense why she would get so mad,” I said. “Going from what the diary said, they broke up because she was getting more work. He dumped her because they were going through a rough patch, then immediately found a new girlfriend...and married Takamori’s mom.”

“Are you trying to say Ryou’s mom cucked her?”

“Could you please mind your language?”

It didn’t feel right to use a word like that for real-life people we knew.

“Am I wrong, though?”

“Right or wrong, from her point of view, it must have felt like Takamori’s mom stole the man she loved from her. And then Takamori was born—her romantic rival’s child.”

“So she let her emotions get the better of her. That’s a little selfish, don’t you think? I mean, she got married to another man right away and gave birth to Hina, didn’t she? Does she even have any right to be mad?”

“...This is just my assumption, but I think she got with Fushimi’s dad out of spite.”

“You think she was trying to tell Takamori’s dad, ‘Look, I don’t need you, I can marry someone even better’? That’s such a...macho line of thinking. Not uncommon for narcissistic celebrities, though.” Himeji shook her head sadly.

...Does she realize she’s talking about herself?

“But she regretted what she said to Takamori,” I countered.

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“I know. I’m just stating the facts.”

Himeji was fuming, though I couldn’t tell if it was because she was a part of that celebrity world herself, or because she was Hiina’s and Takamori’s childhood friend.

“That woman only used Hina and her dad as tools for licking her wounded ego. It sounds like she was a pretty bad mother, and she divorced Hina’s father right away, too.”

Himeji was being pretty harsh. I didn't know if what she was saying was true, but it did make sense.

If she was right, then Hiina must've been looking for something to connect her to the people she held dear.

With her mom, it was acting. With Takamori, it was the promises they'd made.

It'd be so much easier if I could just see her as a rival.

But I was too close to her for that. I'd become her friend.

"But that seals the deal. Hina is not a good partner for Takamori."

I respected the way Himeji could declare that like it was an obvious fact. She was so self-confident—it was her way or the highway, and she wasn't too shy to say it. The look in her eyes made it clear she thought that she was the one for Takamori.

"You really love him, huh, Himeji?"

"Bwuh?!"

She started choking. Was it really so surprising for me to say that?

"You okay?" I asked.

"I—I didn't mean it that way."

Sure, sure, Miss Tsundere. She was red in the face—was it from choking or was she just embarrassed?

Don't look at me like that, you sneaky, adorable little brat.

"What *did* you mean, then?"

"Uh....." She looked away. I felt the need to poke fun at her.

"We're allies now. You gotta be honest or I'll make you my wingman."

"Wha...?!" She pouted and whined like a puppy "F-f-fine..... I'll be your wingman if you want."

I chuckled at her stubbornness.

Yeah, right. You'd never. Is it so hard for you to be honest?

When she first arrived, she'd thrown everything into disarray. But the more I got to know her, the more I realized what a cute, fun girl she was.

I felt like I could give Takamori my blessing no matter who he picked in the end, whether that was Hiina or Himeji.

The wrap party came to a successful close. Everyone looked pumped when I sang, and there were no awkward silences. I really appreciated that, even if they were just being polite. I'd been worried they would all be wordlessly looking at their phones.

Fushimi, Himeji, and Torigoe each sang a couple songs. I found it curious how the girls looked cuter than usual when singing.

The following Monday, I was on my way to school with Fushimi and Himeji, when the latter began grumbling about her brutal rehearsals and how much of a nag the director was.

At first, I thought she was trying to brag in front of Fushimi, but it turned out that wasn't the case.

"That sounds rough," Fushimi said.

"I don't mind the singing," said Himeji, "I just don't really get what the director is trying to do at times..."

She seemed genuinely bothered by it.

I had witnessed the relationship dynamics at the rehearsal hall firsthand, and I began to worry the older girls' trash talk might extend beyond simply critiquing Himeji's acting.

"It's going to feel great when I blow that baldy's socks off with my acting."

But whatever the issue, Himeji still sounded like herself, and that relieved me.

"That attitude of yours might cause problems," said Fushimi, "but it's one of your strengths, too."

"It sure is," I agreed.

We began to see more and more students around as we got closer to school. A lot of them exchanged greetings with Fushimi and Himeji, but one girl didn't

stop there and walked right up to Fushimi. She was short and in her third year.

“Fushimi, can I talk to you?”

“Umm, yes?” Fushimi replied, seeming confused.

“Your class is putting on a film for the festival, right? Are the preparations keeping you busy?”

“Not right now. The film is complete and there’s not much to do.”

“Sorry I’m asking this out of nowhere, but, well, I’m the president of the drama club. My name’s Yoshimoto.”

I knew about the drama club. They put on plays every year for the school festival.

“We perform every year for the school festival,” Yoshimoto continued, “and I was wondering if you’d be interested in taking on a role in our play?”

“M-me?” Fushimi pointed at herself. She looked surprised, but I could see her eyes beginning to sparkle.

“I heard you’re taking acting classes.”

“Oh. Yes, I am.”

The stiffness in her face began to melt away as she realized where the conversation was going.

Himeji made a show of clearing her throat a few times, but Yoshimoto ignored her.

Give up already. She’s not here for you.

“I also heard you starred in an award-winning short film?”

“Yes, yes I did.”

I could sense the pride rushing to Fushimi’s head.

Yoshimoto explained that a club member had been hospitalized and they needed someone to take over for them, but no one in the club could handle the role. That was where Fushimi came in.

“The school festival play is always the last show of the year for our club, and

we want to make it one to remember.”

“Yes. I’ll help you.” Fushimi answered immediately without a hint of hesitation.

“Huh? But I haven’t even told you about the part or—”

“I’ll do it.” A fire burned in Fushimi’s eyes—a mix of confidence and a desire to help out those in need.

You’re unnerving her, Fushimi.

“Um, really? Are you sure your own class doesn’t need you? There will be rehearsals, and it will probably eat up a lot of your time...”

“That’s no problem. I can do this.”

Fushimi had zero intention of giving up. She always liked helping people, and I figured she’d made her decision the moment Yoshimoto asked for a favor.

“Th-thank you!” Yoshimoto said. “Okay, then we’ll discuss the details after school!”

She said good-bye and left with a smile on her face.

“Good for you, Fushimi,” I said.

“Yeah!”

In contrast to Fushimi’s smile, Himeji heaved a big sigh.

“To go for you when I’m right here...,” she said. “That girl made the wrong choice.”

Wow, no humility whatsoever!

“Even if you agreed to do it,” said Fushimi, “you’d act like a total diva and cause them a lot of hassle.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Would you even have time to rehearse?”

“No. So I would have turned them down.”

“What exactly is your problem, then?”

If she was just going to turn them down, why act so bitter over not being asked?

“A performer always appreciates being offered work even if they have to say no.”

“You’re exhausting.”

It seemed Yoshimoto had a good eye, after all.

“I kept taking my lessons even while we were filming Ryou’s short,” said Fushimi. “So I really want to do something like this to test out my abilities.”

Not long ago, I might have felt crushed by the sight of Fushimi’s smile as she spoke earnestly about her aspirations.

“I wonder what the part is,” I mused.

But now, I was able to offer her my sincere support.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been onstage. I can’t wait!”

I thought back to the DVDs neatly organized in Fushimi’s room. I’d only seen the spines and didn’t recognize most of the titles, so I’d tried looking some of them up. Whether by chance or design, Satomi Ashihara appeared in about half of them.

For one reason or another, Fushimi must have been paying attention to her mother’s career. Maybe she looked up to her, in a way.

“I hope it’s a good part,” I said.

“Yeah!”

There were still three weeks until the school festival. I was sure Fushimi could do it.

...Later that same day, during lunch, Yoshimoto came to get Fushimi, and the two of them headed off together. Apparently, they were going to use the break to go over the contents of the play and Fushimi’s role.

Torigoe seemed curious about what was going on, so as we made our way to the physics room, I told her what had happened that morning.

“Oh, I see,” she said. “I keep forgetting that Hiina is like our school’s idol.”

“Himeji was with us, and she was fuming that the girl from the drama club didn’t give her so much as a second glance.”

Torigoe giggled. “I can just picture it.”

“Everyone knows Himeji as the pretty transfer student, but she’s been keeping her past as an idol secret, so I don’t know what she expected. Of course, there’s also the matter of her personality...”

“No, no, I’m sure she picked Fushimi because she was in your award-winning short film.”

“That thing?”

“Yup. No-name actors who star in popular films or TV shows often wind up with a lot more work. It happens all the time.”

Come to think of it, I could name a few such celebrities.

“I think that’s what’s happening with Hiina.”

If true, that would be great. Although the review I’d gotten had implied Fushimi was a big reason I’d won in the first place.

I thought back to her smile that morning.

I knew how she’d cried after failing that audition. How that pig had asked her to use her body to get into his agency. How restless she’d been at seeing her rival succeed. I’d seen her struggles up close.

A role in a school play was small, perhaps. But it was huge for her. For the first time, a stranger wanted her to act for them.

Torigoe and I arrived at the physics room, sat in our usual spots, and began eating.

“Do you know how many people are in the drama club?” I asked.

Her answer was immediate. “About ten or so. Losing one would make a pretty big difference.”

I had no idea how many people were needed backstage, but I imagined they didn’t have the numbers for someone to take on the extra role.

“I wonder what it’s about,” I said.

“Just ask Hiina later.”

“Right.”

Torigoe giggled softly.

“What’s up?”

“If you’re that curious, why don’t you go watch them?”

“No, no. I’d only get in the way.”

It felt as if Torigoe could read my mind, even the unconscious parts of it, and that embarrassed me.

“By the way, I also figured out what I want to do,” she said.

“Oh, really?” I tried to keep my tone casual. I was curious, but I didn’t want to seem overeager.

“After watching you make that short film on your own, even while you were busy with other stuff... This is gonna sound lame, but it really inspired me.”

“That’s not lame... So, what do you wanna do?”

“Uh... Wow, now that you’re asking me in so many words, I’m starting to feel self-conscious.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.” I chuckled.

“I mean, I think I finally get why Hiina wanted to hide her dream of becoming an actress from you.”

I understood what she was saying. What was it that made this kind of thing so intimidating?

I wouldn’t laugh no matter what she wanted to do, and I was sure Torigoe knew that. And yet saying it still wasn’t easy.

Maybe it was because most of what we did was the same—we wore the same uniforms, came to the same school, took the same classes—and this was the one thing where we differed.

Fushimi’s acting and my video editing, which had blossomed into a desire to make films, each reflected our personalities. Talking about it felt like bringing

our inner selves to the surface.

“I’ll cheer you on no matter what it is you wanna do,” I said, “and I’ll pray for your success.”

“...I wanna be a porn actress.”

“Wha—?”

I lifted my head up from my lunch box and looked at Torigoe.

.....What? Just now... What was that?

The moment our eyes met, she held her sides and laughed out loud.

“Your eyes turned into dots.”

“Are you s-serious?”

She did say my film had inspired her... And well...I guess the two fields are related...

“No, I’m kidding.”

“O-oh... O-of course you are. You really got me there.”

Torigoe laughed out loud, unusual for her.

“As for the real thing I wanna do, I’m not sure yet whether I can manage it. If I succeed, I’ll tell you, okay?”

“Yeah. All right.”

So in the end, she wasn’t going to tell me. At the very least, knowing her, I was sure she wouldn’t do anything crazy.

“Back to Hiina. I wonder what her part will be? I hope it’s like a tree or something. That’d be funny.”

“It would be, but c’mon.”

I doubted it would be anything like that.

We kept chatting, forgetting about the time until the bell rang.

“Let’s hurry,” I said, “or we won’t make it to fifth period.” I was about to leave the physics room when Torigoe pulled on my arm.

“...Torigoe?”

She loosened her grip little by little, until she was only pinching my sleeve.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Umm.”

She glanced timidly at me, and her cheeks turned rosy. Then she dropped her gaze and wiggled her toes.

“Would you consider playing hooky with me?”

“Huh?”

“I heard from Hiina...that you did it with her, before.”

She had to mean the time Fushimi and I got off the train at that unfamiliar station and went to the beach.

After a moment she continued, “Ahh... Actually, scratch that. Sorry. I was just having fun talking to you and blurted that out.”

She tried to smooth things over with a smile and hurried past me.

“Torigoe,” I said. She stopped at the sound of my voice, but she didn’t turn around. “I’d be happy to play hooky with you.”

Fushimi would grumble about it later, but I wasn’t a model student to begin with.

“Moron.” She turned around, and I saw a troubled smile on her face. “You can’t be late to class, Prez,” she said and sped away.

Most of our classmates were in their seats by the time we arrived, and a few turned to look at us, thinking we were the teacher. Once they recognized us, however, they went right back to chatting.

Fushimi was in her seat staring intently at what appeared to be a screenplay. She didn’t realize we were back.

“So what’s the part?” I asked.

“Oh, Ryou,” she said. “Hi. It’s an original play, and the part is pretty big.”

“Oh good!” said Torigoe. “Sounds like you won’t have to do some weird two-

bit part.”

“Duh. They wouldn’t need to ask for help if it was just some background character.”

Torigoe was joking, but it seemed we’d had nothing to worry about.

Fushimi said the drama club had done an original story last year, too. I’d never gone to see them, so I had no idea.

“The screenplay makes it sound pretty entertaining,” said Fushimi.

“Now I’m curious,” I said.

“Sorry, but no spoilers allowed.”

I frowned, and Fushimi giggled.

“I’ll be going to the drama club after school today and reading through the script, so you can head home without me.”

“Okay.”

Fushimi looked extremely serious—her face as she read the script was practically burning with motivation.

“Then I shall accompany you home. Be grateful,” announced Himeji arrogantly.

Later, on the way home, I muttered, “Fushimi’s really into it, huh?”

“Her earnestness is her strength,” Himeji replied. “Though it also makes her easier to break.”

This remark showed how well Himeji knew the other girl—as expected from a childhood friend.

“I simply pray the drama club isn’t left wishing they’d asked me instead,” she added, smirking. She must have been picturing just such a scenario.

“It sounds like she’ll be playing the secondary heroine. Personally, I think she’s better suited to that kind of role than you are.”

“Are you saying I couldn’t do it?” Himeji furrowed her brow.

“No. I just meant that when filming you, I noticed you have a sort of glow. I

think you'd have a hard time playing second fiddle."

"Y-you think so...?!" Her lips curved into a smile.

"I think you would be a better choice if they were looking for the main role."

Back when Himeji was chosen for the musical, I'd felt bad for Fushimi. After all, she was good at singing and dancing, too. But as I continued filming the school festival short, I came to understand the glow Himeji had on-screen.

Mr. Matsuda told me later that they'd also prioritized Himeji's preexisting résumé, though, and I *did* think that was unfair.

"You have your own strengths, Himeji," I said.

Just like Fushimi has hers.

"Wh-what's this all of a sudden? Why are you trying to butter me up, you fool?"

Embarrassed and happy, she started slapping me gently.

"I can't believe you're so weak to praise, despite that huge ego of yours," I muttered.

Himeji, meanwhile, put on a triumphant smile and turned in the opposite direction from her house.

"Let's go get pancakes," she declared. "My treat!"

...

"Himeji...I'm starting to worry about your professional future."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, you're...a little too easy to please."

"Wh-what?!"

"I didn't say any of that because I was hoping you'd treat me to pancakes..."

"I know. I just thought...I'd see if I could get some more out of you." She suddenly turned meek, which, unfortunately for me, only made her seem cuter. "You never give empty flattery. I know that. So to hear you say that stuff about me..." Himeji closed her mouth without finishing her sentence.

After a moment I said, “Then I suppose I shall accompany you for pancakes. Be grateful.” I smiled and signaled her to keep walking.

“What a smug brat you are.”

“I learned from the best.”

“I won’t pay for anything over one thousand yen.”

“Wow, that’s double what I’d imagined.”

“On what planet can you get pancakes for five hundred yen?”

Himeji cheerily led me away in search of some place where we could get pancakes.

“By the way, this is a date,” she announced.

It is?

I wondered if it looked that way to those around us.

Moments later, she added, “I know it’s my fault, but now that I’ve said that, I’m starting to tense up...”

Way to shoot yourself in the foot, Himeji.

We entered a trendy-looking café full of high school girls from the surrounding area. And when they saw us, a bunch of them started talking.

“Look, she brought a man.”

“I’m so jealous...”

“Is she here to show off?”

“I want a BF, too!”

Himeji kept quiet while they showed us to our table. We sat across from each other, and she covered her smile.

“You’re not actually my boyfriend, though,” she muttered.

She kept from looking at me as she played with her hair. Her loafers, however, were practically glued to my sneakers.

After a while, she got used to the other girls’ gazes and returned to her usual

self.

The girl from planet Praise-Hungry made me list thirty of her most appealing traits. Though it might be more accurate to say she squeezed them out of me.

“It seems like you really care for me, Ryou.”

I returned her smirk with a wry smile.

“You made me say all that.”

“You wouldn’t have come up with that many if you didn’t already think they were true.”

Himeji rested her chin on her hands, jolly to the end. She gave me no chance to argue.

“Well, I wouldn’t make a stop on the way home like this with someone I disliked.”

“Oh? I—I see……” Himeji looked down and seemed to shrink in on herself. “Hey...,” she said. “I heard that, at this school, they have couples volunteer for the closing dance at the festival.”

“Oh, that. Yeah.”

It was an unofficial event run by the student executive committee every year. It was kind of a tradition, so they’d probably do it this year, too. But since it was unofficial, anyone who didn’t want to participate could just go home, as I had done the year before.

“Do you have a partner for that, Ryou?” she asked.

“Umm, how was it?”

I looked away from the driver’s seat where Mr. Matsuda sat and toward the side-view mirror. I was too scared to face his reaction.

His luxury sedan ran smoothly and quietly as it decelerated.

I looked ahead and saw the light turn red.

Mr. Matsuda had said he wanted to see the completed school festival film, so I’d sent him the file.

“What perspective do you want me to give you, Ry?”

“What do you mean?”

I met his eyes through the gap in his fancy sunglasses.

“Do you want the perspective of a regular audience member, the perspective of a professional, or my own personal perspective?”

“The least harsh one.”

He giggled before lightly pressing down on the gas pedal once again.

“Boooring.”

Boring’s fine. I’m not mentally strong enough to ask for someone’s opinion when I know it’s going to be scathing.

Lately, I’d been doing less desk work at the office; instead, Mr. Matsuda was taking me with him to shoots and the like.

We were currently on the way to the studio to watch another idol group from our agency film a music video. I asked whether an amateur like me should even be there, and Mr. Matsuda told me to look at it as an educational field trip. I was getting paid for it, too, for which I was exceedingly grateful.

