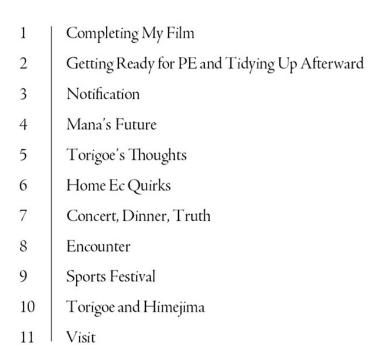


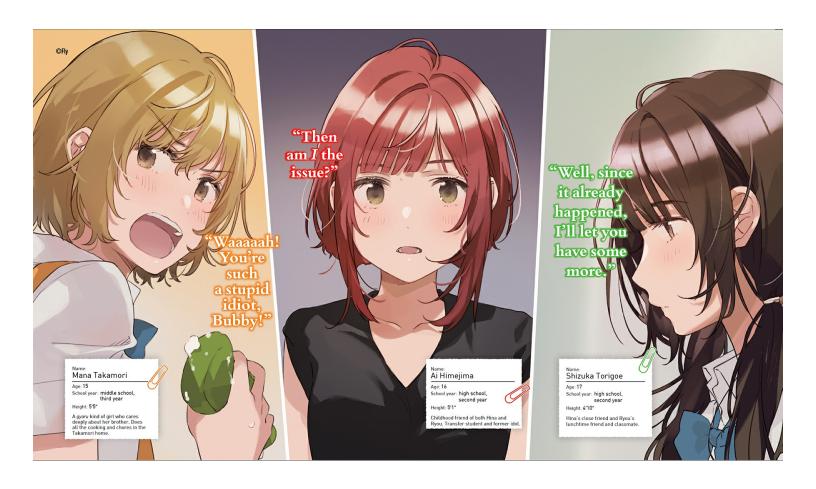
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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend



Kennoji Illustration by Fly



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1 Completing My Film

The Fushimi on the screen wore a melancholy expression.

I rewound the video ten seconds back to check the flow up to that point.

It was the last day of summer vacation. I was planning to submit this film to a competition, and I only had a few hours before the deadline.

"Maybe it was better the way it was before...," I muttered to the screen, then rechecked the video prior to my last edit.

...I've seen this so many times now, I have no idea what's best.

Fortunately, I could simply upload the video for submission—that gave me time to make these last-minute adjustments before the date changed.

"No making your film before you finish your homework."

Under this brutal constraint from Fushimi, I'd finally wrapped up my assignments three days ago.

When was the last time I'd finished my summer homework early? It couldn't have been any later than fifth grade. That alone was quite an achievement.

It was all thanks to Fushimi's nagging...er, I mean, her constant support. Though she was also the reason I was having to work on my film up until the last second.

"One more time, from the top."

The video itself was only eighteen minutes long, so it wasn't a big deal to review the whole thing. Unfortunately, watching it so many times had made me completely unable to tell which version was superior.

"Bubby? Bath's ready."

With a thud, my sister Mana entered my room. She was using a towel to dry her hair.

"How many times have I told you to knock first?"

"Not like you're ever doing anything."

I sighed.

But what if I was?

Her middle school was starting classes tomorrow, too, and she had redyed her blond hair. She was currently wearing a tank top and some embarrassingly short shorts.

"Another movie for the school festival?" she asked.

"No, this one I did for myself."

She widened her eyes.

"A movie for yourself?"

Right, I never told her.

"There's this film competition. The deadline is tonight at eleven fifty-nine PM, and I'm trying to get it ready for submission."

"Whoa!" She peered into the display. "Hey, that's Hina."

"Yup. She's the main character."

Since I'd had no time and no one else to ask, Torigoe and I appeared a few times as side characters.

I hadn't been planning on showing it to Mana right now, but it was already playing.

"Thank goodness she's not in her plain clothes," my sister said.

"Yeah, she's in uniform the whole time."

"Very wise, young man."

"I know."

Mana giggled.

My childhood friend was the most popular girl in school, yet for whatever reason, her fashion sense was nonexistent. When shooting films for myself, I

had her wear her uniform as often as possible.

"I wanna watch it from the beginning," said my sister.

I glanced at the clock in the bottom right corner of the screen; it was just past ten. I still had some time, and maybe taking a bath would serve as a good change of pace.

"You may find it boring," I warned. Nevertheless, I wanted someone else's thoughts, so I decided to restart it and let her watch.

"Oh, please. No need to go on the defensive."

Mana slapped my shoulder, and I let her take my seat.

I was curious to see her reaction live, but I had to take that break.

I grabbed a change of clothes and my phone. When I got downstairs, I saw I had a text from Torigoe.

Will you make it?

Probably, I quickly replied.

Torigoe had written the screenplay for the school festival film, and partly for that reason, I'd spent a lot of time talking over the contents of my own film with her.

She'd come with me to shoot despite the blazing heat and had even agreed to play background characters—she had been a lot of help.

You made the right choice getting Hiina for the main role, she said.

At first, I wanted Torigoe to be the star. In my opinion, the character's vibes were closer to hers than to Fushimi's. I ended up asking her a few times before she finally refused outright. But Fushimi's acting turned out to have its own charm. She adjusted herself to fit my image.

Looking at her through the lens, I realized once again how good an actress she was. I had given her the screenplay beforehand, so she had some time to prepare, but the final product left me and Torigoe speechless.

Was acting talent something you could inherit? I'd only recently learned that her mother was also an actress. Maybe that was why it was her dream to become one, too.

I couldn't remember it, but my mom said she and Fushimi's mother were mom friends, so I had definitely met her at some point when I was very young.

I took only a quick shower and skipped soaking in the tub, then hurried back to my room. Mana was staring at the screen, her chin propped up on her hand.

When the film ended, she turned to look at me.

"What did you think?" I asked.

"I dunno."

I dunno, huh.

I hadn't been aiming for a wide-ranging appeal like a Hollywood movie, so her reaction was probably to be expected.

"But I get the vibes," she said at last.

"And?" I prompted her for more.

Mana raised one eyebrow and pondered.

"Erm, I'm not sure how to put it, but even though there were very few lines, I felt like I could tell what Hina was thinking, or something."

Honestly, that...

"Thank you."

...was really nice to hear.

I patted her head; her hair was still damp.

"Eep?! What're you doing, Bubby?!" Mana swung her feet and giggled. "Hina's so different from how she looks in the school festival film. I was like, whuh?"

Yeah, that one was more grounded and orthodox.

"It's like she pulls me into the movie," she continued. "She's amazing."

That was the best praise a creator could receive.

I chose to submit what I'd shown Mana. I'd done everything I could do; I

might as well try, even if I was sure I'd lose.

I took my chair back from Mana, then I opened the film company's website, filled out the form, and attached my video. When I hesitated for a moment on the submit screen, Mana roared out a battle cry and clicked it for me.

"Ahl"

"Hee-hee. No point in reconsidering now, right?"

I guess she's right about that.

The screen refreshed, and a message displayed, reading, Submission complete.

"You start classes tomorrow, too, don't you?" Mana said. "Go to sleep already."

Right again.

Like her, I also had to go back to school the next day.

"Sure, sure." I shooed Mana away.

"If you don't get up, I'll wake you with a kiss!"

"Why on earth ...?"

"I thought you'd love that, since I know you adore your cute little sister."

"No way. The only one obsessed with her sibling in this house is you, gyaru girl."

"I'm not obsessed!"

She stuck her tongue out and said "G-N!" before leaving my room.

I could only assume that was short for good night.

Before turning off the lights, I lay down on my bed and messaged Torigoe that I'd submitted my entry.

It was the morning of the first day of classes.

"I'm pooped." Himeji sighed from the next seat over.

This was Ai Himejima—Fushimi's and my childhood friend. She used to be an

idol until a little while ago. Now she was working as a performer.

I cast her a sidelong glance and muttered, "Uh-huh."

Just thinking about the tests that would start the following day had tired me out, too.

"Excuse me." Himeji looked at me and narrowed her eyes. "Shouldn't you be asking why?" She sighed again.

"Ai, don't bother. He's a lost cause," Fushimi cut in from the seat on my opposite side.

Am I getting dissed right now? At any rate, it seemed Himeji wanted me to ask why she was tired. Just go ahead and talk if you wanna talk.

"So what happened?" I asked.

Himeji cleared her throat dramatically. "My play will be opening in December."

I'd been hearing mention of this play for some time now. So they'd finally decided on a date.

Himeji glanced at Fushimi, gauging her reaction.

"Ggghhh..." Fushimi bared her fangs like an angry puppy.

Fushimi had failed the auditions for the play at the last stage, so she didn't like hearing about it.

"Stop provoking her, Himeji," I said.

"I'm not provoking anybody. I'm only sharing some news."

So don't give me the news in front of Fushimi, all right?

Fushimi wasn't much better—she had zero resistance to provocations; she'd lash out in envy at the tiniest thing. And then anytime Fushimi tried to assert dominance, Himeji had to slap her with a comeback.

Summer break had done nothing to fix their habit of fighting over everything.

"As I was saying," Himeji began again, "I'm pooped because rehearsal has been so intense lately."



Rehearsals for the play had begun during the break. It seemed like quite a lot of preparation time for a play set to open in December.

"It's the same for everyone in every club," Fushimi said quickly. Her voice was cold.

It was rare to see her make that expression at school. Her attitude was probably due to the two of them being childhood friends.

"You've got it so good, Hina... Now that you're done with filming for the school festival, you get to laze around every day. I wish I had time to relax." Himeji shook her head despairingly, but this was all just an act meant to further provoke Fushimi.

"Just quit, then."

"It is my job, and I refuse to give up."

"Well, okay." Fushimi turned away sulkily, her cheeks all puffed out.

"Himeji, please," I said. "Quit it, already."

I knew she was just trying to get back at the other girl.

It had all begun when Fushimi, who was more experienced, helped Himeji with her acting during filming for the school festival. Fushimi had been arrogant and rude, and Himeji still held a grudge over it.

"As usual, you always choose her over me." Himeji pouted and pulled her desk away from mine.

"That's not—" Just as I was trying to defend myself, Torigoe came over, weaving her way through the new gap.

"Hey, there. Arguing first thing in the morning, huh?" she said, looking fed up.

"Yo," I said, returning the greeting, then motioned for her to sit in an empty seat whose owner had yet to arrive. "I've done nothing, by the way. It's all between Fushimi and Himeji."

"That's your problem—you do nothing," Torigoe said, sitting down.

"Good morning, Shii!" Fushimi smiled and waved.

"Morning, Hiina."

Her full name was Shizuka Torigoe—hence, Shii.

Mana's nickname is more accurate, though, I thought as I watched them talk. She looks more like a Shizu than like a Shii.

"How did your film turn out?" Torigoe asked.

"I'm content with my work, but I'm not sure the judges will find it interesting."

"Show it to me sometime."

"Sure. I could send you the file."

I could feel Fushimi staring at us.

"Oh, okay... Actually, no. If you don't mind, I'll drop by your house..." Torigoe cast a quick glance at Fushimi.

"Sure, if you'd prefer," I said. "You coming, too, Fushimi?"

Fushimi gently shook her head. Her swaying hair gave off the clean scent of her shampoo. "No, I'll watch it another time."

Strange. Fushimi was usually adamant about getting a look at stuff like this.

"Can I come over today after school?" Torigoe asked. "Are you free?"

I nodded. "Man, I'm starting to get nervous."

"Oh right—it'll be your first time watching something that's all done."

The school festival film was still in the editing stages, so this would be my first time showing someone a final version of something I'd made.

"So you really managed to finish it," Torigoe said, as if confirming.

"I would've had more time if it weren't for our hellish amount of homework."

"That's your fault for not doing it sooner." Fushimi pouted.

"I still can't believe I wound up finishing all the assignments on time as a result."

"What do you mean?" said Fushimi, chuckling. "That's what you should've

done in the first place." Torigoe smiled, too.

Then Waka, our homeroom teacher, quickly greeted the class and took us to the school gym for the opening ceremony.

"Takayan, Takayan."

Deguchi tapped my shoulder, and I turned around. He was the only guy in class I could call my friend. His eyes were just as narrow as they'd been before break.

"What happened to the video of the beach trip?" he asked.

I'd promised him I would put together a video of the time we all went to the beach together. I'd completely forgotten.

"Sorry, I've been busy with other things."

"No worries. But keep in mind," he said with a grin, "I might treat you to a meal, depending on how well it turns out..."

He must have been really excited about it. I knew he was hoping for a lot of bikini shots of the girls, but I was going to give everyone a copy, so I wouldn't be making any weird edits or anything.

No meal was worth risking the girls' judgment, as far as I was concerned. Sorry, Deguchi.

After the ceremony, we headed back to the classroom. Normally, students spent this time deciding what to do for the school festival. But since our class was already past that stage, I simply reported my progress to the others.

School ended early. It wasn't even noon yet.

Himeji had rehearsal, and Fushimi went to her thespian academy.

Torigoe and I had nothing else to do, so we headed to my house to watch my film, as promised.

It was still hot out. The inside of the chilly train was like a different dimension. It was deserted at this time of day, too, so we got to sit side by side.

"Sorry about asking to see it so suddenly," said Torigoe.

"It's fine. I wanted someone else's opinion anyway."

Mana's reaction had been generally positive, but I wondered what Fushimi would think.

"Somehow it feels like a waste to go straight home after getting out of school so much earlier than everyone else," she said.

"Yeah, I get that."

"Oh, by the way, I don't know the first thing about movies, so don't expect anything too insightful."

"I feel like you'd just go for the jugular if you found it boring... Right, Torigoe?" I could picture it already.

She smiled faintly. Maybe she'd seen my expression cloud over as I spoke. "I wouldn't be that harsh about something you worked so hard on."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"Probably."

"Probably?!"

I could already hear her murmuring, How did it turn out this crappy when the screenplay was so good?

"I'm joking."

She laughed, causing our shoulders to bump. I flinched, and she blinked at me, just as bewildered as I was.

"S-sorry," I said.

"I-it's fine," she replied. Then her voice changed. "I should be asking you to pay up for the privilege of brushing shoulders with me, Ryou!"

"What's gotten into you, Torigoe?" I widened my eyes.

She blushed, then said, "Well, since it already happened, I'll let you have some more."

Huh...?

Though she'd already moved away, she pushed her shoulder back against mine.

I blinked repeatedly, confused. But then Torigoe went back to normal.

".....That's what Himeji would say... Don't you think?" she whispered softly.

"O-oh... I get it."

I did not get it. Why was she doing a Himeji impersonation?

"I heard about how Hiina and you started talking again."

"The groper thing?"

"Yeah. If I were about to get groped, would you save me, too?"

Torigoe looked at me with upturned eyes, though the gesture lacked confidence.

"Well, obviously."

"Even though you turned me down?"

She stared at me from up close, the look in her eyes oddly serious. I suddenly realized where I was and looked away.

"That doesn't matter. But I guess I'd probably call the police first."

"W-well, I suppose so."

"And then I'd find a way to buy time until they got there."

"A solid plan, but not exactly what I was hoping for..." Torigoe hung her head.

We finally arrived at the station closest to my house and made our way past the ticket gates.

We plunged out into the humid air, squinting in the sunlight as we made our way, side by side, to my house.

"I'm just saying," she began, "if someone swooped in to save me and it turned out to be the guy I liked... Even imagining it makes my heart skip a beat, you know?"

I was a little surprised that even Torigoe got excited over stuff like that. She was a girl, too, I supposed, though that should have been obvious.

"...What?" she said.

Apparently, I'd started staring at her without meaning to.

"Nothing." I shook my head nervously.

"You have common sense, morals, and smarts, and yet you're hopelessly dense when it comes to romance. Is there some reason you're like this, Takamori?"

"A reason? Uh...lack of experience?"

"But I don't have any experience, either. I'm so easy, all it took to make me fall for you was eating lunch together."

"You're being too down on yourself, Torigoe. How am I supposed to respond?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

Don't say stuff like that with a straight face.

"This is impossible. Just stop."

When I finally threw in the towel, Torigoe let out a laugh like a sigh.

What was this, exactly? Unlike with Fushimi or Himeji, I didn't feel like I had to think so hard about how I acted around Torigoe.

Torigoe met me in high school, which meant she only knew me as a loner with no redeeming qualities or interests to speak of. For that reason, I didn't feel like I had to impress her.

"You already turned me down, so there's no need for me to act cool," she said. "I can just be myself..."

"So you feel at ease around me because you don't have to put up a front?"

"Exactly." She nodded.

"I get it. There's no need for me to put on an act with you. I can take it easy, say whatever I'm thinking." I nodded a few times to myself.

Then Torigoe disappeared from my side. I turned back and saw her looking down, blushing.

"What's wrong?"

```
"T-Takamori... Did you really mean that?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, um, it's just...uh..."
```

Torigoe fidgeted, pulling at her uniform, combing her fingers through her hair, and smoothing down her bangs restlessly.

```
"Doesn't that mean that...you...like me?"

Like me.

Like me...?

Like her?
```

"Huh?"

Like her...

I had to repeat the words to myself for a while to fully process them.

"Uh. Err. No, it's nothing. Forget it. I-I'm just delirious. Just fantasies going around in my head. Sorry for blurting out something so crazy!" Torigoe waved her arms up and down frantically.

She hurried out in front of me, then changed the subject. Her voice sounded unnaturally high.

"So are you choosing humanities or sciences?"

She didn't even wait for me to say anything. Clearly, she didn't want to talk about it anymore.

At our school, the students were split into humanities and sciences starting from October of their second year. That was next month for us.

```
"Humanities," I replied.
```

"Same here."

...And that was where the conversation ended. For a while, we fell into silence.

When we reached my house, Torigoe was still red all the way up to her ears. We went to my room, and I turned on the AC and asked her to sit down.

She didn't say anything, and I felt as though she was observing my every movement.

I unplugged my laptop, booted it up, and handed it to her.



```
"It's the top left folder. See it?"

"Yeah."
```

I heard her double-tap the trackpad as I left the room to get some tea. Just like with Mana, I was too embarrassed to sit with her as she watched it. I was afraid of what she'd say.

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"Like me...," I repeated aloud.
```

I liked her as a friend, obviously. I'd felt the same from her, or possibly more, and then she'd confessed to me, confirming it. But the things she said and did on the surface weren't the whole story.

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...Wait, when did I start thinking like that?
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I mulled this over as I poured two glasses of barley tea and grabbed a bag of snacks before heading back up to my room.

Torigoe was still watching the short film.

She was pretty focused on it and didn't even notice my return. What would she say? I was more curious about her reaction than Mana's, since she'd helped me out with the screenplay.

Then I heard the sound from the last scene. After watching and rewatching it so many times, I could recognize it immediately just from the audio.

The film ended, and Torigoe kept staring at the screen. After a while, she pursed her lips.

```
"What did you think...?" I asked timidly.
```

Finally realizing I was there, she turned her back to me. I heard her sniffle and saw her touch her face with her hand.

```
"Torigoe?"

