

THERE'S NO WAY
A SIDE
CHARACTER LIKE ME
COULD BE
POPULAR
RIGHT?

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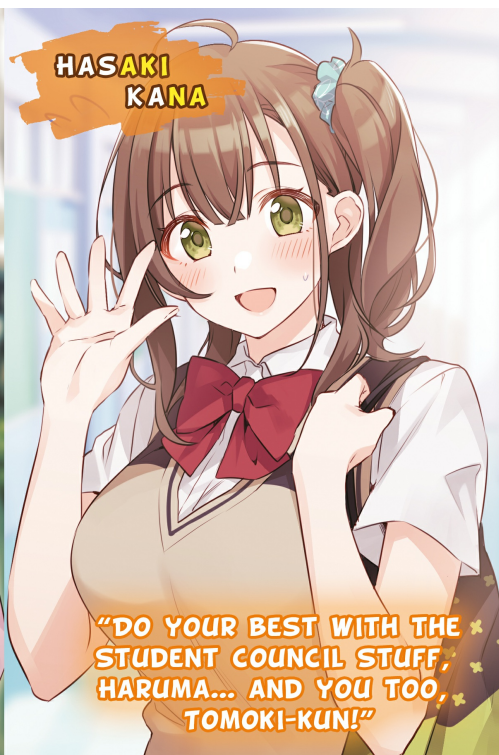
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**"SENPAI, WILL YOU BE
MY BOYFRIEND?"**





Chapter 1: There's no way a side character like me could be popular, right?

My time in middle school wasn't the greatest. Actually, scratch that—I'd say my past 15 years on this earth have been pretty shitty.

People have always avoided me. I don't know whether it's out of fear, hatred, or something else. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say it's because of my looks. Apparently, I look like I'm constantly out for blood. Well, that's the story of my life summed up: people stay well out of my way, so I never had much chance for social interaction.

Most people approached high school with a sense of optimism—they considered turning over a new leaf, having a fresh start, and all that. They'd think to themselves, "Maybe things will be better." To be honest, I never entertained any of those ideas.

As it turned out, my pessimistic outlook was both right and wrong.

Don't get me wrong, though. Everything was still basically the same: people avoided me like the plague, hated on me, you know the deal. I was already used to it, though, so I didn't really mind.

"Oh well, I guess that's just how it is."

I repeated that to myself over and over again, so I wasn't the least bit surprised that things remained the same once I'd entered high school.

However, not everything turned out the way I'd expected...

"Yo. Wanna hang out at DonMac later after school? I mean, we're in the same class and all, right? So, why not?"

He was the only one who talked to me with a friendly smile on his face. He was none other than the protagonist of our story.

Not only was he attractive, but he was also super athletic and smart. He was the kind of guy who got scouted by modeling agencies whenever he went out. He was the kind of guy who would always top the charts for our test scores. He was the kind of guy who'd be the ace of any sports club... even taking into account the fact that he was part of the student council.

Most people would figure a guy that perfect must be a cocky douchebag, but he was nothing like that. Actually, he treated everyone as equals. .

He was the perfect hero to any story, the kind that people looked up to and aspired to be.

So with all that said, it's safe to assume that Haruma—that's his name, by the way—was pretty popular around school. You'd be right.

And, for the cherry on top, he was also popular with the ladies. Because he was the perfect package, he was always surrounded by cute girls who wanted a little slice of the cake.

Take his childhood friend, for example: she was one of the popular girls in school, and she was always hanging around him. The student council advisor, a pretty hot teacher, relied on him most of the time. He even had a cute little sister, to boot.

Mix it all up, and you had the perfect recipe for the leading role: handsome, popular, and studious. This placed him right at the very top of the school's social pyramid. I mean, if he wasn't the protagonist of the story, then who the hell would be?

So, long story short...

The more you knew like Haruma, the more you'd think that he should have been the main character of this story.

Don't even bother comparing yourself to him; it would just drive you mad. The only thing you really could do would be to wave the white flag and admit defeat. You couldn't help but think, "Damn, this guy is really amazing."

At some point, I ended up becoming his friend. I don't really know how

or why, but it happened. You know the character who tended to stick around the protagonist, the side character? That was me. I didn't really mind that, though, as I was more proud of my status than anything.

I didn't really give a damn about how the others at school might have hated me. As long as Haruma understood my struggle, I would be fine. Just the mere thought that the protagonist of the story got what I was going through was enough for me. It was nice to know that he had my back, and it eased the burden off my shoulders a bit.

...Anyways, back to my life at high school.

At this point, you might be thinking that it was mediocre at best, and shitty at worst. Then again, it couldn't have been *that* bad, right?

It's true. Thanks to Ike Haruma, the whole experience wasn't as bad as I had expected.



Nothing really outstanding happened in my first year of high school. Once we reached our second year, though, something happened to me; something that was totally out of the blue for a side character like me.

"Senpai, will you be my boyfriend?"

She was a total cutie, with light brown hair that skirted around her shoulders, and makeup perfectly applied to highlight her features.

So that begs the question... Why did she confess to me, of all people?

"Say what?"

She sighed at my response. Was it wrong of me to assume that I'd misheard her? I mean, look at me: I'm the guy that everyone at school ran away from. Why did someone as beautiful as her want me to be her boyfriend?

This was something Haruma should have experienced, not me.

"You're gonna make me repeat myself? You're such a meanie, Senpai... I said, 'Will you be my boyfriend?'"

She smiled faintly at me, but there was a serious look in her eyes as she repeated herself.

She happened to be the protagonist's sister. Like her brother, she was also at the top of the school hierarchy. Definitely someone who could have been considered the heroine of any story.

Her name was Touka. Ike Touka.



Chapter 2: The Side Character and the Protagonist

It was spring, and the start of my second year of high school.

For some people, it was a beautiful season in which you could watch the cherry blossoms flutter around. Personally, I wasn't a fan of spring—it meant new faces in class, just like every year. Such was the life of a high school student.

It was the opening ceremony for the new term, which meant I needed to figure out which class I was in. There was a bulletin board with our class assignments posted near the school's gate, so I headed straight toward it. A fairly sizable crowd had already formed around it when I got there. While the excitement for the new term around me was palpable, I didn't really give a damn. I just wanted to get in and leave. Unfortunately, though, I happened to bump into someone. He recognized who I was, and, well...

“Oh, sorry du—, Augh?! T-Tomokiii?! S-Sorry! I'm really sorry! I'm so sorry, dude!”

The moment he saw my face, he started apologizing like crazy. Yeah... he was terrified, all right. Just as I was about to tell him it wasn't a big deal, another guy noticed the situation and decided to add fuel to the fire.

“Huh?! T-Tomoki-kun?! Hey! Make way for him, guys!”

Well, everyone's eyes were on me then. They even started stepping back. The only guy who hadn't moved was the one I bumped into—he was practically frozen in place, on the brink of tears, and still profusely apologizing.

“Look, it's Tomoki...”

“He bumped into Tomoki?! Oh man...”

“He’s definitely gonna get murdered later. Rest in peace.”

The whole thing had become a bit of a public spectacle, and even the new students had started staring at us curiously. I wasn't surprised that people would eventually start talking about me, but I didn't really expect it to have started right off the bat. Seriously... right at the beginning of the term before I even knew what class I was in. I felt pretty annoyed, to say the least.

I'll explain: apparently, everyone at school thought I was some sort of dangerous criminal, so they avoided me. Why, you may ask, did they think that? Well...

“Damn, Tomoki. You look scary, dude.”

It was my face. My face was really scary looking.

I was born with this face, so there's nothing I could do about it. To add insult to injury I had a small scar under my eyebrow that I got from an incident years ago. It made me look even more menacing than I already was, like I was a thug or something. That's how everyone saw me, anyway—like some kinda monster, not even human.

“I m-mean... forgive me, Tomoki-kun!”

I told him to just shut the hell up and go. I passed him and headed straight to the bulletin board to see which class I was in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the guy breathe out a visible sigh of relief, a hand on his chest.

All I wanted to do was get the hell out of there and head straight to class.

... Finally, I found my name.

It seemed like I was in class 2-A for the upcoming term. Right after I found my name, I started searching for someone else's. I hoped he was in my class, too.

“Hey, Yuuji. Looks like we're in the same class again. Let's make the best out of it.”

I heard someone address me from behind, and recognized him right away. It was my only friend—no one else would have talked to me as casually as he just did. I turned around to face him.

“Yo, Ike. Same goes. By the way, how long have you been creeping behind me?”

He was Ike Haruma, the story’s protagonist, and my only friend in school. He was the whole package: athletic, attractive, outgoing, and sharp. It was like the gods cheated when they created his character sheet and gave him all the best stats.

I bet he'd have been surrounded by people right now if I hadn't been standing next to him.

“I just got here. Looks like no one wants to approach you yet... At least it makes you stand out in a crowd.”

“Oh, piss off.”

We bantered back and forth. That's just how we were as friends.

“Well, I’m just gonna go to class now, and... actually, scratch that. I’ll just kill some time somewhere first.”

I could already picture it: the moment I entered the classroom, everyone would cower in fear. I really didn't want to deal with that if I could have avoided it, so I’d just go somewhere else until classes started.

Originally, I'd planned on arriving right before the ceremony started. But, on the other hand, I knew that looking for my classroom would eat up some of my time. Arriving late wasn't a good look for me, since it would've just reinforced the idea that I was some kind of thug. I didn't want people to look at me like that, since it'd only make my school experience even shittier.

He smiled brightly at my words and replied, “Oh, sure. See ya later.”

I stepped away. Instantly, the vacuum of space filled in, and Ike was rushed at from all sides.

“Hey Ike, we’re in the same class, man!”

“Me too! Wanna exchange LINE profiles?!”

“Hey! Trying to get a head start, huh?! Ike-kun! W-Wanna exchange profiles with me too?!”

I witnessed something truly surreal. No matter how many times I'd seen it, I just couldn't get used to it. And you know what? For some reason, I never felt any sort of jealousy toward him. I never really asked myself, “Why him, and not me?”

I was his friend, after all—when I saw him happy, it made me happy, too.



The opening ceremony ended.

I glanced at my classmates out of the corner of my eye; they all seemed pretty excited about the new term. I prepared to leave, but Ike called out.

“Hey, Yuuji! Wait a sec!”

“Huh? What is it?”

My reply was terse, but I wanted to end the conversation as quickly as possible. We tended to stand out a little too much when we talked—someone at the very top of the school hierarchy talking to someone like me, the school thug.



“Everyone's planning to get together and hang out after this. What about you? You're coming, right?”

The room went deathly silent after he said that, and all eyes turned to us.

I shook my head.

“Sorry, but I've got some stuff to do.”

Ike looked like he wanted to say something, but then bit his tongue after a moment of hesitation. He nodded instead. Good—it seemed like he understood the situation.

“Oh, okay. Sorry for keeping you, dude. See ya tomorrow.”

“Sure, see ya.”

As I went to leave, I could visibly see the relief on everybody's faces. Before I could head out the door, though, Ike called out and stopped me again.

“Oh yeah, Yuuji—one more thing.”

“What is it now?”

“Well, it's about my sister. She's a freshman this year, so hopefully you two get along.”

He said with a smile on his face.

“...Thanks, I guess.”

I finally left the classroom. Get along with her? Yeah right. I knew she'd take one look at my face and be too scared to talk to me, just like every other girl at this school. I didn't see how it'd be any different just because she was his sister.

...Back then, I never expected that she would be the first girl to ever ask me out.



Chapter 3: The Side Character and the Heroine

It was the next day, and I was at school once again. Same old, same old.

I entered the classroom, and all the lively chatter that was going on immediately stopped. It was dead silent.

I hadn't done anything wrong, so I just went to my seat. I felt a little upset about the situation.

"Yo. Morning, dude," Ike called out to me the moment I sat down.

"Morning."

As we exchanged greetings, everyone else slowly went back to chatting. Weird.

Last year, people wouldn't even talk while I was in the classroom. I figured it would have been the same thing this year, too. Maybe it was because they had some extra time before classes started? Maybe it was because it was a new class with fresh faces? I didn't know why, but at least they seemed to be less on guard than I'd expected.

"Well, yesterday, I pretty much told them how you're anything but a criminal. Seems like I've managed to convince them, at least a little."

Ike didn't sound very happy about the classroom's attitude, though.

"Always sticking your nose into other people's business."

"I just wanted everyone to know that you're actually not a bad guy at all. You haven't really done anything since last year to warrant the way they've been treating you, so that's why they trusted me. I guess you didn't want me to do that, though?"

"Do whatever you want."

I tried to answer as coldly as I could; in reality, though, I couldn't have

been happier—he'd actually helped me, his friend, out. Then again, he was the protagonist—of course he'd help his friend out, right?

“Yep. Will do,” he retorted with a smile.

The bell rang, which signaled the beginning of class. Our teacher entered the room.

“Good morning. I’m taking attendance, so everyone sit down in your seats.”

“Smell ya later.”

And with that, Ike returned to his chair.



Classes ended without much fuss. The final bell rang, signalling the end of school, and I stood up, ready to head home.

“Yuuji—if you're free, could you lend me a hand for a bit? I have some printouts for the first years here, and I have to carry them from the printing room to the student council one. I can't really carry them all alone, so...”

Ike bowed his head apologetically. He was popular in school, so he'd managed to win the vote to be the Student Council's president, no problem.

“Hm? Helping the Student Council? I mean, sure. As long as it doesn't take an eternity.”

“Thanks! Sorry to ask you. I owe you one.”

“Sweet.”

Before we went to the printing room, we decided to leave our bags in the student council room. There were a number of buildings in the school: one where the classes were located, one that dealt with the administrative side of things, *etc.* The student council room was located on the second floor of the administrative building, so we headed over there.

Ike fished a key out of his bag once we reached the door.

“Wait a sec, lemme open the door real quick... Oh, wait, it’s already open.”

“Forgot to close it last time?”

“No, it's gotta be...,” he whispered as he opened the door. It opened to reveal a woman inside the room.

“Good work today, Makiri-sensei.”

“Yeah, the same for you, Ike-kun... Looks like you’ve come to help out again, Tomoki-kun?”

She was Makiri Chiaki, a teacher at the school and the advisor for the student council. She was pretty new—she'd transferred here last year—but she’d already built up a fanbase because of her youth and cute looks.

I wouldn't let her looks deceive you, though. She was tough as nails and acted like it around everyone. She garnered not only admiration, but also fear.

“I didn’t have anything better to do, so yeah.”

I actually liked her. Not because of her looks or anything like that...

“I see, thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

...It was because she didn’t look at me like everyone else did. She wasn't guarded around me, nor did she hate or fear me. She always looked at me gently instead. She didn't judge a book by its cover, so she saw me for who I really was. That was something I couldn’t really say about the rest of the teachers I’d had so far.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Ike-kun. I just came here to grab the council's daily activity report.”

She took the report and left.

“Good for you, huh?” Ike joked and nudged me with his elbow.

“Oh, shut up,” I answered with a smack to his shoulder.

“Come on, bro! That hurt! Let’s get to carrying those prints, Yuuji.”



“Hey, Haruma! Doing Student Council work?”

As we headed toward the printing room, we heard a cheerful voice calling out to Ike.

“Yep. I gotta hand these out to the freshmen.”

“Oh, really? Nice work!”

The girl who called him out smiled. Her name was Hasaki Kana, and she was one of the school's beauties. She was also one of Ike's childhood friends, so you can already guess that good looks weren't the only thing she had going for her.

There were a lot of guys who chased after her because of her celebrity-tier looks, but she was more than just a pretty face. She was also a great athlete. She was part of the tennis club at school, and apparently also pretty famous—known nationally, as a matter of fact.

“What about you? Going home and straight to the court?”

“Mhm. Sorry that I can't help you while you're stuck doing all the Council work alone,” she replies in a light-hearted tone.

Heh, I would expect no less from one of Ike's childhood friends. Your run-of-the-mill childhood friend would have probably been super awkward and embarrassed when talking to the protagonist—you know, blushing, stuttering, and all that. But she acted completely normal around him.

“Nah, don't worry about it. Yuuji's here helping me out.”

And the moment he mentioned my name...

“Wait. By Yuuji, you mean... Tomoki-kun?” She whispered to him, looking rather nervous.

She had been so focused on talking to Ike that she hadn't even noticed me. Not wanting to be the elephant in the room, I popped out from behind him so she could see me clearly.

“Eek! T-Tomoki-kun! S-Sorry! I couldn't see you behind Haruma,

and...!"

She looked seriously nervous. Well, when it came to interacting with girls, that was nothing new. I mean, I actually felt bad for scaring her because of my face. For real.

"Don't sweat it."

"O-Okayyy!" She shouted. Her face was beet red, and her teeth were chattering.

"...I'll just go ahead to the printing room before you."

"Don't. I'm coming with you. Anyways, Kana, do your best at the tennis club today," he told her before running up to me.

"Oh, okay. Do your best with the Student Council stuff too, Haruma... and you too, Tomoki-kun!" She answered, trying to hold her fear back as much as possible.

Well, "A" for effort. Most of the students just ignored me and never talked to me ever again, so...

I nodded in reply, and she sighed in relief. She placed one hand over her chest, her face still bright red.

Was talking to me really that much of a nerve-wracking experience? I couldn't stop thinking about her reaction and the way she spoke to me the moment she realised I was there. I might have looked scary on the outside, but I was actually very self-conscious.



"Thanks, Yuuji. You seriously helped me out."

Ike thanked me after we finished carrying all the papers.

"Don't sweat it. Like I said, I had nothing better to do anyway."

No, really—I had no plans after school. I'd never been able to join a club, so all I did when I got home from school was stuff like studying, playing sports, reading manga or light novels... that sort of thing.

Some people played games, but that wasn't really my thing. I'd tried

them before, but most of them were multiplayer and required other players to join in on the fun. Now, they mostly just annoyed me.

“Anything else you need help with?”

“Nothing really springs to mind. I can finish this stuff pretty quickly on my own.”

“Okay, then I’m out.”

“Hey! Wait a sec, dude!”

I turned around and managed to catch the can of cold coffee that he threw at me. It was probably from the fridge in the room.

“Here's your payment for today.”

“Didn't you say earlier that you owed me one?” I said jokingly.

“Come on dude, how could I forget about that? Consider this a bonus.”

“I'll take it then, no complaints.”

“Nice. See you around.”

“See you.”

We both looked at each other and nodded. Just as I’d opened the door to step out, though, Another girl passed in front of me. She stopped and turned around—I assume because of the noise the door made when I opened it. Our eyes met.

“Eek!” She screamed and quickly backed away. She saw my face and started trembling. Even though something similar had just happened with Hasaki, I still found the reaction just as shocking.

She had a red ribbon on her uniform, so she must've been a first year.

I felt sorry that she had to look at my mug on her very first day of school.

“What’s wrong, Yuuji?”

Ike came out of the room, no doubt concerned by the scream he'd heard.