We arrived and entered a different room than we had last time. A few people greeted Mr. Matsuda upon seeing him.

Although he was idiosyncratic, for lack of a better word, Mr. Matsuda was a master of communication. Not only could he keep a conversation running smoothly no matter who he was talking to, but he could also bring it to a close at the perfect time. He remembered everyone’s name and face, and even their background. I was constantly taken aback by just how amazing he was.

We walked down a hallway and passed several greenrooms. They shot TV shows and movies here, too, and plates with names I didn’t recognize were hung beside each door. So far, there were no actors or idols I could brag about seeing in the flesh.

But then I saw the name beside the door at the end of the hallway: SATOMI ASHIHARA.

“Hmm?”

Hmmmm??

I did a double take. Then a triple take.

Satomi Ashihara...

“What’s wrong, Ry? Let’s go.”

“Huh? Oh yeah.”

I followed Mr. Matsuda away, but my mind was stuck on that nameplate.

Fushimi’s mother, Satomi Ashihara. She’d divorced Fushimi’s father almost immediately and had barely met her daughter since.

My mom said the neighbors hadn’t thought well of her. Apparently, her reputation as a mother was the exact opposite of her renown as an actress. As I’d told Himeji the other day, I also had a negative impression of her, though I wasn’t sure why.

I don’t have to drop by and say hi, right? I doubt she even remembers some random kid Fushimi was friends with.

We opened the studio’s door and went inside.

They were already preparing for the shoot. The director ran up to Mr. Matsuda, and they began talking about the props and how to evoke the proper mood. All the while, behind-the-scenes staff were carrying out their tasks. This was a real, professional workplace.

I had no idea what Mr. Matsuda wanted out of the music video, but there were a lot of retakes, and he had a lot of comments for the stars.

Eventually it was time for a break, and Mr. Matsuda handed me a hundred-yen coin and told me to go get something to drink.

I left the room and headed to the paper cup drink dispenser I’d seen on the way in. As I did so, I noticed a woman heading to the same machine from farther down the hallway.

Our eyes met.

The last time I’d seen her was on a TV drama, but I knew right away it was

Satomi Ashihara. She must have been in her forties, but she somehow looked like a young woman in her late twenties. Was it her makeup? My mom didn't look that young even with makeup, though. Maybe it had something to do with her features.

...Like mother, like daughter, huh? She looked like Fushimi. Or should I say Fushimi looked like her?

She arrived at the machine first and inserted a coin. She glanced at me; maybe I was staring too hard.

"U-um, are you Ms. Ashihara?" I asked.

The simple question already had me sweating. It felt like I'd just gone into the faculty room at school knowing I was about to be yelled at.

"Yes?"

I thought she'd be more taken aback by some random boy trying to talk to her, but she wasn't. Instead, her face seemed to cloud over, and she hesitated a moment before pasting on a fake smile.

"I'm Hina Fushimi's childhood friend," I said. "My name is Ryou Takamori."

"Oh, so I was right. I was just thinking it might be you."

Her fake smile vanished, replaced by a soft, nostalgic glint in her eyes.

"You recognized me...?"

"Yes. After all, you look just like Shinra... Like your father."

Oh right. She was childhood friends with my dad.

She was extremely charming, and it wasn't just her looks. She was gracious, mild, and gentle. And even though she never raised her voice, her every word came out clear and crisp. Perhaps that was just part of being a professional actor.

Surely she must have been even more charming before she divorced, so why had I found her so scary?

She asked how I was doing, why I was at the studio, if I was still friends with Fushimi, and so on and so forth. Then she pointed at the vending machine.

“Want a drink?” she asked.

“Oh, no need. I was already handed money for it.”

“Please. Let me.”

I gave in, and she bought me juice.

“Have you seen a picture of your dad when he was young?” she asked. “You really look just like him.”

“That much?” I said, then realized this was a perfect opportunity to ask the question on my mind. “By the way, did you know Hina is taking acting lessons?”

“Of course. I talk to her father on occasion, and he told me.”

It was only a guess on my part, but I figured Fushimi had watched her mother’s films as a way of getting to know her.

“I told him he should talk her out of it, but it sounds like he wants to support her.” She sighed. “The industry isn’t the dreamlike paradise they paint it as. I have no idea how or why she ended up doing such a thing.”

How could she say that? Over the past few months, Fushimi had learned firsthand how ruthless the industry was. And yet not only had she continued taking lessons, she’d practically leaped at the chance to help out the drama club. She would’ve given up long ago if the harsh reality of show business was enough to make her quit. But she was still trying hard to move forward and doing her best.

“You should try telling her to quit, too,” Ms. Ashihara continued. “Maybe she’d listen to you.”

How could I? And why would I want to?

I nearly said as much out loud. I had to focus to keep my mouth shut.

“There are lots of things in the world that it would be better to give up on,” she said.

She didn’t sound like a mother worried about her daughter. Instead, her words sounded like the cold opinion of a third party, far removed from the situation at hand.

I forcefully steered the conversation back to what I'd wanted to discuss.

"We'll be showing a short film we made at the school festival, with Hina in the main role. She'll also be participating in a play. She's rehearsing hard for it."

"I see."

It sounded like she didn't care at all.

"Please go see her," I said, looking straight into her eyes as she tried to look away.

"Do you still like her?"

I felt my face flush at her question, which only made me more embarrassed.

"No—it's not that—really—I mean—" I spoke quickly, and my words blurred together.

She looked taken aback, before putting on a smile.

"Hee-hee. You're pretty cute."

"No, really. Seriously."

Why am I trying so hard to deny it? Why not just say "no" and move on?

"Anyway, as I was saying... If you have the time...could you please go see her?"

I told her the date, and she glanced down at her expensive-looking watch.

"I'm busy, I can't. And I'm sure she doesn't want to see me."

She turned around, paper cup in hand, and started to walk away.

"I've never heard her say she resents her mother!" I called after her.

Without showing the slightest reaction, she continued back the way she'd come and disappeared.

I gulped down my juice and threw the cup away before returning to the studio. Once there, I gave Mr. Matsuda his one hundred yen back.

He was sitting on a chair beside the main camera, drinking canned coffee.

"You can have this back," I said.

“Why? You didn’t get a drink?”

“I ran into Satomi Ashihara at the machine, and she paid for me.”

“Oh right. The girl’s here today.”

“The girl?”

“That’s what I call her. We’ve known each other for more than ten years, you see.”

Mr. Matsuda sure had acquaintances in the most unexpected places.

Apparently, they met during a shoot back when he was working as a model. The fact that he’d been a model was news to me, and I wound up more surprised by that.

“So she just treated a random boy to a drink? She must’ve been in a good mood.”

“I know her, actually.”

I gave him the rundown.

“...Oh, so she’s Fushimi’s mom. I knew she had a kid, but she never talked about it.”

“I see. About that, Fushimi’s been working hard rehearsing for a play to be performed at the school festival. I think it’s because of Ms. Ashihara that she wants to be an actress.”

“And?”

“Could you ask Ms. Ashihara to come to the school festival? If she’s free, that is.”

Mr. Matsuda cackled. “No way.”

“Wha...? Why?”

“Sticking your nose into other families’ business never ends well. I told you she never talked to me about her daughter. I doubt she’d start now just because I asked.”

He has a point.

“You shouldn’t meddle in other people’s affairs. But I understand you care a lot about Fushimi.”

“No, no. We aren’t talking about that.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, brushing aside my objections. “If Fushimi explicitly wants her mother to come see her, then I might agree to help.”

I guess I have been making a lot of assumptions.

I hadn’t asked Fushimi about her mother directly. As I’d told Ms. Ashihara, I’d never heard Fushimi speak badly of her... But what did she really think?

Fushimi’s not the type to hide how she feels, so I’m sure she would have said something by now if she really hated her mother...

“Satomi’s really pretty, right?” said Mr. Matsuda, interrupting my thoughts.

“Well, yes. Celebrities are really something else.”

“So you’re into cougars, eh, Ry?”

“Why would you think that?!”

And anyway, if she looked like a twenty-something, did she even count as a cougar? That said, I was a little scared of how charmed I’d been when she said, *“Hee-hee. You’re pretty cute.”*

“She’s even your friend’s mother. A dream situation for all MILF enjoyers.”

“Please stop talking like I’m into MILFs and cougars. I never said that.”

Mr. Matsuda laughed maniacally between sips of coffee.

After that, I secured his promise that he would help if Fushimi truly wanted Ms. Ashihara to come see her perform.

“I’ll try,” he said, “but I can’t do anything if she’s busy that day, okay?”

“I understand.”

If Ms. Ashihara wanted to see her daughter perform, the school festival play wouldn’t be her last chance. She would have plenty more opportunities in the future.

“So, what do *you* plan to do after high school, Ry?”

“Excuse me?”

I froze. Mr. Matsuda and I had serious discussions sometimes, but he’d never asked me that before.

“I guess I’ll go to college...”

I had promised Fushimi we’d go to the same school, though I had no idea which one that would be, or what I’d be studying.

“Since you’ve continued helping us out even after summer break, I was thinking you might as well join us.” Then, under his breath, he whispered, “But college would be the best option, of course.”

Apparently, he hadn’t been as serious as I’d thought.

The midmorning shoot continued well into the evening, after which Mr. Matsuda took me home.

After seeing off the luxury sedan (which stuck out like a sore thumb in my neighborhood), I called Fushimi on the phone.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Do you have time to talk right now?”

“Hmm? Sure.”

She was at home. I told her where I’d gone for work that day, and the conversation naturally led to how I’d met Ms. Ashihara.

“...I see.”

When I heard the tension in her voice, I realized this wasn’t a good topic to discuss over the phone.

I said I’d come over and hung up. A few minutes later, I rang her doorbell, and she popped her head out a window.

“Come in,” she said.

I waved at her and entered. Just in case, I knocked before barging into her room. She gave me the okay, and I opened the door.

“Picking up where we left off...”

I went over everything that had happened that day. I explained how I'd run into Ms. Ashihara, and that she knew Fushimi wanted to be an actress, and that Mr. Matsuda was friends with her.

"I've never asked you about your mom, so I was wondering what you think of her."

According to Fushimi, she and her mother had rarely even met, so I figured it wasn't as simple as liking or disliking her.

"Is it because of her that you want to be an actress?"

Fushimi quietly hugged a cushion for a moment, then nodded slightly.

"I told you I wanted to become an actress after I saw my first play, and that's true. But my mother is also part of the reason."

"Let's have her come see the short film and the play," I suggested.

She shook her head. "No, no. Really, there's no need. I'm sure she's busy, and seeing an amateur's acting would only be painful for her..."

Fushimi buried her face in the cushion, as if trying to run away from the subject.

"You don't know that," I said.

"I do!"

"Why? Did she say that to you?"

Fushimi kept her face against the cushion and began shaking her head.

Then you don't know what she'd think of your acting.

"The reviewers liked you in the short. I think you should be more confident."

Fushimi flinched at the memory. "Why are you so intent on showing her my acting?"

It was an obvious question. Her relationship with her mother had nothing to do with me.

"I just thought you would want to show your skills to someone you consider special, no matter what they might think afterward."

When her father came to parents' day in elementary school, Fushimi would always raise her hand at every question, flustering even her teachers. That was just the kind of girl she was. I'd known this about her forever. She wasn't the type to hide—she tackled things head-on and wasn't afraid to show her stuff.

And that was why it felt strange to me that she was being so timid now.

"...I barely remember my mom, and my grandma never had anything good to say about her. So I'm a little scared." I listened in silence as she continued. "I never talked about my mom partly because I have no memory of her. That, and because everyone had such a bad impression of her. I was afraid you'd feel the same... But she's really amazing."

"I know. She's so pretty."

Fushimi chuckled; that clearly wasn't what she'd meant.

"That, too, but I was talking about her acting."

She said she started watching her mother's films out of curiosity. She'd wanted to know what she was like, and little by little, she began to admire her work. She spoke fervently and without pause, as though talking about her favorite movie.

It really was just as I'd thought. No matter what others said, and even if she didn't have any memory of her, Fushimi was proud to be Ms. Ashihara's daughter.

"She's a talented actress first, and my mom second, so I'd feel bad taking up her time just to show her my acting..."

It was rare to hear Fushimi say something so negative. But this just proved how sensitive a topic it was for her.

"I can say with confidence that my short film and the one we made for the school festival are good enough to show to other people. And I think your acting is a big reason for that."

Fushimi finally looked up. "But I'm not even good enough to pass auditions. You're just biased because you're my friend."

She looked deep into my eyes and waited for me to reply.

“Even if I’m biased, other people have praised your acting and stage presence.”

I wondered just how similar childhood friends could be. Even though we’d been estranged for a while, it seemed we still thought the same way. She was talking just like I had before shooting the school festival short.

“That’s just because your movie was well planned and I happened to fit the role... I’m happy about the positive reception, but I’m sure you would’ve won that prize even without me.”

“That’s not true.”

Even with some experience, and despite the praise of our friends and those around us, we feared the judgment of others and turned gloomy and pessimistic. She reminded me of how I’d been not too long ago, and I found myself wanting to do for her what she’d done for me back then.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m here to back you up.”

Fushimi’s face scrunched up, and tears began to form in her eyes. They rolled down her cheeks like shooting stars.

“You sound really cool and all, but that won’t work.”

“I was able to make those films thanks to your support. I wouldn’t be going to the studio with Mr. Matsuda if it weren’t for you.”

Fushimi wiped at her tears, but they wouldn’t stop. I sat by her side, and she wrapped her arms around me gently. I patted her head as she continued to sob.

“I—I want Mom to be proud of me just like I am of her...”

She’d set up a hurdle for herself, and now she was afraid she wouldn’t make it over. I knew how that felt.

But hurdles like this couldn’t be judged from a distance. You had to run up to them before you could tell how tall they really were. There were a lot of things like that in life, as I knew well from experience.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” I said. “And if there is, you can ask her. She is a pro, after all. She could probably teach you a thing or two.”

Fushimi looked up at me, and I grinned.

“Let’s show her how awesome you are,” I said.

“...If she thinks I’m terrible, will you console me?” She looked up at me uneasily, and I smiled back at her.

“I doubt it’ll come to that. But if it does, I’ll do whatever it takes to cheer you up.”

“It’s a promise, then. I’ll do my best to impress her.” Fushimi steeled herself.

“Though I guess we don’t know if she’ll even show up yet.”

“Ryou... Could you try not to rain on my parade?”

“Oops.”

I apologized, and Fushimi giggled.

3 Each One of Us

After Fushimi confirmed that she wanted her mom to come see her, I called up Mr. Matsuda and asked him to pass the message along to Ms. Ashihara.

“I wonder if she’ll go,” he mused. He didn’t seem very certain.

By then, we’d made flyers to advertise our film, so I sent one to him.

The poster was pretty well done, with the composition emphasizing that Fushimi was the lead actress and that Himeji was in a supporting role.

“Is this going to make people want to come see it?” Himeji asked.

School was over, and I was in the classroom filling in the class log.

“I think so.”

I was sure she’d say that more people would come if we centered her instead.

“More people would come if you centered me instead.”

She really said it. Word for word.

“It’s common sense to emphasize the star. You’re the focus in your musical’s ads, right?”

“Naturally. It’s me we’re talking about, after all.”

Would you mind sharing some of that absurd confidence with Fushimi?

I finished filling in the log and grabbed my stuff.

Lately, Fushimi was rehearsing with the drama club after school, so I mostly went home with Himeji.

“Let’s go, Himeji.”

“All right.”

She gathered her things, and we were about to leave the classroom when she remembered something.

“Oh, wait... Today is Library Day, so please head to the library.”

“Library Day?”

The heck is that?

“You’ll know once you get there,” she said, smirking. “Although, if you want to go home with me that badly, I am willing to grant your wish.”

If Himeji said I’d know when I got there, it probably meant Torigoe was in the library. If memory served, she was on duty that day.

“Okay, I’ll go.”

Himeji and I said good-bye at the entrance hall. From there, I went to the faculty room and dropped the class journal on Waka’s desk, then headed to the library.

I opened the door and, as expected, Torigoe was sitting at the counter by herself, reading a novel.

“Working hard, eh?”

She raised her head at the sound of my voice.

“Welcome. Are you here to borrow a book?”

“No. Himeji told me to come here today, for some mysterious reason.”

“Himeji...” Torigoe pressed her fingers to her temples and frowned. She sounded a little fed up. “Can’t you be more subtle...?”

She sighed and pulled herself together, then motioned for me to take a seat beside her.

“Are regular students allowed to sit back here?” I asked.

“Sure. The teacher comes by from time to time, but it seems like she’s out today. And it’s not that big a deal anyway. You shouldn’t get in trouble.”

“Okay.” I sat down.

A few third-years were sitting in the self-study space visible from the counter.

I yawned and gazed out the window while Torigoe focused on her book. It felt just like lunch break. At some point, though, the sound of her turning the book’s

pages stopped, and she slammed it closed.

“T-Takamori.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I send you a file?”

I was surprised but didn’t ask what she wanted to send me. Considering how nervous she was, I figured it couldn’t be anything too weird.

“Sure,” I said.

“Okay, then.”

She sent me a message with an attachment right away. It was a text file.

“I—I wrote that.”

“Really? Is it a novel?”

Torigoe nodded shyly.

So this was what she wanted to do.

“...Yeah. It’s pretty short, though... I wanted you to be the first person to read it.”

“I don’t know much about novels, you know. You sure Fushimi wouldn’t be better?”

I felt certain she would be able to give Torigoe more useful opinions.

“Yes,” she replied. I turned to my phone, ready to start reading. But Torigoe got flustered and covered my screen with her hands. “Ah, not now! Whenever you have time! But not in front of me!”

“I thought you wanted to hear my opinion right away.”

“That’s what I wanted at first, but it’s too much for me.”

Yeah, I totally get it. I felt the same way when I showed people my short films. It’s awkward waiting for the other person to finish.

“I’ll read it at home, then.”

“Please do... I just felt like I was the only one who didn’t have anything.”

“Is that why you wrote this?”

“I mean, Hiina and Himeji had things they wanted to do. You used to be like me, and then even you found something...”

“What do you mean ‘even you’?”

“Sorry.” Torigoe giggled. “I guess I just wanted to do something. And it’s thanks to you that I found the courage.”

“I didn’t do anything...”

“It’s probably boring.”

“No need to get defensive. I know exactly how you feel.” I chuckled wryly.

“Say something nice, okay? Shower me with praise. Then I’ll feel like I can do anything.”