"Oh, sorry, it's just..."
```

There was nothing in the movie to cry about—no dying lover, no letter from a dead mother, nothing. But the very first time I watched the whole thing...I cried, too. I'd figured I was simply too invested in it as its creator, but maybe that wasn't it.

"Now I know why you said you wanted me to star in it," she said.

"Right?"

So she'd finally understood.

"When I read the screenplay, I thought Hiina would do just fine, and we adjusted it for her, but I might've been a good fit, too." She sniffled again before turning to look at me. "I doubt I'd do very well once I was in front of the camera, though."

Dismissing her own comment with a self-deprecating one-liner was very like Torigoe.

"What did you think of the film itself?" I asked.

"It hit hard."

"R-really?!"

Just hearing her say it was okay would have been a win.

"Whoo! I did it!" I shouted to the heavens, feeling rewarded for all my effort.

"Please, you exaggerate." Torigoe smiled and closed the laptop.

I handed her a glass of tea and opened the bag of snacks, then I asked for her detailed thoughts.

She shared all sorts of comments: "Didn't think that scene would turn out like that." "I liked the look on her face." "You really nailed the vibes here." She praised the film openly.

"You may have a chance at winning the contest," she said at last.

"Please don't give me hope."

If she kept flattering me like that, I might convince myself it was possible.

As we chatted, the tea and snacks disappeared.

"You did your homework, put your all into the festival short, and finished your own film...," she said. "While I wasn't looking, you turned into a real hard worker."

"You make it sound like I was a slob before."

I thought the same, though. Looking back, I really used my time efficiently.

I grabbed the laptop and stuck in a USB drive to copy the file so I could give it to Fushimi the following day. Somehow, it was already almost one o'clock.

"Torigoe, what about lunch?"

"I was thinking of going back home. You?"

"If we're not doing anything, I'll either stop by a restaurant or pick up something at the convenience store."

I was planning to do just that after seeing her off at the station.

"In that case, if you'd like..."

"Yeah?"

She glanced down and flushed as I waited for her to continue.

"...W-want me to m-make you lunch?"

"That sounds nice, but wouldn't it be a lot of work?"

Torigoe shook her head. "I'm not as good as ManaMana, but I help out a lot back home."

"Sounds like I don't need to worry, then. What were you thinking of making?"

"If you don't mind me using whatever you have lying around..."

"That should be fine."

The fact that she didn't need to buy anything made it clear she knew what she was doing. We headed to the kitchen and took a look in the fridge.

"Wow. As expected of ManaMana. So orderly," she said, impressed.

"So? Think you can manage?"

"I can make some quick fried rice, if that's all right."

"I would be overjoyed."

Torigoe grinned. "Okay, then. Just wait, I'll be done in a jiffy."

I did as she asked and waited in the dining room. I watched TV, glancing now and then at Torigoe.

She was quite skilled. She only had to ask me where to find the spices and plates. She knew how to do everything else.

Soon, I could smell the oil and hear the pleasant sounds of rice cooking.

"I'm home!" came Mana's voice from the entryway.

My sister was supposed to finish school in the morning, too. She must have stopped somewhere on her way home.

"Welcome back!" I replied; I had to—she'd keep repeating herself until I did.

"Bubby, did you invite someone over?"

"Torigoe."

"Wow, Shizu's here?" Mana peeked into the kitchen and saw Torigoe holding a ladle.

"Sh-Shizu's brazenly trying to score brownie points?!"

Brownies? She's making fried rice.

"Welcome home, ManaMana," said Torigoe.

"Thanks. I mean—! Why the heck are you making lunch?!" Mana's expression turned sharp.

"Not...for brownie points," Torigoe said, looking away.

"Why else?!"

"Mana. Why're you getting so mad?" I cut in. "Is it because we used what was in the fridge? You said I could grab anything."

"That's not it!"

Then what?

Mana hurled her bag down and walked up to Torigoe.

"I made enough for you, too," said the other girl.

"No, Shizu. I'm in charge of my bubby's stomach. This is unfair. Cooking is my territory."

That's the problem?

"Well, I'm sure you're the better cook, but...," Torigoe began.

O-oh? Where is this going?

"Isn't your cooking a little too elaborate and well-balanced?"

"So what?" Mana shot back. "That's how a little sister's cooking should be. It's the best you can get."

"Takamori likes junkier food, too, you know."

"...!"

W-wow, I can't believe it. Torigoe's overwhelming Mana.

Naturally, I liked to eat proper meals, but I also enjoyed quick, well-spiced food. Mana tended to make more of the former.

"Y-you think you know my bubby's preferences better than me?"

Mana crossed her arms defiantly. She had the air of a stubborn old man defending his family noodle shop.

"You're too absorbed in technique. Just because you have the skills, you've let it go to your head."

"I—I have not!" Mana puffed out her cheeks.

Not only had Torigoe encroached into Mana's territory, but she was managing to stem the backlash and push in even further. Feeling she'd won the round, Torigoe served three plates of fried rice.

"Shizuuu. I know how you feel, really. But there are some things that are offlimits. I thought we had a pact."

"Give it up, Mana," I said. "The food's already done."

We all sat at the table, placed our hands together, and gave our thanks for the food.

I scooped up a spoonful of fried rice and took a bite. The egg was mixed in well, and it was scrumptiously seasoned, with added salt from the bacon I'd let Torigoe use. She'd even added lettuce as an accent.

"S-so?" Torigoe asked, nervously.

"Now you're asking me for comments, huh? It's good," I said.

"Glad to hear it," she replied before taking a bite herself.

Mana was chewing away while snorting and smiling victoriously. "It's good, but that's all it is."

"Don't say that."

Mana ignored me and continued. "I could have made two more dishes in the same amount of time."

Mana's smirk was overbearing, but Torigoe paid her no mind.

"Whatever."

"I am my bubby's chef."

I had an officially appointed chef now?

"It's just lunch," said Torigoe. "Normal is fine."

She had a point. It wasn't like I wanted to eat something super elaborate for lunch. I'd rather just get something in my stomach and move on.

Still, it seemed this was a matter of pride for Mana.

"If you want to curry favor with my bubby, you'll have to defeat me first."

"You're like an annoying mother-in-law, ManaMana."

Mana nearly blew her top at being called a mother-in-law by someone older than she was.

"Cool it, Torigoe," I said. "You're not helping."

"You sure you're not just forcing Takamori to eat whatever you want to cook?" she went on.

"I don't wanna hear it from someone whose fried rice is just average."

"Stop arguing! Mealtime should be fun, guys."

I'd had enough of their petty bickering. After my outburst, the two of them continued eating in silence.

Mana must have seen the very act of Torigoe cooking in our house as a

declaration of war. And since they were so close, Torigoe responded in kind... And now they'd both clammed up.

It was getting awkward.



```
"So you're pretty serious, eh, Shizu?" Mana said at last.

"About what?"

"You know what."

"I... Yes."

Mana smirked. "Okay, then I'll forgive you, just this once."

And with that, the war came to an end.
```

◆ Shizuka Torigoe ◆

"Thank you for having me."

As I was leaving Takamori's house, he proposed the same thing as before: "I'll walk with you to the station."

"No, thanks. Here is fine."

"Okay," he replied, giving up right away.

In truth, I wanted him to insist, grab me by the hand, and lift me up onto the back of his bicycle.

"…"

I shook my head to clear those thoughts away. I didn't want to become a nuisance. Besides, Takamori didn't have the guts to pull off something like that.

I left his house and walked to the station and through the ticket gates alone.

Watching his film, I'd felt a kind of sympathy, like he'd drawn my portrait with his camera. I doubted he'd done it on purpose, but it made sense why he'd asked me to star in it instead of Hiina. If I'd agreed back then, we would've been all alone, just the two of us, both when working on the screenplay and during filming...

I shook my head to dispel my thoughts once again. I might have ruined it with my bad acting, so it was for the best that Hiina took the role.

What would she think of it? Would she sing its praises, just because it was

made by the guy she liked? But Hiina had a stubborn side to her, too. So maybe she would be surprisingly frank.

"I just gave him my honest opinion. I didn't let my feelings sway my response at all," I muttered to myself under the noise of the arriving train.

What's up with me today?

I took an empty seat and cast a sidelong glance at the passing scenery.

It was probably because of what he'd said.

"There's no need for me to put on an act with you. I can take it easy, say whatever I'm thinking."

Just remembering it made my face go red. I looked down at my toes so the other passengers wouldn't see.

The words with you had to mean that he didn't feel that way about others.

The way he'd said it, so naturally, had made me start to think he liked me and just didn't realize it. A line like that could cause some real misunderstandings.

It made me start to wonder... Was there something I had that Hiina and Himeji didn't? What if it wasn't a misunderstanding, and Takamori figured out how he really felt...?

I could feel a smile coming on, and I hid my face behind my hands. What should I do? I'm so happy.

If that was the case, I wanted to stop worrying about the little stuff and just be honest about my own feelings.

...Of course, it probably wasn't true.

Ever since helping Takamori with his screenplay, I'd been thinking vaguely about doing something myself. Before, he'd been like me, with no real drive, and I'd been surprised to see him working so hard at something.

Just then, I got a text from Takamori.

Mana says she went too far, and she's sorry. She wants you to forgive her for today.

Tell her not to worry about it, I texted back.

OK. Also, despite what she said, I thought the food was really good. Thanks! You already rejected me once. So why are you getting my hopes up again?

(2) Getting Ready for PE and Tidying Up Afterward

"Is there some reason we have to do a hundred-meter sprint?"

I grumbled as I pushed the rattling line marker, drawing a white streak across the starting position.

"Stop whining," said Fushimi.

"Class reps are just glorified gofers."

"You knew that when you volunteered." She giggled.

Our classmates were on break while we helped with preparations for the day's PE class. Fushimi handed me one end of a tape measure and trotted away.

"About here!" she called out.

Evidently, she'd reached the hundred-meter mark. I gave her the "okay" sign and moved the line marker up to her.

None of this was a big deal for Fushimi. She was a good swimmer, a fast runner, and skilled at ball sports, to boot.

Her gym uniform exposed her thin limbs, so pale it seemed the summer hadn't even touched her. She had her long hair tied up in a ponytail, ready for the one-hundred-meter sprint.

Eventually, our classmates swarmed onto the field.

"What're we doing today, Director?"

"The one-hundred-meter sprint. We'll be recording everyone's times."

"Oof... Really?"

Due to my directing the film for the school festival, my nickname had changed from *Prez* to *Director*.

"Director, can't you tell the teacher we wanna play soccer instead?"

"Tell 'em yourself."

"Ugh, you're so cold."

Another guy laughed out loud at my curt response.

I had to do odd jobs as class rep, but I wasn't all that compassionate toward my classmates, and I certainly wasn't a pushover.

I noticed a guy approaching take a quick glance at Fushimi. It was Deguchi, and his first words as he came out of the changing rooms onto the field were, "Fushimi's got her hair up."

"For better or worse, she takes these things very seriously," I said.

"Haaah." He sighed. "Well, I'm just glad I get to see the back of her neck."

At least the guy was clear about what he was after.

"She's faster than most guys, just so you know," I said.

"I wanna watch over her from the goal." His grin let me know that his mind was in the gutter. Then his gaze moved to Himeji.

"So we're running? I guess I don't really mind," she said, chatting with another girl on her way over. Apparently, she'd overheard the day's plans.

She looked great in her gym clothes, so much so that I had to wonder if she was really wearing the same thing as everyone else. She looked more like a cosplayer than like a student wearing her school's uniform.

"She's huge," Deguchi muttered.

This guy sure doesn't keep his thoughts to himself, huh...? Deguchi's lack of shame was something else. I had to agree with him, though. Himeji's curviness was a stark contrast to the lean Fushimi. And her chest was only accentuated further by the way she lethargically crossed her arms.

"Takayan, it's over," he said. "I won't be able to take it."

"What?"

"A hundred-meter sprint? Those things are gonna be bouncing all over the place."

"Please stop talking."

"None of the guys will be able to stand up after watching that."

"I said shut up."

I remembered Himeji being good at sports back in grade school. Her job involved dancing and singing, too, so her heart and lungs had to be in great shape.

"She's been practicing for something lately, right?" Deguchi asked.

"Yeah, I guess," I said noncommittally. In fact, I knew all about it.

Himeji had been chosen for the part and started rehearsing during summer break, causing some delays in our filming schedule. She had explained the situation to everyone and apologized.

That was probably why she was drawing even more attention than Fushimi, now that school was back in session.

Various rumors were making the rounds: "Did you hear the transfer student is an actress?" "I guess the stories about her being a former idol were true."

"There's just something about her. She's a real star," Deguchi said, casually praising her. I agreed.

Looking at her through the lens of the camera really brought that home. There was something powerful about her, visually, about her character, even when she wasn't doing anything special—she was eye-catching the same way Fushimi was.

"Where's Torigoe?" I muttered, looking around.

As it turned out, she was already changed and on the field. I just hadn't seen her.

She was the only one wearing her tracksuit jacket; just one glance told you she didn't intend to participate. It was very like her.

The teacher arrived, and everyone lined up. After attendance was taken, there was an explanation of the day's activities. We were to pair up and measure each other's time for the one-hundred-meter sprint.

P-pairs...

This was the biggest reason I didn't like PE: We always had to pair up.

"Takayan." Deguchi grinned.

"...Oh well."

"Don't sound so disappointed, mon ami."

"Cut that out. It's embarrassing."

"Oh, come on, you know you like it when I call you my friend!" He jabbed my side with his elbow.

It wasn't that I liked it; I was just relieved.

First, we had to do a lap around the field to warm up.

"I can't remember, are you a fast runner?" Deguchi asked as he plodded along.

We'd had physical fitness tests back in April, but there hadn't been a one-hundred-meter sprint.

"I'm average. I played soccer in middle school, so I shouldn't be too bad."

Soccer...

Why did I suddenly feel like I'd lost a competition?

For better or worse, PE class always exposed unexpected sides of a person. In my case, it was always for the worse, so I really didn't like it.

Whenever we played sports, the guys in the corresponding club always dominated, and it was super obvious they were trying to get attention from the girls. I was terrible at all of them, though. No attention for me.

When it came to track and field, like what we were doing now, we were all timed. That created explicit rankings, letting you know who was above and below you. Just thinking about it depressed me.

"Shii," said Fushimi to Torigoe, "you should take off the jacket."

"I'm fine like this."

"It causes too much wind resistance, and it'll make your times worse."

"Unlike you, I don't really care about getting my best time."

"Huh? Really?" Fushimi cocked her head to the side.

I'm pretty sure you're the only one who cares, Fushimi.

Torigoe fidgeted and glanced at me. The moment our eyes met, I remembered what she'd said on our first day back—"Doesn't that mean that... you...like me?"—and looked away in a panic.

With each step Torigoe took, her black hair swayed softly against her back. I caught a glimpse of her profile. As she talked to Fushimi, her eyes softened and her lips drew into a smile.

"Torigoe's got the goods, too, but that jacket... Wonder if she'll take it off," Deguchi whispered.

I better tell her not to take it off even if she gets bad times.

Watching from behind, you could get a good idea of class dynamics.

After Torigoe and Fushimi finished talking, another girl came up to Fushimi, and they began chatting. Then a few guys joined in.

There were more girls around Himeji; she'd been in school for only a short time, but she was already making herself an army. Perhaps the way she refused to yield to or cozy up to anyone appealed to the other girls. Those same traits, however, made her hard to approach for the boys. Still, she was quite popular with guys from other classes who weren't aware of it.

"The guys were divided into Team Fushimi and Team Himejima for a while, but it seems that's over," said Deguchi, sounding like a real expert.

As for Torigoe, once more people had gathered around Fushimi, she moved over to one corner by herself.

Her aura of *Don't speak to me* was much stronger than Himeji's, making her even harder to approach. Her expression was so hostile, you could almost see the menacing sound effects behind her like some powerful villain in a manga.

She could have way more friends than I did if she only put on a softer expression.

Just then, an especially popular, good-looking guy walked up and started talking to her. I had no idea what he was saying, but Torigoe's expression remained stiff as she did nothing but nod or shake her head.

I figured she was nervous. Once the guy moved away, I saw her heave a dramatic sigh of relief.

"Torigoe, how fast are you?" I asked from behind.

She could tell it was me; she kept her eyes ahead while answering.

"What do you think? Think I'm fast?"

"No."

"Then don't ask." She shot me a sidelong glance and smiled.

"See, you're cute when you make that face."

Suddenly, she burst into a coughing fit.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"It's your fault...for saying stuff like that..." She was teary-eyed, perhaps due to the coughing. She was also oddly flushed. "I—I don't have any desire to be a people pleaser like Hiina... I just...want to talk to the people I like, and that's it."

It seems that includes me.

She slapped my shoulder.

"What the—?"

"Couldn't resist," she said.

It's not like it hurt, but I'd rather not be hit for no reason.

After we finished the lap, we did some simple stretches before finally starting the hundred-meter sprint. We had to make three attempts and record our best time.

Did we really need to do three? It was obvious the first one would be the best for those who didn't exercise regularly. They'd be out of stamina by the second and third.

My buddy Deguchi waited by the goal, stopwatch in hand.

Five people lined up by order of their student numbers, and a whistle signaled the start of the race. I was in the second group. As I got ready, I saw Fushimi waving at me from near the goal.

I raised my hand in response. But was the gesture really meant for me?

"Fushimi's waving at me...," said one boy.

"She's waving at me, not you."

"You guys can argue all you want, but she's actually waving at me behind you."

"I'm gonna hug her the second I reach the goal."

"The lady is clearly cheering on this humble swordsman."

Is that a samurai among our classmates?

"Can you even run, Ryou?" Himeji asked as I waited for my turn.

"What? Of course I can run."

Could I run fast? Now, that was an entirely different question.

"Let's see who can run faster, then. It'll make things fun. Whoever wins treats the other to a pudding from the cafeteria."

A pudding from the cafeteria...

The pudding at our school wasn't some prepackaged item. They actually made it by hand, and it was pretty delicious.

I vaguely recalled being about evenly matched with Himeji back in elementary school.

"All right," I said. "Let's do it."

"I hope you don't regret this, Ryou."

She was far more confident than I'd imagined.

As soon as I said yes, I started regretting my decision. Hadn't Mr. Matsuda said she needed stamina for the play or something...?

We moved up to the starting line, and the teacher yelled, "Ready!" then blew the whistle. How long had it been since I'd last run with all my might?

Familiar scenery flashed past me. I could hear the wind and my own hard breathing in my ears. The fastest guy was way ahead of me, but I ended up in second place for my round.

"Not bad, Takayan."

I panted as Deguchi walked up to me to show me my time. Thirteen seconds and some change. Wow. Pretty good.

"Fwyaaah?!"

I turned at the sound of Fushimi's animallike scream and found the girls ganging up on a guy.

"What happened?" I asked.

Deguchi had seen the whole thing. "When that guy reached the goal, he actually tried to hug Fushimi for real, but the girls stopped him just in time."

"Oh..."

You can't try stuff like that for real.

"I'm so sorry!" the joker yelped as the girls kicked him.

"Maybe the kicking was what he was really after," Deguchi mused.

That sounded like one messed-up fetish. I couldn't begin to relate.

"But she waved at me!"

"Th-that was...that was for Ryou!" Fushimi shouted bashfully before running away.

At that, all eyes turned on me.

"""Can't beat childhood friends..."""

I had no idea how to react.

"Nice one, Ryou, nice one." One guy grinned at me, mockingly calling me by my first name.

"First Prez and now Director, you sure have gotten popular," Deguchi said heartily.

Is that what he calls this?

I took over the stopwatch, and Deguchi went to the other side. While I was still calming my breathing, the boys' first round ended, and the girls' began.

After a few rounds, it was Torigoe's turn.

"You got this, Shii!" Fushimi cheered. It seemed she'd made her way back at some point.

Torigoe waved at her to stop, red in the face. "P-please, don't."

Then the whistle sounded, and Torigoe took off.

I hadn't expected her to be a great runner, but she seemed to be having an even harder time than I'd imagined.

She hurled her arms and legs around as she tried to run. The motion was adorable and very unlike her. As a result, no one laughed or mocked her, they all simply looked on, warm smiles on their faces.

"The way she runs is so cute," someone said.

"She's like a different person."

"New feelings are budding within me..."

I felt the same. The way you could tell she was giving it her all contrasted sharply with her usual personality.

As Torigoe steadied her breathing, Fushimi handed her the stopwatch and walked over to the starting line. As she did, Torigoe approached me.

"...You're laughing," she said.

"Am not."

"Liar."

"Why would I lie about that?"

"I guess you wouldn't." She sat down. "But the guys laughed at me back in grade school. They said I ran funny."

"I guess it's not the usual way to do it, but I think it fits you."

"How do you mean?"

The whistle sounded, and the next group of girls ran toward us.

"I guess that, despite everything, you're always doing your best."

"..."

Torigoe buried her face between her knees and muttered, "It doesn't feel that way to me... But then, you're always paying close attention to me, aren't you?"

She smiled at me with her eyes, but for whatever reason, I couldn't meet her gaze.

Is that so? Am I...?

The whistle sounded again, and this time, Himeji was at the starting line. She had perfect form, as expected. On top of her impeccable style, the way she ran and the serious look on her face made for a lovely image.

"Look at that bounce..."

"Stop. The girls are gonna beat you up."

She had a nice body, and I heard a lot of the guys making remarks about it. If we'd been swimming, I bet we would have had a crowd on our hands.

"How was your time, Ryou?" Himeji approached with a cool smirk on her face as she steadied her breathing. She was brimming with confidence.

"Thirteen point sixty-five."

"Wha?! You cheeky little...!" Wrinkles formed in her shapely brow. I must have been faster.

"I've got you beat in academics and sprinting, too. Seems your skills don't match your confidence, Himeji."

"I-it's not over yet. We have two rounds left."

"Do your worst."

"You'll regret those words in about ten minutes, I promise!"

Himeji was way too easily provoked. She fumed, huffing as she turned her back on me and left.

"You get so aggressive around her, Takamori."

"I've known her for a long time, so I know how to get her riled up without making her genuinely angry."

For her part, she was always trying to one-up me, so I had to capitalize on every opportunity I got.

Incidentally, Fushimi easily achieved the fastest time among the girls.

We repeated the process until everyone had sprinted three times. As expected, my best time was my first. I was pooped by the second and did terribly. Still, I ended up winning my bet against Himeji, and she promised to buy me the pudding.

"Oh well. It's not like a one-hundred-yen pudding will make a big dent in my finances," said the sore loser, acting like a rich girl.

Class ended, and everyone dispersed except for Fushimi and me; we had to tidy up. The only upside to being class rep was that people remembered me more easily...

I stacked the cones and hoisted them up. Fushimi grabbed the box with all the stopwatches, and we headed to the gym's storehouse.

"Can you carry all that, Ryou?"

"It's heavy, but nothing I can't handle."

"I just feel bad, since I've got the light stuff."

"Wanna switch, then?"

"You know I'm counting on you."

"See?"

Fushimi giggled. "You've got this, Ryou! Hang in there, Ryou! Let's go, Ryou!" she sang.

"Stop singing weird songs."

"I'm cheering you on!"

"That's fine, just don't sing your cheers." I sighed.

Fushimi laughed. It felt pretty good to have her cheer me on, but the cones

weren't that heavy.

We entered the chilly storehouse, and I returned the stack to its place before brushing off my hands.

"Good job," she said.

"It's nothing." I shrugged.

"Oh right. I couldn't wait, so I asked Shii what she thought about your movie..."

"A-and?"

Did she say something different behind my back? Torigoe wouldn't do that... But I don't really understand women. Maybe there's another side to her...

Fushimi stared at me smugly.

"Wh-what? What did she say?"

"It might upset you..."

So she really did say something different to Fushimi behind my back...?

I was already upset. I had the mental fortitude of a soft cracker.

"R-really ...?"

I felt my legs go weak and sat down on an old vaulting box in the corner. The colors were fading from my sight.

"Oh, crap! No, no, I didn't mean that! I'm sorry, I phrased it all wrong." Fushimi panicked when she saw my reaction. "Shii praised you. She was surprised you could make something like that in such a short time."

"Torigoe's nice, so maybe she just said that to make me feel better..."

"D-did you switch into gloomy mode?!" Fushimi widened her eyes as she walked up to me and sandwiched my face between her hands.

"Wh-what're you doing?" I could feel her warmth through the palms of her hands.

She peered into my eyes. "You made the film, and I'm starring in it. There's no way it could be bad." She smiled like a sunflower, brimming with confidence.

"You and me together are unbeatable."

"Where's that coming from?" Despite myself, I chuckled at her baseless confidence.

"You laughed, that means I win!"

"So we're playing games now, are we?"

Fushimi laughed out loud, her shoulders shaking.

The storeroom was lit by a single tiny window, which made our little corner feel especially dark. Just then, the door closed with a rattle.

""Huh?"" We exclaimed in unison.

Is someone playing a prank? Just as I was about to say something, I heard a clack.

"Ryou, was that...?"

"They couldn't have locked us in, right?"

I approached the door cautiously and pushed against it with my whole weight. It didn't budge.

W-we're locked in?!

I tried again and again, but it wouldn't open.

"No good...?" asked Fushimi. I turned around and saw tears in her eyes. "Does that mean we're trapped in here...?"

"Looks like it."

"What nooow?! We're gonna be late for claaass!"

"That's what you're worried about? Forget about it."

"But we're class reps!"

"Skipping one period is no big deal."

"Aww..."

She wasn't crying yet, but Fushimi's eyes were like a dam moments before collapse. She was panicking. I had to keep her calm.

I remembered her saying she liked getting her back rubbed, so I did just that.

"Don't worry, whoever has PE next will open it for us."

Fushimi sniffled. "Really...?"

"Yes. We won't be trapped here forever."

Good. She's calming down. I rubbed her back carefully so as to not touch her bra.

...?

Wait, where is her bra?

"I left my phone in my bag, too. Can't call anyone."

"Uh, yeah," I replied half-heartedly, more worried about the bra situation.

I tried softly touching her back, but I didn't feel a bra underneath, or anything else, for that matter.

D-don't tell me...she's not wearing anything? Why was my childhood friend going around braless?

"You don't have yours, either, do you?" she asked.

"I don't bring my phone to PE."

"Right." If Fushimi was a rabbit, her ears would be drooping right about now.

"Oh, maybe we can call out through there and get someone's attention!" She pointed at the window. It was about seven feet up and fitted with security bars.

"Who would we call ...?"

I drew a mental map of the grounds.

The storehouse was in one corner of the field. The sandpit for vaulting was the only thing nearby. We were pretty far from the classroom and clubroom buildings. The only time people came out here was for PE.

"No one will hear us way out here," I said.

"I have a plan."

"Yeah?"

Even if we shouted in the direction of the window, not much noise would reach outside. Nevertheless, Fushimi cleared her throat and declared, "We'll just have to combine."

"What?!"

She was serious.

J-just what kind of sounds is she hoping will be heard out there?

"Is that why you're braless right now?"

"Wait, what?! How did you know?!" Fushimi flushed and covered her chest with her arms.

"From when I was rubbing your back..."

"You pervert! Degenerate horndog!"

"The only pervert here is you! What d'you mean we're gonna combine?!"

"Y-you've got it all wrong! I meant I'd climb on your shoulders!"

Why say it so ambiguously, then?

I sighed in relief as Fushimi detailed her plan: She'd climb up on my shoulders, get close to the window, and call for someone.

"I guess it's better than doing nothing." I agreed to the plan and helped her onto my shoulders.

"Whoa! I'm so high up! Ryou, look! I can touch the ceiling!" She slapped it merrily.

"Stop playing."

"Oh, sorry. I must be heavy."

"That's not the issue here..."

I held her knees with both arms as her thighs sandwiched my face. She had her shorts rolled up—evidently, they slowed her down.

I could only look forward as I steadily walked up to the window.

"...Fushimi, please tell me you're wearing underwear down there, at least..."

"O-of course I am!" She slapped my head.

"Why take off the top, then?"

"I figured I'd be faster if I was lighter."

It's just PE class. Why on earth would you go that far just to get a better time?

I couldn't say that to her, though. I knew she was always serious about everything. Instead, I replied robotically, "I guess that makes sense."

I glanced up to check how far the window was and saw Fushimi's straight torso and, above that, her face, expression serious. The thought crossed my mind that I probably wouldn't be able to see Himeji's face from this position.

Fushimi grabbed the bars.

"Someooone! Anyooone! Hellip!"

I followed her example and joined in. "Someoooone! Helllp! Fushimi, anyone out there?"

"Nope."

Figures... "Worst case scenario, we're here until someone comes for their club."

"I—I can't have that."

"You think I can?"

I felt my toes crushing something. I glanced down and found what appeared to be a used love glove on the floor.

Why?! Wait, I remember Deguchi saying that people sometimes used this place to... "combine." Was that true?

If anyone found out we were locked in here together...

I shook my head to drive the fantasies away.

"Anyooone!"

"Wait, Fushimi, stop!"

"Huh? Why?"

