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Illustrator/Azuri Hyuga

Chapter 1: Our First Summer

Chirrrp, chirrrp. The cries of cicadas echoed around him. Shiraseki Kai stood in place, half naked, underneath the heat of the summer sun.

No matter how hard he tried to maintain his poker face, he could hear the alarm bells of his heart ringing from the inside out. In his right hand, he held a waterproof digital camera that he'd received from Misako, and his empty left hand was stained with nervous sweat.

Splash! The loud sound of water brought him back to reality. When he looked over, he saw a lifeguard scolding an elementary schooler for having jumped into the lazy river.

Kai would have surely been reported once or twice for standing around half naked with a camera had he been in the middle of town. However, the same could not be said for his current location; at the pool, it wasn't out of place at all. Although he couldn't help but worry if his swimming trunks—the first pair he'd worn in years—looked okay, or if his lanky, untanned body was an unseemly sight, there wasn't anything he could do about either of those now.

"Ah! There he is! Kai-kun!"

"—Unpunctual, apologies. We made you wait, Kai."

Kai turned around to face them and froze in place before he could reply. Yet still, his eyes managed to move just fine. *Blue and red*, he thought dazedly. A blinding contrast in skin tone accompanied these colors.

"Kai-kun?"

"Oh, s-sorry...!" Kai stammered, all while wondering what he was apologizing for.

Nanaka tilted her head curiously. She was wearing a blue bikini with a variety of colorful flowers printed across the fabric, and it fit her bright personality well. Her arms and legs had a healthy tone as they smoothly stretched out and unabashedly exposed themselves under the sun.

In addition, the openness of her current wardrobe helped her shapely chest—which was neither too large nor too small—to assert its presence more boldly. Or rather, perhaps it was simply that Kai’s gaze happened to be drawn to it. *Yeah... That’s probably it*, he thought.

“Needless apology is a weak strategy,” Akane observed. “Have you forgotten what I’ve taught you?”

“N-No... I’m sorry, Akane-san.”

“Don’t apologize right after I tell you that,” Akane warned him, as she folded her arms.

Akane had on a halter neck swimsuit. It was a deep wine red color, which offered a more mature impression than Nanaka’s swimsuit. There was a thin layer of black mesh covering the bit between her chest and neck. One single layer. The lone layer partitioned off a section of skin to contrast with the smooth white everywhere else, and only served to embellish her beauty such that Kai couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“...Kai? What’s gotten into you?” Akane asked.

“Um, well...” *I was enchanted*, he thought. Of course, he couldn’t say that out loud.

“I think...” Nanaka began, “I understand how you feel, Kai-kun.”

“Is that so?” Akane questioned.

“I’ve been thinking this since we went out to buy our swimsuits together, but, Akane-san, that swimsuit is... um, it’s kinda... sexy?”

“But Nanaka,” Akane argued, “it covers more than your swimsuit, doesn’t it?”

“You’re not *wrong*, but...”

Akane touched the mesh with the tips of her fingers and glanced down at her chest to see for herself. Then, turning to Kai, she asked, “Do you agree?”

The way she had turned to him was so unfair.

“.....Yes.” Kai struggled with himself for a moment, but he couldn’t think of any other reply.

“...I see.” Akane took another second to look at herself and then looked away, ever so slightly. “Don’t... stare too much.”

“A-Akane-san,” Nanaka continued in surprise, “you get embarrassed too...?”

“Did you think I was some sort of robot?”

“No, of course not. It’s just... you know?”

Look, can you stop turning to me at times like these? were Kai’s honest thoughts, but it was also true that he had never seen Akane avert her eyes in embarrassment before. That being said, it was the tiniest of differences; her expression had hardly changed at all.

Still, it meant that the gap between them had grown smaller than it had been when he was at Tsukigase; they were close enough now that Kai could notice the tiny difference. It was strange to think that they’d grown closer after he transferred schools.

“Kept’cha waiting!” Aya yelled.

“...I don’t want people thinking I came here with this idiot.” Eru was annoyed to her wit’s end, and a tinge of anger made its way into her voice. She was wearing a black swimsuit and a large hat, in order to ward off any repulsive sunlight. Her swimwear was a bikini, but the bottom piece was in a pareo style and almost looked like a dress. Eru’s ample bosom was already evident enough when she wore her uniform, and the centerpiece of her current attire was a bottomless canyon.

But the issue at hand... was Aya, who was standing beside her.

“What’s wrong, senpai?” Aya asked teasingly. “Is this what you’re into?”

...*Sigh*. Kai couldn’t help but exhale. Aya was walking alongside Eru with her hands behind her head... in a school swimsuit. She was short and, frankly, had a childish figure, so it fit her terrifyingly well. It might have been more accurate to say it *happened* to fit her.

“By the way, this is an option, too.” Aya rummaged through the vinyl bag she was carrying in one of her hands and pulled out something which she held up to her nearly two-dimensional chest. She moved her hand away to reveal...

“Oushima,” written in giant childish lettering. Also, she had a smug grin plastered on her face.

“How’s this?” she goaded.

“Are you stupid?” Kai replied curtly.

“Oh! Nice reaction!” Aya cheered. “I knew I could count on you to say the punchline with those dead eyes of yours!”

Kai hadn’t the faintest intent to make her happy, but it seemed he’d played right into her hands.

“Well, come on,” she continued. “We all know you need at least one person to play the fool.”

“I don’t think anyone on this planet has ever made that a rule,” Kai retorted.

“By the way, there’s one more gimmick here,” Aya pushed on.

Kai winced, thinking, *There’s more?*

“On my back here,” said Aya, turning to show off a zipper. “If I pull this down...” *Zzzip!* The sound of the zipper rang out and the school swimsuit dropped to the floor. Underneath, she was completely... clothed. She had on the one-piece swimsuit that she had meant to wear all along.

“It’s standard for the splash art to change when you evolve your unit,” Aya declared.

“But you didn’t evolve or anything...” Kai commented.

“That’s enough fooling around,” Akane cut in. Aya shrugged her shoulders with a smug grin, like a child being scolded by her mother. Akane continued, “We’re all here now. Let’s begin by taking the photographs Kai’s elder sister requested of us. Kai, I leave the arrangement to you.”

“R-Right,” he agreed uneasily while thinking, *Honestly, you could just ignore any request from that sister of mine.* While Kai would have liked to say so, he knew Akane would never agree—that’s just the kind of person she was. She couldn’t break a promise, even if what she’d promised to do was utter idiocy.

“Uhh, alright, can I get you all to line up over there?” Kai turned toward the

four of them as he fumbled with the unfamiliar camera. Though they each had their own peculiarities, it didn't change the fact that they were all cute girls, and the scene on the other side of the viewfinder reminded him of an idol group photoshoot.

"Here I go," he announced. *Three, two, one*, and the shutter snapped at the end of the countdown.

Kai checked the photo immediately. Misako had begged him for this ridiculous photo session with tears flowing down her face, saying, "This is my lifelong dream...! Kaaaaaaai...!" However, the picture was so good that, just this once, Kai felt like he might even thank her later.

"I-I think it turned out great!" he reported.

"There's still more to go, isn't there?" asked Nanaka, who had run over to him and carried the camera off.

"Huh?" asked Kai, feeling confused.

Meanwhile, Nanaka had stepped in front of a mother and child and asked the mother something... Well, Kai knew what she was asking for. This was another one of Misako's lifelong dreams, and it seemed there was no getting out of it.

Make sure to take a group picture with everyone in it, she'd told them. Oh, of course, that includes a beet-red Kai, okay?

Apparently, Nanaka was doing her best to honor that stupid request. "C'mon, Kai-kun!" she said as she took his hand and began running toward the others.

The blazing sun was surely far hotter than the warmth of Nanaka's hand, but the sensation in Kai's fingers was the more intense heat.

"Kai," said Akane, "you ought to be in the middle."

"No," he protested. "I'm good on an edge..."

"Senpai, you're the tallest one here," Aya pointed out. "I'd like it if you sat down. You'd have us all around you. Wouldn't that be cool? This is a grade-A harem, you know?"

"Dear, you're the only one who's short here," Eru objected.

“Shut up!”

“Hey...! You fool, don’t slap my chest! They’ll spill out!”

Spill? What’s going to spill? How? Huh? Aya and Eru were duking it out above Kai’s head, and he made great efforts not to imagine what was happening there.

Instead, he looked forward to see the lady with the camera holding her hand to her cheek with an entertained look on her face. “Oh my, you’re a popular one, aren’t you, mister?” she teased.

No, um... sorry. I know I stick out like a sore thumb, but I don’t have anywhere to run or hide... Kai wanted to make excuses, but couldn’t manage to speak up.

“Alright, here it goes.” The lady took their picture and, sure enough, Kai was the only one whose face was red. The image of Misako dying of laughter floated into his mind.



Although she was sitting at home, torturing herself over her manuscript, this was all Misako’s fault. As soon as summer break had begun...

“Sir! Take a gander!” Misako noisily came over and fanned out five tickets, bringing the makeshift fan up to cover her face with a flair of grandeur as she shot Kai a seductive look through her glasses.

“I don’t wanna,” said Kai. From her speech and mannerisms, he surmised that she was writing a novel based around courtesans. He had a bad feeling about this, so he proactively tried to shut her down. His long history with his sister led his instincts to be right most of the time...

But of course, there wouldn’t have been any trouble at all if Misako could be stopped that easily. “Woe is me...” she faked a sob. “What a cold gentleman. I pray you, lend me your ear for but a moment... *Nom.*”

“Wah!” Kai yelled. Anyone would do the same if their sister suddenly nibbled on their ear.

“...To repel me away so,” she continued laboriously, “I shall be brought to tears...” Misako deliberately crumpled herself up on the floor and pretended to

cry. Ever since Kai had ignored her and she had *really* begun bawling, his resistance to tears had shot down significantly.

“...What is it?” he asked suspiciously. “The thing in your hands.”

“I’m glad you asked!” Misako hopped to her feet like a grasshopper, blowing away any semblance of meekness that she had previously shown. “This here is...”

To summarize the lengthy, heroic epic of a conversation they went on to have: essentially Misako had won a drawing at the market for a vacation. There was a place called Yuzawa that was famous for its ski slopes in the winter, and she had received day-passes for the pool located there.

Five of them, which Misako now began to line out onto the table one at a time. “This one and this one are for me and for you,” she began. *Flop, flop.*

“This one is for the oh-so-cute Nanaka-chan.” *Flop.*

“This one and this one are for the overly cheery Oushima Aya-chan and Kuroba Eru-chan that a little birdie told me about!” *Flop, flop.*

And like that, all five tickets were soon laid out.

“...But I don’t want to,” Kai protested.

“Kai?” said Misako. “I only reveal my hand *after* I’ve set my trap, you know?” Then she puffed out her chest with pride and shoved her phone in Kai’s face.

The LIME messaging app was opened to a conversation with Nanaka, and her response to everything Kai had just heard was, “I’m SUPER looking forward to it!” accompanied by the stamp of a laid-back seal. What’s more, she continued on to say, “I’ll make sure to ask everyone else!”

Kai figured that Aya would probably be on board for something that seemed this fun. And while Eru wouldn’t exactly be the first person to say yes, it was a different story now that Nanaka was confirmed to be going.

I see, Kai thought with resignation. He knew better than anyone else that he wasn’t the sort of person who could raise a concern once he’d been backed into the corner like this, and Misako was well aware of it, too. The pieces had already fallen into place.

She got me, he realized. Then he thought, *Wait, when did she exchange contact information with her, anyway?*

“Nanaka took my first ‘Shake it!’” Misako said, smugly waving her phone around.



And yet, Misako wasn't at the pool, and the reason could be summed up in one sentence: her manuscript was *seriously* in trouble.

For a woman who lived solely on a mix of worldly passions, desires, and instinct, there was no other reason why she would give up on the pool. Despite her actions, Misako was shockingly serious when it came to her novels. Unlike her crocodile tears from before, she had legitimately started bawling this time, but there was no helping it now.

And so, with Misako unable to join them, they came to the pool without her.

“—Rest, accompanied,” Akane was saying. “Tired, Kai?”

“I wouldn't say I'm tired...” he denied weakly. “I think I've already had my share of fun.”

After taking the group photo, they'd all gone down the water slide over and over, then had a serious shootout with the water guns that Aya had brought, then raced down the lanes to see who had to pay for lunch, and at some point they'd suddenly remembered the water slide and gone back... It felt as though he'd enjoyed a lifetime's worth of pool experiences.

Kai had never so much as gone to the pool with people he considered to be friends. This was the first time he had experienced a summer like this, so he couldn't tell if this was normal, or if they were being too wild.

Listening to the hubbub of the pool soothed his exhausted body, but the heat followed him even into the shade, and his sweat continued to flow. It was certain that he would have been more comfortable in a cool, air-controlled room. But for now, Kai was enveloped in a pleasant sensation of satisfaction that he would surely lose if he did move.

“I see,” said Akane, sitting across from him at a shaded table by the poolside.

Her hair was clumped together to stop it from spreading out in the water, and it was draping across her right shoulder. One or two tiny droplets of water slid across the surface of her swimsuit.

When they found out Misako couldn't come to the pool, Nanaka had said, "I'm gonna ask someone!" and lo and behold, it was Akane, of all people. In the past, she wouldn't have been able to come with how busy she was at her club, but this summer, she'd retired from the Tsukigase High Social Game Club after completing *Rondo's* massive overhaul.

"For a long time, I had thought it was strange," she said.

"What was?"

"There were many users who looked forward to characters in swimsuits, were there not?"

"There were," Kai agreed.

"Yet, to be honest, I did not understand that feeling. I could comprehend the line of thought that users wanted sensual outfits," she went on thoughtfully, "but in that case, there was no reason it had to be swimsuits in particular..."

"However, I think I can understand now—spending time with the people close to you in swimwear is so joyful, after all," Akane concluded. "I'm sure the users wanted to see their favorite characters look so happy."

Akane felt as though she should have come sooner. Her smile was refreshing to look at, as though she had purged all her inner demons; Kai felt like he could almost see straight through her.

"Still," she added, "you've changed quite a bit."

"...Me?" said Kai.

"If this were the old you, you would have forced yourself to appear to be fine when I asked you earlier if you were resting, and would have ran away back into the pool."

"Would..... I have done that?" he wondered.

"At the very least, I think so," Akane told him. "Those kinds of changes are often imperceptible to those they affect. They say that a change in environment

can alter a person... How vexing.”

“...Vexing?” Kai attempted to ask what she meant.

But it seemed Akane was done with the topic, and she fixed her posture to change gears as she began, “Now...”

Kai had seen this look in her eyes many times at Tsukigase. It looked like it was time to get to business.

“We have received an invitation from Summit,” she announced.

“...Is that the real reason you came here today, Akane-san?” Kai wanted to know.

“No, I came here today because Nanaka invited me. Had I not had this opportunity, I would have found some other means by which to contact you.”

“...I see,” Kai said neutrally. “So you were invited to Summit.”

“—What’s Summit?” asked Nanaka, who had slowly crept up on him.

Kai jumped up when she pushed a cold can of juice onto his neck. “Wah, that’s cold!”

“Ahahaha, nice reaction, Kai-kun. Ah, here’s one for you too, Akane-san!”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Akane. “Good timing, Nanaka. What happened to the other two?”

“They said they couldn’t handle the heat anymore, so they’re in an indoor break room.” Nanaka gave them a dry smile while handing one of her three cans of juice to each of Kai and Akane. She then opened the last one for herself and sat down next to Kai.

He turned toward her when he heard the satisfying *hiss*, and a drop of water fell from her hair and shattered across the base of the soft, white mountains below. *Calm. I have to stay calm.* Kai closed his eyes and repeated his mantra in his mind two, three times before locking eyes with Nanaka.

“The official title is ‘School Game Developer Summit,’” he explained, “but that’s really long, so most people call it SS or Summit. To put it simply for you, it’s basically a development competition.”

“A development competition...” Nanaka mused. “That’s different from the management competition from before, and it’s the one where you have to make a game from scratch, right?”

Among the regular contests held between social game clubs across the country, management competitions were based around improving an existing game. Meanwhile, development competitions involved making a brand new game from the ground up. Summit was an event specializing in the latter, and its mission statement was to stimulate the improvement of students’ development skills over the course of summer break.

However, there was supposed to be a stipulation that they’d improve the skills of students *who were already at a certain level*.

“So are we gonna enter or something?” Nanaka asked.

“Not quite,” Akane told her. “Summit is not something you can enter because you would like to. Only teams who have proven their ability in the routine competitions are invited to participate. The *Rondo* team was invited due to their work on the overhaul the other day, but... as you know, the nucleus of that project was your group. Personally, I think it would be natural for you to accept the offer instead.”

“But that’s—”

“There’s no need to worry about the logistics,” she went on. “I’ve already talked to the organizers on Summit’s end. It seemed they were already aware of Meikun’s status in our joint development, and talks proceeded without issue.

“Of course, you have the final say, but... there are certainly merits if you accept,” Akane pointed out. “Though you dodged disbandment, your school’s student council will likely consider demanding results in development competitions, as well. However, simply participating in Summit is more than enough to be considered an achievement.”

There would be no formal issues with Meikun High’s participation. Additionally, there were the benefits that came with it, as Akane explained. There wasn’t anything to lose by participating; that much was nearly guaranteed. The only issue was that Summit was generally an event to which only the country’s top social game clubs were invited. In baseball, the

equivalent would be the Spring Koshien Invitational.

Frankly, Kai couldn't deny that the Meikun Social Game Club wasn't quite on the same level as the other participants. If they declined the offer based on an evaluation of their own abilities, it would make Akane look like a fool for recommending them. However, it was the same story if they showed up and dropped the ball.

"...Are the members at Tsukigase okay with this?" he asked.

"Of course... Rather, they are currently in a state of turmoil as they attempt to keep up their management post-overhaul," Akane said. "It's embarrassing to admit, but they are in no state to participate in Summit themselves."

"I see," Kai replied. If that was also taken care of, then it truly was their decision to make. *What to do...*

"Kai-kun?"

"Y-Yes?!" Kai unconsciously raised his voice as Nanaka tapped his shoulder.

"Is this something that's kinda rare?"

"Um... yeah," he told her. "I mean, I've never gone to one, either."

"I see!" Nanaka exclaimed. Leaning over toward Akane, she went on to say, "We'll do it!"

Akane relaxed her eyes slightly and turned to Kai. "Kai, is that fine with you?"

Kai hesitated, and found himself unable to respond right away, but when Nanaka's fearless face came into view, it took his breath away. He knew that she had her own thoughts and considerations, but Nanaka's smiling face almost appeared to be having fun.

Making eye contact with Akane, Kai reset with a small breath in and a small breath out. "...Yes," he said, and gave a solid nod alongside his answer. "It's true that this is a rare opportunity. I'll do my best."

It wasn't as though he wasn't scared: their ability was lackluster; they had no experience; they might stick out; and they could betray Akane's expectations of them. Once Kai started thinking negative thoughts, there was no end to them. The more he thought, the more negativity he uncovered. But at that rate, he'd

never get anything done.

...*She really is blinding*, he realized.

Akane had told him that he'd changed, but it wasn't true. He might have made excuses like 'I've never done it before,' or 'I might embarrass you,' to run away—if Nanaka wasn't with him. Saying he'd changed when he was still like this was merely an overestimation.

Kai could still see Nanaka happily grinning out of the corner of his eye, and he felt a faint shard of shameful restlessness appear. Ever since that day, she had been running straight forward like a beam of light. He wondered whether or not he was really worthy of seeing her smile.

"It's settled!" Nanaka exclaimed. "Okay, I'm gonna go tell Eru and Ah-chan, too!" With that said, she rose from her seat and ran off, her back illuminated by light reflecting off the pool water as their view of her got smaller and smaller.

Akane's gaze followed her, and she gently squinted her eyes, saying, "I'm looking forward to it."

Chapter 2: Yozakura Aina

They split paths with Akane at Yuzawa. There was a bullet train station there, so she had no need to go out to Niigata on her return to Tokyo.

The drawing ceremony for Summit to decide their opponent was to be held in Tokyo, so they would follow on that same train soon enough, but now was not yet the time for that. There was still something they needed to do before then.

They saw Akane off at the station and returned to the rendezvous point for the travel company they were with to catch the bus home. Nanaka and Eru sat beside one another, and Kai and Aya sat behind them.

Once the bus began moving, Kai leaned his head over the seats in front of him and called for Nanaka and Eru's attention. "Um, I know we'll all be tired from today, but let's have a meeting tomorrow."

"Bleeghhh," Aya let out a lazy groan beside him. "I'm feeling all sting-y with sunburn over here. I don't wanna move tomorrow."

"I told you so..." Nanaka scolded. "It's because you didn't put on sunscreen properly."

"It's your own fault, fool." Eru was less sympathetic.

"It's *not*," Aya objected. "Nana-sen's hands when she was putting the sunscreen on were kinda lewd."

"Th-They were *not*! ...Right?!" Nanaka swung the conversation to Kai.

"Well... I didn't see you put it on her, so..." He didn't know whether that was the case or not.

"Anyway!" Nanaka advanced the conversation by force. "I was thinking that we needed to meet, too, so I'm on board! This is our first development competition, after all! We probably have a lot we need to prepare, right?"

"It's more of..." Kai searched for the right words. "The preparation before the preparation, I guess?"

“Before?” Nanaka asked, quizzically tilting her head.

Aya’s lack of enthusiasm surged up from the bottom of her heart and her head drooped sadly. “It’s my least favorite part... We’re frontloading, aren’t we?”

“That’s right,” Kai affirmed.

“Ughhh. I hate this whole be-there-early and do-it-in-advance mentality,” she whined. “Isn’t it stupid? If the meeting starts at 10:00, then it should be fine if I’m there at 10:00. If the deadline is the fifth, then it should be fine if I’m done by the fifth. When people talk about margin this and buffer that, all I can think is, *shut up*.”

“I might have nodded along at some point during your rant if you hadn’t overslept and been ten minutes late to our meetup this morning,” Kai pointed out.

“But look, it worked out, didn’t it?”

“It worked out because I built a time buffer into our scheduled meeting time.”

“I like people who tell gentle lies,” Aya claimed flatteringly.

“I think I like people who aren’t late all the time,” he replied.

“La, la, caaan’t heeeaaar youuu!”

Kai was glad that he’d chosen to have everyone gather fifteen minutes before the bus took off, and now he internally resolved to give Aya early deadlines for their club schedule going forward. That was his plan: the fact that there were people like her was the reason that planners made schedules that looked like they were barely cutting it on the surface, but actually had time to spare.

He’d pressure her by saying, “There’s only three days until the deadline,” but internally, he’d know they had a week left. Then he’d press on with, “How’s the progress?” while wearing a smile on his face.

That had been a hard process for Kai until he’d gotten used to it. The planner was in charge of supervising progress more often than not, so it was common for them to be in charge of talking to the members on-site and controlling the rate of progression. However, in the end, the work was being done by other

people, so there was a limit to what they could actually control. If telling someone to work faster made them do so, he wouldn't have any issues in the first place.

As a result, the strategy for those whose norm was to be late was to give them a compressed schedule from step one. Aya had called it a 'gentle lie,' but a lie was a lie. Honestly, even now Kai didn't like the way he was getting used to lying through a smile.

"...Kai-kun?" Nanaka called out.

"Oh. Ahem," he cleared his throat and realigned his train of thought. "Getting back on topic, Nanaka-san... do you think you could play both soccer and baseball at the same time?"

"No way," Nanaka answered without any hesitation, as would anyone. If there existed a person capable of dribbling a soccer ball at the batter's box while hitting a home run, they would be well beyond the levels of a human being.

"Okay, then do you think you can both manage and develop a game at the same time?"

"...Oh." Nanaka's eyes widened as she figured out what he was saying.

"Right. If we go to Summit, we'll be concentrating on development, so..." Kai trailed off.

"...So, we won't be able to implement our planned management fixes," Nanaka finished for him.

"Exactly," he agreed. "We can get out of our routine competition if we formally accept the invitation to Summit, but our normal day-to-day management is a separate issue."

"And *that's* why you said the preparation before the preparation," she concluded.

The Meikun Social Game Club's game, *Miracle Stage*—also known as *MiSt*—hadn't quite shot up the rankings, but it did have more users than before owing to the buzz generated from their joint venture with Tsukigase. They might not

have been in a position to implement a large scale event, but they still needed to keep up with their regular support for the game.

For example, they could ready a set of events that changed weekly or daily (which were often called ‘daily quests’ and generally offered materials to strengthen units), and that was the bare minimum that they absolutely had to prepare.

Whether the management staff was participating in Summit or not had nothing to do with the users, and leaving a message like, “We’re going to Summit so no updates for a while,” would have been incredibly rude to their players.

“—Respect, foremost. Listen, Shiraseki: a social game that no one plays is akin to one that doesn’t exist at all. That’s why, above all else, we must not forget to be respectful to our users. But don’t misunderstand—we must not lick their boots, because we are equals. Both management and userbase must coexist. Without one or the other, a social game ceases to exist.”

Kai had learned that lesson from Akane around the time that he first joined the club. He was deeply blessed to have received so many key words of wisdom that he could look back on whenever he lost his way.

“First, I think we need to build our plans for this month’s management decisions as fast as possible,” he explained.

“Umm... oh, right,” Nanaka pondered. “The drawing ceremony for Summit is next week, after all.”

“Aw, man,” Aya moaned. “If we had as many people as Tsukigase does, we coulda split the work up.”

“Well there’s nothing we can do about *that...*” Kai agreed with a sigh.

Just as Aya said, Tsukigase could probably have held down the fort even if they’d lost a good chunk of their members to Summit. Earlier, when Kai had mentioned the baseball and soccer analogy, they would have been able to make it work if they’d had more than the necessary eleven soccer players and nine baseball players.

For the four current members of Meikun’s social game club, it was a situation

they weren't even allowed to dream of.

"Okay," Nanaka said, pumping up her fist to draw everyone's attention. "Let's meet up tomorrow morning! 9:00 AM at the clubroom!"

"Waaaaaaahhh!"

"Looks like Ah-chan can come," Nanaka noted. "How about you, Eru?"

"I don't mind, dear."

"Great. Oh, and Kai-kun, does that work for you?"

"Yep, that's fine."

"Alriiight!" she cheered. "Here comes the warm-up before Summit! Let's go!"



"Isn't it whack that Nana-sen's not here after saying all that?!" Aya demanded.

"Shut your mouth," Eru snapped back. "Unlike you, Nanaka let us know that she'd be late."

"I wasn't asking you, you Nana-sen-lover! Senpai, isn't this whack? Are you gonna let her be late just because she said she would?!"

"She sent us a message, so I think it's fine?" Kai ventured.

"Argh! I forgot you're a Nana-sen-lover, too!" Aya griped. "I don't have any allies!"

"...It's not about being your ally or whatever," he explained. "Aya, if you happened to not feel well or something, all you would need to do is let us know."

Kai decided to skip straight past the whole 'Nana-sen-lover' bit. Aya had a habit of confusing everyone by complicating the situation and weaseling away, so she frequently used that kind of language to try and bait them.

The basics of dealing with these sorts was to ignore them. Unfortunately for Kai, he was used to interacting with this personality type from dealing with his sister (whose ability to annoy was three levels beyond Aya's), so letting this slide didn't even tickle.

“Fine, then,” Aya muttered. “I’m sleeping in tomorrow.”

“That’s not happening,” he told her flatly.

“But I told you ahead of time!!!” Aya moaned pitifully.

Kai simply looked down at his phone to check the time. It was already thirty minutes past their scheduled start. In their LIME group chat, Nanaka had written, “A teacher called me over so I’ll be a bit late,” followed shortly by, “Wait just a bit longer! Big announcement incoming!” alongside a stamp of a shocked seal drawn in a lazy cartoon style.

“...Wouldn’t it be funny if we got disbanded again?” Aya joked.

“It wouldn’t be funny, and besides... her texts seem cheerful, so I don’t think that’s it,” Kai replied.

“I wonder. Mmkay, since we don’t have anything else to do, you wanna have a little contest, senpai?”

“Rolling the gacha and comparing rarities isn’t exactly what you call a contest,” he pointed out.

Sick of waiting, Eru put on her headphones and started scratching away at the tablet in front of her usual computer. Though she undeniably had communication issues, Kai felt like he could learn a thing or two from the way in which she never wasted a second.

Even on the bus ride home yesterday, when they’d all been chatting together at first, Eru had pulled out a small croquis notebook and begun sketching as the conversation died down.

“*Sigh*, I’m boooored,” said Aya, who was melting like a raw egg in a frying pan. “Oh, I got rainbows.” She was flicking at her phone with her right hand while staring at gacha animations. Then she howled, “Ohhhhhhhhhh?! ...Aww.” It looked like her pull was a bust. As an aside, her pose remained lazily sprawled out from start to finish.

Yep, thought Kai to himself. *No matter what kind of overwhelming skill set she has, I shouldn’t be learning from her.* Instead, he opened his laptop with a sigh, figuring that he ought to work on whatever he could. The moment he’d had

that thought, though, he heard the light *tap tap tap* sound of footsteps from the hallway, and the door opened with great momentum to reveal Nanaka, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Sorry for the wait!” she told them.

“Oh, Nana-sen, you’re here—wait.” Aya froze with her mouth wide open.

Kai felt the same way. He had also tried to greet Nanaka, but the words got caught before he could speak. That was how strong her presence was.

“Whozzat?” Aya wanted to know.

“I’m glad you asked!” Nanaka declared with gravity. “Here we have a second-year student, just like me and Kai-kun: Yozakura Aina-chan! What’s more, she’s a new member of our club!”

So that’s why Nanaka got called over by the teachers in the middle of summer break, Kai mused. However, his further thoughts were paralyzed the instant that Aina walked into the room.

To be absolutely sincere, she was stunningly beautiful. She gave off nearly the same impression as the plaster statue of a goddess left in the fine arts room.

The girl introduced as Yozakura Aina carried herself with polished mannerisms befitting of her first impression, and yet strangely had a soft air of approachability akin to that of a flower. She wore a pink hoodie over her summer blouse, which swayed softly as she walked. Her black hair was as fine as silk, and it was plain to see that she took ample care of it. That didn’t mean it was overdone, however, and it still had a touch of homeliness as it floated down from her head.

“Nice to meet you!” As Aina gave them a small bow, her black hair flowed elegantly down. Despite being taller than Nanaka, her head was a smidgeon smaller, and her large eyes were supported by a nicely shaped nose. She flashed Kai a soft smile when his eyes met hers, and that was enough to make him gulp. “My name’s Aina,” she sang out, “let’s get along! ♪”

“Hoo boy,” Aya blurted, “what’s up with this 2D-looking beauty? Are you one of Nana-sen’s friends who happened to have been an elf in their previous life? Or maybe you’re an android or something?”

“Geez, I’m not an elf or an android!” Aina said, while laughing lightly. “Both of my parents are Japanese. Sorry I couldn’t live up to your expectations, um... and your name is...?”

“First-year, Oushima Aya. I’m the social game club’s programmer.”

“Whaaat?! You’re a programmer?! That’s so cool!” Aina gushed. “I wouldn’t have guessed, with how small and cute you are! I wish I had a cute little sister like you, Aya-chan!”

“It’s not like my looks have anything to do with programming, though,” Aya pointed out. “If we were sisters, I’d make you roll the gacha with me every day, you know?”

“Oh, is that *BeauSt*? Look, look, I got lucky and rolled the newest character!” Aina pulled out and displayed her own phone from her hoodie pocket in response to the phone screen Aya thrust her way.

“Wow, you got a plain addition off rate-up in a death pot gacha,” Aya said admiringly. “Not bad.”

“Right?” said Aina. “I wonder if that’s enough to win your trust?”

“Welp, I don’t really change how I act no matter who I’m with, so let’s get along.”

“Yup, let’s! ♪” Aina responded with a smile and playfully began messing with Aya’s twintails.

BeauSt’s official name was *Beautiful Story*, and it was an RPG social game developed by the Tokyo-based Kongouin Academy Social Game Club. They were a school with absurd amounts of funding, and all the social games under their management had ludicrous amounts of spending in the graphics department. From illustrations to 3D modeling, they prided themselves on their peerless visual design.

However, good things were not cheap—or so went their policy—and their gacha system was brutal. If one were to add a new character into a social game, most would offer a time-limited rate-up to boost the odds of that character appearing. Furthermore, they’d create a separate banner from their usual gachas tailored solely for that character. Generally speaking, all social games

followed a similar format, so if you had played one game with a gacha, you would know the standard of what to expect.

Kongouin Academy was anything but standard. The ‘plain addition off rate-up in a death pot gacha’ phrase that Aya had muttered sounded like an ancient curse, but the ‘plain addition’ part meant that the character was simply added to the existing pool of gacha characters and the ‘off rate-up’ part meant that their odds of appearing were the same as every other character of their rarity.

Lastly, these sorts of vicious gacha systems where you couldn’t guess what would come out next were called ‘death pots.’ On this point, there was some variance; some people reserved the word for when characters and equipment were mixed together, and others used it when new characters were mixed together with old, powercrept characters, so there wasn’t a clear consensus per se—

His internal rambling was cut off by a dignified greeting.

“Um, and you are...?” After having conversed with Aya for a time, Aina now turned toward Kai. One step, two steps, three steps forward, and she was right in front of him. Her hair swayed when she came to a stop, and the pleasant smell of a spring sun emanated from it.

“Oh, uh, hi...!” he said. “I’m Shiraseki Kai, a second-year just like you. I also joined this club recently—” *so I hope we can get along*, is how he would have finished if he had been given the time.

“You’re *the* Shiraseki Kai?!” Betraying the energy in her voice, Aina gently caught Kai’s right hand up in both of her own as though she were drawing water from a fountain. The sensation of her slender fingers (which were so thin he was worried they’d snap) and a vague warmth traveled up his arm, paralyzing everything from his hand to his heart.



“U-Um...?” Kai tried to escape, but despite her grip being somewhat tender, he couldn’t pull his hand free.

“That’s amazing!” Aina continued, and then began pumping his hand up and down. It felt like she was directly shaking his heart.

Kai felt like his gaze was being sucked into hers as she looked up at him from slightly below eye-level. “Um, it’s just that!” she began. “You’re the one being praised on the Social Game Link, right?”

“That cannot be attributed to me,” he insisted. “That was the result of—”

“Still! It’s true that they were praising you, isn’t it? If so,” said Aina, gripping his hand tightly and drawing his averted eyes back to her before concluding, “you have to puff up your chest with pride. *Especially* if it’s something you achieved with the help of others... right?”

“That... might be true, yes,” Kai cautiously agreed. If he truly considered it an accomplishment, then he should be proud of it; that made sense. Otherwise, it would mean he wasn’t proud of his fellow club members, who’d walked the path alongside him.

That simply wasn’t true. Thus, if he considered it a feat that they had all achieved together—and if he considered it to be important—he needed to be proud of his work, just as Aina said. And then, he should make the point that he didn’t do it alone *after* that.

“But,” said Aina, smiling gently, “I don’t think anyone would blame you for boasting... I wouldn’t have guessed you to be so modest. Kai-kun, you’re a good guy. You know... I like people like you. ♪”

“Uh, I, um, uh... Th-Thank you,” Kai finally managed to reply. The sudden fast ball of the word ‘like’ had stabbed into his brain, and that was all the response he could muster.

“Oh, sorry!” Aina apologized. “I didn’t mean to hold your hand for this long... I was just so happy to get to meet you, Kai-kun. I’m sure you didn’t like holding hands with someone like me...”

“No. Th-That’s not... true,” he stammered.

“Really? I’m so relieved... Oh, since we’re both second-years, it’s okay for me to call you Kai-kun, right? You can call me Aina, too! And no need to be so polite. ♪”

As she stared straight at him, Kai couldn’t get any words out and settled for a simple nod, to which Aina responded with a full-fledged smile.

“U-Ummm!” Before Aina could say anything, Nanaka wedged her way into the conversation and gestured toward Eru with her arm. “The one drawing over there is Kuroba Eru! She’s a second-year like us, and—”

“I know,” said Aina, cutting her off.

Was it Kai’s imagination? When Aina heard the name ‘Kuroba Eru’ and made her reply, her eyes had a cold tinge that hadn’t been even remotely present until just then. She left a lingering sweet smell in her wake as she walked past Kai, and he lost sight of her eyes.

Eru couldn’t hear anything past the music playing through her headphones as she single-mindedly moved her pen across the tablet, so Aina quietly tapped her on the shoulder.

Eru’s expression was typically full of emotion whenever she finished an illustration, but that was about the only time that was true. Her almond eyes were most often seen quietly and sharply staring off at something. But now, as she slowly turned back to look at Aina, those same eyes instantly donned a piercing glare. She violently tore her headphones off her ears and back to her neck, shot up, and got up into Aina’s face, as though she was a thug picking a fight.

“...Why are *you* here?” Eru demanded to know.

“Um, long time no see,” said Aina. “You see, I kinda joined this club. Let’s get —”

“My word, don’t *fuck* with me!!!” Eru’s right hand shot up in the heat of passion, and she shoved Aina’s shoulder with all her might.

“Aieeee!” Aina screamed, launched backward by the blow like a sakura flower being carried off by a powerful gust of wind.

Kai caught her fall before he was even aware of having done so. Aina was shaking in his arms and muttered, “K-Kai-kun,” while begging for help with her eyes. She entrusted her weight to him and latched onto his shoulder, after which she proceeded to make distance with Eru by hiding behind his back.

The way things turned out, Kai was basically shielding Aina from Eru. He didn’t even know what was going on.

“Oh dear, are you already wrapping yourself around that *bitch’s* finger?!” Eru demanded scornfully. “Both of your eyeballs must be rotting out of their sockets! I can’t *believe* how much of a moron you are!”

“H-Hey!” Nanaka interjected. “Eru?! Calm down...!” She hurried to hold Eru back by the shoulders, trying to pacify her.

“Is it true that she joined the club, dear?”

“W-Well, yeah,” Nanaka replied.

“We ought to cancel her membership immediately,” Eru opined. “She’s no better than the vermin who gather in the local fields. All this *thing* will do is bring misfortune.”

“S-So mean...!” Aina wailed. Kai couldn’t see her as she said that, but he could tell from the trembling hands on his back that she was in distress.

Kai didn’t understand their circumstances. He didn’t understand at all, but... “Don’t you think that’s going too far?” he asked Eru.

“...Huh? I don’t want to hear the opinion of someone so *easily* led around by the nose as you!” Eru replied defensively.

“Eru.” Nanaka’s voice served to dilute the color of Eru’s rage by a small margin. “I think that was a little too far, too... Did something happen between you two in middle school?”

“I...” It was a rare sight to see Eru look around in desperation, as she was doing now. She eventually turned away and ended with, “...can’t say.”

“...What about you, Aina-chan?” Nanaka inquired.

“I....” Kai could hear the hoarseness in the voice behind him. “I said ‘long time no see’ because we were in the same club in middle school... That’s all I said.”

“...I see.” Nanaka put her hand on her chin and contemplated the situation. “...Eru? Aina-chan’s club registration form already went through, so it’d be pretty hard to undo it... and, well? I think it’s a good thing to have more members for times like when we’re participating in Summit... So, I think... if you won’t explain your reasoning to me, I can’t support you here.”

“...” Eru said nothing, but the pen she was gripping made an unpleasant cracking sound.

“That’s why, later, you can tell me—”

“Fine,” Eru said coldly. Her voice was like ice, completely devoid of all the heat she’d had earlier. “You should do as you wish, dear. However, I don’t want to speak to her, and I don’t want to hear her voice. I will sit here and draw by myself. If you have something you need me to do, then I’ll do it.”

“E-Eru! Th-That’s not...!” Nanaka tried to stop her, but Eru shook her off and re-equipped her headphones before drawing away at her tablet.

“...Honestly, she hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Huh?” Kai whirled around because he’d heard someone mutter in a completely novel tone of voice, but all he found was Aina, who hadn’t changed one bit.

She asked him, “Kai-kun, is there something wrong?”



Afterwards, they had begun discussing the work they needed to complete before Summit, but the situation had not been pretty. Eru had drowned herself in her artwork without a peep. Nanaka would ask her a question over LIME and Eru would send her a direct message containing her reply. It had been a horrible sight to see. How bad could it have been, you ask? Well...

“Okay, basically the only thing on the planners’ end is to update the master data,” Kai summarized.

“And I need to fix up the time period for limited quests,” Aya continued.

“Can I go ahead and add the Excel columns on my end?” he asked.

“Oh, no, I already did that,” the programmer replied. “Just input your data

into the ones I made.”

“...That was fast,” Kai said in admiration. He added, “Oh, don’t worry, Nanaka-san. I’ll explain this to you later.”

“R-Right!” Nanaka replied.

“All that’s left... is the schedule for the illustrations we’ll be using as our reward.”

“Ah, give me a minute! Um..... Eru said it’s fine!” It wasn’t as if Nanaka had sat in deep thought during her pause. Rather, she had been waiting for Eru’s confirmation over LIME.

Eru’s attitude failed to improve for the entire day, and she quickly returned home by herself when it was time to leave. Meanwhile, the other four members of the social game club exited the school gate and walked the path home bathed in the scarlet sunset. Kai and Nanaka walked beside one another, and in front of them Aya and Aina were merrily chatting away. Even in the evening, the summer breeze was uncomfortably warm, and Kai’s summer uniform clung to his skin.

“What a predicament...” Kai observed.

To which Nanaka nodded along, musing aloud, “I wonder what’s going on...”

Of course, the predicament to which they were referring was the tension between Eru and Aina.

“I don’t think... there’s anything about Aina-san that’d make her instantly snap like that,” Kai said slowly.

“I get what you mean,” Nanaka agreed. “Aina-chan’s cute.”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant...!”

“Oh, um! Sorry!” Nanaka frantically waved her hands. “That’s not what I meant, either. It’s just, even as a girl, she’s almost *too* cute.”

“.....Th—”

“.....‘Th’?”

“.....N-Never mind... It’s nothing.” Kai had tried to say, ‘That’s not true.’ There

was a part of him that wanted to let it out, and he had already begun speaking, but ultimately he couldn't keep his foot on the gas long enough for the words to come out.

It was true that Aina was cute. Not only that, she was strikingly beautiful, as well. With her mix of cuteness and beauty—and this was something Aya had initially pointed out—Kai wouldn't have batted an eye had anyone told him she was from a 2D universe. That, or from a movie or a glittering runway. She was closer to being an exquisite doll than a 2D character, so perhaps that was more fitting.

If Aina appeared within a film at the movie theater, Kai wouldn't find anything amiss. In fact, he thought that the spotlight would fit her quite well.

But all that was its own topic.

Walking beside him, Nanaka was also *extremely* cute. Though, he couldn't say that to her face, of course. Instead, he said, "Nanaka-san, you went to the same middle school as those two, right?"

"Yup," she agreed. "But I was in a different club from Eru in middle school."

"I guess you wouldn't know anything, then."

"That's... right... Back then, Eru was just... so blinding."

"Are... are you talking about illustrations?" he guessed.

Nanaka's tiny nod of affirmation caused her long shadow to stir significantly. "By the time we were in middle school, I was way worse than Eru when it came to drawing. I thought to myself... *maybe this is what talent is*.

"And so... I ran away, I think," she went on. "I made the excuse that we should study different styles of art, so we joined different clubs: I went to the Fine Arts Club, and Eru went to the Manga Research Society. I think those two only ever met at their club, so I think something must have happened there.

"...It's strange to think that Aina-san was in a manga research society," Kai mused.

"That's true. Maybe she likes manga?"

"Who knows... I haven't talked to her enough to know what she likes and

doesn't like."

"Alright, I'll try asking Eru about all this tomorrow before our club meets... But I don't think she'll tell me what happened," Nanaka admitted.

"...Really?"

She nodded slowly. "From the looks of it."

If *Nanaka* couldn't get an answer, then Kai had no hopes of even hazarding a guess. Of course, it wasn't like Eru would open a tightly closed gate with cheers and ceremony just because he knocked. And if he asked Aya to try her hand, she'd probably vandalize the gate and call it a day. Alternatively, there was the possibility that Aya'd blow the gate open and force her way in, but then *she* would be locked into hostilities with Eru; that was not a solution.

Nanaka couldn't provide royal hospitality or anything, but the odds of her getting an audience was at least higher than zero. It wouldn't be an easy task, but Kai knew that leaving Eru to Nanaka was the best course of action.

"I'm counting on you to talk to Kuroba-san... Oh, and, Nanaka-san," Kai said, stopping in his tracks. Nanaka came to a halt herself, and turned back to face him. Reflecting the fiery sunset, her sandy blonde hair had a crimson shine as it fluttered about. He finally declared, "'—Do not submit yourself to inadequacy.'"

Shocked by his words, Nanaka rapidly blinked in confusion.

"Like saying you don't have any talent," Kai clarified. "It's easy to look for an excuse like, 'I'm just not good enough.' If you accept that, even once, the excuses begin to pile on: 'I have no talent, so there's no point in trying. So, I won't try. So, so, so...' The inferiority will overflow, and 'There wasn't anything I could have done' becomes insurance as you do nothing. Unable to do anything, you will be caught in a vicious yet half-hearted cycle... is what Akane-san used to say to me all the time when she scolded me to not spoil myself... Now, I think she's completely right."

"Akane-san really is strong." Nanaka said. "And so are you, Kai-kun."

"You're the same way, Nanaka-san... The reason I came to believe these words is because I saw your room." The innumerable pages of illustrations that flooded her room were proof that Nanaka had kept crawling forward when she

was on the brink of being crushed. Thinking back, Kai remembered that there was no small number of drawings that were proper studies with a classically artistic approach.

Nanaka had said she had run away. But seeing her try and take all the things she came across and make them her own, Kai simply could not agree... And again, the same thought returned to him: it was harder to *not* like someone who tried their hardest, as she did.

“Umm? Are you two having a moment here?” Kai turned to see Aina tilting her head at them. Behind her, Aya had her hands behind her head and was smirking like she was a front row spectator.

“Ah, s-sorry!” Nanaka apologized. “Kai-kun and I were just talking for a while!”

“...Are you two dating?” Aina asked.

Pft! Kai nearly did a spit-take at her brazen question. “N-No,” he denied, “we’re not!”

Aina took one look at Kai and then another at Nanaka to confirm his statement, and said, “Oh,” to herself. Then she picked up with, “I was talking to Aya-chan just now and I realized something: I never talked about what I wanted to do at this club!”

“Oh, now that you mention it...” Kai had been so distracted by Eru’s attitude and Summit pre-preparations that he had completely forgotten.

“Aye-aye’s gonna put a new weapon in our arsenal,” claimed Aya, whose nickname for Aina appeared to be ‘Aye-aye.’ She sounded like she’d be off napping and eating bamboo leaves.

Aina rummaged through the backpack on her shoulders and pulled out a book. “What do you think this is?” she quizzed. The bound paper was about a B5 size, but it wasn’t that thick and had no cover.

From the top of the book, Kai could see a handful of tags sticking out on pages that Aina had flagged. “...Is that a script?” he asked.

“Correct!” Aina displayed the booklet by lifting it up next to her face and

accompanied that motion with a perfectly timed wink. “Fledgling voice actress Yozakura Aina is in your care. ♪”

Chapter 3: Two Sides of a Sakura

They had planned to meet the following afternoon, so Kai decided to spend his morning cleaning up his home. As per usual, he woke up and made his way to the living room but did not come across Misako. He figured it was around time for her to show up, sipping tea with frizzled hair and bags under her eyes, but it appeared that she was still struggling with her manuscript.

First, he washed his face in the powder room. His bed head was especially bad today, so he took a quick shower to fix it and wash away his sweat. He had been leaving the AC on at nights so he wouldn't get heatstroke, but just lightly enough that he wouldn't catch a cold, either. Even with the cooling unit running, Kai still woke up to the heat of the morning sun and covered in sweat.

Before moving, Kai had imagined Niigata to be similar to Hokkaido, which had cool summers. However, the summer heat didn't feel any different from Tokyo. After a quick search online, he'd realized that the temperatures of the two regions weren't all that different.