“Nah, it’s nothing.”

Nothing out of the norm, anyway. If this was how she'd reacted just from looking at me, imagine how she would've been if I'd actually said “hi” to her. She would’ve ran away screaming and crying for sure.

“Oh, Touka, it’s you. What are you doing here?”

Ike seemed to know her, given how casually he was speaking to her and calling her by name. She regained her composure after seeing him, and that small window of time gave me the opportunity to see what she actually looked like.

She had light brown hair that reached her shoulders. She wore a little makeup, but it looked pretty natural. My initial opinion of her was a normal fashionable girl, if you know what I mean.

“Didn’t I tell you to not talk to me while we’re at school?” She whispered, not even looking at him.

Wait, what the hell?! Ike talked to her, and she wasn't happy about it?

Ike interrupted my thoughts by answering, “Yeah, yeah. Whatever. By the way, I’ll introduce you two. He’s Tomoki Yuuji, the guy I’m always talking to you about. Be sure to treat him nicely.”

He completely ignored the fact that she said not to talk to her.

“Do I need to repeat myself? I said... wait, he’s *the* Tomoki Yuuji?”

She looked at me again, clearly puzzled.

What had he meant by "the guy I’m always talking to you about"? And what was up with that look on her face? As for me, I was just as clueless about the expression on my face, or even what I *should* have been feeling.

“Sup.”

I attempted to be as expressionless as possible when I whispered to her; I couldn’t even muster a smile.

She stared straight at me.

“Hmmm... Hi there. I’m Ike Touka—Ike Haruma’s little sister. He’s always talking about you, Tomoki-senpai. He says you’re a reliable person.”

He did? I mean, I’d take her word for it. Damn, did I ever feel lucky. I was honored to be his side character.

...Wait a sec, that wasn't what I should've been surprised about!

“Wait, you’re his little sister?”

My head was still a little clouded by what she said. When I took a better look at her, though, I could see the resemblance. I mean, she was beautiful, so I guess they'd both gotten their equal share of the beauty gene.

“Yep, that’s me.”

Judging by how she had treated him earlier, I assumed she was a tsundere. She had to be the type that really cared for her brother deep down, even if she didn’t show it on the outside. Or maybe she lied to herself too, pretending that she didn't care when she really did. Whatever the case, I was sure she was one or the other.

“I’ll get back to my job. Could you spend some time with her, Yuuji?”

“Uh, sure. Break a leg, dude.”

Ike returned to the Council room. I could see his sister glare at his retreating figure.

I bet she was annoyed because she'd wanted to spend more time with him, but he left early... or something like that.

“I’m honestly surprised. I never figured I'd be able to meet you of all people.”

“I’m also quite surprised, Tomoki-senpai. You look super menacing!”



She'd changed her attitude and was smiling. This was a total 180 from the way she first looked at me; maybe she was playing coy? I didn't really have any experience speaking to girls like this, though, so my answer wasn't as smooth as I'd hoped.

"R-Right?" I managed to stutter, not really knowing what else to say. I wasn't the most sociable person, and it showed.

"The hell? What do you mean, 'right'? I'm starting to like you."

She flashed me a bright smile.

It seemed like my fumbling ass was accidentally funny. Nice, I guess?

"Gotta say, though, Senpai—you really are menacing. And funny."

"I am?"

It was the first time a girl had ever called me funny. Actually, I don't think a guy had ever called me that, either... So it was more like the first time *anyone* had ever called me funny. Period.

"Yeah! Actually, let's exchange phone numbers! Pretty please?"

"Huh? I mean, sure?"

"Yaaay!"

Judging by her reaction, not to mention the look on her face, she was happy about receiving my number.

I opened my phone and managed to add her to my contacts after a bit of struggling. Hey, prior to this, I'd only ever used it to talk with Ike. I didn't really know how it worked.

Now I'd be able to talk to his sister, as well. I guess it was one more excuse to use my phone.

The moment I added her number, I received a message. It wasn't even a normal message. It was some kinda sticker of... whatever the hell that thing was supposed to be, accompanied by a speech bubble that read, 'Let's get along!'

I'd never received a message like this from a girl before, so I'd be lying

if I said that I hadn't been happy about it.

“Yeah, sure. Let’s get along,” I answered.

“Mhm! Let’s get along from now on, Seeenpai!♡”

Ike Touka, in a move that filled the role of the protagonist's little sister perfectly, gave me a brilliant smile while clutching her phone with both hands.



Chapter 4: Confession

It happened the day after I met Touka, Haruma's sister.

There was nothing really special about that day. I'd say it was just another ordinary day. Although people in class had lowered their guard a bit with Ike's help, everyone outside of our class still avoided me. In the end, Ike was still the only person I talked to.

Anyway, yeah. Nothing really special happened that day, with the exception of a text from his sister. The message read:

"Wanna ask u about smth. U free this afternoon? Meet me behind the gym."

"Looks like today's going to be busier than usual," I thought.

Looking back, I hadn't been able to read between the lines. I hadn't given her message a second thought. I'd just figured she wanted to ask me about her brother or something.

And if I was a character in some light novel, I imagined I'd be the one giving life counseling to the typical cute little sister.

"Sure, let's meet. Not behind the gymnasium, though. Otherwise, people are gonna think that I'm trying to kill you or something."

It hadn't even been 10 seconds before I received a reply.

"Wtf? xD Ur so funny Senpai. OK gonna wait on the roof."

"I think the roof is locked, and we aren't allowed to access it."

Just like it was in anime and manga, the roof was inaccessible to us students. She probably didn't know, since she was a new student and all.

"No prob," she replied.

"No prob"? What did that even mean? Maybe she'd gotten a hold of the key somehow? I wasn't really sure. What I was sure of, though, was that the roof would definitely be a better meeting spot than behind the

gymnasium.

"Okay then."



Lunch break started, which meant that it was time for my typical solo lunch session. Sometimes, I ate in the student council room with Ike. He hadn't invited me on that day, though, so I quickly finished my meal alone. Afterwards, I tried to casually head toward the roof... I didn't want anyone to notice me.

I headed up the stairs and grabbed the knob of the door leading to the roof, convinced that it wouldn't open. Imagine my surprise when it gave under my hand and opened.

"Oh, hey there, Senpai!"

She'd been there waiting for me and greeted me the moment I opened the door.

"Yo. You got the key to open the door, I assume? Asked a teacher or something?"

"Nope. I was out for a stroll around the building the other day and noticed the lock was actually broken."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

Well, it was pretty obvious that the second and third-years wouldn't have known—teachers had always told us that the door to the roof is closed. I'd always just taken their word for it, so it was no wonder that I'd never ventured up there because of it. That revelation made me want to give the teachers and school staff a heads up—to tell them to at least keep things like broken locks in check, but whatever.

"The wind feels really nice, doesn't it?"

I thought the same thing myself as I watched her try to keep her hair from fluttering in the wind.

"Yeah. Sun and wind always made a good combination."

Ugh, what kind of answer was that? That was so lame.

When I thought about it, though, I realized that I was actually having a totally normal conversation with a girl! The fact that she hadn't run for the hills as soon as she saw my face was also pretty amazing. That was impressive considering even teachers ran away from me sometimes.

“Sorry to cut to the chase, but what did you want to ask me about?” I asked her. I noted as I spoke that her cheeks flushed when she smiled.

“Actually, I lied. I didn't really have anything in mind that I wanted to ask you about.”

“You lied? So why'd you tell me to come out here of all places? Just because?”

“Would you be mad if that was the case?” she tilted her head up and looked me in the eyes.

Some people would've called her pushy for what she did, but I actually found it pretty endearing, if anything.

“I mean, not really. But why would you even want to hang out with me in the first place? Aren't I a drag?”

“No way! I like spending time with you, Senpai. You're pretty funny!”

She had an impish smile on her face. This was completely new territory for me—I'd never experienced a girl who looked at me like that before, so I ended up all nervous and tongue-tied. Thankfully, she continued the conversation while I stood there silently.

“But, well... it's not like I called you here for no reason, y'know?”

“Oh, really? Then what is it?”

“Come on, Senpai. Acting all bold and cutting to the chase like that... you're gonna make me blush. It's embarrassing, y'know?” she lowered her head and mumbled out.

I saw her fidget while her cheeks flushed red. Embarrassing? Making her blush? I was really interested now—why had she even called me here?

I was silent, but she must have noticed me looking straight at her. She braced herself, as if to harden her resolve, and returned my gaze. She took three deep breaths and said...



“Senpai, will you be my boyfriend?”

“Say what?”

“You’re gonna make me repeat myself? You’re such a meanie, Senpai... I said, 'Will you be my boyfriend?’”



She looks at me. Her face is misty, and she has a smile on her face.

Does she expect me to answer that right now? Because I seriously can't.

I'm just a side character. How does she expect me to have any kind of experience with this? How am I supposed to handle this? This is the first time a girl's ever confessed to me!

But... I can't help but think that there's something fishy about all of this. I mean, I just met her yesterday. Now, totally out of the blue, she wants me to be her boyfriend?

This wouldn't be weird if I was someone like Ike, who's actually the protagonist. I could totally see a girl confessing to him the day after meeting him. It's a plausible scenario. But c'mon, me?

To begin with, could you honestly say that someone like me could get a confession at all? The answer to that question is obvious, though.

I mean, there's no way a side character like me could be popular, right?

Chapter 5: The Falsehood

“Should I take your silence... as a no?” Her voice quivers as tears well up in her eyes.

Every fiber within my being urges me to protect her: her misty face, her sweet voice, her trembling shoulders. But... I can't bring myself to answer right now.

I'm a side character in this story, nothing else. This shouldn't be happening to me.

I can't help but wonder why she'd confess to me of all people. I do have an idea about what she might be after, so let's see...

“Why me?”

“Well, you may look real scary at first, but you're actually pretty funny and chill. Plus, my brother always tells me how reliable and nice you are. That's why I thought you'd be good enough,” she answers shyly.

Bingo—I don't know exactly what she's after, but it's obvious from the way she just phrased herself that she definitely wants something other than a relationship with me. She must've chosen me for her little idea because Ike said I was “reliable.”

I can already imagine what she wants...

“Let's pretend we're a couple! That way my beloved brother will get super jealous!”

Heh, I can already see her saying that. I mean, of course she would, right? Only, like, every little sister in a light novel does that. Read you like a book, girl.

So basically, she's just not honest with her feelings. She pretends that she hates her brother, but in reality, she wants to hog all of his attention. I assumed that Ike would've had her in the bag at this point, considering he's the protagonist and all, but... Now that I think about it, Ike is kind of a

dumbass when it comes to taking the hint from girls, so I guess it's the same deal here.

Like, look at Kana, for example: she's obviously aiming for him, but he's totally oblivious to the fact she likes him.

“Okay. How about you tell me what you really want from me instead?”

Her smile vanishes for a split second—bullseye. She does want something else from me. It's only gone for a split second, though; her perfect smile springs right back up immediately after.

“Come on, Seenpai. You don't need to be such a meanie. Is that any way to talk to a sweet young maiden pouring her heart out to you? You're hurting my feelings, you know?”

Her tone and her smile are light.

“It's okay. I can tell there's something else you want.”

I'm not gonna tell her that I can see right through her and know she has feelings for her brother, though, just in case.

The moment I say that, her smile completely evaporates. This time, instead of springing back, it's gone for good. Her expression becomes icy, fixing me with a cold stare instead.

“Huh, okay. And here I was gonna try this the nice way so you could be useful and blissfully unaware. You're sharp, dude.”

Of course I'm sharp—you're in front of *the* side character himself. I may not interact a lot with others, but I can easily see through them when it comes to stuff like this. After all, when it comes to this whole play, I've mostly been the spectator.

She sighs, clearly annoyed, and starts ranting.

“Being asked out, being in a relationship... don't you think it's a frickin' drag? It's only been three days since I've entered this school, and eight guys have already confessed their 'love' for me. Eight! And none of them even really know me! They just did it because of my looks. What d'you think of that?”

“Well, that tells me you’re already quite popular around here. Unless you're trying to brag about your looks?”

To be honest, I’m actually pretty jealous. I mean, being confessed to eight times in the span of three days? That's impressive.

My greatest achievement so far has been two people—Ike and Makiri-sensei—talking to me because they actually like me... and that was in the span of a year. Imagine three days.

There's a huge gap between the two of us.

She replies with a huge sigh, as if tired and burdened by the whole thing.

“You think I like guys confessing to me just 'cause I'm cute? It definitely doesn't make me happy. It actually really pisses me the hell off, y'know?!”

Her attitude has done a total 180—she's gone from that cutesy act to straight up shouting and cursing.

I guess I kinda get how she feels, though.

“That’s why I figured I should try confessing to you and use you as my fake boyfriend. You're pretty infamous here on account of your resting bitch face, so I bet no other guy would even dare try to get close to me.”

She smiles, but it's definitely different than her earlier one. This time, it's laced in sadism.

“My shitty brother also called you a ‘good guy,’ so I thought that you wouldn’t really be a bad choice. I mean, the only thing that’s scary about you is your face.”

So all I took from this was that she wants to have a fake relationship with me, but I still don't know what she's really after. That’s how I feel, anyway—that she’s still hiding things from me.

“Anyways, I told you everything now. So how about you just play along and become my fake boyfriend? Actually, if you don’t, I’ll spread some nasty rumors. I'll tell everyone that you tried to do nasty, horrible things to me.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Take it as a threat, I don’t really give a crap. You’re the one who’s fighting the losing battle if you refuse. Think about it—if I do spread rumors about you, would anyone even care to listen to your side of the story? I mean, for all I know, you could even get expelled for it. You wouldn’t like to get expelled, would you?”

She looks at me gently, her smooth voice as soothing as a cat’s purr. She’s completely convinced that I’ll just obey her, just like that.

But...

“You’re stupider than I thought,” I sneer.

“...What?”

“My reputation has already been dragged through the mud. You think a couple more baseless rumors will make the school expel me? No way. I would’ve been expelled a long time ago if that were the case. Your threats are worthless.”

“Oh...”

Oh man, she looks pissed. I feel for her, but she probably didn’t give this plan much thought.

“Plus, I bet your brother would listen to my side of the story and probably believe me. No need to assume things beforehand.”

He’s always tended to be on the right side of arguments, so I bet that he’d be able to see his sister’s lies for what they really are. As long as he believes me, I don’t really care about the rest of the school.

She’s clearly angry. She looks down at her shoes while she clenches her teeth, trying to look for a counter-argument to what I just said. She looks completely miserable right now.

“I don’t mind faking a relationship with you, though.”

I have no idea what I can do in this situation—I mean, I can’t even communicate with other people properly. But I feel like I owe Ike one for making my life better at school. I bet he doesn’t like his sister giving him

the cold shoulder at school, what with her weird aversion to him and all. I'll try to make them get along better by doing this.

Maybe while I'm doing this, I'll learn her real intentions behind this. But, for now, I don't count on it.

"Huh? Wait, you're up for it?"

"Yeah."

We glance at each other and she nods.

"...Is that some kinda threat? Like, you'll go through with it so you can fool around with me?. Do I need to remind you that I don't feel intimidated by you or whatever you say? I don't feel anything for you, either, so don't even think about getting it on with me. Not even if you want to."

"Sure. I'm not really expecting anything out of this. I'll be your fake boyfriend, no problem."

"And why would you say yes, exactly? Especially now that you know what I'm really after and what I think about you."

She looks worried, and rightfully so. It's not really a weird question to ask.

If I tell her it's because I want her and her brother to get along, she'll just call the whole thing off for sure. I guess I'll have to give her my other reason. It's pretty embarrassing to say out loud, but who cares at this point?

"This is the first time someone's relied on me for anything. So, that's why."

She looks at me, utterly dumbfounded.

"Huh?"

It doesn't have anything to do with her being Ike's little sister or anything like that. I'm genuinely happy because someone asked me for my help for once. It's embarrassing, I know. Maybe I shouldn't have told her.

“That sounds like a pretty dumb reason, Senpai,” she says and looks at me doubtfully.

“I was actually just thinking of how dumb it is as well, to be honest.”

“...Haha! And that’s it? Hahaha! That’s sooo funny! You’re totally hilarious, that’s for sure!”

Now her laugh and smile are genuine.

I look at her resolutely while she laughs, preparing myself for what I’m going to say next.

“Anyways, I guess it looks like you’re my ‘girlfriend’ now. So cut me some slack, will ya?”

“Same here, Senpai! Also, what’s with the ‘ya’? Could you not refer to me like that, at least? I have a name, y’know?” she protests with puffed-out cheeks.

“How about I call you Ike-san?”

“Rejected. That’s what you’d call your girlfriend? You’d just be calling me what you call my brother, so please spare me,” she retorts while crossing her arms.

Okay. I’ll think of something different, then. Can’t be that hard...

“It’s Touka,” she speaks up, interrupting my thoughts.

“Huh?”

Her cheeks flush a cute rosy colour.

“I told you to call me by my name. It’s Touka. Okay?”

“Sure thing, Touka.”

The moment I call her by her name, she smiles.

So I guess now we’re a “couple”—even if just a fake one.



Chapter 6: Lunch Break

It's the day after Touka and I became a "couple." Morning classes pass by in the blink of an eye, just like always; before I even notice, it's already lunch break.

I shoot my classmates a glance out of the corner of my eye. They're a noisy bunch, all right. I get ready to go to the cafeteria. Cramming all of my books and things into my desk, I stand up and get ready to leave.

"Yuuji! Let's eat in the student council room together, man!" Ike chirps, looking as happy as ever. "I gotta go to the cafeteria to buy my lunch before we go, though. What about you? You brought yours, or...?"

"Nah, I have to go there too."

"Okay, then how about we go together?" he asks.

We both head toward the class's entrance, ready to leave. But then, suddenly...

"Ah! Ike-kuuun! Your sis is here!" A girl near the entrance of our class exclaims.

Just like she said, Touka is at the door.

"Hm? Touka? Gimme a sec, Yuuji."

"Sure, don't worry."

With all eyes on them, Ike heads over to her.

They're the perfect duo: Haruma, the popular guy everyone knows, and his gorgeous sister Touka, who seems on track to be just as popular. The two of them together demand the attention of everyone in class, including me. I'm focusing on trying to make out what they're saying to each other.

"What's up, Touka? Why'd you come here?"

"Definitely not to see you, that's for sure... Ah! There's Yuuji-senpai! Hey! Let's have lunch together!"

...I wasn't expecting to hear my name pop up in their conversation.

She smiles devilishly and waves her hand in my direction, which makes everyone in class turn around and look at me. I'm so confused right now... Why is this happening, again?

I frown, which makes everyone avert their eyes. Nice. Why did everyone react like that? Was it some sort of act they practiced beforehand or something?

Well, whatever. She called for me, so all I can do is go over there and see how this goes. Ike looks surprised, as he should be. I mean, his sister and I getting *this* close in the matter of a day? It'd strike anyone as weird, to say the least.