```
"We're in a pinch here."
  "Yeah, that's why I'm doing this."
  "No, you gotta stop. Look down."
  I tapped the thing on the ground with my shoe.
  "? ...R-Ryou, what're you doing down there?!"
  "It's not mine!"
  "You're acting weird today! Weirdly perverted!" Fushimi cried and thrashed
about, causing me to lose my balance.
  "You're the only pervert here, no-bra!"
  "I didn't do it for perverted reasons!"
  "Stop moving already!" I was about to topple over. "Whoa—!"
  "Eeek!"
 I spotted the high jump mat and adjusted our trajectory so we'd fall on top of
it.
  "Fwgyuh?!"
  "You okay?" I asked.
 The next moment, the door opened with a clack.
  "Are you okay, Ryou, Hina?!"
  "Takamori, Hiina, you okay?!"
  Himeji and Torigoe appeared in the doorway.
 Someone came... Thank goodness.
 As I felt relief wash over me, I saw their expressions change from worry to
exasperation.
  "What are you two doing ...?"
  "What do you mean? We were trying to get out."
 I finally let go of Fushimi's leg.
```

"Takamori's kissing Hiina's leg," said Torigoe.

"Am not! Fushimi, c'mon, help me explain."

I looked at her; she had her eyes rolled up.

Oh no.

""...""

The other two shared a look before leaving and locking the door behind them.

"Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy! Don't lock us in again!"

"We were stupid for worrying about you!" said Himeji. "Enjoy yourselves in there!"

"She was up on my shoulders, calling for help, and I tripped, that's it!"

"Sure, leg-kisser."

"Don't give me weird nicknames!"

After a lengthy explanation across the closed door, they finally opened it, rescuing us.

"Hiina, why're you only wearing your uniform shirt on top...?"

"Err, I... Ah-ha-ha..." Fushimi laughed, dodging the question.

Torigoe and Himeji glared daggers at me.

"It wasn't more than ten minutes...," said Himeji. "Animal."

"Bra-stripping monster."



"I didn't do anything..."

As I tried to explain, Fushimi joined in, finally clearing up the girls' suspicions.

After noticing we hadn't come back, the two of them had gone to the changing room to look and had noticed Fushimi's uniform was still there. Worried, they'd gone to look for us.

If only we had known, we could've just waited quietly and stayed out of trouble...

3 Notification

One afternoon after school, I was at home, editing the short film for the school festival.

The video itself was about 70 percent finished. I was slowly but surely collecting the background music from the students in charge, and it looked like we might be done within the month.

That said, I imagined I would need to make some final edits once I saw everything put together.

I had my eyes on the computer screen when I saw a notification for an email.

It was rare for me to get emails at my desktop address. Was it spam?

If I see any suspicious attachments, I'll just move it to the trash without looking...

With this thought at the back of my mind, I opened my inbox and saw the sender: Management Office for the Shinoh Cinema Student Film Competition.

"..."

There was no way this was some kind of advanced phishing attempt, right?

The subject read, About the work you submitted to the short film category.

Did I mess up the submission rules somehow? I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach as I opened the email.

It began with an extremely formal greeting, totally foreign to a high school student like me. After that came a few words of thanks for my submission that was clearly following a template.

At a glance, it didn't sound like I'd messed anything up.

There weren't any sentences like "Your film was really cool!" or anything. It just read like a business letter. But mixed in among the flat, insipid text, was a

single line that caught my eye.

We award your film, Blue Summer, with the special prize.

"Agh, coff, coff?!"

What the heck? I started coughing.

There, in front of me, was the title I'd chosen at random simply because I couldn't come up with anything else.

"Special prize?! Did they get the address right?! This is the title I came up with, but..."

I closed the laptop and stood up. I considered the possibility the email was a scam.

"In order to claim the prize, please wire 100,000 yen to the following bank account" ... That's what an actual scam would say. But there was nothing like that in the email.

"...What the heck?"

I tried clearing my mind and reviewing the facts. And still, the only thing that came out of my mouth was "What the heck?"

I opened the laptop again and reread the email.

We will send the prize money to your bank of choice, so please indicate the bank name, account number, and payee name in your reply.

After that, it said I should contact the management office with any questions.

They're wiring me money? How much was the special prize again? I opened up the website on my phone. Ten thousand yen.

It felt so weird to think I was about to get money for a film I had made.

"Maybe I was the only participant?"

I read over the website and then the email once again.

Apparently, this communication was only being sent out to winners, and they asked us not to say anything until the official announcement at the end of the month.

I felt like I had top-secret information in my hands.

I wanna shout it from the rooftops...

"Bubby? You didn't say 'Welcome home!' Stop ignoring me!" I heard Mana angrily stomping her way to my room. "I'm home!!" she yelled the moment she came in.

"Uh-huh. Welcome home."

"... What's wrong? You're acting weird."

"No, I'm normal. Very normal. Just like any other day."

"Hmm?" Mana tilted her head and peered at my laptop. "You watching porn?"

"Wh-whuh?! Don't look!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her back, but she was too strong.

"Huh? Huh? Bubby, is this...?" She stared intently at the screen.

She'd read it. The cat was out of the bag.

"I just got an email about the short film I submitted. I carefully considered the possibility of it being a scam... But it looks like it's real."

Mana's bag fell from her arm.

"WOOOW! NO WAYYY! WHAAAAT?! I DON'T BELIEVE ITTT!!" Mana slapped my shoulders and head. She was hitting me pretty hard.

"Ow! Hey, stop it."

"The special priiize!! Duuuuuuude!!" She grabbed my shoulders and shook me violently.

"You're getting way too excited. Calm down."

"Stop pretending you're above it all and let loose, Bubby! This is amazing!"

"I'm not pretending! I'm happy. It just hasn't sunk in yet."

All her praise was making me feel awkward. I scratched my head.

"Ah!" Mana exclaimed before booting up her phone's camera and taking a

picture of us.

"No pictures."

"Why? We gotta treasure the moment. Oh, I'm gonna post it online. I'll add the caption *My bubby's the best!*"

She typed out the post with lightning speed.

"Wait. nooo! We can't do that!"

"Huh? Why not? I wanna brag about my bubby's achievements."

"They're gonna make the announcement at the end of the month, and we're not supposed to say anything until then."

"They should just tell you that day, then! Weird!"

I'd thought the same thing. But well, maybe this was just how they did things. Either way, there was only a week left before the end of the month. It was almost October.

"I knew you could do it, Bubby. Hee-hee!" Mana puffed out her chest.

"You did?" I cracked a smile.

I'd always figured I was pretty useless as her big brother, but maybe this would finally wipe away my sense of inferiority.

"Did you tell anyone else yet?" she asked.

"No. I don't know if I'm even allowed to tell people I know."

I could probably tell Fushimi and Torigoe, either way. They weren't terminally online like Mana was, so they wouldn't start posting about it.

"I see, I see. So I got to hear first. Hee-hee." Mana looked satisfied at that. Then, as if remembering something, she asked, "Who're you telling next? Shizu or Hina?"

"Fushimi, I think. I'll be seeing her tomorrow."

"...You should call Shizu."

"Huh?"

I supposed she had a point. It wasn't as though I had to say it in person.

```
"Anything you wanna eat today, Bubby? I'll make whatever you want."
"Curry."
"All right!"
```

Mana's short skirt spun as she turned around and headed downstairs. I heard a noise outside and figured she was taking her bike out to go shopping.

I texted Torigoe right away.

They haven't made the official announcement yet, but...

She read the message while I was typing the follow-up.

What? Did you hear a leak about something going on sale?

No. But it turns out the film I submitted got a prize.

Once again, the text was immediately marked as read, then my phone rang. Torigoe was calling.

```
"Hello?"

"He-he-he-hell-lo?"

"Torigoe, calm down."