“Uhh, like... *How cute?*”

She blinked a few times, and her face began to redden.

“Huh?! N-no, I didn’t mean that... But that’s pretty nice, too...” She trailed off.

“I was talking about the characters.”

“.....R-right.”

From the look on her face, it seemed she’d gotten the wrong idea.

I felt her kick my toes.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“For leading me on.”

“It’s your fault for misunderstanding.”

“You made my heart skip a beat!”

That made my own heart skip a beat.

After a moment she asked, “Are you ready for the amusement park tomorrow?”

Deguchi had suggested we go there as a group—the same lineup as our beach trip during the summer. In the days leading up the festival, other classes came

to school even over the weekend to help prepare, but all we had to do was decorate the classroom like a theater and we'd be done.

"I don't think I've been to one since I was a kid," I replied.

"Same."

Our destination was a small park everyone in the area had visited at least once. Mana was hyped when I told her. She was really looking forward to it.

"I'll make us lunch," Torigoe said.

"You?"

"Yup. Tell ManaMana to let me make at least half of it."

Torigoe looked the same as always, but it sounded like she was pretty excited, too.

Eventually it was time to close up the library. Torigoe checked to make sure no one was still inside, then she locked the door.

She left to return the key to the faculty room, then met back up with me in the entrance hall. We left school together.

"It's pretty dark already," I said.

"Yeah. It's always like this after library duty."

"Want me to see you home?"

Torigoe's house wasn't that far from school.

"I'm not gonna hold back, you know? If you offer, I'll say yes."

"Uh, sure. Go right ahead."

"Okay, then. Please see me home."

With that decided, we made our way to her house. As usual, we chatted about nothing in particular, then said good-bye at her door. I started toward the station, then turned back. Torigoe was still outside and waved to me. I waved back.

Go inside already.

I sent her a text, and she replied right away.

You go home already.

We didn't want to shout at each other and bother the neighbors, so we kept our exchange to text. After that, we waved one last time, and I headed home.

It was Saturday, but I still had to get up early. It almost felt like I was going to school.

Mana had woken up an hour earlier and was already finished making lunch. "Another *gyaru* cooking masterpiece!" she said, clearly in high spirits.

She called her work "*gyaru* cooking," but it was better than what most mothers made.

Himeji and Fushimi arrived, and Mana gave the latter her now customary fashion check.

"I think we might even be able to keep some of this!" Mana said.

"Whoo-hoo!" Fushimi cried.

Well... Hmm. Yeah, sure. Okay. This outfit is a lot less unique than what we were seeing before.

"I knew I could do it!"

While Fushimi celebrated her achievements, Himeji, dressed like a fashionable college student, frowned.

"Huh? You still look pretty bad, if you ask me."

"But she doesn't look like a clown," said Mana.

"True," I agreed.

"A clown...?" Himeji cocked her head.

"Finally, Mana complimented me!" Fushimi cheered. "I'm so happy!"

That was not a compliment.

"C'mon, Hina," said Mana. "We're getting you changed."

"Why?!"

"I said we could keep *some* of this. You've leveled up from 'clown,' but you're still only at 'frumpy.'"

It was strange to hear *frumpy* called a step up.

“Whaaa?” Fushimi cried as Mana dragged her upstairs.

“What about my clothes?” Himeji twirled by the entrance.

She wore a white blouse, a long skirt, and ankle boots—the embodiment of autumn fashion. Her clothes looked a little too expensive for a high schooler, but they weren’t overly luxurious, either. She struck a good balance.

“You don’t look like a high schooler.”

“...Are you calling me old?” She glared at me.

That one was a compliment.

“I meant you look mature.”

Please understand. I’m not dissing you.

“You should’ve said that from the beginning.”

Why am I getting attacked for paying her a compliment?

“We’re back!” Mana skipped downstairs.

Fushimi followed behind. It looked like she was wearing an entirely different outfit.

“Did you really keep anything...?” I asked.

Is this a spot the difference puzzle?

“Oh, look, Ryou!” said Himeji. “Her socks! She’s wearing the same socks!”

Himeji’s got some memory. I can’t even picture what Fushimi was wearing before.

“Congratulations!” exclaimed Mana. “Frumpy Hina has evolved into...Stylish Hina!”

After managing hair and makeup for the festival short, Mana was a pro at helping people evolve.

Fushimi now wore a knit sweater and a knee-length flared skirt.

“I can’t really tell the difference...,” Fushimi muttered.

The girl in question didn't seem convinced, however.

"This is definitely better," I said. I couldn't elaborate much, since I knew little about women's fashion.

"It's a big improvement," said Himeji. "Kudos, Mana."

If I'd been bolder, I would've said the same thing.

Fushimi also seemed to have changed her makeup. Her features looked brighter than usual.

"Well, if you two say so." Fushimi nodded reluctantly.

The three of us formed a block, and Fushimi's unique sense of style was roundly denied.

It was always shocking to see how different Fushimi looked after Mana made her change.

"Let's hurry, or we'll be late," Himeji said.

I checked the clock, and it was indeed later than I'd expected.

We quickly left the house and made our way to the station nearest to the amusement park.

We arrived at the amusement park about an hour later.

After making it through the ticket gate and into the park, we all gazed at the map together.

We'd already met up with Torigoe, Shinohara, and Deguchi. As I thought, everyone had been to the park before. Fushimi, Himeji, Mana, and I had come here in grade school with all the kids in the neighborhood. It had felt huge back then, and now it seemed much smaller.

"Was this place always so small?" Fushimi said, as if reading my mind.

"I don't remember it at all," added Mana.

"We were in first grade, so you must've been in preschool," said Himeji.

"Really?"

As the childhood friend trio took a little trip down memory lane, Deguchi

glanced around.

“It’s Saturday, but the park is practically empty,” he said.

“Only kids and families come here,” I explained. It was just a local amusement park. “Even the roller coaster seems a little underwhelming now, huh?”

The carts made a loud noise as they slid down the big drop. They seemed to move slower than I remembered.

We picked a simple route, starting with the roller coaster, which was right next to us.

“I’ll pass,” said Shinohara. “I’m gonna camp out on this bench and watch. Have fun.”

“Whaaa? Don’t say that, Boss! Join us!”

“Mana, I keep telling you not to call me ‘Boss.’”

“Don’t get mad...” Mana pouted.

“Ryou, do you like roller coasters?” Fushimi asked a little anxiously.

Oh, now that you mention it... A memory came to mind.

“I don’t know if I love them, but they don’t scare me.”

“I remember Hina getting super scared riding this one back in the day. She totally—”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! D-don’t say it!” Fushimi covered Himeji’s mouth in a panic.

“Did you do something, Hiina?” Torigoe looked like she was about to burst into laughter.

“N-nothing, what could you possibly mean?”

This perfect beauty had a dark past—one so traumatic, it seemed she wanted to sit out the roller coaster, too.

“There’s no need to force yourself,” I said. “We don’t want *that* happening again, do we?”

“Are you making fun of me, too?! It wasn’t that bad!”

It was definitely that bad.

“Oh, I remember!” Mana exclaimed. “Hina was crying her eyes out!”

“Is that the only thing you remember?!”

Mana smiled ruthlessly. I remembered it, too.

“Oh, wetting yourself and bursting into tears is no big deal,” I said. “At this point, it’s just a cute memory.”

“Takaryou... Do you find girls wetting themselves cute?”

Shinohara didn’t even look shocked. Instead, she was observing me like a scientist might study some kind of insect.

“Get your head out of the gutter. I meant a kid getting so scared they make a mess and start crying is just a funny memory.”

I’m offended. Does she think I have fetishes like that?

Come to think of it...what fetishes do I have? No, stop. This isn’t the time for introspection. It’s almost our turn to get on the ride.

“Aww, what should I do...?” Fushimi mumbled weakly.

There were only a couple people in line, and our turn was fast approaching. Torigoe and Himeji looked at each other.

“Hiina, you really don’t have to force yourself.”

“No one’s trying to pressure you. You can just stay with Minami.”

Shinohara was already seated on the bench by the roller coaster.

The carts slowly returned to the starting point, and Himeji and Torigoe got on first. Rather than sit in the same car, one sat in the front and the other in the back. They were both looking up at me.

“Well then,” said Deguchi, “I guess I’ll sit next to Torigoe...”

Torigoe cleared her throat so loudly, it sounded like someone revving a motorcycle engine. Deguchi showed no reaction and sat down in the cart, casually saying, “Wow, I’m so nervous.”

“C’mon, Ryou. It’s going to leave.” Himeji slapped the seat beside her.

“Fine, Ai. I’ll let you have Bubby this time around.” Mana pushed me toward

her. “And I’ll be taking the seat next to Shizu, Deguu.”

“Why? Now I have to sit by myself!”

“Good. I know you just wanted to grope her.”

“I did not!”

While they argued, the lady in charge introduced the ride.

I was in the front row and had a great view. I thought Himeji would say something as soon as I sat down, but she kept quiet, a stern look on her face.

“You okay, Himeji?” I asked.

“Hoo—foo—wh—who do you shink you’re talkin’ to?”

“Are you having a problem with your mouth?”

The security bar was lowered, and Himeji gripped it tightly with one hand. Her other hand grabbed mine. It was cold and shaking.

“May I?” She looked up at me, her voice pleading.

It felt pretty good to think someone so ridiculously confident was relying on me.

“This way,” she said, “if I die, you’ll die with me...”

“Please don’t say that.”

Now I’m gonna panic, too.

“Have fun!” The lady in charge said as the cart took off and slowly rattled up the track.

“Ryou...!”

“Wh-what?”

I was flustered, so my response came out a little rough, but Himeji never let go of my hand.

“I—I...!”

Just then, we reached the highest point of the roller coaster. A sharp drop followed.

“A-Aii!!”

Himeji’s voice morphed into a scream. I heard Mana cackling behind us.

The scenery flashed dizzyingly past us as we were thrown about by the carts’ speed and centrifugal force. But for just a moment, I caught sight of Fushimi and Shinohara on the bench below. They were pointing their phones at us.

Himeji kept screaming. As expected of an actress training for a musical, her voice was loud and clear.

After the last curve, the cart slowed down, and the lady in charge received us cheerfully.

“Welcome back!”

The safety bars slowly rose, and Mana got out and stretched.

“Ahhh. That was great,” she said. “I laughed so hard.”

She was clearly talking about Himeji, not the roller coaster.

“I feel bad for her, ManaMana.” Surprisingly, Torigoe seemed fine as she got off the ride. But then I noticed that despite her calm expression, her legs were shaking. “It’s been a while, but I still got all tense and freaked out.”

I stood up and started to get off the ride, then paused. Curious, I glanced over at Himeji. She had tears in her eyes.

She’s crying?!

“Ai’s crying for real!” Mana could barely keep herself from laughing.

“Was it that bad?” I asked.

Himeji sniffed.

“We can talk about it later,” I said.

It’d cause problems if she tried to stay in the cart. I got off and reached out to her. Taking her hand, I proceeded to pull her out.

“Why is it that the sight of a strong-willed girl crying makes my heart race so?” said Deguchi.

How should I know?

At last, Himeji stopped crying.

“I just started thinking of all the people involved in the musical I’d be letting down if I died in a roller coaster accident,” she said.

You were more worried about that than dying?

We met back up with Fushimi and Shinohara, and, just as I thought, they’d filmed the whole thing. You could hear Himeji’s shrieks over the rumbling of the ride.

“I will treasure the rare sound of Lady Hime’s screams...” Shinohara gazed at the video with a gentle look in her eyes. Her hands were together, as if in prayer.

“Are you all right, Ai?” Fushimi, on the other hand, sounded genuinely worried.

“D-delete that! Delete that right now!” Himeji snatched Shinohara’s phone and deleted the video.

“You cannot delete the memory from my mind, Ai.” Mana was smiling from ear to ear.

Himeji had zero resistance to teasing, and she immediately took the bait and started arguing.

“Pretty girls bickering jovially in an amusement park... What more could I possibly ask for?” Deguchi said, deeply moved.

Next up were the teacups. There was no line, and I got on the ride with Mana.

“Yahoo!”

She started twisting the steering wheel with abandon right from the beginning, and I quickly developed motion sickness.

“Now we’ll cure you by spinning the other way!”

“P-please don’t... You’re gonna kill me instead...”

My weak voice didn’t reach her, and she spun the wheel, her eyes sparkling. Naturally, this only made me sicker. In the end, the five-minute attraction felt like an hour of torture.

“You’re looking a little pale there, Takamori,” said Torigoe.

“I vote we take a picture,” suggested Himeji.

“Let’s!” agreed Fushimi. “The title will be ‘That Time Ryou Nearly Died on the Teacup Ride.’”

The girls took advantage of my weakness to take all the pictures they wanted. I didn’t have the strength to tell them to stop. I just barely managed to stagger to a bench and sit down.

“You look like a boxer thirty seconds before he gets knocked out,” Shinohara said.

It was a great description of how I felt. Unable to say anything back, I decided to focus on resting. After a while, I regained my sense of balance.

“By the way, Himeji,” I said, “were you trying to tell me something back on the roller coaster?”

“Huh?”

“I heard her start to say something, too,” said Mana. “It was right before the drop, wasn’t it?”

“Me too,” agreed Torigoe.

After Himeji took a moment to remember, her cheeks began to flush.

“.....I didn’t...say anything.”

“No, no, you did,” Mana insisted.

“I’m going to get ice cream,” Himeji said suddenly, running away toward a shop.

Mana and Torigoe looked at each other mischievously, then ran after Himeji to continue their attack.

“I’ll go get drinks. Want anything?” Fushimi asked the rest of us.

I stood up. “I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks.”

In the end, Deguchi and Shinohara didn’t want anything, so it felt less like we

were getting drinks and more like we were going on a little walk.

While we were looking for a vending machine, we came across the haunted mansion. Fushimi grabbed my hand and came to a stop.

“Ryou, how about we go in, since we’re here?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah. Just the two of us... You don’t want to?”

I couldn’t say no—not when she was looking up at me with those hesitant, upturned eyes. I didn’t know if it was the makeup or the clothes, but she looked even cuter than usual. Maybe it was because I wasn’t used to seeing her out of her uniform.

“I don’t mind,” I said. I’d meant to keep going and add, “But everyone’s waiting for us,” but before I could, Fushimi said “Let’s go, then,” and started pulling me by the arm.

We had already decided to skip the haunted mansion, since several people didn’t want to go.

“Are you okay with scares?” I asked.

I remembered how she’d given up in the middle of a horror movie during the summer festival.

“Not really...”

Her tone of voice gave me the impression she really, *really* didn’t like this kind of thing.

The haunted mansion was completely deserted, maybe because it was still midmorning. The ride was modeled after an abandoned hospital, and the park staffer in charge gave us a flashlight and a perfunctory explanation of the route.

“There are three seals inside,” he said. “Find them and make your escape.”

That was the story behind the ride.

There was a short exchange over the intercom, and then we were told to go inside. Fushimi was clinging to my arm before the guy had even finished his explanation.

“Don’t wet yourself this time, okay?”

“.....”

I waited for her to reply, *I won’t!* But she stayed silent.

Then, after a moment, she said, “I—I should’ve gone to the bathroom first...” She had tears in her eyes.

“Fushimi. If you wet yourself now, it won’t just be a cute childhood story.”

“I’m not a child anymore...”

“Right. And grown-ups don’t wet themselves.”

That was what I wanted to hear. In that case, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about.

After we took a few steps, the door closed behind us with a creak.

“Ah... Aaaahhh! They locked us in?!”

“The guy explained all this already.”

If they didn’t close the door, light from outside would get in. I matched Fushimi’s pace as we ambled down the nearly pitch-black hallway.

I could hear water dripping from somewhere. Cold air brushed my neck.

There were no cheap wind sound effects. You could tell this wasn’t some student project.

“Isn’t the story a little weird, though?” I said. “Why would we want to remove seals when the place is haunted? Aren’t they supposed to be *sealing* the ghosts? I feel like we’re digging our own graves here.”

“Huh? Oh..... Yeah, you’re right.”

Fushimi wasn’t paying attention. She kept shivering and clinging to my arm, like she was a newborn fawn and I was the only thing holding her up.

The seals were located in the examination room, the morgue, and the surgery room. I looked at the basic map we’d been provided.

“This sure feels like an adventure, huh?” I said.

“Stop being impressed and get a move on...,” Fushimi shot back.

We heard a splashing sound as the ghost of a female former patient appeared at the end of the hallway.

“Aah?! Aaah! Aaaaaaaaah! Eeee! Eeeee?! Ryo-Ryo-Ryo-Rororo-Rou!”

It's not that scary! Who the heck is "Rou"?

“Try to calm down,” I said.

Fushimi positioned herself between me and the wall. *Am I your shield?* The ghost staggered toward us, and the moment she walked past...

“UGHAAAH!”

...she thrust her zombielike face right up to ours and yelled.

“Whoa! H-holy...”

That was apparently the big scare, because as soon as she was done, she walked away.

At moments like those, I look right into the person's eyes. It reminds me that they're just an actor at work, and it calms me down.

I remembered how Mr. Matsuda had told me the agency was sometimes approached by theme parks looking for part-time workers. Maybe that ghost was a newbie actor. As I wondered about this, the fright washed away.

“Huh? What? What happened?”

Fushimi was shaking me, her eyes firmly shut. *Of course.*

“Open your eyes.” I felt around for her face and forced her eyes open.

“Stop it!”

“Ow!”

She slapped me. *You stop it.* She was still clinging to me, and I moved forward, dragging her along.

“You're in more danger if you refuse to open your eyes. You could trip.”

Despite her reluctance, she finally relented. She looked down at her feet, only to notice that the hallway floor was covered in hand-shaped bloodstains.

“YOU TRICKED ME!!”

“Crap. I wasn’t trying to. Sorry.”

Talk about bad timing.

There was a skeleton on a chair in the examination room wearing a lab coat. Judging from the coat and the stethoscope hanging from its neck, it was probably meant to be a doctor.

“Ryou, can you do it...?”

The seal was on the desk behind the skeleton.

“Fine, fine.”

I snatched the seal quickly, one eye on the skeleton in case it moved. As soon as I was done, it started cackling.

“Th-that’s it...?”

It was just a chortle. *Okay.* I sighed in relief and turned back toward the hallway. But Fushimi didn’t follow me. She was paralyzed, her eyes rolled back in her head. *Pretty girls shouldn’t make faces like that.*

“Wake up, you’re wasting your good looks,” I said.

“Wha?!”

“Let’s go.”

“Ryou, did you just compliment my looks?”