"Hope you had a good day today, Senpai! Wanna have lunch together?"

Now she's talking to me and totally ignoring Ike. She isn't even trying to give Ike an explanation of what's going on. I'd like to tell him myself, since he looks really lost right now.

"Um, sorry, but Ike and I already made plans for lunch. So, yeah."

My answer doesn't make her very happy, and that's putting it mildly.

"So you'd rather have lunch with my brother, who's just a friend, over *me*, your girlfriend?"

Everyone in class glances over at me again. How annoying. Maybe if I frown again, they'll stop looking at me? ...There we go.

Their reactions feel so exaggerated, and it's the second time they're doing this. This feels more like a skit at this point. You know, like some sort of scripted scenario. Is everyone here trying to make me laugh or something? Jokes are meant to be told once. If it didn't make me laugh the first time, it ain't working a second time either.

"Wait... you two are going out?"

Ike is obviously surprised at what she just said. Seeing him so confused makes Touka smile.

“Yep, you heard it. Yuuji-senpai and I are going out now. So please don’t get in between us, okay?” She says in a proud, triumphant tone.

Aha, I see what she’s going for here. It’s the classic “making my brother jealous” strategy, with a dash of “I actually love my brother, but I’ll fake having a boyfriend so the seeds of envy start blossoming.” Very clever.

To be honest, I’d rather hang out with Ike—you know, getting our food and chilling in the student council room. Plus, I don’t like the idea of Touka dragging me around as she pleases, so I think I’m gonna have to say no.

On the other hand, Ike’s just so confused right now. Maybe he’s seen through Touka’s ploy and realizes how she feels about him? If that’s the case, it’d be fantastic. It would mean that they’d have a chance to get along better. In that case, I’d better play along.

“...Okay, sorry Ike. I’ll have to explain a few things to you tomorrow, but it seems like we’ll have to take a raincheck on today. You fine with that?”

Ike seems taken aback by my question for a moment, but he quickly returns to normal.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. Must be a pain to be dragged around by my sister.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah! You tell ‘em, Yuuji-senpai! We’re a couple now, so you’d better butt out!”

I think she’s going too far there, but it seems she’s having fun doing this.

“Okay, then. See you later, dude,” Ike says.

“Bye-bye!” Touka sing-songs condescendingly.

“Uh, yeah. Sure,” he answers tersely, clearly still confused about the whole situation.

I can feel everyone staring as Touka and I leave the classroom; especially Hasaki Kana, who seems to be glaring daggers at us.

“I need to buy my food, so let’s get going.”

“Sure.”

We head toward the cafeteria through the corridor. After we're some ways away from my class, Touka says, “Man, I felt so many people glaring at us back there...”

She sounds angry.

“You mean Hasaki?”

“You noticed it too, Senpai? It just seems to me like she was pissed. Don't you think so?”

“Well, I bet she’s just worried about you going out with me of all people. I mean, you’ve known each other since you were kids, right?”

“Even if that’s the case, we've barely even talked since, like, middle school,” she replies, clearly upset.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. That’s why I don't really get it if it's true. I have no clue why she’d be worried about me at all, considering we haven’t really talked in years,” she says. She's clearly puzzled about the whole thing; her fingertips rest tentatively on her lips, and she tilts her head, wondering about the cause of Hasaki’s attitude.

Maybe Touka doesn’t look at it like that, but I’m pretty sure that Hasaki considers her a sister and is just worried.

“But that was sooo fun!”

Looks like she doesn’t really care that much about Hasaki, since she's changed the topic of the conversation instantly.

“And what was fun, exactly?”

“Seeing the stupid look on my shitty brother’s face!” she replies with a big grin

“Oh, I see. I just found the whole thing tiring, to be honest.”

“Did you see how everyone was gawking at us? Your classmates sure

like to exaggerate! Their reactions are like part of a comedy skit or something!”

Looks like we're on the same train of thought. I would've definitely laughed if I was in her place, but sadly I'm already used to it.

“Oh yeah, Senpai—remember our plan? We've got to make everyone believe we're the real deal so guys'll stop asking me out. So please stop trying to make lunch plans with other people, 'kay?”

She's the one who just barged into my class and forced me to go along with her. The worst part about all this is her total lack of remorse. She actually believes she's in the right here. Guess I'll just be a jerk back.

“I see...”

“Hm? What's up, Senpai? You get what I mean, right?”

“So you're one of those dominatrix types, huh? I see.”

She raises her eyebrows, clearly not very content with my statement.

“Did you even listen to me?! I didn't mean it like that, okay? Would you please stop twisting my words?!” She cries out, puffing her cheeks again in anger.

Me, on the other hand? I'm having fun.

“...Just kidding.”

“You're seriously making fun of me? You're such a prick, Senpai.”

Her little tantrum dissipates as quickly as it arrives, though, and soon she's speaking to me normally again.

“Oh yeah—we're eating lunch together tomorrow too, so keep that in mind.”

“Fine by me. You okay with that, though? Wouldn't you rather eat with your classmates? I mean, the term just started.”

“It's fine. I wanna focus on showing off our relationship to everyone so they don't think it's just fake. Plus, to be honest, I like spending time with you more than with my classmates. Huh? What's up? You're all quiet

suddenly,” she says, glancing over at me.

“Uh, it’s nothing. Anyways, tomorrow lunch together, yeah? I’ll be there.”

“Huh? I mean, as long as you get it...”

Judging by the look on her face, it's pretty obvious she wants to ask me how I feel about all of this. But I don't think that she'll understand my feelings now, even if I tried to explain the situation to her.

I'm happy that she told me she'd rather spend time with me than with others—the only other person who's ever told me is Ike.

I'm too embarrassed to talk to her about that right now, though. I just can't.



“Ugh, it's packed in here. Damn.”

The moment we enter the crowded cafeteria—obviously filled with people wanting to get their food—Touka instinctively steps back and goes speechless. She definitely doesn't want to be here any longer than she has to.

“Oh my goodness! What is a frail, delicate maiden like me to do? If I were to brave the storm and venture alone into that crowd, why, the lunch break would be over by the time I had gotten my food!”

Could she have been any more dramatic?

“So what?”

“I reeeally want a set of the mixed sandwiches!”

So judging by her syrupy fake giggles and her grin, I'm assuming she wants me to go and get it for her. Man...

“So the mixed sandwiches, right?”

“Wait, you're actually gonna get it for me? I was joking, Senpai. You know how guilty I'd feel if I treated you like my servant?” she replies while placing some coins in my hand.

She's cheeky, all right.

"It's okay, I'm used to this. Just watch: I'll buy the food in no time."

"Wait, in no time?" she asks, clearly confused.

I head toward the crowd of people, and right before I'm stopped by the wall of students...

"What the?! T-Tomoki-kun?! H-Hey, guys! Make way!"

One of the guys at the back of the crowd notices me and starts shouting at everyone in front of him.

"What?! Tomoki-kun?!"

"You're kidding... Hey, guys! If you value your lives, make way!"

"Eeek! Someone save me!"

After a few cries and shouts, a path opens up for me. One of the only perks about my situation is that it doesn't even matter when I arrive to get my food, I always get it fast. As I make my way to the counter, I try to forget the fact that I'm cutting the line and making others wait even longer.

I'd like to tell them how sorry I am, but I know it won't really matter. In my experience, the best thing I can do right now is to finish as quickly as possible.

"What's it gonna be?" snaps the lady at the counter. Well, she's looking as unsociable as ever.

"One Yakisoba sandwich, one croquette, one sweet roll, and a set of mixed sandwiches... please."

"That'll be 650 yen."

I hand her my pocket change, and she gives me a bag with the things I ordered. She thanks me in what is probably the most blunt tone ever.

I make my way back to Touka.

"You reminded me of that chapter in the Bible when Moses parted the Red Sea and passed through."

I can already imagine her thinking that this “ability” of mine is quite useful.

“Oh, and thanks for buying me the food! You’re a lifesaver!”

She snatches the plastic bag from my hands after thanking me.

I’m confused—on one hand, I can’t help but think that she’s selfish. On the other hand, she actually thanked me for this. I’m not sure what to make of the genuine gratitude she just expressed toward me. At least, I think it was genuine.



The weather’s nice, so Touka decides that we should eat outside. We buy some drinks at one of the vending machines; after buying everything, we leave the cafeteria and head outside.

The place we picked to eat is already buzzing with couples.

“Hey, wait a second. Why is Tomoki here?”

“What? Oh damn, he really is. Let’s just go somewhere else.”

...Okay, there aren’t any couples here anymore.

“Whoa, you cleared the place just for us! Nice going, Senpai. One glare of yours is enough to drive the masses away!” she says, clearly amused.

“I wasn’t even glaring at them. This is how I normally look at others.”

“You know it!” she says lightly. She’s clearly trying to tease me, but she’s so direct about it that I can’t even get mad at her.

“So, that bench over there looks comfy. Now that it’s empty, how about we sit there?”

She heads toward the nearest bench, and I follow suit and sit beside her.

“Aaah, I can’t wait to have my sandwiches! ...Wait a sec! You’re actually eating all of this by yourself, Senpai?!” Touka says incredulously as she takes out her share from the bag. Of course, she’s noticed what I ordered while looking inside the bag.

“Yeah. I should be the one who's surprised, though. I mean, is that really all you're eating?”

“It's more than enough, you know?! I eat a bit more if it's a PE day, though,” she replies through bites of her sandwich.

“Huh, I see,” I answer. I start eating my food as well.

“Wait a sec, I know what you're implying! I bet you're dying for a bento handmade by me one day, aren't you?”

She looks at me with a worried expression.

“Uh, no. I wasn't thinking about that. How did you even come up with that?”

“I figured you were going for the whole ‘Sandwiches clearly aren't enough for you, so why don't you just make yourself a bento and eat from that? Actually, make me one too!’ spiel.”

She's so off the mark that I'm totally speechless.

“Man, that would just take too much effort. Dont'cha think so? Isn't eating with a cutie like me good enough for you, Senpai?”

Well, she may be many things, but shrinking violet isn't one of them. She sure has some self-confidence, huh?

“Aww, that's a bummer.”

I decide to just play along with it so we can cut the convo short. Touka seems happy by my reply. She's definitely the type of girl who happily plays along when she gets flattered.

We keep talking while we eat, but at one point of the conversation, Touka seems visibly annoyed and snaps.

“I swear, they're so annoying...,” she whispers.

“Yeah, I definitely agree with you there.”

There's a bunch of people looking at us from their classes inside the building. Although they think they're being slick by pretending not to look, there are so many short glances being shot at us that, in the end, it feels

as if we're constantly being watched. Even though we're outside and alone, even eating here feels stressful.

“Don’t they have anything better to do with their lives?” She snaps in a pissed tone.

“Well, I think it's because someone like me is eating with a cute freshman like you. You don't see that everyday, so I kinda get why they’re doing it.”

She looks at me, surprised.

“...What?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how you just tried to flirt with me without even flinching. Gotta be careful around you, Senpai.”

“I wasn’t trying to flirt with you; I mean, you’re cute. I just stated an objective fact.”

“See? I knew you were trying to put the moves on me! Oh my god, Senpai! You’re a total player, aren’t ya?!”

She flashes a bright smile.

Seeing her smile like that pisses me off, in a way. I mean, she’s not a good person. She’s wily, foul-mouthed, obstinate, and she's got a pretty malicious personality to boot. But she *is*, without a doubt, very cute, and that pisses me off.

“I can feel them glaring daggers, though. They're angry now, not really curious about why we’re together anymore,” I whisper, mainly to myself.

“Hostility? I don’t really get what you mean,” she says, confused by what I said.

“It’s mostly from guys that clearly like you and hate me because I’m your boyfriend. That's my guess, anyway.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t be interested in a guy with enough balls to try to fight you over it.”

“Well, you'll be the first to know if there's someone who's man enough for you, then.”

I shrug at her while she looks at me.

“I don't think it'd ever happen, anyways. Even among the first years, there're already rumors about you, so there you go,” she says while taking sips of her orange juice.

It hasn't even been a week since the term's started, and the first years are already scared of me? Damn.

“Does that make you sad?” she asks.

“A little.”

“Just a little?”

“...Yes.”

Part of me feels sad about the fact that the first years are already shitting their pants just from hearing my name, but in the end, that's the story of my life. Mostly, I'm impressed about how she manages to talk to me without any issues. Despite how the rest of the first years feel about me, she shows no fear at all.

She reacts with a “hmm,” but doesn't really say anything else in return. I guess she won't push the point further, but who knows.

Instead, we keep talking about random things right until the bell rings. Looks like the lunch break's over.

“Oh, looks like we're out of time. See you after class!”

“After class? For what?”

“Isn't it obvious? To go home together, dummy! We have to make everyone believe we're a couple, remember?!”

“Oh, right.”

We don't actually *feel* like a couple whenever we're together, so I tend to completely forget about it.

“Let's go back to our classes.”

“Yeah, let's go.”

We both stand up and head toward the building together.

The only person I've ever had plans with after school was Ike; so even if it's with her, I feel happy about it.

Chapter 7: Returning Home

Classes end, and it's time to go home.

I cram all of my books and notebooks into my desk and heave out a tired sigh. I stand up, ready to leave the classroom. Everyone's been eyeing me curiously ever since Touka made a scene during lunchtime. There's nothing I can do about that, so it's better to just suck it up and move on.

I made sure to have some fun while it was happening, though. Whenever I returned someone's stare, they'd let out a small shriek and quickly avert their eyes without fail. It was pretty amusing.

Anyway, I'm so tired. I just want to go straight home so I can be a potato. Unfortunately, I'd already made plans with Touka. We decided to go home together, even though she never mentioned where we should meet for that.

If I wait for her at the school gate, I'd only scare the other students who're trying to leave. Maybe I should just ask Touka. I'll just take out my phone, and... huh? There's a message from her.

"Busy atm w/ppl in my class. Can u wait for me at urs?"

"Sure, I'll be here," I answer.

I sit down again and lean over the desk—there's not much I can do now but wait.

"Hey Yuuji, you got a moment?" Ike asks, suddenly materializing in front of my desk.

I can tell that whatever he wants to talk to me about isn't just normal small talk.

"Um...! D-Do you mind if we talk to you for a bit, Tomoki-kun?! I swear it won't t-take long!"

Hasaki Kana is with him. She struggles to talk to me, stuttering over her

words and just generally acting strangely. I think this is the first time in my two years of high school that I've been approached by anyone of their own volition... at least, apart from Ike.

“Uh, yeah, sure. What’s wrong?” I ask.

Hasaki freezes in place, and her eyes tear up—she’s too scared to even speak. Good thing Ike’s with her. He notices what’s going on, smiles at me, and asks in her place.

“Oh, it's nothing, really. I just came to ask about you and Touka. Hasaki was pretty interested in hearing the details too, so here she is.”

Oh, right. I should've known that's what it was going to be about, considering the scene Touka made earlier and all. I almost forgot that Hasaki's been their friend for ages, so she's been a part of their childhood. Like I told Touka earlier, I bet Hasaki thinks of her as her own sister, in a way. I wouldn't be surprised if she's worried about Touka going out with the school's supposed bad guy. If I were in her shoes, I'd be worried too.

“Uh, sure. I'll explain it to you guys. I don't want others to listen in, though, so if you guys don't mind moving somewhere else. Maybe somewhere less crowded...”

“Sure. Let’s go somewhere else, then.”

Hasaki nods frantically without saying a peep. I can definitely sympathize with her. She must be struggling with a lot of emotions right now, on top of fighting that fight or flight instinct. She’s willing to face her fears just for Touka, though.

I take a good look at her. Deep down, she’s a nice person. Unfortunately, the moment I lay eyes on her, her face goes beet red, and she hides behind Ike.

I didn't mean to scare her. Man, I feel terrible now...



Hasaki, Ike, and I head to a place near the emergency stairs. It's the

perfect spot for solitude since most people don't walk by.

“I tried asking Touka through text, but she wouldn't even open it. I just wanna be sure of a couple of things; hopefully you understand. Like, for starters—how long have you been going out now?”

Touka has to be the only girl on this planet who'd totally ignore Ike's messages. But that's beside the point—I see he's not wasting any time jumping straight into the questions. Hasaki frantically nods to his question while hiding behind him. Well, if he's going to be frank, I might as well be, too.

“Uhhh, well... Yesterday, she basically told me to meet her on the roof during lunch, and she just confessed to me. After that, I guess we were official.”

Touka might think it best to ignore him, but I don't see the harm in telling him about our relationship... just as long as I take out the part where we're just faking everything.

“So the day after you two met, right? Um, so you're actually going out? No joke? I mean, why would you go out with Touka of all people? I'm guessing you barely even know her.”

He's not wrong; I really don't know a thing about her. The only thing I know, based on our exchange that day, is that her personality leaves much to be desired.

I'll just tell them about all the things I like about her that made me want to date her... then again, I kinda have to rack my brain for any good traits...

“I mean, she's cute, so...”

Both Ike and Hasaki are surprised by my answer. Actually, Hasaki seems more angry than surprised.

“Wait, does that mean-! D-Does that mean that as long as she's cute, anyone's good enough?! Like, it could've been anyone other than Touka, right?!”

Hasaki jumps out from her hiding spot and starts shouting at me. I can only stare at her, utterly perplexed. Her shoulders are visibly trembling despite her shouting.

“So you’re saying you just went out with her because of her looks, not because you actually like her?” she asks. The two of them wait for an answer.

They wouldn’t be wrong, in a way. I mean, I don’t really particularly feel anything for Touka. There’s no love or anything sappy like that. Then again, it’s not like I hate her, either. If I really had to pick, I’d say she’s on the neutral scale for now. But, putting that aside...

“No, it’s not just ‘anyone.’ What I like about her is... that my looks didn’t scare her at all.”

I’m not thrilled about saying that, and Hasaki doesn’t seem too pleased, either. She’s visibly frustrated, with clenched teeth, and... wait a second, is she about to cry?

“I... I’ve always...!”



She's about to say something, but she can't find the courage to continue.

"It's better not to say anything else right now, Hasaki," Ike tells her.

His calm demeanor is a stark contrast to her hysterics. She looks at him helplessly and desperately tries to say what's on her mind. Finally, choking out a sob, she cries, "Waah! Haruma, you idiiiioot!"

She runs off toward our classroom. Ike turns and looks at her retreating figure.

Well, I get what she was trying to tell me, even if she didn't say it. Yep, I've got it all figured out—Hasaki likes Touka and really cares about her. I bet my totally bullshit excuse for dating her made Hasaki so upset that she ran off like that, unable to accept the situation.

"Uh, sorry about that, Ike. You saved my ass there."

I'm pretty relieved, to be honest. I wasn't really expecting her to call me out like she just did.

"Huh? What do you mean?" he asks, confused.

I guess he just doesn't consider this a favor. Seriously, he's such a great guy.