Kai wiped himself dry with a bath towel and began to boil some water in his electric kettle before returning to the bathroom to dry his hair. By the time he was nice and dry, the kettle had worked its magic, and the water was boiling hot. He grabbed his usual mug from the kitchen cabinet and measured out some instant coffee.

After setting it down onto the coffee table in his living room, he went back to his bedroom to retrieve his laptop and four smartphones. Turning on his laptop, he opened Excel to the same file upon which he always recorded his data. He took a single gulp of coffee and began simultaneously tapping away at all four phones. Up until this point, it was just another morning.

Ding dong, the doorbell rang out of the blue, and Kai's eyes snapped to the time displayed at the top of his phones' screens. It wasn't *that* early, but it was still too early for it to be a package delivery. To begin with, he didn't think he had ordered anything, and his parents in Tokyo hadn't told him to expect

anything, either.

With that possibility crossed off, it was most likely to be Misako. However, she had never rang the doorbell before (after all, she had a spare key), and since she would probably devote herself to her manuscript for a little while longer, these odds weren't all that high, either.

With these things in mind, Kai recalled that something like this had happened before, and his pulse quickened. Back then, he had come to the conclusion that it was Misako and had opened the door to find Nanaka instead.

As the scene played back in his mind, her smile came to life and made Kai nervous. *Ding dong*. Again, the doorbell served to rush him along. Kai rose to his feet and took a deep breath before opening the door.

"Ah! I'm so glad you were awake, Kai-kun. Morning! ♪"

"Wha, uh, good... morn... ing?" he managed to choke out. *This made it twice*, he lamented to himself. He'd been sure that he was going to be able to say 'Good morning' properly this time, but it was clearly not meant to be.

The girl in front of him—Yozakura Aina—practically wore a halo above her head with the way the morning sun shimmered off of her dark hair. Paired together with her gorgeous looks, she truly resembled an angel.

"...Kai-kun?" she said, after a short pause. "You okay? Did you just wake up?"

"N-No, I'm fine," he denied hastily. "Um... Aina-san, what brings you here?"

"I came over because I kinda wanted to talk to you, Kai-kun. Is that... a no?"

The faintest angle, he thought distractedly. She'd tilted her head to the side by the slightest of angles, yet the sway of her hair and the upwards glance of her eyes turned that tiny movement into something special. It was her own magic spell that activated at ten degrees to the right.

"No, but—my room is dirty," Kai had to admit. For the past few days, he'd been too busy preparing for the pool trip to clean up around the house. The laundry and dishes had piled up into a mountain.

"I'm the one who wants to talk, so I don't mind, you know? Or... maybe..." Aina trailed off, before activating her ten degree magic once again. "Do you not

want to talk to me?”

“Th-That’s not—”

“Then that’s that! Excuse me! ♪” Aina sang out, pushing Kai back into his own home. She took off her shoes instantly and he could hear the light tip-taps of her footsteps following behind him.

While wondering how someone could be so cute on every level down to the sound of her footsteps, Kai had a thought. *Hold on, wait. Why is someone like that in my home, anyway?*

“Ahh, I see what you mean now,” Aina said as she observed the piles of plates and clothes that needed to be washed. “...Kai-kun, are you living on your own?”

“Y-Yes,” he admitted.

“I see.” She looked around the room and then twirled around to face Kai. With a bashful look on her face, she said, “This is my first time visiting a boy who lives by himself... ♪”

“Right, um... Sorry.”

“Geez, what are you apologizing for?” Aina laughed and turned her eyes to the laptop in the living room. “Ah...! Sorry... It looks like I really did get in the way of something.” Pointing a slender finger toward the devices on the coffee table, she asked, “Is this something you do every day? Like a daily routine of yours?”

“Um... I’m always studying other social games,” he told her, “and I happened to be in the middle of that process.” *How did she know I do this every day?* he wondered.

Kai didn’t put that question to words, but Aina answered it all the same. “A laptop, four smartphones, and coffee,” she explained. “There’s a lot of stuff here, but it’s strangely organized... Like there’s not any unnecessary clutter? The whole thing seemed well-polished so I figured, ‘Kai-kun must do this all the time.’ But... do you really need this many phones?”

“Oh, that’s because I stay up to date with all of the games in the top 100 on the rankings,” he said automatically. “I wouldn’t be able to keep up with just

one.”

“All of—?! S-Sorry! I’m really sorry for dropping by out of nowhere like this,” said Aina, rushing to apologize.

“I-It’s fine,” Kai said, dismissing her concerns. “I can always do this later.”

“...No, you shouldn’t put these kinds of things off! I have some basic training I always do in the mornings too, like running and voice checks... Wow. So this is the secret to your big success with *Rondo*. That’s amazing,” she concluded, while tenderly running her fingers across the keyboard. A small *click click click* rang out as her hand slid across the keys.

Then, Aina hopped up like a bunny and turned Kai’s way. “...Okay,” she sang out. “Kai, you go ahead with your daily routine. ♪”

“Huh? But what about the thing you wanted to talk about?”

“While you do that,” she said, pointing toward the dishes and laundry, “I’ll clean up for you. ♪”

“N-No, you don’t have to—”

“Hey... Kai-kun? The way things stand, I’m already bothering you, and the topic I want to discuss is kind of heavy to boot. I want to thank you... or, like, I’d be happy if you let me earn a favor here.”

Despite the fact that Aina had said her topic was only ‘kind of’ heavy, her grim face was far darker than the cheerful tone of her voice. Kai could only think of one subject of discussion that would make her feel that way; it must have been about Eru and Aina. There was no mistake that something had happened between those two. That being said, they couldn’t let the feud continue on forever; that would cause unending trouble for the club’s activities.

“...I understand,” he told her.

“Good!”

Kai only agreed to make it as easy as possible for Aina to speak up, but she was way happier than he anticipated. Her brilliant smile was infectious and tugged directly at Kai’s own emotions.

“Leave it to me! I might not seem like it, but I’m really good at housework!”



“Whoa... it’s good.”

“Really! I’m glad to hear it! ♪” Aina’s small lips relaxed into a smile as she watched him from across the table. “Eat up!”

The food she was offering Kai was a plate of sandwiches she’d made from the contents of his refrigerator. Her homemade sauce was so delicious that Kai couldn’t help but wonder how in the world she’d managed to whip it up with the few ingredients at her disposal.

Aina clearly hadn’t lied about being good at housework, as the laundry and dishes were wrapped up in the blink of an eye. She even cleaned up every nook and cranny of his bedroom while the washing machine was running.

After all that, she *still* had time to spare, so she made these sandwiches for him, as well.

“So, the thing I wanted to talk to you about...” Aina’s expression suddenly grew serious—though she didn’t look him in the eye—and she got up, silently walked along the edge of the coffee table before sitting back down next to Kai. As he sat cross-legged, his left leg was in range to bump into her knee. In fact, it already had.

“...!” Kai was caught off guard by the jolt of lightning that ran down his spine. When he looked down, Aina’s thin, white hand was resting atop his left thigh. The warmth of her palm felt as though it went straight through the fabric of his pants and made direct contact with his skin.

As Kai turned toward Aina, the pair naturally came to face one another. Aina’s eyes were tinged with melancholy, and he could discern each individual eyelash that ornamented them. And yet, he couldn’t find a single pore on her smooth skin, even from this distance.

If he made a wrong move, he’d end up making contact, so Kai was stuck in place.

Aina took a deep breath to harden her resolve, and said, “I want you... to use me as a voice actress.”

“.....Huh?” *But—your fight with Kuroba-san*, Kai thought, struggling to reconcile the two topics. “...Um...” *Was that not what you were going to talk about?*

“You mean... in *MiSt*?” he finally brought himself to ask.

“Of course,” Aina told him. “I want to be a voice actress, no matter what. Once I graduate, I’m going to go to Tokyo to enter a training program... but that’s not enough to guarantee success, right? So, I think it’s important to get some experience now.”

“...Is that why you joined the social game club?” Kai asked.

“Oh, no...! That’s not it!” Aina leaned in and closed the gap between them even further. “I had already been playing *Rondo*. But after... *that*, I thought it was curtains for the game until—bam! A miracle! And what’s more, I found out that the person who brought this miracle about was a boy in the same grade, at the same school as me... Right then, I knew it had to be you! I want to be a voice actress in the game *you* make!”

“L-Like I said before, that wasn’t just—”

“That’s fine! I wanted to be in the *MiSt* that you were working on!” Aina asserted once more. “So... Kai-kun, I want you to make up a plan that involves my voice. Will you do it?”

This entire time, Kai’s brain had been paralyzed by the sweet fragrance radiating from Aina right into his face. Her whispers slid into his ears to tickle his heart, one after another. He could tell that his heart was on the verge of exploding and shooting out of his mouth. There was no helping it; he didn’t have the experience to stay calm when Aina was so close to him.

“...Aina-san.” Kai took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes, which were twinkling in anticipation of his answer.

“...I’m sorry,” he said, but that wasn’t enough for him to cede. “I... can’t take that request.” Removing her hand from his lap, Kai put a good deal of distance between them before taking a deep breath. One was not anywhere close to enough, so he took another—this time even deeper—and only expelled the air in his lungs once he had quelled his excited heart.

“Do you recall what we discussed at our meeting yesterday?” Kai began to explain. “Our club is locked into participating at Summit, which means we need to work ahead of schedule to complete our managerial responsibilities... so we won’t have much leeway for a little while. After that, we will go to Summit and participate in a development competition. At the very least, that’ll take up our entire summer break. Even afterwards, *MiSt* is lacking in a lot of fundamental places, so we still won’t have the elbow room to squeeze in voice implementation... This is our current state of affairs. Therefore—”

“Ahaha!”

Kai was about to conclude his statement with, *I can’t promise you that*, when he heard laughter akin to a sudden blast of wind. Of course, if it wasn’t Kai, then there was only one person who could have laughed.

“Aw, man. You’re so obviously a virgin that I figured it’d be easy to win you over,” Aina admitted. “You’re stronger than I thought.”

“Huh? ...Huh?”

It was as if a different person had appeared before Kai’s eyes. Her face, hair, clothes, body—everything was the same as the Yozakura Aina from a moment ago, but the aura around her was distinctly dissimilar.

“Well, it’s whatever. If you’re the logical type, that makes it easier for me anyway,” she went on.

“...A-Aina-san, is that you?” he spluttered.

“That’s right,” she sang. Her smile had the same shape as before, yet it, too, was altogether different. What was more, this seemed to be her true nature.

“You said you didn’t have any leeway... but I’m sure you’ve noticed? This game needs voice acting,” she pointed out. “What I’m about to explain is something you already know, deep down. Are you ready?” she asked, and went on to logically explain the points of her ‘The Pros of Appointing Yozakura Aina as the Voice Actress for *Miracle Stage*’ lecture.

First off, the most fundamental issue was that *MiSt* did not have voice acting.

The truth was that this could actually be seen as a critical flaw. In this day and

age, there were as many social games as there were stars in the sky, so the bare minimum requirements to be an average game kept going up and up—not to mention anything *beyond* that. The specifics varied by genre, but for a character-focused game like *MiSt*, it was expected that there would be voice acting in some form or fashion.

If the team had extra time and manpower, the story would be fully voiced. If not, there would still be shouts and grunts for battle scenes along with proper lines on the character's display page. At any rate, the lack of voice acting meant a character-focused game was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle.

Of course, it wasn't as if adding voices fixed everything, and it wasn't impossible to succeed without it. Still, if they weren't beginning from the same start line as their competition, they'd need to make up for the deficit with some other incredible feature.

In that sense, Aina was correct in assuming that Kai had also considered voice acting a necessity. While *MiSt* had RPG elements, at the end of the day it was a character-focused idol game without voices. Unless they found a truly outstanding workaround, the team would have to overcome that obstacle eventually.

Users want to play the best, most amusing game. A social game that can't even keep up with everyone else's bare minimum won't even be looked at, and that was the simple truth.

Based on such an analysis of the current social game landscape, Aina concluded her monologue by once again pushing Kai to build a plan that included herself as the voice actress.

"Well, I've been playing a bunch of social games to appraise their merits, so I get what you mean when you say there are more important points to be fixing," Aina concluded.

But then she said, "I'm looking forward to your optimistic deliberation, okay, Mr. Planner? I'm sure you got *personal* experience with how good my acting is, didn't you? Anyway, I'll see you later in the club room," she told him as she headed toward the front door.

Right before leaving, Aina turned around and flashed him the same soft,

honest smile that she'd worn up until now—that is, up until showing Kai her true nature.

“Bye-bye! ♪” she sang out.

Like a tornado personified, Aina came and went.

Chapter 4: Dissonance in Preparation

“Morning! ♪” Aina said.

Kai didn’t expect to be greeted in such a dizzyingly normal way. When he met Aina again in the afternoon, she was back to playing the same innocent darling from head to toe, as if the events of their prior meeting had all been a terrible dream.

But every now and again when their eyes met, Kai recognized the same look from this morning peeking back at him. He realized she was showing off that side of herself on purpose, so that he wouldn’t forget. It was an appeal: she was practically demanding of him, ‘Watch my acting skills.’ Regardless, with such an intense display first thing in the morning, Kai wouldn’t have been able to forget even if she begged him to.

Once everyone gathered together, he repeated the explanation for why voice acting would have to wait for Nanaka, Aya, and the headphone-wearing Eru

Aina nodded along sensibly and agreed to follow his decision, but Kai knew the displeased look in her eyes was more than his imagination. From their ensuing conversation, he found that she had absolutely no knowledge regarding game development. In order for her to grasp the basics of social game management and the decision-making process, he assigned her to act as Nanaka’s aide.

“Professor Nanaka! ♪” Aina sang, turning to the other girl.

“P-Professor?! U-Umm...! I’m a little nervous, but I’ll explain anything I can!” Nanaka promised.

“Okay, professor!” said Aina, who immediately raised her hand.

“Yes?!” Nanaka called on her enthusiastically.

“I was told that I’m going to help you write up the master data... but what *is* the master data, anyway?”

Ah—Kai barely stopped himself from cutting into their conversation. He and Nanaka had divided up work to write master data plenty of times, but he had never explicitly defined what master data was to her before. Thus, he figured he'd need to explain, but... *I don't need to interrupt*, he reminded himself.

“Oh! Right?! I get you! I really get you! You wonder, ‘What *is* master data? Is there non-master data?’” Nanaka stopped to glance Kai's way for a brief moment before continuing on slowly, “Um... broadly speaking, social games have two types of data.”

Aina raised up a peace sign with her fingers and asked, “Two types?”

“Yup, two types.” Nanaka mirrored with a peace sign of her own as she answered. “These two types are ‘data that changes’ and ‘data that doesn't change.’ The one that does change is like... for example, the player's level keeps going up and up, right? So that's the kind of data that changes. For the type that doesn't change... for example, maybe the very first combat has a slime that gives you 100 EXP. That's always the same for every user, right? That's data that doesn't change... Bringing this all back to your question, master data is the data that doesn't change!”

After having explained all of that in one sitting, Nanaka whipped around to face Kai with such momentum that he could have sworn he heard the sound of her turning. “That's right, right?! Master Kai...!”

“M-Master? Um, yeah, that's fine,” he told her reassuringly. “Your explanation was basically right.”

“.....I'm so relieved.” Nanaka felt reassured from the bottom of her heart, and it showed in her smile.

In truth, nothing about her explanation was wrong: master data effectively encompassed all the static parameters that were established within the game. The monster example that Nanaka used was easy to understand. Other examples included character names, skill names, dialogue lines, and story text. Even the list of items that could appear in the gacha was considered to be part of the master data.

The only nitpick Kai had was that the term ‘master data’ was *colossal* in scope. Therefore, it was common practice to specify what kind of master data was

being discussed. There were separate Excel sheets for quests and gacha, often referred to as 'quest master' and 'gacha master' respectively. The general term 'master data' was usually reserved for discussing all these subcategories together, or whenever it was easy to discern what branch was being referred to through context.

"Wow! I get it now! Nanaka-chan, you're so smart!" As Aina continued praising Nanaka with 'Wows' and 'You're amazings,' Kai internally agreed with her.

There were tons of planners who began writing data files without a clue about what master data was. They'd go along, wondering what to call master data, questioning whether or not what they made was master data, and updating the master data all around them without a solid idea of what it was they were doing. Surprisingly, this was a good enough practice to keep working. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for a planner to be unable to provide a clear explanation when asked what master data was.

These sorts of planners would often only stop to ask themselves, 'Wait, what *is* master data?' when working in an environment without preexisting data to build from (such as a brand new project). After asking that question, they'd finally come to understand a fundamental part of the whole process.

But Nanaka had been getting along with Akane since their joint project, so perhaps she'd learned that lesson from her. Kai looked over at Nanaka to see her smile of relief, and was pleased to see that she was capable of standing on her own two legs as a planner.

"Man, I'm really glad..." she exhaled. "I was really anxious that you might tell me I was completely wrong."

"That wouldn't happen..." Kai responded. "But why'd you call me 'master'?"

"Well duh," Aya cut in, "Aye-aye called her 'Professor' earlier, so she just chose something that sounded smarter than that. None of that matters right now, senpai. Right now, all you need to do is say, 'Good girl, good girl!' and praise Nana-sen like you would pet a dog."

"I-I'd rather be praised normally!" Nanaka objected.

“So you do want to be praised, then?” Aya pointed out.

Nanaka didn’t say anything back, but her blank, stupefied face did all the speaking for her. Having effectively dug Nanaka’s grave for her, Aya grinned smugly, and Nanaka turned to Kai. When their eyes met, she blushed shyly and looked away.

Kai would have praised her as much as she wanted had he not been so self-conscious about doing so. With all the ado Aya introduced to the situation, he hesitated and couldn’t bring himself to speak up. After all, a ‘good girl’ was definitely out of the question, and ‘You did well’ seemed kind of condescending. *What else could he say?* he asked himself. ‘You’re amazing’ would seem sort of impersonal...

As Kai mulled over what to say, Nanaka’s emotions popped off and she exclaimed, “...Geez, Ah-chan! Don’t tease me like this!”

“Nana-sen...! Look at his face! Senpai’s definitely picking his words for you, so hold it in a bit longer!”

Led on by Aya’s statement, Nanaka looked over toward Kai again, and this time it was he who looked away. He ended up averting his eyes toward Aina, and for an instant, she turned sour and clearly mouthed, ‘Dumbass’ with large, deliberate motions so that Kai would understand. After blinking, he was again met with a flawless smile from a cheerful beauty.

“Don’t tease your upperclassmen like that! Hey, Ah-chan, listen to—” Nanaka tried to capture Aya as she made her escape, but then her phone vibrated from where it was resting on top of the table. Nanaka turned on the device and checked her LIME notification and—after looking over at the corner where Eru was working away—she sent a reply.

“Eru said she’s done working on the materials you asked her for, so she wants you to check over them,” Nanaka announced. “She said she’ll be working on her own art until you do.”

“O-Okay,” Kai agreed uneasily. “I’ll check them right away...”

Pen-on-tablet scratching echoed throughout the newfound silence in the room. There was an air of electricity surrounding Eru that didn’t require any

language to ward off any attempts to talk to her.

Ultimately, Eru's poor mood remained in place. Even after completing the pre-preparations, her attitude showed no signs of cracking. Without a word, she only notified Nanaka of her progress. She came to the club alone and left for home alone.

Nanaka had tried to ask what happened between her and Aina, but her inquiries were met with no new information.



Development, debugging, and implementation—with their rigid schedule in place, the time passed exceedingly quickly.

Between Eru and Aina's drama and the management-end preparations, it almost slipped Kai's mind that the Summit Drawing Ceremony was only a day away. Summit was a development contest at its core, but their opponents had yet to be decided. The initial drawing ceremony was an opportunity for the participating students to confirm their opponents and mingle with other talented developers.

One way or another, the five of them managed to complete their pre-preparations. After confirming their meeting time for the following morning, they went their separate ways at the train station. Once he was alone, Kai remembered that he didn't have any food at home and stopped by the supermarket.

As he walked out with his groceries, he was confronted with the lengthy shadow of Eru, who was waiting for him. This wasn't the first such occurrence, and Kai mused that he was lucky not to have been assaulted by a package of sasa dango this time.

"...Um..." Kai was the first one to break the silence.

"Was it your order?" Eru began interrogating him.

"What?" Though Kai meant to exhibit his confusion, Eru only became surer of her position as she intensified her glare.

"You're making my dear Nanaka investigate that tramp," she accused him.

“Investigate... That’s—”

“Absolutely it,” said Eru, interrupting him mid-sentence.

“*Not* it at all,” Kai corrected.

“The fact is, Nanaka keeps asking me about her.”

“...Look,” he said, feeling frustrated. *Why can’t she understand something so simple?* “That’s because Nanaka-san is worried about you, Kuroba-san.”

“...I didn’t ask for her to worry.”

“Then what do you want her to do?” Kai could feel that he was getting confrontational, and didn’t like it. Despite being able to recognize that with his brain, he couldn’t stop himself. He found himself saying, “If you keep acting like this without any explanation... not even Nanaka-san will understand you.”

Eru’s glare sharpened into the point of a razor’s edge.

However, Kai didn’t feel like he’d said anything wrong. He desperately fought his instinct to avert his eyes and stood his ground against Eru, face to face.

“I don’t want that harlot around,” Eru told him flatly. “I thought I made that clear?”

“What Nanaka-san—no, what all of us are wondering is...” *Why do you feel that way?* But before Kai could say they wanted to know what happened, Eru ruthlessly cut him off with a dry smirk.

“Do you truly think that I would tell you if you asked? Don’t screw with me, dear,” she spat out.

“It doesn’t have to be me. Just tell Nana—”

“Even I!” Eru paused to swallow back her growing voice before repeating, “...Even I have things I can’t tell Nanaka... That I can’t tell Nanaka *because* it’s her.”

“Then—” *Who can you tell?* he wondered. *Do you have someone you can tell?* Kai began to make these statements, but quickly stopped himself. When nothing else came to mind, he stood at a loss for words. In his own case, Kai would never come to the same conclusion Eru had reached under normal

circumstances. His sister was so careless that he'd like to swear never to rely on her again, but he still talked his problems out with her. In fact, she'd helped him out a ton recently.

Kai wondered if Eru had anyone like that outside of Nanaka.

"Don't get the wrong idea just because of the episode with Tsukigase, dear," Eru suggested. "So long as I can continue drawing alongside Nanaka... that's all I need. I don't need 'everyone.'"

"Kuroba-san!"

Eru turned on her heel and refused to stop when he called out to her. As she walked away, her raven hair rocked with every gust of wind; each time, her long shadow swayed strikingly.

Chapter 5: School Game Developer Summit

The Summit Drawing Ceremony took place at a private school located in Shinjuku, and it took about two hours to travel from Niigata to Tokyo by bullet train. Since the ceremony began at 2:00 pm, the five members of the Meikun High School Social Game Club met up and boarded before noon.

Owing to the fact that it was a normal weekday, the non-reserved section of the train was fairly vacant. Nanaka and Aya sat together, with Kai and Aina in the seat behind them. Behind those two, Eru sat alone.

Aina had been staring out the window for a while, but as they entered a dark tunnel, she finally opened her mouth. “How long are you going to leave her like that?” she asked quietly, so that only Kai could hear her.

“...Are you going to tell us what happened?” he countered.

Aina continued to stare out the window and into the dark walls of the tunnel. Without so much as turning around, she said with a laugh, “But! But! I didn’t do anything! Eru’s just mad at me for no reason... but, you know... I’m sure it’s not her fault. There was probably a misunderstanding somewhere—would you believe me if I said that?”

“...Sorry,” Kai told her. “I think I worded that wrong.”

“It’s not about how you worded it,” Aina quipped. “You’re asking the wrong person.”

“That’s not something I can do,” Kai admitted. “I’m leaving it to Nanaka-san.”

“Huh, you’re more businesslike than I thought,” Aina observed. “Not like I have anything against that.”

Kai would have considered sitting next to Eru had they not crossed paths at the supermarket the day before. But at this point, it was clear that doing so would have been a pointless waste of his time. *In that case*, he thought...

“I don’t know whether or not what you just said is true,” he began. “And... as

rude as it is for me to say so, I don't think I can trust you."

"...Well, isn't that natural?" Aina retorted. "I think it'd be weirder to trust someone so easily."

"But that's because I still don't know much about you," he said, locking eyes with her reflection in the dark window. "The time I spend talking to you has the same amount of value as the time I spend talking to Kuroba-san... I think."

...I won't know if I don't talk to them, Kai told himself, although there wasn't any guarantee that he'd come to understand either girl through conversation. He also worried that he might add pressure to someone's personal struggles, as he had when inadvertently exposing Nanaka's insecurities as an illustrator.

But, he thought, if I had gone one step further... If I had confronted each and every one of her tears more seriously... Even today, that thought continued to follow him. Whenever he laid in bed, kept up by his thoughts, Kai would always think back to Nanaka's tearful face, lit by the setting sun. He knew that all the 'what-ifs' in his mind would never amount to anything, which was exactly why he was determined to face his current troubles head on.

"...You're such a..." Aina trailed off midway through speaking, shifting her gaze from the window to eye him suspiciously for a moment. "Humph," she said, turning back to the glass. As she did so, the train exited the tunnel, and she remained silent until they arrived in Tokyo.



The group changed trains at Tokyo Station to ride the Chuo Line until Shinjuku. Whether it was the middle of a workday or not, Tokyo was always overflowing with people, and Shinjuku especially so. They mistakenly headed for the south gate, only to find themselves at the east gate, and after much confusion they finally exited via the west gate.

They reached their final destination after ten minutes or so of walking, and promptly entered an elevator upon arrival. After getting off at their floor, they found a large set of double doors a short distance away. There was a receptionist directly in front of the entrance who said, "Please wear this inside the venue," as he handed each one of them a neck strap. The strap had a clear pocket dangling off of it containing an identification card that listed their names

and school.

On the other side of the double doors was a large university lecture hall, complete with rows of terraced seating. It seemed that each high school in attendance had their own assigned seats, so they quickly found the spot reserved for Meikun High and sat down.

“This is kinda exciting,” Nanaka said giddily as she took the seat next to Kai.

“...You mean, the drawing?” he asked.

“No, not that,” she said with a small laugh. “This is my first time ever visiting a college classroom.”

“Huh... I see.”

“You seem pretty calm about it.”

“But now that you’ve mentioned it, it’s sort of on my mind.” Kai looked around to see that the hall was now almost at capacity. The differing uniforms sitting side by side gave off a subtle aura of tension. *That’s probably why Nanaka-san’s speaking so softly*, he thought.

“College, huh...” Nanaka mumbled. “Kai-kun, what are you gonna do after graduating? Work? University?”

“...University, I think.”

“Are you gonna go back to Tokyo for that?” she questioned.

“...I haven’t sat down to think about it yet, but probably.” Previously, Akane had told Kai that she’d slip his name to the recruiters at Tricolore Games... However, there was no realistic chance that he’d get a job like that.

The reason Akane had been invited to such a meritocratic company was because she herself had slowly racked up a great deal of achievements—not because someone had simply recommended her.

Shiraseki Kai did not have such achievements. Thus, he refused to buy into the fantasy that some company would send him an offer prior to graduation, which meant that he’d need higher education.

When it came to social games, a good chunk of the fresh hires made by the IT

industry centered around college graduates. There were a handful of companies that accepted new recruits directly out of high school, but those were primarily for skilled illustrators or programmers. In essence, they wanted specialized experience, and it was uncommon for planners to fall under that umbrella.

On top of that, most game development companies were based in Tokyo. Thinking ahead to his future job hunt, it wouldn't make sense to choose a university anywhere else—the cost of travel and lodging would rack up quickly. For example, if he were to go to college in Niigata, he'd have to use 20,000 yen on a round trip bullet train *per interview*. He couldn't justify spending that much every time he got further into a company's selection process. There were some companies that would recompense travel expenses, but that wasn't something he could consistently rely on.

As a result, the most pragmatic choice was to find a school in Tokyo. Kai thought logically, chose logically, and decided on his future logically, which almost made it sound as though he was a prudent decision-maker. But... frankly, that decision was merely a process of elimination. It wasn't anything to be proud of.

After Kai summed up his explanation to Nanaka, she shook her head at him. "That's not true... You're amazing," she told him. "I don't have any other friends who've thought about their future like you."

"Amazing...? No way. I'm so worthless that I *have* to think about my future to make it work."

"Kai-kun," Nanaka said as she pointed a finger directly in front of Kai's nose. "'—Do not submit yourself to inadequacy,' right?"

"...Right," he mumbled.

"Haha, Akane-san is amazing, too."

"What about you, Nanaka-san? College?"

"...I haven't thought about it properly, either... but, probably. But I think, instead of college, I think I'd be okay with a trade school for game development," said Nanaka. "After all, there's too many things about making a

game that I don't understand at all. I'd like to go to Tokyo, too... but my parents want me to try to get into a national university back home, so that might be a bit tough. It's not like I'm that smart," she concluded with an awkward laugh. As if to overwrite her statement, the entrance to the lecture hall blew open with a loud *slam!*

The man who walked through the doorway was built like a pro wrestler, probably in his mid-thirties. His black leather jacket was unzipped and a decal of an anime character peeked out from the t-shirt beneath it. He had donned a pair of sunglasses, and the top of his head had been shaven bald.

The long stride of his torn jeans was accompanied by a loud *thud* with each step. He walked all the way to the back of the room—where the lecturer's podium was located—and sat down there, with his legs crossed. He removed his sunglasses to reveal a mean glare, and his unshaven mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile.

After refusing a microphone from an event organizer, he began speaking. "Ahem. Welcome, all of you, and well done for making it on time. The guy who's supposed to be here caught a summer cold, so I'll be standing in as the judge. I'm Hifumi Tetsuma. I usually work as a producer at a company called Tricolore Games, but all that crap about me doesn't matter."

The tense crowd of students had begun stirring from the instant he entered the venue. It had nothing to do with his appearance; rather, it was a quiet frenzy caused by the fact that *the* Hifumi Tetsuma had shown up.

Hifumi Tetsuma was one of the infamous producers behind the industry powerhouse, Tricolore Games. Every title he had a hand in had been a hit. He was involved in everything from RPGs to shooters, and yet all of his games were fun. There were more than a handful of planners at Tsukigase who looked up to him.

"Hmm... Looks like you've all heard of me, huh." Tetsuma himself seemed to have caught on to the atmosphere in the room and he heaved a massive sigh. "Let me just say this: I haven't heard of you. They told me that there's a bunch of first-class students lined up here, so I should keep tabs on any kids that look promising—but I'm not gonna do that. This is a pain in my ass. I can't even

smoke here.”

Tetsuma pulled a cigarette out of his pocket while muttering, “Can’t they at least let me have a smoke?” under his breath. Upon closer inspection, what he had was a crumpled cigarette that had already been used. Nevertheless, he put it into his mouth and seemed truly at peace as he inhaled through it.

“Pwaah! That hits the spot... Honestly, nicotine’s the only thing I can trust,” he sighed. Then he continued on to say, “Alright! Let’s get this show on the road. In the past, I think Summit looked through your project proposals, but there’s no need for that this time because it’s a fucking pain.

“I’m sure you all want to hurry up and make your game, right? Then do it,” he told them. “Well, if you wanna write up a proposal then go for it. I won’t read it, and I certainly won’t judge you off of it. The only thing I’m looking at is your final product. Oh, and it doesn’t have to be a game, either. We’ll hand out topics for each pair of schools, so as long as you follow that I don’t give a damn what kind of app it is. Let’s see... if you want a proper rule, then how about ‘anything goes as long as it’s fun’?”

Having dispensed with the preliminaries, Tetsuma now inspected the room from side to side with a scowl. Everyone had been overwhelmed into silence. He concluded with, “That’s it from me. If you have any questions, ask them now; if not, we’ll move on to the drawing. Anything?”

A few seconds elapsed in silence, but then a boy near the front of the room raised his hand.

“You,” Tetsuma ordered. “Tell me your question.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you very much for your explanation. This isn’t a question in regards to the rules at Summit, but rather a personal question for you—for Hifumi Tetsuma. Is that okay with you, sir?”

“...Go ahead.”

“Thank you very much. In the future, I would like to work in the games industry as a planner. I very much look up to the games you make. However, Hifumi-san, you have never once agreed to an interview. I doubt I’ll ever have a chance like this again, so I’d like to ask you to tell us one thing—anything—that

you keep in mind to make good games.” The boy’s voice was awkward and rife with nervousness. He was clearly telling the truth when he said he looked up to Hifumi Tetsuma as a creator.

After glaring at the boy for a moment, Tetsuma suddenly erupted with laughter. “Gwahahahahaha—*cough*! What a dumbass question! This is why I didn’t wanna come to a place like this.” He scratched the back of his head and pointed directly at the dumbfounded boy. “You. You making fun of me?”

“N-No! I would never!”

“If you were being serious, then that’s even worse... Look, people say my games are all a hit, but even then, the best I’ve been able to do is make the top 10 in the rankings. You know that much, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

“Listen here: I’m always giving it my all to make it to the very top. Always have been, and always will. Something I ‘keep in mind to make good games,’ huh?” Tetsuma scoffed. “Why the fuck should I spill my secrets for some kid who doesn’t know the first thing about games? You plan on becoming a planner, right? Then you’re gonna be a corporate enemy in the future. There’s nothing in it for me to tell you!”

The boy’s response was now an inaudible murmur, but Tetsuma continued to hammer him. “It’s not just you, got it?” Then, addressing the rest of them, he asked, “Are all of you here trying to learn how to make a game from someone else? Are you stupid?”

“There’s no textbook on how to make a game. There isn’t even one proper way to make a project proposal. Nobody knows the answer; that’s what makes it so fun.” He slammed his foot on the ground and shot back up to his feet.

“I came here to be a judge, not a teacher. No one knows where the next fun game will come from, and that’s doubly true for a one-and-done deal like this. That’s why I’m treating you as equal creators. You’re students, but before that, you’re creators like me. That’s my end, so you all better hold up your end and start talking to me with your *output*. I don’t need any of the extra crap... Any other questions?”

At some point, the boy in the front had sat down, and nobody else dared to raise their hand. The lecture hall was quiet again, but it was a different breed of silence than what it had been before. There was magma bubbling from the floor, and everyone in attendance had an unspoken fiery drive running up their spines.

“Should’ve been like that from the start,” Tetsuma said with a laugh, glaring out across the room. “Alright, let’s start the drawing.”



The drawing did not use a classic lottery box with a hole in the top.

“All our battles are fought digitally. We can’t be using an analog option like that.” With that declaration, a giant screen came down from the ceiling behind Hifumi Tetsuma. The lecture hall went dark and the projector began to whirr.

The display showed a 3D model of a giant gacha machine. There were a ton of plastic capsules all tossed together, each of which held a plate with a school’s name etched on it. The only difference from a normal gacha machine was that there were two slots for the prizes to come out of instead of one.

Tetsuma tapped on his smartphone. The machine churned out two balls, which split neatly in two with a satisfying *clack* sound to reveal two nameplates. With this, the first set of opponents had been decided.

“But wait, there’s more,” he announced. As if the animation had been waiting for his cue, the plates began to turn. On the other side, the plates had the words ‘Weapon’ and ‘Feels Good’ written on them, respectively.

“These two are your topics,” he informed them. “It’s technically a rule for you to include this prompt in the design of your game, but I’ll leave the interpretation up to you. You can take ‘Weapon’ to mean swords and guns, or you can argue that ‘Thought is man’s greatest weapon!’ or whatever to expand your bounds. Anyway, this one’s on the easier side to understand—boooring.”

The drawing continued on without much else to note. Meikun High’s name didn’t appear until the very end, when the 3D model was completely out of capsules. The other plate that came out alongside theirs read ‘Kongouin Academy.’ It seemed their opponents were to be the infamously bourgeois

team at Kongouin.

And then, the plates flipped around to display their topics: 'Character' and 'Breath.' These two words would be their theme for the competition.

The projector screen had shifted its perspective back to the empty gacha machine. Despite having been completely exhausted of capsules, it continued to wobble as if there were more to come. Then, it suddenly popped up and exploded into pieces. The special effects were beautifully done and had far more work put into them than they deserved.

"Alright! That's it, we're done! C'mon, get out! Hurry up and go home so you can start development! Your job is to turn in a fun app in two weeks' time, so —"

A member of the event staff frantically ran up to Tetsuma and whispered something into his ear. "...Tch. Apparently, there's going to be a party in the next room over after we're done here," Tetsuma told them. "Sounds like they set up some food that's way too good for you brats, too. Go if you want. Sorry to say so, but I hate these kinds of pointless social events, and I'm going home.

"So long, kiddos. I'm not expecting much, but I wish you all the best of luck." Tetsuma gave them an emphatic thumbs-up and left the scene with the same thunderous footsteps as his initial entrance.

His departure caused the razor-sharp tension in the air to soften. Some students stood around and discussed the results amongst themselves, while others made their way out immediately. It seemed a lot of the schools were Summit regulars, as Kai could see people with different uniforms chatting with one another.

"Should we go to the party?" Nanaka asked everyone.

"Anything is fine," Eru answered.

Hooked by the promise of food, Aya suggested, "They have sweets, so why not go?"

"I wonder what kind of yummy food they prepared. I'm so excited! ♪" Aina concurred.

“Then... let’s go,” Kai agreed. It wasn’t as if there was an entrance fee, and they still had time before their train home departed. With the offer of a free meal, they had nothing to lose, even if they didn’t have a more concrete reasoning to attend.

“Okay!” Nanaka exclaimed. “Plus, we should go greet our opponents at Kongouin Academy.”

“Ah, that too,” Kai agreed. He hadn’t even considered that.

“Oh?” Aya eyed him curiously. “Senpai, are you gonna pretend to greet them and start a fight? Sounds good to me! Go tell those Kongouin pricks to add sparking to *BeauSt!*”

“Cheers to that!” Aina joined in.

Aya and Aina nodded together and exchanged a quick high-five. Kai didn’t quite understand why, but the two of them got along strangely well. “That’s just your personal grudge,” he lectured.

“It’s the *user’s* grudge,” Aya corrected.

“That’s still not my problem,” he insisted.

“...If you’re going to dawdle like this, I’m going on ahead,” Eru said as she made for the door.

“Ah! Eru! Wait, wait!” Nanaka chased after her and the other three followed slightly behind.

The party was being held in the room opposite the lecture hall in which the drawing had taken place. This was a simpler room with level flooring, in which tables had been lined up against the wall like a buffet. A handful of tables had been placed in the middle of the room so that guests had a place to put their plates down.

Kai overheard the conversations of the students around him as he lined up for the buffet. The majority were talking about Hifumi Tetsuma: some passionately applauded his speech while others were more cynical, calling his entire performance an obvious act. However, it was a fact that he was the center of conversation, for better or worse.

“Everyone’s talking about that guy,” Nanaka said.

“Yeah, they are,” Kai agreed.

“I get it.” She took a bite of the fruit on her plate and continued, “‘There’s no textbook on how to make a game.’ ...I was just talking about my future with you, so I felt like he was saying that directly to me.”

“Nanaka-san,” he protested, “that was an extreme case, so—”

Amidst the hubbub of the party, a piercingly high voice landed its mark like an arrow in Kai’s ear. “Goodness me,” it said, “how trite! Everywhere I turn, the masses are hooked on that bald old man. I have been surrounded by superficial drones who yield themselves to passion without logic! Say... do you not agree, ladies and gentleman of Meikun High?”

When Kai turned to see where it came from, he saw... a boy that looked like a mushroom. He *was* a mushroom—Kai was sure of it. There was no other way to describe him. He wasn’t quite a thick matsutake, but more of a gangly white mushroom. Despite being all skin and bones, he was nearly two meters tall. The unhealthy bluish complexion on his face was adorned with glasses as round as the bottom of a milk bottle and a neatly trimmed bowl cut.

Was that his voice? thought Kai. As soon as the question arose in his mind, the boy shook his head and gestured to his own feet. Kai obliged him and looked down to see a girl.

“No! No, no, no! You looked down on me, didn’t you?!” With her index finger pointed toward Kai, the girl looked like a spear sticking out of the ground. *She must have been the one who was talking*, he noted. She looked even shorter than Aya, with hair that had been tightly coiled into a pair of golden drills (which Kai had only ever seen in anime) that swayed to the rhythm of her melodramatic movements.

“What...! What utter humiliation-ation-ation!” she cried out dramatically. “*Kinoyama!!!*”

“As you command.” The mushroom boy slithered into place in front of her with a motion that was difficult to put to words, and got down on all fours. The short girl mercilessly placed her feet on his back without a moment’s hesitation.

“Ohhhhhooo...!” The mushroom boy let out a disgusting sigh of ecstasy as he was stepped on, like he was preparing to release a cloud of spores.

After having mounted the boy, the girl overtook Kai in terms of height. Now she puffed out her chest, stretched her spine, and tilted her head back in order to be able to look down on them. “Hmph,” she chuckled contentedly.

“Um...” Kai ventured, “Who might you be?”

“Y-You...! You mean to say you don’t know who I am...?! I see the miniscule amount of time you spent on the front page of the School Social Game Link has gone straight to your head!” the girl scoffed. “What an unscrupulous man you are!”

“It is just as you say, my lady,” Kinoyama, the boy upon whom she was standing, echoed.

“Wha— Kinoyama! Don’t move!” she scolded him. “It’s scary when I sway about! Commit yourself to being a pedestal!”

The girl dug her heel into his back and he let out another vulgar squeal. “D-fough! As you wish!!!” The sound he made caused Kai physical discomfort.

The girl slipped a dazzlingly ornate fan out of the pocket of her uniform and opened it once to show off. Then she snapped the fan shut and pointed it toward Kai with vigor. “Very well,” she concluded, “I suppose it *is* our first time meeting, now that I think of it. Since you are so sorely lacking in both tact and height, I suppose I shall shoulder the burden of maturity and offer my name. I am Kongouin Mirei! No need for formalities, you shall call me ‘Lady Mirei.’ Also, it is nice to meet you!”



“N-Nice to meet you,” Kai replied.

“Ohohohoho!” she chortled. “What was that pathetic greeting?! I see that you have been thoroughly intimidated by the great Mirei herself! Kinoyama! Do you not think our victory has been decided?!”

“It is as you say, my lady.”

“...Hey! Kinoyama! You. Are. A. Pedestal! Stop moving!”

“D-foughhh...!”

“Um,” said Nanaka, gingerly approaching them. “Would you happen to be students from Kongouin Academy?”

“Exactly! How perceptive of you! ‘First: live beautifully!’ With my gorgeous face embodying our school’s motto so well, I’m sure it was trifling for you to notice!”

“Um... I don’t really know anything about your motto,” Nanaka confessed, “but your name was the same, so...”

“Then you must surely be blind,” Mirei declared. “I regret having praised you. I had my hopes for the rumored Shiraseki Kai, but I suppose that after coming all this way from the backwater that is Niigata, it can’t be helped that all of you are so boorish—wait, what’s this?” Mirei kicked Kinoyama’s rump, and he began to move, sliding across the floor while maintaining his four-legged stance in order to make his way over to Aya and Aina.

“What?” Aya asked in a standoffish tone. “You’re too loud. Step back.”

“My, a shy one, aren’t we?” Mirei teased. “Your hairstyle is modeled after my own, is it not?”

“Huh?”

Now that she mentioned it, Kai noticed that both of the girls were blonde. On top of that, they were both extremely short.

“But this is no good,” Mirei noted regretfully. “Look, the ends are frayed. If you want to mimic me, then live beautifully.” She snapped her fingers, and a girl instantly came to her side with ninja-like movements to hand Mirei something.

“Use this hair treatment,” she commanded. “Also, with hair like that, I’m sure you don’t take care of your skin, either. Here, this is a set of my favorite cosmetics. I wonder if you know how to use it? If not, feel free to take a gander at the instructions left within.”

“Wha—I don’t need this!” Aya declared hotly. “Who do you think you are?!”

“I am Kongouin Mirei!”

“Geez, shut up! Why are you yelling when I’m right in front of you?!”

“No need to be so sheepish. Well, you there, standing beside her. Do lend her a hand if she can’t figure... oh?” Mirei kicked Kinoyama again.

“Heeheehee!” he yelped enthusiastically, carrying her over until she was staring down Aina.

“...You’re quite beautiful,” Mirei noted, her eyes shining with glee and melting in pleasure as though she had set her sights upon the most beautiful gemstone known to man.

“Really? Thanks! ♪” Aina hummed. “And you’re... Kongouin Mirei-san, right?”

“...Perhaps a tad *too* beautiful,” Mirei concluded.

“...Huh?”

“I will create the most beautiful game this world has ever seen. As such, I have studied every form of beauty on this planet... There is simply no universe in which I would miss a stunning specimen like you.”

“Aww, but I’m just a regular high school girl...” Aina gushed. “Right, Kai-kun?”

The memories of her entering the club and the events at his house prevented Kai from nodding along when Aina added the word ‘just’ to her statement. She had left far too much of an impression on him for that. Besides, he could definitely see the beauty that Mirei was talking about. Aina was definitely gorgeous; he could say that without any reserve.

“There’s no need for you to turn to that potato for support,” Mirei told her. “After all, you are beautiful.”

Kai noted that he had suddenly been demoted to potato. The girl who had

done so was now observing Aina with all the focus of a person peering through a keyhole.

After some deliberation, Mirei seemed to have come to a conclusion. “...Could it be?” she finally asked. “Yozakura?”

It only lasted for an instant: Aina grit her teeth and her expression stiffened for a fraction of a second, but it was enough for Mirei to confirm her suspicions.

“Indeed, there is no room for doubt!” she declared. “Yozakura Aina! To think you would grow to be so dazzling! I see the sands of time have polished you into a true beauty! I suppose it’s no wonder I didn’t notice! For *that* Aina to be in a place like—”

“Hey?” said a quiet voice, cutting her off. “Is it fun to run your mouth about someone else like that?”

A terrified whimper escaped from Mirei’s mouth.

By contrast, Aina’s face was a brilliant smile. The corners of her lips were more perfectly symmetrical than a bisque doll, and the tails of her eyes were nice and relaxed... but her gaze told a completely different story.

“Juuust kidding! ♪” Aina said melodically. “Ahh, if you’ll excuse me. I have to go and ‘water the flowers’!” She twirled around in place and her dark, lustrous hair twirled with her as she winked goodbye, and was gone before anyone could say another word.

Mirei had frozen in place like a grade-schooler in a haunted house, but she returned to her wits once Aina had left. “...I see. I had presumed you to be unworthy of being our opponents, but allow me to revise my opinion,” she declared. “Ladies and gentleman of Meikun High—under my command, Kongouin Academy shall do its utmost to bestow a most beautiful defeat upon you!”

“You sure bark loud for a group that only has graphics,” Aya sneered. “All your development competitions have been trainwrecks.”

“Ah-chan, don’t say that...” Nanaka mumbled.

“Hmph. I am well aware that we at Kongouin Academy are the butt of many

jokes: ‘They’re letting the money do all the talking,’ they say. Thus, our ability to win a development competition that measures fundamental skills is considered laughable.”

“That’s *your* fault,” Eru snapped. “It’s not the illustrations’ fault you failed.”

“It is as you say,” Mirei concurred. “As expected of the esteemed Kuroba Eru.”

“Oh? I don’t remember becoming acquainted with someone like *you*.”

“I said that I study all that is beautiful, did I not? Your drawings are certainly so... Yet, how unfortunate,” Mirei concluded. “Your art could be considered Meikun’s sole weapon, and still it poses no threat to us.”

“Dear me, you sure do like to talk before we’ve even begun,” Eru jabbed back.

“Do you mean to suggest we cannot know until the deed has been done? I wonder,” Mirei mused. “I’m sure you country folk are here to enjoy a riveting summer’s challenge, but we are here with resolution. ‘It’s not the illustrations’ fault,’ indeed. The beauty we create is faultless, and I will not permit anyone to defame it. We simply don’t have time to lose to a leisure club like yours.”

No matter who Mirei was, Kai thought, her mouth had run for a little too long. He could see that Nanaka was moving in to speak, but his own mouth was already open.

“...If money could buy an enjoyable experience, no game developer would have to struggle again. So, I understand why you’d be upset that people bash your work... But it’s not like resolution can guarantee fun, either,” he put in. “And even if it could, I still don’t think we would lose to you.”