“No.”

Her expression transformed, and a smile like spring sunlight came over her features as she followed me. Next up was the morgue—a room filled with corpses laid out on beds. The white cloths that should have been covering their faces had all been removed.

“The map says we have to put the cloths back over their faces, and then we’ll receive the seal.”

“I—I can’t keep relying on you,” said Fushimi. “I-I-I’ll do it this time...”

Really? Just don’t wet yourself, okay?

Fushimi went inside, trembling with fear. She covered the bodies’ faces with

white cloths one by one. She was so scared, some of the cloths wound up askew. Then, the moment she placed the last cloth...the corpse grabbed Fushimi's arm.

"AIIIIIEEEE?!"

"Whoa?!"

Fushimi's shriek drowned it out, but I thought I heard the actor shout in surprise at her reaction. They were so shocked, they let go right away.

A light shone on a spot in the room, revealing the seal.

"E-excuse me..... I-I-I'll be on my w-w-way now..."

Fushimi shrank in on herself and pleaded with the corpse not to do anything else as she left. She snatched the seal and ran up to me, moving at light speed.

"G-got it!" she stammered.

"Okay. Let's go."

"Tell me I did a good job!" She pouted.

I patted her head. That was enough, apparently.

"Only the surgery room to go."

By now, Fushimi had gotten used to the atmosphere. She was no longer shrieking at every detail in the hallway. Sudden noises still scared her, but she was slowly acclimatizing.

We found a door marked SURGERY ROOM with a little window in it. I peered inside and saw a doctor in the middle of an operation.

"Let's go in together, Ryou..."

"Yeah."

Fushimi held my hand tight, and I squeezed hers back, trying to encourage her.

As soon as we went inside, the door locked behind us.

"Huh?"

"Seal, seal... There it is!" I exclaimed.



The doctor kept working, seeming not to notice us. The seal was on top of his surgical instruments.

“Excuse me...”

I gingerly took the seal. Immediately, someone knocked on the door. A few ghosts looked inside through the window.

“NOOOOOOOOO!!”

Fushimi ran up and started clinging to me again. Then we heard a voice.

“You should not be here. Leave right away.”

“Huh? Wha?”

“What did you just say?”

“You should not be here. Leave right away.”

Oh. They’re telling us to leave. The doctor was pointing at the emergency exit.

“Let’s go.”

I pulled Fushimi by the hand and left the surgery room through the emergency exit. We followed a string of arrows down a hallway and finally made it out of the haunted mansion.

“We did it!” Fushimi basked in the sunlight as though she’d just escaped hell itself.

“As one would expect from a theme park attraction.”

I put the seals in a box the staff had set up near the exit.

“What was up with that guy at the end?” Fushimi asked.

“He was probably supposed to be a doctor who continues treating patients even after death.”

“Oh! How lovely. He sounds like a real professional.”

I wasn’t sure I’d call him *lovely*, but he was probably meant to be our ally in the story.

Once we finally reached the vending machine we’d originally set out for,

Fushimi got herself a can of juice. Unfortunately, it was considerably more expensive than what you'd find outside the park.

The can fell with a thud, and I took it out and opened it before handing it to her.

"Th-thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Fushimi must have been really thirsty; she gulped down the juice.

"I'm alive again!" she exclaimed after finishing.

"It's just juice, you know."

I chuckled and bought a bottle of iced tea. After I'd taken about two sips, the rest of our group found us.

"What were you two doing?"

Himeji, Mana, and Torigoe were eating ice cream.

"We had a hard time finding a vending machine," Fushimi lied easily.

I glanced at her skeptically, and she stuck out her tongue.

"We just decided to have an early lunch," Himeji said on behalf of the others. Apparently, they'd all discussed it and agreed while we were gone.

It was about twenty minutes to noon, so it wasn't really that early.

Fushimi and I had no objections, so we all started looking for a good spot to eat the lunch Mana and Torigoe had prepared... But it turned out Torigoe already had a place in mind.

"There's an eating area over there," she said.

"You're well prepared, eh, Shizu?" Mana giggled.

"Shii, you should never say you can cook in front of Mana," Fushimi warned her.

Torigoe shook her head. "It's okay. I've already dueled with her."

"And I seized a crushing victory!" Mana said triumphantly.

I don't remember that part.

We moved over to the eating space and found some weathered white tables and chairs. Mana and Torigoe started laying out the food.

"When did you learn how to cook?" Shinohara asked Torigoe.

"I mean, you gotta know at least a little, right?" she replied, timidly evading the question.

"Shizu's here to rack up the Bubby points. And in *my* arena, the cheeky brat."

My sister really was super picky when it came to cooking.

""

Did Fushimi and Himeji just look really angry, or am I seeing things?

"I can cook, too," said Fushimi. "But I yielded since the two of them had already volunteered."

All you can cook is pumpkin.

"My cooking would steal the show, and that would be unfair," Himeji added.

Your dishes sure are interesting, but not in a good way.

If I were to rate Mana's cooking skills as a nine out of ten, Torigoe's would be a five, Fushimi's a three, and Himeji's a one. Thankfully, there was no need to worry today, as the two people with the most cooking sense had brought the food.

Some side dishes overlapped, but switching between the two kept things fresh. Torigoe's had her family's special touch, while Mana's flavoring was more like a professional chef's.

We talked about our school festival, Mana's future, Shinohara's school festival, and so on. And before we knew it, lunch was over.

"I, for one, am delighted to have had the chance to taste Torigoe's home cooking," Deguchi said. He was gazing into the horizon with a smile on his face, like he could die happy at any moment.

"You're overreacting." Torigoe chuckled. "What did you think, Takamori?"

"I could tell you probably eat this a lot with your family. I liked the homey favor."

"I'm glad to hear it. Although I figured you liked it, considering how fast you wolfed it down."

Did I? I guess I was pretty hungry.

Shinohara gestured toward Torigoe. "Shii may seem fickle, but as you can see, she is very devoted."

"Stop it, Mii!" Torigoe said, shoving the other girl's hand away.

"Devoted or not, I am Bubby's cook. Stay away, Shizu." Mana didn't appreciate having her territory invaded.

Just then, I got a text. It was from Mr. Matsuda.

I tried calling Satomi a few times, but she's not picking up or returning my calls.

The text came with a sticker of a cutesy character with teary eyes.

He was trying to tell Ms. Ashihara that Fushimi wanted her to come to the festival, but it sounded like things weren't going well.

She's not returning my texts, either. This is why she has no friends!

I stepped away to call him.

"Good afternoon. Sorry to call you without asking."

"It's fine. I'm free right now."

"Could you please tell me Ms. Ashihara's number?"

These days privacy concerns were no joke. It was improper of me to ask, and I expected him to refuse outright. I was already thinking of my next move when he took me by surprise.

"Sure!"

Really? I can get a famous actress's number just like that?

"This is what she gets for ignoring her friends. Heh-heh."

"Thank you, but are you sure?"

“What? Are you gonna dox her?”

“I would never.”

“So what’s the problem? She’s my friend. What’s she to you? Just an actress?”

“She’s my childhood friend’s mother.”

“So what’s there to worry about?”

Right. Her celebrity status aside, I just wanted Fushimi’s mom to see how hard she’d worked. And this was what Fushimi wanted, too.

Mr. Matsuda sent me her number right away, along with a message saying, Let’s hope she picks up.

I sent back my thanks.

I wondered if she was usually busy on the weekends, but then I remembered her job wasn’t the usual nine-to-five.

Everybody else was still having fun at the lunch table.

I made up my mind and dialed Ms. Ashihara’s number right then and there. After a few rings, I was sent to voicemail.

Maybe she’s at work.

I did as the voicemail suggested and left a message after the beep.

“I’m sorry to call you out of the blue. It’s Takamori. Mr. Matsuda gave me your number. I asked Fushimi, er, Hina, about the school festival, and she said she’d like you to come see—”

Another beep cut my message short.

“Hey! Takayan! We’re done here!” Deguchi shouted at me.

“I’m coming!” I replied before sending Ms. Ashihara a short message.

One I’d rejoined the group, we walked over to the merry-go-round. The others had chosen it while I was away. I thought we were a little old for it, but the girls insisted, leaving Deguchi and me without a choice.

After that, we went to the rapids, and then to a mini arcade. Everyone was hyped up, and I had more fun than I would have normally.

Deguchi screamed and shouted dramatically whenever something happened, and by evening, his voice was hoarse.

I kept wondering if Ms. Ashihara would reply to my text, but she never did.

Once we had enjoyed most of the attractions, we decided to close out the day with the Ferris wheel.

“It says four people to a pod,” Shinohara said, pointing to the sign.

We had to split into two groups. I went with Torigoe and Fushimi, while Himeji, Mana, Shinohara, and Deguchi got in the other pod.

“Whaaa? But then Deguu will be all alone! Poor guy.” Mana was casually trying to cut Deguchi out of their group.

Himeji nodded firmly. “We’ll have to rethink this.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Deguchi. “Why would we split into two groups of three and send one person in alone?! The max number of riders is four!”

Torigoe pulled on my shirt. “It’s time to get on.”

“Let’s go, Ryou!”

“Well, you guys talk it out,” I said. “See ya.”

I left Deguchi behind and headed for the pod.

The park staffer welcomed us. Torigoe got in first, followed by Fushimi.

“Hmm.”

I was next, but I stopped for a moment. I thought they would sit side by side, but they’d sat down across from each other. The two girls glanced at me before turning to look out the opposite window.

““ ””

I decided to sit beside Torigoe, since we hadn’t talked much that day.

“Mmm...?” Fushimi whimpered.

“You picked my side?” Torigoe blinked repeatedly.

Before I could say anything, the staffer closed the door, and the pod began slowly rising.

The three of us talked about everything we'd done that day as if it was already a treasured memory. Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd come alone with friends to an amusement park. Apparently, the same was true of Torigoe and Fushimi.

"I would've thought Hiina would come to places like this all the time," said Torigoe.

"No, not really. Though I get asked a lot."

"By boys?" Torigoe asked.

"Girls, too," Fushimi replied.

So boys do ask her.

"I bet they were asking you on dates."

"...Let's forget about that."

I knew Fushimi was popular, but being reminded of it made me feel strange. Lots of boys confessed to her, and even more probably asked her out. She wasn't friends with only me. She was friends with everyone... I was just her childhood friend, and I'd selfishly assumed that made us close...

"Ryou, look! I bet that's my house!" Fushimi pointed out the window, her eyes shining like a child's.

"Your house isn't that big," I said.

"I think that's the city hall, Hiina."

"O-oops..." Fushimi smiled shyly in the early evening light.

Just as I found her smile cute, other boys did, too. Just like me, they thought it was directed at them, and fell in love with her.

"Ah! There's a couple...up there...kissing!" Fushimi pointed up with a trembling finger.

Torigoe and I followed her gaze. Although we couldn't see clearly due to the angle, we could tell a guy and a girl were above us, cuddling.

"" "" "" "" ""
.....

We all stared at them awkwardly.

“I wonder what happened to Deguchi.” I changed the subject and looked down below. It appeared the four of them had gotten on together.

Just then, I felt my phone vibrate. I slid out the top part and checked the screen. I had a text. Hurriedly, I pulled out my phone and opened the messaging app.

Just as I'd thought, it was from Ms. Ashihara.

I don't think I can go, considering my schedule. I'm sorry. And I don't think I have the right to see her acting. Good luck.

Mmm... This isn't going to be easy.

Why had she replied to me, and not to Mr. Matsuda?

“What's wrong, Takamori?” asked Torigoe.

“Uh, er... Fushimi, do you mind if I tell her? About watching your play.”

“.....To Shii, sure.”

As the pod slowly moved, I told Torigoe about what had been happening, including the text, but I kept out the fact that we were talking about Satomi Ashihara. I only said that Fushimi hadn't seen her mom since her parents' divorce.

“So she can't make it.” Fushimi dropped her shoulders in disappointment, but her smile was part troubled, part relieved.

“She's a busy woman, huh?” remarked Torigoe. “But can't you just send her a video of the performance?”

“The drama club does record the play every year, and I'll be getting a copy.”

While the two of them talked, I thought about how to respond to Ms. Ashihara. I'd told her Fushimi wanted her to come watch the performance. But she'd insisted she didn't have the right, probably because she hadn't spent much time with her daughter and had barely done anything to help raise her.

The conversation moved on to Fushimi's rehearsals, and the topic kept shifting until they were talking about something else entirely.

I pictured Ms. Ashihara's face. She was so pretty, it was as if I was looking at Fushimi twenty years in the future. Were their personalities similar, too?

She could have just told Mr. Matsuda if she was busy. Yet she hadn't.

Could it be she was still uncertain?

While the two girls chatted jovially, I came up with a reply.

You are the person she looks up to the most, and she wants you to see her best side.

A reply came right away.

Thank you for worrying about her... I'm sorry for what I said.

At the time, I thought she was apologizing for saying she wouldn't come.

Sometime later, the photos and videos from our most recent outing were uploaded to the group chat. We now had an album titled “Amusement Park” alongside the “Beach” one.

I’d thought this would stop Deguchi asking me for that video of the beach, but he kept insisting. “Please, Director,” he’d say in a soft, coaxing voice, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “You’ve already finished your work. Can’t you help a guy out?”

To be honest, I *wasn’t* finished working. I was currently editing a “making-of” video for Waka to show to our class after the festival was over. Everyone had enjoyed the outtakes, so I was sure they’d like this, too. And that thought made the work speed along.

As for Ms. Ashihara, I hadn’t spoken to her since the amusement park. I didn’t know whether she was actually busy, or if that was just an excuse.

“How’s the play coming together?” I asked Fushimi on our way to school.

“Everything’s going perfectly,” she replied. “I think some people will cry.” She sounded full of enthusiasm.

I was relieved that she hadn’t been discouraged by Ms. Ashihara’s refusal.

Once we’d entered through the school gate, Himeji glanced at the other classes as they set up food stalls and prepared for club activities. “This is my first time participating in a school festival... I really like how friendly and homemade it feels.”

“You’ve never participated before, Ai?” asked Fushimi.

“No. I always had to work.”

It seemed that when you worked in the entertainment industry, you had to miss out on lots of events.

The inside of the school had been entirely transformed for the festival, with classrooms decorated as cafés and haunted houses.

We'd posted a flyer for our short film featuring a picture of Fushimi and Himeji in an eye-catching place on the noticeboard. The poster included the screening schedule, and there were more flyers on the desk below. I could tell the stack had gotten smaller since yesterday.

"Look! We're down, like, a hundred flyers!" Fushimi said, voicing my thoughts and excitedly repeating, "Look! Look! Look!"

"Must be my fans," Himeji interjected, raining on Fushimi's parade.

"You haven't told anyone that you were an idol, though, right?"

"Those who know, know."

"Sure, sure." Fushimi rolled her eyes.

Personally, I hoped it wasn't Himeji's fans who'd taken all the flyers.

"What if we get so many viewers, there aren't enough seats!" said Himeji.

"We might," I agreed.

"Should we grab more chairs?" suggested Fushimi.

We'd already completed our final test screening and moved all the desks into an empty classroom. With only the chairs left, our room was like a mini theater.

"Oh no...," Fushimi said, exhaling anxiously.

"Hey, taking a flyer doesn't mean they'll come," I said.

"No, that's not what I'm worried about. I was just thinking, with how terrible Ai's acting is... What if everyone makes fun of her?"

"Oh."

"Your insults have come a long way, Hina." Himeji shook her head. "But no need to worry, amateur. My appearance alone will bring a standing ovation."

"Not everyone is a blind admirer," she shot back.

Despite what Fushimi said, to be quite honest, it wasn't so much that Himeji's acting was bad but that Fushimi's was simply that much better than everyone

else's. She was head and shoulders above the rest. That said, Himeji had improved by leaps and bounds. And personally, I thought she looked so good on camera that a lousy performance wouldn't cause that many problems.

Soon we'd reached our classroom. It was a lot plainer than the others, with forty chairs facing a screen and not much else. There was an opinion box set up by the exit. I was sure it would wind up full of notes about how cute Fushimi and Himeji were.

Everyone was full of nervous excitement, discussing where they'd be going and who they'd go with.

"Ryou, there's a haunted house," Fushimi said. At some point, she'd picked up a guide with info about the festival.

"And? You didn't exactly sail through the last one."

"It was fun. And you were so reliable." She smiled, thinking back on it.

Himeji was holding the same guide and mumbling to herself. "A haunted house, a crepe stand, a maze, a café... There's even a display on local culture..."

Local culture displays tended to be pretty niche. They put up information about the history of the school and its surrounding area. I'd dropped by one last year, and it felt like I'd left the festival for a different world. It had been so calm and quiet.

Himeji showed me the guide. The festival would be held on Friday and Saturday, and the play was scheduled for Saturday at three PM.

"Takamori, let's go somewhere once you're done with your shift," Torigoe said. She was already in the classroom.

"Oh sure," I said.

"Me too!" Fushimi joined in, but Himeji stopped her.

"Hina, you're coming with me to the local culture exhibition."

"What? Why?"

"And then he'll be going with me to the crepe stall, the haunted house, and the café."

Himeji one-sidedly started filling in my schedule.

“Hold on. Don’t I get a say in this?” I shot back.

While I was complaining, a girl from another class came up to Himeji, and they started talking.

“About what we discussed...,” the girl began.

“Give me two complimentary tickets and it’s a deal.”

“Thank you! That’s no problem! We’re counting on you!” The girl was beaming on her way out.

I had no idea what they’d been talking about. Neither did Fushimi or Torigoe, judging from the looks on their faces.

“They’re putting on a café,” Himeji explained, “and they asked me to help attract customers.”

The girl was from the class next door, and according to the guide, they were putting on...

““A cosplay café,”” Fushimi and Torigoe said in unison.

“Ai, what are you going to wear?” said Fushimi.

“Are they gonna make you put on a lewd outfit...?” Torigoe asked anxiously.

“They said I’ll be wearing a nurse uniform.”

Himeji...a nurse?

I could picture her, with her endless confidence, saying something like, “*I’m not sure what it’s for, but since I’ll be doing the injection, I’m sure you’ll be fine.*”

“Nurse costumes are always lewd,” said Torigoe.

I think that opinion says more about you than anything else.

“Shii, you’re wrong,” said Fushimi. “Nurse outfits are totally innocent.”

And I think it says a lot about me that I can’t entirely agree with her.

“I don’t care about the outfit,” declared Himeji. “I’ll look good in anything.”

““Wow.””

Her confidence had surpassed being annoying. I almost wanted to start clapping.