"In any case, I'm just relieved that it's you. Here I thought that Touka had hatched some kinda scheme or something, and was just forcing you to go out with her... but it doesn't seem like that's the case."

His words make me freeze. Spot on. I mean, I was the one who decided to go along with her plan, but it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say she was forcing me to go through with it.

"G-Good to know."

Ike nods and smiles.

"Touka's can be a pretty big handful sometimes, but deep down, she's a good girl. Hopefully you treat her well," he says as he taps my shoulder kindly.

I have a lot of mixed feelings about all this. I mean, Touka was probably hoping he'd be jealous of us. She probably didn't expect him to accept our relationship as easily as he just did.

Plus, there's no need for him to tell me to treat her well. Isn't that obvious?

"Sure thing. Leave it to me, dude," I reply with a slight smile. That's weird—I rarely ever smile.

Suddenly, my smartphone buzzes. I take it out and see Touka's number displayed on the screen. Wow, good timing.

"Is it Touka? Take it, dude."

I tap the green phone symbol, only to be greeted with her angry voice.

"Senpai, why are you not in your classroom?" she snaps in a harsh tone.

"Sorry, Ike and I went somewhere to talk. I'll be there in a bit."

"You were with my brother?"

Looks like that didn't help improve her mood.

"Anyways, I'll be waiting in front of your class."

"Got it," I say as I hang up.

"...She's mad, isn't she?" Ike asks.

"Definitely not in the best mood right now."

"It's my fault for having you come here."

"Don't worry about it."

He smiles.

"I knew you'd be the best choice for her boyfriend," he says. He turns around and starts heading down the stairs. He explains, "If I go with you and see Touka, she'll just look for a reason to argue with me. I'll just leave now and avoid the hassle."

He bids farewell, and I do the same.

I return to my class and spot Touka standing in front. She looks bored as hell.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

She starts in surprise and turns around, but then looks up at me and says, “Hope you had a great day, Senpai!”

She peeks behind me.

“Ike's not with me. He already left.”

“Oh, really? Then how about we go home too, then?” she says cheerfully. She immediately follows it up with a large sigh, though, and says, “Actually, I just wanted to apologize for that call just now. I'm the one who's been making you wait, so that was mean of me.” She clasps her hands together, looking at me apologetically.

“It's okay, I'm already used to it,” I reply as we walk toward our lockers.

“Are you implying that I'm always mean to you?” she retorts.

“You always get pissed whenever I talk to Ike in any way, shape, or form, so... yeah.”

“...Okay, that might be true, but still!” she cries out with puffed-out cheeks.

We arrive at the lockers, change out of our slippers, and leave the school.

“By the way, Senpai...” Touka says, breaking the silence.

“Isn't this the first time you've ever gone home alone with a girl?”

Okay, that's a tough one. There are a few ways I can approach this. Depending on how I react, she might get what she wants and roast me. Then again, I can't come up with a “correct” way to answer her, either.

In the end, I do what I do best: I ignore the question and continue walking straight ahead without saying a single word. Touka stays behind a bit and watches me wordlessly, but soon starts grinning impishly.

“Oh my god, Senpai. Don't tell me you're so embarrassed that you're

totally speechless. You're sooo cute!"

"Yeah, I'm just so moved that I'm finally able to go home with a cutie like you. I'm at a loss for words over here. Ain't I totes the cutest thing ever?"

"There you go with your silver tongue again," she laughs and starts jovially slapping my back.

She's slapping it so hard, it even hurts a bit. So annoying.

"Oh, right—I just remembered something. D'you mind if we stop somewhere else before we actually go home?" she asks.

"Sure. Just let me go home first, and then you can go wherever you want before going to yours."

"Oh, c'mon, Senpai! Don't be like that," she says lightly between chuckles.

I look around us. We're already past the school gate, but there's still a good amount of other students here on their way home. Like us, they're also heading toward the train station. Anyone we come across just stops and stares at us with mouths agape.

I never thought I'd ever experience being on the receiving end of jealousy. The other students can't believe someone as plain and boring as me gets to go home together with one of the school's idols, just like that. Life is weird. Honestly, the whole thing just makes me really nervous. I'm relieved they can't tell I'm sweating bullets over here...

"Am I imagining things...?"

Maybe I am, but I swear I can hear them whispering something. Nope, I'm definitely not imagining things. I'm kinda shocked they'd act like that, but I guess all I can do is take it in stride and move on.

"Oh, right, Senpai—which way do you go once we get to the train station?"

"I think I take the southbound train; and, if I remember correctly, you take the northbound one, right?"

She gives a flippant and disinterested, "Oh, okay," at first. Then, she suddenly screams out, "What?!" and stops dead in her tracks.

Puzzled by her reaction, I turn to stare at her, only to see her looking frightened. She's hugging herself tightly while her whole body trembles like a fawn's.

"H-How do you even know I go that way?! Don't tell me you followed me when I went home yesterday, you... you stalker!"

She's clearly shocked by my response, but that makes two of us. I can't believe *that's* the brilliant conclusion she's reached so quickly.

"I've gone home with Ike before, so isn't it obvious that I know where you'd go?"

Her face immediately flushes red when I defend my case. She coughs to clear her throat and bluntly says, "Okay, I didn't think of that."

There's no escaping now, Touka. Now that I've found a crack in your defenses, you bet I'm gonna unleash a full-on assault.

"You're the type who's super self-conscious about everything, aren't you?"

"What the...?! You sure have some nerve, saying that! You're a total jerk, Senpai!" she puffs up angrily at my response.

In spite of myself, I find myself smiling and laughing at the whole situation.

She stares at me blankly.

"Is it really that funny? Plus, you look scary when you smile like that, dude..."

Ouch. If her voice could materialize, her ice-cold words would be piercing like icicles right now.

"My bad. I'm just surprised that I'm able to have a normal conversation with someone who isn't Ike, for once."

Not my proudest moment, I'll admit. I'm actually pretty embarrassed to

tell her that.

She's a little shocked at first, but she soon looks me in the eyes and smiles.

“I’m actually having fun too. I mean, we’re already at the station. I totally didn’t even notice ‘till now.”

Now that she mentions it... Wow, we’re at the station already? It feels like we got here in no time at all compared to how long it usually takes me to get here.

“Well then, see you tomorrow!”

“Sure, see you.”

We bid each other farewell inside the station and go our own ways.

As I wait for the train, I think back to the conversation we just had. It was just friendly banter in the end, and we both had fun.

Maybe we even looked like a couple walking home? Personally, I don't think we did. It felt more like a normal conversation between friends, you know?

...And I don’t know why, but for some reason, that kinda puts me off.



Chapter 8: Commuting to School

Friday.

I managed to wake up earlier than usual to go to school. I think it's thanks to the fantastic weather today—I can't see a single cloud in the sky. It's pretty refreshing, and it helps me wake up and feel a bit more optimistic about having to face the constant drag that is high school.

There's a group of guys ahead of me also heading toward the school. They're all happily joking with each other as they walk. They're being pretty boisterous and loud, shouting and goofing around without caring about anyone around them. That doesn't really bother me, but I am jealous of how happy they seem to be.

I pass by them, and the moment they catch sight of me, they all go completely silent. Well, they're not looking so happy anymore.

“Oh, fuck off, guys! I mean it! W-Wait...”

“Huh? Why'd you go silent all of a...?”

“Uh, guys? What're you...? Tomoki?!”

Every time this happens, I feel bad that everyone in school somehow seemed to have a secret meeting where they all agreed to shut up around me. This feels like borderline bullying.

Anyway, I pretend to remain aloof and keep walking as if nothing happened.

“Phew, I thought he'd kill us for a sec there.”

“Dude, maybe what they say about him being a murderer is legit after all.”

“Yeah. With that kinda face, I can't really picture him being a respectable person.”

I dredge out a sigh. I'm already tired, and the day's barely started. At

this rate, I can tell I'll be exhausted by the time the weekend hits.

Just ahead, I happen to spot yet another group. This time, it's a bunch of girls chatting with each other. They seem to be in high spirits, judging by their high voices and annoyingly loud laughter. At least it makes their conversation easy to listen in on.

"Actually, I heard the other guys in class mention it yesterday... But, Touka, are you seriously going out with *him*? Him, of all people?"

"Oh, yeah. I think he's called Tomoki or something? The guy with the scary face. He totally seems like a creep."

"Yeah, that guy. I can't believe that someone like him is allowed to, like, even breathe the same air as you, Touka. I mean, you're our idol, you know?"

"He definitely looks like one of those mafia bosses you see in the movies."

"Like a mafia boss?! Oh my god, totally!"

Looks like I'm the main topic of their conversation.

There are two girls in the front who're talking, and there's a third one following behind. Actually, the third one is Touka, so I guess the other two laughing ahead are her friends? They're definitely first years, so I think my guess is right.

Touka answers their question with a stiff, robotic voice.

"Oh god. Well, Yuuji-senpai *does* look like some kind of scary mafia boss, and he *does* feel dangerous, in a way."

Well, I'm sorry for being sooo dangerous. Didn't she make me buy her food yesterday? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

"...But, he's actually the nicest guy! He actually loves me and cares for me lots. Add all that up, and it makes him super cute in his own way, don't you think?"

...Okay, now I'm confused. Who's she talking about?

I don't really feel anything special for her, I don't really give a damn about what she does, and I don't think I'm a nice guy at all. Plus, I don't look like a mafia boss. So this "Yuuji-senpai" that they're talking about sure as hell can't be me.

"Damn, Touka. I'd still avoid him like the plague anyways."

"Yeah, he's just too scary looking. I'd definitely scream if he got too close to me."

"You'd scream? Wow. I'd rather have someone like your brother, Touka."

Looks like they've moved on from me to Ike now. Looks like he's popular even amongst the first years. I get it—he's handsome, and a nice guy to boot. I get why they think he's attractive.

"I feel you! Haruma-senpai is just so hot! I totally don't get your taste in guys, Touka. So weird. I mean, with someone like your brother around, I thought you'd have higher standards."

"Yeah! Hey, Touka, Haruma-senpai's single right now, right? Would you introduce him to us, please? Just think of it like helping your friends out."

"Hey, I want in too! Pretty please, Touka! Introduce me, too."

"I don't even get along with my brother."

Touka suddenly turns around, allowing me to actually see how tired she looks. Our eyes meet, and she smiles the moment she notices me.

"Oh my god, Senpaaai! You should've just called out to me from the start if you saw me!♡"

She greets me with a cloyingly sweet voice and runs toward me. It makes the other two girls notice me, too. They look at me, clearly nervous.

"...Sorry. I woke up earlier than usual today, so I'm still half-asleep. Didn't even notice you were ahead of me."

Her friends breathe a sigh of relief.

“Hey Touka, we don’t want to bother you two, so we’ll go ahead.”

“See you later.”

“Okay, later! ...Looks like you didn’t hear what they were talking about,” she says in a tired voice as she looks at her friends' rapidly retreating figures. When I don't offer a response, she asks, “Helloooo? So did you listen to what they said or not?”

“Yeah, something about a guy with a super scary face that apparently loves you to bits. I think you called him Yuuji?”

“Oh my god, you totally heard everything! Are you mad?” she says jokingly.

“Not really, no. I’d be permanently angry if I got pissed by things like that.”

“You’re totally right. But I wasn’t wrong when I said that you’re a nice guy, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you didn’t notice us because you were worried about the other girls, weren’t you?” she asks me with a serious expression on her face and continues, “I bet those two dumbasses didn’t get a thing I said about you, either.”

“I don’t really care if I’m misunderstood, to be honest. I’m actually shocked that you chose to tag along with me instead of going with your friends.”

She raises her eyebrows, surprised at my response.

“Well, they’re not my friends in the first place. I just happened to come across them on my way to school, so we’re not friends or anything like that.”

“Oh, I thought that might be the case. You didn’t seem like you were enjoying their company.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty annoying in general,” she explains in a tired voice.

I can really only shut up and agree with her. I should just let her keep talking, just in case I say something distasteful.

“Actually, Senpai, I wanted to ask you something. You have any plans tomorrow?”

I get why she doesn’t want to keep talking about that. I didn’t want to keep talking about them, either, so I’ll just respond to her question.

“Uh, not really. I was thinking of asking Haruma to hang out somewhere.”

Touka puffs her cheeks angrily at my reply. Clearly, someone's not very happy about my weekend plans.

“Huh?! Why d'you wanna make plans with my shithead brother instead of *me*, your girlfriend!? Y'know, your significant other?! I can’t believe this!”

“Yeah, right. We’re faker than a three-dollar bill. What? I'm guessing you want me to make plans with you tomorrow instead, right?”

Her expression sours, and she starts shouting so that everyone on the damn block can hear her.

“Oh my god, Senpai! So we’re gonna go on our first date tomorrow, right?! I can’t wait!”

...Back to making stuff up out of thin air, I see.

I don’t even know what she means by first date. I didn’t say that at all.

I should probably ask her what she's on about, and—

“Wait, so Ike's actually going out with Tomoki for real?” one of the students looking at us wonders aloud.

“And here I was serious about asking her out...,” another student says dejectedly.

“Why do the nice guys always finish last? Girls always go for the assholes. We live in a society, bro.”

Everyone starts giving us a piece of their mind after her proclamation

about our “first date.”

This girl, I swear... How far is she willing to go with this?! Can she please put herself in my shoes for once?

I glare at her, and she responds with a sneer, “You better be sure to make a good boyfriend tomorrow, Senpai.”

I sigh. I gotta calm down. Calm down, Yuuji. Calm. Well, whatever. It's not like I had any plans tomorrow, anyway.

“Don't get your hopes up or anything.”

She smiles at me with a devilish look in her eyes.



Chapter 9: The First Date

It's the first Saturday since the start of the new term.

Looks like Touka wasn't kidding yesterday when she made that scene in front of everyone about our first date today. She's really planning to have that date with me. We've exchanged a few texts and agreed to meet in front of the train station.

And here I am. I've arrived earlier than the time we agreed on, but it looks like she had the same idea.

It's kinda weird to see her without her school uniform on. She seems different, in a way, but she still stands out in the crowd regardless. She's pretty far from me, but I'd spotted her from a mile away.

"Oh, come on—why don't you hang out with us?"

"You'll have the time of your life."

She's surrounded by three guys who don't look like the friendliest bunch.

Well, Touka is really cute. I guess it's a given she'd attract creeps.

"I'm sooo sorry guys, but I'll have to pass. I'm waiting for my boyfriend," she says with a gentle smile.

Well, she handled the situation well. Hopefully, the guys get the message and leave. I mean, that would be the logical thing to do here.

"Your boyfriend? Sure, sure—whatever. I bet he's some boring dude, right? Just come with us."

"Don't be so cold, baby. You're gonna hurt our feelings."

It doesn't look like they're going to give up anytime soon.

Everyone who's passing by just ignores the situation and keeps walking. I feel sorry that she has to deal with those pests on her own, so I rush toward her.

“Hey, sorry for making you wait.”

The moment she sees me, her smile brightens, and she runs toward me.

“You guys know her or something?” I ask the guys.

As soon as they see my face, they take a step back in shock. Even these guys are scared of me? The ones who're supposed to be the real criminals here? Man...

“I’m sooo sorry, guys! My boyfriend would get super mad at me if I hung out with you. See ya around!”

She seems so confident when she says that, but I notice that her slender arm is trembling the moment she slides it around mine.

“Yeah, I’d get pretty upset. Sorry about that.”

The sooner we get out of here, the better; so I’ll just start going now, and...

“Hey, asshole! Wait!”

One of the guys shouts from behind me.

“...What?”

“You think just glaring at us will make us shit our pants or something?”

“You just wanna look cool in front of your girl, huh? You're outnumbered—there's three of us here, and you’re on your own. I bet you were just tryin' to shake us off so you could run off with your tail between your legs.”

“This place's too crowded, don'tcha think? Let’s go somewhere a little quieter.”

...Okay, so I wasn't off the mark. They're definitely criminals.

The three of them surround us and lead us toward a deserted alleyway. On our way there, Touka gives me a concerned glance—she’s clearly worried about the whole situation. I mean, the death grip she's got on my arm is another solid giveaway.

We arrive at the deserted alley.

“S-Senpai...,” she whispers worriedly.

“Don’t worry; it’ll be fine.”

“And just what's gonna be fine, huh?”

“Still trying to look cool?”

“Hehe! You fuckin' idiot!”

The three of them surround me with jackal-like grins.

"Time to eat some asphalt!"

One of them throws a punch at me.

I quickly glance at Touka, who's behind me. I need to keep myself in check and make sure I don’t make a mess out of them in front of her.

I easily grab the guy's fist as he's mid-punch.

“What the?!”

I throw him away from me, which makes him lose his balance and topple backward. He crashes into one of the other guys, and both of them fall to the ground.

I look at the two of them lying there and say, “I don't want to make a big scene, so how about we end this?”

I wouldn’t like a passerby to see us and call the police either. They'd just end up making a mountain out of a molehill.

“Cut the bullshit!”

Weren’t you the one who started throwing the punches?

I turn to face the guy who has the best physique out of the three. He's probably the leader of their little gang. Looks like he’ll pack more of a punch than the other two.

...It turns out he just relies on brute force, though. I can clearly see through his moves. I fight back a yawn as I use his strength against him and pin him down on the ground.

“Nagh! Fuck! Fuck off of me!” he cries out angrily as he struggles to break free from my grip.

He sure has balls, still trying to shit-talk me after getting wiped so easily. Hopefully, now they get the message that they shouldn't keep looking for a fight.

“Just give up, and I'll pretend nothing ever happened. But if you're still looking for a fight, I'll actually have to start trying, so just keep that in mind. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

As soon as I finish threatening them, they calm down and start nodding repeatedly like puppets.

“Sorry, dude. We won't lay a finger on your girl, swear on our moms' graves.”

She's not even my girlfriend, but whatever.

“I'm glad you guys get it.”

I let the leader go; he quickly gets up and helps his friends up as well. Without saying a single word, they turn tail and run out the alley.

They're smarter than I gave them credit for. If this had gotten out of hand, I bet Touka would've been shocked, and that's putting it lightly.

“...Whoa, Senpai. You don't just look the part, huh? You're a legit criminal, through and through,” she says once she's sure the guys are gone.

“I don't think I'm a criminal. They looked for a fight, and I just tried to finish it as peacefully as I could.”

“You call that peaceful? Damn, you didn't even realize how dangerous you are.”

“Haaah... I swear, you're just...”

She could at least thank me for getting rid of those assholes.

I was going to tell her as much, but I can see that her hands are still trembling slightly, so I'll drop it.

“I was sooo scared, y'know? I'm not a big, strong man like you, Senpai. I'm just a weak and delicate lady! I'm sorry for being so cute that I attract those kinds of guys, okay?! It's not like I enjoy being hit on! Hmph! Happy now, Senpai?!”

She's right there. I wasn't really thinking about that, so I guess that's my bad.