"Um, what? Is this a prank? If so, I d-don't appreciate it."
```

"No, it's for real," I insisted, my tone serious. "I'm telling the truth." At last, she seemed to believe me.

"The film where I helped out with the screenplay?"

"Yup. Thank you for that. Couldn't have done it without you."

"No, that's not true. It's all down to your talent, Takamori!"

She sounded unusually hyped up.

Talent, huh? I wonder if that's really true.

We spent some time reminiscing about all the work we'd done during summer break, then I warned her that we had to keep it secret before hanging up.

Does this mean I was able to bring out Fushimi's charisma?

So I managed to do it. And this was the result...

As I thought over the factors that had led me here, the reality of it began to sink in.

Sitting in my room, I clenched my fists.

The following morning, I was woken by the sound of the doorbell.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

The loud, intense rings just wouldn't stop coming.

"I recognize this pattern."

My slippers flip-flopped all the way to the door. Just as I'd thought, Himeji was on the other side.

"Ryou!"

"What? Do you have any idea what time it is?" I yawned.

"I just heard from Mana!"

"What now?"

"She told me about your film!" Himeji said excitedly.

Mana... Is she gonna go around telling everyone she can find? I gotta stop her.

"Oh, that."

"What do you mean Oh, that? Come on!"

"Sorry, I just woke up." My brain was still foggy.

Apparently, Himeji had come all the way to my house after running into Mana.

"Anyway, congratulations," she said.

"Thanks," I replied indifferently.

"Hey, Ai's here." Fushimi came up behind Himeji and joined us. "Good morning, Ryou."

"Morning."

"Did you hear the news, Hina?" Himeji asked her.

"About what?"

Himeji glanced at me, silently demanding I explain.

"Oh, err, it's still a secret, but...the short film of mine you acted in won a prize."

"…"

Fushimi's face turned serious, and she froze. "What was that?"

"It won the special prize. Thanks...for starring in it." Finally, I'd gotten to thank her. I'd been meaning to since the day before.

Fushimi shoved Himeji aside and entered the house.

"You did it, Ryou!"

"Really, it's more like you did it."

"No, it's your achievement. You filmed it, and you completed it in time! All your hard work is getting recognized!"

"It really wasn't just me..."

I was about to mention Torigoe when she interrupted.

"This victory is yours and mine!"

She jumped at my chest and hugged me hard.

"We did it! We did it!" she cheered artlessly.

Mana, Torigoe, Himeji, and Fushimi were all happy to hear the news. Just getting to see their faces made me feel like all the work had been worth the effort. Their smiles made me happy, too.

"H-hey, get off him!"

Himeji grabbed Fushimi's shoulders to tear her away from me.

"What, Ai? Let us enjoy the moment."

"You can enjoy it without hugging!"

Like a boxing referee, Himeji stuck her leg between us to force herself in and finally push us apart.

"Gee, what's the harm? He's filmed you, too." Fushimi pouted.

"For us, that's just work," said Himeji, emphasizing the word work. She brushed her hair aside and snorted. She was definitely trying to one-up the other girl.

Fushimi's mouth twitched.

Neither of them had any resistance against the other's provocations...

"Well, if you look at it another way, with your acting skills, work is the only reason he'd film you." Fushimi sneered. "Isn't that right, Ai?"

"How I wish I could spend my youth however I liked, like you do, my dear jobless Hina. Not only do I have to go to school, all my free time is taken up by practice for my stage play."

Fushimi's lips trembled. "Why do you have to be such a haughty grouch?! You won't get any fans like that!"

"Grouchiness is no obstacle when you have talent. Keep crying, loser."

Now it was me getting between them.

"Take it outside! I still have to get ready for school!"

I pushed them out and shut the door.

I was still in my pajamas. I looked at the clock—I'd already wasted ten precious minutes of my morning.

I changed and grabbed my stuff at triple the usual speed. I could hear their voices outside the whole time—it seemed those two never got tired.

On our way to school, I told them to keep it a secret until the official announcement, and they agreed.

At that point, I began worrying that maybe I'd gotten it wrong and none of it was real. Maybe I'd hyped everyone up for nothing.

Anxiously, I opened the email again, wondering if it was some kind of mistake. I didn't stop checking it like that until September 30.

That day, I woke up unusually early and checked the competition website.

It was already updated with the winners from each category, as well as with the evaluators' comments.

My finger trembled as I tapped the link for the short film category.

My name...was there.

I saw it right away: Ryou Takamori. The email hadn't been a mistake; the page really did list my name and my short's title. Aside from the special prize, there was a grand prize and a gold prize. Apparently, over three hundred people had applied.

I timidly read the evaluator's comment on my film.

"The school setting is nothing new, but the way it delves into the minutiae of daily life from a personal perspective leaves a solid impression. Despite its rough edges, you can feel the creator's intent and artistic sense."

P-praise.

There was a bit of criticism at the beginning, but...

Artistic sense.

Artistic sense...

Artistic sense.....

Those two words were burned into my retinas and kept spinning around in my brain.

Then I noticed there was more.

"The lead actress, too, is a real talent. Her performance more than makes up for the work's shortcomings."

With that, the comment ended.

Fushimi really was amazing, even from the perspective of a professional.

I wanted to toot my own horn, too, for doing so well. Maybe it was just a fluke, but just this once, at least, I'd managed to capture her charm on film.

"…"

Only my submission's comment mentioned the acting—the comments on the

grand prize winner and those on the gold prize winner had no such notes.

"Her performance more than makes up for the work's shortcomings."

My childhood friend had the looks and talent to make it to the final round of auditions for a stage play without even joining an agency.

I couldn't imagine that an actress of her caliber had participated in any of the other entries. Even if the other directors were able to make the best of their actors, I had a significant advantage.

With Fushimi, it was easy to catch the audience's eye and leave an impression. She was on another level compared to the competition.

Didn't that mean that, if I'd just grabbed any random person from the high school drama club, I would have failed?

Basically, I didn't win this prize...Fushimi did.

Clap, clap, clap.

I received applause from my classmates that morning during homeroom.

"Um, thank you, thank you..."

Getting so much attention was super embarrassing.

"Fushimi, you told Waka, didn't you?"

Waka handed out a notice first thing in the morning. It was a printout of the film competition's website announcing my award.

"Of course!" she replied. "I saw the website had been updated, and I just had to let the world know!"

I sighed in the face of her innocent gaze. "It's embarrassing."

"I think everyone is happy to hear that the director of our school festival project has got the skills, you know?"

Maybe. But I wanted to be the one to tell them when I was ready.

...Although, I would never want to boast about my supposed achievement, so I probably would've ended up keeping quiet about it forever.

"Takayan, congrats!" Deguchi bared his teeth in a huge grin and gave me a

thumbs-up.

"That's amazing, Director!"

"I knew you were doing a good job when we were filming."

"Takamori might be quiet, but between this and his role as class rep, you can tell he's actually pretty capable. He's not half-bad."

Everyone in class was talking about me. I was embarrassed, but it felt kind of nice. I didn't like being the center of attention, but maybe even that wasn't so bad, considering the reason.

Fushimi cleared her throat dramatically, intimidating those around her.

"I know better than anyone that Ryou can achieve whatever he puts his mind to," she said. "He's always been like this."

"Stop bragging about how long you've known him. It's super uncool..." Himeji sighed.

Fushimi didn't seem to hear her, though, since no argument ensued. "Did you tell Mr. Matsuda?" Himeji asked me.

"I'll tell him today, since I've got work."

"You should. He's got high hopes for you. I'm sure he'll be glad to hear it. He might even kiss you, he'll be so excited." I pursed my lips as the image crossed my mind, and Himeji giggled. "That aside, things are getting serious..."

"What things?"

"The way the girls in class look at you is entirely different from before the break."

"I noticed that, too," Fushimi interjected. At some point, she'd put on her glasses, and her brow furrowed intellectually. "Ryou was giving out orders as the director, everyone's leader. And girls love a capable leader."

"They do?" I tilted my head.

Over summer break, the only girls I'd interacted with were Fushimi, Himeji, and Torigoe; I hadn't had any meaningful exchanges with anyone else.

"Hina's analysis makes sense," said Himeji. "As I see it, part of the reason is

that everyone has learned how talented you are, despite your usual tendency to fade into the background..."

"Yes, that makes sense. Ryou might be unsociable, but he's a good, kind boy at heart."

I couldn't tell if they were praising me or dissing me. What's more, I'd prefer they didn't analyze me to my face.

"Yes, yes, everyone quiet down," said Waka. "All students will be gathering at the gym, so let's go."

Chairs rattled as everyone stood up.

"Oh, Takamori!" Waka stopped me. "Just a heads-up, you're going to be called on."

"Called on?"

By who? What about?

"The principal is going to talk about your award."

"Whaaat?!"

Wh-when did things start escalating out of my control?!

Waka had learned about it from Fushimi, and she'd probably told everyone in the staff room.

"The day has finally come when everyone finds out about you...," Torigoe muttered bitterly.

"In no time at all, my childhood friend will become the most popular kid in school...," murmured Fushimi. "Don't forget about me, Ryou..."

The most popular kid in school is you.

Himeji poked my chest with her index finger. "Don't get cocky. You still don't know anything about the real world."

"You're the only one being strict with me, huh?"

"Yes. It is still too soon for you to feel content." Himeji smirked and ushered me onward.

She had this ambition, this drive for self-improvement that went beyond a normal high schooler's.

When we arrived at the gym, a regular school meeting took place. Then my name was called, just like Waka had said. It was painful getting up onstage. I didn't want every single student looking at me.

The principal explained the competition and announced I had won an award. The reaction was not particularly huge, but everyone clapped, like in homeroom.

I was getting all the attention, but as the evaluator's comment had stated, Fushimi was a big part of why I'd won, and Torigoe had played a significant role as well.

I decided to be very clear about that if anyone asked for details.

A few people did come up to me as we left the gym, both from our class and others. I figured that would be it, but more people came to see me at the end of every period.

"I also love movies," a girl in the drama club told me.

I could feel the pitch-black aura audibly emanating from Fushimi, who was sitting on my right. "I think I like them more than she does," she said.

Why was she making this a competition?

"She looks like a poser," she continued.

"Stop acting like you're so cool," I shot back.

Weren't you a people pleaser? Stop being so aggressive.

The girl couldn't stand the awkward mood and left with a forced smile on her face.

Then another girl stopped by.

"I've been making videos on my phone, do you have any advice?"

She wanted to know how to improve the videos she posted on social media.

"Oh, that's easy."

My interest in film had started when I began editing videos for Mana's account, after all. As I tried to explain, however, I felt another pitch-black aura emanating from Himeji, who was sitting on my left. It, too, seemed to rumble in my ears.

You too, Himeji?

"Do you really need to ask him about that? Just look it up on the Internet," she said, openly hostile.

"Huh? Wha? Who asked you?"

"I'm just stating the facts."

Why are you starting arguments?

I tried smoothing it over, but the girl left extremely angry.

I heard a muffled chuckle and turned around to find Torigoe's shoulders rocking up and down.

"Stop laughing and help me stop them," I said.

"Sorry. But it's no wonder you're not very popular, what with the gods of wind and thunder parked on either side of you."

The god of wind on my right side was watching the classroom door, checking whether anyone else was coming.

The god of thunder on my left fumed and grumbled, "For starters, I am way more popular than Ryou."

Now you're coming after me? What gives?

"Seems they have your defense covered. I'm relieved." Torigoe laughed again.

Meanwhile, my "defense" ignored any and all guys who approached me.

Whenever a friendly guy from some sports club or a nerdy dude came by, Fushimi would say, "Ryou, this is your chance to make friends."

"They can hear you, you know? It's embarrassing."

"Um, as you can see, Ryou is introverted and sometimes pretentious, but he is not a bad person!" Himeji joined in.

"Don't give me an introduction, either. That's even more embarrassing!"

And aren't you mostly dissing me?

I figured I might get a few more days in the limelight, and that would be it.

Fushimi and I were walking to the station after school when I felt my cell phone vibrate for an unusually long time. It turned out to be a call from an unknown number—from another cell phone.

The only possibility I could think of was that, since Mana had been telling everyone at her school about my award, it might be an old acquaintance from middle school who'd heard the news.

"Sorry, I gotta pick this up."

Fushimi flashed me the "okay" sign.

"Yes, hello?"

"This is Wakatsuki from Top Agency speaking."

It was a man I didn't know. Was it a wrong number?

"Yes?"

"Is this Ryou Takamori?"

"Yes, that's me."

Wakatsuki... Who's that? Hmm, wait. I think I've heard that name somewhere. Top Agency sounds familiar, too.

"Congratulations on your award. I was one of the judges in the competition."

Oh, right. It was the name of the entertainment office listed on the competition website.

"Thank you very much."

If I remembered correctly, this Mr. Wakatsuki was one of the agency's top brass.

What did he want with me? Could it be...he was scouting me? Maybe he'd been so enamored with my film that he wanted to lock me in as a video director or something while I was still young.

I got anxious all of a sudden. I felt my face grow hot and my fingers tremble as they held up the phone.

"I-is something the matter?"

"Your short film was very good."

I had no idea where this was going; I could only wait for him to continue.

Fushimi looked at me curiously from a distance. She must've realized I wasn't speaking with a friend.

"It didn't have any credits, did it?"

"Oh, right. It didn't. Was I supposed to add them?"

"It doesn't affect your evaluation, but most people do." Mr. Wakatsuki let out a low-pitched chuckle. "Is the girl in your film a friend from school?"

"Yes, she is."

"I want you to tell me about her."

Something about this felt off, so I made sure to answer his questions without giving away any of her personal information.

...So it wasn't me he was interested in.

It should have been obvious from the beginning which of us was more compelling.

"I asked her to star in it because she was taking acting lessons."

"I see, I see." Mr. Wakatsuki gave a subdued reply before asking, "Would you mind putting her in contact with me?"

I told him I would ask her about it, before hanging up. He said to give her the number he'd used to call me.

I put my phone back in my pocket, and Fushimi looked at me suspiciously.

"Who was that, Ryou?"

"Err... One of the judges from the competition."

"Wha?! A-and?! What did they say?!" Fushimi's eyes lit up.

I should tell her, but I don't know anything about that guy. I don't even know if he is who he says he is. Maybe I should get confirmation first.

"He praised the film and the actress."

"Oh! That's awesooome! They even mentioned me!" She punched the air. "They talked about me in the evaluator's comment, too. Oh gosh... I'm so hyped!"

"I only won because of you. Thank you. I mean it."

Fushimi laughed cheerily. "I owe you my thanks, too, for asking me to help you. We won because we were both great, right?"

"I hope so..." A shadow passed over my face as I thought back to the phone call.

"I'm sure neither of us could have done it alone," Fushimi said. She was so happy, she was practically skipping. "Now let's make that school festival short just as amazing and famous!"

"That's not happening."

"Yes, it is!" Fushimi grinned mischievously.

I had work, so we said good-bye at the station and boarded trains going in opposite directions.

"Wakatsuki? From Top Agency? Yeah, I know him." Mr. Matsuda glanced at me as he filed his fingernails.

"He called me today," I said.

"Did he, now?" He raised an eyebrow.

I was in the middle of my job answering emails at Himeji's agency, Reiji Performing Arts.

"What's he want with you, Ry?"

"I submitted a short film to a Shinoh Cinemas competition and won the special prize and..."

"W-wait, you did what?!"

"Anyway, that's not what I want to talk about."

"I-I-I-I-I said wait!"

I'd already gone through this reaction way too many times and just wanted to get to the point.

"We gotta celebrate! Get Aika here!"

"Thank you, but please let me finish."

"Gosssshhh! Stop putting on airs!" He snorted.

At last, he seemed ready to listen, and I told him about the call.

"I don't like it one bit," he said. "He's just using you to get to Fushimi."

His manly remark—perhaps *gallant* was a better word, since I didn't want to make him mad—instantly cleared up the hazy feeling in my chest.

"Are you gonna shoot him down? You haven't told her yet, have you?"

"I was thinking of ignoring it if he or his agency weren't the real deal."

"So that's why you asked me."

"Yes, exactly."

I gave him the phone number the man had used.

It seemed that, though Mr. Matsuda wasn't too familiar with him, he did have him listed in his cell phone contacts. He looked at both screens with an annoyed expression.

"That's the right number. Keiji Wakatsuki, Top Agency's CEO. Look him up."

I did as I was told and searched his name on the web.

I ended up on the company's home page, which was plastered with pictures of their talent. I could see a lot of young actors and models from recent commercials and TV dramas. Another page featured a photo of Wakatsuki himself.

"They're in the same business as us, but their agency is still pretty new, and they're quite ambitious," said Mr. Matsuda.

"So he is real."

"That he is."

Still, something bugged me about the way Mr. Matsuda was talking about this Wakatsuki guy. Right from the beginning, I got the impression he didn't like him very much.

"Fushimi has already failed a few auditions for other companies," I said. "I think this could be her lucky break. It sounded like he recognized her talent."

"Why don't you ask her, then? You can rest assured the company is real. Leave it up to her."

"I will."

"Unhappy about something?"

"Huh?"

"It's written all over your face... Remember, Ry, in the end, the director is someone who works behind the scenes. It's impossible to stand out more than the actors. Only a few auteurs ever earn that kind of recognition."

I didn't know how Mr. Matsuda did it, but every once in a while, it was like he could read my mind. I hated how right he was. Many times, he'd give me the approval I craved or console me when I couldn't get it elsewhere. He had a really sharp eye.

"...I just can't help thinking, after that phone call, that people liked Fushimi's acting way more than my composition, framing, and editing."

When I tried to put my frustrations into words, Mr. Matsuda snorted.

"Don't underestimate the professionals. You're not the only one who worries about stuff like that, Ry. And rest assured, those in the know are giving you a good look."

I felt more at ease after hearing that.

Even so, I was positive Fushimi must've been a lot more attractive than the other films' actors.

"But forget about all that for now! We've gotta throw you a party!"

Mr. Matsuda grinned and started writing something down in his notebook.

4 Mana's Future

"Hey, Mana, what high school are you gonna go to?"

I asked the question casually over dinner while we were watching TV. The program just then was about high school life, so it was easy to broach the topic.

"Hmmm, I'm not sure."

Mana, still wearing her apron, was holding a bowl in one hand while using chopsticks to grab more food with the other.

Despite her frivolous-looking style, Mana was a serious person with a good attitude, not to mention a great cook. She was smart, too. She'd shown me her test grades once over the break, and I'd been flabbergasted. She had above an eighty-five in every single subject. The only person I knew with grades like hers was Fushimi.

"Why not go to Seiryo? You're smart."

Seiryo University High School for Girls was the school Shinohara, who Mana called "Boss," attended. It had the highest standard score in the area, and many of its students went on to attend its famous university.

"Their uniform is peak, for sure."

Peak? Does she mean "good"?

I had no idea what made girls' uniforms good or bad, but it was true that Seiryo's was recognizable at a glance, and clearly distinct from those of public schools.

"A lot of girls wanna go there just for the uniform, right?" I glanced at her as I said this, gauging her reaction. She continued to move her chopsticks, totally unbothered.

Evidently, the uniform wasn't a big deal to her.

"I wonder where I should go," she muttered, chopsticks in her mouth.

You should just go wherever you want, I thought. But then I wondered if the sheer number of options had her feeling paralyzed.

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"Why did you choose your school, Bubby?"

"Because it's close to home."

"Simple."

"Right?" I smiled.
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If I was being honest, it was also because their standard score wasn't all that high, so even a bad student like me could get in if I made an effort.

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"Do you know why Hina chose it?"
"No... I wonder."
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Fushimi had always had good grades, even back in elementary school. She could've gone to Seiryo, like Shinohara. Maybe she didn't care about going to a high-achieving school, since she'd already decided she wanted to be an actress.

"Since you brought it up," said Mana, "it just so happens we had a bunch of presentations today from potential schools."

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"And?"

"Seiryo has a lot of clubs. It looks fun."

"Well, there you go."

"..."
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Mana stared at me. I paid her no mind and continued eating.

Oh, is this pamphlet about that?

I casually grabbed a brochure that had been left on the table and opened it up. Come to think of it, I remembered getting something similar when I was my sister's age.

A model with a breezy smile on her face was wearing the school's uniform. The text detailed possible paths after graduation, school events, and clubs.

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"So you want to join a club in high school?"

"Nah."
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But you just said they looked fun...

"Hina chose your school to be with you, by the way."

"She did?"

"Yeah."

Mana interacted with our neighbors a lot more than I did. I bet that's where she got her info.

"It is close, after all. From our house, and hers."

Not that close, though, since we still had to take a train.

Not giving the topic much thought, I grabbed another piece of potato—or, I tried to. Mana grabbed the same one with her own chopsticks, as if saying, "Hold up."

"Hey, I was about to take that," I said.

"That means your school is also close to me."

"Huh? Yeah, I guess. I commute from home, after all..."

It seemed she was really determined to eat that bit of potato, so I decided to try for something else. But when I reached for another piece of food, she stopped me again.

She's doing it on purpose.

"What?" I asked.

"What are you thinking, Bubby?" She looked super mad.

"About what?"

"You don't mind if I go to Seiryo?"

Not...really?

"It's a private school," she continued, "so it'd cost a lot. I'd have to take a crowded train every morning."

"Well, that last bit would be the same even if you went to my school."

"You want me to get molested on the train?"

"No, of course not. Why are you assuming that'll happen?"

Mana pouted silently and refused to answer.

The truth was, I had already witnessed such a thing happening twice—so I knew there was no guarantee it wouldn't happen to her.

And I was pretty sure she'd roll up her miniskirt until it became a microskirt, making it even more likely than with Himeji or Fushimi. But that would be the same no matter which school she attended, so long as she took the train.

Was it actually our finances she was worried about?

"Why're you mad, Mana?" I poked her slippers.

"I'm not mad."

People who say that are always mad.

Mana finished eating before me and left to start the dishes. She clanged the plates against each other loudly as she worked.

Mmm. I haven't seen her this upset in a while. From experience, trying to say anything in this situation will only make things worse.

"Well, my school has Torigoe, Fushimi, and Himeji, so it might be more easygoing for you."

If this backfires, I'm retreating for today.

Timidly, I looked up.

"Sounds super-duper," she said, still cleaning the dishes.

She didn't look happy, but it seemed like I hadn't screwed up, at least.

"...And I'll be there, too, so why not?"

"Well, I guess if you want me to, I could do that."

Are you sure this is the best way to decide your future?

"Mana, you need to think very carefully abou—"

"Waaaaah! You're such a stupid idiot, Bubby!" Mana shouted. It was like a dam had burst. "Dumb jerk! We only get to be together for one year in high school! Of course I wanna be with you!"

Her breathing was ragged.