Eventually, it was time for all the students to gather and for the executive committee to officially declare the beginning of the festival.

Once everyone was dismissed, some students returned to their posts while others began wandering around and enjoying the sights.

I was on duty first thing, so I started back toward the classroom.

There was one showing every hour, and I was planning to stay a bit after my shift to see what the audience thought.

Just then, somebody reached their hand around my shoulder. It was Deguchi.

“Let’s go to the cosplay café, Takayan.”

“Later, okay?”

“So you’re into the idea, huh?”

“I just don’t have any reason to say no.”

I looked around for Fushimi. I figured she’d be interested in the audience’s reactions, too, and was planning to invite her along. But when I spotted her, she was with the drama club.

Looks like she’s busy with her own stuff.

I’d given Ms. Ashihara detailed info about when the play would be. She’d said she was busy, but I suspected that was only an excuse. She could still change her mind.

I found Torigoe looking overwhelmed by all the people, and we went back to the classroom together. She said Fushimi had a meeting with the drama club and that she had no idea what Himeji was up to.

There was already a crowd outside our classroom.

“Takamori, look,” said Torigoe.

“Are they all here for the cosplay café?”

Its popularity is through the roof, huh?

“No, they’re here for our short.”

“What?”

I tried to calm down as I hurried inside and found all the seats taken. Quite a few people were leaning against the lockers at the back or sitting on the floor.

“There’s so many people,” Torigoe said.

“Do they have nowhere else to go...?”

“Don’t put yourself down like that.”

I was hoping we’d get about a hundred people over the course of the festival, but we were already at close to half that with only the first showing.

A few guys from our class dropped by, and they were all surprised.

“Whoa. Look at all these people!”

“Yeah. Even I’m starting to get nervous...”

“Wow... You’re amazing, Takamori.” Torigoe sounded unusually excited. “Even more than I thought.”

When nine o’clock rolled around, the first showing began. We closed the curtains and doors, making it dark inside the classroom. As we started setting up, people stopped chatting and started paying attention.

Although our classmates and Mr. Matsuda had already seen it, this was the first time it would be shown to complete strangers.

My fingers trembled with worry and excitement as I moved the mouse.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Torigoe put her hand on mine. The soft, chilly touch of her fingers brought me back to reality.

I moved the cursor to the play button and clicked.

The short I’d watched over and over and over again played on the screen.

Throughout its thirty or so minutes of run time, there were no laughs, no scenes baiting the audience to cry, and obviously, no Hollywood-style action sequences.

I knew that the audience was unlikely to show any big reactions, yet my

worries kept piling up as the silence continued. The film felt much, much longer than it ever had before.

Eventually, the ending came, and the screen went dark. Someone clapped, and from there, applause spread through the audience like a wave, the sound growing louder with every heartbeat.

“If you have any thoughts about the film you’d like to share, there’s an opinion box by the exit,” I said as I opened the curtains and the door. “We’d love to hear what you thought.”

I figured no one would bother writing down their thoughts unless they had a really strong opinion, so I delivered the announcement very matter-of-factly. But contrary to my expectations, everyone wrote something down.

“Ryou, Ryou, Ryou!” Fushimi leaped into the room. “It’s a breakout hit!” Apparently, she’d been waiting outside.

“We still don’t know what they’re saying about it,” I replied.

Maybe they’d only clapped to be polite.

“No, I’m sure it went well,” Torigoe said calmly.

“How can you tell?”

“Last year, there was a class that did a short play or a skit or something, and when I took a look, very few people were watching.”

I guess we’re doing better than that, at least.

“The power of Fushimi, huh...?”

“That must be it...”

Torigoe and I looked at each other and smirked.

But Fushimi moved between us and insisted, “No, no! Ryou’s a big draw, too.”

“Me? You really think so?” I had to ask twice. It just didn’t sound believable.

“You directed an award-winning short film. Of course people are interested in seeing your work.”

Right, and they even recognized me in front of the whole school. I guess that

makes sense...

“Also, Shii.”

“Y-yeah?”

“A good screenplay is vital for positive reception. The audience clapped that much because you did a good job.”

“So she’s got talent, too?” I asked.

“Of course!” Fushimi nodded with pride. “Our team is full of powerhouses!”

Fushimi sure was riding high. She was beginning to sound like Himeji.

As the audience for the first showing left, we let the next group inside. There was still time before the film started again, though, so the three of us took a moment to check out the opinions in the box.

“Is the first showing already over?” Himeji showed up wearing her nurse uniform.

The white outfit featured a short skirt and knee-high socks, along with a nurse cap and a stethoscope hanging from her neck.

“Ai, what in the world are you wearing?!” Fushimi rushed to cover her from prying eyes, but Himeji didn’t seem to care at all.

“So? How do I look?” She put on a smug smile and struck a pose.

“Lewd, just like I said.” Torigoe furrowed her brow. “So they’re making you wear that to pull in customers? What are they, a clip joint?”

What do you know about clip joints, Torigoe? ...Not that I know anything, either.

“It’s not fair to use sex appeal. And you’re not even from their class.”

All the girls called her cute and commented on her nice figure as they passed by, which only further boosted her ego. She really loved being fawned over.



“Do you like that kind of thing, Takamori?” Torigoe asked.

“Not really.”

“Don’t lie. You can’t take your eyes off of her.”

I guess...I have been staring a little. I mean, it’s really weird seeing her in an outfit like that. And she does look good.

Torigoe sighed and started arranging the papers from the opinion box.

“How’s it look?”

“Generally positive.”

She handed me a stack, and I read them one by one. Half of the comments talked about Fushimi being cute. About 20 percent mentioned her rival’s acting being so bad, it was funny. The rest were short and basically said, “I liked it.”

“We should keep Himeji from seeing the comments about her,” I said.

“I agree,” said Torigoe. “By the way, Takamori—”

“Ryou—”

Torigoe’s and Fushimi’s voices overlapped, and they looked at each other with troubled expressions.

“Hmm? What is it?” I asked.

Torigoe cleared her throat, and Himeji called Fushimi over.

“Hina, the class rep said they wanted you to come help.”

“Huh? Right now? At the cosplay café?”

“Yes, though I don’t know the details.” Himeji pulled her by the arm out into the hall.

“Are they gonna make her wear something, too?” I wondered.

After all, inside the school, Fushimi was even more popular than Himeji.

“I guess it’s fine, as long as it’s not too sexy,” I added.

“So you say, but I know you’re interested.” Torigoe shot me a suspicious glance.

“Don’t look at me like that. And what were you trying to say a second ago?”

“Oh right,” she mumbled. “.....Is there anything you wanna go see? I could come with you...”

Anything I want to go see...? Nothing had really caught my attention when I was looking at the guide. Well, besides the really silly stuff like the cosplay café.

“Not really.”

“In that case, would you mind coming with me?”

Apparently, Torigoe *did* have something in mind. I was curious about what she wanted to see, so I replied right away.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Th-then let’s go,” she said. She walked out of the classroom and down the hall in the opposite direction from Fushimi and Himeji.

“Where are we headed?”

“Here.”

I looked up and saw she was pointing at a sign that simply said, T_{EA}.

“A tea stand?”

“It’s a space for tea *ceremonies*.”

Oh, like making matcha and stuff?

The guide said the tea ceremony area was managed by local volunteers.

“You like this sorta thing?” I asked.

“I appreciate peaceful, quiet moments.”

“Traditional stuff really suits you. I think you’d look good in a *kimono*.”

“R-really...? If I dressed up like Himeji, would you want to see?” she asked. She sounded oddly serious. I got the feeling I couldn’t just give her a casual yes.

Himeji craved attention, so wearing a showy nurse outfit like that was nothing to her. But Torigoe would probably be fidgeting uncomfortably the whole time.

I was curious, since it would be a rare sight. But I didn’t want anyone thinking

I was a pervert or something, so I kept my answer vague.

“I dunno.”

“I—I see.”

“I guess it would depend on the costume.”

“We don’t need to...but since we’re here already, how about we go there, too?”

She pointed at a sign which read KIMONO RENTALS.

So this is where everyone’s been getting their kimonos.

Himeji had filled up my whole schedule, but she was currently off dressed as a nurse and busily grabbing customers.

I looked out the window and saw her holding a cardboard sign. Beside her... was another girl wearing a police uniform.

“Hey, that’s Hiina,” said Torigoe.

Indeed. The other girl was Fushimi.

“Looks like they gave her a lewd costume, too.” Torigoe looked at Fushimi’s short skirt and frowned. “She acts all cutesy, but she craves attention, too, huh?”

I decided to pretend I hadn’t heard that little barb.

Just then, a classy-looking woman noticed us and ushered us inside. “Please, come in.”

“I’ll wait,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“C’mon, Takamori. You’re already here.”

Torigoe pulled my arm and dragged me inside. She wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“My, my, you’re a couple? How lovely!” The woman giggled.

“N-n-no...” Torigoe shrank, her face turning red.

There was another older woman inside. It seemed to be just the two of them.

The first woman took care of Torigoe, while the older woman looked after me. She was very quiet and only spoke to give me instructions. I followed her directions as she helped me get dressed.

I could hear Torigoe talking with the other woman across a partition dividing the room.

“Sorry about the misunderstanding,” said the woman.

“No, it’s no problem.”

“So you’re not a couple...yet?”

“Huh? Um..... No... I don’t know...” Torigoe’s voice was small and weak.

“Well, good luck!”

“Uh... Mmm... Thanks...”

Do they know I can hear them?

Meanwhile, my conversation with the older woman was extremely limited.

“Hands.”

“Yes.”

“Hold this.”

“Yes.”

I never said anything but *yes*.

I put on a black *kimono*, then a purple coat. I had to buy the *tabi* socks for 300 yen, but the *zori* sandals were rentals.

I finished first and waited out in the hallway until I heard Torigoe emerge and thank the woman.

“...How do I look?” she asked.

She wore an ultramarine *kimono* with a flower-patterned *obi* band. She had her hair up behind her head.

“It really suits you, just like I said.”



“.....You think?” She’d stopped frowning over Fushimi’s short skirt, and a tender, shy smile bloomed on her face. “You look cool, too.”

Embarrassment suddenly hit me, and all I could say was “Thanks...”

Torigoe looked embarrassed, too, and her eyes were darting around the hallway.

The woman from a moment ago poked her head out and asked, “Do you want me to take your picture?”

Torigoe nodded repeatedly. “Please.”

She handed the woman her phone, and we stood in the hallway with the garden behind us.

“Stand a little closer together!”

We scooted ever so slightly toward each other.

“Closer!”

Then Torigoe’s shoulder bumped into my arm.

““Ah.””

When we yelped in unison, the lady grinned and winked. Torigoe shook her head in response. Then they did it again.

Wink, shake. Wink, shake. Wink, shake. Wink, shake...

Their alien communication ritual eventually stopped once Torigoe moved in and locked arms with me.

“J-just for a moment, okay?” She was red all the way to her ears, almost on the verge of tears.

It was then that I heard the shutter click. The woman took a few pictures, and once Torigoe had her phone back, she looked them over.

“I’m so red in the face... How embarrassing... Geez.”

Wondering what she was so embarrassed about, I sneaked a peek at her phone. The photo showed a beet-red Torigoe linking arms with me as I smiled nervously. Behind us...a girl dressed as a police officer was shooting us a dead-

eyed stare from the garden.

What the heck...? She's terrifying...

She looked scarier than a ghost.

"Who knows what she might do to us if she catches us," said Torigoe. "We better hurry."

Torigoe thanked the lady for the pictures and rushed over to the tea ceremony area.

Thankfully (?) Fushimi didn't find us, and we grabbed a seat under a red umbrella out in the schoolyard. We enjoyed tea and snacks alongside other *kimono*-clad students and locals.

Apparently, this was a casual kind of tea ceremony; I was relieved no one had started nitpicking my etiquette.

Torigoe explained to me that there was a tea ceremony space and *kimono* rental this year because a senior in the student council happened to be studying the art of tea.

After wandering around the school in *kimonos* for a while, our time was up, and we returned them and changed back into our uniforms.

"Do you want a copy of the picture from earlier?" Torigoe asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

Torigoe looked at her phone with a sweet smile.

What's so funny about sending me a picture?

Eventually, the file reached my phone, and I opened it up to see. It was the picture without Fushimi in the background—just the two of us in *kimonos* with my tense smile and Torigoe's red face. Thanks to the woman's instructions, we'd ended up really close together.

It was a picture to remember in a different way from the one we'd taken on the school field trip.

"Takamori, what're you doing for the closing event?" Torigoe asked.

"I'm thinking about joining in this time."

“I noticed you heading home right away last year, so I figured you’d do that again...”

“Well, Fushimi asked me to dance this year.”

It was a promise we’d made during summer break. At the time, I’d agreed easily, not really understanding what she meant.

Knowing Fushimi, she would understand if I changed my mind. I’d simply have to give her a proper reason and she’d be fine with breaking the promise.

The closer we got to the school festival, the more people talked about the closing dance party. It was clearly a huge deal for the students.

Most of the couples dancing were boyfriend and girlfriend, and for those who weren’t, it was like a declaration that they were now dating.

“I see,” said Torigoe. The distant hustle and bustle of the festival echoed softly in the quiet hallway. “My sister...Kurumi and my mom will be here soon. I’ll go meet them at the gate.”

Torigoe put her phone away and walked off. Then she stopped and turned around.

“Takamori,” she said with determination on her face. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

Force myself? What does she mean?

I started to say, “Torigoe, what do you—?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” But she cut me off and shook her head, a troubled smile on her face.

Torigoe seemed to be analyzing me lately. She often asked Mana about me, or told me to think about things, or asked me to define various concepts. Had she finally reached a satisfying conclusion?

Forcing myself clearly had something to do with Fushimi.

I didn’t feel like I was forcing myself to do anything. Although I did feel gears realigning in my brain from time to time in a weird way.

Forcing myself... Forcing myself...

“Ryou, Hina’s here to play.”

I remembered a time in my life when hearing my mom say those words had made me feel nauseated.

I was pretty young back then, and something had happened that made me stop wanting to be around Fushimi. Maybe I was just tired of hanging out with her, or maybe I’d gotten bored of playing house all the time... In any case, Mom found it weird that I didn’t want to see her, and she let her inside, just as she always did.

“What’re we playing today, Ryou?”

I think she made me play house that day, too.

“Why are you here?”

I asked her that over and over again.

“Because I like you and want to play with you.”

She always gave me the same reply, with the same blithe smile.

Every time she said it, I felt myself grow more and more callous. I thought, *You don’t actually like me*. I don’t think I ever said it out loud. I just bottled it up and forced myself to play along with her.

Torigoe’s words had unlocked that awful memory. But now that I thought about it, something felt off. Was Fushimi really like that when she was young? She kept saying she liked me, even though I was sure she didn’t.

I’d been convinced she was lying, even though I knew better than anyone that she wasn’t the type to do something like that. So why had I thought she was lying?

Maybe the gears in my head had realigned because somewhere, deep down, I thought I was being lied to.

Fushimi? Telling lies?

I just couldn’t believe it.

Just then, the loud sound of a whistle echoed through the hallway. Taken aback, I turned toward the source and found Fushimi dressed in her police

uniform. The moment our eyes met, she pointed a toy gun at me.

“You’re under arrest! ☆”

She struck the kind of cute pose that would be followed with a glimmering effect in a manga. I stared at her, completely confused.

Torigoe’s complaints were accurate—Fushimi’s skirt was so short that even this simple pose exposed a fair bit of her tights-clad thighs. Her shirt was short, too, revealing her navel when she moved.

“S-say something!” she called out. “You’re making me look like an idiot!”

“Oh, sorry. I was just lost in thought.”

“What were you thinking about while staring at your childhood friend in cosplay?!” Fushimi pouted, then smirked. “Could it be I look so cute, you instantly fell for me?”

“You look good. It’s a little risqué, but it seems like you’re pretty into it.”

“They *made* me wear this,” she said, emphasizing that it wasn’t her choice.

Maybe she had been desensitized after seeing her childhood friend in that sexy nurse outfit.

“So, about the closing party,” I said.

Fushimi’s eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“Are you sure you wanna participate? I didn’t really give it much thought when we made that promise.” We’d talked about it while waiting for the train on our way back from the audition she’d failed. “And I thought maybe it was the same for you.”

“No way.”

No way...huh?

“I think, deep down, I’ve been feeling like you might be lying, somehow,” I said. “I just didn’t realize that’s what it was until now.”

“What?” She furrowed her brow in disbelief. “Why would I lie to you? We’ve been together forever. I can tell when you’re lying, although not always for sure.” Fushimi looked up at me. “So I’m sure you can tell, too. Even if you’re not

one hundred percent certain.”

I understood what she meant. I probably would’ve been able to tell, if only vaguely, if Fushimi was lying.

“I saw Shii and you wearing *kimonos*,” she said.

“Oh yeah.”

I saw you watching us.

“Ryou, you don’t have to force yourself to come to the closing party just because we promised.” Despite her words, she looked at me restlessly. “There’s Ai, there’s Shii... It doesn’t have to be me.”

Once again, it seemed as if her own words were hurting her. The look on her face hurt me, too.

“Fushimi, I...”

I felt like I had to say something, but then Himeji appeared at the end of the hallway and shouted, “There you are!”

She was still wearing the nurse uniform, and she had a sign advertising the café hanging from her neck, now plastered over with flyers for our short.

“I was wondering where you’d run off to.”

“I have a meeting with the drama club soon,” said Fushimi. “So I’ll have to bow out early.”

“No problem. The others already know. They were just looking for the right time to let you go.”

“See you, then.” Fushimi walked away.

“Good luck, Fushimi,” I called after her.

Ms. Ashihara might come, but the chances were very low.

Fushimi smiled and waved, then turned the corner and disappeared.

It was almost noon already, so Himeji and I went to grab something to eat.

There were a variety of stalls—*yakisoba*, *okonomiyaki*, omelet rice, curry... I asked Himeji what she wanted to eat, and her response was quick and simple:

“Everything.”

“You can eat all that?”

“Please. You’ll be eating half of it, obviously.”

“Hey, don’t drag me along on some kind of food bender.”

“But aren’t you curious? Even if the quality is low, things like this are all about the atmosphere.”

“Don’t trash-talk the food.”

Himeji took a wallet out of a hidden pocket in her dress. If her skirt were a little longer, she’d look just like a nurse out on her lunch break.

“I’ll pay for everything,” she said. “All you need to do is stand in line.”

“Oh, no. We’re sharing, right? I’ll pay half.”