“I bet I scared you too, so yeah. Sorry about that.”

She gives me a surprised look.

“I-I was, not gonna lie! I don't really care, though; you're always scary either way.”

I thank her for her extremely kind and considerate words.

“Oh, I see. Nice to know.”

“...But, to be honest, I feel sorta embarrassed. I mean, you're the one who helped me out. So I feel like I should be thanking you, instead of having you apologize for scaring me. I have a better opinion about you now, though, Senpai,” she says and smiles at me.

“Could you elaborate on that?”

“Well, before, I thought that you were just a nice guy who only happened to look like a thug. But now I know that once you're angry, you actually turn into a dangerous thug,” she hugs herself as she says this, pretending as though she's scared.

“How's that a better opinion of me?”

“Whoopsie. You got me there.”

Oh, so it was another one of her jokes. Classic.

I notice her hands have stopped shaking, and I can't help but smile when I do. Touka notices my smile and blushes a little. She looks a bit embarrassed.

“Well, looks like we've had a rough start, but how about we go on our first date now? Let's make the best out of it.”

She nods silently at what I say, her cheeks still flushed a petal pink.



“So what’re we gonna do now, Senpai?” She asks me while we walk in front of the train station. She’s back to normal now.

“How about watching a movie?”

“Going to the movies? Not like it’s a bad idea, but doesn’t that sound too normal for a date?”

“How’s that a bad thing?”

“I mean, sure. At least we won’t get involved in another fight if we go,” she answers with a shrug.

What the hell is she expecting from me? The least she could do is be more honest about what she wants. When she gets all cryptic like this, it just gets on my nerves.

Since we've decided to go to the movies, we head toward a theatre that's located in a nearby shopping mall.

“Well, I’m fine with going to the movies... but are they even showing anything good today?”

She checks the board that shows which movies are being screened today.

“...Oh my, Senpai! Don’t tell me that you got the idea 'cause you wanted to see the “Love Letter” with me! It looks super cheesy and predictable! I see I can’t relax for even a second around you. You’re always trying to woo me, aren’t ‘cha?”

With a smile, she points at the movie poster, which features a shamelessly handsome actor and a young actress in the center.

“Huh. I thought you’d rather watch something like this, to be honest.”

It’s one of those post-apocalyptic flicks where a buff dude and his cute chick sidekick tramp around the world and kick other people’s asses. This one, specifically, seems to feature some cowboy-looking villains.

It's been on the billboards since winter of last year, so it must've been quite the hit.

"Maybe you've already seen it?"

"Whoa there, Senpai—hold your horses. How d'you figure that? How would a cute, delicate girl like me enjoy a movie like that? It looks like it's packed with violence."

"If I had to say... it fits your personality pretty well."

"I swear...", she says while pouting. After a second, she continues, "I'd be lying if I said I didn't see the trailer on TV the other day, or that I found it interesting."

In the end, we decide to go and watch it. It turns out it's filled with a lot more violence, gore, and screaming than you'd imagine.



The movie has quite the production value—it doesn't lack any edge, and the special effects are impressive. The action scenes are also pretty cool and well-made.

I glance to my side from time to time to check on Touka, but she seems to be watching the movie intensely with a smile plastered on her face. Yep, I knew these kinds of movies were her thing.

She's so surprised and excited by the movie that she doesn't even notice when she latches onto one of my sleeves. I check on her because I figure something's wrong, but she's staring raptly at the screen. Her expressions are as easy to see as the movie showing in front of us.

It's fun to see this side of her and to watch her reactions based on what happens in the movie. It's definitely a new side of her, and one I normally can't appreciate.



"That was fun."

"Yeah. Skipping that romance movie was a good choice," she agrees, nodding.

We're at a fast food joint, sipping on drinks while talking about what we thought of the movie.

"You seemed to have fun watching it, though. Like, way more than normal," I say in between trying my drink.

"Wait a sec, Senpai, don't tell me that..."

I look at her, only to be greeted with an evil smile.

"What?"

"You toootally love me, don't you, Senpai? Did you seriously spend the whole time ogling me instead of watching the movie? Oh my god, Senpai! You can look at me whenever you want, don't worry! You should at least try to forget me for a little bit and watch the movie!" she says in a teasing tone. She playfully kicks at me with the tips of her toes.

Man, does she ever stop daydreaming? Or at least keep quiet about it?

"Yeah, I let myself go there. It was pretty cute seeing you enjoying the movie so much."

She's just going to turn whatever I say against me, so I'll just agree with her and move on.

"...What?!" she answers, surprised.

She stops kicking at me, too. Thank god for that; that game of one-sided footsie was starting to hurt.

Why's her face red now, though? She's also fidgeting; did I say something wrong?

"What's wrong?"

She looks at me, somewhat befuddled.

"Well, it's just that you've been super nice and flattering me so earnestly... It feels pretty embarrassing, y'know? Not that I don't like it, but still..."

She tilts her head.

It looks like she completely misunderstood what I meant and didn't pick

up my sarcastic tone. I can't really tell her I wasn't trying to flatter her, though—she'd just turn it against me and make it look like I'm just being coy or something.

After deliberating on it for a while, I come up with an excellent idea. Maybe I can finish this date faster than I thought. I finish my drink and say, "...Maybe we should leave it here for today, then?"

"Why would you even say that?!"

"You seem really embarrassed about all this, and you're trying too hard to not show it."

"...Did you just act nice so you could have an excuse to call this off? If so, that's the shittiest reason ever," she says while staring at me.

Awkwardness ensues; we look at each other briefly and force ourselves to smile.

"Let's just forget about this. Anyways, what're we doing next?"

"How about just keeping me company, huh?" she asks while sulkily while pouting.

I don't really have anything specific in mind since I've never gone on a date before, but maybe we could go there...?

"How about we go to an arcade?"

"An arcade? Wait, don't tell me! Are you going to show off your impressive criminal skills again? Maybe extorting little kids out of their allowance?!"

"I'm not planning on showing that off. Mainly because I've never even done it in the first place," I say with a sigh.

"Yeah, I know," she answers lightly, a smile on her face, "Are you gonna show me your 'epic gamer' skills, then? Y'know—playing, punching the screen 'till it breaks, throwing ashtrays at people 'cause you're mad you lost..."

That all sounds strangely familiar. I think I saw it in a manga I read not too long ago...

“Who do you even think I am?” I say in a tired voice. She looks at me with a grin.



We arrive at the arcade. We enter, and after checking out all of the games inside, Touka says, accompanied by the biggest shit-eating grin ever, “Looks like there’s no one else around here to be your criminal match, Senpai.”

“No clue what you’re talking about.”

She’s probably joking around so much because of the fight I had with those guys before. I guess she wants to tell me that she wasn't bothered by it, and that she’s not scared of me.

Well, at least she knows how to communicate, in that sense. It makes me think that she actually could give a damn about others if she really put her mind to it. It would be nice if she worried about me more often, but at least I know she cares about me a little.

“Well then, Senpai. Let’s do some 1v1 action!”

I nod.

“Let’s try this racing game!”

We decide to try the racing game she picks out first and choose the versus option.

Judging by the way she’s handling the controls, this isn't her first time at the rodeo. Unfortunately for her, I’ve played this game countless times already, so I’m obviously better than her. In the end, I win by a huge margin.

“Ugh! Okay, then—how about that beat-em-up next?!”

She spots a pretty popular fighting game machine that's vacant, so we sit down there next. She’s surprisingly quite good at the game, but it’s not enough for her. I win effortlessly against her, so much so that I don't even lose any HP.

She doesn’t punch the screen or throw any ashtrays at me when she

loses, but she does glare daggers at me.

“Fine! Let’s play some air hockey now. This time, I won’t lose!”

She slides a coin into the machine, and we both head to opposite ends, ready to play. Again, she’s good at it... but my reflexes are sharper than hers, and I hit the puck with way more strength, so it’s a lost cause for her.

She couldn’t even score a single point against me. The final score is 11 to 0, and she looks like she's on the brink of tears.

“...You’re disgusting,” she utters as tears well up in her eyes.

“Normally, when a guy brings a girl to an arcade, he's supposed to go easy on her! What the hell, Senpai?! D'you have fun preying on the weak?!” she spits out, glaring at me heatedly.

“I mean, I had fun.”

“Ugh!” she shouts through clenched teeth.

I'm actually pretty surprised—I think she’s a little *too* mad over this. Where is it coming from? Does she really hate losing that much?

Wait a sec, I think she completely misunderstood what I just said.

“Wait, my bad. What I meant is, I had fun because this is the first time I’ve ever come to an arcade with someone else.”

I've tried to make friends with other people here before, but everyone was just frightened of me. In the end, I’ve never had the chance to play these games with anyone else.

“So yeah, sorry. I’m probably spoiling the fun for you.”

She looks at me, surprised at my explanation.

“C'mon, Senpai. How can I call you disgusting after you told me that? Dummy.”

“My bad.”

“I’m tired of playing against you, so how about we try doing something together now?” she asks while pointing at another machine.

“...The photo booth? You want us to go in there? Are you drunk?”

“Okay, I thought you’d complain about it, but I didn’t expect you to ask me if I was drunk. C’mon, is it that big of a deal? If I stick the photo on my phone case, everyone at school can see how much of a lovey-dovey couple we are!”

“Oh, okay. You have a point there.”

She’s right. It might help keep other guys at bay, like she wants.

“How about we take a picture, then?”

“Sure thing, Senpai! C’mon, let’s go!”

We enter the section of the arcade that’s “Out of Bounds for Single Boys,” as one sign puts it. Touka heads straight into the photo booth.

We insert a coin, and a funny voice asks us to choose a mode for the picture.

“I’m choosing this one!” she declares and quickly chooses one of the options displayed on the screen.

"Get ready to pose for the picture, guys! ♪" the machine sing-songs.

“Come on, Senpai! Let’s pose like we’re an actual couple. But no touching me, okay?! Try not to get too down about it and end up in tears.”

“Sure. I don’t know what you mean by posing like a couple, but I’ll just leave it up to you. Also, that’s not something I’d cry about.”

“That’s right! Just leave it to me! And stop trying to look so tough, dude!”

She gives me some instructions about how I should pose, so I just follow suit.

Snap!

There, that’s the final photo.

Touka seriously bosses me around as we try several times to take a good photo. Finally, fortunately, we take a good picture. Now I can be free.

“We can use an app later to write whatever we want over the picture, but you don’t mind if I just do it here and finish this quickly, right?”

“Sure. I don’t even know what you’re talking about, so just do your thing.”

She nods and starts writing some stuff over the picture displayed on the screen. I decide to check out what she’s doing.

“Doesn't my face look pretty weird like that?”

“Hm, yeah. I thought that using this filter to make your eyes bigger would distract from the fact that you look terrifying, but...”

“Looks like I didn’t do a good job posing.”

“Yeah. To be honest, you look like a ghost here more than anything else,” she sighs.

She could at least be a little nicer when she's talking about my looks...

“Hm, I wonder if just writing this could work...” she ponders as she finishes fidgeting with the screen.

A copy of the photo comes out of the machine. Touka snatches it and peels off the adhesive protector from its back.

“Okay, Senpai, take out your phone.”

“Uh, sure.”

I take it out, and...

“Here you go! No tearing it off, you hear me?”

She slaps the photo on the back of my phone, just like that. She didn’t even bother asking me for permission before doing so.

I check out the picture—I can see myself, looking "like a ghost," as she claims, next to her. The flash when the machine took the photo was really bright, so I thought it was going to come out too shiny. I guess it was fixed with a filter.

There's no need to take a long look at the photo to see that Touka looks 100 times better in real life. People say the prettier someone really is, the

less photogenic they are. I'm hoping that it's the same deal with me. I mean, I can't be this scary-looking in real life... right?

"Sure, I'll be careful with it."

She answers with a smile, "I had fun with this arcade date, really. But now I'm hungry, so how about we have something to eat and call it a day after that?"

"Oh, I see. I had fun too," I say with a smile of my own.

Putting aside the rocky start we had, thanks to those guys, I think our date went pretty well. I'm relieved, since it was my very first and all.

First Date: After Story

When I get home, I head straight to my room and throw myself onto the bed without even bothering to change out of my clothes. I close my eyes and recollect the day's events.

“Man, Yuuji-senpai is so weird.”

I thought as much the first time we met, but the time we spent together today just reinforces my belief. I mean, he's brusque, scary looking, and super strong. Like when I saw him fight today, for example—he definitely gives off gangster vibes. But he's also a very considerate guy, kind of an airhead, and definitely socially awkward. It's obvious he's not used to interacting with other people based on how he talks to me. But still—he's actually a very nice and gentle guy, for sure.

I feel like everyone misunderstands who he truly is, including me. Even though I'd pegged him as just a nice guy, and nothing more, today showed me how wrong I was. He's not just a nice guy, and people aren't wrong when they claim that he's scary or dangerous.

Today, when those three guys surrounded us, I was really, really scared. And seeing Senpai totally unphased by the situation scared me even more. I thought, “Is he used to this kinda thing?” Well, it wasn't like he expected them to reach that level of violence... but to think that he wasn't even expecting it makes it even more frightening.

That's not all there is to him, though. I mean, today's actually been mostly fun. So much so that I forgot about the fight for a while.

Going to the movies, discussing what we thought about it while having a drink, and getting owned at the arcade was enjoyable... Okay, maybe that last part wasn't so fun, but still. Overall, I think that it was an enjoyable experience.

We may not know each other well, since it's only been a week since we first met, but I know how weird and nice he is. I know about how

frightening he can be, but also about how good of a person he can be. Despite his traits, I still think being around him is fun.

That can't be all there is to him, though... I feel like there's something else about him, something that he hasn't shown me yet. There must be something. I know there is, since even I have things I'd rather keep hidden. I bet it's the same deal with him, and he's got something he doesn't want to show others.

We've only been dating for a week, but I want to know more about him. I don't even know what I'd do if I knew more about that secret side he keeps hidden away, but for some reason, I want to know. I just feel it inside me; I want to know more about him.

That's why I think he's weird.

I think about him more and more each day. It's not because I like him or anything like that; it's mostly because I'm curious about him. More than that, however, it feels like I'm expecting more from him each day. Like I expect him to understand my true self.

...Not that I'd ever open myself up to him like that, but I just *feel* like he'd understand me if I did. And the more I think about it, the more I hate myself for ruminating in my weakness.

I shake my head and stand up. I reach over for my purse and take out the photo I took with him at the booth. There's Senpai, in all his ghastly glory, enhanced by the intense flash. I'm next to him, looking cute as ever.

I read the message I wrote down on the photo: "Our first date!" Reading it makes me smile fondly—I definitely had fun today, even more than I'd like to admit. I peel off the back of the sticker and paste it inside the flap of my phone case.

"God, he looks way too scary!"

I'm not planning to rip it off of my case because of it, though. Actually, the more I look at it... he's kinda charming, in his own way... or maybe not?

I expect something from him. After all, I'm Ike Haruma's sister, and I'm pretty sure he's the reason why Senpai agreed to the fake relationship. No matter how cute I am, he'd never agree to do it just because of my looks.

I know that what I want from him is something out of his reach. I don't think he has even the slightest notion of who I really am, just like the rest. But somehow, deep inside, I just expect something else from him that I don't from other people. Despite that, I know it's just another way he'll end up disappointing me.

Ultimately, that's what I think of him and our relationship, but...

"The next time we go to the arcade, I'll crush him with the game I'm best at!"

I'm already thinking of our next date.

I can't deny it: I'm interested to see how our relationship goes... as well as interested in him.



Chapter 10: The Student Counseling Room

It's Monday, and the start of the new week after my first date.

Morning classes are boring as usual, finishing without any incidents. This leads to lunch break.

"You should've seen everyone's faces when they saw our picture today. It worked out super well!"

I'm sharing a bench with Touka as we eat in the courtyard.

"...Good to hear, I guess."

Can't really say I care much about it, to be honest.

"It's a shame that I actually pasted it on the inside of my phone case's flap, 'cause everytime I open my phone with the lights off, I can't help but get scared by your freaky embarrassed face," she says while waving her case in front of me so I can see the photo in question.

"Just take it off, then."

"Nuh-uh. Actually, I think that it could be effective in warding off evil spirits, considering how scary it looks, so it's staying on."

"She can't avoid being rude whenever she speaks, can she?" I think to myself as I eat my food.

We finish eating, and we're just about to head back to class when...

"Hey guys, do you have a moment?"

Whoever she is, she's clearly talking to Touka and me. Who could it be? ...Oh, it's Makiri-sensei.

"Sure," I answer.

"Wait, what?" Touka whispers to me, followed by a curt, "What do you want?"

“I don’t think we should talk here. Come with me to the student counseling room.”

Oh, well. Looks like we’ll have to put off going back to class for now. Off to the counseling room we go.



The student counseling room is in the administrative building on the first floor. It’s a room with a couple of sofas and a small, white coffee table in between. Touka and I sit on one side, and Makiri-sensei sits on the other side.

“I’ll just get straight to the point: you two are basically going out, right?” she asks with a serious look.

Her straight, black hair contrasts nicely against the white table—she’s outstandingly beautiful, and there are a lot of guys in the school who have a crush on her. Well, that’s what I’ve heard from Ike, anyway.

She’s not someone the students speak openly with, however. Even though she has her own fanbase, she’s still one of the toughest teachers around the school. Most of the people in school avoid her out of fear.

“Yep, we’re going out! We’re not doing anything naughty, though! Our relationship is very wholesome, so I don’t really know why you brought us all the way here just to ask,” Touka quickly answers, full of confidence.

Poor her. She clearly doesn’t know Makiri-sensei well enough yet to be answering like that.

Makiri-sensei looks at me after Touka answers. I’m not scared of her. Sure, she’s hard on people, but I know how honest she is with others. I appreciate that part of her, so much so that I can’t really bring myself to lie to her about anything.

“No, we’re not actually going out.”

“W-Wait, whaaat?! Wait a second, Senpai; what are you talking about? Aren’t we the best couple that’s ever blessed this planet? You scared me for a moment there! You know I don’t like those kinds of jokes☆! ...Like, I

really don't," Touka says. She's smiling, but I can tell from a mile away that she wants to murder me right now.

"What do you mean by that, Tomoki-kun?"

Makiri-sensei presses the issue with that question.

"Well, as you can see, she's got all the makings to be popular around here."

"Yeah. Ike-san is quite beautiful, cheerful, and friendly, to boot. I wouldn't be surprised if several of the boys around school were chasing after her," she replies.

Touka stays silent as she listens to our conversation. She's usually the kind of person that loves to be the center of attention and showered in praise, but now's quite different. She's trying very hard to not burst from anger and reveal how pissed she really is.

"So, basically, she doesn't really want to go out with anyone. All the guys in school keep pestering her and telling her how crazy they are about her, so we both agreed to fake a relationship so they'd finally leave her alone."

Makiri-sensei nods after I explain the situation.