Was that supposed to be obvious?

"Yet here you are, telling me to go to Seiryo. It drives me crazy. I know you love me more than you let on! You're totally obsessed. Be more honest with your feelings!"

I did love my sister, but I wouldn't say I was obsessed.

"Don't make me out to be some kind of pervert," I said.

"You wanna go to high school with me, don't you?"

Mm. Mmm...?

I thought about saying no, but I didn't want to make her any more upset.

"Uh... Well, err, sure, I guess..."

"See!" Mana smirked.

She'd basically forced me to say it... This was exactly how she ended up getting those ideas about me being obsessed with her.

"Either way, Mama said to choose a public school, so I was already set on going to yours."

If you'd already decided, what was all that?

Mana's mood instantly did a one-eighty, and she began humming cheerfully.

(5) Torigoe's Thoughts

I was sincerely happy about Takamori's award, especially considering I'd helped out a bit.

I would've thought he'd be over the moon about it, but he was the same old Takamori.

The thing was, that wasn't the case for those around him. People's impressions of him had changed. Now they looked at him with awe, like someone amazing they'd never noticed before.

I knew this from experience—I was the same.

I'd known what the short would be about, but once it was all put together, and with Hiina's acting on top, the film had become something entirely different.

Once everyone realized Takamori had that kind of talent, the rest of the class started to treat him with a kind of reverence. This realization had begun to set in while working on our school festival project, but it had sped up considerably once he got that award.

Boys who had previously never said a word to him began approaching him and calling him "Directooor!" in a friendly, jokey manner. The girls had a harder time getting close, however, due to the beauties at his left and right putting up a protective barrier and keeping them at bay.

I appreciated that. The idea of a bunch of poser girls learning how awesome he was and descending on him all of a sudden made my heart lurch.

All our teachers touched on the news at the beginning of their respective classes. They would congratulate him or ask him a bunch of questions, like some kind of interview.

He always replied flatly, but I could see his expression cloud over now and again.

... Was I just imagining it?

Maybe he was simply fed up with being asked the same questions over and over.

A while back, he was just like me; he had no friends, he preferred eating lunch in silence by himself, and he had no goals to speak of. He just wanted to coast through school...

If you'd told me a year ago that he'd suddenly be the center of everyone's attention, I wouldn't have believed you.

I was just as happy as I was sad.

It felt like a band I'd supported since their indie days had suddenly gone mainstream—like before I realized it, he'd taken off for some place beyond my reach. It made me feel incredibly lonely.

If only I had something to dedicate myself to, too...

I spaced out in class, spinning a pen idly in my hand. If only a goal would fall from the heavens into my lap. As if.

After class, I had library duty; I put away my stuff and stood up. The class reps were merrily writing out the day's journal entry.

"Ryou, you spelled that wrong."

"No, no, this is how you write it. This is how I've always written it."

"Don't be stubborn."

They were flirting, like always. I felt a pang of jealousy...

Brushing away the feeling, I made my way to the library and sat down behind the counter. My only jobs were to help students check out books and return books to the shelves.

Few students used the library, anyway, so I spent most of my time reading.

"An award! I wish I could win an award!" the librarian said to me.

"Oh, you mean the short film?"

She probably didn't know I was friends with Takamori.

"Yeah. I recently submitted a novel I wrote to a competition for new authors, but I didn't win."

"You write novels?"

"Just for fun. But I'm painfully aware of how amazing it is to win something like that."

"Yeah."

A novel... Could I write a novel?

"How do you write?"

"I use my computer. Though recently I've also been writing on my phone."

Oh right. I had this image of using pen and paper, but you can just do everything digitally. Suddenly, the idea of writing seemed a lot easier.

Maybe I can try that. I doubt it'll go well at first, but I have some experience after helping with that screenplay. I bet I can write something decent, at least.

"Mii, Mii." I phoned my bestie as soon as I got home.

"What's up?"

"I'm gonna write a novel."

"I heard about the award. Takaryou's influence, huh?" She giggled. "Let me read it when you're done. Personally, I'd like to request the rawest, most passionate BL of all time."

As usual, her response made me chuckle.

"I haven't decided what to write yet. But yeah, I'll let you read it once it's ready."

The conversation derailed after that, and we started talking about manga we'd been obsessing over lately. Before I knew it, an hour had flown by.

Mii sighed. "What in the world is Takaryou doing? You're such a nice, earnest, BL-loving girl."

"Did you need to include that last bit?"

I knew that Takamori saw me as someone special in his life, one way or

another, and honestly, that was enough for me.

"What if he likes boys?"

"I don't think so. I saw the porn manga in his room."

"Mmm. Then maybe the Takamori family has a rule where they're not allowed to fall in love..."

"What is he, an idol?" I chuckled.

"Otherwise, it doesn't make any sense. From my perspective as a bystander, it seems totally unnatural."

That I agreed with.

Soon, our conversation came to an end.

"A rule against falling in love..."

It couldn't be. ManaMana had never mentioned anything like that. If anything, she seemed to be helping me out from time to time.

"If that's not it..."

Maybe he's just afraid?

6 Home Ec Quirks

I told Fushimi about Wakatsuki as she, Himeji, and I made our way to school.

"The head of an agency who was a judge for my short said he wanted to get in contact with you after seeing your performance."

"With me?" She widened her eyes in surprise. "After seeing my performance?" She spoke in a low voice as if still digesting what I'd said.

"You know anything about Top Agency, Himeji?"

"I've heard of them," she replied. "I don't have a lot of info, but I know some girls who work for them."

Apparently, she knew them well enough that they'd say hello whenever they met on the job.

"They have a website with more information," I told Fushimi. "So you can take a look at it later."

"Y-yeah!"

Fushimi nervously took out her phone and tapped away. She was probably pulling up the website as we spoke.

"I got confirmation from Mr. Matsuda that they're legit, by the way."

"R-really?!"

I'd decided to give her his number if she showed interest. Who would've thought that my short film would become Fushimi's big break?

"Ryou, we gotta celebrate! Let's go all out! We can go to a karaoke place, a net café, order some pizza, go for some sushi...!"

"That's...certainly going all out... Yeah, let's do it."

"All right!"

I'd just received my award money, so I could cover all of it. I wouldn't have won without Fushimi, after all.

""

I felt a prickling sensation in my chest. Every time it happened, I remembered what Mr. Matsuda had said: "In the end, the director is someone who works behind the scenes."

Himeji was peering into my face.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" I asked.

"You are free this weekend, aren't you, Ryou?"

"Can't you phrase that more like a question?"

She was right, though, I was.

"There's a SakuMome concert Saturday evening. Want to go?"

Does Fushimi have a date in mind for the party?

I glanced over at her.

"Party... I can't wait...," she muttered.

She was lost in her own world, but it didn't seem like the party was happening right away.

"Mr. Matsuda got me two tickets," Himeji continued. "The girls want me to go, it seems."

I noticed an unusual darkness in her eyes.

SakuMome—Sakurairo Moment—was the idol group she'd previously belonged to.

Himeji had quit due to poor health and had moved back here. I figured she was asking me to come along because it was hard for her to go alone. Maybe it felt like going to watch a game played by your former team.

"It'll be a good distraction," she said.

"In that case, let's go," I replied.

Himeji's face lit up. She seemed to notice her own change in expression and

shook her head. Reining in her emotions, she put on her usual composed look and continued haughtily, "The girls are all very cute, though not as cute as I am. And they'll be dancing and singing and throwing smiles at everyone."

"Hmm? So what?"

"I'm saying, don't get the wrong impression! They don't care about you in the slightest."

"You don't need to tell me that." I sighed.

What kind of person do you think I am?

Third and fourth period that day were taken up by home economics. We were practicing cooking.

Students formed teams of four, so I naturally ended up with my two childhood friends and Torigoe. They each wore their own apron, and somehow, that was enough to make them look like homemakers.

The teacher wrote down the recipe for each dish on the blackboard and explained what we'd be doing.

That day's recipes could also be found in our textbooks: seasoned rice with pork miso soup and boiled spinach. A very typical Japanese menu.

"You can cook, Hina?"

"Better than you, Ai. That's for sure."

Himeji snorted derisively. "You wish. Pathetic."

Are you sure you should be talking, Himeji? Surely you haven't forgotten the detergent soup you served me?

"Again with the quarreling," Torigoe muttered to herself.

"You can actually cook, right?" I said.

"Yup. And more than just boiled pumpkin, unlike a certain someone," she replied.

Oh, Fushimi... She isn't wrong, either.

"Himeji looks like she'd cook up some wacky stuff, too. So I'm pretty sure I'm





Torigoe's rather biased opinion caught the other girls' attention.

"Shii, are you talking about me? You'll see. The time has come for me to prove my versatility."

Let's hope you're not bluffing...

"I bet the most you've done is help your mom out in the kitchen a few times, Shizuka."

"I cook for my whole family when she's not home, though."

uu ""

That shut them up. Torigoe smirked.

"L-let's duke it out! See who's better!" Fushimi barked.

I chided her. "This isn't a competition. We're in class. We have to work together."

The other teams were already getting ready and splitting up the duties. We were the only team arguing among ourselves.

"I cannot stand by and allow someone to insult me like this," declared Himeji. "The time has come to show you that, though my cooking may be 'wacky,' it can still make even veteran professionals shed tears of envy."

I regret to say that time has not come and likely never will.

"I'll do my own thing," declared Torigoe. "You two can follow the recipe and make boring old seasoned rice."

This was war. There was no stopping it now. Even Torigoe, the most rational one among them, was picking fights.

"We're supposed to work together as a team," I said.

aaa nnn

None of them were listening.

The warring parties silently began preparing their own dishes. But it didn't make sense to hold a competition if everyone was making something different. What were they gonna do?

I stood back and watched anxiously. Then they all grabbed some spinach.

...What about the other two dishes? Uh... Am I gonna have to make the rest?

While all three of them began preparing their spinach, I checked the recipes and got started on the other dishes.

The other teams seemed to be having fun, but over here, the tension was palpable.

"Move, Hiina. I'm using the water."

"No, I'm using it."

"Shizuka, I can't open the shelf with you in the way."

"Do it later."

All three of them were the type to insist on doing things their way, so the thought of sharing or yielding never crossed their minds.

I continued my own work while glancing at them now and then to make sure they were working.

Torigoe was making the best progress. Then Himeji, then Fushimi, in that order. They worked in silence, as if they were on some TV cooking competition.

Meanwhile, the other teams, made up of boys and girls working together, chattered and giggled while washing and cutting the vegetables. They were fully enjoying this chapter of their youth.

"Takayan, this isn't how you're supposed to split duties." Deguchi approached me with a chuckle. "They're all making boiled spinach?"

"It's a matter of pride. Everyone was desperate to show their superiority, and now we're here."

"You sure have it rough, huh ...?"

Deguchi looked at me with pity and lent me a hand with the work.

"What about your team?" I asked.

"The sink and stove are taken, so there's nothing for me to do."

So that's why he was here.

"I guess it's awkward being the only one standing around."

"Yeah."

My dishes were really moving along now that I had an assistant.

I glanced at Himeji, the one I was most worried about, and it seemed like she was doing all right. She was watching the other two and copying them. I figured that was for the best.

Fushimi was ever so carefully cutting the spinach. She checked every cut with a ruler. This is cooking, not a science experiment...

Comparatively, Torigoe was doing great; it seemed her confidence was justified.

I was being careful myself, making sure to follow the recipe and not mess anything up.

Eventually, the rice finished cooking, and the soup came together, and I just had to wait for the other three to finish.

Why're they all taking more time than I did?

"You may go ahead and eat your food once you're finished," the teacher said, and all the teams that were done began eating.

"There we go!" Himeji smiled confidently. She was the type to never suspect she might be wrong...

Her boiled spinach looked decent, at least at first glance.

"I'm finished, too."

Torigoe was next. She might have been slow, but I wasn't too worried about the taste or quality.

"Wh-why are you so fast?! I doubt you did a good job!"

Fushimi's earnestness seemed to be failing her here. It looked like she'd need a bit more time.

"Hina, speed is also an important skill in cooking," said Himeji. "The ingredients will spoil if you take too long."

"And save your comments until *after* you've tried ours," Torigoe added. She had a point.

By the time Fushimi was done, some other teams had already finished eating, and it was almost lunchtime.

We had three servings of boiled spinach. Everyone grabbed a different-colored bowl to make it easy to tell them apart. Torigoe's was white, Himeji's purple, and Fushimi's light blue.

Wait, isn't Fushimi's...a teacup...?

Torigoe and Himeji glanced at her curiously but didn't try to correct her. It was a contest, after all—no need to help out the enemy.

"Fushimi... You sure lack awareness for someone so careful." Deguchi had blurted out what we were all thinking.

It was then that I realized Deguchi had grabbed a seat like he was part of our team all along.

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone sit down," said Fushimi, taking charge.

Has she still not realized her mistake?

"Hands together, Ryou. Give your thanks."

I'm getting scolded for improper manners while being served food in a teacup... You really think this is normal?

All five of us said our thanks and started eating.

The seasoned rice and pork soup turned out well, since I'd made them exactly like the recipe said.

"Takayan, you make a good soup."

"I know."

The girls were staring at one another's hands, as if to keep the others in check.

"Should we have Ryou be the judge?" asked Himeji. "I believe he has a good sense of taste, as he was brought up eating Mana's cooking."

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"Yeah. Go ahead, Ryou," said Fushimi. "Put an end to this conflict."
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"Okay, okay."

Let's start with the teacup...

The moment I took a bite, a startling sweetness spread through my mouth.

"Uh... F-Fushimi, what did you put in this...?"

"You like sweet stuff, right? Like the pumpkin."

"But that's naturally sweet! You don't just add sugar to anything!"

"I-is it weird...?"

I knew how hard she'd worked on it. I wanted to reassure her somehow, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Anything is great when a pretty girl makes it! Who cares about the flavor?!"

Deguchi, I'm not sure that sounds as reassuring as you think it does.

Then he took a bite.

"Oh... Fushimi, I'm so sorry. I can't eat this. And why is it in a teacup? That's pretty weird."

He finally said it!

"I-it's not weird!"

"It is weird, Hiina."

"Yup. Weird."

The psychic damage was considerable; Fushimi pulled up her legs and hugged her knees. "It's still edible... It's not weird..."

Himeji was next. She grabbed her bowl and explained smugly, "In order to bring out the flavor of the ingredients, I cooked it rare."

Isn't that just a meat thing? What on earth is rare spinach?

I took a bite. It was crispy and tasted like grass.

...Himeji, you're supposed to boil it.

Then I remembered she'd said speed was an important skill in cooking...

Y-you're not supposed to speed things up like this!

"There's still more, so please, eat up." She smiled, but my appetite was gone.

"Ai... Heh. This is raw," Fushimi said, getting in some payback. "You're making it sound nice by saying it's *rare*, but it's just raw."

"Like you can talk, a girl who puts sugar in her boiled spinach."

After seeing my reaction, Deguchi didn't even try it.

"Deguchi, didn't you say that anything is great when a pretty girl makes it? Go ahead. Eat it. Come on."

I needed help finishing it.

"Sorry, Takayan," he said seriously and shook his head. "I lied. Some things are beyond redemption."

He ate up everything I'd made, though, and asked for seconds.

Am I his number one...?

Finally, I tried Torigoe's.

...Yep, it was as I'd thought. Hers was the least offensive, and thus the hardest to comment on. She'd certainly done a decent job. Not bad, but not great, either.

After receiving no comments from his poison tester, Deguchi had a bite, too, and immediately pointed at Torigoe. "Torigoe wins."

"Yup. No objections."

A flash of joy colored her impassive expression. "Yay."

When the lunchtime bell rang, some guys came up to our group. It seemed they'd heard something about two pretty girls cooking.

We offered them Fushimi's and Himeji's leftovers, but they realized right away that something was amiss. They left without eating any, simply smiling quietly to themselves.

Damn, there was no fooling them...

Once we finally began cleaning up, Torigoe started putting the others down.

"Oh, poor Hiina, poor Himeji, so bad at cooking."

"I'm just not in my best condition today," Himeji said. "Don't think you've won."

You're never in "good condition," Himeji.

"Yeah, Shii. I'll win next time, you'll see."

Where is this confidence coming from?

In the end, Mana's cooking was the best, though it felt a little unfair comparing everyone to her.

7 Concert, Dinner, Truth

I gave Wakatsuki's number and email to Fushimi that afternoon.

"Keep in mind I've never talked to him in person, so I don't really know what he's like."

"Okay. Thanks. I'll try getting in contact with him."

He'd texted me his email, in case Fushimi was wary of calling him on the phone.

She took a picture of my phone's screen showing the data, looking nervous all the while.

"Hope it goes well," I said.

"Yeah. Hopefully he's not, like 'You're different from how I imagined..."

I understood why she was antsy. Fushimi had already failed multiple auditions. She'd never gotten an unsolicited offer before. This could be her chance.

"You'll be fine. He wanted to talk to you because he liked your acting. He wants your talent in his agency, right?"

"D-does he?" Fushimi chuckled awkwardly.

Unless he'd changed his mind, it sounded to me like he was checking her interest, not calling her in for some kind of interview. Still, it was reasonable for her to be worried, considering what she'd been through.

"I don't think you need to worry about offending him. Act like you always do, and you should be fine."

"Y-you think?"

It would be irresponsible of me to say any more, so I left it at that.

Later that night, Fushimi texted me.

We're gonna meet on Saturday!

I replied to her with a suitable emoji.

So she was finally going to become a celebrity. Just thinking about it made me feel a little lonely.

"Himeji, did you fail a lot of auditions at first?"

It was Saturday. We were sitting across from each other at a café in town. The concert was that evening, and we had some time to kill.

"You mean auditions to become an idol?"

Himeji's street clothes had changed to accommodate the fall season—she looked more refined and mature.

"Yeah, that sort of thing."

Himeji took a sip of her café au lait before saying simply, "No. I did not fail."

Despite what she said, I frequently heard stories on TV about actors struggling with not making the cut.

"...Seriously?"

"Yes. Including the audition for the stage play I'm working on now, I've never failed. That is, if we only count in-person interviews."

She's even more powerful than I realized!

Fushimi, meanwhile, was on a losing streak.

"I ended up choosing Mr. Matsuda because of his passion and good character."

So she was accepted to other agencies, too? No wonder she had so much confidence.

Then I told her about Mr. Wakatsuki.

"Why Hina?"

"Well, he saw her acting."

Himeji looked down at the table. "The reality is, there's loads of girls on Hina's level, both in terms of looks and skill."

"I guess he just saw something special in her."

"Hmm..."

Himeji's reaction didn't seem very positive, just like Mr. Matsuda's. Maybe from the perspective of someone already in the industry, it didn't seem that special.

"Speaking of skill, have you gotten any better yet?"

Himeji puffed out her chest and smiled proudly. "You wouldn't believe your eyes if you saw me now. You must come and see the first showing. You'll think, Oh, how I wish I had kissed cute little Ai when I had the chance!"

Was that supposed to be an impression of me? That's what I sound like to her?

"And what would you do if that actually happened?" I said jokingly.

Himeji blinked repeatedly; my response had clearly taken her by surprise.

"W-well, if it comes to that... Th-then you should just kiss me!" she cried out, her face flushed.

She'd raised her voice, and I could feel people around us staring.

"Hey, keep your voice down."

Ignoring me, she went on. "T-to begin with, I already gave you permission, s-so why won't you t-take advantage of the offer!"

Oh right. I forgot about that.

"My acting will blow your socks off," she continued.

"Don't worry, I'll be wearing shoes."

Himeji did not like my joke. "Gosh... You simply refuse to leave your field, don't you Ryou? And you won't go into anyone else's, either."

I...had an idea of what she was talking about. She was probably referring to my apparent lack of interest in romance.

"That makes it easy to stay, of course," she muttered to herself while poking my sneakers with her foot. "What I mean is, you can do it—so just go ahead and

do it." She challenged me with her eyes.

"I gotta prepare myself mentally and stuff, you know?"

"Is that the problem?"

"Huh? What do you mean, that?"

"Nothing." She shook her head. "I heard Mr. Matsuda made a reservation at a nice place to celebrate your award."

Apparently, we were eating there after the concert.

Himeji showed me the restaurant's website on her phone. I could tell immediately that it was not the sort of place high schoolers went to.

"I made sure to tell Mana, but..."

Himeji observed me from the top of my head to my chest and all the way to my feet below the table, and then she smiled. Her sincere expression overlapped with my memories of her and made my heart briefly flutter.

"Yup! She did a good job."

"Mana...? Oh, so that's why she was so fussy about my clothes and hair today."

I was wearing a collared shirt under a muted jacket. She'd complimented me as I left, saying I looked more handsome this way.

It was true that my usual clothes would have stood out at that restaurant.

The concert venue didn't have seats, though. We'd all be standing. Wouldn't I look weird there?

"We'll have VIP seating, so you don't have to worry about getting crushed by the fans," Himeji said, as if reading my mind.

The time finally came, and we left the café. Himeji wore sunglasses so she wouldn't be recognized. As far as I was concerned, they only made her more conspicuous.

"I'm feeling pretty nervous," she said. "It's my first time watching one of their concerts since I left..."

"Did you think they wouldn't want to see you?"

"I did at first, but it seemed I was just being paranoid. Mr. Matsuda said the girls were happy that I'd recovered and started working again."

Himeji had told me before that she'd caused them a lot of trouble, but it seemed like the other members didn't feel that way at all.

As we approached the venue, I started seeing people who looked like fans. They had merchandise in their bags or wore concert T-shirts, making it pretty obvious. There was a huge crowd by the tent selling such goods.

We entered through the back, and several members of the staff called out to Himeji.

One after the other, they said things like "Long time no see," "How have you been?" or "It's your first time in the audience, right?"

One of them showed us to a special booth on the third floor with ten or so seats, and we sat down in the corner. There were already tons of fans downstairs. The brochure said the place could hold up to two hundred people.

"This is one of SakuMome's biggest concerts," said their former member.

"Is Mr. Matsuda not joining us?"

"He's the manager, so he's probably backstage with the jitters about now."

Oh right.

Eventually, the lights turned down, and the concert began. It started with an up-tempo song, and light sticks danced in the darkness.

Himeji hummed along, swaying her head in sync with the fans' hands.

"Don't stare," she said in embarrassment when the song was over.

"I couldn't help it. You started doing that unconsciously, huh? Why did you ask me to come anyway?"

At first, I thought she was afraid to face the others alone after leaving the group, but it turned out that wasn't the case, and Himeji didn't seem like that sensitive of a person, either.

"...Because you seemed down."

"Me?"

"Yes. Hina doesn't seem to realize, because she's so hyped about being scouted, but you've become even quieter than before."

I hadn't realized it myself, but I had a hunch what might have caused it.

"Huh, you're usually not this considerate."