“Really?” She chuckled before shaking her head overdramatically. “Normally, the man would offer to pay for everything. You’ve got some work to do, Ryou.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She handed me a thousand-yen bill and said, “I’m kidding. I really don’t mind.”

I sometimes forget she’s my childhood friend, too. She sure knows how to manipulate me.

Because the stalls were run by various classes and clubs, they were even cheaper than the school cafeteria. A thousand yen was more than enough to buy one of each item.

I went back to look for Himeji and found her sitting in the rest area set up in the schoolyard.

Two guys who looked like college students were talking to her.

P-pick-up artists?!

They must have thought a girl like her sitting alone in an outfit like that was some kind of invitation.

As I inched closer, I noticed something was off. The two guys were bowing to

her.

“Excuse me? She’s with me, is there...?”

I couldn’t finish my sentence before one of them silenced me with a glare.

“You’re with her? What’s your relationship?”

I was startled by how fast he started picking a fight.

“Umm, she’s my classmate and childhood friend.”

Their glares only intensified.

“Her classmate?”

“And childhood friend...?!”

The two guys were shaking as Himeji turned and spoke to them.

“I had him buy us lunch. We’ll be eating now, so if you have no further business with us, please go.”

The two of them walked away, downcast.

“I’m not who you think I am!” she said to their backs as they walked away.

“Fans?”

“Yes. But they had the wrong person.”

“You mean they recognized you.”

“No, Aika of SakuMome no longer exists.”

I placed the packages of food one by one on the table.

“They were pretty understanding, though. I thought fans were more... passionate.”

“I believe it is part of an idol’s job to educate their fans. I don’t want anyone to think I have followers that would bother my group mates or other people. I was always strict with them.”

So Aika’s fans see her word as law.

Wait... Is that why Shinohara treats her like a goddess? She certainly seems like a “well-educated” fan.

I was honestly kind of impressed.

“You really are a pro,” I said.

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. I think that’s pretty cool, actually.”

She snorted and put on a boastful grin before splitting her chopsticks. “Let’s eat.”

She dug in, and I followed suit.

“By the way,” she said, “I’ve noticed you getting friendly with Torigoe lately.”

“Have I? I don’t think much has changed.”

The conversation trailed off, and we focused on eating for a while. I figured I could tell Himeji about Ms. Ashihara, so I did.

“Hina’s mom? *That* Satomi Ashihara? She’s coming here?” She frowned in disbelief.

“She said her schedule’s full, but I think that’s just an excuse.”

“...Perhaps.”

“I think she’s afraid because they haven’t seen each other in so long.”

As I explained my hypothesis, Himeji’s face twisted. Something about what I was saying seemed to bother her.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing... It’s just, I heard Mr. Matsuda say she would be shooting a film in Hokkaido.”

“Hokkaido?”

“Yes. Hokkaido.”

“Hokkaido...”

“That’s why I don’t think she was making excuses. She probably just can’t make it.”

“She just can’t make it.”

I could only parrot what Himeji was saying.

Oh. That's too bad. It would have been the perfect opportunity, too...

"Why are you so disappointed?"

"Well, Fushimi looks up to her. She's the reason she wants to be an actress. And she wanted her mother to see her in the play..."

"But it's not like she'll never have another chance. If Fushimi becomes an actress, her mother will have tons of opportunities to see her. As long as Hina keeps at it, there shouldn't be a problem."

"That's easier for you to say, Ms. Pro."

"You're right, I am a pro. So I might as well speak like one." Himeji smirked.

She had a little of everything I'd brought, but never more than two bites. I had to eat the rest.

"May I take a picture?" a first-year asked, pointing his phone at her. A few other boys were with him, also with their phones out.

Himeji moved to sit beside me. "You can now."

She linked arms with me. Her tight clothes accentuated her good figure. I had to use all my focus to keep my gaze away from her chest.

"Forget it...", the guy said, and the group soon left.

"Does everyone already know you're Aika?"

"Maybe. Or maybe he just likes me." Himeji sighed. "I wonder what he was planning to use that photo for?"

I'd rather he didn't use it for anything...

Himeji grabbed her chopsticks and cut a big slice of *okonomiyaki*.

"But it's easy to shatter all their weird fantasies. I just have to do *this*." She clung even closer to me and carried the *okonomiyaki* slice to my mouth. "Eat up."

"Now you're giving weird fantasies to everyone else! They're all staring at us!"

I could feel twice as many people glaring at me now.

“Oh, but I like being the center of attention.”

You brat!

“And a patient must follow his nurse’s instructions.”

Himeji put on a naughty grin and pushed the *okonomiyaki* against my stubbornly closed lips as if giving me little kisses.

“Fine, fine.”

I licked the sauce on my lips and opened my mouth slightly. She shoved it down my throat, forcing me to open wider.

“You like it?”

Her smile warned me not to say no.

“Y-yeah...”

I couldn’t even taste it, I was so embarrassed.

“Your turn.” She opened her mouth.

“...”

I frowned, and she mouthed “Quick.”

“Why would a patient be feeding his nurse?”

She was clearly ad-libbing this scenario.

“What are you talking about? Who’s a patient?”

You’re the one who said all that stuff...! Stop looking at me like I’m being stupid!

I could already hear people murmuring around us.

“Bold.”

“So they’re a couple?”

“Bet they’ll be together for the closing party.”

“It should have been me, not him! It’s not fair!”

“Exhibitionists always break up right away.”

Yeah, this was pretty much what I expected. And now I'm feeding her, though I guess I couldn't really avoid it.

Himeji didn't seem to care about the gossip.

"Himejima's so cute!" shouted three first-year girls when they spotted us. Himeji waved at them with the smile of a goddess.

She was way too used to this level of attention. She must really enjoy it, just as she'd said—but I was different. That said, I didn't dislike that side of her. After knowing her for so long, I could see it in a positive light. She didn't use to be like this, but living in the limelight seemed to suit her.

Himeji took pictures with the girls while I ate what she'd left behind. Apparently, she didn't mind photos so long as the ones asking were girls who wanted pictures of her, rather than of Aika the idol.

"I'm so happy! I've always thought you were super cute, Himejima!"

"Of course. Thank you."

Wow, a classic customer service smile.

I had already finished lunch and thrown away the trash by the time the girls left.

"Let's go to the maze," Himeji suggested. "I want to see how fun they can manage to make one using only cardboard."

"So you're a maze expert now?"

She clearly wasn't going to take no for an answer. I followed as she skipped along merrily.

"Are you done advertising for the café?"

"Yes. They only asked me to do it in the morning."

...Then why are you still wearing that outfit? Don't tell me it's just because you like the attention.

Class 1-A's room had been transformed into a maze. The student outside gave us a warning before letting us in.

"Watch your step. It's dark inside."

The room smelled of dry cardboard. It really was dark, probably to make it easier to get lost. I could hear people talking elsewhere in the maze from time to time.

“It feels handmade, doesn’t it?” I said, before Himeji could unconsciously diss it by calling it *cheap* or something.

She giggled. “Nice choice of words.”

We reached a fork in the path and each pointed the way we wanted to go. I chose left, and Himeji chose right.

“I guess we’ll have to split up,” I said.

“Why would we do that?!” She slapped my shoulder.

“I was just kidding.”

One good thing about Himeji was that it was still fun when we disagreed. Maybe she stubbornly insisted on having things her way precisely because I never acted upset about it.

We turned right, as she’d suggested, and quickly ran into a dead end.

“Guess this is the end of the line,” I said, before turning back around, only to come face-to-face with Himeji.

Instead of following suit, she moved closer to me.

“Himeji?”

“Don’t you have fun with me?”

“I do.”

I was telling the truth.

“Then why not pick me for the closing party?”

Himeji had asked me out before, even though I was sure plenty of people asked her out all the time.

“Why do you fixate on Hina?” she asked.

“Himeji... We’re in the middle of the maze...”

Soon other people would be coming up behind us. I wasn’t trying to evade the

question. I simply thought we should continue this outside. She shook her head, sending her hair swaying from side to side and letting off a scent different from the cardboard.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to continue once we’re outside.”

Maybe the darkness was giving her courage.

“When you invited me before, I told you I was turning you down because I’d already promised Fushimi... But you see, just like Fushimi is special to you, she’s special to me, too.”

My mind was spinning as I spoke, and I said each word as I thought of it. They were moving directly from my brain to my mouth.

“I’ve been making promises with Fushimi since we were little.”

“She was just copying me.”

It seemed Himeji’s grudge was bigger than I’d thought.

“That may be the case, but...”

“Knowing how sweet you are, you probably feel bad for her because she keeps failing all her auditions.”

“No.” The word came out firmer and harsher than I’d anticipated.

“...Sorry. But this curse of yours is—”

“You said something about a curse before, at the restaurant, when Mr. Matsuda treated us. What do you mean?”

It’d been so out of the blue back then that I’d simply ignored it. But I couldn’t let it go this time.

“You have this distrust, this aversion to falling in love,” she said.

An aversion to falling in love?

I felt the noise clouding my thoughts dissipate.

“...I barely remember Hina’s mom. It should be the same for you, and yet you’re afraid of her.”

“She probably scolded me or something.”

That's what I'd always thought. Was I wrong?

I figured being scolded by someone other than my mother would leave a scary impression, but I had no clear memory of such a thing happening.

"Not to harp on it, but back then, you liked me."

You wanna talk about that right here? And while dressed as a nurse?

"Yeah, I think I did."

"You liked Hina before that. Do you remember why you switched over to liking me instead?"

"Switched over...?"

She'd used a strange turn of phrase, but it was the truth. My memory wasn't clear, but when she put it like that, it felt right. Torigoe's words had reminded me of something else earlier, too.

"There was a time when I started disliking Fushimi," I said. "It was when we were in preschool."

"I think this curse of yours is related to that."

The curse has something to do with me not liking Fushimi?

"But we shouldn't be talking about this here, not to mention with me dressed like this."

I could see her fed-up expression even in the darkness.

"Hey, you're the one who brought it up."

Himeji giggled and pulled me back the way we'd come.

"Let's revisit the fork and go left this time."

Every time we came to a fork, Himeji and I pointed in different directions. Every time, we went Himeji's way, and every time, it led us in the wrong direction. We came to dead ends, looped back to the same path, and so on and so forth. We were lost in the maze for over ten minutes.

"I wasn't expecting much from a cardboard maze, but that was pretty fun," said Himeji. "For a student project, it was much more difficult than I would have

guessed.”

“You made all the wrong choices,” I retorted with a chuckle.

“Think about the closing party, okay?”

“Himeji, I told you, I...”

“Just think about it. It’s like the maze. I don’t mind if you make mistakes or take a detour.”

She wanted to tell me it was all right if I got it wrong, that I could rethink it. But she also made it sound like choosing her was the only right answer.

“I wish I could be more like you,” I said.

“You want to be a super-sexy, ultra-cute and gorgeous girl that looks good in anything?”

“Exactly. That’s the confidence I’m talking about.”

A question mark popped up over her head.

Himeji finally felt like changing out of her nurse costume, so we went back to the café. The place was full of customers being served by boys and girls in cosplay. The popular guys even had girls coming just to see them and take pictures.

Himeji came back out in her school uniform, and the class rep bowed to her.

“Thank you, Himejima.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

“This is your pay.”

The class rep gave her two complimentary tickets.

“I will make good use of them.”

It was a win-win. Himeji got to bathe in the limelight, and the class got a ton of customers.

Just as I was wondering how our class was doing, a screening ended and students poured out in droves.

“Takamori, Himeji.”

Torigoe was holding a little girl's hand. It was her sister, Kurumi. Their mother was behind them.

"We watched your short," her mother said. "It was good."

I bowed. "Thank you. And it was Shizuka who came up with the story."

"You know, she's been up to something over the past few days. She keeps holing up in her room."

"Aah! Don't say anything." Torigoe made her mom turn around and urged her and Kurumi away with a forceful "See you later." Then she turned back to us. "Himeji, are you done with work?"

"Yes, after a bit of free overtime."

Don't pretend you weren't enjoying yourself. You even plastered over their ad with flyers for our film partway through.

Fushimi happened to be watching the film, too. Back in her school uniform, she walked up to us.

"The meeting ended early, and I had nowhere else to go... Hee-hee. I also wanted to see what people thought."

She'd ended up watching it three times despite not being on shift.

That was when I remembered Deguchi saying he wanted to go to the cosplay café. I wondered if he was still interested in going.

I texted him, and he said he didn't care anymore since he'd already seen the best cosplays ever—Himeji as a nurse and Fushimi as a police officer.

"So, what are people saying?" I asked. "Are the seats still being filled?"

"We brought in more chairs, and there are still people standing at every screening," Fushimi replied. "A lot of people have stopped by. Around two hundred at least."

"Whoa."

"Wow."

Torigoe and I were both blown away, but one person had a different opinion.

“I’m in this film, too, you know,” Himeji interjected. “I was expecting a lot more.”

“I saw the two of you—Ai, Ryou. You were out on a date, right?” Fushimi narrowed her eyes and booed.

“It’s only natural I attracted a lot of attention...,” Himeji said.

“Is there any food you haven’t tried yet? Want to go as a group?” Fushimi suggested.

Torigoe and Himeji agreed, so naturally, they chose some place we hadn’t gone, without even waiting for my reply.

We went for crepes, then cotton candy, off-season shaved ice, and *taiyaki*. After going around the stalls, we took our loot to the rest area.

I took a bite of the sweet, cloudlike cotton candy.

“How’s the play going, Hiina?” asked Torigoe. “It’s tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. We rehearsed the whole thing, and it went perfectly.” Fushimi put out her hand in a victory sign.

“There are always monsters lurking onstage. Don’t let your guard down until it’s over.” Himeji stuffed her cheeks with crepe.

“Hee-hee. You don’t sound very impressive with cream on your face, Ai.”

“...!”

“Classic clumsy Himeji.” Torigoe wiped the cream away with a tissue.

“I’m not clumsy. And I was giving you advice, as your senior with more stage experience.”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’ll be on my guard,” said Fushimi.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention,” added Himeji. “Shizuka, I read it.”

“Really?”

“I read it, too,” Fushimi joined in.

I observed their chat as if from a distance, all the while thinking about what Himeji had said in the maze—that there was a link between my dislike for

Fushimi and the curse-like trauma she'd mentioned.

Come to think of it, Torigoe also told me not to force myself. Was that related, too?

5 The Curtain Rises

I woke up the next morning, ready to attend the second day of the school festival.

Checking my chat with Ms. Ashihara had become part of my morning routine.

No new messages. I sighed.

If she's filming in Hokkaido, maybe she really can't make it. I'd hoped it was an excuse, but it seems she was telling the truth.

I ate the breakfast Mana made while she did her makeup at the dining table.

"Are you coming to the school festival today?" I asked.

"Yeah, with friends." She stopped curling her eyelashes for a moment to look at the clock. "Aren't you running late?"

"As a reminder, Fushimi's play is at three PM."

"Yeah. And I've never seen a real play, so I'm super-duper hyped."

"I'll make sure to tell her."

"Nice. But wait, won't that put extra pressure on her?"

"I don't think your presence is that big of a deal." Ms. Ashihara, on the other hand, was a different story. "I'm sure it'll just make her happy."

At that point, someone rang the doorbell. I hurried to the entrance and opened the door to find Fushimi and Himeji waiting for me. Mr. Matsuda was standing behind them.

"Morning, Ryou."

"Good morning."

"Morny-morn! ☆"

I rubbed my eyes. Apparently, I hadn't hallucinated Mr. Matsuda.

“Umm, what’re you doing here?” I asked.

“What? I’m going to the school festival, duh.” He pointed behind him at the luxury sedan parked outside.

“You’re driving us to school?”

“Yes, Ry. You have thirty seconds to get ready.”

“Oh, I can leave right now.” I slipped on my shoes and tapped the toes against the concrete floor. “You just wanted to say that line, didn’t you?”

“Yep!”

“At least you’re honest...”

Fushimi and Himeji chuckled at our exchange.

“Is Ryou like this at work, too?” Fushimi asked. My childhood friends were sitting in the back of the sedan to either side of me.

“He’s pushier.”

“Pushy? Ryou?” Fushimi looked at me as though she’d just found out I was an alien.

“Could you please not give her weird ideas?” I said.

“It was just a joke, Hina. There is no way Ryou is pushy,” Himeji said.

“Thank goodness. I was worried he was misbehaving at work.”

“Do you have no faith in me?” I sighed.

Mr. Matsuda cackled.

“By the way, has Ms. Ashihara said anything?” I asked the back of his head.

He shrugged. “Nope. She gets into method acting when she’s in the middle of a shoot. She rarely responds to this sort of thing when she’s like that.”

I could sense Fushimi tense up at the mention of her mother’s name. Though she was uneasy, she probably still hoped Ms. Ashihara would come.

We chatted about nothing in particular and soon we found ourselves in front of the school.

Once we were out of the car, Mr. Matsuda said, "I'll be back by noon."

Himeji cocked her head. "Will you be looking around by yourself?"

"Of course not. You'll be my guide, right, Ai?"

"No. No way am I showing an old guy around my school."

"Oh, what's the problem? You got to flirt with Ry yesterday, right?"

"...?!"

My hair stood on end while Himeji turned beet red. A memory of the two of us in that dark maze crossed my mind.

"Flirt?" Fushimi blinked in astonishment.

"Oh my. I was just trying to trick you, and you fell for it."

"Geez! Go to work now!" Himeji shouted.

"See ya!" Mr. Matsuda waved before taking off.

"Gosh. That guy..." Himeji sighed with a mix of frustration and anger.

Mr. Matsuda had known her for a while, and he really knew how to push her buttons.

"What were you two doing yesterday before we met up?" Fushimi asked. I assumed she was just curious.

"Oh, nothing in particular," I said. "Himeji wanted to flaunt her nurse costume and sat down in that same rest area where we ended up eating. A couple of guys who looked like college students almost blew her cover."

Fushimi had this *of course* look on her face.

"...I asked him to come to the closing party with me," Himeji said.

"Huh?" Fushimi froze.

"That's all." Himeji cooled her heated cheek with her hand. Then she turned around and walked off toward the entrance.

"Right. I shouldn't be surprised," Fushimi said to herself. Smiling weakly, she started to walk off as well, though considerably more slowly. "I bet she's actually pretty lonely. Ha-ha..."

“I said no,” I called out after her.

“You don’t have to force yourself to keep our promise, okay? I’m just glad you said yes back then...”

Fushimi started speeding up, like she didn’t want to see my face.

I caught up to her and grabbed her hand—but only in my imagination. In reality, my feet were glued to the ground.

“Hina doesn’t really...”