Mirei was clearly affected by his words, as she pouted her lips and furrowed her brow. “I wasn’t aware that potatoes were capable of speech,” she retorted acerbically. “Shiraseki Kai, what sort of resolve do you claim to have?”

“‘As a creator, speak with your output.’ ...Isn’t that right? If you want to win so badly, then you should heed the words of our judge,” Kai suggested.

“...I take it you have no intention of revealing your hand... Haha! It seems that you at least learned something from your time at Tsukigase! You—excuse me, you *all* seem to be somewhat amusing... Allow me to offer my apologies for my

rudeness,” Mirei offered graciously.

“...Thanks.”

“Yes, well, I’m quite looking forward to when we next meet. Now then, I bid you adieu,” she said, gathering her skirts with both hands in order to bob a curtsy at them. “Kinoyama, let us go home!”

A stomping sound was accompanied by a nightmarish “D-foughhooo!” and Kinoyama took off with his lady still atop him. Mirei had drawn out her fan, and the sound of her “Ohohohohoho!” could be heard well after she had left the room.

Chapter 6: The Emptiness of Beginning

The Meikun High group left the building after Aina's return. The timing lined up nicely for them to head straight to Tokyo station and catch their bullet train. On the ride home, Eru once again sat alone in the front, with Aina and Aya behind her, and Kai and Nanaka behind them. There were a good number of people traveling with their families, perhaps owing to the fact that it was summer vacation. *Maybe they're going back to their homes in Niigata*, Kai thought.

"Here you go," Nanaka said, handing him a cookie that she had bought at a gift shop.

"Thanks," Kai replied, as she got up to reach over the seats in front of her and pass the sweets around to the rest of the club's members. "Are you sure?" he inquired. "Weren't these supposed to be gifts?"

"I bought some for my family separately, so it's okay!" she told him. "I wanted to eat these right away, so I bought them specifically for the train ride home."

"I see." In that case, there wasn't any reason for him to decline. The chocolate cookie was so soft that it melted when he put it into his mouth. It was sweet, but comfortably mild. Perhaps the stressful environment he had been in a moment ago added to that feeling.

"Thanks, Kai-kun."

"...Uhh?"

"I feel like I was supposed to be the one to stand up to her, as the club president."

Kai realized she was talking about the last bit of conversation he'd had with Kongouin Mirei. "No, I basically just played right into her provocation..." he assured her. "I meant to put it more nicely..."

"I mean, she made fun of us," Nanaka protested. "I don't think you were in the wrong!"

“...No. It might have seemed that way on the surface, but I think she wasn’t actually badmouthing us,” Kai concluded. *That’s why I wanted to restrain myself a bit more.*

Nanaka tilted her head curiously and asked, “What do you mean?”

“This is just my personal theory,” he said as Nanaka nodded along, “but I think she was testing us.”

“...Does that mean she thought we weren’t motivated?”

“She was probably testing our motivation, too,” he agreed. However, that hadn’t been Mirei’s main point, which was why Kai had gotten so upset.

“Do you remember the goal she mentioned? ...She wanted to give it her all to win and overcome their bad reputation,” Kai reminded Nanaka. “I don’t think she was lying. So, they need to win. But their opponents were first-time participants at Summit and their social game was near the bottom of the rankings... Motivation aside, she questioned, ‘Will winning against people like us even mean anything?’”

“...What the heck,” Nanaka said, squeezing her hand into a fist.

“This is all my interpretation, though,” Kai said, all while thinking to himself, *I should have stayed calm*. No matter how intensely his heart boiled, he needed to keep his head cool.

“—Beginning, calm. The god of rational thought favors a cool abode. Do not let the blood rush to your head, Shiraseki.” Akane had often scolded him this way whenever he lost his temper. Kai wouldn’t have expected it, but he’d come to accept that he was quick to rise to emotional provocation. He was utterly hopeless when it came to conveying that through words and expression, but his feelings themselves were subject to the slightest trigger.

If Mirei had only questioned his resolve, he wouldn’t have gotten so upset. Kai had no idea how prepared the people at Kongouin Academy were—he didn’t know how serious they were, either, and that went both ways. For example, they had no idea what kind of determination Nanaka had. Mirei didn’t know, and yet she’d looked down on her anyway. *That* was why he couldn’t stay silent.

“...You know, Kai-kun...” For whatever reason, Nanaka seemed genuinely happy as she said, “You’re actually really passionate. Like that time you bit your thumb.”

Kai reflexively looked down at his right hand, thinking that this was a prime example of his hot-headedness.

“I really like that part about you.”

“.....Huh?”

“Ah, th-tha-that’s not what I meant, okay?!” Nanaka rushed to assure him. “My friends in class said you were expressionless and hard to read, so...!”

“Oh, s-s-s-s-so th-that’s what you meant.” Kai stumbled through his sentence and sighed internally with disappointment. It was a fact that he was expressionless, so there wasn’t any use in letting her statement get him down, but humans are creatures whose greatest weakness is being confronted with the truth. Still, it would probably be terrifying to everybody if he were to suddenly start emoting after the end of summer break. *What the hell? This is a lose-lose situation*, he complained to himself.

“I-I keep telling them they’re wrong, but they don’t believe me... Maybe I should go ahead and tell them the thumb-biting story?” Nanaka mused.

“Uh, please, anything but that...” Their impression of Kai might change, but that would surely be from ‘quiet kid’ to ‘psychopath.’

“Aww... But I wouldn’t have guessed that Kongouin-san was thinking that,” Nanaka pointed out.

“I’m pretty sure that was the ‘rudeness’ she apologized for at the end.”

“I see... Hey, wait?” Nanaka put her pointer finger to her cheek and began to ponder. “But... if she apologized, then she’s not that bad of a person, right?”

“I’m not sure, but I think so, too. If she *really* were looking down on us, then she wouldn’t have apologized for it afterwards,” Kai agreed cautiously. “She probably just wanted to confirm that we were up to par.”

“...Hey, Kai-kun? Whenever a character like that shows up in a game... isn’t it usually a super powerful enemy?”

Kai could only muster a dry smile, thinking that it seemed Nanaka had caught his drift. Just as Kongouin Mirei had said, Meikun High was a fresh-off-the-farm country school that showed up to its first ever Summit with zero experience.

Kongouin Academy, on the other hand, was a regular participant. Manpower, experience, team coordination—everything was on different levels. To begin with, Kai and company had never competed in a development contest with their current members. On top of that—

“But I’m sure it’ll be fine!” Nanaka’s hands were balled up again, but this time they were overflowing with enthusiasm as she pumped them once in front of her chest. “Maybe ‘fine’ isn’t a good word... I mean, we’ve never even done this before! All we can do is try and give it our all!”

Her bright words, full of encouragement and bravery, shone a spotlight on the dark thoughts plaguing Kai’s mind that shocked him back into the present.

It was the same straightforward radiance as the sun suddenly appearing in front of his eyes. *Nanaka is right*, Kai thought. *If you haven’t done it before, then all you can do is try. Dragging your feet because you have no experience will just leave you stuck in the same spot.* He was supposed to know that already.

“...Kai-kun?”

“Oh, s-sorry.”

Nanaka squinted at him quizzically and then laughed. “You’re so funny, Kai-kun. I’ve never been in a development competition before, so I think I’ll be relying on you a lot... but I’ll do anything I can! How should we go about this all?”

“First... is coming up with a plan,” Kai reasoned. “He said we don’t need a project proposal, but that just meant he won’t *judge* us off of it, and it’s usually an important step to complete.”

“Then the project proposal it is!” declared Nanaka. “Should we all do it together? Or just the planners?”

“About that...” Kai took a small breath, held it, and let it go. *If you haven’t done it before, then all you can do is try. Find your determination.* “Can you give me two days to myself?”



“If you guys don’t mind, then, first I’d like to come up with a proposal on my own.” *Why did I say that?* he wondered. That thought had been gnawing at the corner of Kai’s heart since he’d told Nanaka his plan in the train. All he was going to do was create a rough draft. However, since even *that* took time, he got two days. Thus, the club would be on break for that period of time.

He had explained that to the members in the front seats. He felt like he could see and hear Aya’s dull, “Looking forward to it,” Aina’s faux-sweet, “Kai-kun, you’re on fire! Go for it! ♪” and even his own embarrassing, “I’ll give it my best shot,” all in third person.

Had it been because of Hifumi Tetsuma’s performance and the intensity of the lecture hall?

No.

Was it because he had been provoked by Kongouin Mirei’s taunting? Did he want to prove his own worth?

No, again.

It would have been nice if he’d had a reason like that; he’d feel like the main character of a shounen manga.

...It’s Nanaka.

In the end, that was the only reason. The brilliant smile that accompanied Nanaka’s clear and simple solution—if you haven’t done it before, all you can do is try—gave Kai a push on the back... and also tangled his feet in a vine of anxiety.

Those who can go ahead and take the first step, no matter how small, are strong. Planners, programmers, designers—regardless of profession, those who became capable (as opposed to those who were capable) were always those who gave things a try.

If they came across a wall, they’d try and climb it. If they came across a pit with no bottom in sight, they’d go ahead and jump in. And if they failed, they’d come home from their venture with something new. That something would

become their sustenance, and the next time they'd climb higher and dive deeper.

Over and over, they'd continue this process until one day they couldn't be seen anymore. By the time Kai thought to chase after them, it was too late. Every step he'd take would equal two or three of theirs, and the gap between them would only widen at an ever-accelerating pace. It wouldn't be possible for him to catch up.

Kai had a hunch. Ever since that day, he'd had a hunch that Nanaka would eventually reach that place. And at this rate, she'd continue to do so far, far away. They were walking together for now, but that was *only* for now. Their school and club happened to be the same. That was it.

Talent was radiance; radiance was light; light was overwhelmingly blinding... and fast. Kai had seen talent zip past him countless times. He'd catch the instant they flashed their brilliance, and by the time he noticed their brightness, it was too late—the distance between them would be insurmountable.

At some point, he thought, *I should rise up to the challenge like they do*, but it was impossible. He couldn't help but think about trouble, risk, calculations, recklessness, ability, experience, effort, disappointment, talent... The reasons to *not* start were infinite.

That 'go ahead' simply wasn't possible for Kai. He couldn't help but to look before he went ahead and leapt. At one point, he seriously considered the idea that his only talent was hesitation.

But he hated that. He wanted to be someone who could stand beside her.

Kai knew what he had to do; all he *could* do was jump in. The truth was that Nanaka wasn't alone—Kai had no experience with development competitions, either. He was inexperienced, so he couldn't hide his uncertainty. There was a real fear that he wouldn't be able to create a proper plan even with two days, and that everyone would be disappointed in him.

Still, he wanted to show himself that he, too, could take that step forward. Was there any reason lamer than his?

"Um, well... see you?" Nanaka said her goodbyes with a worried look as the

group dispersed at the station. Instead of heading for the exit and home, Kai headed for the south gate. He crossed the wide walkway that crossed over the train tracks and made his way down the stairs to the entrance of a large bookstore.

This was the biggest bookstore he knew of within walking distance of his house. The shop was split into two floors, and there was an escalator right by the entrance that connected to the basement. Kai had been fond of the place ever since Misako had introduced the location to him. It had a pleasantly quiet atmosphere, perhaps partially owing to the fact that it was located underground.

The technical writings were stored on the basement floor, so Kai went straight to the escalator and headed to his destination. There were a few titles that seemed useful, but his wallet wasn't fat enough to purchase more than a couple. Besides, he only had two days. There wasn't enough time to read them all. Instead, he reached out for the one that he had set his mind on beforehand.

"Are you seriously starting over from the most basic of the basics *now*?" a clear voice called out to him. It was especially distinct as it cut through the silence of the store.

"...Aina-san," he acknowledged.

"Of course. From what I could find, you didn't have any history of participating in development competitions at Tsukigase, after all. Or rather, I'm sure you didn't have the leeway to." Aina's footsteps echoed across the quiet floor as she made her way over to Kai and peeked into the book he had chosen. "And? Are you learning from scratch?"

"Th-This is, well—"

"What are you panicking for?" she demanded to know. "Is this *that* scandalous?"

"...I didn't mean to lie about anything," he mumbled.

"Look," she said, and ran her hand through her hair in annoyance. "Geez, I hate all this dawdling over *nothing*. I'm telling you, it's fine. If you want to try and do it yourself, then go for it. Or is someone gonna die because of you?"

“No, that won’t—”

“Then it’s fine. Do your own thing until you’re satisfied. That old baldie said that our output is everything, so if your work leads to a good product, then it’s fine... If he really only judges us on our output, that’d be perfect.”

“Th-That’s true,” he agreed, “but...” *If that’s the case, why did you follow me?*

“Well, it’s not like you’ll make anything good after reading one book, and it’s not like you’d make something good even if you had experience, *and* your whole ‘I’m gonna study hard and do my best, ♪’ stick-in-the-mud mentality doesn’t give me any hope for a fun proposal.”

“.....Right.” Kai’s reply was quieter than a mosquito’s buzzing. He couldn’t tell if Aina was rooting for him or kicking him while he was down.

“Anyway, I couldn’t care less about you,” she told him dismissively.

“Couldn’t care less...”

“Why haven’t you asked me anything?” Aina asked, and shot him a solemn, piercing glare.

Kai retracted his hand from the bookshelf (where it had been frozen this entire time) and turned to face her. “Me, ask you?”

“...You’re not feigning ignorance, are you?”

“Not at all.” Kai had no clue what she was talking about. *Did I do something to offend her?* He scrambled to sort through the day’s events, but nothing came to mind. In fact, he had spent the entire day worrying about himself, so he didn’t have the spare time to think about anyone else.

A deep sigh pulled him out of his thoughts. With an exasperated look on her face, Aina said, “...I’ve had enough. Everything I say here is just me talking to myself, so shut up and listen. All that stuff the blonde Kongouin brat was prattling on about had to do with my past. I’m not doing it anymore, but I used to be a child actress. That’s what she was talking about. And, since we went to the same middle school, Nanaka and Eru already know... and judging from Aya’s reaction, she already knew, too. I used my real name back then, so everything comes right up with an online search. Nothing I can do about it now.”

Now that she mentioned it, Kai did indeed recall an exchange like that taking place. His epiphany must have shown on his face, because Aina let out another deep sigh.

“I’m not even on your radar, am I...? That pisses me off in its own way. Are you and Nanaka-chan *really* not dating?”

“...Th-There’s no way—”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I’m done here. That reaction’s enough for me. Anyway, good luck.” Aina waved her hand to signal that their conversation was finished. However, as she turned heel to leave, she suddenly stopped with an, “Oh...” and glanced over her shoulder. She pointed cutely at her lips and sang, “If your plan uses my voice, I’m behind you, no questions asked. Buh-bye! ♪”

Aina shot him a mischievous smile, like a demon tempting him to darkness. And then, this time, she was truly gone.



There was no time for hesitation, so Kai quickly made his purchase and left the bookstore. He returned through the walkway and headed out his usual exit, stopping by the convenience store to grab an instant dinner on his way home. That, and a handful of chocolates. When he inevitably found himself stuck, the sweets would be an easy way to replenish his energy.

Kai arrived home at 6:00 pm. He finished bathing in 15 minutes and spent another 15 eating cup ramen. From 6:30, he spent two straight hours reading the book he’d bought from start to finish.

Though he lacked experience with development competitions, he already knew how to write a project proposal. Akane had drilled all the basics into him when he was at Tsukigase. Still, he hadn’t done so in a long while, so he was worried that he might have forgotten how to do it. The book he had chosen only had information he already knew, but it was a perfect refresher to put his thoughts into order.

In short, there was no correct answer when it came to proposals. However, there were essential elements that needed to be present. This seemed contradictory, but it was the truth. First, there was no absolute standard that

dictated, 'This is how a proposal must be written,' so the contents and formatting varied in countless ways. Frankly, it was a means by which the planner expressed themselves.

That being said, game development was a group effort. No one would be able to act without understanding what kind of game they were making. Thus, that expression was an essential element.

Kai carefully pulled the memories of his lessons with Akane out of a treasure box in his mind, one by one, and stopped to ruminate on them.



"Shiraseki, start with five pages."

"Only five pages?"

"As a rule, assume that your reader has absolutely no expectations of you," Akane told him. "Do you have confidence that you can hand someone a thick stack of papers, tens of pages long, and maintain their attention throughout?"

"...No."

"Cover page; concept; target; selling point; gameplay. These are the topics needed to begin a project proposal."

"Th-That's all?"

"You do not seem to believe me. That will correct itself as I explain. First, we have the cover page. Shiraseki, were you surprised that I included the cover among the five pages?"

"...I was," he admitted.

"Let me return to my initial explanation. Shiraseki, we assume the person who will read your document has no expectations. In this scenario, what will they think when they see a blank white page cover with a poorly typeset title in Gothic typeface?"

"They... wouldn't even think to turn the page."

"Exactly. Consequently, the quality of the cover page is critical. If possible, you should go as far as to recruit a designer to create an appealing front cover. The

next topic is 'concept,' but... this one is intimately related to the 'target' and 'selling point' that follow. There are many instructional manuals that insist on the importance of these topics, and as a result, many people tend to think of them separately.

"...I'm sorry, what do you mean?"

"Let me begin by explaining the three of them in simple terms," she suggested. "I will return to their individual details later on."

"The concept refers to the objective of the game. What kind of game will it be? It needs to explain that to the reader. Any inaccuracy here will cause inaccuracies throughout your proposal."

"The target is just as the label suggests: who is this game for? It is your job to hypothesize on that. An error here, and your game will never reach anyone."

"Lastly, the selling point is the hook of the game. Some refer to this as 'benefits' or 'advantages,' but ultimately, it does not matter so long as you are able to explain why the end user would appreciate your proposal. Without this, no one will so much as look your way... Do you understand, Shiraseki?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "I've heard of these concepts before, so I'm following."

"...Is that so? Then let us continue with an example," Akane decided.

"Shiraseki, say you were to develop a game that utilized your smartphone's GPS functionality. Imagine the selling point is 'By taking gaming outdoors, you can get in shape while having fun.' Who would be your target audience? Try to give me as concrete an answer as you can."

"...Would it be people who have sedentary hobbies, like reading or film watching?" he suggested.

"Is that all?"

"...Maybe we could also consider people who get light exercise in the form of walking or window shopping, but lack any athletic hobbies such as sports."

"I see. Let us say that we managed to pare the target down to your first suggestion. The concept and gameplay would need to be more potent than any adversarial content. Should you choose to target those who prefer the indoors,

you will need suitable appeal to match.”

“That means... if the game is less fun than a book or a movie, then no one will play it.”

“Precisely. On the other hand, your second suggestion lowers the hurdle. If the game is meant to be played with one hand while shopping, a casual concept and gameplay loop may fit the project better... However, trouble may arise if you decide on each section without considering the others. In an extreme case, you may find that your target audience is the elderly, but your concept would only ever be popular among young people.”

“...I see.”

“Still, there is no need to overthink things,” Akane advised him. “You can begin thinking about the concept, target, and selling point from any of these subjects. If your target is middle and high schoolers but your concept is something as unpopular as studying, you will naturally need an exceptional selling point to overcome that. So long as you do not stubbornly solidify your plans early, these three points will come together as a matter of course.”

“Understood.”

“Lastly, we have the gameplay. Allow me to warn you in advance: Shiraseki, a page is enough. How would this game be enjoyed? What kind of gameplay loop are you anticipating? All you need to do is convey the most appealing core principles of your game. Statements such as ‘We have subquests; we have missions; we have PvP,’ that explain every detail are inane. All you need is one. Show them the nucleus of your game. Not only will a list of features fail to convey anything, it may even deliver a message you should never send.”

“A message you should never send...?” he echoed.

“—Anxiety, transmits... Confidence, Shiraseki. A proposal embellished with this and that will appear lost. Three arrows are too much. Draw the bow until your absolute limit, and let fly a single, true arrow.”



Looking back now, Kai could finally understand that what Akane had taught him was indeed fundamental. There were also parts that she had intentionally

glossed over. For example, at the industry level, there needed to be a section on ‘monetization’ so that the company could turn a profit.

However, this time there was no need to do so. The lessons he’d learned from Akane were plenty, and those lessons had taken root as knowledge within Kai’s brain.

He knew what he had to do. He knew... but nothing came to mind. The time passed in an instant, and it was already midnight. The PowerPoint on his laptop screen was snow white. He had nothing.

“...How am I supposed to be confident like this?” Kai said to no one in particular. He was simply rebutting his own memories as he mumbled to himself.

It felt like the middle of his body had been scooped out, leaving a clean cavity from end to end. He was empty.

Nanaka and Eru had an intense passion for drawing. Aya had her strange attachment to the gacha. Kai could sense that Aina had remarkable will in her dream of becoming a voice actress. What about him? He just liked social games. He happened to stumble into this world on Akane’s invitation. He put everything he had into meeting her expectations, and now... here he was.

Do I have anything like the others? Kai wanted to beat his own chest, but had a feeling that an empty sound would echo out. He was too scared to try.

What do I want to make? Maybe that’s why I can’t think of anything.

Because my answer is blank.

“...This is no good,” he said aloud, and slapped his hands against his face with a bit too much force. He rode that momentum to stand up and head to the powder room, where he washed his reddened cheeks with cold water.

Whining and worrying wouldn’t get him anywhere. For the time being, he needed to come up with ideas—anything would do.

Kai pushed his laptop back and opened up a notebook. In the center of a blank page, he wrote the topics ‘Character’ and ‘Breath.’ Then, he surrounded them with anything he could think of relating to those themes.

The sound of his pen scribbling on paper made him feel like he was *doing* something, and he managed to calm down, ever so slightly.

Chapter 7: If I'm Going to Forget One Day

There were already rays of sunlight shooting through the gaps in the curtain when the handle of the front door slowly turned with a muted *click*.

Kai pressed the power button on his phone to see that it had just hit 8 o'clock in the morning. *The PowerPoint slide on my laptop screen is as blindingly white as the morning sun*, he thought, and folded his computer. He also shut his notebook, into which he had aimlessly scribbled words the previous night. None of what was written there had led him to a new idea.

Kai stretched his arms to the ceiling and then whirled around to see his sister, who was wearing a rather risqué bikini, and attempting to stealthily tiptoe in. Misako held a water gun in her right hand and a vinyl kiddie-pool in her left, along with an inflatable pool ring already around her waist. From the look on her face, he had a feeling that she was quite proud of being fully equipped, which she most definitely was.

"Good morning, everyone!" Misako exclaimed.

"I'm the only one here," Kai replied dryly.

"To share a wonderful moment at the pool with such beautiful girls under a sparkling midsummer sun..." she began rambling. "The gates of paradise have opened! Now, Nanaka-chan, allow me to cover every nook and cranny of yours with sunscreen!"

"...Nee-san?" he ventured.

"Oh, Aya-chan, are you headed for the water slide? Don't underestimate me. I'll have you know I'm a novelist who can elegantly handle the waves of encroaching deadlines thrown my way. Watch, as I go down the slide while standing on the inner tube! And when I succeed... you know what comes next, don't you?"

".....Are you having fun?"

"Don't stay grounded in reality by yourself!!!" Misako whined at him.

“Kaaaaaaaaai! Don’t you understand?! You of all people should know just how badly—just how *desperately* I wanted to go to the pool with everyone...! How much I wanted to ‘teehee’ and ‘ahaha’ with them!

“Can’t you see that and play along for me?! Or are you basking in a sense of superiority because you got to enjoy the experience with all five of your senses?! That’s low,” she said accusingly. “And lewd! Kai, you naughty perv! I wanted to feast my eyes out of my sockets, too! I’m so frustrated! And sad! Aaarghhh!!! Time, I beg of thee, rewind! But leave my manuscript completed!”

Misako looked like Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* as she put both of her hands to her disheveled face. She had sped through her words like a spirit speed-chanting a curse as she made her way toward her little brother. Her eyes were bloodshot and overflowing with so many tears that it almost seemed like an elaborate prank.

Just how excited was she for the pool trip? Kai wondered.

...*Sigh*. He knew letting out his breath audibly would only cause more trouble, so he simply said, “Give me a second,” before heading to his room. He brought back the digital camera that was on his desk, with a single photo that had been properly printed. “Here,” he offered.

“...Could... this be...?” Misako asked haltingly. The developed picture was the first group photo they had taken. Kai had thought of the idea when they’d come across a convenience store with a printer on their way to see off Akane.

In the photograph, Nanaka was smiling. Akane looked like she was posing for a passport, but Aya was sporting a goofy grin. Eru was squinting at the brightness of the sun, and Kai was in the center of the photo. He was blushing as he held out a peace sign and awkwardly stared in the general direction of the camera. Honestly, it was one of the single most embarrassing pictures he had ever been in, but it was Misako’s request, so there had been nothing to be done about it.

“There’s messages from everyone on the back,” he told her. Kai had added a disclaimer that they didn’t have to put much thought into it, but he’d asked all the girls to write a comment all the same.

Thank you very much! I hope you can join us next time, Misako-san! -Nanaka

My sincerest gratitude for allowing me this precious opportunity. -Kurenai Akane

It was fun, but I'd prefer a play store card next time. -Aya

I got some good practice drawing swimsuits, so thanks. -Kuroba

A handful of simple and haphazard messages were written on the back of the photograph. Kai felt awkward penning a note to his own sister himself, so he hadn't planned on doing so. But Nanaka told him, "She'd be the happiest to see one from you... don't you think?" Figuring that Misako would only see it once her deadlines had been taken care of, his message simply read, *Good work on your manuscript.*

"...Did Nanaka-chan get everyone to do this to thank me?" Misako asked.

".....No," he admitted. *So she's asking me this, after all.* "It's just... I thought you'd be legitimately depressed, so..."

"It was you?"

"...Yeah, what abo— Whoa!" Misako was hugging him in an instant. She was too fast for him to have any chance of escaping. "N-Nee-san...!" he choked out. "Think about what you're wearing!"

Misako had instantly tossed aside her pool ring and begun clinging to Kai while wearing nothing but a drawstring bikini. She was practically naked at this point, so he could feel a variety of different soft bits pressing against him, but the fact that it was his sister left him less than pleased.

Despite his best efforts to peel her off, Kai couldn't best Misako's ridiculously deceptive strength, and she didn't intend to let go on her own volition. *Plus*, he realized, *trying to force her off could cause her swimsuit to catastrophically slip off.*

In fiction, the situation might have been considered a 'lucky pervert' moment, but alas, this was reality. Kai was incapable of getting excited over his sister's body. All he felt was overwhelming discomfort.

"Kai," Misako suddenly broke the silence at point blank range with the most serious expression he had ever seen on her. "Let's get married."

“We can’t,” he told her flatly, “and I don’t want to.”

“Your sister’s serious, you know?”

“The way you just referred to yourself contains all the reasons we can’t. Besides, I’m serious about not wanting to, too.”

“...What a troublesome little princess,” Misako mumbled. “Rejecting a proposal from yours truly? ...Now I’m interested.”

“You can do your weirdly good ‘prince charming’ voice all you want, but you’re not raising any flags here,” he insisted. That aside, Shiraseki Kai’s gender was male. At the very minimum, he wasn’t a princess, anyway. “...Well, I’m glad you cheered up.”

“Don’t excite me out of the blue any more than you already have, my kitten. Otherwise, I won’t be able to hold myself... Hm?” Misako stopped, as if she had discovered a tiny stain on a shirt. “Come to think of it... you look awful, Kai. Did you paint those bags on yourself?”

“Why would I ever do that?” he demanded grumpily.

“Then I guess something must have happened,” Misako deduced. “Alright. I guess your dependable, trouble-busting older sister will give you a little leg up.”

“Can you stop giving me multiple places to stop you in one sentence?” Kai complained. First, Misako was a self-sustained troublemaking factory. Second, her legs had already been wrapped around him, so it was a little late for her to be offering him a ‘leg up.’

“Big sis is in a *really* good mood right now,” she said coaxingly. “I’m pretty sure I’d properly answer any question you ask me.”

“...In that case...” Perhaps it was because Kai had been swept up in his stupid sister’s blazingly fast pace. But he had spent the entire night wracking his brain... to come up with zero ideas. He was probably even more exhausted than he himself realized. But by the time he’d noticed, Kai had already thrown his question out. “Nee-san, why did you become a novelist?”

It wasn’t as if this was the first time Kai had asked. The last time he’d tried, Misako had dodged the subject by saying, “It’s to write about my little brother.”

She *did* include a little brother in some form or fashion in each of her novels, so it wasn't fair to say that this was a complete lie. However, just like with her usual antics, Kai had a hard time figuring out what she was truly thinking.

"...Young man," she said sternly, "can you promise that you'll talk to me about what's on your mind afterwards?"

Kai hesitated for a moment, but ultimately nodded in reply. Misako gave a mature laugh, answering, "It's simple. I wanted to live out my own reality."

"...Sorry, what?"

"The reason I like novels the best out of any art form is that—no matter how many copies are printed, no matter how many people read the book—all it amounts to is a different world for everyone," she explained. "In essence, I'm greedy. I want someone to see the world I see, but I don't want to share my world with anyone else. That's why it had to be novels."

"But, if a lot of people read it... Is that different?" he wondered.

"For example: 'The man was of average height and build, but his t-shirt bent along his hunched back as he rode his bicycle upside-down.' I'm sure that no two people would imagine the exact same man," Misako went on. "There exists a world for every person who reads it; that's all it is. I don't have any noble reason... I love creating my own little world. And I'm happy if that can become someone else's unique world, too. That's why I write novels."

"...So that's why," Kai muttered. He could tell from all the years he'd known her; despite the fact that there were a lot of parts about her answer he didn't quite understand, this was undeniably one of the rare occasions that Misako was laying her heart bare.

"...And?" she asked, pressing him to hold up his side of the bargain with her eyes.

Having experienced one of Misako's scarce moments of pure honesty, Kai didn't feel the urge to run or hide, and explained everything from A to Z. He explained that he had talked big by promising to write the proposal himself, and that no good ideas had come to mind. That, maybe, the reason for his failure was that he didn't have anything that he wanted to make. Not only that, but his

reason for wanting to do so hadn't been spurred on by Hifumi Tetsuma, Kongouin Mirei, or even his own pride as a planner. It was just a pathetic show of bravado because he was anxious about the forward momentum he saw in Nanaka.

Misako neither laughed nor taunted and simply nodded along as she listened... or so he'd thought.

"...Pft."

".....Huh? Nee-san..." *Did she just... laugh?*

"...I, I can't. Ah... Ah... Ahahahaha!" she cried out, exploding in laughter. "Kai, even for me, that's too much for my heart! Give me a second here!"

"I already told you everything, anyway," Kai said harshly. Misako's roaring laughter was so far beyond his expectations that he couldn't help but be a tad bitter about it.

"Sorry, sorry. I was wondering what kind of serious trouble you had for me, but... Okay, let me give you two bits of advice," she began, holding up the index finger on her right hand. "First, Kai, it's a mistake to think of people's minds as some mathematical formula in which some singular input leads to some singular result. You see, humans aren't made to be that simple. For example, I came here from my own apartment in this swimsuit earlier."



“What’s wrong with you...?” Kai wondered.

“What do you think was going through my head?”

“That’s my line...”

“I thought, ‘I want to surprise Kai.’ I also had a feeling that it’d feel nice to walk around in a swimsuit,” she added. “Plus, I was curious as to how people would look at me if I did it. Of course, the desire to vent my frustration over missing the pool trip was probably mixed in there, too. All of these ideas were contained in the human we know as ‘Shiraseki Misako.’”

“I have a feeling that can all be summed up as your brain boiling over,” Kai said dryly.

“Kai, I’m sure that Hifumi Tetsuya person lit a fire within you,” Misako went on, ignoring his statement. “The same goes for that Kongouin Mirei girl. You got heated... and frustrated. There’s nothing wrong with that. The anxiety you noticed over Nanaka-chan is probably true, too. But that’s not the only thing. Kai, you have a habit of belittling yourself.”

—*Do not submit yourself to inadequacy.* Kai heard a certain voice in his head.

“You *just* like social games,” she told him. “That’s more than enough. Bring that with you to the ends of the world. Kai, reckless confidence and hope for the future are the privileges of youth. I try my best not to forget them, but it’s harder than you’d think... One day, they’ll slip my mind. That’s why they’re special,” Misako cautioned herself with a delicate voice.

Nee-san, Kai was about to open his mouth when she suddenly shifted gears.

“But all that aside, aren’t you turning away from another important emotion of yours?”

“Huh?” *Another one?*

“I mean, this is basically all because you *wanted to show off your cool side to Nanaka-chan*, right?”

“.....Huh?” *No. No way.* As the words spun around Kai’s mind, he recognized that his face was getting hotter by the second. His embarrassment was about to exceed its boiling point.

The fact that he was embarrassed meant... Misako was spot on. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, but couldn't bring himself to say it.

In that moment, Kai vaguely perceived a flash of brightness, which was Misako snapping a photo of him with her digital camera. "Ahahahahaha!" she laughed.

"There's no helping it, Kai," she told him next. "The maze of youth is like a labyrinth, and there's no one a person understands less than themselves. Leave it to Ace Detective Misako to deduce all this from a stray lamb's testimony!" Mustering every ounce of smugness into her smile, Misako chortled.

Kai wanted to say something, but he was still too busy cooling down his face.

"And the other thing," Misako went on, lifting a second finger to create a V. Now that she mentioned it, Kai recalled her saying she had two suggestions, but he was so flustered that he wanted to run away before even hearing the other one.

"Our paths may differ, but this is my advice as a professional. When you're so lost that you question foundational ideas like 'Why do I create?' it means you're tunnel-visioned to the point of blindness. It's impossible to create something good in that state. For times like these," Misako said, shoving Kai's back and causing him to stumble in the direction of the front door. He turned to catch his phone and wallet that his sister had tossed his way. "You should take a walk until your mind is nice and empty. Go, get going!" Misako kept pushing him along, and he was at the door in seconds.

It was a fact that Kai wanted to cool off. At any rate, he *sincerely* wanted to put his heart in order after all the embarrassment he'd just experienced.

There was something fleeting about Misako's gentle smile as she watched over him and said, "I only know how to live by creating things on my own. I don't know the hardships of creating a single world with someone else. He fights his own battles in a foreign land; that's why I respect the human we know as Shiraseki Kai. So, hold your head high," she concluded.

If only she hadn't been in a bikini as she said it, Kai knew he would have been proud of his awesome older sister.

Chapter 8: Nameless Wonder

Clear blue skies weren't exactly a thing in Niigata, and clouds dotted the otherwise sunny day. Even at 9:00 am in the morning, the temperature was beginning to soar, and the fiery sun quickly sapped the strength from Kai's sleepless body.

After walking around aimlessly for a little while, Kai found himself at the train station. With no plans of taking a train anywhere, he bought a sports drink at the nearby convenience store and decided to set a destination for himself. Misako had told him to walk until his mind was empty, but at this rate he was prone to collapsing. His usual lack of fitness was multiplied by the all-nighter status condition, so Kai wanted to find a place to sit down and rest.

Ten more minutes of walking led him to a sizable park. It was apparently a community staple, as a children's pool had been appended next door, and the largest library in the area was also nearby. The park served simultaneously as a relaxing spot for the denizens of the town and as a playground for the elementary schoolers on summer break, who were playing baseball with soft rubber balls and plastic bats. Kai caught them in the corner of his eye as he took a seat on a bench beneath the shade of a large tree. He was either more exhausted or out of shape than he had previously thought, because he felt his hips melt into the bench as he sat down.

"...Phew," Kai unconsciously exhaled. The red hotness in his face had subsided, but now his entire body was overheating. He regretted not having bought ice cream at the store.

"Excuse me, young man."

"Yes?" he turned toward the sudden voice to find an elderly woman with a hunched back pushing around a stroller.

"Have you seen a cat around here?"

"A cat?" he echoed.

"She's a black cat with golden eyes. And her tail is like this," she said while making a right angle with her hands. "It's all bent up."

"I haven't seen her. Um, if you'd like..." Kai rose to offer her the bench.

"Oh, you're too kind." The old woman moved frame by frame in slow motion until she finally came into contact with the seat.

"Did she disappear?" he asked.

"We were out on a walk, you see."

"A walk?" he asked. "With your cat?"

"We always come out to this park together. Both of us are reaching our final years... Before I knew it, the days would fly by with us cooped up inside. Miyo rides on this," she said, eyeing the stroller, "and I push it to the park. When I take this collar off of her, Miyo's free to walk around the park, and she comes back after a little while..."

"But she hasn't returned yet?"

The gray woman slowly nodded. "Maybe she went on without me."

"No, come on." *What is this lady saying?* he wondered uneasily. But out loud, he said, "Um, if you come here often, then she's probably still somewhere within the park. I'll go look around for her."

"...Mister," she responded with a wrinkly smile, "You're a good man. How would you like to marry my granddaughter?"

"U-Uh, that's a bit..." Kai floundered. "Um, I'm gonna go look for her."

"Ah, wait," the old lady said. "Take this collar with you. If you put that on her, Miyo will know it's time to go home."

"Your cat must be very smart," he commented.

"Ha, ha, ha," she cackled. "I wonder if there's any animal smarter than a cat out there. She's got eyes like a full moon and fur like a beautiful night sky, so you can't miss her."

I see, Kai realized. The Japanese 'Mi' for beautiful and 'Yo' for night were probably the basis for her name.

“Sorry to ask this of you,” she said as he walked off.

Kai didn’t get any leads from the kids playing baseball, so it seemed unlikely that Miyo was sunbathing somewhere out in the open. He began to ignore the open areas to focus on the more hidden spaces, and began his search from the corner of the park.

“Miyo-chaaan,” he called, and stumbled upon her quicker than he had expected. Right after raising his voice, a *meow* came back in response. On the other side of a few small trees, he could see a black cat clearly meowing atop a fence in his general direction. She wasn’t that high off of the ground—she was perched a little above head-height for Kai—but according to the old woman, the cat was getting up there in age. *The chances are that she had gotten stuck up there*, he realized.

Kai pushed his way past the shrubbery, which caused Miyo to flinch back in surprise. Praying that she wouldn’t run away, he walked up with his arms outstretched, to which the cat responded by stepping into his embrace. He could feel her warmth on his stomach as he carried her like that all the way back to the woman.

“Excuse me, is this the one?” he asked.

“Ohh,” the old lady marveled, her mood visibly improved. “Miyo.” As soon as her name was called, Miyo hopped out of Kai’s arms and climbed onto the bench to lay down on her owner’s lap. The cat replied to her master’s summons with a comfortable purr and then balled herself up. The woman offered her gratitude by saying, “Thank you, young man.”

“No, I found her right away, anyway... I’m glad she’s back.”

“Miyo, say thank... oh, she’s tuckered out. Looks like it’s time to head home,” she said, while loading Miyo onto her carriage. “Alrighty, mister, thanks for everything.” The cat was still comfortably balled up in the stroller as the woman rose up from the bench and left.

...And left.

.....And left? The elderly woman had frozen up like a bugged out game character. Kai could have sworn that a minute or so had passed before she sat

back down and laughed heartily.

“Ha, ha, ha,” she cackled again. “Looks like I’m all tuckered out from looking for Miyo, too.”



The old lady’s name was Haruko.

“You really are a good man, mister.”

Kai couldn’t just leave her there, so he now found himself listening to her incessant praise as he pushed the carriage along in her stead. The black cat on board hardly stirred and remained still as they walked along.

The walk to Haruko’s house took thirty minutes from the park—though Kai alone could have made it in ten. Her home was a solitary unit made of wood, and sectioned off by a concrete fence. There was a path to the garden right beside the front door, and Miyo trotted along it until she was out of view once she noticed they were home.

“I’ll feel awful if you don’t at least help yourself to some tea before you go,” Haruko offered with a smile. Kai couldn’t figure out a way to decline.

Once inside, there was a staircase immediately in front of the entrance. The old woman showed him past it to the doorway on the left, which led to a traditional Japanese living room floored with tatami mats. She instructed him to sit down on a floor cushion and headed to the kitchen in the room over. The garden was right outside of the living room, and Kai could see Miyo curled up in a ball, sunbathing out on the veranda.

It was an idle, warm space in which time stood still. Until—*tap tap tap*, a set of footsteps rang down the staircase. Those footsteps—or rather, the girl they belonged to—didn’t seem to notice Kai’s presence as they approached.

“Grandmaaa? You’re finally back! Are you okay? Geez, this is why I told you that I’d walk Miyo in—” her voice tapered off into silence.

Kai locked eyes with her.

She probably had a room on the second floor, and had come down when she sensed her grandmother was home. Her hair was messier than what Kai had

seen at school, and she was lightly dressed: she only had on a thin camisole and a light jacket sloppily sliding off her shoulder. Her eyes were wide open, and her shock was surprisingly easy to read.

Aina rubbed her eyes in an exaggerated way. Kai did the same.

...Oh god, this is reality, he thought. What now?

“Wha—” Her eyes grew sharp as she shouted, “What are you doing here?!”

“No, well, there’s a reason for—whoa, wait!”

“Wait for—oh,” she suddenly paused. Aina had been stomping toward him, but finally realized what she was wearing as she did so. “I can’t believe you!”

“But that wasn’t my fau—” he tried to protest.

“Shut up! In the first place, why are you even—”

“Aina! Quit that!” Haruko returned to scold her granddaughter. “Watch that mouth around our guest!”

“B-But, Grandma, this idiot—”

“Don’t go calling him an idiot,” she chided. “This nice young gentleman helped me find Miyo when she got lost, and went out of his way to bring her all the way home for me. We ought to be thanking him, not insulting him... Now, where’s your ‘I’m sorry’?”

“B-But, Grandma...”

“Aina.”

“...I... I’m... Sorry.”

It appeared that Aina couldn’t lift a finger against her grandmother, and her face was a complicated mish-mash of embarrassment and frustration. Kai could hardly believe she was the same person as the cool beauty at school.

“Good girl,” Haruko praised her.

“You! Don’t you dare leave!” Aina demanded with an outstretched pointer finger. Then, she turned to clamber back up to the second floor.

“Here you are, mister,” Haruko said encouragingly. “Drink up.”

“Th-Thank you.” Kai took a sip of the barley tea that had been placed in front of him to calm his restless heart. As the chilled tea made its way down his throat, he finally felt like he could face the situation he was in.

“Do you know Aina?” Haruko asked.

“...We’re in the same club,” he told her reluctantly.

“Is ‘at so. Mister... do you *know* Aina?”

Do I know her? Kai could tell what the old woman meant from the look in her eyes. “...I do.”

After their encounter at the bookstore, he had looked her up online. Aina’s parents were famous enough to have their own Wikipedia pages: her father was an academy award-winning actor, and her mother was a top class model who toured overseas. Written alongside their accolades was information about their thoroughbred daughter, Yozakura Aina, who had worked under her real name as a child star. She had inherited her father’s acting prowess and her mother’s charisma to make for a level of genius that certainly went beyond riding her parents’ coattails. However, the article ended by stating that their talented daughter suddenly quit her line of work and disappeared from the entertainment industry.

“Children... don’t get to choose their parents.” Haruko’s voice was accompanied by the refreshing jingle of the wind chimes hung on the veranda. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her talk to one of her friends... It’s supposed to be so normal. Please, just be her friend.” Haruko spoke as if to entrust her fate to the wind, and her words echoed in Kai’s ears.



Aina came back after a short while, looking like the personification of the word ‘fashionable.’ Her newly donned blouse went well with the shorts, which in turn accentuated her long legs. She retained a natural appearance despite her sophisticated apparel, and her bed head had been replaced with straight, silky black hair. Given Kai’s memory of her appearance just moments before, Aina’s transformation was magical. Without so much as uttering a word, she was commanding him, “Forget what you saw earlier.”

The only reason Kai was still sitting in the living room was because Aina had told him to wait (surely a terrible fate would await him had he gone home), and he planned on knocking back the rest of his tea and heading out as soon as she returned.

But then Haruko said, “Oh, it’s noon already? I’m boiling somen noodles, so have a bite before you go,” effectively cutting off his escape path.

To be more precise, Kai wanted to push through and decline her offer, but Aina snuck up behind him and grabbed him by the back of his shirt. “...Don’t worry about me, just nod along with Grandma,” she whispered. He couldn’t sense any ulterior motive, so he found himself staying put.

As a result, there was now another cup of tea on the other side of his own second helping, and farther beyond that, Aina was sitting across the table.

“...This is the happiest Grandma’s looked in a while, so.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“...You’re so softhearted,” she accused.

“I mean, it’s just lunch.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Well, that too, but... the thing with Miyo... I’m not sure what happened, but you helped her out, right? In that case, thanks,” Aina said. “She’s... getting old, after all.”

Miyo moved from the sunny spot outside in order to lay across Aina’s lap, as if to declare that it was her destiny to ball up there. She let out a happy purr as Aina’s white fingers scratched gently at her neck.

“...You don’t have to think too much about what Grandma told you,” Aina said after a while.

“Huh?”

“My room is right above this one. The house is old... I could hear you.”

“...I’m sorry,” Kai apologized.

“Stop.” Aina’s clear voice carried directly to Kai. “There’s nothing that warrants an apology just for knowing. The past is the past; the present is the

present. I... am me.”

Miyo twitched awake, and Aina petted her head to make it up to her for moving. “...This girl was a stray,” she explained. “I’m not too different, myself. Grandma picked us up, and now our family is Grandma, Miyo, and me. That’s all there is to it.” Her words were cold, but carried no loneliness. In fact, they conveyed a core strength that made the table’s worth of distance seem far out of reach.

“Um...” For whatever reason, Kai found himself thinking of Nanaka’s smiling face as she set aside the reason for her tears. He was scared that he might be hated, but he’d had enough of thinking, *if only I had asked back then*. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. “We’re in the same club, and I think... we’re friends,” he added slowly.

“.....Huh?” The exasperated look on Aina’s face was physically painful to see. “Are you... trying to console me?”

“Um, well... Yeah... I’m sorry.” *Why didn’t I just say yes?* Kai wondered, and instantly felt regret. He wanted to hang his head in shame at how pathetic he was, but this was the best he could do.

Aina heaved a sigh and quickly turned away. Her manner of snubbing him was far more cat-like than the old furball sleeping on her lap. “If you’re going to apologize afterwards, then don’t say it at all... You’re confusing me,” she told him.

Then, changing the subject, she said, “Anyway! Hurry up and go make a super-plan that makes good use of me! Going for a walk is well and good, but you *have* been working on the Summit proposal, right?”

Aina hit him where it hurt. Kai reflexively winced, which was met by another sigh when she noticed. “Well, I’m not exactly surprised. I had a feeling it’d turn out this way when I saw you at the bookstore. What, are you the artsy type? Do you have something against discussing with the other members?”

“N-No,” he denied quickly, “I don’t.”

“Then it’s simple,” she said with another deep, exasperated sigh. “If you have someone you can talk to when things don’t pan out, then go talk to them.”

“...That’s... true....”

—To ask is a moment of shame. To not ask is a lifetime of shame. These are words that all know, yet none can execute, Shiraseki. Planners worry over much, and they decide much, as well. However, trusted advisers are among a planner’s greatest assets... Oftentimes, proposals made with the cooperation of many minds contain their passions, too.

Another lesson from Akane sprang to life, triggered by Aina’s refreshing advice. *That’s it*, Kai thought. With infinite time to ponder, he could deliberate all he wanted. There were some things that only revealed themselves after exploring his own mind.

But the situation at hand was different. Their time was limited, and he was wholly inexperienced. He could think and think and think, but it would all be for naught if he dug a hole to nowhere. “...You’re completely right, Aina-san,” he admitted. “Thanks.”

“‘Thanks’?” Aina repeated. “...I can’t tell if you have too much pride, or too little... Oh,” she paused. With a sly grin, she took Kai’s hand and pulled him up to his feet. “In that case, come with me. Grandmaaa! We’ll be upstairs!”

“Mmkay!” came a delayed response as Kai went down the same path that the bedraggled Aina had disappeared into earlier. Back in the hallway, he walked up the wooden staircase with his clubmate and made his way to the farthest doorway on the second floor. There was a nameplate that read ‘AINA,’ which felt out of place in the Japanese building. Clearly, this was her room.