"Who do you take me for?" She jabbed my side.

"Lady Aika, right?"

She narrowed her eyes and pouted. "No. I'm your childhood friend."

That's right, Himeji's my childhood friend, too. I offered her a wry grin.

After that, the group sang and danced to a few more songs, taking time to talk between each one, and the concert ended about two hours later.

An instrumental version of one of their songs played in the background as the fans left the venue.

"What did you think?" Himeji asked.

"It's amazing how intense it feels live."

Himeji cleared her throat. "Don't forget I was one of them."

"They're so friendly and authentic, too. I can understand why the fans are so passionate."

"If I'd known you'd enjoy it so much...I could've sent you a ticket at least once...," Himeji muttered, her eyes fixed on the stage.

"Maybe I would've fallen for Aika the idol."

When I'd watched concert recordings before, I'd always thought she had a powerful allure.

"Huh? Huh? What did you just say?"

I tried to get up, but she pulled me down by the hem of my shirt.

"Let's go," I said.

"No way! Look me in the eye and repeat what you just said. Otherwise, we're

not leaving."

"I said I finally understand how your fans feel."

"That's not what you said. You said you would have fallen for Aika."

"So you did hear me. Why make me repeat it? And I said maybe..."

Suddenly, her nice smell tickled my nose.

By the time I realized what was happening, her lips were touching my cheek.

"...!"

I could tell Himeji's face was red, even in the dark. She used her handkerchief to fan herself and stood up.

Did she just...kiss me?

"L-let's go, then," she said. "Get up already."

Himeji rushed off, as if fleeing.

"Wait, that's not the way."

"Ugh!" She quickly turned on her heel and hurried down the stairs.

I followed behind, and we left the venue the same way we'd come.

"I would usually go to the greenroom to greet them afterward," she said, "but I won't do that today, since I didn't bring anything for them."

Himeji called for a taxi with practiced motions. The driver asked us where we were going, and we double-checked the restaurant's address before giving the directions.

As soon as the car started moving, we fell silent. Himeji said nothing about what had happened, so I figured it was best not to mention it.

Then I heard her mutter in a voice so low, I could barely hear it: "That just now...was an accident."

"Oh, okay." What else could I say?

"Now I understand why Hina became so assertive... It's all your fault, just so you know." She wrapped her pinkie around the edge of my hand. "Because nothing moves you."



I could tell from her tone of voice that she didn't mean physically.

Just then, something crossed my mind. It was like a dark haze—it enveloped me, paralyzing my body and mind.

"I'm serious, you know," she said.

"You can't really..."

"What?" She glared at me mischievously. I raised my hands in surrender, and she burst into laughter. "You don't need to try and find ulterior motives behind what I do."

Ulterior...? But I don't...

Or was I doing it subconsciously...?

As I mulled this over, the taxi came to a stop. We paid and got out of the car in front of the restaurant.

Decorative plants whose names I didn't know adorned the entrance. Inside the dimly lit establishment, several couples were dining, wineglasses in hand.

"I believe there's a reservation for Matsuda," I said to the clerk who received us.

"We were waiting for you," he said, showing us inside.

Himeji and I sat next to each other in a booth. Himeji seemed as restless as I was and kept looking from side to side. It was kind of adorable.

The restaurant's interior and furnishings were chic, and we felt hopelessly out of place.

Where's Mr. Matsuda...?

"Ah," Himeji exclaimed.

"What?"

"Mr. Matsuda said he'll be late and that we can start without him."

She showed me her phone, displaying his emoji-filled text.

I'll pay for everything, so let Ry know you can order whatever you like. 🌣

I was relieved to hear that; this place looked expensive.

"...He should've known not to make the reservation for right after the concert," Himeji grumbled.

Since it sounded like Mr. Matsuda would be a while, we called over a waiter and ordered drinks and food.

Salad, pasta, and pizza—and they were all about double the price I was used to.

Himeji and I chatted as we enjoyed the food and battled with the unfamiliar cutlery.

"This is pretty good." Himeji smiled broadly after her first bite of the pasta.

Next, she gulped down her amber-colored drink served in a tall glass.

What did the waiter say it was called? It sounded like a special attack from some edgy anime.

"Phewww, that's good."

"It's not booze, is it?"

"It's a nonalcoholic cocktail."

I guess it's fine, then... Wait, is it?

"Which is better, this or Mana's cooking?" she asked.

"This, I think."

"Ah! The mask has finally slipped! I gotta tell her!"

"No! Don't!"

I would get a beating as soon as I got home, and she'd let me starve for the next few days.

Himeji was only kidding, thankfully. She giggled.

"Is that really alcohol-free?" I asked.

"Why don't you try it and seeee?!"

Himeji's speech was starting to sound a little slurred. Suddenly, she linked

arms with me and got so close, our shoulders were touching. She insisted I try some of the drink and brought the glass up to my mouth. I gave in.

...It tasted lightly carbonated, but I didn't detect any alcohol.

"You're too close," I said.

"This is how everyone's sitting."

The other private seats I'd glimpsed on our way here were occupied by couples snuggling up together, clearly in romance mode.

"It's actually more embarrassing if we keep our distance," she insisted.

"Where's the logic in that?"

Himeji flagged down a waiter as he passed by and ordered another drink with a ridiculously long name.

Since Mr. Matsuda had promised to pay, she was putting in orders left and right. A drink would arrive, and she would gulp it down on the spot and hand the empty glass back to the waiter.

Now she was clinging to my arm like a koala.

"......They didn't tell me...," she mumbled.

"Who? What?"

"They're adding a kiss scene to the stage play."

"O-oh."

"The director and Mr. Matsuda asked me...and I said yes."

"I see."

"I—I didn't want them to know I haven't k-kissed anyone before!"

"There's no need to get all bent out of shape over something like that."

"I'd never hear the end of it from the younger girls."

Aren't you the youngest one?

Himeji had a lot of pride, and this sounded just like her.

"In any case, I don't know if we'll kiss for real in the play, but for practice...I

will kiss you now."

"Wh-wha?! What did you just say?!" I panicked, but Himeji seemed dead serious.

"It's the perfect opportunity."

"No. And look where we are... We're in public."

"No one will see us as long as we don't call a waiter. The other diners wouldn't be so rude as to spy on us."

"That's not the issue."

"Then am I the issue?"

Himeji's eyes wavered, her usual confidence gone.

"No, that's not it...," I said.

"You seem to be totally devoid of self-awareness, Ryou. So I, Goddess Ai, will free you from your curse."

"What are you talking about? Curse...? You're drunk."

Himeji giggled weakly. "I'm not. I told you those were nonalcoholic. I may have called Hina a bad girl...but I am pretty bad myself. Bad enough to provide you with the proper mood and excuse to accept a kiss from me. I hope you can forgive my adorable wiles."

She whispered into my ear as she grabbed my shoulders and brought her face up to mine. Her flushed cheeks drew near, and her supple, cherry-colored lips softly touched mine.

I could see myself reflected in her moist eyes.

Himeji pulled back and caressed her lips with a finger before turning her back on me.

".....I—I should've brushed my teeth first..."

"Same..." Though she didn't exactly give me a chance.

My brain had slowed down, and I was still catching up with what had just happened.

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"That wasn't your first, was it?" she asked.
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".....No."

"So you admit it!" She slapped my cheek lightly.

"Ow!"

"You cheater! Who gave you permission to kiss someone else?! I-it had to be Hina, right?!"

"What do you mean it had to be her?"

It was, of course.

"You promised me first! Gosh! You awful cheater!"

Himeji stomped on my foot.

That hurt, but if it helps you calm down, go ahead...

"H-how many times did you do it?"

"Just once. It just sort of happened..."

"I see. Just once, eh?" Himeji nodded, seemingly satisfied. "So you're not smoothing every chance you get?"

"No."

"I'm still mad, but I guess it could be worse. I forgive you." The goddess had granted me her pardon. "And besides, this one was just, like, practice. You just happened to be convenient. That's all." She spoke quickly, as though she'd prepared the excuse beforehand.

"Don't use me for practice..."

"Then you want me to go kissing other men? Ai's lips aren't so cheap."

"I never said that."

Himeji laughed out loud. She was oddly amped up. She was talking more than usual and wouldn't stop drinking and eating.

Maybe she was trying to hide her embarrassment over the kiss.

Himeji tilted her head and stared at me. "What would you do if I said I want to

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practice some more?"

"I'd give you a plushie."
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"Gosh! You're so dishonest!"

She leaned close to me again, still in high spirits.

♦ Hina Fushimi ♦

I arrived at the Top Agency offices wearing the clothes Mana chose for me.

Mr. Wakatsuki said he wanted to meet and discuss things with me in person. It seemed he wasn't going to simply ask me to join their agency after seeing the short.

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"Aww... I'm shaking..."
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The office was in a high-rise building; I double-checked the floor inside the elevator before pushing the button marked 25.

Ryou was on a date with Ai that day. They were going to have dinner after seeing a concert. I wanted to go with them, but I had the interview. Begrudgingly, I had to tell them to go without me.

What were they doing now?

I wanted to believe that Ai was too stubborn to try anything forceful, but...

I got off the elevator and followed the signs down the hallway until I found a door that looked right.

"G-good afternoon...? I'm Hina Fushimi..."

A few women in plain clothes were working at their computers. They all looked so smart and fashionable.

One of them noticed me. "Ms. Fushimi? I heard from Wakatsuki. Please follow me."

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"Y-yes. Fank hew..."
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I fumbled my words, and she giggled. Then she took me to a sort of drawing

room and asked me to sit on the sofa.

"He'll be here soon. Please make yourself at home."

"Y-yes."

I remained stiff and paralyzed as I waited, going over the Q&A list I'd made for myself the night before. At least I tried to go over it—my nerves erased everything from my mind.

I imagined the guy couldn't be too weird, since he was the CEO and important enough to be a judge in a film competition, but...

"I've got work for you in the adult film industry."

What if he said something like that? I guess I'd have to refuse and head straight for the door.

After waiting restlessly for about twenty minutes, I heard a knock. I immediately straightened up.

"Apologies." A man in his early thirties wearing a fancy suit entered; he had a low voice and a stylish mustache. "I'm Wakatsuki. Pleased to meet you."

I stood up and bowed. "I-i-i-it's m-m-my *pleachur*. I'm Hina Fushimi." I fumbled my words again and blushed.

"Sit down, please. And relax, I don't bite."

"Yes," I said, then sat back down.

He made small talk after our introductions, and, once I was relaxed, he cut to the chase.

"I take it you want to be an actress, Hina?"

"Y-yes. I starred in a play once..."

I told him about it, and he recognized the name.

"Oh, one of that guy's... But I'll be honest, realistically, it's difficult to jump straight into being an actress. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you see, while you can apply to auditions and such, it would be hard for you to get a named role."

"I see." I let my shoulders droop.

Mr. Wakatsuki went on to explain. High-school-aged roles usually went to people in their early twenties, as students like me weren't considered ready yet. On the other hand, for even younger roles, child actors with history and experience always had the upper hand.

"To start out, you'll have to play extras, characters simply named *Girl A* and such."

"Th-that's okay. I understand."

I was well aware that getting a starring role right off the bat would be difficult, so while it was disappointing to hear it spelled out, it wasn't unexpected.

"In any case, that's how it'd be if you were to join us. If you know of somewhere else that could market you better, then you might be better off going with them."

I wouldn't be here if I did.

The other interviews I'd had always went too far. Some places even asked me to be judged in a swimsuit. I had old guys stare at my face, my chest, my legs... It was disgusting.

"By the way, Hina, how is your mother doing these days?"

Memories of her from my childhood flashed through my mind.

"My mother? What...do you mean?"

"You're not close with her?"

"I rarely speak to her. I just get presents on my birthday, and that's it..."

"I see. When I was young, Satomi Ashihara was very famous. I heard her name frequently after getting into the industry, too. She hasn't had many starring roles recently, but she's a good actress with a strong presence."

I only knew her as my mother. She left when I was little, so I barely remembered her to begin with, and I hadn't seen much of her work. Honestly, his praise for her as an actress meant nothing to me.

"I imagine one of the reasons her career continued for so long is because she's in the biggest agency."

"My mother has nothing to do with me or my work," I stated plainly.

I didn't want to hear about my talent being genetic or something that came from my mother or whatever.

"So you don't think your relationship is likely to improve?"

"No. She lives for her work. She has no interest in me."

I got the feeling that she'd only see me as an acquaintance even if I entered the industry.

"Hmm... I see... That's a shame," he said.

A shame...?

"I am sorry to have wasted your time. You can go now."

He stood up.

"Huh?"

But you said nothing about my acting, or what I should do to join you, or the terms, or anything...

Did he really not care about me or my acting? Just my mother?

Was he simply trying to use me to get in contact with her?

"E-excuse me! What about me...joining your agency...?"

I couldn't stay quiet, but he seemed to have already lost interest in me. He spoke flatly.

"Hina, listen. This industry is very small. I heard you've been failing your auditions. There is a reason for that. Girls who have charm, who make you think *This is it*—they pass easily. Even when they have a shortcoming or two."

They pass easily... I thought of Ai.

"You auditioned for seven places and got nothing. That means they saw nothing special about you."

In the face of his cold facts, I could say nothing. All that came out were tears.

I know that better than anyone else.

"I understand you look up to the industry, with all its glamor... You want to become a celebrity, right?"

"I... Yes."

"I'll introduce you to the CEO of another agency. You'll have to deal with some things you may not like, but..."

That's the look. Those eyes. Those foul, moist eyes, staring at me—at my face, my eyes, my chest, my hips, my thighs, my legs. And all the while, I could feel something precious inside me wearing thin as I simply endured.

"You must put up with it if you want to join us. You need that endurance, that ambition, in order to become something from nothing."

I bit my lip hard, trying to keep everything inside. I might have blurted out something I shouldn't have otherwise. Or maybe I would've just sobbed.

I stood up, bowed, and left the room.

The tears kept coming.

He didn't care about me. He only called me here because of my mother.

He knew I'd been failing my auditions, and that's why he made me that offer.

It hurt so bad. I felt so miserable. I couldn't stand the harshness of reality. Soon, my tears completely blocked out my vision.

◆ Ryou Takamori ◆

"Mr. Matsuda says he'll come later to pay," Himeji told me after checking her phone.

Both of us had eaten like animals; I wondered how much it would be. Probably over 10,000 yen.

According to Himeji, Mr. Matsuda was a regular at this place, and he had the pull to delay payment. He sure was one amazing guy—or gal?—to be a regular here.

"I gotta make a pit stop," I said.

"Okay. I'll wait for you outside."

Himeji left the restaurant alone. My heart pounded as I watched her go, but the staff showed no sign of stopping her for leaving without paying.

On my way to the restroom, I heard the high-pitched laughter of a woman and the low chuckle of a man.

"Hmm! I only got a glimpse, but she looked cute!"

"She's got a nice face, that's for sure. But nothing to write home about."

That low voice... I recognized it.

"And still, the CEO calls her to his office!" The woman giggled.

"I thought I should give the girl a reality check."

"You're so mean!" Despite her words, it didn't sound like she was actually criticizing him. "I saw her crying. You slammed her during the interview, didn't you?"

"Please, I didn't go that far. And she didn't cry in front of me."

After hearing that voice and part of their conversation, I ended up eavesdropping. I had a feeling I knew what they were talking about.

A pretty girl. An interview. And that voice.

Could they be talking about Fushimi? Was that Mr. Wakatsuki?

"I thought she might have Satomi Ashihara's or her agency's contact, but it turned out that wasn't the case."

Satomi Ashihara was Fushimi's mother. And that meant...he'd used her.

"And? You didn't let her join?"

"Well, that's up to her. I told her I could introduce her to another agency or she could join ours, but I wasn't going to let her in for free. She had to *put in the work*, if you know what I mean."

"Ugh, you pig!"

"You know it's not like that for everyone. There are the girls we want in, and

the ones who have to work for it. Say whatever you want... Now, give me a minute."

They'd said Fushimi was crying.

I knew how excited she'd been about that meeting.

The weight of her dream of becoming an actress was so much greater than mine. I'd filmed that short for fun, but she was seriously depressed each time she failed an audition during the break. There had been times when she'd seemed like she was about to lose her way.

Then, finally, someone appeared who recognized her talent. She was on cloud nine every day awaiting her moment.

Just thinking about how she must've felt had me clenching my fists. I gnashed my teeth in frustration.

A man came out from a VIP booth, way more luxurious than the one Himeji and I had been at. It had to be him. He wore a fancy suit and an expensive-looking watch.

He seemed to be heading for the restroom. He shot me a puzzled glance before passing me in the dimly lit corridor.

"Um, excuse me." I grabbed his shoulder to stop him. Without realizing it, I was putting a lot of force into my grip.

"Hmm?" He turned around with an irritated expression.

I put my whole weight into my fist and smashed it into his face.

I heard a dull crack. It sounded like I'd hit somewhere delicate.

"Gwoh...!"

Wakatsuki staggered back and fell on his butt.

My fist hurt. My knees trembled. Slowly, I calmed my ragged breathing.

He acted more surprised than hurt, holding his cheek as he lay on the floor, his eyes wide.

"Huh? Wha? What? Uh, who, who are you?"

The moment I hit him, my anger cooled.

What am I doing?

There were plenty of things I wanted to say. But I couldn't cause any more of a scene in a place Mr. Matsuda frequented.

I didn't answer his question and hurried out of the restaurant. Just like Himeji, I wasn't stopped at the entrance.

"What happened, Ryou?" Himeji asked, worried.

"Why do you ask?"

"You have a scary look on your face..."

"Nothing happened. Let's go."

Himeji softly undid my fist.

I realized she wasn't going to believe me.

As we walked silently toward the station, she asked again, "What happened? Was the restroom too crowded and you're holding it in or something...?"

I didn't know whether she was saying that as a joke or if she was serious, but it relaxed me somewhat.

"No, it has nothing to do with the restroom."

"Then what happened?"

I took a deep breath and summarized what I had seen.

"... Top Agency's CEO was there? And he said that?" She frowned.

"Yeah, and I...got a little worked up."

Himeji blinked. I was sure she'd say, "How strange" or "You never get angry." I thought the same.

"I guess it's not that unexpected from you. You do have a stronger sense of justice than you let on..."

For some reason, however, she accepted it. She didn't criticize me one bit for punching him.

"We met back up when you tried to save me from a molester, after all. I know you have a strong chivalrous spirit."

"You think? I've never punched anyone before, though."

"Well, there's always a first time." She wasn't concerned at all—she was practically praising me for it. "How did it feel?" she asked.

"I shouldn't have done it. My hand hurts."

"That's about what I expected from you."

We arrived at the station and grabbed a train headed toward home.

"If..." At last, Himeji broke the silence that had fallen when we'd boarded the train. "If it had been about me, would you have done the same?"

"Huh? ...I wonder."

I'd done it all on impulse, so I wasn't sure how to answer. We got off the train and walked home along the darkened streets. The sun had fully set, and a beautiful blanket of stars shone above us.

"If I was Hina and I heard what you did, my heart would start racing, and I wouldn't be able to contain myself anymore."

"Contain what?"

Himeji sighed and stared at me with narrowed eyes. "Only a boor would ask that."

"Sorry. I was just curious because you weren't clear."

We stood at the crossroads leading to Fushimi's house.

"Should we go see her?" I asked.

Himeji shook her head. "Not me. I'm her rival," she answered honestly. "It'd be presumptuous of me to try to comfort her; after all, I don't understand how it feels to fail."

Maybe Fushimi felt the same way.

"All right. See you later, then. Thanks for today. I had fun."

"I—I should be thanking you... I had fun, too...," she whispered, looking at me

with bashful, upturned eyes. Then she turned around and left.

I reached Fushimi's house about two minutes later, and her grandma answered the door.

"Oh my, if it isn't Takamori."

"Good evening. Is Fushimi...? Is Hina home?"

"As it happens, she's still out. She's answering my texts, but I don't know where she went..."

She's not home yet?

It's already so late. Is she out somewhere, moping over what happened?

"I see. I'll go look for her."

"Really? Thank you."

I bowed before leaving.

Where are you, Fushimi? Her grandma said she was answering her texts, so she's not missing. But she didn't tell her where she was.

I couldn't imagine her simply strolling aimlessly through the city after the interview, and I couldn't picture her hanging out with someone else, either.

Despite everything, she had few friends. She talked to a lot of people at school, but when it came to those she spent her free time with, she only had me, Torigoe, and maybe Himeji.

I went around checking all the places I thought she might be and found someone on a bench along the boulevard where the summer festival was held.

"...Fushimi?" I called her name.

It was her.

"Oh, Ryou. What's up?"

"Don't you 'What's up' me. That's my line. What're you doing here?"

"Spacing out." She tapped the seat beside her, so I sat down. "You remember the interview? ... I have to apologize to you about something."

"Apologize? To me?"

I had plenty of things I needed to apologize to her about, but not the other way around. They must have been pretty harsh with her in the interview. What could she possibly need to apologize for?

"I was all hyped up without ever thinking about how you felt. The truth is that it should've been you getting attention for the short."

"Oh, that's it?" I sighed in relief.

"Don't say that like it doesn't matter. I basically used you as a stepping stone... It wasn't right." Fushimi looked down at her feet.

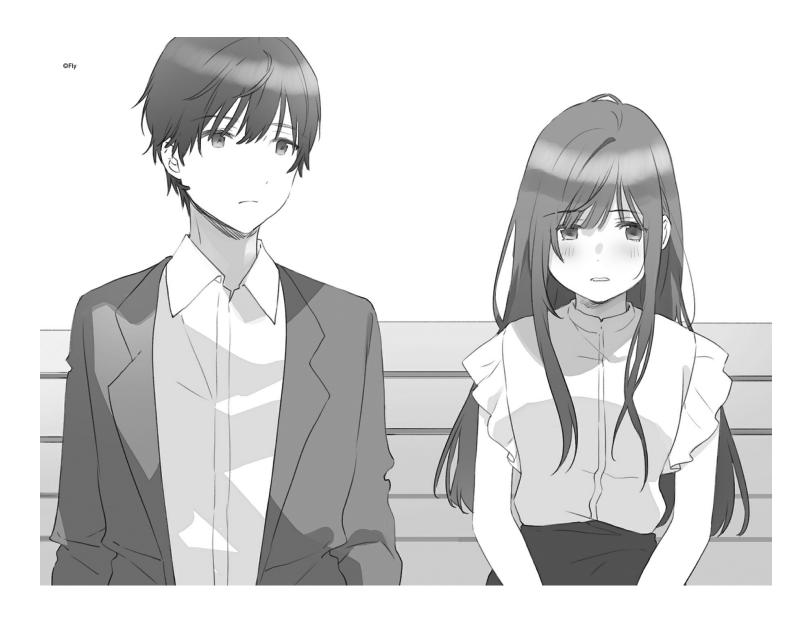
"I mean, yeah, it felt weird. That said, if you asked me if I want to be a film director, I don't think I could give an answer right away. But you're different."

I wanted to be recognized, sure, but I was able to be happy for her about the call because I understood how much passion, resolve, and effort Fushimi put into her dream.

It was me who needed to apologize—for putting her in contact with that bastard.

"Today, I finally realized. It wasn't me that Mr. Wakatsuki wanted—he was just after an in with my mother and her agency."

So he actually said that to her face.



"I see."

She was acting oddly cheery so as not to worry me, but it only added to my concern.

"It wasn't about my acting. It wasn't about me. And that's when I realized that this is how you must have felt."

"Stop worrying about me."

I wanted to comfort her, but the words wouldn't come out. She had failed audition after audition and now this. How could anyone have guessed the CEO of an agency would personally contact her when he wasn't even interested?

I almost told her she should've joined Mr. Matsuda's instead of being stubborn... But I swallowed the words back down.

Relying on her connections was the last thing she'd want to do right now.

"It seems like I do still have a chance to get in..."

"Don't say any more. I understand."

Everything I'd heard at the restaurant had been true.

Fushimi's voice was distorted by tears.

"I finally got a role, in your movie, and someone noticed me. Should I really let it end like this...?"

"Stop worrying about me. I don't think you wasted an opportunity or anything."

I got the feeling Himeji had played a big role in all this. Fushimi's childhood friend was an active celebrity, and she'd lost a part in a play to her by a hair. How could she not let it get to her? How could she not get desperate after failing so many times?

"There aren't that many popular actresses who were super active even in high school, are there?" I said. "Himeji just got a head start because she was an idol first. You shouldn't worry so much about it."

I rubbed her back as she began to sniffle.