Someone’s voice echoed in the back of my head. I was pinned down by some unknown force and couldn’t take a single step.

I felt betrayed.

She always made it seem like she liked me.

If all that was a lie, then I didn’t want to see her anymore.

“Mornin’, Takayan!” Deguchi bumped into my shoulder. “What’re you doing just standing here?”

“Uhh, I was just distracted.”

“Still drowsy?” He laughed. “Let’s go. I read all the comments on our short, and man, no one gets it! Everyone’s focused on how cute Fushimi and Himejima are, and no one seems to understand your technical, directorial, and compositional genius.”

“I didn’t realize I had a highbrow elitist so close by.”

“Heh. Please, enough with the compliments.”

That was a dig.

“I’m telling you not to be such a snob. People can’t usually tell what’s good or bad about a production beyond the actors. That doesn’t bother me at all.”

“That’s too bad.” Deguchi snorted.

When did you become such a hipster?

We changed into our indoor shoes as Deguchi told me about our classmates’ reactions.

“Everyone’s happy that so many people are watching it, and they’re loving the rave reviews.”

“Oh? I think that’s a good thing.”

“They’re all grateful to Fushimi for the suggestion and to you for working so hard on it.” He rubbed the base of his nose.

“Who rubs their nose in embarrassment these days? Are you my grandpa?”

Deguchi laughed out loud and slapped my back.

Once we all gathered for homeroom, the teacher shared news and a few warnings with us as usual.

“I heard over two hundred people came to watch the short yesterday,” Waka said. “That’s amazing. Applause.” Everyone clapped. “It seems it’s quite popular. I’m proud of you all. But don’t get too crazy just because it’s the last day.”

Once she was finished, it was time for the festival to begin again.

I had no plans for the day, so I turned to ask everyone else if they had any ideas. It was then that I noticed a tense look on Fushimi’s face.

“The rehearsal went perfect,” she mumbled. “Perfect. No issues. No issues...” Frowning, she headed out of the classroom.

“Fushimi,” I called out after her.

“Sorry. Please leave me alone for today.”

I was hoping to distract her, but it seemed I’d gotten in the way instead.

Himeji shrugged and sighed. “It’s always the hard workers that flub their lines during the show.”

“Don’t say that.”

What a Himeji-like line of thought.

“I’m kidding. And I’m looking forward to the play, just so you know.”

Oh right. I forgot to tell Fushimi how excited Mana was.

I considered sending her a text, but I was sure Mana had already done so by

now.

“Ugh.” Himeji frowned as she looked at her phone. “Mr. Matsuda’s coming back in thirty minutes.”

“That was quick.”

“Doesn’t he have work to do?”

“I’m sure he’ll say he’s always wanted to see li’l Aika’s school or something.”

“Actually...that’s exactly what he said...” Himeji dropped her shoulders. “Too bad, Ryou. It looks like I must babysit your boss.”

What does she mean, “too bad”?

“I am sure you will die of boredom without the lovely Ai keeping you company at the school festival, but there’s nothing I can do.”

I wasn’t sure whether she was joking or for real. And as for Torigoe, she had said Shinohara would be coming today, so I figured she’d be keeping her company the whole time.

“Would you like to go around with Mii, too, Takamori?” Torigoe asked.

I still wasn’t used to people calling Shinohara “Mii.” It didn’t suit her.

“No, I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your fun.”

“I see.”

“What, so you’re free, then, Takayan?” Deguchi had just arrived and caught sight of me.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll stay to watch the audience’s reactions.”

“Let’s go pick up some girls,” he said. I remembered another classmate saying the same thing the previous year. “You don’t have anything else to do, right? Let’s go!”

Deguchi grabbed my shoulder, and I froze, unsure what to say.

“Deguchi’s such a sleazebag, it’s almost charming, huh?” said Torigoe.

I know how you feel. He’s so sincere and predictable, it’s reassuring.

“Huh? Torigoe, are you saying you like—?”

“No.”

“Let me finish!”

“I doubt you’d even have the courage to talk to any girls.”

I felt the same, and I had no intention of joining him.

“You’ll eat your words when I come back with a thousand girlfriends! Right, Takayan?!”

“Don’t drag me into your harem fantasy.”

Torigoe looked like she wanted to say something as Deguchi dragged me out toward the school gates.

“Here I come, ladies...!”

He sure was fired up.

You only encouraged him, Torigoe.

Deguchi spotted a girl from another school and approached her with a “Hey!”

“Oh boy... I just hope no one calls the police on him.”

“Hey, Takaryou.” Shinohara approached me. She was wearing street clothes and had a puzzled look on her face. “What are you doing?”

“Watching over this guy as he tries to pick up girls.”

“Gosh... What a waste of time.”

“I agree.”

“No, I mean... Where’s Shii?”

“Waiting for you, I think.”

“All right. You stay here.”

Me?

Shinohara quickly disappeared into the school building.

“Yeah, so I’m in second year. The name’s Deguchi...”

He was talking to a pair of *gyaru* girls. He really was going for quantity over quality.

“Whoa! So you’re gonna treat us?”

“Huh? No, I...”

“What’s the point of going with someone older if they’re not gonna treat us?”

“Right? LMAO.”

The girls laughed and clapped. I could see Deguchi’s morale gauge dropping in real time.

“Hey, it’s Mana!” one of the girls called out.

“You’re late!”

“Sorry! I missed the train—!”

As it turned out, the *gyaru* girls were my sister’s friends.

“Hey, Bubby!”

She waved at me, and the girls who’d been talking to Deguchi followed her gaze.

“Whoa, that’s your bubby? The film guy?”

“Oh wow. He’s, like, super good at editing and stuff, right?”

They looked me up and down with great interest.

“Yup. This is my bubby.” Mana awkwardly introduced me, then asked, “Why’re you here at the gates?”

“Mana, you are not gonna believe this,” Deguchi said, “Your brother was trying to get a date with your friends without realizing who they—”

“Um, what?”

I shivered at the look on her face.

“Then they said there was no point in dating someone as old as Takayan if he wasn’t going to treat them, and he got totally bummed out.”

“That was you, prick.” I punched Deguchi’s shoulder.

“Whoa, hold on. I’m totes okay if it’s Mana’s bubby! Wanna walk around together? I’m down.”

“Yup, that sounds rad. I wanna hear about the movie!”

The middle school girls seemed raring to go, but Mana jumped in between us.

“No! No way, no way! Bubby’s no good! You don’t wanna date a guy who can’t even go to the bathroom by himself!”

“Hey, don’t make stuff up!” I cried.

That’s slander.

“So they were your sister’s friends...?” said Deguchi. “That’s pretty hot.”

“Get your head out of the gutter.” I sighed.

At the risk of starting some weird rumors, I would have to say Mana was far cuter than her two friends.

“Bubby’s off-limits, but you can go for Deguu. He’s got deep, generous pockets.” Mana pointed at Deguchi, fully ready to throw him to the wolves.

“Are you for real?”

“No cap?”

The girls’ eyes lit up, and Deguchi, ever hopeful, pointed at himself with a smirk.

“It’s true,” he said, then added in a whisper, “.....I can afford some juice, at least.”

It seemed the two girls hadn’t heard that last bit.

“Let’s go, then!”

“What about you, Mana?”

“I—I’m going with Bubby!”

“Me?”

““Incest,”” her two friends called out in unison.

Mana stuck out her tongue playfully.

“I bet they kiss at home.”

“Yeah. It’s so obvious.”

We do not! Isn't she gonna say anything?

"I'm gonna go for it, Takayan," said Deguchi. He left with Mana's friends, a determined look on his face.

You realize they only see you as an ATM, right?

"This is on another level compared to middle school, huh?" Mana said.

"Yeah. There's no shops in middle school, and all the class presentations are serious, so they're not very fun."

As Mana looked around, she suddenly realized something. "Is the Boss here?"

"Yeah, she just arrived."

"I'm gonna go with her, then."

"Oh, okay."

I was a little taken aback as she took off without me. In the end, I'd wound up all alone.

As I was heading back to the classroom, I came across Torigoe. She didn't say anything about Shinohara, so I figured they'd split up. Since I'd just been ditched by Mana, the timing was perfect, and we decided to walk around the school together.

Torigoe said she didn't have anywhere she wanted to go, so we wandered around aimlessly for a while, passing by all the classrooms without even looking inside.

"Did you read my novel?" she asked.

"Yeah, though I'm only about halfway through. Everyone's so fast, and I'm so slow. Sorry."

"No, it's fine. Tell me what you think once you're done."

"Of course."

I already knew what most classes were doing by now, so there wasn't as much to explore. Not to mention Torigoe had no interest in any of the presentations.

“I’m just so worried people will think I’m ripping off this or that story, or that I’m basing my characters off this or that person.”

Torigoe seemed chattier than usual. Maybe the festival mood was having an effect on her. I listened to her talk about her writing and nodded occasionally.

Eventually, she said she wanted to try the curry she’d missed out on the day before, and I followed her.

There were a lot more people sitting in the rest area today. We looked for a place to sit down and eventually found our way to the stairs of the empty special classrooms building.

I loaded up a cheap plastic spoon with the brass band club’s curry.

“Is Hiina okay?” asked Torigoe. “She looked so nervous.”

“Himeji said it’s always people like her who flub their lines.”

Himeji had a lot of experience performing live, and she probably knew all about such things. In fact, it sounded so convincing, I was starting to really worry.

“Why’s she always saying stuff like that?” Torigoe sighed.

“I guess it’s just her personality. And she really wants to set herself up as Fushimi’s senior, so she tends to come off as haughty and harsh.”

As childhood friends, Fushimi and Himeji had always had a special relationship. And now Himeji was an entertainer, and Fushimi was striving to become one. It must be hard not to bring that into every conversation.

“The drama club’s plays are really popular,” Torigoe said. “I heard they filled the gym last year.”

That would mean they’d had an audience of over five hundred.

“You heard?”

“Yeah, I didn’t go myself.”

“Same.”

Our eyes met, and we laughed.

Out the window, I could see people carrying folding chairs into the gym. Our empty curry plates were already stacked on top of each other at our feet as we talked about the school festival, our short film's reception, and Torigoe's writing again. The time flew by.

"One hour left, huh?" Even I was getting nervous.

"Hey, about the closing party..."

I opened my mouth, but she interrupted me.

"Wait. Don't say anything. If....." She opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. She repeated this a few times and played with her hair before she finally looked back up at me. "If you...if you were to think...you could g-go with m-me...I'll be waiting...in the physics room. That's all."

Torigoe looked away. Her hair hid her face from the side. Her breathing was heavy, as though she had used up all her mental energy.

"All right."



The mention of the physics room reminded me of the first time we'd met during lunch break.

"The first time I saw you, I was surprised that someone had the same idea as me," I said.

"...You mean hiding out in the physics room during lunch?"

"Yeah. We were in different classes back then, but we were the same—loners who couldn't stand being in the classroom. It made me happy."

"Yeah, I felt the same. I was surprised that you didn't have anyone to spend lunchtime with despite how outgoing you seemed."

That gave us a sense of solidarity—of camaraderie. It didn't take long for us to begin talking.

"I think you really changed me, little by little," she said. "I used to hate lunch, but then I started to look forward to it. And when you didn't show up now and then, I realized I had no way to contact you."

"Yeah, I used to skip school sometimes."

"I was surprised to learn how much of a delinquent you were. Anyway, having you there during that time with me really gave me solace. You didn't pry or anything. It was like you knew exactly what topics to avoid—you gave me space while still not leaving me alone. That perfect amount of sympathy, the mood we had going, I came to really appreciate it, if only subconsciously..." Torigoe grabbed a piece of trash from the floor. "What am I even saying? There's still time, but let's go."

She stood up and brushed the dust from her skirt.

"I'll throw away the trash." I reached out my hand to take it, but Torigoe kept walking and didn't turn around.

"Hey. If I had told you I liked you back then, would you have liked me back?"

"...Yeah, probably."

I'd always felt like the time Torigoe and I spent silently together in the physics room had more depth and substance than my classmates' superficial chats back

in the classroom.

Torigoe kept her eyes on the ground the whole time, so I couldn't see her face. At some point, I noticed she had stopped moving and was staring at a single spot on the ground.

"Wait, is that...?" she mumbled. Then, suddenly, she took off. She briefly turned back and yelled, "You go ahead, Takamori. I'm going to the restroom."

I nodded and headed to the gym.

The gym was already dark. Blackout curtains had been put up to block the sunlight.

"It's even more crowded than last year."

"Yeah, because Fushimi's in it."

"So I've been hearing."

I sat on a folding chair and listened to the people around me chat. Fushimi really was the most popular girl in school—even more than Himeji.

"What're you doing sitting all alone, playboy?"

I heard a familiar voice as someone tapped my shoulder from behind. It was Mr. Matsuda, dressed stylishly and wearing a pair of fake glasses. *Who's the real playboy here?*

"Are you alone?" I asked. "Where's Himeji?"

"Aika? She disappeared after showing me around the school. By the way, I liked the movie. I'd already watched it, but seeing it in that homemade theater gave it even more of an indie vibe."

"Really? I'm so glad!"

"And no matter how many times I see it, I can always get a laugh out of Aika's awful performance."

"Don't say that to her face or she'll get bummed out for real."

"...So that's why she vanished."

Too late, huh?

“Oh, there she is. I’ll go get her,” he said, getting up.

I looked around for Torigoe. If she was just going to the bathroom, she shouldn’t be too long...

I scanned the seats that were quickly filling up, then turned toward the entrance, then back to the seats. As I continued this process, I caught a glimpse of someone familiar.

“Is that...?”

Ms. Ashihara...? Am I seeing things? ...No, it really is her.

She was just sitting there. I would have thought she’d disguise herself and put on sunglasses or something, but she hadn’t.

She was good at going unnoticed, though. She was blending in with the background, and it seemed like no one else had realized it was her.

She didn’t look as young as she had the last time I saw her. She didn’t look old, either—she just looked like a pretty, mature woman.

There was another woman beside her, maybe her manager. They were talking between themselves, serious looks on their faces.

Just then, our eyes met. I gave her a quick bow, and she responded in kind.

I felt the need to tell Fushimi, but I didn’t want to put any extra pressure on her. Or would knowing her mother was here encourage her?

“Thank goodness.” I sighed and leaned back in my chair.

When I did, I felt something strange in my pocket. I stuck my hand in and took out a folded piece of paper.

What’s this?

I opened it with care. It was a note in Himeji’s handwriting.

I’ll be waiting for you in the middle of the sports ground for the closing party.

When did this get in here? Was it Mr. Matsuda?

The meeting spot was convenient—the sports ground was where the closing party would take place. It didn’t matter where in the vast sports field you

danced, however. The tradition was to dance with whomever you liked, wherever you liked.



The idea was that couples would go to the corners of the field to flirt, but Himeji was new to the school—did she not know? Or had she chosen her location despite that?

She'd picked the middle of the field—the most conspicuous spot. It was very like her, somehow.

I could picture her saying, *"I get paid to sing and dance. Obviously, I ought to have the best spot."*

Being with Himeji was always fun.

I never felt bored when I was with her. I thought back to the time when we borrowed the camera over summer break and hung out, and then to yesterday, when we walked around the school festival together. We always had fun.

That had been true ever since we were children.

Even back then, she was always full of self-confidence. She did what she wanted and said what she thought, always pulling me forward. "Let's go there," "Let's do this," "That will be fun." There was never a dull moment.

I'd liked her back then. I was too young for romantic love, and thinking back on it now, maybe my feelings had always been a little different. But I *had* liked her.

She transferred schools and became an idol, then quit and came back stronger than ever.

In some ways she hadn't changed, and in others, we both had. We'd grown up a lot since we'd last seen each other.

I didn't want to give her a bigger head than she already had, but I really respected her work ethic. She was always straightforward and confident in herself. Sometimes she could be overbearing, but I still found her really impressive.

I folded the paper and put it back in my pocket.

I looked around for Torigoe, but she was still nowhere to be found. The seats were filling up, and a first-year girl had already taken the one I'd intended to save for Torigoe. I decided to tell her where I was via text.

I was about ten rows from the front, close to the middle. I thought it was a good spot, but it seemed Himeji and Mr. Matsuda had chosen seats elsewhere.

The lights gradually dimmed.

“The drama club’s play, ‘Diary,’ will begin shortly. Please silence or turn off your cell phones and be respectful of the viewers around you.”

The spotlights from the catwalk shone on the closed curtains.

According to the synopsis in the festival guide, the protagonist was a girl who had died and was visiting her beloved as a ghost.

Fushimi was playing the boy’s current girlfriend—one step below a starring role.

The buzzer rang, and the curtains slowly rose as everyone in the audience lowered their voices.

◆ Hina Fushimi ◆

The uniform the drama club had ordered online smelled brand-new. It was a sailor uniform, but different from the one I usually wore. The ribbon at the chest was white.

Apparently, the club president—who was serving as the play’s producer—was the one to pick it out. But once it arrived and we opened it up, everyone seemed to think it was really cute, so I didn’t object. To be honest, I didn’t quite get it; I thought our real uniform was plenty cute, so I didn’t understand why we needed something different. But the president said it was better to use something the audience wasn’t already familiar with.

At the sound of the buzzer, the curtains lifted.

The scene began with Yumi, a third-year girl, starting to date Keigo.

“Please go out with me!” Keigo said.

“You really like me?” Yumi asked.

“I do!”

I watched from the wings. There was still some time before I was supposed to go on. I was playing Riina, the girl who stole the ghost girl's boyfriend. I didn't like her when I first read the screenplay, but then I came to realize she wasn't a bad girl, and I started empathizing with her.

The club president, who was also playing a background role, turned to me and whispered, "How many times have you been in a play before?"

"Umm, three," I said, inflating the count. This was only my second time.

"Then I guess you're not that nervous."

I shook my head and chuckled. "I am."

It was true I'd done this once before. But unlike with movies, you didn't get to shoot any retakes if you messed up. The first time around, I'd been full of reckless enthusiasm, but this time, my anxieties were different.

I'd been brought in as a helper for this production. The club itself was small—one person on sound, two people on lights, and six actors. I couldn't mess this up for them. I had to put on an act I could be proud of on the first try.

I'd only get one shot at this.

And though Ryou hadn't given me any updates, my mom could be here watching. I couldn't embarrass myself.

The story moved on as the protagonist died in an accident and turned into a ghost. The lights switched from general illumination to a single beam. As the spotlight focused on Yumi alone, the last line of the prologue echoed through the gym: "Can no one see me?!"