"O-Oh my god, Senpai! You're going to make me, like, super-duper sad if you keep lying like that!" Touka cries out while forcing out the weakest smile possible.

Flames of fury are almost audibly crackling in her eyes. If she's trying to make me feel bad about all this, she's definitely not succeeding.

"I see. It's a good thing that this nice Senpai is helping you out, right, Ike-san?" she says while smiling at Touka. She continues, "If that's how the situation is, then I don't think there's any reason for me to keep you guys here."



“H-Hey, wait a sec! You believe him? Like, you didn’t think it’s just some kind of convenient excuse or anything like that?!” Touka exclaims, confused.

“Not really. I’ve known Tomoki-kun since his first year here, and I know for a fact that he’d never lie to intentionally hurt a girl,” Makiri-sensei replies, giving Touka a serious look.

Well, I’m glad to know that she trusts me that much.

She’s so direct and blunt that Touka is left speechless and has absolutely no retort.

“Y-You’d better not tell anyone about this, Sensei. Please!”

“Of course, I understand. I do respect your feelings, and I don’t want Tomoki-kun’s efforts to go to waste either,” Makiri-sensei replies with a gentle smile.

Touka growls briefly, as though unable to fully accept the situation.

“...Fine, then. I’m assuming we’re through now, yes?”

“Mhm. I’ll warn you right now, though: you two try not to stick out as much from now on. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Touka answers flippantly, clearly wanting to leave as soon as possible.

I nod.

We leave the room and walk in silence until we return to the courtyard. The moment we reach the courtyard, she starts shouting at me.

“Why the hell would you tell her the truth?! I can’t believe you!”

“I told her because I knew that she was worried about you.”

“Huh? What d’you even mean by that?” she asks with a frown.

“The fact that you’re going out with the school’s ‘criminal’ is obviously a red flag for the teachers. They’ll start thinking of you as a problematic person, too. I assume Makiri-sensei heard about our relationship at some point and wanted to help us out, if possible.”

“...Yeah, right. I still don’t get it, dude.”

“Well, I do.”

I bet I'm right. I bet that the moment the teachers heard Touka was going out with me, they marked her as another problem child at school.

Back when I actually was a beacon for trouble, I remember Makiri-sensei and Ike doing everything they could to help me. She decided to ignore the rumors that were spreading around and actually help me. Like I've said before, she doesn't care about outward appearances. She actually cares about how people really are on the inside, and she always does everything she can to help her students.

She's a good teacher, and someone I can trust.

“Sigh. Well, I can't change the past. There's nothing I can do at this point. Senpai, I'll only say this once: this is the only time you ever tell someone else the truth.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You sure? Not even to my shit brother, not to the other teachers, not to anyone! If anyone else knows about our secret, then it'll be over! You hear me?”

Now she looks really desperate. To be honest, if Ike really wanted me to tell him the truth, I'd do it. I can't bring myself to lie to him, even if I did this just so he and his sister can get along better. I don't like lying in general, but this time, I'll have to lie to calm her down.

“Yeah, I won't. Okay?”

“...Okay, good to know,” she says, her face still slightly puffed from anger.

“There's no need to be so tense about all of this. Chill. I wasn't planning to back out on this, anyway.”

“Right. Can't let this golden opportunity go to waste, right? I mean, you get to be around the girl of your dreams,” she replies. Her anger's dissipated, and now she's serious instead.

I swear, I'd pay just to know where she gets all that self-confidence.

Chapter 11: Trip to the Library

After another uneventful day of classes, Touka comes to my classroom. As we're walking down the corridor, she asks me something I wasn't quite expecting.

"Hey, Senpai—how about we go to the library?"

"Sounds good. You can go, and I'll wait for you here."

"Sure thing! ...Wait a second! You have to come too!"

"Why? What do you need me there for?"

She smiles as if she knows something I don't and says, "So here's the catch, Senpai: there're a lot of people who go there after school to study and stuff, right?"

"I think so."

"Which means there's a whole audience to show how lovey-dovey we are!" she says while clenching her fist.

"Are you sure we're not going to end up bothering the people who're just trying to study, instead?"

"No worries about that, Senpai! That would only work against us, after all. All that matters is that people see us together after school in the library! That's all!" she says while flashing a cheerful smile.

"...Okay, then, sure. Let's get going, I guess."

"Okaaay!"

It's not like I care very much about where I'm going after school, and I have nothing better to do at home anyways, so I'll tag along with her.



"This is actually my first time here," she says while standing in front of the library door.

“I don't really come here much myself... Damn, there's a lot of people here. Let's be as quiet as we can.”

I can tell there's a lot of people here based on the number of shoes placed in the lockers outside of the library. It seems like people weren't kidding when they said a lot of people use this place; it's pretty packed.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

After Touka reassures me that she'll behave, we finally enter the library. Most of the students are sitting in neat rows along the long tables, and they're either reading books or studying.

There's a small creak as we open the door, but it's quiet enough that the people inside don't even notice us entering. We scan the area for any open seats. Oh, there are two over there at the end of the table. Touka and I move over to them.

I pull out the chair, ready to sit down, until I notice a school bag left on the chair; it's not free after all.

Maybe I should take it and move it somewhere so I can sit down? Then again, that'd probably mean... I mean, I'd be stealing someone else's place, right? Or maybe the bag belongs to the guy sitting next to me? Wouldn't it be rude to just take it and move it elsewhere? I'll ask him before I do anything.

“Hey, can I sit here?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, sorry. I'll take my bag... W-Wait a second, T-Tomoki-kun?! Why the hell are you here?!”

The moment he shouts that, everyone in the library turns to focus on us.

“Whaaat?! Why is Tomoki-kun here?”

“You gotta be kidding me. Hey, everyone, run! You think this is any time to study?!”

“Ugh! And just when the book was getting good... But I totally can't focus if he's here.”

Complaints start flooding in like a landslide. In a matter of minutes, just about everyone clears the library; they're absolutely terrified at the thought of me being here. Now it's just me, Touka, and the guy I was talking to.

“A-Ahaha! I actually just remembered that I have something important to do! Here, take my seat! It’s all yours!” the guy quickly gets up and dashes out of the room.

“Wow—you booked the entire room for us today! Nice going, Senpai! You never disappoint,” Touka says after making a whistling sound to show she's impressed. She's clearly poking fun at me.

“If you mean that mass stampede I just caused that cleared the place out, then sure.”

I look over at the counter. There’s supposed to be someone working there to help check out books and whatnot, but I don't even see them. Damn, even the people who're supposed to be working here ran away?!

“Let’s just make this the first and last time we come here together. I don't wanna bother anyone who actually came here to study seriously or whatever.”

If I end up coming here repeatedly, other students won't be able to use it. Obviously, I don't want that to happen.

“You’re a nice guy, Senpai,” Touka says with a serious expression.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It's just... I don't think you've really done anything wrong here. They're the ones who chose to shit their pants and run away. I just think you should ignore them; if they really wanted to study, they’d stay.”

Damn, she’s actually pissed.

“Are you trying to console me or something?”

“Nope. I’m just pissed at them, in general... and at you, too.”

I get what she’s trying to say here. Really, I do. But...

“It’s not like I can somehow convince them that I’m not a criminal when that’s what they all think. So I can’t really blame them for running away.”

“Huh, I see,” she answers, totally deadpan.

Damn, this silence is awkward. What are we even supposed to do now?

“Well then! Since we’re already here, and the room is practically ours, I think we should just make the best out of it! Let’s finish our homework while we’re here, and we can also chat or whatever!” she exclaims. Looks like she’s back to her usual cheerful self.

Nice save, Touka. She definitely sensed the awkwardness hanging in the air and did something about it. I don’t mind going along with her suggestion at all, actually.

“Well, since I’m here, I could help you out with your homework.”

“Nah, it’s all good. I doubt you could teach me anything, Yakuza-senpai.”

“...I’m a year ahead of you. I can definitely help you out with your schoolwork.”

“No need, really! That’s because... hehe... I got the top marks in my entrance exam!” she says with a smug grin.

“Damn, that’s impressive.”

No, really. It actually is impressive. The moment I say that, though, she does a complete 180—her smug smirk vanishes, and she looks completely dejected instead.

“Well, considering who my brother is, it’s a given that I’d have to get the best marks,” she whispers in a dispirited voice.

“What? What does being Ike’s sister have to do with anything?”

“Huh?”

She’s surprised at my reply.

“Oh, I get it now,” I say, “Is it because he’s helping you with your studies or something like that?”

That'd make sense—I mean, if I had Ike tutor me daily, I'd definitely do way better on my exams. Maybe I'd even do well enough to take second place in our class rankings.

“No, he's never tutored me,” she answers. Her expression darkens further.

I don't get her... So she's proud of her exam marks, but she doesn't like having people recognize that it was through her own hard work? Why would that be the case? She should be proud of her efforts. I don't understand why she's acting this way.

“I don't really get how any of that is related to being Ike's sister, then.”

“I mean, it's probably not, but...”

“Well, your good grades are a result of your hard work, right? You didn't even rely on your brother's help or anything like that. I don't think you should be acting so down about it.”

Touka remains silent after my reply.

“What's wrong?”

She shakes her head at my question.

“No, it's nothing,” she whispers.

An awkward silence blankets us again. Normally, Touka would be able to come up with a topic in the blink of an eye, and the awkwardness would be gone; but, right now, she's remaining silent.

I guess I'll try to come up with something to talk about myself, but given that I'm a complete disaster when it comes to human relationships, nothing really springs to mind. Shit.

“Ugh, god! I just feel totally off today! I'm going home!” Touka shouts, and she quickly stuffs her notebook inside her bag and stands up.

“Uh, sure,” I say as I follow suit.

We quickly leave the library.



We don't say anything at all to each other on our way home together. Touka's off in her own little world, immersed in her own thoughts.

I probably messed up earlier and said something that upset her. I wanna apologize, but I don't even know what made her angry in the first place. I try to come up with something to talk about, but we end up reaching the station without exchanging a single word the entire way.

"Well then, Senpai..."

Touka bids me farewell in her usual manner and heads towards her respective train platform. Her whisper was so low that I could barely make out her promise to see me again tomorrow.

So maybe she's not mad? I wish I had more experience with situations like this, because I'm so lost right now. It doesn't help that she actually smiled at me when she said goodbye, so that confuses me even more.

...And here I am, just happy to see her smile. I'm a simple man to please, I suppose.

Chapter 12: Another Main Character, or an Antagonist?

It's the next day.

Lunch break has just started, and I'm in class. Suddenly, Touka slams the door open and shouts, "Yuuji-senpaaai! Let's have lunch together!"

Huh... it looks like she's back to normal. Here I thought that yesterday I'd made her angry, but I guess I was wrong.

I stand up and walk over to her.

"Let's go to our usual spot!" she exclaims with a big smile.

I nod and head toward the door. Right as we're about to leave, though, somebody calls out from behind us.

"Hey, you guys got a moment?"

I turn around; it's Ike. Before I can say anything, Touka jumps in, ready on the defensive like usual.

"No, we don't. Didn't I tell you not to talk to me while we're at school?"

Judging by her snappish tone and the daggers she's glaring at him, she's definitely trying her hardest to tell him he's bothering her. Ike just looks confused and a little weirded out by it all, so I cut Touka off. I should at least hear what he wants.

"What's up?"

"Do you guys mind if we join you for lunch? There's something we'd like to talk to you guys about," he answers in his usual gentle manner.

"Huh? What's your deal? Nah, I think we'll pass," Touka answers curtly.

I'm hoping this is part of her plan to make him jealous and not coming from a place of pure malice. She's being a little too aggressive toward him, I think.

"Wait a second, you said 'we'...?" I ask. Who's the other person he's talking about?

“Yeah.”

He nods. As he does, a girl peeks out from behind him.

“H-He’s talking about me!”

It’s Ike’s childhood friend, Hasaki Kana. Her short, chestnut-colored hair flutters delicately around her face the moment she pops out from behind him.

“Why’s she coming along? I don’t get it; what’s your deal?” Touka snaps, now clearly annoyed by the two of them.

Hasaki quickly answers, “I j-just want to make sure your relationship is pure!”

“Huh? Our relationship is none of your business, though? Why do you even feel the need to check on us?” Touka asks with a shrug. Damn, shots fired. Touka isn’t pulling any punches, huh?

“B-but it actually *is* something that should be my business! I... I worry about you, you know?! And... and... I-I worry about T-Tomoki-kun too!” she answers. She glances at me for a second, but when I return her look, she averts her eyes.

She probably wants to make sure that I’m not doing anything weird to Touka. The girl in question, however, doesn’t seem to appreciate Hasaki’s concern at all, and she still looks visibly pissed.

“Huuuh? I don’t get why you’re so worried about all this. It’s actually kinda annoying, more than anything y’know?”

Hasaki makes a strange groaning noise and takes a step back at her biting words. I thought Ike would come in and try to help her out, but he’s just watching silently from the sidelines. It makes me pretty feel bad, to be honest. I mean, Hasaki’s clearly struggling right now, and Ike isn’t stepping in to help. I guess I’ll try to soften the situation a little bit.

“C’mon, it can’t be that bad. I don’t mind them coming,” I say as I look at the two of them.

Hasaki seems surprised by my answer. “I-Is it really okay?” she asks.

I nod wordlessly.

“Nice!” she whispers.

“Thanks, man,” Ike finally replies with a gentle smile.

“H-Hey! What the hell, Senpai?! You’re not the only one who gets to call the shots here, okay?!”

Well, I should’ve expected Touka to get mad. She’s not even trying to hide her feelings anymore, her anger bristling. Ike simply shrugs at her opposition.

“...Haah. Well, okay. If that’s what you want, Senpai, I’ll make an exception just for today.”

“Thanks, Touka.”

“Hmph!” she pouts.

Oh well, looks like we’re going to have a fun lunchtime with these two and Touka in perma-pissed mode.



We head toward the usual spot in the courtyard. Just like always, we’re the center of attention—but today, we stand out more than usual.

Obviously, it’s because the protagonist, Ike, is here. He’s followed by his sister, Touka, who’s always the center of attention because of her cheerful and friendly attitude. Then we have Ike’s childhood friend, Hasaki Kana, one of the school’s cutest girls, and the ace of the tennis club. And last, but not least, we have me—the school thug.

“I-It’s been a while since we last had lunch together, huh, Touka? Back in elementary, we were always together, remember?!”

“...Now that I think about it, it’s actually been a while since we’ve last spoken, as well,” Touka replies.

“Uh, haha... Yeah... I’ve always looked out for you, though.”

“Looking out for me doesn’t do much good if you don’t even bother talking to me.”

“Ahaha...”

Damn, it's pretty obvious Touka doesn't like her. Maybe she considers her a rival because she's close to Ike?

Hasaki forces a smile, and we're enveloped by an awkward silence. She looks increasingly troubled, though, and eventually turns to Ike.

“Ha...Harumaaa...”

She asks him for help.

“Well, when you two started drifting apart, Kana was getting really good at tennis. It's a given she didn't have as much time to spend with you anymore. She had to go to competitions left and right. Plus, I also remember you started avoiding her, didn't you?”

Damn, Haruma. Absolutely no chill.

“Huh? I don't remember avoiding her, like, ever. It's pretty shitty of you to just make stuff up like that out of thin air. Plus, don't talk to me while we're at school.”

Touka snaps at Ike and turns away, as if to ignore him. He seems sad for a moment, but quickly returns to his usual smile when he notices me looking.

Man, I wish I could help them get along better somehow. I really wish they would. It's really just a question of “how.” While I'm brainstorming, Hasaki regains her courage to speak.

“Um, T-Tomoki-kun!” she shouts.

“What's up?”

Her face is beet red. Once again, as soon as she notices me looking at her, she looks away. I feel sorry for her. She probably finds me really scary, but I'm trying my best to appear as friendly as I can; I swear.

“A-Are you two really going out?!”

Huh, interesting question. That's a really sharp observation. It's true that we're not actually going out—maybe Hasaki's been watching us

closely enough to notice that Touka and I aren't really as close as we appear to be.

“We are.”

“B-But... it doesn't feel like that at all!”

My answer only makes her more suspicious, and she raises her voice even more.

“Huuuh? Are you blind or something, Hasaki-senpai? Yuuji-senpai and I are the most lovey-dovey couple around! Right, Yuuji-senpai?!”

Oh man, Touka's ready to make another scene.

Hasaki's expression hardens; clearly, she's not the least bit content with Touka's answer. I can't blame her for being upset.

“I-If that's the case, then...! Then you'll have no issues k-kissing right now, right?!”

Hasaki riles herself up and shouts at the two of us. She's not pulling any punches, either—if Touka was looking for a fight, she just found herself one.

I don't think you can force people to do that, even if they were actually going out. Plus, we're at school—probably not the best place to make out.

“Huh? And why should we? Just because you said so? I don't get you.”

“D-Didn't you just say you two are 'lovey-dovey'?! If that's the case, then you shouldn't have any problems kissing each other!”

“...Are you for real right now? Do you realize we're at school?”

“Yes, I'm for real! So why don't you two show me if you're for real, too?!”

“Ugh.”

Looks like Touka loses this fight.

“Calm down, Kana.”

“You stay out of it, Haruma!”

Hasaki is so riled up that she doesn't even care about the large scene she's making. Everyone's paying attention now. If this keeps up, she's not going to calm down until Touka and I kiss.

Not gonna lie, I'm a little worried now. We're not going out, so we can't kiss just like that.

What should I do? Wait, I've just come up with the best possible excuse ever.

“Sorry, Hasaki, but I can't really kiss Touka right now.”

“What the hell?” Touka whispers angrily.

Ike looks at us dubiously, and Hasaki seems cheerful by my reply.

“I knew it! ...Wait, what do you mean by that?”

Her happiness lasts just a few seconds before being replaced by confusion. She tilts her head in puzzlement.

“No matter what you say, you can't just force me to kiss Touka out of the blue like that. It's not something that should be taken so lightly.”

“Huh?”

“Wait, what?”

Touka and Hasaki answer in unison, both of them clearly confused.

“I'm saying that I'm really going out with her. This isn't any game or anything like that. The most we've done so far is hold hands. We haven't even kissed yet. I want to cherish this relationship, so I want to take my time and do things right.”

Hasaki's mouth gapes in surprise when she hears my reasoning. It might just be an excuse I made up on the spot, but it sounds like a pretty valid thing to say if our relationship was real.

Unfortunately, I'm outright lying, so, yeah. As much as I'd like to be sincere with her, I have to make something up.

Hasaki's clearly processing my statement mentally, as her expression

flicks between several stages of confusion like some sort of television. It's actually pretty funny to watch. Finally, she goes completely pale.

I guess she's not a fan of that proclamation of affection for Touka that I just shared. Yeah, I just realized that's what I implied there... I feel pretty terrible about it now. I mean, Hasaki's even started crying and everything.

“N-No way! Sniff, hic! Haruma, you JEEERK!”