"Sorry... I'm sorry. I always cause you so much trouble...," she said.

"No. I'm the one causing you trouble."

Once she calmed down a little, I told her to call home. She phoned her dad right away and told him I was with her.

It was late, almost midnight.

"You went out with Ai today, right?" Fushimi pouted. "How was it? Did you have fun? Even though I was having a miserable time?"

"I didn't know that would happen."

"You look like you had a lot of fun... You sure you weren't bewitched by her boobs?" Fushimi furrowed her brow and looked at me with a face full of spite.

"What's her chest have to do with me having fun?"

"Did you flirt?"

"No."

"You're lying."

"Wha?"

"I can smell her perfume on you..." She stood up and started walking away. "Ai's special to you, isn't she?"

Fushimi sounded angry, though her voice was flat.

She's special to you, too, isn't she? I thought as I followed her, though I didn't say it out loud.

"I'm going home!" she said. "Don't follow me!"

"You were just crying, and now you're angry with me? Come on, I'll see you off. I'm not leaving until I know you're safe at home."

"Ugh! Don't bother!" She puffed out her cheeks like a child and sped up like she was trying to escape me.

"C'mon, don't be immature..."

"You're the child, you dummy!"

"Don't yell."

"I'm not yelling!" she shouted.

Her steps were heavier than usual, too.

"I thought you'd be too depressed to go on..."

Despite her anger, I was relieved to see her so full of energy.

"Are you here just to make me mad? Well, you're doing a great job."

"I'm not. I was trying to cheer you—..." I stopped myself. If I said that, she might realize that I'd already known what happened.

My fears ended up unfounded, though.

"Okay, then. Come and cheer me up."

"O-oh?"

Once put on the spot, I wasn't sure what to do.

"Um... Don't worry!" I said. "Everything's gonna be okay! You can do it next time! You've got this!" I started clapping, like I was cheering on a sports team.

"Not quite what I was imagining." She cocked her head and giggled. "Oh well. I don't appreciate Ai marking you with her smell, but I'll accept your encouragement."

She really held a grudge...

I saw her home, and we waved good-bye.

I hope she was able to pull herself back together.

Now that I'd heard everything from Fushimi directly, I found it even harder to forgive that rotten lowlife.

8 Encounter

"Sorry about yesterday," Mr. Matsuda said in his usual high-pitched tone. He was driving us around for work.

"Oh, no," I replied. "I'm sure you must've been busy. It's okay."

"How was the dinner I paid for?"

"Scrumptious."

"Good to hear."

He wasn't being sarcastic; he looked honestly happy to hear I liked the place.

I usually worked at the office as a liaison between him and representatives from other companies, but this time, he was taking me somewhere else.

"So where are we going?"

"A recording studio. Remember SakuMome announced a new song at yesterday's concert? They're shooting the music video. I figured you'd be interested."

He was right. I was curious to see what a professional shoot looked like.

"Who did you like best out of the four, Ry?"

When I thought about how Himeji had once been part of the group, I couldn't help but feel she had the biggest presence of them all.

"They were all cute and amazing, so I couldn't really say."

"Wow, such a nice guy answer." He giggled.

We arrived at the studio about thirty minutes later. They gave us staff passes, which we hung around our necks.

"Um, what should I be doing?" I asked.

"Just watch and learn," said Mr. Matsuda.

We showed the guards our passes, and they let us through the small entrance. Then we went in a door marked Studio 3.

There in the darkness, a few adults were adjusting the lights, checking the crane camera's motions, and doing various other odd jobs.

The props were already in place.

"I'll go say hi to some people. Feel free to take a look around."

Without waiting for me to answer, Mr. Matsuda left to talk to a middle-aged man in a suit, who was observing the preparations. From what little I could make out, it sounded like he was from the record label.

Mr. Matsuda had said that Sakurairo Moment was a minor idol group. Apparently, what separated major and minor artists was the record label they belonged to.

I remembered him grumbling about how major groups had their own struggles.

So Himeji used to go to shoots just like this.

Perhaps bathing in the spotlight in front of cameras and at concerts would give anyone confidence.

"The girls are coming!" someone exclaimed, and everyone clapped. The four of them, all in costume, entered from a far door.

They were the same girls I'd seen yesterday. Mr. Matsuda said a few words to them.

I mentally compared him with Mr. Wakatsuki, whom I'd met by chance the day before.

Mr. Matsuda was only interested in men, so he had no reason to propose sleazy conditions to the girls trying to get into his agency. That comforted me.

As for Mr. Wakatsuki, I didn't regret punching him. In fact, I wished I could've hit him a few more times. I'd probably never meet him again, though.

After the girls went through one final hair, makeup, and costume check, the song began to play, and the four of them started dancing. At some point, the

song paused, and they checked the footage before picking up where they'd left off. The cycle repeated for thirty minutes until they took a break.

Sakurairo Moment might be a minor group, but there were over twenty people on staff for the filming. And they all had jobs to do.

Wow, so this is what a pro studio is like. That was my only thought. I felt like an elementary schooler.

I heard a few people coming and going and turned around to look at the door. That was when I saw Mr. Wakatsuki.

Ugh. Wh-what the heck is he doing here?

Shoot. He saw me.

"Ahh! You're the guy from yesterday!"

And he recognized me, too.

He was wearing a different luxury suit and some gaudy rings.

...He's got a Band-Aid on his face. Had it hurt that much?

He stomped over to me. "Who the hell are you?! Apologize now! Where do you get off punching me out of nowhere! That's assault!"

The fact that Fushimi had held even a fleeting hope of working with this lowlife filled me with sadness and frustration. I couldn't forgive him.

"...You should be the one apologizing," I said.

My heart was racing, and my vision seemed to go red; was blood rushing to my head?

"What?! Who are you? Who do you work for?"

He shoved me, but I stood firm, refusing to retreat.

I tried my best to stay calm, but in the end, I just couldn't take it.

"I heard what you were saying. About how you asked her to sell her body to get into show business! You took advantage of your position and treated her like crap!"

"What's that got to do with you?!"

He grabbed me by the collar, but I grabbed him back, pulling at the base of his loose necktie.

"You made my childhood friend cry! It's got a lot to do with me!"

At that point, I realized a commotion was starting around us.

"My, my, what happened, Ry?" Mr. Matsuda said without the slightest tension in his voice.

By then, some of the nearby adults had already separated me and Mr. Wakatsuki.

"Mr. Matsuda," I said, "this piece of shit asked Fushimi to sell her body to get into his agency."

I was also furious at him for only pretending to care about her acting and trying to use her to get to her mother.

"So this kid is with you, huh?" he said, looking at Mr. Matsuda. "He punched me in the face yesterday. How're you gonna make up for it?!"

"He did?" Mr. Matsuda said, sounding amused. "Well, that's your fault, isn't it? Saying such things to a girl just working hard to achieve her dreams. Don't you think?" he asked no one in particular.

"Everyone does stuff like that!"

"I don't."

"That's because you're, y'know...!"

So everyone knows about Mr. Matsuda.

"I had an awful premonition about this the moment you brought up his name, Ry." He sighed. "I'd heard about this piece of garbage before."

Piece of garbage...

"I'd heard he was coming to observe, but I didn't expect things to turn out quite like this." Mr. Matsuda giggled as though it had nothing to do with him. "But, Ry, violence is no good. Bad boy."

That was the extent of his admonishment, though. He didn't fire me or ask me to take responsibility.

"Let me punch that kid," Mr. Wakatsuki demanded.

"My, what a barbarian. I think not."

"Then he should grovel! Either you or the kid should rub your head against the floor. Then I'll forgive you."

As he continued to yell, Mr. Matsuda narrowed his eyes.

"I kept quiet, simply warning the girls that they should be careful of sleazy adults, but..." He glanced at one of the idols.

All eyes gathered on a girl with long hair as she spoke in a soft voice.

"I auditioned for Top Agency back in my first year of middle school...and was told they would let me join if I sold my body."

"You don't remember, do you?" said Mr. Matsuda. "Since you tell that to everyone."

"..."

Mr. Wakatsuki kept quiet for a long time, before at last he said, "I—I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"You're the refuse of society... Go die in a hole, pedophile."

"That's slander!"

"Didn't you just say everyone does stuff like that?" I cut in. "Everyone heard you."

He opened his mouth before shutting it again without saying anything.

"I mean, if you want," said Mr. Matsuda, "I could call up a magazine and spill everything right now. It's a lot more than just ten or twenty girls, isn't it?"

"...!*"*

Mr. Matsuda pointed at the floor. "But if you grovel and apologize, I might forgive you."

"Ughhh... Y-y-y...!"

He wanted to say you but couldn't even get it out.

He bared his teeth and glared daggers at Mr. Matsuda. Shoving away the guy

who was still holding him back, he took a step forward before bending his knee.

"Please forgive me."

"That's not low enough." Mr. Matsuda's lips curved in a malicious grin.

Who's the bad guy here again?

"If you don't want to, that's fine. I've got more pressing matters to attend to."

"Ugh..." Finally, Mr. Wakatsuki bent down until his head brushed against the floor. "I... I apologize."

Considering all the girls he'd hurt, this hardly seemed like enough, but I felt my anger subsiding. I looked at Mr. Matsuda and nodded. He understood what I meant and clapped.

"All right, break over. Let's pick back up."

The tension in the studio subsided, and everyone returned to their stations. Before I noticed, Mr. Wakatsuki was gone. Apparently, he no longer had the guts to stay and observe.

Filming ended about two hours after that.

Mr. Matsuda said he wanted to hear more about what had happened, and so we headed to a café after the shoot.

"Oh, so he was at that restaurant? I'm sure he'll run away the next time he sees my face." He cackled. "But, Ry, I had no idea you were capable of something like that."

"I'm not, normally. It was the first time I ever punched someone..."

"I guess that shows how much you care for Fushimi."

Oh... Yeah.

I'd been confused about why I'd done it, but it made sense now.

Just like how I had special feelings for Torigoe, I had similarly special feelings for Fushimi, too...

"Well...she's my childhood friend, and I know how she feels and how hard she's worked... Uh, what's with that look on your face?"

As I raised my gaze from the coffee cup in my hands, Mr. Matsuda covered his mouth, like he'd been caught.

"N-nothing, it's nothing." He forced a laugh.

The topic moved to my short film, and I showed him the finished video on my phone.

He gave the phone back to me once it was over.

"What did you think?" I asked.

"Amateurish. Painful."

"Aw..."

He was merciless.

"That's praise. It really took me back to high school and all the pent-up emotions I had inside me. I meant that it leaves an impression."

"That's partly thanks to Fushimi's skill, isn't it?" I shot him a furtive glance, and he smiled.

"I can tell what you want me to say, so I won't say it."

Meanie...

It's like he could read my mind. It was strange; it made him more and less approachable at the same time.

Some time after that, I was working, and Mr. Matsuda was reading a magazine—something he rarely did.

"Anything interesting?" I asked.

He giggled crassly. "Look at this."

He walked up to my desk and showed me what he was reading. The magazine was open to an article titled "The Secret Interviews of a Certain Modeling Agency President."

Hmm? That sounds familiar.

I looked up at Mr. Matsuda, and he just wouldn't stop smirking.

"Is it him?" I asked.

"I wonder! Maybe someone somewhere said something."

Clearly, it was you.

"Didn't you say you'd forgive him if he groveled?" I asked, confident I was right.

"What do you mean? I did forgive him."

He confessed easily. It seemed he had no intention of trying to hide it.

"But you told the magazine."

"My feelings on the matter and the fact of his crimes are entirely separate." He looked at me like I was crazy for even asking.

I mean, not to defend him, but should you really be tricking people like that...?

"It's his fault for having skeletons in his closet."

...Mr. Matsuda was *not* setting a good example as an adult.

Better make sure not to get on his bad side, ever.

Mr. Matsuda didn't seem to like Mr. Wakatsuki much from the beginning, and he had something of a tough, stubborn streak; I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out he was just waiting for the chance to destroy the guy.

"He could've simply denied it and said the girl misunderstood, but then he all but admitted it, and in front of sooo many witnesses." He headed back to his seat, merrily humming SakuMome's new song. "Ry! This calls for a celebration! Bring the champagne!"

"We're still on the clock."

"Gosh, you're so serious!" He slapped the desk.

I ended up keeping the magazine. It seemed he'd intended to give it to me in the first place.

"By the way," I said, "Himeji told me she had a kiss scene in her stage play."

"Oh, that? She's not gonna kiss anyone onstage. They'll just pretend."

I thought back to the feeling of her lips on mine. The look of her flushed face, and her bashful words.

You said you needed to practice...

After work, I dropped by Fushimi's house to show her the magazine.

"Turned out he did that all the time in secret."

"Oh... Wow."

Once she finished reading, Fushimi closed the magazine with a clap.

"Ever since then, I've been thinking about things."

"Yeah?"

"Acting practice is fun, and I can do that without an agency. There's no need to rush things. I'll still make the effort to join one eventually," she said, smiling. She seemed reinvigorated.

She'd looked up the histories of all the actresses she saw on TV. Some started out as models, some doing stage plays, and a fair share only debuted in their midtwenties.

Knowing that eased her anxiety and made her feel less like she had to race to join an agency and make her debut.

"Ai said that nobodies have better luck linking up with other nobodies."

"She doesn't mince her words, does she?"

Fushimi's tone was light, however. It seemed she hadn't taken it to heart.

"She's ruthless, but that's her way of cheering me up, I think."

"Maybe."

It was possible she was just trying to put the other girl in her place, but as Fushimi said, they could also be taken as words of encouragement.

If she wanted to encourage, though, she should've been more straightforward about it.

"If that's the conclusion you've come to, then great. You don't need to compare yourself to Himeji."

"Yeah. Sorry for all the trouble I caused."

I shook my head.

I never thought I would punch a stranger like that. It was all because of how much I cared about Fushimi...

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"..."

"Ryou?"

"Oh, it's nothing..."
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For a second, I heard a voice in the back of my mind.

As I tried to move forward and get a grip on my feelings, something grabbed my foot and pulled me back.

What if it was only me who cared about her like that? What if Fushimi didn't consider me special?

My train of thought had gotten derailed.

...Why do I think like this?

9 Sports Festival

After a few words from the principal, the student council president announced the official start of the sports festival. Sparse applause ensued. Fushimi alone was clapping like her life depended on it.

She wore her gym uniform and a headband.

"Let's do this, Ryou!"

She was all fired up. I, on the other hand, was only happy because we didn't have classes that day.

"Which event are you in, again?"

"The borrowing competition," I answered as we made our way to the first event.

Thanks to the existence of the sports festival committee, we class reps didn't have to organize anything; we basically had no work to do.

The only bother was that all students had to participate in at least one event in addition to the general participation ones.

"And you?"

"I'm doing the relay race, the three-legged race..."

Most of the people on the former were in sports clubs—it was one of the most hotly contested events in the program. For Fushimi to have wedged her way in, she had to be a model student, skilled both in class and on the field.

Most of the events toward the beginning were essentially just games. The more serious competitions were all in the latter half.

"Directooor, the borrowing competition's about to start. Get ready."

I raised my hand at the festival committee rep to signal my understanding.

"R-Ryou...! Relax...! You've got this!" Fushimi cheered me on.

You make it sound like I'm taking my college entrance exams. I was nothing if not relaxed.

"Thanks. I'll do my second best."

The borrowing competition was hardly something to get so worked up about. Then, as I turned around toward the starting line, Himeji stopped me.

"Ryou, you can rely on me if you need anything." She puffed out her chest.

"Will do."

I walked to my position. I glanced at the crowd and found Torigoe among them, in even lower spirits than usual. She looked like she'd try to bail at the first chance. Maybe she would rather have regular classes; she didn't like sports very much, after all.

My name was called; I was in the first group.

I felt the gazes of the guys lined up beside me.

"So this is Fushimi's childhood friend...!"

"I heard he's also close with the ex-idol Himejima."

I could see in their eyes that they were all determined not to lose to me. I was just in this for fun, hoping it would all go smoothly, so I was more than happy for them to pass me by.

The competition was announced, and all eyes gathered on us. I couldn't help but feel a little nervous, despite myself.

Bang! The pistol went off, and I ran. Soon, we came to a net that we had to crawl under. Then we had to jump over a few hurdles. Finally, we got to the table with the cards that told us what we had to borrow.

The quick ones were there in a flash.

I grabbed one of the ten or so cards.

• • •

What?

"No, no. I don't know anyone like that."

I was stuck thinking and wound up in last place.

Oh... I guess I shouldn't take this too seriously.

"You can do it, Ryou!"

A few yells of *Director!* and *Prez!* followed Fushimi's cheering.

I ran up to the place where everyone in class B was. Other people were grabbing microphones or teachers and getting ready to finish the competition.

It has to be Fushimi or Himeji. Or I guess Torigoe works, too?

Then my eyes met Fushimi's.

"Fushimi, c'mere!"

"Huh?! M-me?! O-okaaay!"

Fushimi came onto the field, and I grabbed her hand and led her toward the goal.

"What? What did it say?"

"I-I'll tell you later."

"?"

She tilted her head. Naturally, when we lined up at the goal, I was in last place.

"Last place, eh?" she said.

"It's still early, we'll be fine. These ones are never serious anyway."

"Geez!" she said, scolding me. "Why do you have to put yourself down like that!"

The guys who finished first stared at us.

They all looked dead inside.

"So what did it say?" Fushimi asked.

Just as she did, the announcer started revealing what each card said and what everyone had borrowed.

For the card that said Madonna, a student had brought the old lady who

taught classic literature, sending everyone into fits of laughter.

"And in last place is class B's Takamori, with the card saying Idol."

A stir went through the crowd.

"Ryou."

"Oh, um, well..."

"You think of me as an idol?" She fixed me with her innocent gaze. "Shouldn't you have called for Ai?" She looked seriously confused.

"Don't take it so literally. I mean, you wouldn't normally have a real idol for a classmate, right? You gotta go along with the joke."

"Is that so?"

"Y-yeah. There's no right answer. Just think of it like...you're the idol of our school."

I looked away from her as I spoke, but then she moved over into my field of view. A giant smile was spread across her face.

"I see. Mm-hmmm. So I'm your idol."

"That's not what I—..."

Just then, I felt a menacing aura emanating from the crowd of our classmates.

"Ah..... I can feel Ai's presence..." Fushimi gulped.

The competition now over, we walked back toward the group, and, indeed, the source of the miasma was Himeji.

"Ryou! I do not accept it. It should've been me! Sit down! There! Right now!"

"C'mon, why does it matter? It's just a game." I set up a chair for myself and sat down.

"Not on the chair. On the ground. On your knees."

"No."

"I told you to rely on me if you needed anything! Did you not even think about asking me?!"

She started slapping my head and shoulders.

Nothing I say is going to help, is it?

Of course I remembered what she'd said and considered her. But Fushimi's gaze was the first to meet mine. I figured there was no reason to insist on Himeji, so I just went with the flow.

While Himeji was beating me up, Deguchi came up from behind and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Himejima. Just so you know, you're my number one idol."

Himeji glanced back at him but didn't say a word.

"...Nothing?"

Deguchi left, looking a little sad.

Thankfully, that took a bit of the edge off her anger. Himeji snorted in displeasure and left.

Finally, the storm has passed.

The general participation events followed, with tug-of-war and the ball toss. And then began the final activity of the morning—the cavalry battle.

"Torigoe's gonna be on top?" said Deguchi. I hadn't realized until he said it.

"Torigoe..."

No wonder she was so down. You had to really pay attention when you were at the top.

She must have lost a game of rock-paper-scissors.

In contrast to Torigoe, who was pale and shaking in one corner, Himeji rose majestically atop the three other girls. I could hear her yelling confidently, "Everyone follow me! We will obliterate all enemies in sight!"

I hope she remembers this is just a game.

"Himeji's turned into a warlord."

"I wish I was her mount," Deguchi whispered.

Bang! At the sound of the pistol, the battle began.

Himeji came under fire right away. Not only did she stand out because of her looks, but after that little display just now, she'd made a lot of enemies. Six teams surrounded her.

"Bwuuuuuh?! Y-you can't gang up on me! Th-that's cheatingggg!"

She fought back, but her headband was taken within ten seconds.

The warlord has been overthrown... Not even she could take on six at once.

It was too crowded for me to make out what happened after that. Torigoe, though, was sneaking around like a shadow, taking headbands from behind.

In the end, Torigoe was way more successful than the conceited Himeji.

Upon coming back, Himeji didn't even let me say anything before she declared, "Th-that was my plan all along. I was bait."

"Sure didn't sound like it at the beginning."

"..."

"You really took the reins. 'Everyone follow me,' you said."

"So what?!"

I decided it was about time to stop teasing her and dropped it.

Then our other contender arrived. "You did great, Torigoe," I told her.

She shot me a victory sign, her face impassive. It seemed like she'd had fun, in her own way.

After lunch break, there was a cheerleading competition and a performance by the brass band club.

I had no more activities after noon, so I just took it easy.

Then I heard an announcement saying, "Everyone in the three-legged race, please move to the starting line."

Fushimi's running in this one, right?

I started preparing to cheer her on, but just then, she ran up to me.

"Could you run with me, Ryou?"

"What? Me? Who was your partner?"

"Ai, but she's down after what happened and won't come out of the classroom..."

The cavalry battle hit her that hard?

"You made fun of her, didn't you?" she said.

"She brought it on herself. What about Torigoe?"

"She's reading in the library."

In the middle of the sports festival?! I didn't even know it was open.

"Come on already."

Fushimi hurried me along to the starting line. Once there, she tied our legs together and timidly reached around my waist.

"...!"

S-stop looking embarrassed and say something.

"Y-you gotta put your hand around me, too, Ryou..."

"Yeah..."

I reached around her shoulder. It was so thin and soft, it felt like I could crush it if I squeezed too hard.

Because of our height difference, it looked like I was pulling her to my side.

"W-we're so close," she said.

"Th-that's how this works."

It was hard talking with her face so close to mine... And it seemed she felt the same, because she said nothing until it was our turn.

Once it was time to begin, we decided which foot to start with and received the baton.

We counted *one, two* as we took each step. Somehow, we were faster than the others.

We moved ahead of another pair and passed the baton at the same time as

the front-runners.

"We were totally in sync," Fushimi said. "Lightning fast!"

"Amazing what we accomplished without practice."

"It's the power of childhood friendship!"

"Maybe."

Thanks to our efforts, we ended up in first place.

"We turned the tide!" she said, singing our praises. Then she smiled. "Thank you for joining me."

"You're welcome," I said.

A thought struck me then—it was probably pretty normal for a boy and girl in our position to go out at least once, right? Though I supposed I didn't really know what was normal.

As I philosophized on the meaning of childhood friendship and normalcy, the sports festival came to a close.

(10) Torigoe and Himejima

It was after school, and I was doing my job as student librarian.

"Excuse me, Shizuka, may I speak with you?"

It was Himeji. She didn't usually come to the library.

"I'm still on the clock, but I can hear you out."

It was also rare for her to talk to me, even in the classroom.

I couldn't concentrate on my book anymore, so I just looked up at her, sitting on the counter.

"I'm basically just going to monologue at you," she prefaced before explaining what had happened.