“Come on, come on, ♪” Aina sang, and beckoned Kai through the door before he could prepare himself to enter. The room was again of Japanese style, and was six tatami mats in size. Other than the drawer, wardrobe, and full-length mirror, the only things in her room were a desk and chair. He would go so far as to describe it as being drab. However, her desk was cluttered with school supplies, cheap cosmetics, and scripts with tabs sticking out of the top. He felt like that space alone showed a glimpse into her daily life.

“I don’t have any cushions,” Aina told him, “so sit wherever you want.”

“O-Okay...” Kai sat down, and the grassy smell of tatami blended in with Aina’s usual sweet aroma (though that was a given, considering this was her

room) and wafted into his nose.

“Uhhhm...” Aina opened her drawer to retrieve a tripod stand for her smartphone. As she was about to set her phone onto it, she froze. “Hm?”

“...Is there something wrong?” he asked.

“No, I usually stand my phone up for this, but I forgot I don’t have to do that since you’re here today,” she explained. “Here.”

“Uh, what?” The smartphone Kai accepted had been paused in the middle of an anime. He recognized the show as being a recent hit about a group of high schoolers who were trapped in a wish-granting mirror. He recognized the UI, as well; she was using a subscription streaming service.

“What are you doing?” Growing impatient, Aina’s hand stretched into view and tapped the screen. Of course, that caused the anime to play, and the characters’ voices echoed throughout the room.

“Uhh...”

“Pay attention,” she urged. She watched the screen intently until the scene ended, at which point she tapped the screen again. “Alright!”

Suddenly, Aina shot back up to her feet and took a step away, twirling back to face Kai on the tips of her toes. Her smug grin was clearly designed to provoke, but—*drip*, a single droplet rippled out to overwrite her expression in an instant. Kai held his breath. He felt that even the sound of a gulp would get in her way, so he silenced himself entirely. His hands were frozen and he didn’t so much as dare to blink as he watched her.

“‘I prayed within that mirror.’” A beautiful sound reverberated amidst the silence, and Kai realized all at once that the sound had come from Aina; that the sound was a line of dialogue; and that the line belonged to the heroine from the scene they had just watched.

The memories of the anime were rapidly replaced with Aina’s voice, but it wasn’t *just* her voice, either. Every fiber of her being, from her emotive expressions to the tips of her fingers, played a part in her sublime performance. Kai had never seen her work as a child actress, and it had felt wrong to watch an online recording behind her back. He had never paid much attention to

anyone's acting skills before, so he knew his opinion was uninformed... but after seeing it with his own eyes?

Without a doubt, she's worthy of being called a genius. In fact, Kai was so moved that he had forgotten that he was in a desolate six-tatami-mat room.

"I know it's only a reflection—a fake... Can't you let me have this one, real wish?"

Kai felt his soul tug away from his body. If this were a manga, he felt, then he was sure his soul would be slinking out of his mouth; her act was *that* enchanting.

"Hey," Aina cut her own portrayal off abruptly, and that was the cue for the magic to end. That had been the last line in the scene they watched. "I practice... or more like, compete like this all the time... How was it?"

Kai could tell she wasn't testing him. She was serious—perhaps even darkly so—and her gaze and tone of voice clearly conveyed that message.

"That... That was amazing. That was *amazing!* Honestly!" Kai didn't have time to pick and choose his words. If there was any risk of this state of wonder passing him by as he embellished his compliments, then he wanted to go ahead and lay his sentiments out while they were still raw.

It was amazing. It was amazing. Her voice, her expressions, her mannerisms—her *performance* was emphatic down to the tips of her fingers. There was a real possibility that Kai was simply impressed due to his untrained eye. But there was no greater truth than the fact that his heart had been touched, here and now.

"...You know," Aina began tightly. She had seemed quite happy at Kai's first outburst, but her mood soured more and more as he pointed out her acting. "I want to be a *voice* actress." Her pale hand had balled up into a fist, and was shaking ever so slightly. "You keep talking about my expressions and mannerisms... but I don't need any of those! When I asked you, 'How was it?' I was asking if my voice was better than the voice actress in the anime!"

After a beat of silence, Aina herself seemed to regret having raised her voice. "Sorry," she apologized into the corner of the room.

“...Why does it have to be voice acting?” Kai wanted to know, because Yozakura Aina was extraordinarily beautiful. Her presence alone would steal people’s gazes. She didn’t need to lift a muscle to exert her pressure, and mere eye contact with her was enough to send a heart into overdrive.

Kai was glad they didn’t share a classroom, because he was sure the boys in her class couldn’t help but unconsciously steal glances her way all day long. She was like a vampire in a fantasy novel, capable of magically charming anyone in her path; a person like that was capable of such bewitching acting.

It wasn’t as though Kai wanted to devalue voice-based work. He himself was a great fan of games and anime. He couldn’t count the number of times he had been moved, saddened, cheered up, and brought to tears by the skilled voice actors behind the scenes.

But all that having been said, she had so much talent that he had to ask, *Why?*

Aina approached him with a *tip-tap* in her step and lunged at him, her face a razor’s edge away from his. With the casual annoyance of someone tossing away her trash, she asked, “I’m beautiful, aren’t I?”

“I don’t need an answer. I know. I know... better than anyone else. But you see,” she continued, her right hand creeping up to grab Kai by the collar. They were close enough for their hair to be touching when she finally whispered, “I hate that ‘beauty’ more than anything in the world.” Her heart screamed those quiet words into his ear.

“It’s readyyy!” her grandmother’s call echoed obtusely.

“...Lunch is ready.” Aina’s grip loosened and the slim fingers around his neck slid away. “Forget it,” she muttered quietly, and, like a cat, slipped out of the room alone.

Chapter 9: Cry for the Moon

I'm sorry! Kai thought.

Having returned from Aina's house, he'd gone on to wring his brain for every drop of creativity he had. Nevertheless, he'd failed to produce any decent ideas. But Kai knew that if he gave up now, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself for it later. Saying, "Nothing came to mind so I don't have anything," would be unacceptable. There was a bare minimum he needed to achieve in order to call himself a planner.

Kai may not have come up with anything good, but that didn't mean he didn't have *anything*. He'd dedicated an entire day to work following his encounter with Aina, and during that time a few ideas had taken form. The dead of night came and went, and he distinctly remembered having pushed on until the wee hours of the morning, but two all-nighters' worth of serious brain power had caught up to him in the end, and he'd only noticed his nap upon waking. By the time he'd done so, he was on pace to be late for the club meeting, even if moving at top speed. So, he quickly rinsed his face off and flew out the door.

The first thing that came out of his mouth when he entered the club room was, "I'm sorry!" When he raised his bowed head, everyone but Eru (who was working away with headphones on) was peering at him with a puzzled look. "I couldn't come up with anything I'm proud of," he explained, laying out a few printed proposals. "...I'm sorry."

"Senpai, don't scare us like that! Well," Aya amended with a snicker as she glanced at the papers. "On your end, it looks like things were pretty chaotic."

"A-Ah-chan..." Nanaka said. "B-But, look, this 'Characters blow up a balloon until it pops,' idea seems intuitive—"

"But not quite good?" Aina finished. "It's just the topics, as-is. There's not really a twist, is there?" She looked over at Kai to silently convey that she was *shocked* at how poor his taste was.

“Aina-chan, not you, too,” Nanaka said sadly.

“No,” Kai interrupted, knowing that this wasn’t any time for consolation. “She’s completely right... So, I want to begin with a BSS here with everyone.”

“BSS?” Nanaka repeated.

“Brainstorm session, Nana-sen,” Aya chimed in. “Basically, we all throw out anything we can think of.”

“That...” As soon as Nanaka understood, her bright expression returned like the sun hidden by a cloud. “Yeah, that’s great!” she exclaimed. “I think it sounds perfect! Let’s do it, Kai-kun!” Then she quickly retrieved Eru from the back of the room.

This brought them all together at the same table for the first time in a long time—the first time *ever* with Aina in the mix. They were to prioritize quantity over quality, and bring up any idea that derived itself from the prompts ‘Character’ and ‘Breath.’ These were the rules as they began their brainstorm, but... in short, it was a nightmare.

“How about a gacha that you can roll with your breath?! Like this,” said Aya, enthusiastically blowing into her phone. “Or how about the game is set in space, so if you can’t pull anything good, you run out of oxygen and die?! It’s a life-or-death battle with the gacha!”

“Mm, what about a game where you blow into a girl’s ear softly to advance the dialogue?” Aina said, blowing seductively. “And the lines could change depending on how you do. Oh, and of course, I’ll be doing the voice acting. ♪”

Kai was happy and grateful that they were coming up with ideas. They were free to say whatever came to mind. *But, well, you know,* Kai thought. *Aren’t you being a little too free with those suggestions?*

“Ah,” Aya said, raising her hand like a student in the classroom. “I guess you could say I’ve been doing a little enemy reconnaissance. I was wondering if that blonde-drilled runt’s school posted anything,” she said, placing her phone in the middle of the table. “It looks like they’re right in the middle of a livestream.”

The image on screen was of Kongouin Academy’s club president, Kongouin Mirei—or the “blonde-drilled runt,” in Aya’s words—holding a microphone.

There were comments scrolling across the screen from side to side, driving home that the stream was being delivered in real time.

“And that shall conclude our announcements on *BeauSt!* I’m quite sure all the information regarding the new event has you positively thrilled! Hm?” Mirei paused to read a comment. “...Ohohoho! Your opinions on the gacha are most valued among our management team. Would you kindly redirect your comment in chat to our in-game suggestion form? Our customer support staff will shed tears of joy! ...However! Should your verbiage be so vitriolic, they may very well find themselves in sad tears, so be sure to send those messages to my personal Twitter account... Am I understood?”

The comments rolling by on-screen included:

“Shut up.”

“What bullshit.”

“I’ll send it to both.”

In any case, they were being quite harsh. It felt like her chat was full of nothing but haters. They had seemed like a school with many enemies, but this was worse than expected.

“Well, it makes sense,” Aya explained. “Not only did they put up a new gacha banner yesterday, but the drop rates were lower than usual, there’s no safety net, and the character’s only good if you pull enough to max limit break her—but then she’s overpowered. They pulled out every trick to milk their player base on the banner of a popular character, so they’re getting a lot of flame.”

“I get it, ♪” Aina hummed. “This one was really nasty. Plus, the art is so pretty that it makes me want her!”

“I got her, though,” Aya noted.

“Aww, I wish I could say the same.”

“Huuuh?” Aya’s mouth twisted into a mean smirk. “Are you okay with that, Aye-aye? You know you’ll get her if you don’t give up, right? There’s no

character you can't pull if you keep going, you know?"

"I'm not a junkie like you, Aya-chan. Besides, usually you *can't* do that, and you wouldn't even if you could." Turning to Kai, Aina continued, "Kai-kun, you don't keep rolling until you get the character, do you?"

"Uh... This time, I got her straight away," he mumbled.

Aina didn't open her mouth, but the color of her eyes conveyed the message, "Read the mood."

Still, Kai couldn't change the fact that he had gotten lucky. He had gotten the character in question off of his first single-pull, and had an inkling that he was on a wave of good fortune, so he'd kept going and picked up enough dupes to completely limit break her. But he felt like saying that would cause the innocent mask to crumble off of Aina's face, so he used his better judgment and left that bit out.

As Aya and Aina engaged in verbal warfare between the haves and have-nots, Nanaka came over to ask Kai a question. "This kind of thing is hard to balance... right?"

He nodded and answered, "It's one of the biggest headaches you'll encounter while managing a game."

On the surface, 'limit breaking' was a system designed to mitigate the issue of pulling duplicate items or characters. If there wasn't any value in getting a character you already had, then the users' desire to roll would drop dramatically—obviously, since the odds would necessarily worsen with every pull.

The need to alleviate this issue led to limit breaking. (Every game had its own term for it, but the concept was generally the same.) It was a form of insurance that a second copy of a character would make them stronger or give them a new costume, and it guaranteed a duplicate's worth. Naturally, the users would also be happier to see that there was some kind of silver lining than not.

...However, this was the surface level explanation, and Kongouin Academy was being burnt at the stake because the darker side of limit breaking had crept up into the spotlight. Depending on its implementation, limit breaking was also

a system that could *make its players* collect multiple copies of the same unit. Kongouin's new character, who was 'only strong if you max limit break her,' was a blatant example.

By forcing the user to collect duplicates, a development team was effectively increasing the odds of there being in-game purchases. If one copy of a character were enough, then a user could get lucky and land them in one try, like Kai. But if they needed two or three, the odds skewed toward spending becoming a requirement due to simple statistics. As a result, the system could be abused by the developers to hike up their profit per spender, while the users were forced to walk into a hell of endless gacha pulls.

"But of course," Kai concluded, "it still gives duplicates purpose, so..."

"...As long as you implement it well, it'll be good for the user?" Nanaka filled in.

"Yeah. But... if you mess up, people will boil over and it'll end up like this," he told her. The chat window of the livestream was an endless flood of hate and anger.

Developer and user—to balance the merits and demerits for each was a talent that planners prized highly. Looking at the chat messages, it seemed that Kongouin's planners had made a terrible mistake, regardless of what their intentions had been. When the player base had this much bottled-up frustration, it could even affect the management staff; this was not a desirable outcome.

"L-Let us take a step back and move on to our top-secret development team!" Mirei announced. While Kai had been looking away, she had moved to another location.

"M-Mirei-sama, what are you—"

"Move aside!" She kicked the tall boy who had tried to block her path—his name was Kinoyama, if Kai recalled—out of the way, and his mushroom hair swayed as a shudder-inducing "Nfough!" escaped his lips.

However, the comments in chat read:

“Mushroom’s here!”

“What a reward.”

“He’s gross, but I’m so jealous.”

They were somewhat more amicable than before. It looked like this wasn’t the first stream Kongouin’s team had hosted, and that Mirei and Kinoyama’s interactions were viewed as a running joke.

“Welcome to the place where we are currently focusing most of our efforts: the VR development team!” said Mirei. “Of course, I would never allow this to appear before our live audience had we not achieved verifiable results! That is what I plan to—”

“It will not do to show our work, Mirei-sama,” said the mushroom boy.

“Kinoyama,” she pressed.

“...As your attendant, there is a line that I cannot—hfough! Crooough!—cross...” Another kick from Mirei sent raw footage of the mushroom, shuddering in the space between pain and pleasure, across the feed for the whole world to see. The spectacle bordered on apocalypse.

“These people really are idiots,” Aya moaned.

“Well...” Kai couldn’t deny that. “But hey,” he said, “it’s incredible that they’re trying their hand at VR.”

“That’s where you put those giant goggles on, right?” Nanaka asked.

“Nanaka-chan, are you talking about head mounted displays?” Aina suggested.

“Oh, that! That’s it!” Nanaka exclaimed. “You get to play in a virtual world, right? I haven’t tried it, though...”

“You can experience a simplified version by combining your smartphone with some cardboard,” Aina explained. “Some companies even distribute cardboard do-it-yourself kits so you can play their social games.”

“Wow! Do you think Kongouin-san’s team is going to do that, too?”

“Ahh, they look rich enough to go for it,” Aya groaned. “I’m sure she’d say, ‘To distribute cardboard is but a single step of our marketing, ohohoho~’ or something like that. In the first place, I’d rather them figure out their gameplay before they get into this and that about VR and graphics.”

“Me too, ♪” Aina hummed in agreement. “I wish they made the game itself more fun.”

Kai couldn’t *not* hear the underlying ‘It’s boring as hell’ in her remark. In a sense, it was the honest opinion of a user—and that opinion didn’t need Aina’s voice to become visible in the stream’s chat box. The comments read:

“Graphics again?”

“VR is a pain.”

“How about you take off your clothes?”

“The graphics are more than enough, hurry up with a fun game update.”

“It’s impossible for these people to make a fun game, lol.”

“Impossible?”

“Clothes.”

“If you can do 3D then how about an action game?”

“No way.”

“lol 0% chance”

“If they could do it, then we wouldn’t call them Konstopin.”

“That’s true.”

These comments were the unfiltered truth, which was exactly what made them so biting. Like the endless bubbles of a boiling pot, they enveloped the entirety of the stream’s comments section.

“...Can I turn this off?” Aya asked. Her conversation with Aina had lulled, so she reached for her phone.

“Stop!” Mirei barked, as if she was reacting to Aya’s hand. Her voice was commanding, like the ringing howl of a prideful wolf. “Very well. We ‘can only create games that aren’t fun as games,’ was it? Quite. Whatever the truth may be, the fact that our dear users see us in this manner is but another truth we must accept. Then, allow me to make a declaration: as luck would have it, we are participating in Summit.”

“...Mirei-sama?” Kinoyama was a single step too slow to stop Mirei, whose cheeks were flushed with anger as she pointed her finger at the camera, her hand close enough for viewers to make out her fingerprint on their screens.

The prideful wolf had been replaced by a hound whose tail had been trampled. Snarling in rage, she said, “Our opponent is the unaccomplished Meikun High. They may boast an ace illustrator in Kuroba Eru, but the overwhelming skill gap between our graphics is capable of scoring a victory all on its own... However—let me swear this to you—we shall not hold back! We shall create an action game that will bring honor to the Kongouin name! Is that clear?! Our work will leave you floored! All of you who left comments ought to prepare yourselves! If you understand your folly, then admit as much in the chat!”

“M-Mirei-sama,” asked Kinoyama, “what are you saying?!”

“Make way, Kinoyama! Hey! Don’t cut the—” With a quick *bzt*, the video feed went dark.

Silently, the members of the Meikun social game club looked up at one another. “...I guess they’re making a 3D action game over there. Looks like our recon work was a big hit. But...” Instead of her usual boredom, Aya’s brow was twitching with uncharacteristic anger. “Well, it’s not like I care either way, you know? This blonde-drilled runt can say whatever she wants, and it won’t hold a candle to the gacha... But ‘ace illustrator’? I can’t help but feel like this pipsqueak is forgetting something. It’s getting on my nerves how thoroughly she’s underestimating us...”

“I think she’s a teensy bit stupid,” Aina agreed, “but isn’t she still miles ahead of us? We haven’t decided on anything yet.” *Right, Kai-kun?* She didn’t say the last bit aloud, but Kai got the message. It was so obvious that it didn’t need to

be said, and it wasn't as if he could mount any sort of protest.

"E-Eru," Nanaka said, shifting the conversation. "Do you have any ideas?"

Eru didn't have her headphones on, but that hadn't prevented her from remaining silent and sketching away in her sketchbook. She stopped her pen and took a moment to think before finally releasing the seal on her lips.

"Nothing in particular... except..."

"Except?" Nanaka echoed.

"Our topic includes the word 'Character,' so I do believe our plan should include character illustrations," Eru told them.

"...That's fair."

She's completely right, Kai thought. The word 'Character' could also mean something akin to personality or individuality, and those interpretations were within the bounds of this Summit's rules. However, he agreed with Eru that it was best to simply take the prompt at face value.

What's more, Eru's art was one of Meikun's most powerful weapons. It wasn't an option to leave her on the bench during a competition like Summit. Kai wasn't the only one who held this opinion, either.

"Welp, we need characters to make a gacha," Aya said.

"I need a character if I want to voice act," Aina added.

The two girls—each of whom had, up to now, been off in their own world—gave their approval, and Nanaka nodded along. Eru shot a glare at Aina when she spoke, but the situation hadn't escalated any further.

They'd finally decided that, at the very least, they would include character illustrations. From that point on, a ton of suggestions flew across the room (primarily from Aya and Aina), but none of the ideas were constructive, so the last of the thinking fell to Kai and Nanaka as the planners.

Technically, Aina's position in the club was that of a planner as well, but she played the fool and said, "I'll try and come up with more, but I already told you everything that came to mind. ♪" But after taking turns hurling out ideas with Aya, it was possible that Aina really *was* out of leads. Even if she offered

something new, it was sure to wrap back to using her voice at some point.

A short train ride transported the group to Niigata Station, where they broke off to head home. Aya lived on the opposite side of the station, so she left through a different gate. Eru simply stated, “Bookstore,” and disappeared.

Aina lived in the same direction as the last two, but she split up early saying, “I have to buy groceries for dinner. Buh-bye! ♪” Kai figured Haruko had told her to do so, and found himself alone with Nanaka before he’d even realized it.

“Hey, Kai-kun?” she said, pointing her finger toward the only family restaurant near Niigata Station. She continued on to ask, “Do you wanna stop by and brainstorm some more?”

“For the proposal?” he clarified.

“Yup! I felt like all we’ve done so far is listen to Ah-chan and Aina-chan,” she confessed. “How about it?”

Kai didn’t have any reason to refuse, so the two of them made their way inside, where they kept their order to a pair of fountain drinks and french fries to snack on. The fries came out right away, so Kai watched their food and only went to fill up his drink after Nanaka had returned from doing so herself.

When he sat back down with a cup full of melon soda, Nanaka giggled while munching on a fry. “That’s kinda unexpected,” she said with a laugh.

“What is?” Kai asked.

“That,” she clarified, pointing toward his drink. “You like melon soda?”

“Um, well... I wonder,” he admitted. “I wasn’t really thinking when I filled my cup... Oh, but I drink this pretty often when I come to these kinds of places. Maybe I do like it?” The end of his sentence inflected upwards, as if to convey doubt.

“Kai-kun, I can’t answer a question about *your* taste,” Nanaka told him.

“O-Oh, right.”

“That *is* right,” she laughed cheerily. “I feel sort of relieved.”

“...Did something happen?” he asked.

“Well... that ‘something’ is you, Kai-kun.”

“Me?”

“Yup,” she said, shifting her pointer finger toward him. “When you told me, ‘I want to write the proposal myself.’ ...No, even before that. Ever since we left Tokyo, I felt like you were a bit off.”

“That’s because—” *you wanted to show off your cool side to Nanaka-chan, right?* he thought, and stopped speaking mid-sentence.

“...Kai-kun? You okay? Your face is getting red...”

“Um... It’s just... I was feeling a little stressed,” he told her, as a little Misako danced around his brain with a smug grin. *You only noticed thanks to me!* she said, and he swatted the image out of his mind.

“I see,” said Nanaka. “Was it because of that Hifumi Tetsuya person and Kongouin-san?”

“No,” he replied. There was that, too, but that wasn’t quite the core of it.

“Something else?”

Kai began to nod, but froze midway. If he nodded, then the next thing Nanaka would ask about was what he had been stressing over; that much was plain to see. It would be simple to say, ‘I’m stressing because of you.’ The words were simple, and what’s more, it was the truth. Even he could probably say that much. But it wasn’t the whole truth; there was something more that kept him from nodding.

No one would sit by idly when told something was their fault. Kai knew that he would definitely ask for the reason if someone said, “I’m stressing because of you,” to him. And thanks to his stupid sister, he knew exactly why he was stressing over Nanaka.

He could tell her. He could convey that idea if he wanted to: ‘I was stressed. I felt like you would continue walking forward without me. I wanted to prove to you that I could do it, too. I wanted you to see my cool side, just this once. I wanted to show off.’ If he really bit the bullet, he could say all of this. After all, it was only the truth.

But that wasn't it, either. There was something even beyond that. Why did he want to show off his cool side? Why had he panicked, when he'd felt like she was leaving him behind? To answer that, he arrived at a single conclusion: he didn't want to be left behind because that meant he wouldn't be beside her. The trigger for his unusual urge to talk big and show off... If he answered these questions, there would be no denying it.

It wouldn't be any different than telling her, 'Shiraseki Kai _____ you.'

"Kai-kun?" said Nanaka.

"Y-Yeah?! U-Uh! Um, sorry! It's, uh, nothing."

"R-Really?"

It obviously was more than nothing. Even to Kai, his reply sounded pathetic. "Um... how do I put this?" he said, trying to explain. "The reason you thought I was acting weird... and the reason I'm acting weird now, is because my circumstances... er, my headspace? Yeah, my headspace is a little off. So don't worry about... Nanaka-san?"

"Pft," Kai looked up to see that Nanaka was holding her mouth and chuckling at him. "S-Sorry," she apologized, joyfully stifling another laugh and wiping at her eyes. "You're so funny, Kai-kun."

The soft smile on her face pierced through Kai's heart all too easily.

"Okay, let's get started," she said, clearing the air. Then, the two of them nibbled on fries and visited the drink bar as they put their heads together to pump out new ideas.

Even with two of them, there was no guarantee that a stellar, revolutionary, overwhelmingly new idea would fall into their laps. The creativity slowly dwindled, and the time spent looking up at the ceiling with their arms folded, or staring outside, or groaning with their heads in their hands increased.

The time ticked away, but they didn't throw in the towel. *Having someone struggling together beside you is reason enough to push forward*, Kai realized.

"Whoa, it's already this late?" said Nanaka, checking her phone.

The summer days were now long enough for there to still be sunlight, but it

was nearly 6:00 pm. They paid their bill and stepped out of the restaurant into the hot midsummer air. The temperature had hardly fallen since noon, and it completely enveloped them. It was *hot*. Beside him, Kai could see Nanaka groaning about the heat while fanning the collar of her blouse.

“Alright,” she said, “let’s go home.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m going for a little walk,” Kai replied.

“A walk?” asked Nanaka, tilting her head in confusion.

Kai couldn’t blame her. Until now, he hadn’t acted like the sort of person who went for walks. He’d look more natural cooped up indoors, like a snail in its shell, having a staring contest with his smartphone. That impression of him wasn’t exactly wrong, *per se*.

“My sister told me to take a walk when I was feeling stuck... Probably as a change of pace,” he explained.

“Change of pace...” echoed Nanaka.

Last time, by some unbelievable coincidence, Kai had run into Aina’s grandmother and ended up following her to her home. The whole ordeal overwrote any sense of mental organization he could have amassed. He did learn something from his encounter with Aina herself, though; Misako would likely tell him that those unimaginable events were an important part of what made walking outdoors special.

“Kai-kun,” Nanaka took a step forward from his side and twirled back to face him. “In that case, would you mind going out with me tomorrow morning?”



‘If you’re looking for a change of pace, then let’s go shopping together.’ That was essentially what Nanaka was proposing. Her invitation was so simple that Kai nodded along, half sighing out the word, “Sure,” but that was nothing more than a surprise-triggered defense mechanism. Her words circled around his brain until he finally comprehended their meaning, and then he revised his reply: “S-Sure?!” It was less of a reply and more of a reflex.

“Okay, I’ll see you in front of the station at ten,” she concluded.

Well after Kai had split off on his own path home, the words repeatedly haunted him: it was *only* a change of pace. They were *only* going shopping together.

Apparently Nanaka's laptop had been on the fritz, and she wanted him to come along to help her pick out a new computer. It was a normal shopping trip, with a clearly defined goal.

Nanaka had even added a disclaimer, saying, "You know... if you're just looking for a change of pace." She had seemed pensive about the fact that there didn't seem to be anything in it for Kai, but he couldn't have cared less. He was overjoyed. Personal benefit was the last thing on his mind. In fact, the entire situation was a benefit—just the fact that he could go shopping with her. He could have easily convinced Nanaka not to worry if he had explained all that, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

When Kai arrived home, he quickly found himself in a frenzy. *Clothes*, he thought. They didn't have a club meeting tomorrow. Since they weren't going to school, he couldn't justify wearing his uniform. That meant he needed to wear his own clothes, but his habit of purchasing things with plain, boring designs meant that every combination he tried was a tired copy-paste job.

Pulling out his wardrobe left him in a state of shock. After staring down his fashion choices for a while, he took a deep breath and decided that there wasn't much to deliberate on, and that he would go dressed in his usual attire.

However, reaching that decision didn't stop him from worrying about it, and he found himself unable to focus long enough to come up with anything new for the project proposal. With his recent all-nighters in mind, he slipped into bed early to rest his body, but there was no way he could fall asleep so easily. His eyes were shut, but his mind was as bright as day.

We're just shopping. We're just shopping. We're just shopping. As Kai chanted his Buddhist mantra, his mind finally wandered into the realm of dreams.

Kai sprang out of bed the next morning before his alarm had even rung. He committed himself to his usual routine of social game documentation to calm himself down, but his heart was busily thumping its way out of his chest.

After completing his work, Kai changed into his drab t-shirt and pants. There

was still an hour to go, so he opened his laptop in an attempt to work on the Summit plans, only to find that his brain wouldn't cooperate. He gave it up within 15 minutes and began to fiddle with other apps, looking for inspiration, when he realized that he could also do this at their rendezvous point. Laptop aside, there wasn't anything out of place with a guy standing around, playing on his phone.

No matter what, he wanted to avoid being late. Kai was on pace to wait a full half hour for Nanaka, but he didn't mind the downtime. The clear skies relentlessly barraged him with rays of sunlight as he stepped out of his house, realizing that this could very well have been the hottest it had been in days. It wasn't even noon yet, but the broiling heat wrapped around his skin, causing beads of sweat to gather on his arms as he walked to the station.

Nanaka wasn't there yet by the time Kai reached his destination. He checked the time to see that he was exactly 30 minutes early. *No wonder she wasn't around*, he thought, given that he was way ahead of schedule.

Kai made his way into the shade and booted up the app he'd downloaded at home. He may not have been in the sun anymore, but it was still burning outside, and he could feel the heat creeping into his hand as he held his phone.

After waiting for around 15 minutes, he heard a light set of footsteps and a voice calling, "Kai-kun!" Nanaka waved in his direction as she approached, wearing a cool blue top with a bit of breathing room around the collar, along with a skirt and sandals. The simple outfit fit her well, and she looked like she had jumped straight out of the 'summer stylings' section of a fashion magazine.

"You're early!" she said enthusiastically. "Did you wait long?"

"No, I just got here," he told her. "I didn't wait at all."

"...Hmm," she mumbled. Then, after staring at him for a moment, she laughed. "That's a lie! You're sweating a lot, you know?"

Kai wiped his hand across his forehead, only to find it awfully moist: the shade hadn't been enough. He pulled a small towel out of his shoulder bag to clean away the sweat.

"You could've waited in a nearby convenience store," she pointed out.

“...Now that you mention it...” That would have been the logical conclusion, but Kai’s brain had been too entrenched in the idea that they were meeting in front of the station. It was sad how quickly his brain overloaded.

“If you’re good to go, then let’s get moving,” Nanaka suggested. “It’ll be cooler in the store, anyway.”

Kai quickly lined up beside her as she began walking. Their destination was the electronics store beside the station, so it didn’t even take them five minutes to walk over. Once inside, they rode the escalator up to the floor with all of the personal computers.

“Are you looking for another laptop?” Kai asked.

“Nope!” was Nanaka’s reply. “I was going to, but when I asked Eru and Akane-san, they said a desktop would be better for me.”

“I guess that makes sense if you’re going to use it for a while,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yup. That, and apparently desktops are cheaper for their performance. Also, they told me it was a plus that I could switch out the monitor.”

“I see.”

The bar for computer specifications was higher than usual for those working in computer graphics. The requirements for most digital drawing programs were high enough on their own, but on top of that, a game developer could be expected to study 3D modeling software, as well. This meant that, in terms of cost-performance, an upgradeable desktop PC with a separate graphics card was better. Even if Nanaka bought a whole new computer one day, she could at least reuse the monitor.

Nanaka wrinkled her brow in the desktop aisle for a while, taking pictures of the computers she was considering. She talked it out with a nearby employee as she looked through all the available options. After an hour or so of consideration, she stopped in front of one of the PCs and exclaimed, “Alright! I’m picking this one!”

It wasn’t a cutting-edge product, but the CPU, RAM, and GPU were all competent enough for digital art software. What’s more, it would have cost at

least twice as much to buy an equivalent laptop. It wasn't a state-of-the-art item, and it was priced accordingly. Lastly, there was a summer break sale that offered a sizable discount for students.

"Okay, let's call that employee back over," Kai said.

"No, wait!" Nanaka objected. "I'm not buying it now! I'm planning on coming back some other time with my dad to buy it."

"I see," Kai observed. "So today's trip was just an appraisal."

"...‘Appraisal,’" Nanaka snickered. "...‘Appraisal.’"

"N-Nanaka-san...?"

"No, it's just—" she said, shaking her head joyfully. "—I thought, that word choice was so *you*."

"I... see."

"Yes, you do."

Kai didn't have the faintest idea what she meant by that, but Nanaka seemed to be having so much fun that he couldn't be bothered to care.

"It's about time for lunch," she continued. "How about that restaurant again? Kai-kun, have you made any progress?"

"No, nothing good has come to mind..."

"In that case, it might not be for long, but let's work on it together over lunch!"

"That sounds—" Kai stopped to think on their exchange. In the first place, Nanaka was buying a new computer for her future as an illustrator. She had realized that her working environment wasn't conducive to serious growth, so she had mulled it over and came up with a solution. All he could say was, "...I'm sorry. For making you help me out on the planner's end all the time."

Where some people gained a hundred stat points in an hour, others only gained one. The time they had to spend was the only thing they had in common, and it was no exaggeration to say that time was priceless.

Nanaka would have been able to spend her time improving her artistic

abilities, if he hadn't stolen it away with his incompetence. To make matters worse, he had been so caught up in this 'change of pace' that he hadn't gotten anything done the day before, either. Kai was nothing if not ashamed of himself.

"Hey," said Nanaka, breaking the silence. The sour look on her face was atypical, and she went on to lift her index finger. "I just remembered something about you that made me really mad," she told him.

"Mad...?"

"Yup. Do you know what it is? I'll give you five seconds. Fiiive, fooour, threeee," she counted down.

"Huh? What? I made you mad?" Kai had been so pitiful these past few days—not to say that he had been anything to write home about beforehand—that there were too many possible answers for him to choose from.

"Twoooo, ooone... Zero. Time's up." Nanaka pouted her lips and clapped her hands together before announcing, "The answer was... the time we went to Tsukigase!"

"Tsukigase... You mean, the *Rondo* incident?" Kai guessed.

"Yes! Kai-kun... I told you, over and over and over! I *told* you that I would come along, but you didn't listen to me at all. That's it. That's what made me mad!"

"B-But... The ordeal at Tsukigase really was my own personal problem," he protested.

"There it is!!!" Nanaka shoved her raised finger into his face with vigor.

Kai couldn't help but feel like this had happened before... *Oh, that's right*, he thought. There had been a similar episode previously, in which Nanaka had come over to his apartment in order to work on a specification document.

"Listen," she resumed in a calm, explanatory voice. "Kai-kun... you can rely on me, too, okay? Of course, part of it comes from the fact that we're clubmates. But... I don't know if this'll get through to you, but I can't rely on you if you don't rely on me.

“I know you don’t realize it, but you’ve helped me out a ton, and I lean on you a lot,” she continued. “You’re the reason I’m trying my best to continue with art... And sometimes, I get worried that maybe I’m relying on you too much... You’re always doing your best on your own, so then I get really lost thinking that maybe I shouldn’t depend on you...”

Nanaka’s face had been pointed toward the ground during her soliloquy, but now it suddenly shot back up. “Anyway! I lost track of what I was trying to say halfway through... but basically! I want to keep relying on you, so you have to rely on me, too! That’s it! Got it?! Do you understand?!”

“Y-Yes,” Kai fumbled. Overwhelmed by her energy, all he could do was nod along. “I got it.”

“...Thank God,” she said with a smile.

Behind her, Kai caught a glimpse of the employee who had helped them pick out a PC. “Um... Ma’am?” he said. “You’re bothering the other customers, so if I could ask you to quiet down a tad bit...”

The pair looked at each other, now remembering what she’d said and what he’d been told, which caused their faces to flush red in sync.

“...We’re sorry,” their two embarrassed voices overlapped before they went speeding out the door.



After putting the electronics store incident behind them, Nanaka and Kai walked over to the family restaurant without saying a word. They poured themselves fountain drinks and waited for their orders to be served—a plate each of doria and pasta—when Nanaka finally broke the silence.

“I’ve been thinking that I want to do everything I can,” she announced.

Kai looked up from his doria and met her gaze.

“I had a little conversation with Akane-san,” she continued. “She told me there’s a bunch of different paths to take, even as an illustrator. There are experts like Eru, who focus on nothing but their drawing abilities, but there’s other roles, too. For example, there needs to be an art director to manage the

Erus of the workplace. I... still don't have a clear image of how I'll turn out, but I can't just stand still when I know there's a chance."

"In that case—" Kai began to say, but Nanaka cut him off mid-sentence.

"“You should focus on your art’... That’s wrong, Kai-kun! I want to do *everything* I can,” she insisted. “I want to experience it all. For example... if I end up in a management position like that, I’ll be talking to planners a lot, too, won’t I? In that case, the work I’m doing now definitely has its own purpose. Of course, I’ll give my drawings 100%, too! I really will! But I want to try my hand at everything! The plans we’re writing up now are just as important to me! Am I... being too greedy?”

"No... No, you're not," Kai told her. "I think that's just like you." And... Listening to her talk, Kai found himself daydreaming. The image of a distant future came to mind. Distant as it was, he was sure that it would realize itself before he knew it.

I would be foggily glaring at my company computer after an exhausting all-nighter. I'd get up and gather a graphic request form and maybe a specification document that contained some new change from my desk. Then, I'd walk down a hall connecting me to a different department. After a long trek, I'd come to the desk of a raven-haired illustrator, who'd be furiously scratching away at her tablet with headphones on. It'd be a whole ordeal just to get her attention, but there'd be no helping it, since I'd need to talk to her about the form.

Just as I would finish preparing myself, a voice would call out, "Kai-kun," and there you'd be. I'm sure I'd feel relieved to hear you speak. I'm not sure how that would reflect on me as a planner, but there'd be no helping it. That's just how much I'd trust you.

And then, instead of causing a huge commotion the way I would have, you'd handle the matter amicably and even send me off with a cheer. After that, I'd take the new specification document over to a girl with blonde twintails in a programmer's cubicle.

Such was the blinding fantasy Kai found himself in. "No matter what the situation may be," he spoke, "Simply having you by my side is reassuring, Nanaka-san... And it makes me incredibly happy."

“...I-I... see...” she replied haltingly. “You’re happy... Wow.”

“Yeah,” Kai replied frankly, without giving it much thought. But after a moment, he noticed a strange lull in the conversation. When he looked up, Nanaka had frozen solid with bright, rosy cheeks.

“...Ah,” he said awkwardly. *What did I just say? Nanaka being here makes me reassured and happy?* “No, uh, I meant, um—” Kai floundered as he tried to explain the situation, but ‘I was fantasizing about our future office work where you saved me’ would have been unintelligible and probably make the current situation worse.

What do I do? he asked himself. *I guess I give up,* he thought. But just as he had surrendered, a voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, look, it’s Nana!”

“Hm? You’re right, it is. Long time no see.”

“Ch-Chie? Minori?” said Nanaka, greeting two girls from their class, who were standing beside their table. If Kai remembered correctly, their names were Tsukahara Chie and Sasa Minori. He had never talked to them before, but Nanaka could be seen chatting with them regularly.

In a way, with how influential their voices were, these two girls stood at the center of their class. Tsukahara Chie was lively and loud, while Sasa Minori was very laid back, which was reflected in her slow speech patterns. The former had short hair and the latter had a long perm. That was the extent of his knowledge on the contrasting duo.

“Sup! And you are... uh?” Tsukahara Chie made her confusion clear with an energetic, “Umumum?”

“Huh? ...Hmm?” mused Sasa Minori. After a slow epiphany, she continued, “Oh, right. Shiraseki-kun.”

“...Ohhh? What’s this? Nana, could this be a date?”

“I-It’s not!” Nanaka protested.

“Reeeally?”

“Really! Right, Kai-kun?!” said Nanaka, turning to him for support.

Suddenly, Kai was on the spot. He nodded, despite feeling that it probably depended on what the definition of a date was. Regardless of their reason for having done so, it was true that they had gone out together, so “date” wasn’t that much of a stretch... or at least, he thought so. It sort of felt like one, but being denied so thoroughly filled him with an emotion that he couldn’t put to words.

“Hmm?” Sasa Minori looked over, surveying his expression instead of Nanaka’s. “In that case, you can make it, right? Come on, Nana, let’s go to the fireworks festival.”

“Oh!” Tsukahara Chie literally jumped up in surprise to the point where Kai wondered if her exaggeration was deliberate. “That’s right! Nana, why can’t you come?! You’re single, aren’t you? Let’s go see the fireworks together! It’ll be a summer memory!”

“That, and...” Sasa Minori said with a pause. “If you don’t come, then Chie’ll be in hot water since we won’t have as many people as Mizuno-kun’s group... right?”

“Yup! Hot water! Actually, I kinda told them you’d be there when I invited them!” said Chie.

“W-Why did you...” Nanaka spluttered. She was clearly dumbfounded. “Chie, listen to me,” she said. “I told you I’m not into that sort of...”

Kai had frozen up due to the sudden intrusion and lightning quick conversation that had followed, but the words were still coming in. He had a decent grasp of the situation at this point, which was as follows:

Niigata had a fireworks festival near the end of summer break. He already knew this. There were posters for it plastered up at the train station, convenience store, school, and pretty much every other location he could think of. That was probably the festival they were talking about.

Nanaka had been invited to that festival. The group she was slated to go with probably included Tsukahara Chie, Sasa Minori, and a handful of boys from their class. The ‘Mizuno’ referred to earlier was also one of the main characters of their class. His looks were good enough for a guy to tell he was cool, and he was always hanging out with at least a few other guys. Kai had often seen him

talking to all three of the girls here, too.

It wasn't anything to be surprised about. Nanaka's circle of friends was incomparably larger than Kai's. Strangely, she talked to everyone at least a little. He often witnessed her turning down invitations because she was busy with club activities, but that was a testimony to how frequent she was asked to hang out in the first place.

They were going to go to a giant fireworks festival with a new group of friends at the end of summer. It was a common story, with nothing remarkable about it. Kai knew that there were people who spent their time like that while he played social games. Nothing strange about it.

However... while the situation was neither strange nor surprising, Nanaka was clearly in distress. Even now, as Tsukahara continued to energetically invite her and Sasa worked to persuade her, Nanaka was conversing with a troubled smile.

She glanced Kai's way, and they made eye contact. After letting him see her cornered gaze for a moment, Nanaka realized her error and turned back to their classmates.

"Excuse me!" The act of a human decoration opening its mouth got all three of the girls to look his way. "Are you talking about the festival that's being held next month?"

"Yeah, why?" asked Minori.

Kai wondered if the pressure he felt from her confusion was simply one of his bad habits as an introvert. "Um, well..." He was choking up, but knew it was too late to back down, so he put some strength into his legs and continued speaking. "...I'm sorry, but Nanaka-san can't join you for that. We already decided to go as a club. Also..."

Of course, they had never made such plans. Kai was simply letting his mouth run wild. Still, he didn't care what he'd said so long as it got them through this mess. All he wanted to do was help relieve Nanaka of that worried expression.

Kai's heart was on the verge of exploding with anxiety, so he balled up his fist underneath the table. He sucked it up and looked the girls straight in the eye.

This is no different from a presentation, he thought. It doesn't matter who I'm speaking to. I can't look away.

“You’re clearly bothering Nanaka-san,” he told them. “If it’s something that I can notice... can’t you, as her friends, be more considerate of that?”



Fortunately, they wrapped up the incident without any further problems. Nanaka immediately played along with Kai’s story, which went that the social game club had made plans to go together all along. Kai was worried that he might have caused some undue strain on their relationship, but Nanaka managed to settle it without any major complications.

Kai and Nanaka couldn’t get back into the spirit of writing a proposal after the girls left, so they finally called it a day. Kai resumed his brainstorming as soon as he returned home, but he was still a little too shaken up to focus. He hadn’t made any progress by dinnertime, so he stepped out to a nearby supermarket to buy a pre-made meal.

Just when he started worrying whether he had done the right thing or not, his phone began to vibrate. There was a LIME notification from Nanaka. He opened it right away to see a stamp of a seal peeking out from behind a wall.

Nanaka: Whoa, you opened my message so fast!

Kai: Yeah.

Nanaka: Thanks for everything you did today... You really helped me out.

Kai: ...I’m glad to hear that.

Kai’s mind drifted as he typed his reply. *Come to think of it*, he realized, *he had almost never messaged Nanaka privately like this*. This was mainly due to the fact that they used the group chat, which had all of the club members in it. Naturally, this also meant he had never texted anyone in real time like this before.

‘Read’: these four letters instantly latched onto every message he sent.

It wasn't as if there was someone on the other side of his phone screen, but mysteriously, he could feel her presence beside him. He could hear her breathing.

Nanaka: Hey, do you actually wanna go to the fireworks festival with everyone?

Kai: That sounds good. I've never been to one before, so this will be my first time.

Nanaka: Whaaat?!

Nanaka: *A stamp of a seal rolling around in shock*

Nanaka: But Tokyo has the famous Sumidagawa fireworks show!

Kai: I just... wasn't interested.

Nanaka: That means it's your inaugural fireworks festival!

Kai: Is that what this means?

Nanaka: That's what it means! I'm looking forward to it!

There was a pause before Nanaka's next message. Perhaps she herself couldn't decide whether or not to send it.

Nanaka: ...Hey, Kai-kun? ...You were really cool today. Thank you. I mean it.

How was he meant to reply? he wondered, but couldn't think of anything to say. Kai's fingers hovered above the touchscreen without moving a muscle. For whatever reason—maybe because they were talking about fireworks—he looked out his window to see a full moon floating amidst the night sky like a giant, white jellyfish. Its beauty was captivating; a perfect circle had been carved out of the dark heavens.

It was a coincidence that he looked outside, so the next message he received shocked him.

Nanaka: Wow!

Attached to her one-word message was a photo of the same enchanting lunar body on the other side of the window.

Kai's hands acted faster than his mind, and he, too, captured a picture of the moon beyond the glass. The word 'Read' immediately popped up when he sent her the image. He could hear Nanaka say, "We're seeing the same thing," on the other side of those four letters. He saw her gazing toward the same moon, in the same way, from her own room.



Nanaka wasn't physically here with him, but he felt her presence—her breath. Without a word, her entire being was condensed into those four letters.

Oh, he realized. Something in his brain snapped wide open. *This is it.*

Chapter 10: Aoi Nanaka's Melancholy

The truth is, I was really troubled.

I read the apology my friend sent me from my phone's notifications screen, so the little 'Read' icon wouldn't show up, and sighed—but I was aware of the fact that it was the lightest sigh I'd let out recently.

I think it started around a month before summer break, when Chie began talking a lot about the fireworks festival. Chie is a bright, cheerful, straightforward girl, but I have to admit that there are a lot of times when she's not very thoughtful. Even so, I honestly didn't expect her to go so far as to add me to a LIME group with boys in it under the premise of us all going to the festival together. I wasn't sure how it'd all pan out if I just left the group, so I was really troubled by it.

Chie herself didn't have any ill intentions—and there's no denying that this fact made refusing her harder—but I could have solved everything had I spoken up earlier: 'I can't go. I don't *want* to go. There's... someone else I want to see the fireworks with.' If only I told her that, things wouldn't have gotten out of hand.

I was weirdly cautious, caused a whole scene, and even made my friend apologize. What on earth am I doing? He *just* taught me that it was important to communicate properly.

"...I ended up finishing my message with 'everyone,'" I muttered. Turning my smartphone back on, I looked back through the conversation we'd just had: *Hey, I'd written, do you actually wanna go to the fireworks festival with everyone?*

I'd hesitated for a good while over whether or not I should add 'with everyone' at the end. *If I had sent the message without it*, I wondered, *what would he have thought?* He lied for my sake by saying we were going as a club, so would he assume that was what I meant?

What would happen if I went so far as to specify, ‘just the two of us’? What kind of answer would await me? After getting this far, I couldn’t help but wince at the realization that I was trying to test him when we were in such a busy spot with Summit. I decided to stop that line of thought. Besides... I wanted to go with everyone. That came from the bottom of my heart, too. “But...” I said, partially thinking out loud. For that to happen, I need to talk to Eru properly. “...Alright.”

First, I needed to begin by cleaning up all the small things that were within my reach. I opened the message from Chie and sent her a reply saying, “Don’t worry about it,” which I immediately followed up with, “There’s something I wanna ask you.”

Digging up someone else’s history felt dirty, but I was probably the only one in our club who could ask around like this. I wouldn’t let myself regret not doing everything I could for my dearest friend.

I cast my gaze beyond the window. The moon truly was beautiful.