She screams at Haruma and breaks out into a run, dashing out of the courtyard in a matter of seconds.

“Why me?” Haruma says, clearly puzzled as he watches her retreating figure.



“Ummm... Aren’t you even slightly embarrassed at what you just said?”
Touka asks while looking up at me.

Huh? What?

“...Oh, yeah. That was actually pretty embarrassing.”

What the hell’s wrong with me? Man, I’m such an idiot. I bet this’ll come back to me tonight right when I’m on the brink of sleep, and I’ll end up staying up all night from the embarrassment instead. Nice one, me.

Touka also looks surprised.

“Sigh... You’re so stupid, Senpai. Look at your face—you look like a tomato.”

“Oh, shut up.”

She sighs defiantly, as if she’s pretending that my little spiel didn’t affect her. But I can see her cheeks flushing pink, so she’s definitely embarrassed, too.



“Uh, well... let’s just forget about Kana for now,” Ike says, completely drained of energy.

“Sure, man.”

I’m honestly worried about her, but if he insists... I mean, he’s the one who actually knows her. Meanwhile, Touka’s chomping away at her sandwiches and completely ignoring Ike.

“I’ll ask my share of questions now, if that’s cool with you two.”

“Right. You also had stuff you wanted to ask. Go for it.”

He nods.

“I was wondering if you could give me a hand in the upcoming study meet.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Touka asks.

“It’s a study meet organized by the student council. It happens every

year during Golden Week. It's mainly aimed toward the first years, but seniors are also encouraged to go—they can help each other out with their studies and make new friends."

"Damn, sounds pretty boring. Count me out."

Ike ignores his sister and continues with a pleasant smile on his face. "So basically, it's a study meet for the first years. The student council hands out old exams to whoever comes so they know what to prepare for and how to study for them. But after that, there's a live concert in the school's gym, and the cooking club's gonna make food for everyone. Consider it more of a welcoming party for the first years."

Okay, that sounds reasonable. It was kind of a long explanation, but at least it's pretty clear.

"Whaaat? Hell no, that sounds boring. Also, stop talking to me at school."

Tactful as ever, Touka. She totally brushed off his long explanation like it was nothing. Even Ike looks depressed at this point.

"Okay, I'll help."

Those words are enough to make his smile return.

"Oh, really? Sorry to always ask for your help; you're a lifesaver, man. Be sure to have your schedule open after school for the week before Golden Week, okay?"

"Wait, what?! Isn't it obvious that he can't just drop whatever he's doing and open his schedule for you?! We spend time together after class and get all lovey-dovey, so obviously he won't have any time to help you!"

Looks like she doesn't like the fact that I want to help him.

"Sorry Touka, but I'm gonna help him."

"Wh-Whaaaat?! You'd rather help my brother than spend time with me, your significant other?!"

I wish I could tell her to chill out, that we're not even in a relationship to begin with, but Ike is here. I don't want us to get busted, so I'll have to

control myself and keep my mouth shut.

“You’re just exaggerating at this point.”

I know she’s pissed with me, but I’ll take the opportunity to set the record straight while I can.

“Ever since the term's started, I’ve spent most of the afternoons and time outside of school with you. Don’t you think I should have some time for my friends, too?”

“Yeah, yeah—that’s fine and all, but remember how I’m super cute and peppy? Remember how my brains and beauty make me super popular at school? Remember how other guys’ll probably try their luck with me when you’re not around?”

Man, she’s just way too cocky and sure of herself. At this point, I’m starting to think that she just lives in her own little world.

“You sure have balls to say something like that so openly.”

“I mean... it’s the truth, though.”

I look at Ike—hopefully, he can back me up here. He’s forcing a smile, but he seems to understand what I’m silently asking him for when he looks over at me.

“Sorry, Touka, but I’ll be borrowing Yuuji for a bit.”

“Huh? What’re you apologizing for, you shithead? Senpai, are you seriously gonna help him?”

“Yes, I am. Looks like we won’t be able to walk home together for a bit... Sorry.”

Touka stares at the two of us as if she's about to explode. She takes a deep breath and suddenly shouts out, “Aaaah! Okay, okay! Fine! It’ll be a huge drag, but I’ll help too. Okay?!”

“Wait, what?”

“Huh?”

Ike and I reply at the same time, equally confused.

“Are you sure? It’s an event for first years like you, so there’s really no need for you to help if you don’t want to,” Ike says.

“How come you're okay with Senpai doing it and not me? Last I checked, neither of us is in the student council,” Touka answers while giving her brother a fearsome glare.

Ike seems to be deep in thought.

“I'm not against you helping out. If you really want to, by all means,” he replies after a few moments of thought.

“...Are you sure about this?” I ask.

I don’t know what she’s trying to prove by being so stubborn. Is she going to get something out of helping us out?

“I can’t be with you if I don’t, Senpai. Plus, it'd be weird if you did all this work for the first years without me helping or showing up, don't you think?”

“You don't need to force yourself to be with me all the time, y'know? We still have the lunch break, and you just have to go to the actual study meet to avoid the guilt trip.”

I can't wrap my head around why she's suddenly so focused on helping.

I mean, it’d be just a single week where we wouldn’t act like a couple for a few hours after school—is it that big of a deal?

Touka visibly bristles at what I say and takes a few deep breaths. After she calms herself down, she flashes me a stepford smile.

“C'mon, Senpai—is it really that hard for you to ask your cute girlfriend for help? You’re gonna make me sad if you keep telling me you don't want me to help out at this study thing, y'know?”

Now she’s pretending to be nice about it?

Doesn’t help that even if she’s smiling, she's still emanating a seriously murderous aura. It's pretty intimidating, to be honest.

“...Okay, it’d be an honor to have you. Your boyfriend's super lucky to

have you. Let's do our best, okay?"

Touka shrugs in response.

"Like I care about what you think. I'm not helping because of you, dipshit. Don't forget that."

The more I listen to her, the more I'm convinced that she's the tsundere type. On the other hand, her facial expression and the tone when she talks to Ike just gives off major bitch vibes instead; I can't make my mind up.

"In any case, I'll try my hardest to help out. Let's do our best, Seeenpai!"

As she looks at me with her eyes upturned, I suddenly realize why she accepted to help: basically, we'll get to be together, and she'll get to publicly show off how "close" we are.

Not bad. It could also make Ike jealous, too, so two birds with one stone. Well played.

"Same here. Hopefully, you take it easy on me."

Touka doesn't seem to understand what I meant when I said that.



It's a week later.

Once classes end, Ike heads straight over to me.

"All right, Yuujii—today's the day you start helping out, so here's hoping for the best."

"Same."

Yep, today's the first day that we're helping the student council.

We prepare to leave the classroom. As we're heading to the door, we cross paths with Hasaki. Our eyes meet, and she blushes and quickly looks away.

She's been acting like this ever since our confrontation last week. I bet she hates my guts.

“Hey, Tomoki-kun—do you have a moment?” Kana asks while looking intensely at the door, rather than at me.

Huh. I wasn’t expecting her to talk to me. What does she want?

“What is it?”

My answer makes her flinch slightly. Her eyes dart around restlessly, and eventually she settles her gaze on Ike, who's next to me.

“We're kinda blocking the door, so let’s go somewhere else to talk. Okay?” Ike says while checking around us.

Sure enough, there are students around waiting to get out, so we move out of the way. Ike resumes the conversation.

“There’s something you want to say to Yuuji, isn't there, Kana?”

She nods readily, as if she were preparing herself for whatever she wants to tell me.

“I’m sorry about the other day,” she apologizes with a bow of her head.

And here I was ready for her to pester me about my relationship again. I’m surprised... Why's she apologizing, again?

“What's the apology for?”

“I tried to force you and Touka-chan to kiss the other day,” she says, her face fully flushed a tomato red, “I know it just sounds like an excuse, but I just wasn’t thinking straight back then. I didn't really consider how we were at school, and how kissing in front of other people like that would be... awkward. It won’t happen again. I’m sorry.”

“Right,” Ike says in a gentle tone.

Hasaki's face is filled with regret and sadness.

Okay, I get it now.

“Don’t worry about it too much; I don’t mind. Just be sure to apologize to Touka, and you’ll be fine.”

My words make Hasaki smile a bit. Why, though?

“I apologized to Touka-chan this morning, and she said the same thing: just apologize to you, and I’d be fine.”

Huh, I see.

I guess I can see Touka saying something similar. Although, coming from her, I bet it was a lot less flowery or subtle than what I just said.

If I put myself in Hasaki's shoes, I can understand why she'd have all these complex feelings about our relationship. I bet it was especially weird getting the same answer from both of us today.

“Oh, okay. If that’s the case, then don’t sweat it. Actually, I'm mostly relieved things seem to be cool with you now.”

Hasaki shakes her head slightly at my response and looks me dead in the eyes.

“I think what I did was wrong, but that doesn’t change how I feel about your relationship with Touka-chan. I still don’t like it.”

“...Wait, what?”

Her bold statement surprises me.

“I'll talk to you later, so hopefully, we can continue our conversation then,” she says seriously. Rather than averting her eyes like before, she's gazing at me with a certain intensity. Wow, you can really tell how serious she is about this. It really shows how much she cares about Touka. I feel like I really understand her now.

I nod and reply, “Sure, I'll talk to you later. Whenever you want. I don’t mind.”

For some reason, my reply makes her expression darken.

“Anyways, sorry for stopping you guys. See you around.”

She leaves the class, but then turns around to face us, as if forgetting something.

“Oh right, Tomoki-kun—you’re going to help the student council with the study meet prep, right? I can't help, since I'm in the tennis club, but I'm

rooting for you.”

I manage to answer with a weak affirmation, since she took me by surprise, but it still makes her smile.

“Bye-bye, guys.”

She waves at us and leaves.

That was weird... So in one conversation, she managed to apologize, declare her disapproval of my relationship, encourage me, and—last, but not least—leave with a smile on her face. At this point, I can't help but wonder, just what the hell does she think of me?

“Don't sweat what just happened, man. She doesn't hate you or anything like that, if that's what you're thinking,” Ike says while patting my shoulder.

I guess I was pretty easy to read there, huh?

“Oh really? Good to know, then.”

“I'm sure things'll be just fine. Anyways, let's go to the student council room, okay?” he says with a friendly smile.

Will it really be fine? I'm not so sure things will work out with Hasaki in the end. Plus, it's not like Touka and I are actually going out, so this whole thing is just making me feel weirder by the minute. I can't really do much but nod at Ike's suggestion and keep my mouth shut; it's better not to voice my concerns, after all.

We head toward the student council room.



“Tanaka-senpai, Suzuki—sorry for being late,” Ike says with an apologetic bow of his head.

When we enter the student council room, we see that it's already occupied by a boy and a girl.

“Don't worry about it, dude,” they answer with friendly smiles and a wave.

“I’ll introduce you. Yuuji, this is Tanaka-senpai, and this is Suzuki, who’s also a junior. Tanaka-senpai is the council’s secretary, and Suzuki’s our accountant.”

“I think this is the first time I’ve met you, yeah? Thanks for helping us whenever you can. I’m Tanaka, and I’m a year above you.”

He looks at me with a warm familiarity, smiling at me as if I’m his friend.

“I’ve been meaning to thank you too, but I’ve never really gotten the chance. My bad. I’m in the same year as you, and the name’s Suzuki. I hope we get along well.”

She smiles at me too. Even though she’s the same age as us, she gives off mature vibes.

“Huh? I-I mean... Uh, yeah. Same here.”

I can’t hide my confusion. I’m pretty sure these two must’ve heard the awful rumors about me, so why’re they being so friendly?

I look at Ike for an answer. He notices and smiles.

“Oh, right... Suzuki, Taketori-senpai isn’t here yet, is he?”

“Mhm. I think he mentioned something about helping Makiri-sensei out in the staff room, didn’t he?”

“Oh, right. I’ll go there too, then,” Ike replies and heads for the door.

“Ike, please wait a sec,” I say.

I’m not sure I’ll know how to act normally without him around.

“Don’t worry, Tanaka-senpai will explain what you gotta do. Plus,” he says and breaks out into a smile, “Everyone in the student council’s your friend.”

He leaves the room.

...They’re my friends? I don’t get it.

I don’t think I’ve called anyone a friend or an ally. Well, apart from Ike or Makiri-sensei, of course.

“Like Ike-kun says, don’t worry. We know you’re always helping around here, so we’re not really scared of you or anything like that.”

“Yep, what Tanaka-senpai said. Not gonna lie, though, you still look pretty intimidating, so it’ll take a while for me to get used to your face. You might make me jump a few times in the meantime, so sorry in advance.”

They don’t seem scared... I’m seriously so touched. Almost moved to tears, even.

Maybe this is why Ike wanted me to help out so often? That’s the only reason I can think of. That guy is just way too smart for me, honestly.

“...Sure.”

I was trying to showcase my happiness, but that totally didn't work out. Rather than expressing my enthusiasm, I just sound like I want to die.

“Anyways, time to explain what you gotta do,” Tanaka-senpai says.

Right, then...

“Hello, guys! I’m coming in!”

A cheerful voice calls from outside the room, and Touka enters. She notices the three of us and cries out in an astonished voice, “Huh?! Senpai, you’re talking normally to someone who's not me or my brother?! No, it can’t be! Who are you?! What did you do to my Yuuji-senpai?!”

“The hell?” I ask.

“Oh, right—how could I confuse you for someone else, Senpai? No one else in this school would have such a scary face ♡,” she says as she playfully sticks out her tongue.

She’s gone too far.

Tanaka-san watches our banter and decides to continue the convo.

“Oh, yeah, you’re Ike-kun’s sister, right? Pleased to meet you. I’m Tanaka, a senior. I’ve heard some impressive things about you, like how you got the top grades in the entrance exam. I guess that's a given,

considering you're his sister."

"I feel much better knowing Ike's sister will be helping us out, too. I'm Suzuka, a junior. I hope we get along well."

They both smile at Touka as they introduce themselves.

"Sure thing, guys! Nice to meet you two as well!"

Touka's smiling, but I can tell that she's not very happy about what they've said, for some reason.

"Anyways! What do I need to help with?"

She changes the topic instantly, and, at the same time, Tanaka-senpai starts explaining our tasks.

"It's actually a fairly simple job. You two just have to go to the printing room, print the mock exams, and staple them along with these other documents over here."

"Oh, that's all? That sounds, like, a little bit *too* easy, don't you think?"

"You might think so, but there's going to be around 200 people at the event, even though it's not compulsory. We have enough documents for everyone in the school who's coming, from freshmen to seniors, so it might take longer than you think," Suzuka replies with an averted gaze.

"It'll be fine! It's a ton of work, but thankfully we have Senpai with us, right?!" Touka answers with an impish grin in my direction.

I can already tell that she's just going to push all of her work onto me. I can feel it in my bones.

"Yep, having him here is really reassuring. Anyways, sorry to rush you guys, but could you get going to the printing room and get the copies? We still don't know how many students in the first-year class E will attend the event, but the sooner you start, the sooner you'll finish," Tanaka-senpai says.

"What? Isn't that *my* class, though? You haven't received the documents yet? I'm pretty sure we already decided who was going," Touka says.

“Yep. Today was the last day, so I’m sure that your class rep will be here soon enough with the news. As soon as I know how many people are coming from your class, I’ll come to the printing room and let you guys know,” he replies.

“Okay then! Which of these documents are we supposed to copy?”

“Oh, right. I forgot to tell you that. Here you go,” Tanaka-senpai says as he hands me a stack of papers.

“This paper has instructions on how to use the printer, plus the number of people from each class who're joining the event. This'll tell you how many copies you need to print,” Suzuki says, handing the paper in question over to Touka.

Touka and I nod.

“All right, time to get going!” Touka exclaims.

I bow slightly and prepare to leave. Right as we're about to head out, though...

“Hey guys, I’m back... Wait—what are you doing here, Touka?”

Another guy enters the room with a smile on his face. Despite seeming like he's got a short fuse, I can't deny that he's pretty good-looking.

“Oh, Kai-kun! Well, I was just taking care of some stuff, y’know? Actually, you’re here to hand off the attendee list, right? Dude—you sure are lazy for someone who's supposed to be the class rep! Ours is the last one to be turned in!”

“My bad. I’ll try to be better about that next time.”

Looks like he’s her class’s rep.

This is a pretty insightful look at how Touka interacts with other people. She has a cheerful personality, and she’s being super nice now. He should see her whenever she speaks to me or Ike.

“Sorry for delivering this so late,” Kai says as he hands a paper to Tanaka-senpai.

Even when he's apologizing, his tone is pretty easy-going.

"Don't worry. You haven't delivered it late or anything like that," Tanaka-senpai answers.

Kai coincidentally looks my way, and his smile completely vanishes.

"Tomoki... senpai? What're you doing here?"

He doesn't sound very friendly. He's looking at me, not in fear or disgust, but in pure hatred.

"What?"

I thought that Kai would avert his gaze when I addressed him, but he's glaring at me without so much as flinching.

"Why're you here?"

He has balls; I like that. Most of the people here just apologize to my face and badmouth me behind my back later. It's easier for me to face the people that just straight up hate me, like this guy does.

"My bro asked me to lend a hand here, and Yuuji-senpai decided to tag along 'cause he wanted to be with me! Isn't he just the sweetest boyfriend?!" Touka chimes in, cutting me off before I can say anything.

"Huh? He asked you to help out? Why would he?"

"No idea! He just asked; that's all. Anyways, Kai-kun—we have stuff to do, so we'll get going!"

She grabs me by the arm and drags me out of the room as Kai tries to stop us.

"Hey Touka, wait a second!" he cries out.

"Bye bye, see you tomorrow!"

We head off toward the printing room. I turn around and see Kai standing back and watching us. If looks could kill...

"Ugh, I swear, that guy's a pain in the ass," a clearly fatigued Touka mutters.

“Really? He seemed pretty nice and brave.”

“Huh? Senpai, are you for real?”

She looks genuinely surprised.

“Absolutely... Okay, maybe not.”

“Man, just the fact that you're not denying it outright is super weird,” she shrugs.

“Anyway, I wasn't expecting you to lie to get us out of that, so thanks.”

I mean, Ike didn't ask her to help at all. In fact, she basically felt forced to join so she could tag along with me, the guy that Ike actually asked.

And even after essentially getting her into all this trouble, she goes out of her way to save my ass from that Kai guy.

“No need to thank me. He's seriously a pest, so mostly I just wanted to get rid of him.”

“Oh, okay. Well, thanks anyways.”

She doesn't answer. Maybe she's just embarrassed or something? I wish I could look at her and figure out why she did it; but, unfortunately, I don't know her well enough to be able to read her yet. I can believe her excuse, though—that she just did it in her own interests, that she finds him annoying and wanted to get rid of him.

“So he's in your class, I assume? Who is he?”

I try to change the topic of conversation, but she just gives me another impish smile.