I had to listen to her gushing about going to the concert with Takamori and having dinner at a fancy restaurant. I knew it was in her nature to boast, so I just let it slide... But then she cut to the chase.

In short, Takamori found the CEO who'd humiliated Hiina, and he punched him.

I tried to imagine myself as Hiina in that situation, and just the thought of Takamori doing such a thing for me made my heart leap... But back to reality.

I'd thought he considered me special, but as it turned out, I wasn't the only one he saw that way.

"And?" I looked up at her again.

Himeji looked beyond frustrated, loosely cradling her arm and fiddling with her uniform.

"I just thought that he wouldn't do that for you or me. Only Hina."

You think...? ... Yeah, maybe.

What she said resonated with me, and that bummed me out.

So that's why she's got that look on her face.

"...Wait, but you didn't need to brag about your little date with him to talk about that, did you?"

"Hmm? What did you just say?"

I'd whispered my last comment, and she had to ask me to repeat it.

"Nothing." I shook my head. "So you came here just to grumble?"

"Yes, is that so wrong?"

She sure didn't waste her time with ambiguity. Honestly, I was impressed. I chuckled.

"It doesn't make sense that Ryou considers Hina special," she declared.

"Why?"

What didn't make sense about it? Besides, he was free to feel however he wanted.

I mean, I'd rather it be me, but hey.

Himeji had arrived late compared to Hiina and me. She was a disruptor, and she might well flip the whole order of the world on its head. And like Hiina, she was *also* Takamori's childhood friend.

Himeji seemed lost in thought, and I got tired of waiting, so I repeated the question: "Why doesn't it make sense?"

"It's just... When I think of Ryou, I feel he would be better off with someone else."

I sighed. "So you're just jealous."

"N-no!"

"Just because he doesn't feel the way you want him to, it's not okay to lie and say it's 'for his sake'... Himeji, please..."

"Don't look at me like that. I have my reasons for saying what I did."

"And those are?"

"First of all, it's partly Hina's fault that he turned out like he did and..."

"What? Wait, what?" I was so shocked, I repeated myself.

When I pressed her, Himeji said she was talking about how Takamori was such a late bloomer and so clueless about romance.

"It is just my assumption," Himeji said, "and I'm not entirely sure, but..."

At first, I thought maybe she had a point. I had reached a similar conclusion just recently myself. Although it was only conjecture on my part, too.

"And that's why he should be with me instead of Hina."

"Hey, why not me?"

I didn't have the courage to look her in the eye and say that—so I looked back down at the book I was holding. I'd already forgotten where I was.

Before I knew what was happening, I'd been thrown defenseless into the middle of a war between two giant beasts over the fate of the world.

"As they say," said Himeji, "my enemy's enemy is my friend."

I waited for her next words with just a hint of anticipation.

I'd figured the giant beasts didn't even have me on their radar. But perhaps they saw me as having some sort of influence on the delicate balance of power.

Eventually, Himeji spoke.

"How about we join forces?"

(11) Visit

Fushimi seemed to have caught a cold; she called me on the phone and coughed into my ear.

"Sorry, Ryou. You'll have to go to school alone today..."

That sounds nice. Maybe I'll skip school, too.

"Do not skip school."

Did you just read my mind?

I'd paused for a moment, but now I reluctantly resumed putting on my uniform.

She listed off today's notices that I had to give to our classmates, as class rep.

"All right. I'll just ask the teacher if I get stuck."

"Please do. I might not be able to text you back right away."

"Take care," I said, and hung up.

Himeji had already said she wouldn't be going to school due to practice for her play.

...Am I the only one who wants to skip school when he hears someone else isn't going?

After Fushimi's warning, however, I resigned myself to another day of classes.

Once I got to school, Torigoe came over, curious about the empty seats to either side of me.

"Where's Hiina?"

"Oh, she got sick and is taking the day off."

"I see."

"Himeji's also absent because of rehearsals. It sounds great. If only I had a

reason to skip school."

"They're not playing hooky." She giggled.

"I know."

"So it's just the two of us today."

Yeah, with both of the others absent...

She sat down on Fushimi's seat.

"You seem so close when I sit here." She propped her head on her hands and stared at me.

We chatted until the teacher arrived. We had electives first period, and Torigoe asked if I'd brought everything I needed. Who do you think I am?

Incidentally, in our school's case, all our electives were fine arts.

You submitted a list with music, drawing, and calligraphy in order of preference and were assigned to one of them. I was in calligraphy with Torigoe.

Soon, homeroom ended, and Torigoe and I moved classrooms for calligraphy.

I sat down wherever, and Torigoe, who usually went off by herself, sat down beside me.

u n

"..."

Say something.

I sneaked a peek at her and noticed she was restlessly opening and closing her calligraphy bag.

"T-Takamori..."

Her faltering voice reminded me of the other day, when she'd said, "Doesn't that mean that...you...like me?"

"Wh-what?"

"Your calligraphy is pretty good."

I'd been prepared for her to say something else, and her comment almost

came as a letdown. I sighed, though I wasn't entirely sure why.

"I had some classes back in grade school."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, just a bit."

"By the way, you've been friends with Hiina and Himeji since you were little, right? Was Hiina ever mean to you?"

"Mean?"

That sure came out of nowhere.

I furrowed my brow at the question and hummed in thought for a bit.

"Mean... Mean...? Like how?"

"Hmm... Like, say, you peeped on her in the bath, and she slapped you in the face. Typical childhood friend stuff, you know."

How in the world is that typical?

"No. Nothing of the sort that I can think of."

I had a pretty bad memory, so those last few words were carrying a lot of weight.

Why's she asking me this anyway?

"I see. Then maybe we're wrong..."

Just then, the teacher arrived.

Calligraphy class was quite simple; they'd assign us something to write, and we'd turn it in. That was it. So far, no one had ever been yelled at.

I quietly ground my inkstone. At some point I glanced over and noticed that Torigoe's motions seemed surprisingly smooth and natural.

"It's like you were born for this."

"Huh? What?"

"Just saying, the Japanese aesthetic suits you."

"Y-you think?"

Her cheeks flushed, and she ground her ink faster and faster. I began to worry she might start a fire.

"You're paying way too much attention to me, Takamori."

"Not really. I just happened to notice, since you're sitting next to me today."

I continued to grind my own inkstone.

"C-c-could it be that you I-li-li-like me?"

I figured she meant it as a joke, but she stammered too hard to nail the timing.

"Please don't bring that up. I mean, I do like you, in a way."

"Wha ...?"

She widened her eyes and blinked a few times in shock.

She was turning to look at me to confirm what I'd said when her hand slipped, and she flipped her entire inkwell, inkstone and all.

"Ah-wah!"

While she panicked, I mopped up the ink on the desk with a sheet of paper, trying to keep the damage to a minimum.

"Th-thanks, Takamori." Everyone was looking at us now, and Torigoe seemed to shrink in on herself.

"You're wel..." I noticed her face and uniform were stained, too. "You should go wash your face."

"Do you mean that metaphorically, as in I should go think about my actions?"

"How in the world did you get that out of what I said? No. Your face and uniform are dirty."

"Oh," she said, as reality dawned on her. "Oh no."

It was only first period. We had a long day ahead.

We got the teacher's permission, and I accompanied her to the bathroom, stopping outside.

I heard water running, and she soon came out with her face washed and a

handkerchief in hand.

"You look fine now. Himeji would probably be losing her mind about makeup, but you don't seem to—"

"Actually...I do...put on a little."

Wow.

Evidently, admitting this embarrassed her, and she fidgeted awkwardly.

"Just the natural stuff, you know."

O-oh. So, like, the sort of makeup that makes it look like you don't use any.

"Just enough so the teachers don't notice."

In that case, there's no way I'd notice.

"I guess you're a girl, after all."

"...What did you think I was?" she demanded.

I raised both hands in surrender. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. Of course I knew you were a girl... I just meant, like, hey, you have girly interests, too..."

"Anyway, remember that porn manga in your room?"

"You're gonna give me whiplash switching topics like that."

How could I ever forget?

"So you're interested in sex but not romance?"

"I didn't say I wasn't interested."

"So you don't deny the first half..." She nodded pensively.

"What's with all the questions today?"

"Maybe it's just a difference between the way boys and girls think, but I just see those two things as inextricably linked. Maybe you don't."

Apparently, Torigoe had something on her mind.

"What about your uniform? You gonna change the top?"

"...Oh right. I don't know..."

"Maybe you could borrow a jacket from someone?" I said without thinking.

She clammed up. Had I said something odd?

"We don't have PE today," I continued, "but maybe one of the girls keeps their tracksuit here..."

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"[..."
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You?

"I don't know any girls I could ask..."

"Sorry."

Right. Fushimi and Himeji were absent.

If Deguchi were out, I wouldn't have a friend to ask something like that of, either.

"I could lend you mine...but it'll be baggy..."

"I'll take it."

Really? It's huge, though.

I figured she might change her mind once she tried it on. I went to pick it up from my locker and came back.

"Here you go."

Torigoe held it up. She tried holding the sleeves and stretching out her arms, but even with her limbs fully extended, it hung, covering her body.

At our school, boys and girls wore the same tracksuit. The only difference was size.

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"Huge, right?" I said.
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"It's fine."

Seriously?

"Oh, by the way. It's clean. I haven't worn it."

"? Then why is it here?"

"I always forget it, so I just keep it here."

I could borrow one when that happened if I had friends in other classes, but alas... This was my only option.

"Thanks," she said before going into the bathroom again and coming right back out.

The jacket was super baggy, of course... But oddly, it didn't look strange.

I wasn't knowledgeable about women's fashion, but it looked like an oversized hoodie or something like that.

"Do I look weird?" she asked.

"Actually, you look pretty good."

"I'm glad." She smiled. Then she sniffed her shoulder. "It smells like you."

"Hold on a minute! I don't stink, okay? At the very least, say it smells like my detergent."

"You're blushing. You really don't want me sniffing you?"

"What does it matter what I smell like? Don't be weird."

She covered her mouth and laughed out loud at my panic. "It's not that weird for a girl to wear a boy's jacket. I've seen girls wearing their boyfriends' jackets when they're in different classes."

True.

"But...wouldn't me lending you mine put us in the same situation?"

Instantly, she was red in the face.

"W-well... N-no? No. No, no."

"People are gonna get ideas."

"L-let them think whatever they want."

"Are you serious?"

Torigoe spoke so softly, I could barely hear her. "I...don't mind."

She grabbed her collar tightly to make sure I couldn't change my mind and hurried back to class.

I'm not gonna try and peel it off you, you know.

As I walked behind her, I could tell she was red all the way up to her ears.

"I-I'm wearing your jacket, you know?" she said.

"Due to extenuating circumstances. Because I know how it feels to have no friends."

"It smells like you."

"No, it doesn't. I haven't even worn it. It smells like my detergent, if anything."

What do I even smell like?

Torigoe walked quickly, like she was running away. The exchange went in circles time and again as she kept sniffing my jacket.

Somehow, she looked like she was having fun.

After school, I dropped by Fushimi's house.

Her grandma answered the door and let me know that her fever had come down.

I was only there to give her the printouts from class, but after hearing she was doing better, I decided to pay her a visit.

"Fushimiii? Are you up?"

"R-Ryou?!"

I heard a shriek, followed by clattering sounds from inside her room.

"I just brought the printouts. I'll leave them here."

"Wait, wait! I'll let you in, just give me a minute!"

I gave her five minutes. Finally, she allowed me to enter.

"You sound health—..." Her voice and the racket that followed didn't sound like the noises of a sick person, and yet, when I opened the door, she was in bed. "...Are you okay?"

"I don't think so."

She looked at me uneasily and coughed.

All that noise had been her tidying up. If you're sick, just rest, don't worry about stuff like that.

I pulled the chair from her desk and sat down beside her bed.

"There's math homework. I'll leave it on the desk."

"...Okay." She peeked out from under the sheets and answered weakly. "How's Shii doing?"

"She's got library duty. Said she'd be here later. You think you can go to school tomorrow?"

"I...don't think so." She looked up at me and shook her head. "I'm so cold...I might die." She rolled over dramatically, showing me her back.

"You're not gonna die. Should I bring you a heater?"

I saw her hair rustle. I guessed she was shaking her head.

"Come here...under the covers," she said.

"Hmm?"

I'd heard her, but I needed confirmation to know she was being serious. She lifted the sheets and made space for me.

"Are you for real?"

"Yes. It'll warm me up."

I thought of Mana; she was always like this when she caught a cold.

I wasn't sure my getting in would really warm her up that much. I scratched my head awkwardly for a moment, and then steeled myself and did as she asked.

"Fine... Just for a little while, okay?"

"Yes!"

She sounded oddly energetic, but I figured it was all right to spoil people when they weren't feeling well.

I got in bed, still in my uniform. The spot where she'd just been lying was

warm, and it smelled of her.

I tried hard to push away all my indecent thoughts.

"Ryou?"

"What?"

"Nothing." She giggled before sighing.

You're already in perfect health, aren't you?

"Pat me," she said.

"..."

I complied and patted her head, caressing her silky hair.

"Good girl."

"Hee-hee... Hee-hee. Next..."

You think I'll just say yes to anything you want?

"Nothing weird, okay?"

"Nothing weird. I promise."

While she was thinking, I found a book by her pillow. She must have passed the time reading after she started feeling better.

"What were you reading?"



"Fweh?"

I grabbed the book and took off the dust jacket to reveal the cover: *The Story of How I Dealt with My Unsociable Childhood Friend*

It had an illustration of a handsome guy grabbing a pretty girl's chin. She looked spellbound, and her clothes were coming off.

This...is erotica, right?

"Wha?! Wait! Nooo! Don't look!" She snatched the book away. "Th-th-this isn't what you think!"

She was beyond panicked. I figured it was just a light novel, but her reaction was too big for that.

She escaped from the bed and hid the book behind her.

"It's literature, kind of," she said, red in the face.

"'Kind of.' So not really."

Her pajamas were disheveled, and the top button of her shirt was undone, revealing quite a lot of her chest. Yet, despite all the exposure, there was something I couldn't see. Do girls...not wear anything...when in bed?

"I don't think it's good for a kid like you to be reading adult material," I said.

"I-it's not that! It's pure love! J-just...an extension of romance...which does get depicted a bit..." Her voice trailed off as she looked away.

"So you read that stuff?"

"Don't give me that condescending look!"

"So is it good? Any scenes you particularly liked?"

"Don't ask that!"

Okay, enough teasing.

It seemed she really was feeling better.

"It was just more stimulating than I expected...and it cleared my mind."

Apparently, it had her wide awake.

"What are you making me say, you meanie?" She puffed up her cheeks and put her knee back on the bed.

"I didn't ask you to..."

Just then, I heard steps coming up the stairs and approaching her room, so I dashed out of her bed and sat down on the chair. It was her grandma, bringing us tea.

"G-grandma, we don't need anything," Fushimi said, shooing her away.

I mean, I don't want to stay too long. I stood up to leave.

"You're leaving already?" she said.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

Her eyebrows drooped, and she gazed at me sadly. Regardless, I waved and walked out of her room, then bade her grandma good-bye and left the house.

Similar things had happened a few times before... What was she thinking?

Could it be that she felt the same special way about me as I did about her...?

No way. Not about me.

Being childhood friends, we had bathed together and slept in the same bed when we were children—this was probably just an extension of that.

I bumped into Torigoe on my way home.

"You're back from seeing her?" she asked.

"Yup. She seemed like she was doing pretty good. I think she can go to school tomorrow."

"Thank goodness... By the way, you didn't do anything weird to her while she was sleeping, right?"

"No!"

"Of course." She nodded. "I knew you wouldn't try anything like that. You don't have it in you."

I didn't particularly like the way she phrased that. She wasn't wrong...but it didn't feel nice being called a wimp to my face.

"She asked about you," I said. "She'll be delighted to see you."

"I hope so," she said, starting off for Fushimi's house.

Wait, why's she coming from the direction of my house? Did she get lost?

I wondered about it as I made my way home. Mana was already back, sitting on the sofa in her uniform, and she forced me to say *I'm home* by kicking me the moment she saw me.

"...I'm home."

"Welcome back, Bubby. Don't forget to greet me."

"You're too proper for a gyaru."

I sighed and sat down on one end of the sofa. Immediately, she put her feet on my lap.

"Hey."

"Hee-hee."

Her skirt was so ridiculously short, I could almost see under it.

"Shizu just dropped by. You do something, Bubby?"

"I met her on the way here. I don't think I did anything. Why would she come over?"

Torigoe was friends with Mana, so maybe she just stopped by to say hello.

"She asked about what you were like as a kid."

"When I was a kid? For what reason?" I raised an eyebrow.

Mana tilted her head while staring at her phone.

"Who knows?"

"What did you say?"

"That as far back as I can remember, you've always been kind, cool, and the best brother ever."

"Don't lie to her."

"I exaggerate, but I really do think that," she said bashfully before standing up

and leaving for the kitchen.

Why not ask me about it?

Well, whatever the reason, it's probably harmless.

♦ Shizuka Torigoe ♦

"I brought some pudding from the convenience store. That okay?"

"Of course."

Hiina sat up in bed. Just as Takamori said, she was already back in good health.

She opened the packaging and grabbed a spoonful of pudding.

"Delicious. The sweetness radiates through my whole body..."

"Please."

I'd bought one for myself, too, and I took a bite.

"I was surprised to hear you caught a cold, Hiina. You seemed somehow immune."

"Shii, of course I catch colds. What do you think I am?" She frowned.

I could tell she wasn't really mad about my comment.

We spent some time talking about Takamori's visit, and she told me he'd accidentally found out about the book she was reading. I laughed out loud upon hearing the title.

"You're totally reading porn."

"I-it's not that dirty. It's pure love."

"Sure, sure. Vanilla porn."

I was certain of it after hearing the name of the publisher. Maybe Hiina was more uneducated about this sort of thing than I'd thought. I could already imagine her thinking about Takamori while reading it and squirming in bed.

"I imagine he must've been shocked. Think about it—his childhood friend is suddenly reading erotica."

"Shut up!"

She turned away, miffed. Even I found her adorable in her pajamas, making that gesture. There really had to be something wrong with Takamori for him to see her like this and not try anything. He knew as much as Hiina did about sex, and had a libido, and yet.

"Huh? Bubby? Mmm, he was so cool. So kind. Every time I cried, he ran up to me and asked, Mana, are you okay? Hee-hee."

I couldn't get any useful information out of ManaMana. She spoiled her brother way too much. And he was the same with her.

It was not out of mere curiosity that I wanted to know more about Takamori. I wanted confirmation of what Himeji had said.

I heard Hiina's grandma say something from downstairs. I strained my ears; it sounded like she was going to go buy something.

"Hey, has Takamori always been like that?"

"Ryou? Yeah, he's always been like that. Although he started putting on airs after middle school."

I imagined childhood friends were sort of like relatives one step removed.

If you stayed like that for very long, classmates would start teasing you, so I understood why he wanted to create some distance.

"What about grade school or preschool?"

"You're getting greedy." She smirked.

"I don't mean it like that."

"Like what, eh?"

"Oh, gosh. You're such a pain."

Hiina giggled and stood up. "I'll pour some tea. Or would you rather have coffee?"

"Oh, thank you. Either is fine."

"All right, then!"

She left the room. It was obvious she wasn't sick anymore. And she was in a good enough mood to start teasing me. Something must have happened while Takamori was here.

...What if they kissed?

I felt bad just thinking about it, so I decided not to dwell on it.

Some time went by and Hiina still hadn't come back. I grabbed an old notebook off the shelf above her desk. I felt guilty, but I'd been wondering about it since I got there.

Among the orderly textbooks and notebooks on the shelf, this volume alone looked older. I figured it was a diary she had from ages ago.

I flipped through its pages. It smelled dusty. It really was a diary. But it was older than I'd thought—it was dated from before we were born.

I skimmed through it and realized it was her mother's.

Why does she have this?

I opened it to the newest entry and worked my way backward, finding a few mentions of the Takamori family here and there. They talked about the relationship between the two families, and the owner's thoughts about the Takamori parents and their son, Ryou.

I wouldn't have been able to take in this much so quickly if I weren't an avid reader in my spare time.

"…"

I heard footsteps and quickly put the notebook back in place.

"I brought coffee."

"Mm. Thanks."

Hiina sat down on the bed, and I sat down on the chair.

Chatting with her was fun, but I couldn't concentrate on the conversation.

She had to have read the diary, or else why would it be there...?

From what I had just read, Himeji's conclusion wasn't entirely off the mark.

Back in the library, she'd said: "According to what I remember, Ryou turned out like that because Hina betrayed him. It made him distrustful of women, or something, and he's been subconsciously avoiding romance ever since..."

Himeji said it was Hiina's fault, but the truth was written down in Satomi Ashihara's diary.

The diary's writer had told her daughter's friend: "Hina doesn't really like you."

She had looked back on it later and written an apology, regretting that she'd vented like that to a child.

If the trauma from that incident had made Takamori subconsciously change his behavior, then everything clicked.

It was like a curse.

I could tell it happened with me and Himeji. And it had to be even stronger when it came to Hiina. The fact that he was so dense seemed perfectly reasonable.

In fact, he was too sensitive. He picked up on that kind of atmosphere right away and subconsciously avoided it.

Were the childhood friends from the Takamori and Fushimi families destined to be unhappy?

If Takamori remained in the dark, they'd never find happiness even if they got together.

I excused myself from the Fushimi residence and called Himeji on my way to the station.

"Hello?" she answered suspiciously.

"Sorry to interrupt your practice."

"Don't worry, we're on a break. What's the matter?"

"It's about your proposal."

Himeji waited anxiously for my answer.

"I accept. Let's work together."



Afterword

Hello, Kennoji here.

Off topic, but I began getting up early in November last year. Perhaps I'll have stopped by the time this gets published, but now, as the Winter Olympics are being held, I'm still getting up early.

I go to bed before midnight and wake up at around seven thirty AM. Some of you might say, *You consider that early?* But I must let you know that, before then, I had the schedule of a college student, going to bed between two and three AM and waking up by noon. So yes, it is early for me.

Why did I change my habits? Because I saw a video on YouTube saying successful people wake up early. Yes, I'm that simple. I believe that my ability to put things into action the moment I consider them favorable is one of my strong points.

In the end, I only went to bed late because I was watching videos, playing games, and reading manga or books. No need to do all that late at night, is there? What was the point in me staying up that late? I also found it easier to get down to work after waking up before noon, which is why I've been able to keep it up until now.

Creators (though I feel reluctant to use the word for myself) depend entirely on their mentality, so it is very important for us to feel good and refreshed.

Now then, we've finally reached the sixth volume of this series.

I've only had three series reach the sixth volume. I am quite pleased to get to this point with a rom-com instead of with an isekai. My next goal is to reach Volume 10. I'll work hard to make it happen.

I hope that all of you will follow this series to the very end.

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The Girl I Saved on the Train Turned Out to Be My Childhood Friend, Vol. 6 Kennoji

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CHIKAN SARESOU NI NATTEIRU S-KYU BISHOUJO WO TASUKETARA TONARI NO SEKI NO OSANANAJIMI DATTA volume 6

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