Chapter 11: If I Were a Genius

‘Character’ and ‘Breath’—Kai had a feeling that he could now tie those two themes together. Between the two prompts, he had easily come to comprehend ‘Character,’ but truthfully, he had been stuck on ‘Breath’ this entire time. That may have been one of the reasons he hadn’t been able to make any progress.

If he connected the two literally, it would be ‘A character breathing.’ He imagined this concept as an animated character, breathing in and out. They might take deep, slow breaths, or they might go for a run and be panting. Either way, it came down to the sound of breath. Aya had laughed at his makeshift proposal of ‘A character blows up a balloon’ because it’d been a dumb idea that didn’t have any interesting twists—he knew that now.

To begin with, the characters weren’t *alive*. Illustrations were illustrations, and 3D models didn’t change that. However, ‘Breath’ was on the other end of the spectrum: it was unique to living beings. One could argue that this was exactly why you needed to breathe life into a character with a beautiful drawing, and that sounded well and good, but Kai had to wonder whether or not that was really the case.

He simply couldn’t bring himself to agree with that theory of character design. There had certainly been times when he had seen an overwhelmingly beautiful illustration and felt the character had come to life. With the skills of Kuroba Eru at their disposal, they may have even been able to replicate that effect. But in that case, there wasn’t any need for the rest of the *social game club* to be involved in making the app, which was unacceptable.

The final hint necessary to his overcoming this puzzle had been Kai’s LIME conversation with Nanaka.

If they were to breathe life into Eru’s art, they could put all their stock into polishing her drawings. They might animate them, or make use of 3D technology, like Kongouin Academy. There were a lot of avenues from which to

choose, but in the end, they'd all come down to improving the quality of their visuals.

Meikun's social game club was not an environment that had limitless time or unlimited capacity of expression, so Kai didn't want to engage in a head-on battle with Kongouin Academy. He didn't want to compare the raw quality of their assets.

Yet the moment he'd looked up at the moon beyond his window only to have Nanaka send him a photo of the same lunar body, he had felt it: *on the other side of this tiny screen that fits neatly in my hand, she's there*, he'd thought. *In her bedroom—which I've seen once before—she, too, has her phone in one hand as she gazes up to the same moon.*

Of course, this had all been his imagination. Still, Nanaka's sense of presence, as she may or may not have muttered, "It's beautiful," to herself, and her breath had been there. Strangely enough, that sense of closeness felt stronger than it might have had they been in the same room.

If he could cut out that one moment and turn it into a game, Kai pondered, *wouldn't that be the perfect way to convey the 'Breath' of a 'Character'?* This concluded the flash of inspiration Kai had gained from his conversation with Nanaka.

"...What do you think?" he asked cautiously, surveying the reactions of the others in the clubroom. Each of them read seriously through the five pages of content in his project proposal, and the first to raise her head was Aya.

"I think it's fine," she said. "Basically, this is a novel game that you play through a LIME system, right?"

"Y-Yeah, you can think of it that way," Kai affirmed. "The main UI will be the same as LIME's for the most part, and we'll have a multiple-choice dialogue system for the messages. As the correspondence continues, we can have our character send pictures in the form of Kuroba-san's illustrations, or have a phone call with Aina-san's voice... That's what I'm picturing, at least."

"I'm so happy that I get to play a part! ♪" Aina said with a beaming smile. "Thanks, Kai-kun! I'll do my best!"

“You’re the model, Nana-sen,” said Aya, shifting the conversation away from Aina’s role. “What do you think?”

“Huh?!” two voices exclaimed as Kai and Nanaka looked at each other and instantly averted their eyes.

“C’mon, senpai,” said Aya, goading Kai. “It’s obvious that you thought of this plan after messaging Nana-sen over LIME. Or, is there someone else you could’ve messaged...? Honestly, *that* would be a real shocker.”

“...Is she right?” Nanaka asked him.

Since it was true, there was no place for Kai to run or hide. Instead, he just quietly nodded his head in affirmation.

“I... see,” Nanaka stammered. Then she said, “Y-Yeah! I still think this is a great idea! Um... I’m just glad I could help!”

“Nanaka-chan,” Aina teased, “Your face is beet red, you know?”

“No, it’s—”

“I think this plan is fine.” Eru had been silently reading through the proposal, but suddenly dropped it onto the table and began to speak. “However...” she continued, inspecting Kai with a glare. Then her gaze quickly shot over to Aina and she declared, “So long as I’m in charge of the art, I will never let this tramp’s filthy voice dub over my dear characters.”

“But—” Out of the corner of his eye, Kai caught a glimpse of the bloodcurdling expression on Aina’s face. She looked like a rumbling volcanic crater ready to blow. He knew he had to cut into the conversation before she could open the curtains on this theater of war. “Why?” he asked.

“...I’ve already told you once before,” Eru hissed. “I hate the things that I hate. There’s no further reason than that.”

“That’s not an explanation,” Kai insisted.

“Oh, dear, shut up! Of course, it’s not—I don’t have any intention of explaining myself! Did you *really* think I would open up every nook and cranny of my heart if you just talked to me? At the very least, *I* don’t work like that. Not with you, and not with that witch next to you.”

“...I never thought anything that absurd,” Kai told her reassuringly. He didn’t mind if Eru hated him. It wasn’t as if he could think of anything he’d done to try and make her like him. He didn’t know what happened between her and Aina. No one had told him. But that wasn’t what they were talking about, here.

“Kuroba-san, I obviously don’t know what you were thinking when you said all this. If you don’t want to explain yourself, then that’s fine,” Kai told her. “However, if you won’t answer my questions, then I can’t take your side into consideration.

“This,” he said, gesturing to the papers scattered across the table. “Is a proposal I put together as a planner for the Meikun High Social Game Club. As clubmates, all of us are developing this game together. Kuroba-san,” he clarified, “that includes you. To that end, as a planner, I can’t accept your veto without any reasoning—without any explanation, just because you ‘hate’ the idea.”

“...Clubmates,” Eru muttered to herself, voice rich with incredulity. “I had a feeling you were similar, but... I’m done.”

“Eru,” Nanaka called out. “I... I think Kai-kun’s right, here. He thought it over and finally came up with a plan, so to just deny it like that... is wrong... I think that’s wrong, Eru.”

Although they were covered by her long bangs, it was plain to see that Eru’s eyes went wide upon hearing Nanaka refute her. She hung her head, and her hands began to shake. She inhaled a sharp, angry breath and looked up to display an expression even more furious than ever before. “...Nanaka,” she spat. “What on earth are you aiming for?! I—” She suddenly stopped, as if she had only just realized what she was doing.

No more words came out of her mouth. Instead, Eru snatched up her bag with a loud click of her tongue and left the clubroom.



“Ahh, Geez! What the heck is with that *moron*?!” Aina’s voice echoed throughout the clubroom as soon as Eru left, its speaker rising to her feet.

Aina’s usually pleasant mask had been pulverized in rage. “What’s with her?!”

she demanded to know, wearing her emotions on her sleeve while she pounded both fists against her backpack. “Does she think that *I’m* the only one at fault?! No, well, she might be right, but what’s with her attitude?! Don’t screw with meee! Arghhh, geez, geez, geez! I’m so... mad... oh.”

Kai had never witnessed such a clear example of someone returning to their senses before.

“J-Just kidding, ♪” Aina sang out melodically.

“Pff,” Aya’s stifled laugh broke the awkward silence that followed. “Ahahahahaha! Oh my,ahaha, God, oh,ahaha... my sides!”

“A-Ah-chan,” Nanaka warned, “you’re laughing too much.”

“Oh, come *on*, Nana-sen, you can’t tell me not to laugh at that!” Aya cackled. “Aye-aye, oh man, that was good! I was getting all bummed because I figured that idiot was causing another pain-in-the-butt incident. Plus, it wasn’t trouble with Nana-sen like last time, so I was all, ‘I don’t wanna do anything~ What a pain~’ but that was the perfect catharsis! And the cherry on top: afterwards, you went back to your usual dead-obvious schtick without missing a beat!”

Aina covered her eyes with her right hand and let out a massive sigh. “...Oh well,” she finally said. “It’s not like I was trying to hide it, anyway. I sorta knew that Aya saw through me from the beginning... I’m guessing you caught on, too, Nanaka-chan?”

“U-Umm...” Nanaka’s pupils swam around for a moment, but she quickly straightened up and answered, “...Sorry. Since you were a new member of our club, I asked around to see what kind of person you were... That, and I figured there must have been something, based on Eru’s reactions.”

“Welp, I don’t think it’s that weird for Nana-sen to figure it out,” said Aya, “but I’m surprised that you’re *not* surprised, senpai.”

“Well...” Kai answered, “A lot happened.” Aina had come to Kai’s house, attempted to seduce him, and then somehow, he’d ended up at her house instead... He had felt completely paralyzed due to the project proposal, but looking back, perhaps a little *too* much had happened over the past few days.

“...A lot?” Nanaka asked.

“Huh?” Kai was taken aback by the rare pressure in her voice. “Nanaka-san...?”

“I just told him to use me as a voice actress,” Aina clarified. “That’s all, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“...Anyway,” Aya cut in, “Do you have any plans to talk, Aye-aye?”

“Nope.” Aina’s response was shockingly brief and decisive. “You’re getting the order mixed up.”

“...Order? What do you mean?”

Aina threw up her hands in despair at Nanaka’s question and said, “Are you stupid? You’re mixing up the order of who you should be listening to: between Kuroba and I, there’s clearly one person you guys need to hear out first... Don’t make me say it out loud.”



Kai realized he didn’t understand anything about the person they knew as Kuroba Eru.

She was in the same school year as Nanaka, Aina, and himself, and had gone to the same middle school with the other girls. Her hair was long and black, with bangs that covered one of her eyes. She was an illustrator. She had already received business requests and stood at the entrance to the world of professionals, far ahead of Nanaka and Kai. Apparently, she liked illustrations of cute girls. She always had headphones on, but he didn’t know what kind of music she listened to. She looked rational but was actually passionate, hard to please, and quick to anger. She loved drawing more dearly than anything else, reveling in the beauty—and wallowing in the flaws—of her works, to the point where she would pass out from her own emotions.

That... was about it. He had gone home, eaten dinner, and begun thinking about such things when he’d received a phone call from Nanaka.

“Eru hasn’t come home yet!”

“Kuroba-san hasn’t...?” Kai started to ask, before briefly trailing off. “You mean, she’s been gone since we last saw her at the club?”

“No!” Nanaka corrected. “Apparently, she went home once. Her mom came by just now because Eru told her she was coming to my house, and she was worried since it was getting late.”

Kai turned to the clock. It was already past 10:00 pm. “Is there any place you think she’d be?”

“I already checked everywhere I could think of, but she wasn’t there...! Kai-kun,” Nanaka wailed, “what should I do?!”

“...Nanaka-san, calm down.” The sound of her choking back tears ironically served to bring Kai back to earth. He asked her to calm down again as her panicked sense of urgency was transmitted through his phone’s speakers. “I’ll go to look for her,” he promised.

“Th-Then I’ll join you!”

“Nanaka-san, please stay put,” Kai pleaded. “If Kuroba-san comes back and you’re not there, that’ll be a problem on its own.” He took a few more minutes to convince Nanaka of his plan before asking for a list of places to which Eru might have gone, and then heading out.

As soon as Kai stepped out of his air-conditioned apartment, the uncomfortable heat of a humid summer night descended upon his skin. The sticky night quietly stretched out around him, as though he was running headfirst into a thin layer of finely woven spiderwebs. Nevertheless, Kai roughed up his gluey front hair and began to run.

The streets of Tokyo would still be busy at this time of night, but there were only a few stragglers strolling about here in Niigata. There were still a decent number of people around the train station, but a short walk took Kai to a small shopping district where it was rarer to pass by a person than not. The glow of a 24-hour convenience store gently bobbed on the horizon like a real life save point.

If I had the power to save and load, he wondered, could I have avoided this? No, it wouldn’t have helped. After all, Kai didn’t know anything about Eru. No matter how far back he rewound time, no new choices would appear before him. It was easy to forget this truth, but choices only presented themselves after you’d gotten to know the person you were talking to. Random

conversations would never increase a friendship meter somewhere that would beam a multiple-choice dialogue into his brain.

In truth, Kai was sure there had been some better option, but there was no use dwelling on it now. Still, a decision as easy as ‘Search’ and ‘Don’t Search’ didn’t need even a moment’s hesitation.

“...Dammit,” Kai cursed. He had checked all of Nanaka’s suggested locations, but Eru was nowhere to be found. Pausing for a moment, he wiped the sweat off his forehead and chugged a sports drink from a nearby vending machine. As the water he’d lost rapidly soaked back into his body, Kai felt the noise in his mind die down.

He didn’t know where Eru might have gone. *But there must be some place*, he thought. The only memory the two had shared was when she’d warned him not to get too close to Nanaka, and...

“...It’s a long way,” he said to himself. Still, it was the only place he could think of, so there was no getting around it.

Kai had just steeled himself for a long run when a patrolman returned on bike from his route to a nearby police box. Coincidentally, someone had called him over and he had gotten off his bicycle. He probably hadn’t had time to lock it.

Kai’s body began moving as soon as the thought crossed his mind. “Um, excuse me,” he called out.

“Hm? What do you—hey, wait!”

“I promise I’ll give it back!” With the angry shouting of a police officer at his back, Kai stood on the pedals to accelerate as fast as possible, following along a bypass on a street with sparsely placed street lights until he got to a quiet little shopping district. The wheels on his steed creaked as he made his way onto the main road, and went straight across a bridge to get over the river.

On the other side, Kai passed through another shopping district and found that, from this point onward, the path was almost entirely uphill. He felt like his legs would cramp up any second now. *I didn’t know how bad it’d be, since I came on a bus the last time*, he thought ruefully. *That’s it, I’m never coming here on foot again.* After shifting his focus to think about these things for a

while, he found himself nearing the top of the hill and switched gears to go flying downhill in an instant.

The way the night breeze wicked away the sweat on his skin was exhilarating, and Kai quickly put the windbreak—made up of trees that smelled like the ocean—behind him. The view opened up to a scene altogether different from what he'd seen before: a pitch black world expanded in front of him, and the roar of the sea sounded like the cry of some unseen monster.

Placing his borrowed bicycle in the corner, Kai walked down the steps leading to the beach. The lighting around here was less than sufficient so he made do with his phone's flashlight. With the change of seasons, the seaside clubhouse now had a menu plastered on the side. The lively location devoid of people only emphasized the darkness of the quiet waves.

Kai didn't know what he was going to say. He didn't know what he *wanted* to say. Even so, he knew he had to talk to Eru.

She was there, standing in the same place which Nanaka had shown him previously.

As his eyes adjusted to the lightlessness of his surroundings, he could make out the white blouse of a uniform fluttering in the sea breeze. Her long hair draped over it like a raven's tail, and the ends of each strand melted into the shapeless dark.

"Kuroba-san," he said. There was no response. Thinking that she may not have heard him, he took a step closer.

"...Why?" She asked, turning toward him before he could try to ask again. "Why... is it you?" The rest of the story resided in her eyes: there was only one person she was waiting for.

Kai was sorry that he couldn't live up to her expectations, and he himself agreed with her. *But there are times when you have to rise onto the stage, even if it's not the role you signed up for*, he told himself. Nanaka was counting on him. He couldn't back down now.

"What..." Eru paused to let out a giant breath and build up her usual persona. With a puffed chest, she continued to ask, "What did you come here for? Do

you want to continue our quarrel in the clubroom? Will you be satisfied if I tell you my history with that bitch?”

“I came here because I was worried about—”

“Spare me the niceties, dear,” said Eru, cutting him off. “I know you don’t believe the words you’re spewing.”

Kai could tell that she wouldn’t believe him even if he refuted her; every inch of Eru’s attitude was expressing the fact that she had no plans to open up to him.

“...Not with ‘that bitch,’” he told her calmly. “But rather, if you’re willing to tell me what happened between you and Aina-san...”

“One time.” For good measure, Eru repeated herself. “I’ll only explain this to you once. Just *thinking* about her is punishment enough for me.”

“Do you hate her that much...?” he asked.

“It’s not a question of whether I like or hate her. She’s... my *enemy*.” Having said so, Eru’s tale came flooding out.



As Kai had heard previously, Eru had been a part of the manga research society in middle school.

No club was ever comprised of one member. There were around ten other members, with a roughly even split in gender, and one of those girls had been Aina.

Even as seen from Eru’s eyes, she was out of place in the manga society. Aina’s looks were clearly unfit for the role; one glance between her and the other girls was enough to make you feel that they were worlds apart. Afterwards, unable to overcome her first impression and blend into the club, Aina often went home alone.

Aina may have been on her own, but that had applied to Eru, too. Eru had expected some amount of drawing and study from the manga ‘research’ society, but of course, that wasn’t the case. No matter the school, manga societies were generally not that passionate about the craft. It was usually a

place for people who liked manga to gather and discuss the things that they liked, and there were often participants who had no plans to ever draw a manga.

It was easy for Kai to imagine a younger Eru, silently honing her skills all on her lonesome. The fun-loving crowd of ten, and one, and one. That was the club she had been in.

“If that had continued forever... I wouldn’t have minded one bit,” Eru added. But, of course, it had not been meant to be. With ten-some people came the guarantee of annoying interpersonal issues, and failure to fall in with a group—even if one *wanted* to be alone—meant dealing with the sparks flying about the room on your own, too.

The most influential person there had been a girl named Igarashi, who was also the manga club’s president. From Eru’s perspective, Igarashi’s art was far worse than her own; utterly ambitionless, and unfit to be appraised as anything more than a doodle. However, she was the most skilled in the club and had grown to be quite proud of that fact. Igarashi would draw fanart, receive praise from her peers, and grow ever more boastful.

In and of itself, that hadn’t necessarily been so bad. Igarashi must have felt that it was simply fun to draw, and that wasn’t something to scoff at. However, that only held true so long as one didn’t fall into the trap of using their talent to spite someone else.

““We can use my drawing, can’t we?” she said,” Eru explained with a sneer. “Her head was obviously stuffed with flowers or something, so I just told her that crappy artists ought to know their place.”

Apparently, the trigger for the whole incident had been the culture festival. Every year, the manga society published a club magazine for the culture festival. According to tradition, the cover was to be drawn by ‘the club member whose art is the best.’

Besides Eru and Aina, Igarashi probably *was* the best artist in the club, and she herself prided herself on that fact. Still, Eru’s illustrations must have made their way into the corner of her vision. Thus, Igarashi had asked her, “We can use my drawing, can’t we?”

Eru had chosen to flatly snub the other girl. Her exact words were likely verbatim, “Crappy artists ought to know their place.” Naturally, this led to a fight, and there was no chance of Eru voluntarily choosing to bend. After all, she *was* the better artist, no contest.

So, the club president had hatched a plan: the two of them would each spend a week completing one illustration. Then, the other club members would vote to decide which was better fit to go on the cover. Eru wasn’t the type to back down from such a challenge to begin with, and had agreed to participate.

A week later, two pieces of art hung from the blackboard. Even without having seen the art for himself, Kai had no trouble imagining the overwhelming difference in quality. It should have been plain for anyone to see who was the better artist.

However, once the members of the club had tallied their votes in chalk underneath the drawings, the results told a different story. Eru’s piece only had her own vote, while all the other members cast their lots with Igarashi.

The competition had been rigged from the start. Rather, it hadn’t even been a competition at all. Instead, it was an exercise in pre-established harmony, maliciously orchestrated by a girl who liked being praised.

At that point, Eru found the whole ordeal to be pointless. Still, it wasn’t in her nature to back down quietly. She was standing up to cause a scene when a voice had interrupted her.

“Hmmm? Isn’t this weird?” The voice came from a spot separated from the rest of the club members, where Aina sat on an isolated island of her own, separate and distinct from Eru’s. With a questioning tone, she pressed, “But I can’t help but think this one’s better? Hey, I don’t know that much about art, but is this one *really* worse? Hmm, then leave it to me! I’ll take these two drawings and show them to everyone around! ♪ Then... we’ll be able to find out which one is truly the best, won’t we?”

As a result, the vote was suddenly overturned before Aina had a chance to enact her plan.

From that point on, the two of them began talking to each other—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Aina began talking to Eru. Eru would sit at

her desk and draw, while Aina sat in front of her and talked.

Aina only ever spoke to Eru. She told her that, while she couldn't draw, she was good at acting, and would sometimes improvise voice lines for Eru's completed pieces. Her lines were invariably too good to think that they had all been ad-libbed.

"I let myself believe in her skill," said Eru, who hadn't known what kind of practice went into voice acting. However, all skill originated from effort and the use of countless hours of time. Eru *believed* in this principle. She'd believed that Aina must have gone beyond acting lessons, and was giving everything she had to the art—just like her.

Eru had believed that Aina was her only friend in the club. "...That was a terrible mistake," she said now.

The incident occurred on a Saturday, which meant that club participation wasn't mandatory. The only ones to show up on days like this were Eru and Aina. Eru only went to school because Nanaka was required to attend the fine arts club, and she had always found it strange that Aina showed up for the sole purpose of watching someone else draw.

That day, Eru arrived at school late. When she'd opened the door to the clubroom, she'd found Aina standing there with little pieces of torn-up paper at her feet. It was unmistakably the remains of the illustration Eru had poured her heart and soul into for the culture festival.

"That's all there is to it," concluded Eru, her voice devoid of both anger and sorrow. "I will never forgive her... for the rest of my life."

If that's true, thought Kai, *then what do you mean by "That's all there is?"* Every. Single. Day. Whenever he'd see her, Eru was always engrossed in drawing. To see Kuroba Eru was synonymous with seeing somebody draw. For someone like her, it was wrong to say that was *all* there was to it. Still, to Eru, that was more than enough justification for her rejection of Aina.

"But was that really—" A few words of doubt escaped Kai's mouth, and he instantly felt sick of himself. The image of Aina's fingertips lovingly petting Miyo's neck appeared in his mind. He didn't want to believe that those same hands could do something so awful, and now he was doubting his friend as a

result. A precious friend who had helped save him in his time of need, at that.

“You’re... I knew that vixen had you wrapped around her finger.” Eru shrugged her shoulders in disbelief—no, this time, it was scorn. “Don’t take me for an idiot like you, dear... I asked her, ‘Did you do it?’ She didn’t even bother to defend herself. I slapped her as hard as I could... and that’s the end of the story.

“Ugh, my chest hurts,” Eru muttered, and the sound of her voice faded into the background noise of the waves. “Now, you need to answer the question I asked you at the beginning.”

“What question?” asked Kai.

“I asked you, ‘Why?’ Why... are *you* here?”

“That’s because Nanaka-san told me you were missing, so I looked around—”

“That’s not what I meant!” Eru flared back with downcast eyes. She repeated, “That’s not what I meant... This is... Nanaka’s—and *only* Nanaka’s—secret spot.”

“Oh.” Kai finally understood. “Nanaka-san introduced me to this place herself. When I was... bottled up inside, she showed me this spot and told me she comes out here whenever she’s feeling down.”

The ocean winds howled, causing Eru’s long bangs to fly up. This was the first time he had ever seen both her eyes: they were frail and heartbroken.

“...Why?” she asked again.

“Kuroba-san...?” he asked uncertainly.

“I...” The words dripped from her mouth into the endless dark. “I never heard about this place from Nanaka. Nanaka... comes here when she’s sad? I... didn’t know. I didn’t... I...”

“I’m sure she just never had a chance to tell you,” he consoled.

“...You’re wrong,” Eru denied flatly. “I didn’t stumble across this spot by coincidence. On... On the days I spent drawing with her, I noticed she’d go somewhere the next day. I got curious, so I followed her and... That was how I found out she came here to begin... with. Of course, she didn’t tell me. How

could you tell the very person who hurts you in the first place? Now it all makes sense... why Nanaka's not here." Eru's gaze pierced through the night, and there was no telling what shone in her melancholic eyes.



Kai couldn't think of anything to say.

"...I'll move on from Nanaka myself," Eru said, but not to Kai. She was building up a pile of pebbles, one by one. Every stone was a word pulled out of her soul. As she placed it upon the mound, she was preparing to let go.

"...Dear me, perhaps I had the wrong idea of us being close. Nanaka was far away to begin with," she mused. "Ever since we were children, she was bright and had lots of friends... I was a moth drawn to that light.

"It just so happened," she said, staring into the palm of her hand. "Yes, it just so happened that I had the key to a room where I could have Nanaka all to myself: it's called, 'I can draw.' We were going to have our art in the same game. I foolishly thought the two of us could follow that childish dream forever. When she'd say, 'With everyone'... I couldn't have cared less. My dream isn't something I could realize 'with everyone.' But I suppose it's the same for everyone."

Eru raised her head toward Kai. "I'm sure you must understand," she told him. "In the end, you're alone when you create. You can say all you want about 'teams' and 'everyone,' but the essence of it never changes. If you want to be special, you have to bet everything on yourself, or you'll never have a chance of reaching that goal." In the clubroom, on the train to Tokyo, and wherever else, Eru was always drawing. Surely, that was her in her purest form, trying to climb above and beyond her current limitations.

"In the end, you're alone." Eru was right, as Kai was painfully aware. He was reminded of the development room he'd spent so much time alone in at Tsukigase. Reminded of his computer's dim glow, and the lone shadow he cast upon the wall.

Game creation was team creation; that wasn't a lie by any measure. But even if the team created one final game, each team member was alone when they faced their portion of the work. There was no getting around that fact, and it always gave way for a single doubt to form: was there any need to try so hard? Would anyone even notice if you improved this one parameter by a small margin? *Would they?* Was there any meaning to effort that went unnoticed?

The only one who could answer that dim voice was yourself. Yourself, and you

alone—and in that way, too, you were undeniably by yourself.

“If I were a genius...” Eru muttered, “I wouldn’t have turned out like this.”

Kai hadn’t known what to talk about in the event that he found her, but now, for the first time, he felt as though he’d heard her true feelings. And that was why...

“Kuroba-san...” he asked slowly, “were you scared?” When he saw her surprised face, he knew that his suspicions were correct, because she and him were the slightest bit similar in that

Nanaka had blinded them. Now, they feared the day when that light would leave them. Kai understood Eru well, indeed.

“How can you tell...?” Displeased from the bottom of her heart, Eru spat, “Dear me, this is horrid.”



Fortunately, Kai got off with a stern lecture after explaining the reasons behind his bicycle ‘rental.’ After a lot of bowing and apologizing, he and Eru headed to Nanaka’s house, which was just across the street from Eru’s. He had texted Nanaka the news beforehand, so as he brought Eru home—though honestly, they only happened to be going the same way—Nanaka was waiting for them outside.

“Eru!” she called out, running toward them.

But Eru averted her eyes with hesitation. She tried to look up, failed to do so, and ultimately walked past Nanaka to slip into her own house without a single word.

Kai couldn’t see Nanaka’s expression as she tried to chase after her.

“...Thanks, Kai-kun,” Nanaka said gloomily.

“Don’t worry about it.” Checking his phone, he saw that it was nearly midnight. *The story wasn’t so simple*, he thought, *and it wouldn’t be easy to explain things now*. So instead, he asked, “Can I borrow a bit of your time tomorrow?”

Nanaka picked up on his tone of voice and nodded gravely.

Chapter 12: Kuroba Eru's Impetus

Even at times like this, I find that I'm able to draw.

I came home from the sea, was scolded by my parents, and locked myself away in my darkened bedroom. Faintly lit by the glare of my computer, I'm sure I'd look like a ghost if I had a mirror to check myself in.

And despite these thoughts, my hands don't stop. *Scratch scratch*, the impact of my pen sliding across the tablet reverberates through my hand. I can't hear the sound; the music playing through my headphones washes it all away. My heart was shaken with anger today, so I put on some older rock songs. Honestly, I don't care what the music sounds like. So long as it cuts out the conversations, laughter, TV, traffic, footsteps, and the sound of my own breath... So long as it cuts out this noisy world, any song would do.

After a while, I finish my drawing, but I'm not satisfied with it in the slightest.

I get up from my desk in order to rest my hands. A bookshelf sits on my wide desk next to my computer, lined with textbooks and sketchbooks. I've never thrown away a single sketchbook, so there's way too many for me to simply leave them on the table. Every piece I've ever drawn is a priceless treasure to me.

Perhaps you could say I never had anything else, but lately when I see others in my classroom staring off into space, sleeping, or playing on their phones, I count my blessings that I have even one thing to value. I'm sure they'll live their lives aimlessly until, one day, they find themselves shocked at their unchanging and idle lives. Or maybe they won't even be shocked, but I have no interest in people that boring. It's not as if I'll ever interact with them.

I have something that I'm willing to dedicate my entire being to. Apparently, that isn't something that comes easily.

Yes. It should be obvious that something I pour my heart and soul into will be irreplaceably precious—and that's why I feel so bitter. Whenever I see that

tramp, I can't help but think of that drawing I lost, although I know it will never come back.

If I could redo one thing in my life, I wouldn't have made that illustration. I honestly think that. Ever since that incident, I've relegated sketchbooks and croquis journals to practice, and reserved my serious efforts for digital mediums. Even at doujin markets, I make it a point to refuse paper commissions.

I pick up one of the books laying on my desk. It was the very first in my collection, and it's a general-purpose notebook as opposed to an artistic sketchbook. There were doodles made in pencil, crayons, and colored pencils—even my tools were all over the place. Every now and again, I find a foreign drawing mixed in among my own. These were made by Nanaka.

Simply put, I drew for Nanaka. She was already very popular at a young age, and art was the only means I had to spend time with her. She was quite the sore loser back then, and would throw a fit whenever I finished a work that was better than hers. "I'm drawing more, too!" she'd exclaim, and then we'd draw together. I'm sure that among the countless friends she played with, I was the only one to see that expression of hers. That thought made drawing more and more fun.

The idea of drawing together with Nanaka... Even now, it remains unchanged, in a special place in my heart. But if that was my impetus, then perhaps that initial catalyst has long since withered.

I return the sketchbooks to my bookshelf and lock my hands together, stretching my arms toward the ceiling. Once again, I bring myself before the monitor. My shoulders ache terribly, but there's no helping it. My figure doesn't help, and besides, it's been this way for a long time.

I grab my pen. I run it across the tablet. As the lines glide along with it, I feel my heart beat faster. It's fun. Drawing—even alone—is fun. Even when I'm alone, it's fun.

When did this start?

When did drawing alone get to be so *fun*?

“...Everyone?”

I wonder, do I need that word?

Chapter 13: Light, Shatter to Dust

“Morning,” said Nanaka with a tired smile.

“Good morning,” Kai replied.

They were meeting in the family restaurant—i.e., the usual place—and began their discussion after ordering one fountain drink each. Kai started by carefully explaining the various circumstances (and that was putting it lightly) which Eru had told him about the day before. He talked about Aina and Eru, the feud in the manga society, and the details that surrounded it.

Nanaka remained silent, with her eyes glued to a random spot on the table, as she listened attentively, soaking in his every word. Every now and again, she’d nod, tremble her shoulders, or squeeze her hands, until finally the tale was over. Slowly, she raised her head to quietly look at Kai. After a moment, her gaze drifted up toward the ceiling, and she stared off into the distance.

Nanaka returned her line of sight down to earth before muttering, “Eru, you’re so dumb... *I’m* so dumb.” As she scolded herself, she also pulled out her smartphone. A few taps on the screen later, she put the phone up to her ear and said, “Aina-chan?” The hardness in her voice was an unusual departure from her naturally soft tone. Then, she gave the other girl directions to the restaurant and hung up.

It took around an hour for Aina to arrive. Kai recognized her shorts from the time he’d visited her house, and she had a light jacket on to go with it. She was wearing her usual backpack. “Kept you waiting, ♪” she hummed. “Sorry I’m a little late. What’s with the sudden invite, Nanaka-chan?”

“It’s about Eru.” Nanaka’s exceedingly curt reply caused Aina’s expression to shift instantly.

“...I guess I can drop the act,” Aina said tightly. “Alright, and...?”

“Yesterday,” Kai said slowly, “Kuroba-san explained what happened... between you two.” Then he went through the same explanation he’d given to

Nanaka. It was meant to be a sort of confirmation to see if there was anything wrong with his account, but Aina didn't so much as raise a brow—he couldn't tell what she was thinking at all.

After the story, Nanaka took the initiative to ask, "...Is it true?"

"...And if it is?" Aina replied sharply. The two girls' glares slammed into one another wordlessly, and Kai felt as though he could hear the horrible screeching of glass rubbing upon glass.

Maintaining eye contact, Nanaka took a small breath and began to speak again. "If you—If *you*," she repeated with emphasis, "—are the person who hurt my dearest, most important, best friend... I will never forgive you."

"Why's that?" Aina retorted. "'It's because we're best friends!' Is that what you're saying?"

"It is."

"I see. You know, for a 'best friend,' isn't it a little late for you to show up?" Aina scoffed. "In fact, how come you *just* found out? And yet, you call yourself her best friend..."

Kai nearly shot to his feet. The only thing keeping him in his seat was Nanaka, who extended her hand to keep him in place as Aina twirled her hair around her finger to taunt them.

Nanaka took in a deep breath and quietly let it out. "You're right," she finally admitted.

"Huh? What's this?" Aina asked in surprise. "You're admitting it?"

"I've already explained why I joined the fine arts club in middle school to Kai-kun," Nanaka told her. "Eru was getting better so much faster than me that she was blinding. I was jealous... and frustrated. So, we joined different clubs. I think... me running away back then was a mistake, after all.

"Maybe I can't call myself her best friend anymore," Nanaka continued. "Maybe I *shouldn't*... but even then..." A single tear welled up from her eye and rolled across her cheek. Yet her blurry eyes were overflowing with more than that sorrow—they were also full of willpower. "I... I don't want to make any

more mistakes!” Nanaka burst out.

Despite being off to the side, Kai was frozen in place as the two girls went back to silently glaring daggers at one another’s throats. After a little while, the corners of Aina’s lips rose into a faint smile. “You know,” she said, “back in middle school, I really hated you, Nanaka-chan.”



“Did we even talk in middle school?” Nanaka asked.

“Of course not. We were in different classes, too. It was just... a one-way grudge,” Aina said thoughtfully. “I was just frustrated that Eru chose to hang around someone who sounded like she hadn’t gotten over herself yet.”

“That’s... fair enough.” Nanaka began to hang her head but looked back up when Aina loudly clapped her hands together.

“Don’t make a face like that... I don’t think you’re that bad anymore. It’s finally my turn,” she said, rising up from her seat. “Come with me for a bit.”



Kai and Nanaka quickly paid their bill and followed Aina out of the diner. She began by walking away from the station, taking a left at a crosswalk, and continuing straight along the sidewalk of a major road. Their path headed toward the Shinano River, which ran straight through Niigata.

Aina never once turned back as she led Nanaka and Kai down the road. At first, the large street was lined with countless buildings, but the scenery began to shift after ten minutes or so. Just before the Shinano River, there was a redeveloped commercial district called “Bandai City.” The main attractions were the department stores, which were full of fashion brands, but there were all manner of services around them: bus terminals, fast food restaurants, and even specialty stores stocking doujin magazines were all present in the area.

Aina headed into a department store and rode the escalator up to the top floor, where she entered a massive bookstore. She searched around the magazine corner for a time, and after finding what she was after, she made her purchase and instantly turned back to the downward escalator.

“We’re going to the next place,” Aina stated, and resumed her gallant stride once they’d exited the department store. Next, she led them up a flight of stairs to access a skywalk that connected to yet another set of buildings. They walked in the direction of the river and again returned to street level, where Aina entered the building across from the stairway’s exit.

It was a movie theater. The three of them climbed a concrete staircase to enter the theater and were greeted by a hallway, which was lined with posters

for all the currently airing films. Aina passed by the ticket booth and picked up a flyer for an upcoming release before making her way to the waiting area in the back.

The walls of the waiting area were made of glass, and the nearby Shinano River expanded across their entire field of view. Kai thought the sunlight glimmering across the flowing water was beautiful enough to be a cut straight out of a movie.

No, wait, he thought, as Aina made her way to the glass pane and reached her hand out to the window, staring out into the river. *Her silhouette amidst the incoming rays of sun—that's what's truly beautiful. So close, and yet so far away.*

Kai's vision naturally gravitated toward her, and he found himself reminded of how Aina had appeared in her own room. The busy chatter of a movie theater in the middle of summer break seemed distant to his ears. Aina was in a stasis, cleanly separated from the rest of the world, and the sight of her this way dominated his mind.

"Kai-kun," Aina suddenly called out to him, turning around. Her melancholic eyes were fragile enough to break at the slightest touch, and more fleeting than a dimming ray of light. Wrapped in stillness and silence, her right hand extended toward him alongside the words, "Save me."

Her voice slipped into Kai's ears and reverberated directly into his heart. He felt something make its way into the depths of his brain, grasping at the most sacred parts of his mind. He took a step toward her outstretched hand, and that very instant—

"Ta-dah! ♪" Aina sang out. And with that vocalization, the quiet bubble of space around them shattered.

"The setting behind that one was, 'A boy goes home to the countryside for summer break and meets a girl,'" she informed them. "'Utterly alone, the girl battles against the entire world, but offers up the first and final peek into her heart to the main character. That would prove to be their last moment together...'"

"It was pretty convincing, right?" she asked immodestly. There was no trace

of Aina's previous personality that could be seen now. With her hands on her hips and a satisfied look on her face, she exuded enough power to completely blow away any remaining sense of ephemerality. "Hey," she said cheekily, "I asked you this before, but I'm super-duper cute, aren't I?"

"Huh?" Kai tried to respond, feeling dumbfounded.

"Don't bother answering, I already know," Aina told them airily. "And when it comes to my acting skills, people toted me as a genius back when I was a child star. But, see—" she said, lifting up the movie flyer in her right hand and the fashion mag she had bought in her left.

Kai had done his research on Aina, so he recognized the two faces in her hands: the main star in the center of the movie flyer was Aina's father, and the woman decorating the front of the magazine was Aina's mother.

"—None of that was aimed at me: it was for these two, my movie star dad and model mom," she continued to explain. "I'm either the leftovers or the result of nepotism. No matter what I do, I'm always reminded that it's because my parents are amazing.

"For example, I went through a lot of auditions as a kid, right? When I got the role, it was because of the Yozakura name; when I didn't, I was laughed at for having failed despite being the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Yozakura. It was worse than awful. And to be honest, there *were* people who tried to use me to make connections with my parents, so I couldn't even say anything in my own defense... It really was the worst."

Why? Kai wondered, aware that Aina's tale brought forth an emotion in him that went beyond pity or sympathy. In fact, it felt as though someone was churning up his innards.

"But the part I hated the most... was that I couldn't believe in myself anymore," Aina went on. "At some point, you get confused. You ask yourself, 'Are they looking at me, or are they looking at somebody standing right behind me?'

"...That's why I quit on them," Aina said, sporting a brilliantly cheerful smile. "I let go of everything that had to do with being a child star. I got a lot of hate online, with some people claiming that I only got roles because I'd brute-forced

my way in with connections, but I didn't mind all that much. It'd been that way for a long time. What I *was* surprised by... was the fact that my parents—my old man and woman—let go of me, too. 'If you're not going to join us in our world,' they said, and off to Grandma's I went... And that was it."

"Why..." Nanaka spoke, as if to confirm every detail. "Why did that make you want to become a voice actress?" Her question was the exact same one which Kai had asked earlier, back in Aina's room.

"Gosh, isn't that obvious?" Aina asked scornfully. "There's no way I could just let them keep making fun of me! I want to prove I'm the real deal. I won't put out the Yozakura name, I won't put out this face that they gave me, and I won't embellish my voice with anything more than what I have. I... want to live as *me*, that's all."

Oh, I see, Kai finally realized. When she had said, "I quit on them," it had hurt him. It hurt as if she had been talking about him, and now he finally knew why.

Back at Tsukigase, he'd had no friends. When he succeeded as a planner, it was because Akane had laid it all out for him; it wasn't because of *his* skill. When he made the tiniest mistake, he had been mocked for having failed despite Akane's tutelage. In truth, he'd only managed to keep up thanks to her help, and to err under her instruction certainly was his fault, so he hadn't been able to say anything in his own defense.

After the incident that led to his resignation from the club, Kai had been relentlessly bashed on the internet. Faceless strangers who knew nothing of his situation had spread baseless rumors, lies, and words of abuse everywhere, and all he'd been able to do was watch. When Kai had looked Aina up online, the better part of the articles he'd found had been written the same way.

However, Kai had people he could trust, and those people left him with words that he'd carried with him to this day. They had told him he wasn't wrong, and pointed him toward a path that he could firmly plant his feet on. *If I didn't even have that*, he wondered now, *what would have happened to me?*

"H-Hey," Aina stammered in a panic. This time, it wasn't an act.

"Kai-kun..." Nanaka was peering at him, but at a loss for words.

“Ah,” said Kai, finally noticing the cold droplet sliding down his cheek.

“Wh-Why are *you* crying?” Aina questioned.

“...Because you’re *not* crying, Aina-san.” *Maybe, he thought, she has moments that she can’t show anyone where she weeps alone, too. I don’t know if she does or not. She won’t tell me. She won’t tell anyone. I’m sure she’ll pretend to be fine, just as she’s always done, with a tough smile on her face. I can’t imagine she lets her grandmother see her weak side. And while that’s what makes her strong... there’s no way you can always be okay.*

Although this was an issue of the past, there was a time when Kai would have been thrown into a fit of nausea at the mere thought of Tsukigase and the incident behind his departure, because he hadn’t been as strong as Aina. Even then, he knew it was wrong to smile and pretend like everything was fine when you were really hurting inside. Still, it wasn’t good to project his feelings onto someone else, and it wasn’t as if Aina had asked him to do so. Nevertheless, he couldn’t face her lonely smile.

“Oh... Oh, geez! You’re throwing me off...!” Aina grabbed the hood of her jacket with both hands and pulled it forward to hide her face as she looked away. “Gosh,” she mumbled. “You’re such an idiot.”

Kai caught a glimpse of her eye peeking out from under the hood for a brief moment, but she quickly turned away again and closed her hands together, once again obscuring her face.





A short while later, Aina opened her hood again and returned to the conversation. Slowly, she said, “The truth is... This wasn’t the main thing I wanted to talk about.”

She reached into her backpack to pull out a clear, plastic folder. In it was a single sheet of cartridge paper with a drawing on it. Upon further inspection, it was clear that there were several thin cracks running across the paper, like a layer of patchwork.

“Could it be?!” Nanaka exclaimed.

“It’s the one you’ve heard about,” Aina said with a nod. “This is Eru’s illustration... The ripped one. Don’t worry, I taped it all back together.”

Kai took the picture out of its clear sleeve so that he and Nanaka could see it more clearly. It was definitely rougher around the edges than her current work, but there was no doubt that this illustration had been made by Kuroba Eru. It was undeniably hers: it depicted a lovely girl, with delicate attention to the details. And all across it were tiny fissures that had no business being there.

“Everything you heard from Eru... is true,” Aina admitted. “She’s such an idiot. All those monkeys wanted to do was say, ‘I’m not bad at drawing’ and play around, but Eru told them the truth by saying, ‘You’re garbage because you don’t draw.’ And of course, the monkeys are stupid, so they threw rocks at her. But even then, it didn’t get her, so I really thought she was—”

“Aina-chan, wait,” Nanaka said, cutting her off and advancing toward her. “Let me get one thing clear. Did you do this?” she asked insistently. “Did you... tear it up like this?”

“Do you... Do you really think I would?!” Aina asked hotly, her hands quivering with emotion, and Kai worried that her fists were squeezed tightly enough to leave marks.

“She was... my catalyst,” Aina told them. “I put my voice to this drawing and... it made me want to be someone else. *That* was why I wanted to become a voice actress, you know? I could never ruin something this amazing. I was just the first person to find it afterwards.”

“Then...it’s all a misunderstanding,” Kai muttered. “In that case, why didn’t you tell Kuroba-san that—”

“...You think I could say that to her?” Aina demanded incredulously. “Just because I didn’t do it with my own hands doesn’t mean I wasn’t responsible. If I hadn’t gone overboard and caused a scene, none of this would have happened. I was always in that room, watching her spend day after day completing this one illustration. Always... always... ‘I didn’t do it. I didn’t do anything.’ ...I will never be able to tell her that.”

Although Aina had been facing the ground as she spoke, she now took a step back and raised her head to reveal a beaming smile. “And thus concludes this tear-jerking episode of Yozakura Aina theater! ♪” she sang out. “That was everything I can tell you. Nanaka-chan, I’m leaving that drawing to you, okay? I’m sure... she wouldn’t want me to have it, either. Buh-bye,” she said, waving her hand.

As Aina began to walk away, the one to take hold of her waving hand was Nanaka. “Aina-chan,” she questioned, “are you planning on quitting the club?”

“Wha?!” exclaimed Kai, who couldn’t understand why that would be the case.

Aina squinted at Nanaka and replied, “...As the president of your club, do you really think it’s a wise idea to have someone like me hanging around?”

“When I first called you out today... I wasn’t planning on it,” Nanaka admitted. “But that’s what I want to do now.”

“You have the development competition’s deadline coming up, too,” Aina reminded them. “Are you sure you should leave Eru all pouty by letting me stay?”

“But, Aina-chan... You were there for Eru, weren’t you?” Nanaka asked gently.

“...Let go of my hand,” Aina told her, turning away.

“No way,” Nanaka replied firmly, pulling Aina’s arm back when she tried again to walk away.

Before his mind could catch up with the series of events that were taking place, Kai had joined Nanaka and grasped at Aina’s hand, as well.

“...There’s something wrong with you people,” said Aina. With her back turned, neither Kai nor Nanaka could see her face. Nevertheless, her voice had an unbecoming waver to it that only caused them to tighten their grip. “...Are you sure?” she asked again. “Can I really stay?”

“That’s what we’ve been telling you,” Nanaka said in confirmation. “Right, Kai-kun?”

“Right,” he agreed.

“...It’ll definitely end up being a huge pain,” Aina reminded them.

“When that time comes,” Kai reassured her, “we’ll be there to worry about it with you.”

“...Then, if I’m ever in trouble... will you come help me?” Aina wondered.

“So long as you rely on us, Aina-san.”

“...No matter what it is?”

“Of course,” Kai insisted.

“...Now you’ve said it,” she said brightly.

Huh? By the time Kai’s brain had registered his confusion, it was already too late.

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that!” Aina declared triumphantly, spinning around to face them with all the agility of a twirling figure skater. She wore a mischievous grin across her face, and Kai could hear the unspoken *Gotcha!* overwriting any trace of the meekness she’d had before. In spite of himself, he couldn’t help but think that this attitude was far more fitting for Aina, and he let out a laugh.

“Hey, what are you laughing for?” Aina demanded to know. “Well, whatever. I mean, you know? At the beginning, right? I was thinking that maybe I should apologize and all... but do you *remember* her attitude?! Every time she opened her mouth, it was ‘tramp’ this, ‘witch’ that. And at the end of all that, she didn’t want my *rotten* voice on her drawings?! I’m impressed she could talk so much smack when she doesn’t even know how good I am...!”

Aina stomped her feet on the ground and angrily shook her fists as she

recalled Eru's bad behavior. After a moment spent silently trembling in rage, she suddenly went completely still and looked up toward Kai, sporting the most beautiful, cutest, and... most horrifying smile yet. "There's no way I'd just let that all slide now, is there? ♪ Kai-kun? I'm going to make her eat her words... and of course, you'll be helping me, won't you?"

Aina's grin bloomed across her face like a beautiful flower, and despite the difficult expression on his face, Kai had no choice but to nod.



"That's a piece of cake," said Aya.

The group had begun their discussion promptly, but making Kuroba Eru, of all people, eat her words was no easy feat. If they came up with a subpar plan, all that awaited them was a brusque refutation. Kai could hear it now:

'Oh dear, are you messing with me?'

'Oh dear, can you shut up?'

'Oh dear, what's this senseless chatter in my ear?'

'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear...'

"Let's start by talking it out with everyone other than Eru," had been Nanaka's suggestion. As a result, Aya had been called out from her lazy routine of rolling the gacha under an AC unit to join the rest of the club at the family restaurant. Once she'd heard the story, the first thing out of Aya's mouth was a bored proclamation that the problem was simple to solve.