The opening scene I'd watched so many times seemed to end in a flash. The stage went dark, and the desks and chairs for the next scene were hurriedly set in place. I slapped my cheeks.

While it was still dark, I sat down in a chair in the middle of the stage. The boy playing Keigo sat beside me, and we both faced the audience.

I counted to five after sitting down, just as we had rehearsed.

The sharp sound of a switch flipping echoed in my ears, and the stage lit up again.

“When are you gonna cheer up, Keigo?” Riina—the kind of girl other women tended to hate—looked at Keigo as she rested her chin on her hand. “It’s been six months. I know you’re sad, but c’mon.”

Ryou’s camerawork could pick up all my facial expressions, but I couldn’t rely on that now. My acting onstage had to be big, easy to read.

Delivering a line that was primarily expository, I stood up and circled the chairs, glancing at Keigo seductively.

What a nasty girl, I thought again while keeping the act up.

“Let’s go hang out. Moping around won’t solve anything, right?”

Riina dragged Keigo out, unaware that Yumi’s ghost was watching them. Little by little, she helped Keigo cheer up. All the while, the stagehands quickly swapped out props.

Yumi described her feelings in between the others’ lines. She was jealous of Riina, relieved to see Keigo feeling better, and sad that she couldn’t speak to him anymore. But slowly, she began to give up.

“I...like you, y’know?”

My confession had started out as just words, but as I rehearsed, I started putting more feeling into it. It started when I decided to put myself in her shoes.

I could see Ryou in the audience. *Why do I have to notice you now, of all times...?*

The timing was weird...and I started to feel awkward. *I’m just acting, remember? Just acting.* Where was everyone else, though?

Keigo hesitated and delayed giving her an answer, then headed home. That was when Yumi noticed he’d dropped his handkerchief. Through the power of love, she gained the ability to hold small objects, and she started writing notes.

My character was pushed aside for a moment while Keigo and the ghost interacted.

I started worrying again about the story’s resemblance to a certain movie; did the president realize? Ai would’ve said something about it, I’m sure, but I was just a helper and decided not to point it out.

Yumi held back her feelings and hid her identity, instead supporting Riina.

“Why are you hesitating? Riina’s a good girl. Go out with her.”

I couldn’t be like her—even if I knew he couldn’t hear me, I could never be that selfless, faced with the person I loved.

I was a bad girl. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was always scheming. I wanted people to think I was cute, and even if the boy I loved was in love with someone else, I would do my best to change his mind.

I took a sip of the water one of the helpers had handed me before my turn came, and I returned to the stage.

In this scene, I—Riina—was supposed to find out about the ghost and realize it was Yumi.

“Is that you, Yumi?”

This was my character’s most important scene.

“Keigo’s alive, you realize?!” I exclaimed. “But because you keep showing up, he...”

Yumi spoke her lines, even though in the story she communicated via writing. I wanted to take another look at Ryou. I glanced his way while maintaining my focus.

And that was when it happened—it was like there was a spotlight shining on one corner of the audience.

I saw a woman I recognized. I’d seen her on TV, in movies, in my reflection in the mirror.

Mom.

“I didn’t become a ghost by choice! And I still love him! I can’t just forget about him!”

My attention was pulled back to the stage. I could tell the audience was on the edge of their seats, spurred on by the other girl’s impressive performance.

The next line was mine.

...

“.....”

Huh?

What was it? Wh-what was my line?

My mind went blank. What did the screenplay say? I couldn't remember. I could picture the page, but there was a blank space where my line should have been. It was like it'd been erased.

It was gone from my mind.

I felt like I'd been frozen there for hours. Silence filled the stage and the gym, crushing me. The quiet hurt my ears and made it hard to breathe.

Yumi's actor noticed something was wrong and mouthed the line, but she was too far away. People backstage were panicking. They rushed to make a sign.

My eyes wavered and stopped on Ryou. I looked at him pleadingly. He seemed worried, but the moment our eyes met, he smiled and nodded. It was the same expression he'd given me multiple times when shooting the short.

Right, the line... I'd imagined myself in Riina's shoes—poured my feelings into this role.

I managed to grab hold of the line before it could sink any farther out of sight.

I'd wanted Mom to see my acting, too. But in the end...

The one I most wanted to see what I was capable of—was Ryou.

Of course. How could I forget such a simple line?

The words were clear and crisp in my mind, and I became Riina once again. Her lines—my words. I became myself.

As the audience began murmuring, I finally got out the line.

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“I’m not gonna lose!”

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

It felt like the whole gym sighed in relief. The actors and those backstage probably felt the same as the audience.

For about five to ten seconds, the stage seemed frozen in time. I wondered whose line was next, and it turned out to be Fushimi’s. Was this part of the performance?

“I’m not gonna lose!” Fushimi—or rather Riina—shouted, moving her body dramatically.

I’d felt like my gaze had met hers a few times already, and this time I was sure: She was looking at me.

“Because I love him!!”

Fushimi’s voice echoed across the gym.

She stared at a single point, a desolate look on her face, as if she was about to cry.

“Even when he’s with someone else and I’m feeling jealous, I can’t help watching him from the corner of my eye! And when we’re apart, I’m always wondering where he is and what he’s doing!”

I knew she was just acting, but I felt my heart skip a beat.

Maybe every boy in the audience felt the same.

Fushimi was the most popular girl in school—it was said that every boy had imagined himself as her boyfriend at least once. I wasn’t going to consider myself special just because I was her childhood friend.

“I won’t let you say that’s just friendship! I won’t let you say it’s just attachment! I know my feelings are special and I’m in love!”

...No.

Fushimi always showed me a different side of her. It couldn’t be the same

with everyone else. Just like she said she could tell when I was lying, I could do the same with her.

With me, Fushimi always made it clear how she felt.

I kept moving away from her for some reason—memories of the past or whatever—but she never let that deter her. In fact, she was still trying her best to...

As I thought over the past few months, regret filled my chest.

The play went on, and the two girls parted as rivals. Yumi and Keigo kept up their communication, and, once her lingering regrets were satisfied, Yumi was able to move on. The story came to a close as Yumi was reborn and once again met Keigo, now her boss at work.

The audience exploded in applause. I, too, clapped for everything I was worth. The story's ending felt right—it made me want to talk about it with other people.

I wondered how Ms. Ashihara felt and noticed her seat was empty.

She's gone...?

Her manager wasn't there, either. Had they already left?

I stood up and pushed my way through the crowds and out of the gym.

She couldn't have gotten far. I ran all the way to the school gates, but I didn't see her.

Maybe she's in the parking lot?

I turned around and ran as fast as I could.

In the lot, I saw a woman about to get into a taxi. Another woman was already inside. It was her. She must've kept the taxi from the airport waiting for her.

"Ms. Ashihara!" I shouted, my breath ragged.

The manager furrowed her brow in suspicion and hurried into the taxi.

The door closed, and then the back window lowered on the other side of the car.

“Fushimi...did her best for you... Won’t you please say something to her?”

“It wasn’t me, Ryou.”

“Excuse me?”

“She didn’t work hard for me...”

Ms. Ashihara turned to speak to her manager before opening the door and getting out.

She had an awkward look on her face—an odd expression for an actress—as she focused her gaze behind me.

I turned around and saw Fushimi, still in costume.

“Mom.”

“I noticed you forgot your line.”

“Yeah. But I remembered it, a-and rehearsal was perfect!”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it that way..... I’ve been there before. I know how it feels.”

Her chuckle resembled Fushimi’s.

“You do?”

“Hina, you’re terrible. And if that’s the level you’re at even after taking lessons, I think you’d be better off quitting.”

I didn’t think Fushimi was that bad. She’d been the best actor in the play, that much was for sure. Maybe Ms. Ashihara was just being strict, as her mother.

“I’ll get better, don’t worry.”

“You should cherish what you have now. Don’t try to reach for the stars. There’s no guarantee that what you hold dear will wait for you forever.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom.”

“Is that so...? Well, don’t overexert yourself. Enjoy the present.”

“Yeah.”

“And take care of your health.”

“Yeah...”

I saw tears forming in Fushimi's eyes.

You'll get to see her again. Don't cry.

Then the topic changed to me.

"And I see you're just as chummy with Ryou as always."

"Yeah."

"You always have been, ever since you were little..." Ms. Ashihara looked away, hesitating for a moment. Then she lowered her head briefly before raising it again and looking straight at me. "I ran into one of Hina's friends before the play. A black-haired girl with pigtails."

Torigoe?

She must have met with Ms. Ashihara after she told me to go on without her.

What did they talk about?

"She said it was my fault that you became afraid to love. If that's the case—if I hurt you like that, then allow me to apologize."

I frowned in confusion.

"You don't remember?" she said. "I lied to you and said that Hina didn't really like you."

As she said that, the memory suddenly became clear in my mind.

Fushimi and I had been playing together, and Ms. Ashihara had glared at me like I was her nemesis and said, *"Hina doesn't really like you."*

Fushimi didn't say anything. Did she know? Maybe that was why I'd always been frightened by her mother.

"...It was a lie. I'm really sorry if that made you distrustful of women."

So that was why I'd stopped wanting to spend time with Fushimi. Because of what Ms. Ashihara said to me, I began to think Fushimi didn't really feel the way she said she did.

But if that was true, then Fushimi had always...

"Ever since she was little, Hina has always been head over heels for you."

“Aaaah! M-Mom! D-don’t say that!”

Fushimi frowned, her cheeks flushing.

The woman inside the taxi called to Ms. Ashihara, and she nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to go.”

“Mom! What did you think of the play?”

“The script was cliché, and your acting wasn’t good enough for someone taking lessons.”

“Aww... R-really?” Fushimi looked disappointed.

“But your acting improved after you forgot your line. I wonder who you were thinking of when you said all that.”

The redness in Fushimi’s cheeks spread across her face.

“See you.” Ms. Ashihara giggled and got into the taxi. Then the driver put on the left turn signal and headed out of the parking lot.

6 The Closing Party

The school looked a bit drab after the decorations, signs, and flyers were taken down, and the hallways and classrooms went back to their usual configurations.

Once we finished cleaning up, all the students gathered for the executive committee to declare the school festival officially over.

“The closing party will take place on the sports ground. Everyone is welcome to come and dance.”

It was the same announcement as last year.

Torigoe, Himeji, and Fushimi didn’t say anything to me after we finished cleaning.

“Who should I choose?” Deguchi scrutinized the girls around us.

“Isn’t going to the dance basically announcing you’re a couple?”

“Pretty much,” he replied.

I had never heard Deguchi talk about liking anyone in particular.

“All right, I’ve made up my mind,” he said. “Torigoe...”

“Sure... Wait! You like her, Deguchi?”

I did a double take.

“Well, I don’t dislike her. And if she says yes, then that means she likes me! Nothing to lose!”

You haven’t thought this through at all.

I should have been exasperated with him, but somehow, Deguchi managed to make this sort of behavior seem charming.

“T-Torigoeeee!” Deguchi ran up to her on sight.

She happened to be with Fushimi and Himeji when he came up. Torigoe said something to him without batting an eye. It took ten seconds in total, and Deguchi staggered out of the gym, his shoulders slumped.

He wasn't the only one, either. Fallen soldiers lay scattered all around us, hugging their knees.

There were still fifteen minutes left before the dance began. I could see the sports ground from the gym. The executive committee was testing the audio system.

I left the gym and headed back to the empty classroom. Everyone who wasn't taking part in the dance had already left. I could tell from their missing schoolbags.

Himeji's and Torigoe's were still there, but I couldn't find Fushimi's.

Then I remembered that Fushimi had never set up a meeting spot.

I tried calling her, but she didn't answer. The classroom clock said there were five minutes left. At that point, something occurred to me.

If her bag wasn't in the classroom...

Then maybe...

I ran down the hall, threw off my indoor shoes, crammed on my sneakers, and hurried outside.

I looked for her among the students heading home, but I didn't see her.

Maybe it was my fault for not setting a meeting place. I'd just assumed she would.

I tried to catch my breath while calling her again, but she wouldn't answer.

I ran to the station. People gave me weird looks, but I didn't care.

Did she go home?

"Sorry, but have you seen Fushimi?" I asked a passing classmate, but they shook their head.

I hurried back to the school—the closing party was already starting.

Is she with someone else?

I felt my chest burn at the thought. I quickly checked the sports ground, but she wasn't there.

"Are you looking for Hina?" Himeji's eyes met mine as I looked around.

"Have you seen her? I can't find her."

"You didn't pick a place to meet?" She sighed. "You two are such pains in the neck."

"Himeji."

Himeji's calm expression tensed up when I said her name.

"...Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

"...I know." She smiled, though the tension never left her face. "I'll try calling her. I'll tell you if I learn anything."

"Thank you," I said, then ran off to continue my search.

Was she waiting for me somewhere? If she was still at school, why wouldn't she pick up the phone?

I heard a window open overhead.

"Takamori!"

It was Torigoe. She must have seen me wandering around.

"Hiina's over there!" She pointed at the back gate. "I think she's gonna go home! She had her bag, and I called out to her, but she ignored me!"

Students could leave from the back gate, too. But we always went home from the front gate. It would be quite a detour for her.

So why?

"I think she's running away because she's scared you might not choose her!"

Running away...? Maybe that was it.

I was about to take off, but then I stopped.

“Torigoe!”

“J-just go! Don’t say anything! Ugh... You’re such an idiot! Die already! In the end, all you care about is looks!”

After this unusual outburst, she disappeared from the window.

I headed out the back gate and ran the long way to the station.

At last, I found her. She was sitting down, leaning against a telephone pole.

“...Answer the phone,” I said, out of breath.

Fushimi was staring at her toes, her head down.

“Is the closing party over?” she asked.

“It just began.”

“I see. You’re not going with Shii?”

“No.”

Torigoe was a special friend.

She had supported me back when I was all alone. Lunchtime with her used to be the only time I felt like I could breathe.

I didn’t have to pretend with her. I didn’t have to put on airs. I didn’t have to laugh at others, and no one laughed at me. I could just be myself. Just as she’d said, in another life, if she’d asked me out back in those days, I might have said yes right then and there.

I still didn’t understand love, but she was special enough to make me want to give it a try. The reason I hadn’t, even after she *did* confess to me, was...

“You’re not going with Ai?”

“No.”

I got tired of her roundabout questioning.

“I’m here for you,” I said.

Fushimi slowly looked up, her expression uncertain.

“And not because I felt pressured to keep our promise,” I said, before she

could bring it up.

Himeji was my special childhood friend.

She was assertive, for better or worse; she got things done, and she had a strong core. She was such an amazing person that I found it strange she'd want to be friends with someone like me.



I began to like her when I was a kid, after Ms. Ashihara made me distrustful of Fushimi.

Even after she moved away, became a professional idol, and met tons of other people in the entertainment industry, she never forgot me.

If she hadn't moved away, maybe I wouldn't have made those promises with Fushimi, and maybe Himeji and I would've maintained our childhood feelings as we moved through middle and high school.

I could hear a mellow dance song drifting on the wind. We weren't that far from the school.

I reached out to Fushimi.

"..."

She didn't say anything as she glanced between my face and my outstretched hand.

To me, Fushimi was special.

If I hadn't cared about her, Ms. Ashihara's words would have had no effect on me. I wouldn't have been traumatized, and I wouldn't have started avoiding romance.

Those words got to me because I really, truly liked her.

Even after I was lied to, after I started to distrust her, throughout elementary, middle, and high school...we were still together.

The feelings were in my heart; I'd simply been unable to face them.

I kept telling myself she didn't really feel that way—that it was all a misunderstanding on my part, that she was the same way with everyone else and I was just part of the crowd. I saw everything about Fushimi through a negative, distrustful lens.

Trauma warped my feelings, and they came out as words and actions designed to keep me safe and prevent me from getting hurt.

Why did I become so twisted?

Why did I become so scared?

And why, despite all that, had our relationship kept going?

There was only one answer.

“We should’ve set a meeting place yesterday or earlier today,” I said. “I didn’t think about it.”

Fushimi looked straight at me and pursed her lips, as though trying to keep something inside.

“...I think I’ve hurt you a lot,” I said. “I’m sure there have been times when you hated me.”

The sun had already set; the streetlights lit up, shining a spotlight on us in the darkness.

“But if you can forgive me, I want you to dance with me.”

“Yes, with pleasure...” She finally opened her mouth, but her voice was shaking. She held my hand, and I helped her up. “But we can’t dance here, can we?”

“You’re right. Let’s go back to school.”

She hugged me. In her feather-soft body, and in the arms she looped around my back, I felt a clear expression of her will.

Now I could trust her feelings. I could fall in love.

I hugged her back.

“Is this what dancing is like?” I asked.

“Hee-hee. No, but I think this is a good alternative.”

Fushimi giggled into my chest.

I felt affection for the girl before me well up in my heart.

I love you, Fushimi.

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Afterword

Hello. Kennoji here.

This series has reached its seventh volume, and it's time for the school festival.

They're finally going to release the short film they've been working on for so long. It was way back in Volume 2 that they decided to make it, wasn't it?

It feels so long ago now. Back then, they went to a barbecue and discovered Fushimi was taking acting lessons, and Ryou was still looking for something to do.

The second volume was published in August 2020, but I remember writing it during the fall of 2019. It was still just a web series then—I finished writing it way before the series was picked up for publication. It's been three years. No wonder it feels like so much time has passed.

Changing subjects, I'm publishing a new romcom through Sneaker Bunko. It's called *My School Romcom After I Found Out I Could Peek at Her Stats*.

The plot is just what it sounds like. Unlike this series, it's a straightforward romcom where the protagonist is already aware of the girl he likes, with the twist that he can see her stats. But in truth, it's not as straightforward as it sounds. Imagine a pitch in baseball that cuts to the side at the last moment. I won't let you down, so if that catches your interest, please do give it a try.

Fly does a fantastic job every time, but I feel like the cover and insert illustrations for this volume are even better than usual. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule.

I also want to thank my editors and everyone involved in the production and sale of this book for their great work, as always.

If this story is like a ribbon we've been trying and failing to tie since Volume 2, the time has finally come to get it right.

I hope you'll see this story through to the end.

Hina and Ryou
finally meet eye
to eye and begin
a new journey
as a couple...

...as this
sweet love
story about
childhood
friends comes
to a close.

*The Girl I Saved on the
Train Turned Out to Be
My Childhood Friend 8*

Scheduled for release
Winter 2025!!



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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend, Vol. 7

Kennoji

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CHIKAN SARESOU NI NATTEIRU S-KYU BISHOUJO WO TASUKETARA TONARI NO SEKI NO OSANANAJIMI DATTA volume 7

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