"A-Ah-chan," Nanaka asked, clearly taken aback, "do you have an idea?"

"Basically," Aya summarized, "we need to make that massive moron squeal, right?"

"That's right!" Aina cut in excitedly. "You really get me! ♪"

"But," Kai interjected, "isn't that the hardest part?"

"What are you talking about, senpai?" Aya asked lazily. "She's super straightforward when it comes to the quality of a character's art. If we can get her to froth at the mouth like a beached crab, it'll be our victory."

“Hold up,” he protested, “this isn’t about winning or—”

“It’s fine as long as we win,” Aya continued. “Or do you have a problem with completely and thoroughly beating her down?”

“Ah-chan...” Nanaka spoke for everyone present when she quietly pointed out, “You’re really hard on Eru, aren’t you?”

Aya scrunched up her face into an unreserved scowl. With her easy-going nature, she was always smiling—sometimes alongside a hearty laugh, and other times in spite of her exasperation—so this was a rare sight. “Well... how do I put this?” she asked with some consideration. “I’ve said this to Nana-sen before, but I hate people who lie to themselves. The reason Kuroba is such trash is because she *knows* she’s lying to herself, and does it anyway: everything is ‘Nana-sen this’ or ‘Nana-sen that.’ Kuroba is just someone who loves the crap out of drawing, and everyone can see it.”

“...Ah-chan,” Nanaka muttered, heartbroken.

“Ngh!” Aya croaked like a frog that had been stepped on to make her displeasure known. “I’ll pass on getting wrapped up in all this *youth*. And with *Kuroba*?! That sends a chill down my spine!”

“Pft,” Aina chuckled. “Are you getting embarrassed?”

“Aye-aye, you must not want me to help with the plan,” Aya mused threateningly. “You know you can’t put it into action without me, right?”

“In the first place,” Kai asked, “what *is* your plan?”

“You still don’t get it?” Aya replied in exasperation. Kai felt that it wasn’t exactly obvious, considering that she hadn’t even given a hint yet. “We just need to get her mouth foaming,” Aya said again. “And there’s only one thing that’ll make that idiot blow bubbles.”

In a moment of epiphany, Kai muttered, “...Her own artwork.”

Aya didn’t nod, but her lips twisted into a smug grin. “We’ve got the perfect starting point right here,” she said, knocking on the sheet of paper lying on the table. “Plus, we’ve got Nana-sen and Aye-aye, and you’ve even got me. I’m a *teensy* bit good at programming, you know? You know what they say: ‘I can

develop a little!’”

Kai found himself cornered by an almost hateful level of Aya’s smugness. He didn’t quite know what she was planning, but there was nothing more reliable than a serious Aya. “...Am I supposed to reply, ‘I completely understand,’ here?” he wanted to know.

Kai ignored Aya as she burst out into laughter so that he could explain what had just happened to Nanaka and Aina, who had turned to each other when they could no longer keep up. Essentially, there was a Japanese programming in-joke stemming from the fact that the creator of a world-famous operating system had once worn a shirt that said he could ‘develop a little.’ As a result, Kai’s line about ‘completely understanding’ had been a second joke, based around the idea that he knew nothing about programming. After his explanation, the group had to wait for Aya’s laughter to die down before they could hear out the details of her plan.

Chapter 14: I'm Sorry

As per usual, Aya's implementation went beyond Kai's wildest expectations. Their strategy for dealing with Eru came together immediately, but they didn't have much time to make it happen. More precisely, they did have time, but the longer they focused on this project, the more they'd feel the impact on their Summit application.

The result of their tight schedule was...

"Scuse me!"

"Excuse me! ♪"

"E-Excuse me."

...The three girls made their way to Kai's home.

"Whoa, this place gives off the same vibes as you, senpai," Aya said, marveling at Kai's room. "There's nothing extra around here."

"Wha—hey!" he exclaimed. "Stop digging around my room! There's nothing here for you to find...!"

"Kai-kun?" For whatever reason, Aina was back to her cutesy persona. He figured that she simply chose how to act depending on her mood that day. She went on to ask, "Should I clean your room again? It's not like I'll have anything to work on at first. ♪"

"...‘Again’?" Nanaka questioned.

"Yup, ♪" sang Aina. "When I came here a few days ago, I cleaned up and made him lunch. Hmm? Nanaka-chan, have you never come here before?"

"Huh? Um, I've been here before," Nanaka said defensively. "A-And I've even... taken a bath here."

"...I see. Kai-kun!!! I worked up a little sweat because of how hot it was outside, so can I borrow your shower to start things off?" Aina asked.

“No,” he responded bluntly. “How about we start by working...?”

Their current task wasn't something that they could split up to work on. In order for Aya to make progress, she needed to wait on Nanaka, and Nanaka herself had to make adjustments to her retouching as they went along. That also meant the voice lines they included were subject to change as the project progressed.

Initially, they intended to finish everything with one all-nighter at Kai's. However, with minimal progress, everyone went home to grab a change of clothes and they ended up working for three days straight.

Near the beginning, Aya and Aina had goofed around a good amount, but they quickly fell in line to focus on their assigned parts. Everyone was tired, but also energetic. In their bodies and minds, there was a burning flame that was hotter than the summer sun outside, and there was no sign of it cooling down. It only burned brighter the closer they got to completion.

Over the three-day period, the girls (sans Aya, who couldn't cook) were kind enough to take turns making meals. Around dinnertime on the last day, Aina and Aya were heroically discussing the project's finishing touches despite being high off of their own sleep deprivation.

“I! Told! You!” Aina shouted, “The way this line was delivered doesn't match the character's expression!”

“Are you gonna retake it *again?!?*” Aya groaned, “This is more than enough for that Kuro-baby!”

“How many times do I have to say it has to be perfect *because* it's for her?!”

Kai made the decision to leave their spat behind and help Nanaka buy groceries for dinner. He couldn't cook, but the least he could do was carry the bags for her. The setting sun was still remarkably fiery, and the lukewarm summer breeze carried the cries of cicadas to them as they stepped outside.

“Hey,” Nanaka said to get Kai's attention as they walked along. He turned to see her blurry outline dyed a deep red in the evening light. “This is all so exhausting... but isn't it kind of fun?”

“...Yeah, it is,” he admitted.

“A part of me feels like we’re not supposed to be this noisy,” she observed.

“I’m... well—” Kai said, grasping for the right words. “—Used to it, thanks to my sister.”

“Haha... I guess you’re right,” Nanaka agreed as the pair stopped to wait for a crosswalk signal.

Even without closing his eyes, Kai’s head was filled with the boisterous uproar—and it echoed louder in his mind than the cicadas that had been chirping only a moment ago. To begin with, creating a game was *fun*. It was an ordeal when two opinions collided, but even then, it was more common than not to look back fondly on such serious debates. Hot, loud, and fun: these were the words that were supposed to describe his time here.

Kai turned up to the midsummer sky to see the mantle of night beginning to fall, with little stars blinking into existence. Evening and night blurred together across an indistinct border to paint the faraway heavens, completely filling Kai’s view. And yet, he couldn’t help but feel as though something was missing...

“But...” Nanaka murmured, “It’s a little bit lonely.”

“Lonely?” he echoed.

With a small nod, she said, “It’s a little lonely... since Eru’s not here.”

“That’s...” *Ah, I see.* “...Yeah,” he said. “I was just thinking the same thing.”



By the time they returned to the apartment, Aya and Aina had put an end to their battle, and the app they planned to show Eru was finished. They couldn’t imagine that Eru would simply show up if they asked her to come, so they had Nanaka invite her over. After all, Nanaka’s house was the only location they could think of where they might draw Eru out.

When the three girls went home, Kai found himself alone for the first time in a long while. His apartment felt bigger than it usually did. Had Eru been present, it surely would have felt even bigger still.

“I want you to look at an illustration.” The next day, Nanaka called Eru over with a statement that was technically a lie (but not a complete lie). The other

three arrived thirty minutes early to wait on standby in Nanaka's room.

They waited for Eru to show up, only for her to enter by saying, "...Huh?" Packing all of her emotion into that one word, Eru clicked her tongue. Her brow furrowed into a tight wrinkle, and the glint of her eyes sharpened into crescent moons as she glared at Aya, then Kai, and then Aina. Finally, she stared down Nanaka, who was waiting right next to the doorway.

Nanaka began moving one beat faster than Eru, managing to grab her hand just as the words, "I'm leaving," escaped her mouth. Nanaka shook her head from side to side in denial. Once again, Eru observed her surroundings: Aya, then Kai, and then Aina. After doing another pass over each of them, she heaved a sigh and asked, "...And?"

"Here," Nanaka replied, handing her a phone.

"...A smartphone?" Eru questioned suspiciously.

"Tap on this app," Nanaka instructed.

"This one, dear?"

"Yup."

There was only one icon on the home screen, and Eru tapped on it dubiously; the instant she did so, the suspicion and anger faded from her eyes as they opened wide in surprise, and she slowly shriveled onto the floor.

"E-Eru?!" Nanaka's panicked reaction represented everyone present. They knew she would be surprised. It would have been an issue if she wasn't. That was why they'd all put blood, sweat, and tears into their work. However, the sight of Eru feebly peering into the screen betrayed their expectations in every way, and caused Aina to visibly stiffen up. Aya did her best to not let it show, but her fingers began tapping away at an invisible keyboard.

"This is... my..." Eru mumbled. After opening the application, the screen displayed Eru's ruined drawing... without a single blemish in sight.

"You know those people who retouch old paintings...? I think they're called restorers. It almost feels like I've become one of them... No, wait, just feeling like it isn't enough. Don't worry... It'll be okay. I've been learning from Eru's art all

this time... I can do it."

Aina had collected the scraps of Eru's piece to put them together as carefully as possible, but there were still portions where the lines didn't flow perfectly or bits that had been lost. It was a far cry from its former glory, but the one who had restored it had been Nanaka.

They uploaded the image onto a computer, and Nanaka had digitally filled in all of the parts that were missing. She had painstakingly connected every broken line, pixel by pixel, and painted over missing colors by sampling nearby segments to create a seamless transition. Though the damage on the drawing hadn't been catastrophic, it hadn't been easy to fix. And yet, Nanaka completed her task with unwavering focus.

Nanaka had humbly mentioned that she was only able to put it together because she knew all of Eru's habits and idiosyncrasies from mimicking her, but stealing those habits and reproducing those idiosyncrasies was a skill in its own right. There was no doubt that the quality of Nanaka's artwork had improved.

It hadn't seemed as if Nanaka had noticed her own improvement, though, as she'd continued to beat herself up as she progressed. All she'd said was, "I can't believe she drew this in middle school... Eru really is amazing."

That being said, the team had managed to strike awe into the original artist; their first hurdle had been cleared, but this was just the beginning. If they were only going to restore the drawing, they wouldn't have needed to turn it into an app.

"!" An inaudible sound of surprise escaped Eru's throat as her fingertips were drawn toward the character on-screen. It burst the second she made contact, shining particles of light enveloping the character. Gradually, the sparkles raining down from the top of the character's head melted away to reveal a 3D model of the same girl, which had been rendered to retain its 2D appearance.

"God, that drilled runt at Kongouin really ran her mouth, so I figured I'd teach her a lesson," was what Aya had said several days ago. "She was all, 'Wooow, our graphics are sooo amazing~ Our 3D work is sooo faithful to the beauty of our illust—blah, blah, blah.' Huh? She didn't say that? Well, whatever, she said something along those lines," Aya had insisted. "Anyhow... it's common

courtesy to pulverize them when their pride is at their peak, don't you think?"

With a devilish grin, Aya had unveiled what she had been working on since seeing Kongouin Mirei's livestream: a rendering engine that converted 2D drawings directly to 3D. On paper, her words seemed to be absolutely contradictory, but Aya had already finished developing that technology on her laptop. When Kai first saw a sample 2D image rotate in 360 degrees and naturally wave at the camera, he was convinced that Oushima Aya was some sort of magician.

"C'mon, this isn't anything to get worked up over," Aya had insisted. "We already have tech that's similar to this. Senpai, you've heard of Live2D, haven't you?"

Of course, Kai had. It was commonly utilized in the home screens and cutscenes of social games that put a lot of resources into the presentation of their characters' charms. On top of that, it had more recently gained traction among VTubers for streaming purposes. If you've ever seen a 2D illustration smoothly moving around and thought, "What the hell is this?" then it was probably Live2D.

However, the technology for Live2D was only meant to move a *single* image (although there were often many separate layers making it up), and its portrayal was limited to 40 degrees in either direction—any more than that and the picture fell apart. In essence, it was a trick to make 2D *seem* like 3D.

Additionally, the fact that there was only one main drawing being moved around meant that large movements dipped into the uncanny valley. VTubers had a real person behind the 2D image, so when they nodded too deeply or turned too suddenly, it wasn't rare for a viewer to be pulled out of their immersion due to the jerky motion.

Aya's version didn't have any trace of visual discomfort.

"If you know that much, that makes it easy to explain! Well, going into the nitty gritty would be a bit much, especially since Nana-sen and Aye-aye are giving me blank stares, so I'll wrap this up quick," Aya had told them. "This rendering isn't based off of a single image, but a bunch of them. 3D's just a matter of what you show the camera, after all. I just shift the layout of a few

different pictures depending on the camera's position, fill in the gaps on my end, and voila, it looks like 3D. So, the basic idea of making 2D look like 3D hasn't changed, but... if you can fake it perfectly, then all that's left is the real deal."

Kai wouldn't have been able to follow a more technical explanation, either. Aya had mentioned a few constraints, like the fact that it wasn't optimized enough to process more than one character at a time, or that it required a ton of illustrations to work with... But the character hadn't changed at all when it transferred dimensions (obviously, as that was the whole point) and there was no way Kai could sweat the small stuff when he saw the character moving so flawlessly.

It was simply amazing.

"Honestly," he'd asked, "who the heck are you?"

"I'm Oushima Aya, Meikun High Social Game Club's develop-a-little programmer," she'd retorted. "Duh." Aya had been sporting an impish grin, all while Kai had been frozen in awe at her incomprehensibly prodigious new program. Now, that same smile crept onto Aya's face as she watched Eru glue herself to the screen.

It wasn't over yet. They didn't have a card up their sleeve, or anything... it was just that the experience simply wasn't complete without the final piece of the puzzle.

"Don't worry," Aina had reassured them. "This isn't a question of my acting skills. My voice *will* fit this drawing."

In present time, the character inside the phone began to fiddle with a smartphone of her own. They had set her animations up to do so beforehand. On screen, the character nervously took a deep breath as she tapped away at her own virtual phone. For a moment, she hesitated and went into deep thought. Eventually, the lifelike character looked beyond the screen—directly at Eru—and smiled.

The phone in Eru's hand switched its display, and the entire view morphed to show an incoming phone call through the LIME program. There was no caller ID. She didn't need it to know who was calling. Eru picked up the phone just as

timidly as the character had done moments prior.

“I’m sorry,” said a voice.

Why was that the line? Whose message was it? Who was it for? Aina had refused to answer those questions, but there was undeniably emotion packed into those words.

“This... is a photo of me in middle school. I’ve cut it since then, but I used to have long hair, all the way down to my waist... You get what I’m saying, don’t you?”

Kai had felt a strange sensation ever since seeing the drawing for the first time, almost as if he’d seen it somewhere before. Like the drawing had somehow caught his eye in the past. That gnawing sensation directly connected to Aina’s photograph with the straightest of all lines.

“For this character to speak is for me to speak.”

They had initially tried out a handful of other lines, poses, expressions, and gestures, but none of them had met Aina’s standards, causing her shouting match with Aya to stretch out until the last minute.

With everything said and done, their final conclusion was to show the small bit of animation in the beginning, and lead directly into an experience that was indiscernible from a real phone call. Aina had acted out all the motions for the character, fiddling with her own phone to provide base motions for the animations. On that note, Aya had explained some unintelligible mumbo-jumbo about employing an AI to automate the process, but what mattered was that they had been able to evoke the same image through Aina’s acting.

Aina had a lot of trouble deciding on what to say, but for now, all she wanted was for her words to reach Eru. Every facet of the plan had been simple: restore the character that Eru had poured so much love into, and don’t stop until it was fully revived. On top of the artwork, they’d add Aina’s voice to the mix and Eru would scream, “Oh dear, she’s aliiive!” Then, the shock would make her faint and foam, and their mission would be accomplished. That was the entire plan.

However, neither Aina, nor Aya, nor Kai could stop themselves from jumping to their feet in panic at the scene that unfolded in front of them.

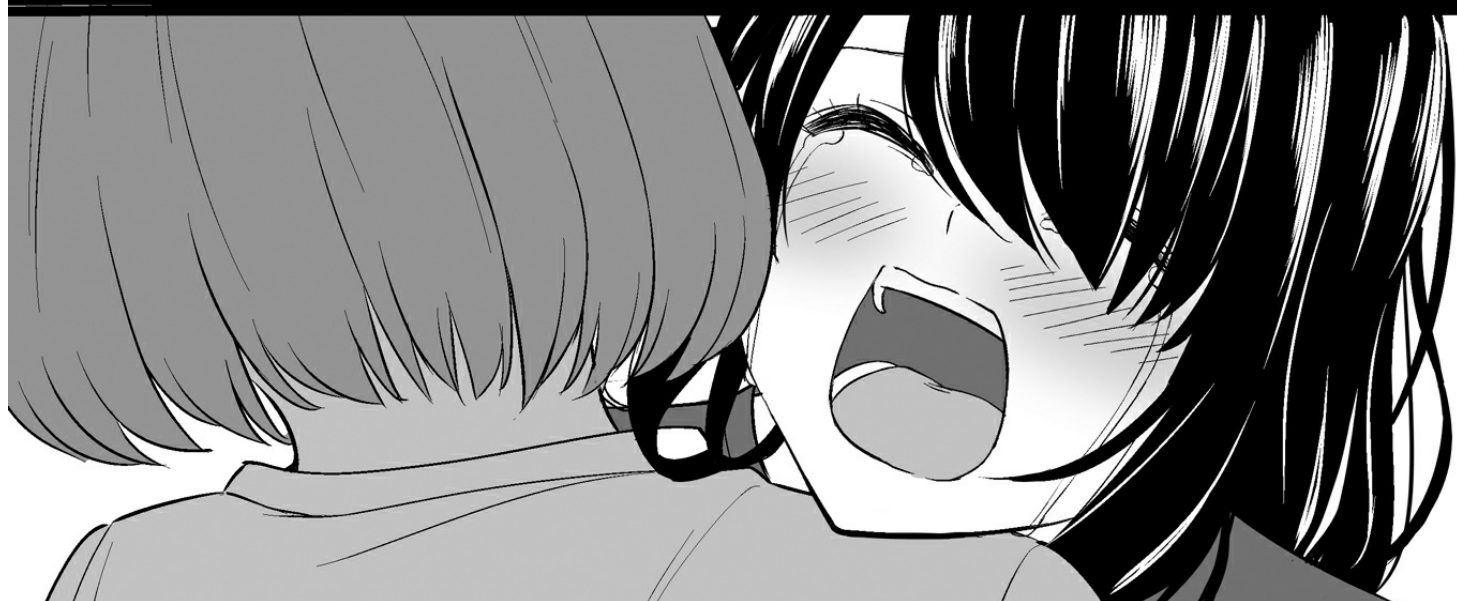
“Ah...” After ending the call, the screen in Eru’s palm depicting the character began to blur. With a quiet *drip*, a single droplet of liquid burst onto the screen and shattered into light. Eru lifted her right hand to her cheek, as if to confirm for herself what was happening, and scooped up a tear rolling down her face. “Ah... huh...?” she asked, clearly feeling bewildered.

Nanaka ran to her side and embraced her from the front.

“Ah, Na... naka...?” Eru asked slowly.

“...You idiot,” Nanaka whispered, squeezing her best friend tight. With her head resting on Nanaka’s shoulder, Eru’s face began to distort. Nanaka comforted her by saying, “It’s okay, Eru.”

“...Gh,” Eru choked. “Ah, waaaaaah!!!”



“That’s all there is to it.” Those were the words Eru had said to Kai on that darkened beach, but he had known it wasn’t true. No matter the time or place, Eru was constantly giving it her all. There was no way that a girl who confronted every single illustration head-on wouldn’t have been hurt.

Nanaka didn’t say anything, content simply to hold Eru in her arms. Like a mirror reflecting some faraway scene, Eru’s sobs were muffled in Nanaka’s chest, but somehow still managed to fill the room.

Chapter 15: Yozakura Aina's Memory

She didn't give off the faintest hint of a good impression. In fact, initially, I thought she was the worst. I don't want to sound like the beginning of a romance manga, but she was stubborn, annoying, thorny, and hard to approach. Actually, it was more that I didn't *want* to approach her.

These are the honest feelings I held for Kuroba Eru in middle school.

She would sit in the corner of our clubroom and scribble away with her pen, and whenever she opened her mouth it was to bite at someone, regardless of whether she was talking to an upperclassman or not. She'd tell them the brutal truth—that they were terrible at drawing—which brought the entire atmosphere grinding to a halt.

No one wanted to approach this rabid dog. But most importantly, all I wanted at that time was to sink to the bottom of the ocean so that I could be all alone. Everything was in my way: the name Yozakura Aina, my looks, everything.

Whenever some oblivious boy confessed to me, I had to restrain myself from telling them to go home and look in a mirror, all while they told me with pure hearts just how serious they were. Then the girls would gossip behind my back about how high and mighty I was for having spurned their classmates' advances. But to my face, these same girls would make up pointless lies about how they'd never say such things about me... All of it, all of it, all of it made me miserable.

So, I joined the manga society. I figured no one would understand why I was there in the first place, and I was right. It being a manga club meant that, at the very minimum, I had a few volumes of manga to leisurely pass the time with. If I turned into a ghost member and went straight home, my grandma would worry about me. I didn't want to see her worried face.

I ended up being a sort of ghost member within the clubroom anyway, and I was satisfied that everything went according to plan. There were a few club members who tried to close the distance in the beginning, but they left me

alone once it was clear that I wasn't interested. I spent my days watching from afar as they chatted about their meaningless trifles. I also looked on as Eru drew without rest and eventually collided with them.

There was one other place I visited every now and again. "You fool," she told me. "No one can perform like that off of talent alone." I had only known my teacher since I'd moved to Niigata, but this was something of a catchphrase of hers. She was a once-divorced woman around forty who'd previously worked as a voice acting instructor at a training school in Tokyo. Now, she lived freely while managing a small troupe in Niigata and writing her own plays.

I hated both the fact that I had been pathetically abandoned and that I'd let myself wallow in self-pity. I had wanted to throw everything out when I'd left the capital, but my old coach from my child star days in Tokyo introduced me to her, saying that I should think things over again—that it was a waste to toss it away.

There's nothing going to waste, I'd thought. I truly believed that, but listened to her all the same. I think it must have been because I enjoyed acting in and of itself.

"I know you don't hate acting, you fool," my teacher told me, as if she had me all figured out. "It's fine if you hate *yourself*. There isn't anyone who doesn't. If you hate yourself so much, use your voice to become someone else. That will still be you, but it won't be the you that hates you."

Even though I didn't quite understand what she was saying—even though I didn't *try* to understand—I think the reason I couldn't get mad at her was because I really did like acting. My teacher called me a fool every time I saw her, but I found it strangely comforting.

I would haunt the clubroom, pop in at my teacher's place, smile for my grandma, and go back to being a ghost. As my own lifeless days went round and round in circles, Eru became more and more alone in the club. It was easy to tell from the outside looking in.

Pursuit begets loneliness. The sight of someone working diligently to chase their dreams is poisonous to the eyes of some people.

The manga society's clubroom was an empty classroom, so it was pretty

spacious for the amount of people we had. Most of the members huddled around President Igarashi, near the blackboard in the center of the room. Eru had claimed the corner seat closest to the hallway, and I watched them from my spot next to the window.

Igarashi and company chatted away; Eru drew.

And the next day.

And the day after that.

And again, the day after that.

It never changed.

They were incompatible.

I did my best not to get involved with Eru—to not even look her way—so I didn't know how good her illustrations were, but I had a feeling they were well made. If not, the other club members would have turned her into a laughing stock. Not only was that unfeasible, but approaching Eru only ever served to hurt *their* feelings, so there could be no doubt that she was skilled. As they drifted listlessly along, her existence must have been venom to their eyes; Eru was someone who stood far above them in skill, and showed no signs of slowing down.

"She's so gross." I'm sure the offhand remark I heard one day was their honest opinion. In that case, it was only natural that Eru and the others would have clashed over the cover art for the culture festival.

I didn't have the slightest intention of intervening. It'd be a pain, and if Eru was going to play the lone wolf, she needed to suck it up and solve her own problems. At least, that's what I'd thought... until I saw Eru's drawing.

It was like my eyes were fixed directly on a light source. Hung on the blackboard, Eru's sublime work of art was radiant. I had figured she was good, but her real talent was so far beyond my expectations that it stunned me into silence. Igarashi's crappy drawing next to it caught my eye so little that I don't even know if I saw it. That's how overwhelming Eru's art was.

I couldn't believe it when the others *still* tried to pull their stunt, and by the

time I came to my senses, I was already running my mouth: "...But I can't help but think this one's better?"

Eru looked taken aback, but I was the most surprised out of everyone there. But since that's how I felt, there wasn't any helping it. Besides, there was another thing that surprised me, because the character in Eru's illustration was unmistakably modeled after Yozakura Aina.

The me that she'd drawn was beautiful, dignified, and a far cry away from my actual dawdling self. I couldn't feel a shred of remorse for the massive gap between the real me and the reflection that resided in her eyes; I was just mad at myself. It wasn't like I'd suddenly recalled my teacher telling me to use my voice to become someone else. I naturally wanted to act. I wanted to be the beautiful stranger on the other side of this sheet of paper; a me who wasn't me.

That's when I started talking to Eru. At first, she was puzzled and annoyed, but she didn't seem to mind all that much. After I'd improvised a few lines for the character she'd drawn, she opened up and we began to talk a little.

"Hey," I remember asking, "Why are you in a place like this?"

"I could ask you the same," she answered, thoroughly displeased.

"It doesn't matter for me," I'd told her. "I'd be fine anywhere, so long as I don't stand out too much."

"...You stand out plenty here," Eru pointed out.

"And whose fault is that?" I'd asked, and Eru glared at me in dissent when I said it. She'd probably wanted to say that she hadn't asked for my help.

It was true that she hadn't asked—that I had, instead, acted of my own volition—as if you could call my unconscious outburst a decision. I really wanted to tell her, "For better or for worse, your illustrations have the power to move people. Keep that in mind!" But the thought of saying that out loud made me feel like I was losing somehow, so I kept it to myself.

"All I'm saying," I'd continued, "is that you don't need to be here to draw."

"...Club participation is required, dear," Eru reminded me.

"Yeah," I'd agreed, "but wouldn't the fine arts club have been a better fit?"

“...Nanaka’s over there.” The words got uncharacteristically caught in Eru’s throat. I think that was the first and last time I’d ever seen her like that.

“Nanaka...? Wait, you mean Aoi Nanaka?” I’d asked, feeling confused. “You’re friends with her?” I wasn’t in the same class as Nanaka, but at least I knew her name.

At every school, there were a few people per grade that everyone knew, and Aoi Nanaka was one of them. She seemed like the kind of person who wouldn’t have had anything to do with Eru unless the world was ending. However, much to my surprise, Eru nodded. She and Aoi Nanaka were childhood friends who’d apparently spent their youth drawing pictures together. And apparently, that continued even now.

“...Woow,” I’d said. “In that case, isn’t that all the more reason to join the fine arts club?”

“There’s no need for that,” said Eru, speaking with absolute faith. “Nanaka’s pursuing the same thing I am.” Then, when I tried to ask her more, Eru fell silent, pulling the headphones that dangled off of her neck back up to her ears. This was the sign that our conversation was over.

Then, the familiar, pleasant sound of pen on sketchbook reverberated throughout the air. Before my eyes, the lines converged to outline the exquisite shape of her next character.

Ever since the day I’d helped Eru out, I began to attend my lessons properly. Every time I dubbed over one of Eru’s characters, the feeling of turning into someone else seeped into my body. Neither Yozakura nor Aina, I was merely the voice of the character in front of me. As a voice actress, my work wouldn’t necessitate my face, and I could even change my name.

All these burdensome reasons aside, the powerful gust of wind which blew straight through my mind when I first saw Eru’s illustration had moved me. I’m sure that was the moment I knew I wanted to be a voice actress.

That hasn’t changed, even now, in the social game club. It hasn’t changed, but... just because her art opened my eyes, it doesn’t mean that I’m the type of person to let someone influence me forever.

Kuroba Eru might not need any friends, and it's not like I want to be all buddy-buddy with her, either. The little amount in which I've conversed with her has only driven home how much of a pain she is. I can tell, since we're of the same flock. Us getting along is foundationally impossible.

It's not that I want to be friends.

It's that I want to show you.

I want you to know that—though we may take separate paths—there's someone beside you who's spent the same hours you have.

I want you to believe that I'm seeing the same thing as you.

This time, I want to be able to convince you, you stubborn fool.

Chapter 16: Last Spurt

“...That sure was something,” said Nanaka.

“...Yeah,” Kai concurred.

Street lights dotted the path forward as the pair walked side by side through the hot summer night, made more uncomfortable by the dampness of their sweat. In both of Kai’s hands, he carried convenience store bags containing provisions for their impending all-nighter. Nanaka had suggested a snack party for everyone to make up, so the bags were packed tight with treats and drinks.

Just a moment ago (though, honestly, it had been so long that the sun had set), the entire team had had their minds boggled.

Eru couldn’t exactly have been described as “quiet,” given that she’d continued to wail like an injured beast. However, she had slowly calmed down into a normal bawl, then into a softer sob, then to a sort of sniffing hiccup, and finally she’d simply pressed her eyes against Nanaka’s shoulder. That entire time, Nanaka had been rubbing and patting Eru on the back. Her gentle demeanor had made it seem like she was going to hum a quiet lullaby.

It had been a serene scene which Kai had felt like he could watch forever. The one to shatter it into pieces had been none other than Kuroba Eru, herself.

“Now, then.” Eru’s face had suddenly popped up from Nanaka’s shoulder, like a robot who’d received a jolt of electricity. Her voice may have been somewhat hoarse, but there was something else mixed into it...

Spirit, Kai had wondered? *Gravitas*? To put it simply, Eru had sounded menacing.

The voice in her ear had caused Nanaka to uneasily ask, “E-Eru...?” as the girl in question pushed herself off of Nanaka’s shoulders in order to stand up.

Crossing her arms and standing with her feet a shoulder-width apart, Eru had towered over them commandingly and glared at everyone with puffy red eyes. “Nanaka fixed the illustration,” she said accusingly. “Aina did the voice work,

Aya handled the rest, and Kai directed the entire thing... Am I right, dear?"

She was, for the most part, so Kai had responded with a nod.

Eru heaved a deep sigh and then exploded. Pointing at Nanaka, she'd exclaimed, "Both your linework and color selection are terrible! It's not even close!"

Then, pointing at Aya, she yelled, "Your work is sloppy!"

Pointing at Aina next, Eru went on to say, "Your characterization is weak! You're terrible!"

And finally, her finger pointed to Kai as she concluded with, "And it's *your* job to point all of this out!"

Having barked at each of them, Eru then exhaled contentedly. But, of course... Whether or not her accusations of "You suck!" and "Your work is sloppy!" were true to any extent wasn't the real issue, as neither Aya nor Aina were the type to back off when there was someone picking a fight.

"Huuuh?!!!" The faux-angel's raven silk and the eccentric junkie's blonde twintails bent out of shape in sync with one another. They were perfectly in unison down to the enraged inflection of their voices, which shot up like a flare to signal the beginnings of war.

"Hey, what did you just say?" Aina demanded to know. "My characterization is weak? *My* characterization? You're telling me *my* acting is *weak*?"

"...Tch, I forgot you were so stupid that I needed to repeat myself," Eru observed mockingly.

"Ooooookay," Aina drawled back. "For the first time in my life, I just heard the sound of something snapping in the back of my head, so don't screw with me! What do you mean, '*weak*?!' This character was based off of *me* to begin with! It's me from middle school!"

"Huh?! My dear, *you* must be screwing with *me*!" Eru declared. "In the first place, this girl's name is Ai, and she has nothing to do with you!"

"You obviously just took the first half of 'Aina!'"

"Ai would never say something like that!"

“She would! Even I can say, ‘I’m sorry!’”

“Ai would only say, ‘Sorry!’”

“That’s only one word off!”

“Which makes all the difference in the world when it comes to characterization!” Eru crowed exultantly. “Dear me, you *suck!*”

“Oh! My! God! You said it again...!” screamed Aina, who was about to burst with anger.

“No, hold on,” Aya spoke up. “None of that really matters, okay? What’d you say? My work, *sloppy?* Huh? You better save the sleep talk for when you’re in bed. I didn’t mishear you, did I?”

Aina resumed, “Aya? I knooow you didn’t. I knoooooow you didn’t just say that what she said about me doesn’t matter. *Right?*”

Whoa, it spread, thought Kai. Once the ball began rolling, it wasn’t going to stop until it reached the bottom of the proverbial hill. It’d be a different story if there was someone willing to catch it, but when the ball was as thorny as these three were, it wasn’t something to get excited over. Even when the proverbial ball reached the bottom, it wasn’t like the spikes on it were going to disappear. Therefore, it was probably best to leave it alone.

He and Nanaka sighed together as if on cue and, after exchanging looks, left the room. Even after they’d quietly shut the door behind them, they could still hear the livid shouting match going on, as Aina, Eru, and Aya were completely oblivious to the fact that they’d slipped out.

“This looks like it might be an all-nighter,” Nanaka said, but couldn’t quite contain the happiness in her voice.

All-nighters weren’t exactly something to welcome with open arms, but Kai found himself smiling back and responding, “Yeah, it does.”

Before Kai and Nanaka left, they’d informed the latter’s mother (who was preparing dinner) of the circumstances upstairs, and that was actually only a moment ago. The room they’d left was probably still a war zone of insults.

“A long time ago, Eru told me this,” Nanaka began. Kai turned to his side to

see her tilting her head up longingly at the stars. With nostalgia in her voice, she continued on to say, “She said that she names every single one of the characters she draws. They’re like her family... or maybe her kids, I think. Whatever they are, they’re all priceless treasures for her... So, I’m sure it must have been shocking for her... and incredibly so.”

Kai wanted to say something, but unable to find the right words, he turned to the sky, as well. The summer night was a black so dark that it seemed like a hole with no bottom.

Eru may have been able to cry today. She may have been able to smile today. But either way, she wasn’t going to forget what happened on that day, which wasn’t going to disappear. Kai knew all of this about Eru because he was the same way. He was sure that the regret would sink to the bottom of her heart and hide away in a dim corner of her soul.

“But still...” As he spoke, Kai felt as if he was asking himself, *But still... what?* “But still... We have to press forward, even if we have to drag her along with us.”

“...Yeah.” Nanaka spoke softly as she repeated, “Yeah, you’re right.” Suddenly, she quickened her pace and stepped out in front of him with a soft, pure-hearted smile. “By the way, Kai-kun. Did you notice?”

“...Huh? Notice what?”

“Eru called everyone by their names for the first time,” she observed.

Oh. Now that you mention it... “Ha ha,” Kai laughed lightly as Nanaka returned to his side, and then glanced over at her to find that she happened to be doing the same. They continued walking without a word, but eventually could no longer hold it in and broke out into genial laughter as they strolled home.

They couldn’t help themselves—it was too funny.



They had less than a week before the day of the Summit results conference, and their daily schedule felt like every day was a club bootcamp. At first, they’d been meeting up at the clubroom in the morning and sticking around for as long as the school’s scheduled club hours allowed. After leaving campus, everyone

who could keep going would head to Kai's house. That said, other than Aina (who had missed a handful of days in order to help her grandmother), everyone was always present.

At some point in the middle of this lifestyle, Kai had noticed something. He noticed something, but couldn't say it out loud because it would shake the very foundation of 'club activity.'

However, there was now someone in the social game club who wouldn't hesitate to simply question her doubts out loud. "Hey, hold on. Do we even need to go to the clubroom? Can't we just start at Kai-kun's? Aren't we wasting our time on the train?" One day, as the gang exited the clubroom and stepped into the still-hot evening air, Aina flapped the hood of her jacket in the wind and brought up the untouchable topic. Kai could see her white collarbone peeking out from underneath her blouse and turned away, feeling like he'd seen something he shouldn't have.

Aina had probably made her statement just because she was hot. Kai had previously suggested that she remove the jacket she was wearing, but apparently it was important for avoiding sunlight and making sweater paws. Kai didn't understand the relevance of the second point, but according to Aina, it was of great importance.

"Kai-kun, if you don't mind..." Nanaka meekly asked, "Can we?"

That was unfair, he'd thought. Whether she was laughing or crying, his answer wouldn't change, but the way she'd asked hadn't left him any room to say no.

And so, now their days began with everyone coming to Kai's apartment in the morning and going home at night. They didn't have enough computers, so they all worked together to lug Eru's work PC out of the clubroom, which was Kai's main exercise for the summer.

However, there was still an issue with using Kai's house—or more accurately, an 'issue' currently visiting it.

"What's with the new character?!" Misako had asked, kicking the front door open to literally tumble inside while listlessly groaning about the heat. She'd begun shouting as soon as she hopped back up, although saying she'd 'hopped'

up might be an overstatement, as she'd really gotten up onto her hands and knees in order to arch her back.

Misako's statement had been directed toward Aina, and the indescribable look of pure disdain in her eyes as she'd looked down on his sister burned itself into Kai's memory.

Still, this was within expectations; in fact, Kai had been counting on it. To make a long story short, he wanted to enlist Misako's help: not as 'Shiraseki Kai's sister,' but as 'Shiraseki Misako, the novelist.'

However, Misako instantly shook her head, saying, "Nope, not happening."

"Wh-Why?" he'd asked.

"I'm not trying to be mean," she'd told him. "Kai, let me put it this way: the work of 'Shiraseki Kai' isn't just the best for this situation, it's a must. After all, I'm guessing this is your plan, right?"

"Yeah...?"

"Then that settles it. Don't get in my waaaaaaay!!!" shouting at the top of her lungs, Misako sprawled out onto the floor next to where Nanaka, Aya, Eru, and Aina were working and took a deep breath. "A nice smell plus a nice smell plus a nice smell equals the tastiest breath I've ever breeeaathed!!!"

This may seem redundant, but Aina's glare was, again, cold beyond what words can express. Misako seemed to sense this gaze, as she blinked once and leapt to her feet. Aina then suddenly returned to her senses, but didn't bother putting on her cutesy mask. *Perhaps she'd given up*, Kai reflected, *because it was too late*.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady," his sister said. "I'm Misako, Kai's older sister. My thanks for your stimulating gaze."

"...You're welcome. I'm Yozakura Aina. And *this* is... Kai-kun's sister?"

"Yes, indeed!" Misako exclaimed. "I'm also Nanaka-chan, Aya-chan, and Eru-chan's older sister in my heart! I can be your older sister, too, if you so please!"

"...Um, Aina-san," Kai said meekly. "Even if you look at me like that, I can't do

anything about her.”

“You ought to train your beast better,” spat Aina.

“That’s right, I’m a beast!” Misako agreed enthusiastically. “A poor beast, craving Aina-chan’s love! Oh! I ask of you! Won’t you call me ‘onee-chan’ just once?!”

“...Um, Aina-san,” Kai said meekly again. “Like I said, um, even if you look at me like that...”

“Hey,” Aina said with a massive sigh. “Does this brute know any tricks?”

“Tricks?” he questioned.

“Other than writing novels,” Aina clarified.

“.....I guess maybe the fact that she’s even louder and more of a nuisance than you’d think?” said Kai, hazarding a guess.

“Kaaaaaaaaai?!” Misako protested, “Aren’t you going a bit too far?! There’re other things you could’ve said there, like the fact that I always show up when it counts to hint at important advice!”

“So basically, you’re a nuisance?” Aina pressed.

“Well, she’s definitely loud,” Aya chimed in. “Oh, by the way, hi! I’m Oushima Aya. This is the first time we’ve met.”

“I find this incredibly vexing, but I agree with you,” Eru noted. “...Also, I’m Kuroba Eru.”

“How rude of me...!” Misako apologized. “I looked at the swimsuit photo so many times, I’d completely forgotten that we’ve never met! I won’t mind if you shower your new sister with adoration—Aina-chan? Why are we holding hands? Where are we going? That’s the front door, you know? Are we going shopping? A walk? Are we playing outside now?”

“Hey, Misako-san?” Aina asked menacingly. “Would you get mad if someone started singing an indecipherable song through a loudspeaker while you were trying to focus on a novel?”

“W-Well, I mean... yes?”

“Alright, then,” said Aina, dragging Misako by the hand toward the front door.

She was going to send her right back through the exit, Kai realized. There was only one thought in his mind, which was: *absolutely superb*.

In a fit of ecstasy, Misako muttered, “Ah, her fingers are so soft and slender, and yet so strong... M-My heart won’t stop throbbing...!” Kai couldn’t help but to hope that his sister would legitimately get herself hurled out the door.

They were three steps away. Three steps away from the front door, Misako returned to her senses and slammed on the brakes while screaming, “Stooooooooop!!!”

“No way, ♪” Aina purred without a shred of sympathy.

“L-Let’s talk it out!” Misako begged. “Aina-chan...!”

Outstanding, thought Kai, who had never seen his sister so overwhelmed in his life. Nanaka must have felt the same way, as she was watching the scene unfold with her mouth agape.

Mustering every gram of willpower in her body, Misako jumped... and prostrated herself on the floor. “I-I beg of you, please, wait...!”

“What?” asked Aina, through the smile plastered on her face.

“There be...” Misako uttered, her face still buried into the floor.

““There be’?”

“As wretched as ye may find me, there be a use for one such as I—Shiraseki Misako—to better the lives of every soul present!” Misako declared dramatically.

“You can help everyone?” Aina clarified.

“And that be... cooking!” announced Misako, springing back to both her life and her feet. “Japanese, Western, Chinese, Indian curries, and even the home-cooked taste of every mother in this country! I can do it all! I really can, I promise! So please, allow me the lowest seat of this banquet, here in this hidden paradise...!”

Misako openly displayed her exaggerated crocodile tears. Seeing the oldest

person in the room wail this pathetically managed to kill Aina's sense of hostility, and she gave way by saying, "Well... I guess if it tastes good..."

"But nee-san," Kai couldn't help but to interject, "isn't that a little... hopeless?"

"Hopeless?" Misako asked.

"Your cooking," he specified.

"Hehe," she chuckled with an infuriatingly smug look on her face. "Don't underestimate your big sister."

Kai could already see how things were about to pan out: Misako would pull up her sleeves (never mind the fact that she was wearing a t-shirt, because she'd still do the motion), and dash outside. All the while, she'd be shouting about securing ingredients. After a while, she'd return, drenched in sweat. The bags in her hands would be from the convenience store instead of the supermarket, and they'd be jam packed with cup noodles... or at least, that was how it was meant to go.

Kai's prediction had been right, up to the part where Misako left for groceries. Everything past that had been wrong in every way. The dinner Misako made them was nothing short of perfection.

"Thank you for the food! It tasted great!" said Nanaka, with a huge grin.

"I... could make... this..." Aina muttered, unable to accept the way things had played out.

"Pheew, that was delicious," Aya remarked blissfully.

"That was... satisfactory." Despite her curt reaction, Eru had eaten the most out of them all.

"Kai," Misako called. Kai had lost a round of rock-paper-scissors and was now washing dishes, writhing in discomfort as he surveyed the opinions of the room. His sister walked over to him and continued, "If I wasn't able to write novels, I'm sure this would have been my calling..."

"Your calling?" he asked suspiciously.

"A trivial job: I'd cook, deliver, and serve food to those four for the rest of my

life...” Misako said happily.

“...I see.”

“Hm? Did you not like the food, Kai?”

“No, that’s not... Honestly, it was shockingly good.” In truth, Kai was undoubtedly the most surprised out of everyone. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have a good reason to think Misako’s cooking skills were subpar. In all the time he’d spent with her since moving to Niigata, she hadn’t cooked for him a single time. She’d always found some excuse to eat out or grab a bento box.

Thus, Kai had assumed she couldn’t cook. But upon pressing for an explanation, all he received was a declaration of laziness: “It was just too much work! ☆” Misako proclaimed with a wink and peace sign.

Apparently, Misako had previously needed culinary experience to write out the details of a cooking scene. She had been able to taste the food in question by going out to eat, but that didn’t help her all that much when it came to writing about the process behind making it in the first place. So, she had decided to cook it herself.

Since then, Misako did the same anytime she had a cooking scene, and at some point she’d come to be remarkably skilled. At this point, she was capable of making pretty much anything.

“Let me give you a hand,” offered Misako, reaching for a dirty dish.

“It’s fine,” Kai replied. “It’s cramped over here.”

“But you’re not satisfied with my answer, right?” There was a small clattering sound as she began washing plates beside him. Misako didn’t turn his way, but it seemed that she’d seen right through him.

“...Do you not want to get involved because you’re a professional?” Kai ventured.

“That’s not it,” she demurred.

“Then, why?” he demanded, knowing that as the team had worked on the application which they were now slated to turn in for Summit, they had run into one major problem: the script.

Breaking the project down into simple terms, it was basically an app where the user was to read a story as they communicated with a character. It was going to be simple conversational phrases like you'd see on LIME, but they still needed some form of script.

In the world of social game management, larger teams (like the *LW* team at Tsukigase) often employed writers to exclusively work on scripts and dialogue. However, smaller social games frequently saw the planner doubling up as the scriptwriter.

The majority of the content currently being released in Meikun High's *Miracle Stage* had been written by one of Nanaka's friends in the literature club. Kai and Nanaka had taken charge of the flavor text and whatnot for all the miscellaneous items, but they didn't have any experience when it came to writing out a proper story. During his time managing *Rondo* at Tsukigase, Kai had relied on his team's writers for both the main and event stories, and never once did it himself.

"It's not like I want you to write it for us," Kai pleaded. "I just want you to look it over and make sure it's not too bad." As a matter of fact, that was the extent of what he *could* ask for. Whether the script was prose or software, it didn't change the fact that a direct contribution from an outsider was against Summit rules.

"You want me to point out typos for you?" Misako offered.

"No, I can just look that up," Kai refuted.

"Then there's nothing I can do."

"...If it's because we're just a bunch of kids—"

"That's not it." Like a mother reading a picture book, she repeated, "That's not it, Kai." Then, Misako chuckled playfully.

"This isn't a joke," chastised Kai.

"Alright, how about I give you the answer instead of a hint this time?"

"The answer?"

"Kai, you *have* to be the one to write it. That's the only answer here," Misako

told him plainly. “It’s not for me to supervise you, and it’s definitely not for anyone else to write it.”

“I don’t understand,” Kai muttered.

After finishing off her last plate, Misako wiped her hands down with a towel and placed them on her hips. “I’m not saying this as a joke,” she lectured. “You showed me your project plan. And now, this is my genuine opinion—not as your older sister, but as another creator.”

“...Can you explain what you mean?”

“You’re right in thinking that passing it through me will improve the structure and delivery—the overall quality of the writing,” she clarified. “I have confidence in my skills. But in all probability, that isn’t what’s needed here.” Misako’s hand slipped from her hips and extended out to pat Kai on the head, where it messily ran back and forth through his hair.

“Hey, what are you—”

“Your feelings, Kai. As long as your feelings are in it, it’ll be alright. Put your faith in your sister every now and again.”

Kai knew straight away that she wasn’t messing with him this time. That much was easy to tell; they were siblings, after all. That fact had caused him legitimate stress at points, but... when it came down to it, he always sincerely trusted her.

But... “Just so you know... I’m a planner, myself, so... I always put my feelings into my work,” he told her.

Kai’s retort begot a rare sight: Misako’s eyes went wide with surprise, and then she smiled happily. “I see. That’s fair. I apologize for suggesting otherwise, Kai.”

“...Kai-kun, do you have a sister complex?”

“Whoa!”

“‘Whoa’? Aww, that’s mean! ♪” Aina hummed. “Don’t treat me like a spooky ghost!” She’d appeared right behind Kai from out of nowhere, and for whatever reason, she was now back to her dainty persona.

“That’s right!” Misako announced, “Kai is incurably sick with a severe case of sister complex!”

“You shouldn’t,” Kai growled, slapping away the hand that had been left atop his head, “lie through your teeth like that!”

“I lied?” Misako protested.

“You did...”

“Really?”

Already sick of this exchange, Kai decided to ignore the teary, puppy-dog eyes his sister was making.

“So, Kai-kun, you’re writing the script?” Aina asked.

“...I am now,” he said.

“I see... Okay, I’ll pat your head, too. ♪”

“Wha—” With no time to duck away, Aina’s right hand made its way above his head. A feathery sense of weight rested on his skull as her fingers slipped through strands of his hair.

“Hey, Kai-kun...?” she said.

The hand on Kai’s head effectively meant he couldn’t move. He couldn’t turn away from Aina. Her large eyes and the long lashes that bordered them were clearer than usual. If he set his mind to it, he could probably count how many she had.

Even though he knew she was only pretending to be a sweet angel, her faint, gentle expression threatened to melt his heart away. With a soft smile, she told him, “If you’re adding voice lines, there’s a lot of work on my end, too. ♪ C’mon, if you’ve got time to think perverted things about me, then hurry up and finish the script. Got it?”

“.....Y-Yes ma’am...” At some point, the hand in his hair had begun squeezing. The dichotomy between her faux-innocent face and her real-vicious words could only be described in one word: *terrifying*.

Chapter 17: Kongouin Mirei's Glorious Victory

That had been the last moment they could afford to spend goofing off. From here on, the team's development cycle became a living hell.

Their one saving grace was the fact that Aya had been working in advance to finish off the parts they needed for the app they'd shown Eru. Even then, they needed to remake all of the graphics from scratch, and Kai's lack of familiarity with creative writing led the script to disaster. It went so poorly that he'd wanted to abandon his post and flee, but Aina soon had fixed his head to his laptop with an iron grip.

When he tried to play some social games as a change of pace, he was met with, "How many words have you written?"

When he tried to get up to grab a drink, he was met with, "How many words have you written?"

And even when he tried to go to the restroom, he was met with, "How many words have you written?"

It went without saying that Aina had been smiling as she said all this, but her adorable, featherlike little flower of a face hid a dark pit of sinister malice underneath. At one point, she had hummed, "You won't find any answers by gazing into my eyes, ♪" and jabbed Kai's eyes out, legitimately knocking him out cold.

However, that hadn't been enough to get Kai's fingers typing. He went into the kitchen to ask Misako (now clad entirely in white like a personal chef) for help, and was met with a line straight out of a battle manga. "Think back!" she told him grandly. "Remember your impetus!!!"

She's probably viewing herself as a character in some sort of culinary battle story, Kai guessed.

Humans were simple creatures and prone to obedience in times of great trouble, so Kai retraced the initial trigger for his idea. He held meaningless—

well, obviously there was *some* meaning in it—conversations with Nanaka over LIME. It might not exactly have been an ‘impetus,’ but this was where his plan had originally come to life.

These conversations worked perfectly. Kai was so nervous and awkward that their messages ended up being a bit stilted, but they still served to help him identify important qualities: the fun, ticklish sensation of chatting over LIME despite being right beside one another, and the swelling joy in his gut whenever he got a notification, were indispensable.

I need to write the script like I’m talking to Nanaka, Kai realized, and lined the story with the ideal moments he wished to experience with Nanaka in real life. The pace at which he worked was by no means fast, but once he had his objective in sight, he managed to chug along without pause.

Meanwhile, Eru blitzed through the character artwork all at once, while Nanaka handled the UI, touched up on Eru’s work, and finished off other miscellaneous art assets. Aya churned out features one after another, and Aina recorded her lines as soon as Kai finished writing them.

They created, implemented, and tested. Then they’d find something wrong and create, implement, and test again, only to find another strange issue, so they’d create, implement...

Fun and hardship blended together to make the days pass by in the blink of an eye. In the end, they continued working until the due date—9:00 am, on the day they were slated to head to Tokyo.

“Hey,” Aina called out to Kai as he was listing everyone’s names in the final credits. “Don’t put my full name in there.”

“Aina-san...” he said slowly.

“For now, I’m okay with you guys being the only ones to know.” Her eyes grew soft and she smiled as she corrected herself, saying, “In fact, I like it better that way.”

Kai had seen Aina smile plenty of times before, with both the mask of an angel and the smirk of a devil. But this was the first time he’d seen something so refreshingly pure, without a trace of shadow lingering nearby.

She was simply listed as being 'Aina' in the credits, and that concluded their work.

Everyone had stayed over with hardly a wink of sleep for the last two days, so Kai's living room looked like a desecrated battlefield. It would have been pure bliss if they could sleep like bricks now, but they didn't have the time. Instead, each of them stopped by home to change into their uniforms and immediately hopped aboard a bullet train.

There were no "Good job's" or "Man, that was rough's" exchanged between them. Everyone was clocked out for the entire two-hour train ride; there was nobody to speak or be spoken to. Besides, they hadn't finished anything yet.

They switched over to the Chuo Line at Tokyo Station to head for Shinjuku, just like before. Five minutes before the judging began, the group reached the familiar private school to find that many of the other schools' students had already taken their seats in the giant, university-style lecture hall.

"Good day to you!" A shrill voice rang out as soon as the Meikun squad found their assigned seats. "Ohohoho!"

"...Kongouin-san," said Kai, greeting their opponent wearily.

"Indeed! I am Kongouin! Kongouin Mirei!"

You don't have to repeat your name so often, Kai grumbled internally. *I know it*. In his current condition, Mirei's high-pitched voice pierced straight into his brain, so all he wanted was for her to be quiet.

"Well, well, well? What's this?" she asked mockingly. "You look positively *awful*. Upon further inspection, that goes for the rest of your lot, as well. Could it be that you'd been working on your submission into the morning?"

"...Yeah, something like that," he admitted. "Anyway—" *Talking to you is exhausting, so could you leave us be?* would have been Kai's next words, but he was cut off by Mirei's short, sharp claps.

Her lanky, mushroom-headed attendant appeared before them. "Here you are," the boy said, slithering in front of each of them. His movements were disgusting enough to cause his onlookers physical discomfort, but he had placed a small glass bottle in front of each of the Meikun High students. It was the

same brown glass used for convenience store energy drinks, except there was no label on it.

“A creator’s body is her greatest capital!” Mirei declared. “This is Kongouin’s own secret recipe! One dose of this energy drink will blow away a mere two-or three-night’s lack of sleep for at least half a day!”

“...You’re giving this to us?” Kai questioned.

“I should find it quite boorish to be later told that we only won because our opponents were not in peak condition,” Mirei declared airily. “I must ask that you be in top form.”

“We already turned in our app, though, so it’s not like drinking this now’d do anything,” Aya pointed out.

Kongouin Mirei let out a sharp gasp and her eyes went wide. Everything about her body language gave off the impression that she hadn’t even considered that fact.

She’s a lot less put together than I thought, Kai noted. “W-Well,” he said reassuringly, “there’s a question-and-answer portion during the judging, so thank you.”

“O-O-O-Of course! That is precisely why I so generously offered you this gift!” said Mirei, puffing up her chest as she tried to force in her own good word.

Unlike the last time she’d appeared, Mirei had not mounted Kinoyama. Owing to her short size (again, she was as small as Aya), she looked like a grade schooler, beaming with pride that she’d been able to buy groceries on her own.

“Oh, *God*, that’s bad! Bleeegh...” Aya instantly spat out after a sip. “Nana-sen,” she gasped. “Tea! Gimme some tea!”

“Hey!” Mirei exclaimed. “Refrain yourself from regurgitating my kindness back into the bottle!”

“Oh dear, this is awful...” Eru muttered.

“I-It’s really bitter,” Nanaka agreed. Then she added, “But thanks, Kongouin-san.”

Everyone’s opinions spurred Kai on with a morbid curiosity, causing him to

take the bottle into his own hands. He twisted off the metal cap and brought it up to his nose to get a sharp whiff of chemical odor.

The truth was that Kai had been a regular user of energy drinks like these in his time working on *Rondo* over at Tsukigase. As a result, he had thought everyone's clamoring was just them being picky. From his own personal experience, he divided energy drinks into two groups: the first was expensive, effective, but short-lived, and the second was cheaper and more moderate in its effect, but lasted longer (or at least, Kai thought so). He'd seen differing opinions online, so he knew his own to be subjective.

Now then, Kai thought, taking a sip... *Well, that's new*. He felt as though someone had stuffed his mouth full with raw herbs. It was like someone had gone out and plucked the leaves of the greenest, most medicinal plants they could find, ground them up, boiled them, and stuffed the result into a bottle. And that was the remarkably *wild* flavor assaulting his tongue.

But they'd probably thought that wouldn't taste good enough, because it was also sweet. It was *obscenely* sweet. They had probably looked at royal jelly and figured they'd dump a ton of honey into the solution, but this caused the mixture to become uncomfortably viscous to the point that Kai could only just barely drink it. Even then, each mouthful was less of a chug and more of a gulp. The dense combination of bitter and sweet clung to his tongue and throat as it slid into his stomach.

Okay... this is bad, he concluded.

"...Woow," Aina mused. She held the bottle in her fingertips, swinging it back and forth to play with the liquid inside.

"My, are you not going to do me the honor of drinking my gift?" Mirei asked her. "It is also perfectly suited to help you maintain your beauty."

"Ummm," Aina hesitated cutely. "I just figured that you should drink it instead of me."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Mirei demanded.

"Look under your eyes... You're not fooling anyone. ♪" Aina pointed to Mirei's face. Upon further inspection, there were light bags present. The fact that they

were visible at all in spite of the concealer hiding them indicated that Mirei was just as bruised and battered as the Meikun crowd.

“...How observant of you,” Mirei admitted.

“Hm? Hold on,” Aina said, pressing further. “Umm, I don’t know if I’m misremembering... but you seemed like you had it pretty easy back during your livestream, right? That means you must’ve been working all morning too! We’re twinning! ♪” She put her honeyed voice to work, lathering every word with provocation.

“Hmph,” Mirei lightly scoffed in contempt before calling for her mushroom-boy. “Kinoyamaaa!”

“At your ready!” he shouted, sliding headfirst into the scene with propped up arms and legs to become his lady’s pedestal.

Mirei stepped atop him, folding her arms and puffing up her chest as she went. “...Indeed, I shan’t deny it. I wasn’t particularly attempting to hide my exhaustion—it’s just that to appear beautiful is akin to our brand of courtesy, after all,” she pointed out.

“There is no such thing as ‘taking it easy’ in this world. True pursuit knows no end,” she continued. “Just as you all drove yourselves to the brink this morning, we, too, offered everything we had in our quest for perfection. That is all there is to it... Oh, I’m sorry,” Mirei said suddenly, turning to Kai. “I fear I’ve spoken too much... ‘Speak with your output,’ was it? At this point, I believe that ought to suffice.”

“...I agree,” Kai replied, naturally locking eyes with the haughty girl. He found himself stuck in a staring contest, as neither side was willing to be the first to turn away.

But then, a loud *thud, thud, thud* began to sound outside, and culminated in the lecture hall doors bursting open. Kai saw the same tattered jeans, accompanied by the same leather jacket, with yet another anime character peeking out from a t-shirt underneath. Hifumi Tetsuya’s bald head and shoulders cut through the air, and his sunglasses shone as he solemnly made his way up to the front of the room.

Upon stepping to the podium, he removed his shades and snorted at the sea of students in front of him. After lording over them for a moment, his lips twisted into a gratified sneer and he announced, “Alrighty, let’s hurry up and get to the judging. There’s a lot of you, so we’re gonna be quick about this... Hm.”

Suddenly, Tetsuya froze in place. His wrinkly, unhealthy eyes swam around in thought as he put his hand to his chin with a groan of contemplation. With his free hand, Tetsuya pulled a crumpled cigarette from out of his pocket, which he then placed into his mouth.

“It’s gonna be a pain if you throw a fit later, so let me get this out of the way,” he announced. “Listen up: I know they’re calling this a ‘judging’ or a ‘critique’ or whatever, but it’s not that big of a deal. Simply put, the winner will be whichever game suits my taste better—whichever game *I like better*. That’s it.

“You might be thinking, ‘What the hell is this guy on about?’ but that’s how it is,” he went on. “I mean, we’ve got a giant mix of different genres, themes, and target audiences here in the first place. Would you be able to accept some numerical score on your game? Well, if any of you dare to waste my time with something that’s obviously not up to snuff, I’ll chew you out all you want.”

He took a moment to survey the crowd and suck on the unlit cigarette. “...Pwaah. So, my point is, don’t worry about it too much. Er, I guess you can worry all you like, but lemme add some disclaimers for you: first is that, if you win, you just so happened to make a game that I ended up liking. So, don’t get it twisted around. And if you lose—as long as it’s not a flaming pile of garbage—you just so happened to miss the mark on what kind of game I like. So, don’t get that twisted, either. Think of me like a self-proclaimed game critic who dropped a review for your game in your comments section.” After another pause, he said, “That’s it for the intro. Any questions?”

Everyone present had come too far to ask anything now. And thus, the judging began. Once again, a giant screen came down from the ceiling above the podium, and the projector mirrored the display on Tetsuya’s smartphone. All the apps from every school had already been installed, and he went through them all in the same order as the initial drawing.

Tetsuya himself seemed to be going in blind, having not played any of the games prior to this moment. The students were allowed to speak up at any point during their game's presentation. Some chose to offer supplementary information, while others waited to answer one of Tetsuya's unpredictable questions.

Meikun and Kongouin had been paired at the very end of the drawing ceremony, so they were going to be the closing act, and Kai's anxiety was through the roof. To begin with, only the top performing schools had been invited to be here. All of the apps shown thus far had been high-quality products, regardless of genre, and each passing presentation caused the terrible worry in Kai's body to grow and grow.

Kai and his team had done everything they could, and he'd felt a definite sense of accomplishment when they had uploaded their final submission. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if it was going to be enough.

Despite what he'd said, Tetsuya had yet to chew anybody out—perhaps owing to the surprisingly high level of work on display. He seemed bored, but nothing had made him lash out at a lack of quality. Kai knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help but pray that one of the clubs before theirs would get beaten to a pulp so that the bar wouldn't be so high.

When it came to the members of Meikun High's social game club, Kai couldn't vouch for all of their characters, but their skill was undeniable. And he'd spent his fair share of time at Tsukigase, so he knew they lined up with the top talent. They were all incredible.

If their work was stamped down into the dust... well, the person who came up with the whole thing had been *him*, Shiraseki Kai. He had watched as their output continuously exceeded his wildest expectations, giving birth to new ideas and specifications. He knew he'd been troubling Eru, Aya, Nanaka, and Aina as he did so, but he'd never stopped reaching for higher heights—and the time they'd spent doing so had been great fun.

However, fun didn't guarantee a good result. The real question was, had they been *correct*? Kai didn't know if there was such a thing as 'correct,' but he still wondered if they had really been reaching for higher heights. This was

something that they'd all made together; it was something that they'd all decided on together. A rejection of their work wouldn't be the personal responsibility of Shiraseki Kai alone; it was the team's responsibility. He knew that. He'd known that. He was completely aware of the fact.

But the beginnings of this proposal had laid inside of himself, and that scared him.

"Kai-kun," said Nanaka, her faint whisper drawing him back to reality. In the seat beside him, she mouthed, "Let's do our best," with a bright, yet evasive smile.

Since they were sitting right next to each other, Kai knew right away what she was avoiding. He saw Nanaka's hand tighten into a solid fist on her lap, packed tight with all of her nervousness. At a time like this, her bright kindness was painfully blinding. *Everyone's the same*, Kai reflected. *Focusing on myself like this makes me look so stupid.*

"Alriiight, last one," Hifumi Tetsuya said, turning to the Meikun students. "The final pair is Kongouin Academy and Meikun High School. The theme was... 'Character' and 'Breath.'"

"Yes!" Nanaka responded, rising from her seat.

"That shall do," Mirei affirmed, doing the same.

The plan was for Nanaka, in her capacity as the club president, to handle the question-and-answer session. Kai would only break in to explain anything she needed help with.

"Okay, let's start with Kongouin," said Tetsuya, and the corresponding app appeared on the projector. The Kongouin Academy logo appeared over a pitch-black loading screen, and then quickly disappeared as the dark slowly gave way like a car exiting a tunnel, incrementally gaining speed as it transitioned into brightness.

The incoming light carved the silhouette of a running girl from out of the blackness, which was running directly toward the player. Accompanied by a prismatic rainbow of light, she sprinted with all her might toward the position of the fixed camera, eventually running past it.

The moment she passed by the camera, a tired panting could be briefly heard, but then quieted as she ran farther and farther away. The camera swiveled and began to give chase, the sharp turn blasting away any remnant of darkness. Now, the screen displayed the girl's back as she ran. Every step she took caused a polychromatic ripple in her wake, giving color to the world around her. Her windblown hair, her body, her shadows, and even the townscape around her grew clearer, until the title, 'RUN GIRL,' floated up into view, just where her back had been.

The scene was masterful. The initial cutscene alone caused a number of students from other schools to be taken aback—almost to the point of disgust. The character and scenery had all been rendered in 3D, and the quality of their graphics was overwhelmingly beautiful. It was as if the app itself was shouting out to the heavens: *this* is Kongouin.

"Hoo boy," Hifumi Tetsuya rubbed his chin and nodded his head a few times. "The looks aren't so bad."

"Ohohoho!" Mirei gloated, "It is indubitably so! Is it not our victory?!"

"I didn't say that," he snapped. "God, you're noisy."

"Oh my, how rude of me! Please, do go on and enjoy the rest of our game!" With her spirits high, Mirei's head tilted similarly upward as she shot her opponents a sideways glance, loudly snapping her folding fan open as if to declare herself the victor.

When Tetsuya tapped on his phone, the title faded away and the game began seamlessly. In simple terms, the game was a standard endless runner; the user controlled the 3D girl who had been shown earlier, running forward while also avoiding obstacles. Swiping left and right moved the character, while pulling down slowed the character's movement. Flicking up caused her to jump. The farther one ran, the higher their score. It was a simple game, but the beauty of the graphics took everyone's breath away.

But there was one more thing. This game had a certain gimmick, which had probably been added to fulfill the 'Breath' component: so long as the player managed to successfully avoid the obstacles in their path, the character continuously sped up. As she sped up, her panting grew heavier and heavier,

and her response time for commands like jumping became sluggish. By manually slowing her down, the player could let her catch her breath. Instead of a typical energy bar, this game relied on the main character's panting—that is to say, her 'Breath'—to convey how much stamina the player had.

Thanks to the lack of UI elements cluttering the screen, the beautiful graphics stretched to fill the entirety of the user's vision. Kongouin's means of handling the constraints given to them also served to highlight their greatest strength; even as their opponent, Kai couldn't help but marvel at their ingenuity.

"I see..." Tetsuya remarked. "Your solution for the prompt is very direct."

"The path we take is none other than the royal road!" Mirei declared. "We have no need for petty tricks!"

"But I'm a pretty messed up guy," Tetsuya reminded her. "That just makes me wanna tell you that it's boring because there isn't any twist."

"B-Boredom and fun have nothing to do with how we interpret the prompts!" Mirei protested.

"Huh? You know this is a *game*, right? Don't you think its fun-factor is important?"

"Th-That is a mere sophism!"

"It's not a sophism," Tetsuya told her coldly. "Like I told you, I'm just saying whatever I want. Well, whatever. It's not like your way of thinking is wrong, either. This 'royal road' of yours feels more like a tidy little alleyway, but I'll admit that it's pretty." With that last remark, Tetsuya decided he was finished with Kongouin's critique. "Alright," he said, closing the game. "Here's the very last one. Meikun, you're up."

"Y-Yes!" Nanaka replied with a wavering voice.

"But, man..." Tetsuya began to grumble but caught himself. "Well, whatever."

Kai knew where he was coming from. The cause of his concern was probably the app's icon. It was a white speech bubble surrounded by green, with the word LIKE typeset in the middle. Being only a single letter off from LIME, it was hard to tell the difference at a glance—in fact, the icon had been an exact copy

of LIME until late into development, where the team figured they ought to at least change one letter.

“...Hm?” Tetsuya mumbled.

Kai knew where his confusion came from, too. Tetsuya had tapped on the icon and was probably wondering why the app wasn't opening. The truth was that the app was designed to display a smartphone's home screen the first time it was launched. It was the usual display, lined with icons, with the time, cell power, wi-fi signal, and battery percentage listed along the top.

However, after three seconds or so of confusion, a pop-up notification appeared. It contained a brief notice that everyone had seen before: 'New message available.'

When Tetsuya tapped the notification, he was taken to the chat window where the only thing he was asked to input was his name. The girl's text plainly read, 'Are you awake?' The audience could tell she was a girl thanks to Eru's artwork, which was sitting in the icon slot.

Instead of a keyboard, tapping on the message window at the bottom yielded a set of multiple-choice stamps that read, 'Good morning,' 'It's noon,' and 'I'm sleeping.' The rest was simple. The player selected one of the options and conversed with her. Every decision changed some back-end parameters, which then changed the way the user interacted with the girl.

For example, she might switch from using the user's last name to their first name. The player might figure out her interests through her peculiar preference in stamps. The user's options might change from 'I'm sleeping' to a more casual 'Zzz.' The girl might send pictures or videos. All of this culminated in their relationship changing and the gap between them closing.

With absolutely no experience writing a proper story, Kai had ultimately been forced to open the drawers of his own mind. The happy, itchy feeling in his heart when Nanaka first called his name and the unforgettable smile on her face when he reciprocated in kind; he took the precious memories locked in his heart and crammed as many of them into the game as he could.

That was all there was to it. Honestly, Kai felt like he couldn't even call his work a “story,” as it was merely a reproduction of his experiences with Nanaka.

He wouldn't be able to defend himself against anyone who said as much, but this was the only thing he could drag out of his soul. If it wasn't enough to get the message through, then there was nothing more that he could have done. After all, that's how brilliantly these fragments of memory shone to him.

After the chatting continued for a while and certain flags were set, the girl finally brought up the topic of fireworks. There were scenarios where the user invited her and others where the girl invited the user that varied according to past interactions, but either way, in the end, the phone began ringing.

The only thing displayed was her name and the call time.

"Are you awake?" Aina's voice repeated the same words that the game began with. Her timbre was ticklish to the ear. There were different lines based on the user's previous choices, but ultimately all the voice work was restricted to this one scene.

"Are you really okay with this?" It was only natural that Aina had raised her concerns during development. She'd pouted, clearly unhappy with how things had played out. "Why not make more use of Aya's 2D to 3D tech? It's crazy good, right? We could make that the main dish, like a video app or something. Can't we just do what we're doing now, but change the focus to video-calls?"

Her doubts had been well-founded, as the software Aya had come up with was a teensy bit baffling. Kai couldn't just *not* use it, though, so he'd included it for the videos that the character sent, though there weren't many of them.

A logical counterpoint would have been to say that the ridiculously advanced technology also required an equally ridiculous amount of art assets. There was only so much they could do in the short time they had... But that wasn't the answer Kai had given.

The trigger for this plan had been Kai's correspondence with Nanaka. Aya's program might have been the way to go, quality-wise. But he had the feeling that it would stray from the epiphanic moment that brought him here. All he had been able to offer was the vague explanation that, "I'm not trying to convey a feeling you can see."

"...I see," Aina had replied shortly. "Well, I'm fine with that. If that's the answer you came up with after racking your brain as our planner, then I'll

believe in you. Just you watch: I'll show you what I've got with a single word."

Aina hadn't seemed totally convinced, but the fact that she *believed in him* led Kai to harden his own resolve. Her words may have been the anchor that kept him grounded till the end.

Finally, the game concluded when the girl sent a picture of herself with fireworks in the sky behind her.

".....Hrmm..." Hifumi Tetsuya folded his arms, knocked his head back toward the ceiling, and let out a low, beastlike groan.

Is he on the fence for our results? Kai wondered. In this competition, critique wasn't the only thing Tetsuya had to offer: he needed to choose a winner between Meikun's app and Kongouin's. He had to decide whose app was more excellent, whose was more suited for victory. It was plain for all to see that the two works had gone in completely different directions, so it was no wonder he was confused. Kai wouldn't have been able to come to a conclusion at all.

What is he going to—

In the middle of Kai's thought, Tetsuya snapped his head back down and announced, "Meikun High wins."

The brevity of his delivery dumbfounded Kai with shock to the point that he momentarily had trouble understanding what had been said.

Meikun High... That's our school.

Wins... That denotes victory.

We... won. He said we won.

Nanaka had simultaneously gone through the same train of thought. Kai turned up to catch her gaze and saw that both her eyes and mouth were wide open in surprise, and realized that his face probably looked the same. *We did it!* he wanted to exclaim, but an angry, spear-like howl cut through the air, aimed directly toward the podium.

"I cannot accept this...!!!" Kongouin Mirei declared, snapping her fan shut and pointing its tip directly at Tetsuya, in order to pierce him with her animosity.

"...Well, I figured as much," he said, scratching the back of his head. He let out

a profoundly annoyed sigh and pointed his resentful gaze toward—Kai, for whatever reason. Kai locked eyes with Tetsuya before he even had a chance to look around and make sure the comment was being aimed at him.

“Meikun High,” Tetsuya said.

“Yes?!” Nanaka practically jumped as she answered.

“Ah, not you. The boy sitting next to you,” he clarified. “You.”

“Y-Yes...?” Kai rose to his feet.

“Yeah, you,” Tetsuya nodded. With a devilish grin, he said, “This has got to be foul play. What, did you want to pull off a once-in-a-lifetime self-destruction?”

“U-Um,” Kai stammered, “I don’t understand.”

“Huh? You were the one that made this plan, right?”

“Yes,” Kai admitted. “But, um... How did you know it was me?”

“No way... You’re telling me you *didn’t* do this on purpose?” Tetsuya asked incredulously.

On... purpose? Kai wondered. He had no idea what was being said to him, or why he was being called out, or even how Tetsuya had figured out that it was his plan. With so many questions, Kai’s processing power was reaching its limit. He glanced over at Nanaka, but that only led them to tilt their heads in confusion together. *I don’t get it.*

Seeing their reaction, Hifumi Tetsuya exploded into laughter. There was no performance here; he was in hysterics. With his hands on his sides, he desperately wheezed for air. “Wow, that’s terrible!” he cried. “Alright, consider this the price you pay for winning. Get ready, kid.”

Kai couldn’t have nodded along if he wanted to. What was he meant to get ready for? He considered the possibility that he’d done something wrong, but in that case Meikun wouldn’t have won the contest.

“You, what’s your name?”

“Sh-Shiraseki Kai, sir.”

“Kai, eh? Lemme ask: did you get your crush’s LIME contact, happily chat

away with her, do a little dance when she sent you a picture, and then get invited out to go see some fireworks?”

“.....Huh?” Kai asked, dumbfounded.

“What I’m *saying*—ah God, this is embarrassing,” Tetsuya briefly paused to mutter to himself. “What I’m saying is that this game is basically a love letter to the girl you like.”

When truly frightened, humans tend to turn away from reality. In Kai’s case, a bunch of pointless things ran across his mind. On the last day of their development, Nanaka’s head had kept dipping up and down as she nodded off due to their all-nighters, and Kai thought that had been very cute. Aina had been pouting at her lack of work. Aya and Eru had been acting like children, kicking at one another from underneath the table, and he had tried (and failed) to pacify them, but that caused Nanaka to laugh. The tangential memories drifted to mind, one by one.

Kai’s mind was not calm. The term danced around in a corner of his head: *love letter, a romantic message*. He’d also seen it called an *epistle of adoration* in a game at some point, but that didn’t matter now. If he were to crack open a dictionary, he was sure “love letter” would be defined as a form of written communication to convey affection and yearning.

It was true that Aya had seen through the fact that Nanaka was the model the project had been based on. But Kai had figured that was only because they were in the same club, and Aya knew what kind of person he was.

Apparently, he had been wrong. The beginning of this game was his correspondence with Nanaka. The half-baked ‘story’ he’d written all came from things he’d talked about with Nanaka. That was it.

“*Your feelings, Kai. As long as your feelings are in it, it’ll be alright.*” The meaning of his hopeless sister’s advice finally sank in.

“I mean, well,” Tetsuya resumed, “It’s nothing special. It’s actually pretty common for creators to make a work dedicated to a specific person. So, I’m not judging you off of that. But that you went ahead and made it *this* obvious in a game that you were showing *me*... Pisses me off.”

Kai did his best to reassemble his scrambled brain, and despite his failure to do so, he managed to reply, "...What does?"

"*You* do, Shiraseki Kai. I was over here thinking you knew about my plan to become a grand wizard among wizards when you came up with this idea, but you're just an airhead!" Tetsuya told him. "Don't fuck with me!"

"Wizard...?" Kai asked, befuddled.

"Yeah? You don't even know that? If a man stays a virgin past his thirtieth birthday, he gets to be a wizard," Tetsuya had to explain.

It wasn't as if anyone had been speaking in the first place, but the entire auditorium was now at a loss for words. Kai couldn't help but ask himself, *What the hell is this guy saying?*

Tetsuya didn't seem to mind at all as he continued, "The issue is this part that pisses me off. You see, I was bored out of my damn mind. Near the middle of the judging, I was close to losing it and storming off, but work is work; I grit my cigarette and pushed through. Every last one of you built up some neat and tidy bullshit, and it's all boring as hell. I'm gonna forget all of this by tomorrow; I won't remember a single one of you. But at the very last moment, *you* came prancing along."

Tetsuya took a drag out of his wrinkled, unlit cigarette and smiled from the bottom of his heart. "Good for you, Shiraseki Kai. Among all the people in this lecture hall, you're the only one who made me remember your name. That's why you won."

"Hold it right there!" It was only natural that Mirei would cut in. A single conversation with her was enough to know that she was not the type to back down here.

"Man, this Kongouin brat sure can holler," Tetsuya observed.

"I cannot accept defeat under a reason such as this!" Mirei insisted again.

"Geez, shut up. What, 'Our game had better graphics, more action, more gameplay, and higher quality, so our game should win!' Is that what you want to say? Well, Meikun's work *was* really plain for the most part..." Tetsuya admitted. "But the tech they used in their video messages was kind of insane."

“B—” After stuttering once, Mirei tightened her will, declaring, “But still! I object!”

“You must think your work was perfect,” Tetsuya observed dryly. “How young. Well, you need that kind of bent in this industry, but... Alright, how about this! Instead of telling you why they won, I’ll explain why you lost... Sound good?”

“I would have it no other way!”

Tetsuya heaved a massive sigh. He lifted up the index and middle fingers on his right hand and pinched his cigarette for a drag, after which he brought the same two fingers out in front of him. “Two points. They’re sort of the same thing, but, well, two points.”

“Hmph,” Mirei puffed. “Then may I ask you to share your wisdom?”

“The first is the panting gimmick,” Tetsuya told her. “I know one of your themes was ‘Breath,’ so it may have seemed like you found a clever solution. But yours was no good.”

“W-Why is that?!”

“I don’t mind having a stamina system or some other gameplay limitation. Otherwise, the game would be too simple. But integrating sound as a gameplay element means that ‘being able to hear’ becomes a prerequisite to play... Do you think you could play this game when your phone’s on silent?” Tetsuya pointed out. “Like I said before we began, I’m judging off of my personal preferences. And my preference is that—console games aside—I don’t like these kinds of gimmicks in mobile games. Well, maybe you could still manage to play, but would it be anywhere close to how fun it’s supposed to be?”

Mirei had no time to cut in, as Tetsuya quickly continued, “That was your first fatal mistake. And the second... This one’s not exactly present in your work, but just a bit of my own conjecture... You completely overhauled the specifications of this game in the middle of development, didn’t you?”

“W-Why on earth would you think that?” Despite choking on her words, Mirei pushed through the restless feeling growing inside her. However, the panic in her voice was all the evidence he needed.

“I have a feeling this game was supposed to be something you showed off in VR. It was going to be an app where you ran alongside a beautiful character to see some beautiful scenery.”

“Wha—”

“Looks like I’m spot on,” Tetsuya observed. “I’ve been studying up on VR recently myself, so I picked up on a few of the idiosyncrasies in the camera movement. But in that case... it’s all the more disappointing. Geez, I would’ve rather seen you swing and miss. It would’ve been forgivable if the reason you gave up on VR was because of a lack of experience or time, but it looks like you’ve been experimenting with it quite a bit, if your livestream was anything to go by. So that can’t be it.”

“...You watched our livestream?” Mirei asked incredulously.

“Duh, you left a VOD of it up on your channel,” Tetsuya scoffed. “I do my work properly, and not just for you; I’ve checked through most of the past work and accomplishments of every team here. But right now, we’re talking about you. You overhauled your game mid-development. You changed it by throwing out VR and adding a shallow gameplay system... probably because of the criticism in your comments section, bashing how poorly your games played. Don’t you think that’s a bit flimsy? Don’t just bend your will over like that.” Though his final words were spoken softly, they carried a passion that echoed in the core of everyone who heard them.

After sucking on his cigarette once more, Tetsuya waited a moment before he added, “Well, that’s my reason... Regardless of whether you were aware of it or not, that kid,” he said, pointing to Kai, “stayed true to himself, and you folded on something precious. That’s the biggest difference between you two. Don’t you think that’s more than enough for you to lose this match?”

Tetsuya’s question brought all the eyes in the audience onto Mirei. She opened her mouth to answer, but finding no words, she closed it again. This was, no doubt, utterly humiliating. Mirei’s tiny body trembled and her frowning face flushed a bright pink. She was holding herself back at the precipice of explosion.

Had he been one second slower, Mirei surely would have broken into tears.

“Mirei-samaaa!!!” Kinoyama shouted, again sliding headfirst into the walkway as if that was the natural course of action.

“Kinoyama,” a whisper escaped her lips as her trembling rage gave way to surprise. She opened her fan wide to hide her face and took a deep breath. Then, with even more pomp than usual, she stepped out into the walkway and onto the back of the groveling Kinoyama.

After glancing at the Meikun team, Mirei stared down Hifumi Tetsuya on the podium. “This contest... is our loss!” After the brusque proclamation, she went through the familiar routine of calling, “Kinoyama!” and riding her steed out the door.

However, perhaps the boy moved more vigorously than she’d anticipated, or otherwise she was simply too tired to maintain her grip. Just as she passed by her opponents and her piercing glare made contact with Kai, her fan slipped out of her fingers. Her mouth opened in surprise and she looked back over her shoulder to see it fall, but Kinoyama continued onward without noticing a thing. The two of them flew out of the lecture hall with great momentum.

Kai picked up the fan only to be struck with awe. The quality of the materials was staggering: he was amazed by what seemed to be peacock feathers, but the real gemstones that sparkled along the handle were even more amazing.

There’s no way they’d leave without it, Kai thought. But... he also couldn’t quite imagine them coming back. If he’d been in their shoes, he wouldn’t have been able to come back—that was out of the question. And he couldn’t leave this fan that cost who-knows-how-much lying around.

“Kai-kun,” Nanaka urged him with a nod.

Kai got up, holding the fan with both hands (God forbid the thing break on his way there) to go rushing after the Kongouin duo. He caught no sight of them in the hallway outside the lecture hall. However, when he looked at the elevator in the middle of the hall, he observed its lamp switching from the second floor to the first. Knowing that he wouldn’t make it in time if he waited for it to come back up, he flew down the stairwell to his right.

Once Kai got out to the entrance hall, he knew where they were, straight away. He heard that unforgettable, shrill voice now drowning in a sea of tears.

“Oh, we’ve lost, oh, we’ve lost, oh, we’ve lost!!!” Mirei wailed. “Kinoyamaaaa! We’ve lost because of *my* decision!!!”

The two of them were along the wall beside an unpopulated hallway. Kinoyama, nearly two meters tall, had been pushed up against the wall, and Mirei was pounding away at him (and not the wall) with clenched fists. Mirei only had the same 140-some centimeters of height that Aya did, so her arms didn’t reach up to the boy’s chest. Instead, she was punching him in the gut, but Kinoyama took it all without the slightest change of expression.

As the repeated tremors shook his body, the flattened glass milk jugs that Kinoyama called “glasses” fell off his face with a *clack*. Underneath were two sharp, calm eyes.



“I beg your pardon, but I told you as much,” he said. There was no trace of the unhinged boy that squealed with delight upon being stepped on. Like a gentle breeze blowing over the surface of a lake, he pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to Mirei.

“My lady, you are best as you are,” he told her. “You are the most beautiful when you live as you are—as you believe fit. The words of the masses have no place among your ear. That has been clearly proven today. Let us reap this lesson as our harvest for this occasion.”

Muttering something with a silent voice, Mirei once again began to whale on him.

Kinoyama watched over her with a tender gaze until, suddenly, he turned toward Kai. It wasn't as if he'd been hiding or peeping—it was a matter of course that he'd been found. After a moment, Mirei noticed Kinoyama's change in demeanor and lifted her face up from his shirt to face Kai.

“Shiraseki Kai...!” she spat.

“Oh, uh... Um, here,” he said, offering her the fan.

Mirei glared at him with a puffy face, absolutely dripping with tears. But her appearance changed in an instant when Kinoyama pulled out another handkerchief and wiped her down. Of course, that didn't magically get rid of her bloodshot eyes or the traces of the tears that had previously streaked down her cheeks.

Tap tap tap. Mirei's footsteps rang out as she walked over and said, “...My gratitude,” while accepting the fan.

I'm sure, Kai thought, that I'm not supposed to say anything here. There were no words that could be given from the victor to the loser. That was a lesson that popped up in many of the games he'd played. And true enough, he couldn't think of anything to say. He was drawing up a perfect blank.

And yet, by the time he was aware of his actions, he had extended his arm out.

“...What is the meaning of this?” Mirei demanded.

“...Thank you very much,” Kai said simply.

Meikun High School had won. That made Kai happy, and moreover, it was the truth. But it was no mere flattery to say that Kongouin’s app had been incredible. Among all the apps today—and even those that had been previously released—theirs had been polished to be a cut above the rest. The moment he’d laid eyes on it, their app had overwhelmed him and grasped at his heart. That was his honest opinion, regardless of the final results.

But Kai knew that saying so now wouldn’t have been the right decision. He knew, and yet he couldn’t allow himself to let his story with the Kongouin team end on a one-off note like this. Their work had been too good for that: it would be a colossal waste.

Mirei stared at his hand. After a short while, she exhaled deeply and stepped forward with her own right hand extended out. It stopped just shy of shaking Kai’s.

“You would do well to remember this, Shiraseki Kai.” *Slap!* A refreshingly sharp sound echoed in the hall. With a magnificent smile, she’d twisted her hips to slap Kai’s hand away with her whole body. “Today, that boorish judge simply had no taste! When we next meet, I swear to you that I will *beautifully* blow away that nonchalant attitude of yours! With that, I bid you adieu!”

Kongouin Mirei let her hair flutter elegantly as she walked away with all the dignity of a victor, leaving Kai with the feeling of passion stinging in his hand. And at long last, Summit—the event that had caused his summer days to feel both long and short—came to a close.

Chapter 18: The End and Beginning of Summer

“Are you really fine with how this all turned out?” On the bullet train home from Tokyo, Aina had been staring out the window without uttering a single word to Kai (despite being the one who demanded they sit together) until, suddenly, she spoke without any prior notice.

“...How what turned out?” Kai asked.

“If you legitimately don’t understand, then I’m switching seats,” she told him pointedly. “And if you’re playing dumb, then I’m seriously going to hate you.”

“...I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“Hmph,” Aina huffed in a foul mood, hurrying him to answer.

Kai knew what situation Aina was referring to—not even he was *that* dense. After the Summit judging had concluded, he’d stood there exchanging looks with Nanaka. They had both worn the same lost expression on their faces, and the fact that they had been standing together drew even more stares from the crowd, so they’d taken their seats in a panic.

Then, Eru had thrown him a lifeline. “Just so you know, dear,” she’d pointed out, “this project isn’t yours alone.”

Those words had brought Kai back to reality. *That’s right!* he thought belatedly. The game itself wasn’t something that Kai had made on his own. His contribution was only the starting point. From there, Nanaka, Eru, Aya, and Aina had all done their parts to give form to a single end result. An outsider like Hifumi Tetsuya may have understood it to be something akin to a love letter, but that wasn’t necessarily true.

That train of thought had formed the basis for Kai’s explanation to Nanaka, who’d been wrapped up in this mess with him. It was a fact that he’d been thinking of her during development, and perhaps the sentiment that came through in the final product was what had been misconstrued as a love letter.

Kai had never once written such a letter in his life, but he couldn’t deny that

what he'd done was similar in the sense that it was aimed at a specific person. Still, he hadn't intended it, and he certainly hadn't aimed for what Hifumi Tetsuya had suggested. It just so happened that the outcome came to be understood in such a way that—and so on.

“Right,” Nanaka had replied. *“That makes sense.”* Peculiarly, her faint smile as she spoke remained stuck in Kai's mind even now.

Was he fine with how things had turned out? Truthfully, Kai hesitated when faced with this question.

“I won't ask a second time,” Aina pressed. She peered into Kai's eyes from the seat beside him as if to confirm his answer.

The only means of answering was to confront the question head-on. “...I don't think I told any lies,” Kai finally said. He didn't think he'd been wrong. But, on the other hand, he wasn't quite sure if he'd been right. None of what he'd said was baseless or fraudulent, so that was the extent of what he could assert in his answer.

“...Is that so? Well, fine, that works for me.” The displeasure in Aina's voice rang out from the window seat as she turned away and once again gazed outside.

There was a brief sound by the glass as the train entered a tunnel. In the darkened glass, Kai could see that Aina's eyes were fixed on none other than herself.

In a quiet whisper, she added, “Nanaka-chan invited me.” Locking eyes with him through the glass, she announced, “I'm going to the fireworks, too.”



The fireworks festival began in August, with the end of summer break just around the corner.

The event took place by the Shinano River riverbed, and, according to Nanaka, the reflection of the fireworks on the river's surface was oh-so-beautiful. However, to get a proper view, they all needed to meet up early to secure a good spot.

Of course, ‘they’ referred to all the members of Meikun’s social game club. Misako had once again entrusted Kai with a camera and declined to go herself. Even when weighed against everything the occasion offered, her distaste for large crowds won out.

“If you want a photograph so badly, then you should come along and take it yourself,” Kai had said in an attempt to refuse her.

However, that just caused Misako to cling to him like she only had a day to live. She’d stuck to his back, gripped onto his legs, and finally flopped over in a tantrum by the front door like a child, cutting off his path while screaming, “No no no no no no!!!” When he’d attempted to step over her to leave, she’d clung to him again, starting the whole process over. When, at long last, Kai had ceded this war of attrition, he was on pace to be late for their designated rendezvous time no matter what he did.

With the camera that Misako had forced onto him firmly in hand, Kai made his way over to meet up with everyone in front of Nanaka’s home (though technically it was also in front of Eru’s home), since she lived the closest to the festival. The heat of summer was still alive and well, and the fact that he was running consequently led him to work up a sweat even in the growing darkness of early twilight. Still, with no time to worry about such things, he hurried along.

Kai showed up five minutes past the time he was supposed to, and was greeted with a “You’re late!” from Nanaka, who seemed more cheerful than upset. As she waved toward him, he could see that the other three had already arrived.

“S-Sorry,” he stammered. He’d noticed from afar, but couldn’t help but think again, *she really is beautiful—and cute.*

Nanaka, Eru, and Aina were all wearing yukata. Nanaka’s hair was styled differently today, tied up into a little bundle on top of her head. Lit by the setting sun, Kai found the sight of her usually-hidden neck to be quite seductive.

“What... do you think?” she asked him meekly.

What do I think? Kai repeated internally. “I-It, uh, suits you... a lot,” he told her.

“...Th-Thanks.” The way Nanaka awkwardly averted her gaze was downright criminal.

“Hey!” Suddenly, Kai felt something pull at his sleeve. He turned to see Aina exaggeratedly puffing up her cheeks in dissatisfaction. “She’s not the only one wearing a yukata, you know? ♪”

Despite the blooming smile on her face, Aina definitely wasn’t laughing on the inside. Kai knew that he couldn’t let himself be deceived by this contradictory expression. He figured that the fact that he could tell as much was proof that he understood her better now than he had before.

Aina’s shimmering black hair alone was enough to make the yukata work on her. If he’d known absolutely nothing about her personality, the scene of her gazing at the fireworks over the river would surely be unforgettable. At least, she naturally exuded enough presence to make Kai think that.

“I told Grandma I didn’t need to wear one,” Aina grumbled, “but she just wouldn’t listen.”

“I think... that was the right move.”

“‘The right move’?” With a single glance, she was telling him to clearly say it out loud.

I really wish she’d stop doing that, Kai thought to himself. Out loud, he started to say, “It su—”

“Oh, I’ve already heard, ‘It suits you,’ so that’s enough.”

“Huh, wait, but—”

“Hmm, then how about this?” Aina asked teasingly. “Cute or beautiful? Which am I? ♪”

What kind of intention lies behind this question—this smile? Kai wondered. He couldn’t even begin to imagine. Aina wasn’t asking anything straightforward; she was probably testing him on something. Regardless of his suspicions, the unknown remained unknown. *Cute or beautiful?* Looking at her again with all this swirling around his head, Kai was no closer to an answer and simply said what was on his mind.

“...Both, I guess,” he finally replied, feeling that this answer was the closest thing to truth. To elaborate, he thought she was neither one nor the other, because Aina’s image was prone to change at the drop of a hat. Of course, that was partly due to her propensity to wear masks whenever it suited her, but the bigger factor was her skill in acting. She’d been polishing it since she was a little girl, and it now made her appear in an infinite array of possibilities, like the patterns of a kaleidoscope.

However, it seemed that Kai’s response was outside the bounds of Aina’s expectations. She faltered for a moment and averted her gaze as she muttered, “...So greedy.”

And once again, Kai felt a tug at his sleeve. This time, he turned to find Aya.

“Senpai,” she said demanding, “what about me?!”

“You’re wearing plain clothes,” he observed. Not only that, but she was wearing an outfit that he’d seen plenty of times during their Summit development hustle. With just a t-shirt and jeans, Aya was wholly undecorated, although in some way, that was quite befitting of her.

“...We’re matching,” she pointed out.

“No,” he told her. “Like I said, we’re just wearing plain clothes.”

“...Yeah, but a yukata is such a pain to put on and walk around in,” Aya whined. “Plus, I end up getting super-duper mad when I wear one.”

“You get mad?”

“...Senpai. Listen to me,” Aya insisted. “In this world of ours, when a shrimp like me dares to wear something the *slightest* bit Japanese, there’s always a gaggle of idiots who start asking if I’m celebrating my third or seventh birthday.”

“*Pft!*” Eru instantly burst into laughter following a failed attempt to hold herself back. She was probably imagining Aya’s yukata-clad figure as she glanced over at Aya a second, then a third time, laughing again with each peek. In Eru’s mind, Aya was probably holding a stick of traditional children’s candy and making a V with her fingers.

“For the first time in my life,” Eru said in between snickers, “I truly understand what pity feels like.”

“...Senpai?” Aya asked.

“What?” Kai replied.

“Can I stick bugs in all the code that has to do with this idiot’s drawings?”

With a heavy sigh and a light chop on the head, Kai answered, “Denied,” to which Aya glared at him in discontent. Regardless of what kind of face she was making, he wasn’t about to allow something like that.

Then, Kai suddenly made eye contact with Eru. She was also wearing a yukata, and the way her long, dark hair slipped down to her waist brought about a dazzling atmosphere altogether different from Nanaka and Aina.

“I’m only wearing this because Nanaka told me to,” Eru explained. “...If you dare make any comment, I’ll poke out your eyes, dear.”

“R-Right...”



The path to the riverbed was already packed with people. Still, thanks to the fact that they had set out early and that Nanaka knew of a hidden spot, they were able to secure a nice view. They were a little ways away from the most popular location, but apparently their position was just right to see both the fireworks blossoming in the sky and reflecting in the water.

They laid out their picnic blanket to claim their territory. The last vestiges of the evening sun caused the river to glimmer orange as the light scattered across its surface. The smell of the flowing river, the cries of cicadas, and the bubbling atmosphere of people—all of whom were eagerly awaiting the fireworks—swirled together with the voices of Nanaka and the others, reverberating both near and far.

Suddenly, a thought gripped Kai: *it isn’t only summer vacation, but summer itself that’s ending.*

“We’re out of drinks!” Aya exclaimed, announcing the first casualty caused by their early arrival. While sitting on the blanket and talking about their summers

—in other words, talking about all the ordeals of this year’s Summit—their supply of snacks and drinks bottomed out before they knew it. There was still a sizable chunk of time before the fireworks began.

“Rock, paper, scissors—” On *shoot!*, Kai and Aina were declared the losers who had to go buy more.

“A-Are you sure?” Nanaka asked. “It’ll start getting crowded soon, so I can come, too.”

“Nanaka-chan, ♪” Aina sang sweetly, “It’s a-okay. I know Kai-kun just moved here, but I’m pretty familiar with this area, myself.”

“Oh, u-um... yeah, of course,” Nanaka stammered. With something else clearly still stuck in her throat, she added, “Hurry back.”

“I want seaweed-salt-flavored chips,” Aya appended.

“Takoyaki.” Despite the utter disinterest in her glare, Eru also put in an order as Kai and Aina headed away from the event site.

Kai knew there was a convenience store relatively close by, since they’d passed by it on the way to their viewing spot. However, as Nanaka had said, there were also significantly more people around than when they’d arrived. Between those lining up for the restroom, eating in front of a stall, and hurrying to secure their own spots, the streets were packed with people.

It took them far longer than Kai initially thought to get there, and he bought up everything they needed in a rush. Aina had told him, “I’ll wait outside, since it’s so cramped,” but she was nowhere to be seen upon exiting the store. At any rate, she would stand out—or rather, she would actively draw the attention of everyone around her. Even on their little journey to the store, she attracted the glances of man and woman alike. He was sure he’d find her right away.

“Hup!” a voice called from behind. Kai silently yelped as a sudden chill on his neck caused his shoulders to recoil. He turned to see Aina laughing with a mischievous grin. In her hand were two glass bottles of Ramune that she’d bought at a nearby stall. “Here.”

“Wha—” He reflexively accepted one and then added, “Oh, thanks.”

“C’mere, this way.” Aina’s slender fingers swiftly shot out and plucked at his wrist, tugging him along. There was a small wall of stone by the edge of the street that was the perfect height for sitting, so Aina took a seat and patted the space beside her with her free hand. She was beckoning Kai to sit with her. “Let’s chat for a bit, Kai-kun.”

“But it’s so crowded,” he protested. “Won’t we be late if we don’t hurry back?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We still have plenty of time,” she reassured him. “...What? Do you not want to talk to me? I’m sure you’d be more than happy to plop down here if it was Nanaka-chan sitting beside you.”

“Why are you mentioning Nanaka-san now?” Kai asked.

“You wanna know? Then sit,” she told him, clearly without any regard for his answer. At this point, she wasn’t going to budge. He knew as much, and also knew that it would be fastest just to go along with her.

Kai barely managed to hold in a sigh as he sat down. As he did so, Aina scooted up next to him so that their legs just managed to touch. Her soft fragrance, different still from the scent of summer or the river, drifted to his nose. Before he could make an escape, she thrust out her Ramune bottle toward him.

“How about, ‘to our hard work’?” Aina suggested.

“...To our hard work,” Kai echoed, lightly knocking the bottle in his right hand against hers. A sharp, refreshing *clink* sound rang out as the marble in the bottle rolled around the glass while collecting little bubbles of carbonation. Going with the flow, Kai took a gulp, and the well-chilled flavor of intense nostalgia slid down the back of his throat.

“...It was a lot of fun,” Aina remarked.

“What are you—er, *which part* are you talking about?” Kai asked.

“Oh, come on,” said Aina, with a genuine, dimpled smile. “*Everything*. Isn’t that obvious? Every single thing that happened this summer. A lot of it was exhausting and... intense, but this is the first time in a long while that I’ve had this much fun.”

“...Is that because you don’t have to wear a mask?” Kai asked. He couldn’t help but find Aina’s gaze melancholic as she’d mentioned how long it’d been. Perhaps the reason he undermined her serious tone was because he wanted to lighten up the air around her.

“How about you stop being so indiscriminately kind?” Aina quipped.

“...I’m not really all that kind,” Kai refuted.

“You are,” she insisted. “...For example, I never thought that I’d be able to stand beside her again.”

Kai realized right away that Aina was referring to Eru. He’d already heard the circumstances between them, and that was meant to be the whole truth. Still, there was one point that he couldn’t wrap his head around. “...Can I ask you one question?”

“The *real* reason I didn’t just say, ‘I didn’t do it’?” Aina asked shrewdly. She’d seen right through him—or maybe this is what she’d had in mind when she sat down. She’d previously explained that the fact that she didn’t rip up the drawing with her own hands didn’t mean she wasn’t responsible—that she didn’t want to believe she was guiltless. So, she didn’t deny anything.

However, Kai couldn’t help but think that she could have at least told Eru that she wasn’t the one to do the deed. Then, at the very least, their relationship wouldn’t have devolved into the cold hatred that it had become.

And above all... “I didn’t do it, but I’m still responsible. If you want to hold a grudge, then feel free. If you want to hate me, then hate me. I won’t deny you that.” He could definitely imagine Aina being the type to explain all of that truthfully.

“I knew,” Aina began.

“Huh?”

“The fact that the chieftain of that monkey tribe wanted to ruin her illustration? ...I knew,” she confessed. “I happened to overhear them talking about it.”

“But then... why didn’t you...?” Kai asked.

“That’s because...” The continuation came to the tip of Aina’s tongue, but first she took a sip of Ramune. Her sight was fixed on the blue marble rolling around her bottle as she finished answering. “...I didn’t think they could do it,” she said wistfully. “That drawing was incredible, wasn’t it? It was really beautiful. Enough to make anyone that saw it think so... Even though I knew—I knew that people are all trash... and that some don’t have any qualms about trampling over others.” Like the fizzing bubbles of her soda, Aina’s voice threatened to disappear at any moment as she concluded, “That’s why I couldn’t tell her that I didn’t do it.”

“But then, Aina-san, you... You didn’t do anything wrong,” Kai pointed out gently.

“Like I said before, stop being so thoughtlessly nice.”

“I’m not saying this to be nice, I’m just—”

“But, thanks,” said Aina, a tiny smile floating to her lips. “I’m glad you—and only you—were the one I told this to.”

If you word it like that, Kai thought, how am I supposed to say anything?

“Wait, hooold it!” Aina’s voice abruptly livened up as she declared, “All this doom and gloom isn’t what I wanted to talk about!”

“You had something else?”

“...What happened at the movie theater,” she said. “Don’t tell me you forgot... You cried.”

“Well, of cour—” Kai’s words were cut short when he noticed that Aina’s watery gaze contained a curious passion behind it. Unable to withstand it, his eyes escaped to the glass in his own hands. It was probably mostly a habit for her, but the way Aina shifted gears so unexpectedly was genuinely bad for his heart. He drank a mouthful of Ramune to calm himself down and let the refreshing chill in his throat cool his head off.

“Of course, I remember,” said Kai. He didn’t need to look to know that she’d been peering into the side of his face this entire time.

“...That made me happy,” Aina confessed. From Kai’s left side, she extended a

hand to rest on his shoulder. “That was the first time... someone else had cried for me. That kindness of yours—I want you to direct it all toward me.”

All of a sudden, a deafening sound rang out above their heads; their chat seemed to have continued a little too long, and now flowers composed of colorful fire streaked across the darkened night sky.

“The fireworks—” Kai said, turning toward the sensation of touch to find that Aina’s face was now directly in front of his own. Time stopped and the world moved in slow motion. He couldn’t see the fireworks. All that was before him were Aina’s large eyes, shapely nose, snow-white skin, and lips the color of cherry blossoms.

At this rate, they were going to—

“Just kidding! ♪” Aina stopped with a devilish grin just when her breath began tickling Kai’s lips. She drew back, and her eyes were the color of the night sky itself; there, he saw the fireworks bloom beautifully. “You really are fun to tease,” she told him.

“...This is bad for my heart,” Kai grumbled.

“Ohh?” she wondered aloud. “I’m enough to get your heart racing?”

“...I think that goes for most people,” said Kai.

Aina faintly knit her eyebrows together and then shut her eyes, letting out a small sigh. “...Stupid,” she muttered. “That’s not what I meant.” Opening her eyes once more, she stood up and said, “Come on, let’s hurry up and go back.”

Beyond the sight of Aina swimming through the night in her yukata, the fireworks exploded one after another. Kai thought back to those he’d seen reflected in Aina’s irises while they were close enough for their breath to intertwine. Feeling the throbbing in his chest quicken, he waved away the picturesque memory and hurried along after her.



Thanks to the rising rockets of color, the trip back went much more smoothly. When they arrived at the picnic blanket, the timing was just right, as the first volley had concluded and the second was being readied. Three voices

welcomed them:

“You’re late!” Aya exclaimed.

“Where is my takoyaki?” Eru demanded.

“Are you okay? It got crowded, didn’t it?” Nanaka asked in concern.

“It was fine coming back, but it was packed on our way there,” Kai explained.

“Don’t sweat it,” Nanaka said, “Besides, it’s hard to find this spot since everyone else has laid out blankets, too. I was getting worried that you and Aina-chan had gotten lost, so I’m relieved to see you.”

“Kai-kun aside,” Aina objected, “there’s no way I’d get lost, is there? Oh,” she paused with a wicked smirk. “...but we did *enjoy ourselves* a little, right?”

“Y-You ‘enjoyed yourselves’?” Nanaka stuttered.

“That’s lewd, senpai,” Aya remarked.

“N-No! This!” Kai protested, thrusting out the empty Ramune bottle. “Aina-san bought some soda all of a sudden, so we were drinking them.”

“Who cares about any of that?” Eru questioned. “The takoyaki’s going to get cold.”

“‘Takoyaki, takoyaki,’ you’re so annoying,” Aina said mockingly. “Here. Be grateful: I went and stood in line for you. Were you always this gluttonous?”

Eru put her hand on the package that Aina had handed her, but then stopped and began silently staring at Aina. “W-What?”

“...Here.” After a long moment of deliberation, Eru offered up one of the takoyaki back to Aina. “I’ll give you one, dear.”

Nanaka was beaming with joy. Seeing this awkward gesture, Kai (who was in no position to be judging others) was swept up in the moment and joined Nanaka in smiling.

“Huh? I’m on a diet, so I don’t need that ball of carbs.” Aina’s reply was curt and to the point.

What part of your appearance do you need to diet for? Kai thought. But despite his gut reaction, he could see that perhaps her current form was the

result of all the efforts she put in to maintaining it. Still, he wondered, *if you're going to pick what you eat so carefully, can't you do the same for your words, just this once?*

But then, Aina continued, "...In the first place, you've given me a lot already... and I'm sure you will in the future, too. I don't need your takoyaki," and turned away as she finished speaking.

"...Huh? What is this girl on about with all this sentimentality? This pitiful miscreant ended up being our gofer, so I decided to bless her with a piece out of the goodness in my heart." This time, it was Eru who was being brusque. And of course, there was no stopping them now.

"Huh?!" Aina's voice inflected upward with rage. "Oh, geez! Fine, then! Give it to me!"

"Hey!" Eru shouted. "Don't eat two at once!"

"Itsh hawt...!" Aina garbled back.

"A-Aina-san, water! Drink some water!" Kai suggested.

"You know," Aya noted, "Aye-aye is a pretty splendid idiot, herself."



The loud booming above their heads resumed amidst their ruckus, and the fiery, rainbow-colored fragments popped into circles of color and scattered to earth.

Aina quickly found her seat by Eru, and Nanaka made room beside her for Kai. He sat down and looked up at the night sky to find that it stretched out unimaginably far. The moon and stars seemed to shine more brilliantly than usual, and the glow of the fireworks painted over those miniscule lights with a thunderous bang that shook the very heavens. There were some that proudly bloomed into vivid colors like sunflowers, and others that drew lines across the night sky like weeping cherry trees. Both were intensely beautiful.

“So pretty,” Nanaka whispered.

Owing partially to the restricted space of the blanket, Kai felt as though Nanaka was directly transmitting her warmth to him. He turned to agree with her when he suddenly realized that his left hand was laying atop Nanaka’s right. He’d been so enchanted by the dazzling flares that he hadn’t noticed at all. It was no wonder he’d felt her presence so closely.

Flustered, Kai lifted his hand away... but for whatever reason, Nanaka layered her right hand over his again. He could dimly feel her gentle warmth, completely distinct from the heat of the summer night, spread throughout his palm.

When he looked at her, she spoke with her gaze still on the night sky. “Hey, Kai-kun... We might be swamped with entrance exams, but let’s come again next year.”

“...Yeah,” he agreed softly.

“But the year after that... will be tough, won’t it? Not just the fireworks... I’m sure it’ll be hard to get everyone together... It’s going to be lonely,” she said slowly. *At some point, the fireworks will end.*

The balls of light shot up, burst, and diffused. Once the rockets ran out, the show would end, only to remain in their memories. The beauty would linger in their remembrance, but that, too, would slowly fade away. Eventually, this would be no more than a single summer’s memory whose radiant luster had

faded.

That might be the natural course of things. “That’s not true,” Kai said out loud. *But who would accept an ending like that?* “Next year, and the year after that, and past that, too... Let’s come together,” he told her. “There’s no need to give up on something that isn’t even here yet... It’s not going to be lonely.”

Kai felt Nanaka’s fingers squeeze his own tightly.

“Yeah,” she said with a quiet nod, and a smile blossomed across her face—lovelier still than any of the fireworks.

Afterword

I like being alone.

You may wonder what the heck I'm going on about so suddenly, but this is the truth.

For example: I like music, and I particularly like listening to Japanese rock. However, despite enjoying live performances, I'm not very good with them. Music moves the soul. And in that moment, I can't help but want to enjoy it alone, without worrying about the eyes of others. I also like watching movies. However, I'm not very good with movie theaters. Film also moves the soul. And again, I can't help but want to enjoy it alone. I prefer to watch them at home, but when there's a title where I can't wait for a physical release or online stream, I try to go to the theater late at night, after the trains have stopped running. I can't say I dislike the atmosphere of an empty cinema lobby or cafe.

I like writing novels. If nothing else, I am alone while writing them. I truly think myself lucky for having met the wonderful medium of writing.

However, that isn't the case in game development.

As demonstrated in this work, game development is a team effort. You cannot make a game alone. More precisely, you will encounter great difficulties if you attempt to create a large-scale game alone. This is ever more the case when dealing with the tempestuous and often overlapping waves of social game management. A large number of people contribute, hybridizing their abilities, and the result is a single game.

I cannot draw. I can't write music, either. Neither can I program. With one person like me, you cannot make a game; this much is obvious. However, there have been more than a couple of times when communication and understanding have failed me, and, in a fit of hubris, I thought, *"I wish I could just do all of this myself."*

But every time, I was taught my lesson.

There were times when a fellow planner came up with a genius plan that I would have never thought of. Other times, a programmer would suggest a more elegant approach to implementation. Once in a while, a designer would use some form of magic to exceed my wildest imagination. Now and again, an illustrator would complete a work gorgeous enough to make themselves salivate. And lastly, there were the moments when I would hear the lines I'd written in the recording booth; all of them linked to an unforgettable sensation. I had done everything I could possibly do, and the sensation was beyond that. This is a simple fact: I could not have seen the view from such heights alone.

This work has been blessed with similar moments of good fortune. When I spoke with my editor, Y-san, I often came away with something that I was sure would be more interesting. When Hyuuga Azuri-san (who has so graciously stuck with me) sent in their wonderful illustrations, I was especially blown away by how cute Aina was on the cover. I remember thinking that I needed to choose my words to at least avoid being overwhelmed by the drawing's charm. Also, while I was working on the second volume, I read the messages and reviews that you all had left me for volume one, and they inspired me to aim one step higher every time. Quality isn't something that can be attained with pure will, so I'm not sure how evident it was in this work, but I sincerely thank all of you.

There are things that you cannot do alone; that you cannot see alone; that you cannot reach alone. However, I believe that the path to such a place first begins by doing everything one can, and only then can a bright passage forward appear. I hope to continue writing novels, in part to once again see such heights.

I'm quickly running out of my allotted space, so let me give my thanks.


Hyuuga Azuri-san, who once again provided their captivating artwork. My editor, Y-san, who helped me out in so many different ways. All the miscellaneous people who were involved in both the production and sale of this book. And to all of the wonderful people who read this novel: thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

It was thanks to your support that I am here writing a second volume for this story. My wish is for this to continue further still, but the future is never so set

in stone.

And for that very reason, I pray that we may meet again.

Shiki Oriori




she'd tilted her head
to the side by the
slightest of angles...
It was her own
magic spell that
activated at
ten degrees
to the right.

"I came over because
I kinda wanted to
talk to you, Kai-kun.
Is that... a no?"

Yozakura Aina





The fiery, rainbow-colored fragments popped into circles of color and scattered to earth. There were some that proudly bloomed into vivid colors like sunflowers, and others that drew lines across the night sky like weeping cherry trees. Both were intensely beautiful.

Kai felt Nanaka's fingers squeeze his own tightly.

"Hey, Kai-kun... We might be swamped with entrance exams, but let's come again next year."

Bonus Short Stories

Summer Means Momotaro

“What?! Kai-kun, you haven’t heard of Momotaro?!” Nanaka exclaimed with the most shocked expression that Kai had ever seen her wear. Her surprise was on the same level as if she’d met a Japanese person who had never eaten rice before.

Their club activities ended in the morning during the final days of summer break, so Kai and Nanaka had been walking through the heat of high noon on their way back from Niigata Station. Neither of them had completed their summer homework, so they’d been in the middle of saying how they should finish it together when Nanaka had suddenly stopped in front of the convenience store. Out of nowhere, she’d asked, “You wanna grab a Momotaro?”

Kai hadn’t understood. Well, of course, he knew of the Peach Boy folktale. If the store she was pointing at had been a pet shop instead of a convenience store, maybe he could have made sense of it: maybe she was saying, “Let’s buy a dog, monkey, and pheasant if they have them.” In that case, all he needed to do was ignore the context of the conversation... And the necessity of buying a dog, monkey, and pheasant... and the fact that no pet shop would carry a monkey or pheasant... and the fact that it really didn’t make any sense in the first place—on second thought, he couldn’t understand.

So finally, Kai had been forced to openly display his confusion. “M-Momotaro?” he asked cautiously.

As a result, Nanaka had become utterly stunned—more so than Kai had ever seen. Truthfully, he wanted to be the one acting surprised, but she had beaten him to it and was now shaking her head in disbelief, as if she’d seen a ghost. “Summer means Momotaro!” she then declared with vigor, balling up her fists and leaning forward excitedly.

Unfortunately, even with her energetic response, Kai was still very confused. “...Are you going to buy kibi dango?” he guessed, trying to sort through all the possibilities in his mind.

For a moment, Nanaka’s expression turned serious, but in the next instant she was covering her mouth and laughing. Her surprise had circled all the way back to humor. It seemed his statement had struck her in her funny bone, as she slapped at his shoulder while desperately trying to calm down.

“Th-That’s not what I meant,” she gasped. “Oh, gosh... But wow, you really haven’t heard of it, huh?” Without any warning, she grabbed him by the hand and led him into the convenience store. Their destination was the ice cream cooler right by the entrance.

“This!” she exclaimed. Without a moment’s hesitation, Nanaka had pulled out a pink popsicle. Kai could clearly make out the name ‘Momotaro’ printed on the packaging.

...I see, he thought. So that’s what she meant.

Nanaka took two popsicles and went straight to the register. As soon as they stepped outside, she said, “Here,” and handed him one.

“We’re eating them here?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Le—”

“I’ll be treating you to your first Momotaro,” Nanaka said, completely cutting him off just as he was about to say, ‘Let me pay you back.’ She continued, “You should hurry up and eat. It melts really fast.”

Kai opened the packaging as Nanaka nodded toward the ice cream. He already had a mental image from the wrapper, but the peachy-pink color of the popsicle inside was so exaggerated it was almost refreshing. He nervously bit at the tip only to be met with the sensation of ice crumbling into his mouth. Instead of the usual hard, slippery, frozen treat, the texture was akin to shaved ice that had been compressed into a bar. Every bite gave a satisfying, icy chew, and the tiny shards of ice melted in his mouth.

Now he understood why Nanaka'd told him it would melt quickly—with how hot it was, the whole thing would disappear in an instant. Perhaps this was meant to be obvious (what with the packaging and color), but the melting ice filled his mouth with a fruity chill that was vaguely peachy. Just like shaved ice, the cold flavor threatened to freeze his brain if he ate too fast.

But man, Kai thought, this is—

"Was it good?" Nanaka asked with a smile. Her head popped into view the very second that he'd finished eating, as if she'd been lying in wait.

"...Yeah," he admitted. "I almost want to buy a few more to take home."

"Hehe, right?"

That really was delicious, Kai thought. It was refreshing despite its sweetness, and the taste had a curious quality that was hard to describe. I can see why she went as far as to say, "Summer means Momotaro."

"Now, this is a bit sudden," Nanaka said smugly. Raising her index finger, she continued, "But here's a pop quiz for you."

"Quiz?" Kai replied.

"If you get it wrong, then... Oh, uh. Um, how about you have to listen to one order from me?" she suggested.

"Uh, well... sure." Taken aback by the snap decision, Kai simply nodded along.

"Ahem," Nanaka cleared her throat. In her best game-show-host voice, she began, "Now then, you've had a good taste of Momotaro ice cream."

"Yep," Kai agreed.

"What flavor was it?"

".....What?"

"What flavor was it?"

"What flavor?" Kai asked in confirmation.

"What flavor?" Nanaka replied with a nod.

"The Momotaro?" he asked again.

“The Momotaro,” she replied with another nod.

“It’s... It’s peach, right?”

“...Is that your final answer?”

“Yeah.” Even if Kai wanted to mull it over, he’d already finished the popsicle, so he couldn’t double-check. To be completely honest, he wasn’t absolutely confident in his answer, but *come on*, it *had* to be peach. If Peach Boy’s ice cream was melon-flavored or something he’d lose it.

Nanaka groaned, “Mmmmmm...” with much ado, and finally flashed Kai a mischievous grin. “Bzzt!!!”

“What?” Kai demanded. “Seriously?”

“Yup,” she replied. “The correct answer was: strawberry-flavored!”

Huh? Kai instinctively looked at the wrapper in his hand. *Yeah, it says ‘Momotaro’ on it. Not ‘Orangetaro’; not ‘Melontaro’; it says ‘Momotaro’ on it. ‘Momo’ as in peach.* For good measure, he brought up the packaging to eye level and showed it to Nanaka. “Not peach?” he asked.

“Not peach,” she answered with a nod. “It’s strawberry.” Kai flipped to the ingredients list on the back in disbelief, but Nanaka simply said, “Oh, the only fruit on the back of the package is apple, since there’s a bit of that in there, too.”

“Apple?!”

“Apple,” Nanaka repeated with a gentle nod. She seemed to be quite fond of nodding today.

I see, Kai reasoned. *So, peaches are made of strawberries and apples—that doesn’t make any sense.* He pulled out his smartphone to look it up, and apparently the frozen snack was infamous as being a bit of a local mystery in Niigata. Everywhere he looked, he found posts from people just like him who’d been shocked that this Momotaro ice cream was strawberry-flavored (and made with apple juice, to boot).

“Okay then,” Nanaka said, “Since you got it wrong, I’ll have you listen to my request.”

“Oh, right,” Kai mumbled. He had completely forgotten. If he’d been with Aina or Eru, he would have prepared himself for the worst (for completely different reasons), and he was sure Aya would have said something annoying about gacha spending.

But with Nanaka, he wasn’t all that worried. *Maybe she’ll ask me to help with her summer homework, like we talked about earlier*, he thought. Whatever the case, Kai was sure that it would be something of that nature, but he found himself completely off the mark.

“Today was my treat, right? So... next summer, I want you to treat me... How about it?” Nanaka put her words together while carefully observing Kai’s reaction. Her mannerisms brought a certain memory to mind: the fireworks festival that took place a few days prior. Their talk of the future amidst the beautiful flowers of color blooming and wilting in the night sky came flooding back—and with it, their promise to go again next year, the year after that, and even after that.

“And then,” Nanaka continued, “I’ll give you another quiz, Kai-kun. If you get the question right, you can give me an order next time... What do you think?”

“...In that case,” Kai boldly ventured, “let me tell you this now: if I get it right, my request will be for you to treat me to another popsicle the year after.” *And the year after that, and the year after that*, he thought. *Someday in the future, beyond the word ‘someday’ itself... I want to spend my summers eating this strange ice cream with you.*

For a moment, Nanaka’s eyes went wide with surprise, but a large, dimpled smile appeared as she said, “Yup! For sure! It’s a promise!”

June Bride

In early June, the Meikun High Social Game Club had finally finished their collaboration with Tsukigase’s *Rondo* team, and semester exams were right around the corner.

“Whoooooooooooooooooaaaaa?!!!” Aya screamed.

“...How about you go and die, dear?” Eru suggested pointedly.

“Eru,” said Nanaka, chastising her friend, “you can’t just say things like that.”

“Well,” Kai interjected, “she *is* being obnoxiously loud... Aya, what happened?” As soon as he asked, Aya thrust forth the smartphone that her eyes had been glued to. It was on an announcement page for a social game titled *Beautiful Story*, managed by another high school called Kongouin Academy.

“There’s absolutely, unmistakably, 100% going to be a swimsuit gacha soon...!” Aya explained hotly. “And these monsters are going to add new versions of their characters in *bridal outfits*! I’ll never have enough points for all of these!”

“I feel like you never have enough points to begin with,” Kai quipped.

“‘Bridal outfits’...?” Nanaka echoed. “Oh, I get it! They’re June brides.”

“It’s a classic trope when it comes to social games,” Kai elaborated.

Seasonal events were an important part of social game management. Spring had flower viewing and girls’ day; summer had swimsuits and yukata; autumn had Halloween and moon viewing; winter had Christmas and New Year’s. However, there were time periods that lacked strong motifs, and implementing a seasonal event during one of those parts of the year was seriously tough. In particular, characters that debuted in June needed to have immense appeal, since the users were often tightening their purses for the inevitable summer swimsuit gacha. As a result, bridal costumes were a staple in any social game revolving around female characters.

“This is such a cookie-cutter tactic,” Eru criticized. “And they call themselves planners?”

“W-Well...” Kai said, “It’s important to live up to your users’ expectations.”

“And this fool is using his users as a shield,” Eru further pressed. With a “Hmph,” she damaged Kai with a painfully disdainful glare.

Maybe she’s not a fan of drawing bridal outfits, he thought.

“Eru,” Nanaka asked, “do you not like wedding dresses?”

“I like the outfits themselves, dear,” Eru answered. “But... why do I have to send out *my* girls to go marry some faceless nobodies?!”

...*Oh, right. I see.* Kai wasn't sure what to make of Eru's assertion that their users were 'nobodies,' but her statement wasn't unpersuasive. Now that they understood what she'd meant, both he and Nanaka looked at one another and felt their shoulders droop.

"Whatever, leave that idiot alone," Aya cut in. "What are we gonna do for *our* gacha banner at the end of this month?"

"The truth is," Kai said, "that's exactly what I wanted to talk about." They'd all been incredibly busy recently, but finally had some spare time on their hands. It wasn't *much* time, but he wanted to fit in updates wherever they could. "We barely have any time, so I was thinking two—or if that's too much, one—preexisting character should get a new seasonal costume."

"...What even is there other than bridal stuff?" Aya wondered.

"Hmm," Nanaka murmured, tilting her head. "What about hydrangeas?"

"Ahh," Aya nodded along, "that does sound pretty June-y."

"Give me a moment, dear," said Eru, who pulled out her pencil and sketchbook and quickly began to draw. All of their gazes were fixed on the paper, and she completed her sketch in the blink of an eye. It was of a smiling Nanaka, holding a single cluster of hydrangeas in front of a flower bed. "...It's cute," Eru mused critically, "but maybe a bit dull."

"W-Why is it of me?" Nanaka asked.

"It would take me too long to try and draw up a new character," Eru replied.

"O-Okay..." said Nanaka.

Kai wondered why Eru didn't simply use one of the characters that she'd already made for their game, but the profoundly cute drawing was so appealing that he couldn't bear to say it out loud. There was nothing 'dull' about it.

"I think we should go with rain," Aya suggested. "It's the rainy season, and Niigata gets hit especially hard. Don't you think it'd be nice to see a character's childish side with her all bundled up in a raincoat?"

"Give me a moment," Eru said again, as she began to draw yet another illustration. This one depicted Nanaka wearing a large raincoat with a clear

umbrella in her hands. She was using her long rain boots to splash around in a puddle.

“...Couldn’t you have chosen Ah-chan instead of me this time?” Nanaka questioned.

“She looks like a kid whether she’s wearing a raincoat or not,” Eru retorted. “There wouldn’t be any gap, dear.”

“...Senpai?” said Aya, turning to Kai.

“What?” he asked.

“If we go with the raincoat,” she said pointedly, “I’m definitely putting a bug in the code.”

“You can’t just keep taking the code hostage...” Kai protested.

“N-Now, now,” said Nanaka, breaking up the glaring contest that had started between the other two girls. She waved her hands to calm them down, and let out a small sigh. “Then... I guess all that’s left is a June bride?”

“...Fine,” Eru said. “Give me a moment.”

Now on their third repetition, everyone knew what was going to happen: Eru opened up a new page in her sketchbook and began to scratch away with her pencil. However, this time, there was a strange sense of premonition in the air. As the lines on the page got closer to completion, everyone’s stares grew more and more focused on the movement of Eru’s hand. Finally, when the drawing was well beyond the state of being a mere sketch, she put her pencil down.

Nanaka was holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a beautifully embellished wedding dress. Her smile was at the same time both vividly clear and meekly bashful, and created a blessed atmosphere of happiness that gripped Kai by the heart with a single look.

Remarkably—*truly* remarkably, Kai looked up to meet the gazes of Eru and Aya, and all of them nodded together.

“This is it,” he announced.

“Indeed,” Eru agreed.

“Yep,” Aya followed.

“This is kinda embarrassing...” Nanaka had begun to murmur with rosy cheeks, but the other three completely ignored her and June brides became their upcoming motif by majority vote.

Later on, after they’d finished all the prep work, an impassioned Eru howled, “It’s heeeeeeeeere!!!” on two separate occasions, her eyes rolling back and her mouth foaming both times.

At the end of the month, they were left with not one, but two new character designs. The artwork for the two brides had been designed so that they could be lined up side-by-side, and they were a huge hit with the user base.

Parental Approval

After parting with Aya and Aina, the evening sun lit Kai’s path home as he walked alongside Nanaka and Eru. Nanaka stood in the center of their formation, with Kai taking up the left side that faced the road, and Eru strolling along the right.

It wasn’t as if they’d had an argument. Nothing in particular had gone wrong. Still, the air between them was a little strained and... awkward.

Eru alone said, “What a wonderful feeling,” and had broken out into a smile.

Aina was the root cause for every single minute detail of this uncomfortable scenario.



Some thirty minutes ago, the team had touched down at Niigata Station on their way home from club activities. Kai had no idea how the conversation worked itself around to this topic—it probably came about as a result of Aya and Aina’s pointless chatter—but things had taken an unexpected turn.

“What?” asked Aya, sounding surprised. “Senpai, you’ve been in Aye-aye’s room? *Alone?*”

“...Huh?” was Kai’s reply.

“Yup, that’s right, ♪” Aina said in her usual sing-song voice before Kai could mount a defense.

“No,” he protested. “That wasn’t—”

“Oh,” said Aina, cutting him off again. “Now that I think back... This is from before he came to my room, but, see, my room’s on the second floor, and I heard my grandma come back home so I walked downstairs to see her... Suddenly, there was Kai-kun! I thought it was Grandma, so I showed up in a—well, let’s just say it was a scandalous outfit.”

“S-Scandalous?!” Nanaka repeated.

“...That was the first time a guy has ever seen me like that,” said Aina, pressing on with the awkward topic.

“Kai-kun?!” Nanaka shouted.

“Yes?!” Kai’s response was carried forward by nothing more than the momentum of Nanaka’s surprise, and he couldn’t find an opening to start explaining himself.

What he found truly, *truly* vexing was the fact that Aina hadn’t technically been lying: her room was on the second floor, Kai had been there when she came down, and her outfit had been scandalous enough to make his eyes swim around. All of those things were true. “Look, that’s, well... it’s t-true,” he was forced to admit. “But! I mean, I guess you could call it scandalous, but it was just Aina-san’s roomwear, so—”

“...Big talk for someone whose eyes were glued on me,” Aina butted in smugly. “I can tell, you know.”

Even in the face of Aina’s implicative words, Kai couldn’t say anything. He made eye contact with Nanaka, and it seemed like she figured everything out from his expression alone.

“Buuuuut...” Feeling quite satisfied with the chaos she’d concocted, Aina now sported a devilish grin steeped in mischievous delight. “...That works out for you, doesn’t it, Kai-kun?”

“‘Works out’...?” Kai echoed incredulously. “What... What do you mean by

that?”

He didn't have a single clue what Aina could be talking about. Truth be told, between things working out and not, he would have said this situation didn't bear any resemblance to the former. If there was a superhero out there somewhere, now was the time for them to come and save him—that was how bad the panicked sirens in his head were blaring. He had cold sweat dripping down his back, despite the hot weather.

Whether Aina knew what he was going through or not, she nevertheless chose this moment in which to drop the biggest bomb yet. “I mean, you're going to be my groom,” she asked slyly. “Aren't you?”

“Wha...?” Air simply escaped Nanaka's mouth in her confusion.

“Huh?” asked Aya, who was wholeheartedly enjoying this unexpected development.

“...” Eru remained silent, but quickly narrowed her eyes in distaste.

“...Aina-san? What are you...” Kai began to ask, his voice trailing off. He poured everything he had into his eyes and sent her an imploring message through his gaze: *Please, calm down and stop saying unintelligible things.*

What he got in return was a fun-loving smile that had (*You're stupid ♪*) written all over it in parentheses.

Nope, he decided. *This isn't working. I give up.*

“Kai-kun,” Aina said sweetly, “my grandma *really* took a liking to you. Gosh, do you know what I went through after you left?! She was all, ‘He'll become a good man, so catch him now while you can,’ and even, ‘I'll allow it, so go seal the deal with living proof of your love.’”

“L-Living... proof?” Nanaka stammered.

“Yup,” Aina answered Nanaka with a nod. Then, she turned to Kai with a grin. “...You want to?”

“I don't!” Kai insisted, all while noting that Aina's current fit of laughter was the liveliest he'd ever seen from her.

“Whaaa...?” Aina asked, feigning surprise. “Why? Why?” Stopping in front of

the train station, she said, “Welp, I guess I’ll leave it at that for now,” which hinted at the hidden, *‘After all, teasing you is fun no matter when I do it,’* that lurked below her spoken words.

This was the usual spot where Aya and Aina would continue going straight, while the other three turned left toward home.

“Well,” Aina remarked, “it looks like... we’ve got parental approval, huh? See you tomorrow, Kai-kun. ♪” Then she waved goodbye, seemingly content to enjoy the outcome of her mischief as she disappeared from view.



If there had been a scene transition there like a manga, movie, or anime, then Kai could have simply jumped forward a day—or three days, or even a week later—but reality was not so kind.

Aya had taken her leave alongside Aina, so the only ones left were Kai, Nanaka, and Eru, all of whom had been dunked into an awkward silence. Although, Eru had expressed how wonderful she was feeling, so perhaps she shouldn’t have been grouped in with the other two.

They’d all started walking again without saying a word, and had continued to walk without further conversation until the present moment. After a while, they arrived at the crosswalk that served as the second fork for the group’s route home. Nanaka and Eru would cross the street at this point, while Kai took a right turn.

Kai felt as though he ought to say something, but knew that anything he said would just sound like he was making excuses for himself. Aina’s devilish smirk came back to him. He wasn’t sure how far ahead she’d planned this, but it was apparent that she’d at least anticipated the current situation when detonating that final bomb.

I’m going to keep my mouth shut, he decided. He turned to say goodbye, when—

“Kai-kun!” Nanaka called out. “Um... Well, uh...” Then she hesitated for a moment, wondering whether or not she should speak up. At the end of her internal dialogue, she blushed faintly and said, “You remember how you came

over when we were winning over Eru? M-My mom said... uh... she said, ‘What a cool and collected boy,’ when we were talking about you! A-And she even said I should invite you over again, so... I-I think... my parents approve of you, too!”

Despite all of her stuttering, Nanaka fit her entire speech in one breath, after which she exclaimed, “See you!” and made her way across the now-green crosswalk at the speed of sound. Eru took a moment to send Kai a disgusted glare, and then chased after Nanaka in a hurry.

Kai didn’t get a chance to say, “See you tomorrow.” He didn’t get a chance to say anything. Stunned, all he could do was watch Nanaka’s back as she ran away.

Beheld in Your Eyes

I am Kinoyama Shien; of dignity, I have none. Nay, let me amend my statement: I *had* none.

On that fateful day, I regained all of the dignity that had been stolen from me, tossed away and withheld at the moment of my birth. Nowadays, I have the great honor of participating in livestream events as a member of the venerable Kongouin Academy Social Game Club. Every time I do so, I am showered with warm comments, such as “Mushroom!” and “Ewww, gross.”

I’m sure the sagacious reader understands: there is no greater pleasure than the shudder-inducing bliss of having one’s presence acknowledged by others. I am Kinoyama Shien. Furthermore, I am a prideful mushroom. I am most certainly not crying! With the faint thought that I might wish to change my hairstyle locked away in the back of my mind, I puff my chest with pride again today.

Now, then, how was I able to regain my lost honor? That is the question. Of course, the answer is obvious. On that fateful day, my encounter with a young girl—Kongouin Mirei-sama—lit my world anew.

Allow me to shout out to the heavens: she alone is my ray of light who pierces through past, present, and future.



The dignity of a man is evident in his food. Perhaps I was sharp-witted to have taken note of this concept as early as I can remember, but there was no room in my young heart to nurture any semblance of the self-esteem necessary to doing so. At the time, I was in the middle of learning (through the daily struggle of life itself) that I was a failure by birthright—a creature without anything to call his own.

The esteemed lineage of the Kongouin family can trace its noble blood as far back as the Heian Era. The Kinoyama clan—which I found myself born into—have been their arms and legs, and we give our very lives to serve as their retainers. Those born with the Kinoyama name commit themselves to a young lady or gentleman of the Kongoin house upon their master's tenth birthday, and then serve until death. I beseech you to not call us goldfish dung. Or, at least, understand that even excrement has its own form of pride.

Due in part to the awesome power wielded by the great Kongouin family, the Kinoyama line was also among the upper echelon of society. The dining tables of our house were lined with only the best cuisine, made with the secret recipes of high-class hotels, and fit to serve even guests of the state. Of course, these meals were not meant only to be eaten; experiencing the flavor, smell, texture, and even the act of cooking these dishes, were all important elements in training to serve an inevitable master.

However, I have never once tasted them.

I often desired to stuff my cheeks to the brim with the wonderfully aromatic, golden french toast served at breakfast time. However, the most I could do was to mimic a statue in the corner of the room, watching over my three elder brothers as they graciously dined according to manners of the table. Gnawing at my hand to hold off my hunger, it felt as though a sea of drool pooled beneath my feet. But naturally, none at the table paid me any heed, because the role of my growling stomach and I was to watch over them. So we watched.

This world is divided into the haves and have-nots. To support one of the haves, one must truly comprehend what that means. For my brothers to experience the life of a have, there necessarily had to be a have-not, as well.

I am more than certain the sagacious reader already understands, but allow

me to leave no room for doubt: the one cast for the role of have-not was myself.



The children born to the Kinoyama family are granted names containing characters for gold, silver, and bronze. The first-born is gold, the second silver, and the third bronze. The names deriving from these three simple metals were in some way a proof of servitude to the Kongouin family.

However, this distinction was only given to the first three. A proper upbringing required time, effort, and money—all the more true when rearing a child worthy of serving the Kongouin family. Thus, the Kinoyama clan implemented an unshakable rule, which was to offer all the ancestral wisdom, knowledge, and wealth to the first three children born, with all who came after branded as failures at birth.

Kinoyama Shien: my name was composed of ‘four’ and ‘lead.’ As such, I was a castaway from the moment I was born. My only purpose was to show my chosen brothers *what it looked like to be a have-not*.

That being said, it was not as if I experienced any particular cruelty—I would like to assure the reader of that. Much like how classrooms have an invisible wall that separates castes based on appearance, the Kinoyama household had a visible wall that separated us by birth; that was all there was to it.

My brothers slept in fluffy beds, walked upon soft carpets, and surrounded themselves with antique furniture as they went about their warm lives. On the other hand, I spent my days in a hole-ridden cottage sleeping on a paper-thin futon, which I laid out on torn tatami mats, with my only decoration being a coffee table (which I suppose was antique in its own right).

And, as I mentioned previously, the greatest disparity in our dignities could be seen at mealtime. As my brothers smacked their lips to the finest dishes from every corner of the world to broaden their knowledge, I was first made to watch them. Eating was strictly prohibited. In turn, my brothers would look at me drip with drool as they were taught that there were some who did not have the privilege of eating.

Then, I would return to my own room to eat dehydrated rice (which was so

stale I'm certain I could not recreate it even if I were to dry my own rice for one thousand years) and plain miso soup. Each grain of rice was harder than a BB pellet, but I was a virtuoso when it came to rehydrating it in the soup to the point of edibility. While this wasn't exactly a skill coveted by others, it was mine to use as I pleased.

I may be repeating myself, but let me mention again that this was not a particularly awful style of life. My social ranking within the house was simply low, but everyone showed me great kindness as I fulfilled my role. In fact, the miso soup may not have had any toppings or extra ingredients, but it was a perfectly concocted chemical substance that covered all my nutritional needs. Though my life had no embellishments to it, I was not dissatisfied to begin with. At that time, I considered my everyday life to be normal.

There were also times when a flower would bloom amidst the dreariness—when my brothers would visit. Every now and again, my brothers would come along with a plate of leftover food. Then they would furrow their brows at my way of life, and turn to me with gentle, affectionate eyes, saying, “We appreciate your efforts,” as they left the food behind. I looked forward to these encounters more than anything else, and they were a great source of pride for me. I knew in these moments that, on their journey to faraway heights, it was my diligent work that allowed them to continue forward without forgetting the scenery below. That thought filled my small chest with beaming pride. I was proud; proud, I say.

If I wasn't at least proud, then how was I meant to keep my heart from splitting in two?



Be that as it may, all things come to pass.

Life changes in but an instant.



“A mushroom ghost!” said an angel, suddenly descending upon my shabby cottage. She raised her voice while pointing at me.

She truly appeared to be a phantasm that resided in the heavens: her

voluptuous blonde locks remained ever-beautiful, even when swayed by the breeze coming through the cracks in the wall, and I remember thinking that one smile from her adorable face could bring the whole world to tears. The light flooding out from the doorway behind her adorned the angel with a glowing halo, while her eyes shone with gallant chivalry. This was my first meeting with Kongouin Mirei-sama.

“My, what a charming room,” she announced. “I shall stay here for a moment.”

At that time, I didn’t know who she was. From her clothes and appearance, I had a feeling she was of high status, but the thought that she was *the* Mirei-sama hadn’t crossed my mind. Of course, it hadn’t. Why would a heavenly being such as herself be in a place like this?

The Ceremony of Eternal Servitude was a ritual that took place on the Kongouin heir’s tenth birthday, and was meant to move along without my presence—in essence, it was an opportunity for the heir to meet my elder brothers. From between gold, silver, and bronze, one would be chosen, and the other two would move to support him from that point on.

What with no worth at all, the boy of lead was deemed unfit to participate in the ceremony. They bid me seal the door to my shack like the mythical Cave of Heaven, and to remain inside the whole day. After all, they wanted to avoid any chance of my unsightly appearance burning into Kongouin eyes.

“What a boring ceremony,” the angel said scornfully. “Each and every one of them is like a potato—conversations with them were so tedious.”

Her soliloquy made me stop and realize, *wait, could she be—?!*

But she continued, “My! Mr. Ghost, look! How curious! Your friends are growing here!” She was pointing at the corner of the room, where a mushroom was sprouting out of the tatami.

“No,” I explained humbly, “that is not my friend—it is an ingredient.” As they say, the dose makes the poison. The unnamed fungus always caused abdominal pain later on, but it was delectable when added to my miso soup.

“You can eat this?! I suppose I should expect no less of a ghost—no, of a

mushroom hermit!” said the girl, laughing in delight. “Hehe, this is the first thing I’ve found interesting since coming here. You, what is your name?”

“My name is Shien... Kinoyama Shien,” I told her, politely introducing myself. “I’m sorry to trouble you, but may I ask for your name, as well?”

“I am Kongouin Mirei,” she declared.

In contrast to her notable confidence, I was on the verge of succumbing to the grinding anxiety in my gut. *This is bad*, I thought to myself. *Oh-so-very bad. This cannot be!* I wondered what would happen should this situation come to light; it wouldn’t have been strange for me to be chased out of the house.

“‘Shien’... That means you must be brothers with the three potatoes I met earlier?” she inquired.

“If they had gold, silver, and bronze in their names, then those potatoes were indeed my elder brothers,” I was forced to agree.

“Indeed? Then, why is it that you were not present at the ceremony?” Mirei-sama asked.

“...I am not qualified to be present,” I mumbled.

“Qualified?” Without any warning, a flame sparked in the back of Mirei-sama’s eyes. Her gaze threatened to burn all that it beheld as she advanced toward me without pause. I had already grown to about 160 centimeters by this time, so when she stood before me, she glared at me from directly below.

“Who decided that?!” she demanded. “Know this, I—”

With an abrupt stop, I noticed her eyes were peering into mine.

“Um...” As soon as I called out to her, she pounced on me as if she’d jumped off a spring board. I was knocked onto my back and nearly lost consciousness when I collided with the tatami, but then saw that she was riding on top of me and staring at me from above.

“What beautiful eyes,” she remarked, holding my head in place by the cheeks. She looked as though she were indulging in the splendor of some peerless jewel.

I had been unable to keep up with this rapid fire of unexpected

developments, but her next words shocked me back into reality: “I’ve decided,” she announced. “Shien, I shall take you as my attendant.”

“...Th-That will not do,” I protested. “As I explained earlier, I do not have the qualifications to—”

“Silence, Shien,” Mirei-sama commanded. “I will not allow you to dim these gorgeous eyes,” she said, while slapping me in my face. “Unqualified, was it?” she mused next. “I am the one who decides. I am Kongouin Mirei. Know that deciding such things without my approval is the truest form of insolence! If you have no qualifications, then let me bestow them to you now.”

“B-But—”

“Shien,” she whispered with a smile, “I want *you*.”

Mirei-sama wants me? I thought. That was the first time I had ever heard those words in my life.

Mirei-sama rose to her feet and let go of me, though I was left dumbfounded. The familiar sensation of frayed tatami felt unusually soft, and the wind howled through the gaps as if to bid me farewell.

“Your eyes are beautiful, but they have been dimmed. Very well,” she declared. “I swear to restore their luster! This world is beautiful, and you shall see it all with me.” As she dragged me outside, the light that flooded my view was brighter than anything I’d ever seen before, and my vision began to blur.

I made two oaths as her servant that day: firstly, that I would stay by her side for all of time, and do everything within my power to protect the wonder that she displayed when speaking of the world’s beauty—so that her vivid beauty would never dull to a lead gray. And second, so as not to make her a liar, that I would never allow these eyes which she’d praised to lose their shine.

Of course, I never had any doubts that the latter would be true. It was a given. After all, the girl which these eyes behold shines more beautifully than all else in sight.

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by Oriori Siki

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