“Oh my, Senpai. Don't tell me you're already thinking about getting all violent? I bet once I tell you, you'll, like, totally bully him into submission. Or maybe you're trying to scout out his weakness or whatever?”

“Sometimes, I wish I could figure out who the hell you seem to think I am.”

Her joking is seriously getting real old, real fast.

“I'm just kidding! ...Okay, mostly kidding. He's Kai Rekka, the class rep

for my class. He's pretty hot, and he treats everyone equally. Plus, he got into high school with really high entrance marks. Obviously, he's really popular among us freshmen. I've only heard a rumor, but apparently he's already been asked out by, like, three different girls," she answers.

"He might be popular and all, but I know someone close by who's ten times more popular."

"Oh my god, Senpai! You sure never waste any opportunity to flirt with me, huh! I know you can't help it 'cause I'm totally cute and all, but please try to contain yourself! We're at school right now, y'know?!♡"

I don't seem to react the way she was hoping, and her jovial tone immediately returns to nonchalance.

"Anyways, he's already the soccer team's ace, even though the term's barely started. So yeah... he's basically one of the top dogs around here already," she explains in a bored tone.

"Oh wow, so he's like the first-year version of Ike."

So he's smart, athletic, and already popular, to boot? He's totally following in Ike's footsteps. They're still not on the same level or anything, but he's already on the right track to becoming the next school celebrity.

"...He's basically like a discount version of my shitty brother, to be honest."

"Damn, that's harsh."

"I can't help it if it's true, dude," she sighs.

"I don't get why he's already glaring daggers at me, though... I can't think of any reason why he'd hate me so early on."

"He likes me, so I'm guessing he's just jealous of you."

"Man, only you would say something like that... But, honestly, that would be the most logical answer."

She stops walking and looks at me apologetically.

"I'm sorry that everyone's so jealous, but I can't help it that I'm popular,

Senpai.”

“What kind of apology is that?”

...Can you even consider that an apology?

“Aren’t you always worried about other guys chasing after me? Y’know, ‘cause I’m super popular and all.”

“I’d be lying if I said no... though I’m more worried about what they’d do to me than anything.”

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting you to go along with me... but your answer kinda pisses me off.”

“Did you want me to say that I’m ‘totes jelly’ of other guys chasing you since you’re ‘sooo popular’?”

“Exactly! If there are other people around, be sure to act super possessive, ‘kay?! Saying you’re jealous with that creepy face of yours... Not gonna lie—picturing that totally would’ve scared me at first, but now I really like the idea!” she giggles.

She’s a little too cocky for her own good.

“I think you’ll be okay, though,” she continues, “I can’t think of anyone in school who’d have enough balls to try and face you.”

“...Yeah, probably.”

I agree with her. I don’t think I’ll ever need to worry about fighting anyone around here, at least. But after seeing Kai staring at me with so much venom, I can’t completely rule out the idea of violence at some point.

We take our sweet time getting there, but we eventually arrive at the printing room.

I retrieve the documents we need to print from the bag and place them on the table. Meanwhile, Touka starts looking over the paper with the instructions she was given and comparing them to the documents I left on the table.

“Actually, how was last year’s study meet for you?”

“Beats me. I didn’t go.”

“Wow, huge shocker.”

Oh come on, don’t say that. That hurts, okay?

Touka notices that I didn't take her comment too kindly and smiles at me.

“Well, since we’re helping organize it this year, you’ll probably have a chance to go, too. Let’s make the best of it, okay?”

“Well, it’d be better to at least try and have fun instead of being pessimistic about the whole thing, I guess.”

Touka notices my dispirited lack of interest over the whole ordeal and offers me another smile as I continue fishing papers out of the bag.



It's the next day, after school.

Touka and I head toward the printing room again.

“When will this suffering end?” Touka groans, her eyes soulless and empty.

I feel her pain—this job's just too simple, not to mention tediously slow. It leaves us with nothing to do for long stretches of time, so most of the time, I just end up milling about, wishing I could take a nap.

I want this suffering to end just as much as she does.

“I don’t think it'll be today,” I answer. I'm stapling some more documents and throwing them into a cardboard box with the rest.

“Yeah... haaah. This job is so freakin' boring. Why must we waste our youth like this?”

She looks completely depressed right now. Despite that, she's still taking her tasks seriously—she hasn’t stopped working for a moment, even with her complaining.

Even if she ended up deciding she was done with working, just having her here keeping me company would help me out.

I'll admit it: Touka might be annoying at times, she might be crass, and she might get a little too into her dumb jokes... but, deep down, she's a good person.

"...Sorry."

"Huh? What're you apologizing to me for? My shithead brother should be the one apologizing for forcing me to do this boring ass job."

"Well, I get why the student council's doing it—in order to prepare for these kinds of events, they're mostly stuck with doing a lot of grunt work. I can't imagine what they're doing right now is any more exciting than our job."

"How does that excuse my brother pushing this shit onto me? I deserve an apology, anyways."

Damn, she's actually angry about all of this. Now I feel sorta bad that Ike's not here with us.

"Ugggh, man! I'm gonna get something to drink from the vending machine!" she stands up and asks, "You want something too, Senpai? I'll go get it for you."

"Wow, you're actually going to go and get for something yourself? Without using me as your servant?"

"Is it really that big of a deal to you? If you don't want anything, I'm off," she says defensively, puffing her cheeks in protest.

"My bad, that was out of line. I'll have a coffee, please."

"There we go; now we're talking. I always take my coffee black, so do you mind if I get you that, as well?"

"Sure," I answer as I hand over some change.

"Aaaah! Look at Senpai making it rain! You're getting me wet over here."

Am I the only one who thinks she can be really vulgar sometimes? Just me?

“Okay then, I'm off! And no slacking while I'm gone, Senpai!”

“Yeah, yeah. Move your ass already.”

“Byeeee!” Touka sing-songs as she leaves the room.

Now that she's gone, I notice the rhythmic sound of the copying machine whirring over and over again. It's spewing out papers endlessly... Man, I want to take a nap so badly right now.

I stand up and stretch my body to shake the sleepiness from my body. I take the new stack of documents, which have emerged fresh from the printer. Suddenly, I hear a knock on the door.

It can't be Touka since she just left a moment ago to buy those drinks. Besides, she'd never knock in the first place.

“Come in.”

The door opens, and Makiri-sensei enters.

“I was told that Ike-san was here, too, but you're the only one I see.”

“She just went to buy some drinks for us.”

“Oh really? That's some bad timing, then,” she says, looking somewhat awkward.

What does she mean?

“I actually bought a couple of things for you guys as thanks for helping out. I should've come here earlier; that way, you guys wouldn't have had to waste your money on drinks.”

She places a plastic bag on the table and starts to pick out its contents: two bottles of tea and two ice creams. Expensive ones, by the looks of them.

“You sure you wanna give these to us?”

“Mhm. This job isn't all that easy, right?”

“Well, it definitely takes more of a mental toll than a physical one.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much how it is. Once Ike-san returns, make sure to have these, okay?”

“Sure thing. Thanks.”

She smiles.

“It’s fine; don’t worry about it. I should be the one thanking you two—you’re a great help to the student council committee.”

“It’s not like I have anything better to do, anyways.”

Her smile only increases.

“How’s school been lately?”

“Well, recently, I’ve been able to start talking to more people apart from Touka and Ike. I just talked to Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki from the student council, so I’m actually pretty happy about that.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.”

“I gotta thank you and Ike for that.”

I’m trying to hide my embarrassment as much as possible. For some reason, Makiri-sensei seems a little annoyed by what I just said.

“Nope, it’s not because of me—it’s all because of your earnest hard work. There are a lot of people who have their eye on you. I bet you’ll talk to even more people from here on out. I guarantee it.”

She seems to be dead set on believing that my increase in popularity is all my doing, and that she didn’t do anything herself. Meanwhile, I know that alone, I’d never have been able to get to this point. The fact that there are people looking out for me and appreciating my work makes me happy.

“Well, you and Ike definitely played a big part. The two of you gave me a chance.”

“I... really didn’t do anything,” Makiri-sensei says in a dispirited voice. She looks sad.

“Sensei?”

I'm about to ask her what's wrong, but before I can...

“I'm baaack! ...Hey! It's Makiri-sensei! Why are you here?”

Touka slams the door open, totally interrupting us.

“Mhm. I came here to give you guys a snack and something to drink as thanks for helping. Thanks, Ike-san.”

“Huh? Oh, you shouldn't have bothered. There's no need to thank us, honestly. Wait a sec! So I can have that ice cream?! Damn, Sensei, you're super generous!” she exclaims, homing in on the ice cream Sensei brought us.

“Of course you can—it's for you guys, after all. Unfortunately, there's not much else I can do. Anyways, I'm going to have a peek at the student council to see how they're doing.”

“Okaaay.”

I bow my head to thank her as she leaves the room.

It would've been nice if I could've asked her why she looked so sad.

“So there's chocolate chip cookie, and... Hey! This one's the new flavor! Can I have this one, Senpai?!”

“Go ahead.”

“Yesss!”

She hands me the coffee I asked her for, as well as the ice cream.

“Senpai, you're looking kinda bummed out. What's up? You want my ice cream instead of the chocolate chip cookie one? Well, too bad! It's already mine! But maybe if you're a good boy and you beg nice enough, I'll give you a bite...”

Huh, so she could tell I was down. Okay, I guess she can worry about others when she actually wants to.

“Don't worry about it. I was just thinking about something.”

“Huh? You were... thinking? Can't say that suits you.”

“Isn't that going a little too far?”

“Well, whatever! I'm just glad it's nothing big! Now I get all this ice cream to myself without feeling bad!♡”

She starts munching away at her ice cream, looking happy as can be. Seeing her so happy melts any negativity I had. I shouldn't worry too much about what happened with Makiri-sensei. I'm sure I'll have plenty of chances to ask her in the future, after all.

Chapter 13: The Denunciation

It's after school on Friday, and the day before the study meet.

The Golden Week holiday starts tomorrow. All the other juniors and seniors who have nothing to do with the meeting are already hanging out and doing whatever they want elsewhere.

Ike's one of the rare exceptions who stays here—he's the one in charge of the event, after all.

"You okay helping out today, too, Yuuji?"

"Yep. I think that was obvious," I answer with a nod.



We head back to the printing room, grab the boxes filled to the brim with the mock exams we'd printed, and return to the student council room. Looks like there's no one here yet apart from us.

"Now that we're done with this mock exam thing, what should I do today?"

"Well, you've already helped me bring the boxes, so you're pretty much done. All you need to do now is show up tomorrow, and you're good."

Well, looks like my work here is done.

"The sports clubs will be using the gym until 1:00 p.m. tomorrow. Once they're done, we'll have about three hours to organize the place, since the event starts at 4:00 p.m.."

"And who's gonna help out with setting up? You guys are gonna be helping the freshmen out, right? I can't possibly do everything alone."

"Members from a few sports clubs will be helping you out. Now that I think about it, the volleyball club has been pretty adamant about helping out. More so than the other clubs, actually."

"Oh, really?"

“Yep. Just head to the gym around 1:00 p.m. and help around there if you can, please. I’m counting on you.”

Won’t I just be a bother, though? I mean, I’ll probably just get in the way of getting things done, since I’m sure I’ll just end up scaring the people who’re supposed to be helping out. But how can I say that to Ike’s face after he just told me he’s counting on me? I guess that’s all that matters.

“Well, that’s it for now. Do you have any questions before you go? If you have any later, you can just shoot me a text, and I’ll be sure to answer.”

“Nah, I don’t. It’s fine.”

“Cool. Okay, then, you’re done for today. Thanks for helping out this week. See you tomorrow.”

I nod and leave the room.

Now that I think about it... where’s Touka? I haven’t seen her even once yet after class. I guess that since we finished our work yesterday, she just wanted to go home early today.

I take out my phone to check the train schedule. Immediately, I see a message that Touka sent a while ago:

"Can u come to the roof pls ASAP? I know its a pain but I need help w/smth"



I head up toward the roof just as Touka’s message requested. The door leading to the roof is closed, but once I get close enough, I can hear two people talking to each other on the other side. It sounds like it could be Touka and... I think Kai?

I can’t really make out what they’re saying that well, but I’m guessing Kai must be confessing to her. That’s probably why she wanted me to come: so I could fulfill my duty as the fake boyfriend.

Unlike me, he probably genuinely likes her. I’m just going to ruin this

moment for him. Sorry about this, Kai.

I open the door.

“I’m telling you to stop hanging around with Tomoki, Touka!”

Now that I can hear what they’re talking about, it doesn't really sound like a confession at all... does it?

“Not gonna lie, Kai-kun, your confession kinda sucked. It's actually bumming me out. So yeah... Sorry, but no,” Touka replies with a cold voice.

He shakes his head.

“Touka! I’m just worried about—! Huh?! Tomoki Yuuji-senpai?! Why're you here?”

Kai's the first one to notice me. He's surprised at first, but only for a split second—his expression immediately darkens with hatred.

“Hey, Senpai! How'd you know I was here?! Is this the power of love that people keep talking about in the movies?”

Touka also notices that I’m here and starts with her usual spiel. I'm about to interject that she was the one who asked me to come up here, but I quickly think better of it. I notice what she's expecting of me, so I follow her game.

“Well, maybe...”

“Wow, Senpai! You’re amazing!” she cries out as she rushes toward me. Once she gets to me, and with her back turned to Kai, she pouts and whispers, "You're a little late, dude."

“So, uh, did I interrupt something? Did you need to tell her something, Kai?”

I'll try my best to refrain from pissing Touka off further.

Kai doesn’t answer, though. He stays silent.

“Oh Kai, you're a real piece of work. Y'know, Senpai, he was totally just shit-talking you behind your back—he kept insisting that I should stay

away from you and junk. Don't you think that's just about the saddest way to confess to someone?" she says while pinching the cuffs of my sleeves. Judging by her voice, she's pretty much done with the whole situation.

"Wrong! I'm not confessing, I'm just worried about you!"

"There's no need to worry about me. Senpai and I are in a loving relationship, so... sorry, not sorry, Kai-kun. Let's just go, Senpai."

Nice to see that she wants out of this just as much as I do. We turn around, ready to leave, when Kai shouts out.

"You don't know what he's capable of when he gets angry!"

Touka stops walking.

"Oh, so I guess you're the expert now? All right, then—go ahead, tell me what he's like," she answers, dead serious.

"He's a violent psycho! Last year, during the summer, I saw him beating up a bunch of people. It was terrifying. I don't get how they let a disgusting criminal like him in this school."

I'm seriously surprised that someone can say something like that to my face. Impressive. I'm even more surprised that he's doing it after seeing me like that before. He must really hate my guts to be able to face me right now.

"You should break up with him as soon as possible. You'll regret it if you don't."

He looks at Touka seriously.

Touka remains silent, then eventually, she curls up her fist. Her serious expression hasn't budged an inch. After a few seconds, she speaks up.

"You think you know Yuuji-senpai? You're just like the others. They only see what's on the outside and judge him because of it. You guys don't even consider how he really is on the inside. No, you don't know him at all. I don't know what happened last summer... but I bet he was just misunderstood and got into some trouble, just like usual. I know for a fact

that he'd never resort to violence unless there was absolutely no choice.”

...So far, only Makiri-sensei and Ike have taken my side when I've tried to explain what happened last year, but Touka took my side without even hearing the story. I'm happy she's on my side.

"So based only on what you saw, you decided to go out of your way to treat Senpai like a criminal. So, like, what? You think you're some kinda white knight who needs to save the delicate damsel in distress from the villain or something? The hell's wrong with you? It just makes you look super annoying, lame, and—most importantly—creepy."

"No, that's not what I mean—!" Kai exclaims in a panicked tone.

"Shut up. Don't you *dare* badmouth my boyfriend ever again."



She speaks in a whisper, but her words are powerful enough to echo inside my head.

Kai, who's probably never seen Touka this angry before, promptly shuts up.

"Plus, if you really wanted him to stay away from me, why the hell didn't you talk to him about it first? You're totally only pretending to care about me, when all you really care about is yourself. You probably haven't noticed it yet with your head so far up your own ass, but reality check—you're a fucking narcissist. I'm never gonna break up with Senpai."

Damn, she's not pulling any punches here. He looks taken aback by her outburst, but soon collects himself and faces us.

"I see. I finally get it—I understand how you feel now, Touka. I'm sorry I didn't notice 'till now."

"If you get it, then piss off already—"

Before she can finish speaking, Kai cuts her off.

"That was all to avoid Senpai's wrath, right? You said that so I wouldn't get hurt."

"Huh? Where the hell'd you get that idea from? Are you braindead or something?!" Touka's eyes burst with a fiery hatred; a direct contrast to her frigid voice.

"I understand. Don't worry, your effort won't go to waste—I'll leave for now. Just wait a little longer, okay? I'll save you."

Touka angrily clicks her tongue at his reply. Kai, who seems to think he "finally gets it," heads toward the door. As he passes us, he doesn't so much as glance at Touka. Instead, he glares up at me, leans in, and whispers, "Tomorrow. Same time, same place. Don't you *dare* run away."

Touka didn't hear a word of what he just said. As soon as he closes the door behind him, she grumbles, "He's the freakin' worst, I swear..."

She's really pissed right now. Was it really because he was talking shit about me? If that really were the case, nothing would make me happier.

“You really covered my ass there. You even got all worked up over getting him to leave and trying to help me out. Thanks.”

I’m sorta embarrassed, but I still need to thank her, right?

She answers me with a confused, blank expression.

“...Huh? You think I did all that just to help you out?”

“Well, I’m not trying to say all of it was for me, but you definitely got angry because of it. Or at least, that’s what I think.”

She seems surprised by my answer and spends a few seconds in silence.

“What’s with you? I swear to god...,” she says. Her voice is hoarse and cracking as she tries to restrain her emotions.

I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do. She seems to be struggling with something—should I ask her what’s wrong? What should I say if I do? Does she just want to be left alone? I’m at a loss.

Chapter 14: Her True Motivations

“What a pain,” Touka says, finally breaking the silence.

She’s very angry right now. Easily the angriest I’ve ever seen her before. I don’t know if she’s mad at me or Kai right now... or maybe she’s mad at both of us?

“What I just said was directed at me, okay?! I’m mad at myself right now! I’m mad because what I told Kai was all just an act, and I still got pissed over it!”

She then turns to face me. She’s trying to hide her anger, but I can see it simmering deep in her eyes.

“I’m just the same as you, y’know?! Everyone judges me just because of my looks, or because they know my brother. Guys constantly confess to me just because I’m cute, and girls just approach me because they want to get with my brother. It’s never because they actually want to be my friends. I swear—they’re all horrible people and a real pain in the ass.”

I remember the exchange she had with that group of girls on our way to school one morning. So that’s the sort of thing she has to deal with every day?

“Do I even need to exist? I could be anyone—it doesn’t matter who, as long as I’m Ike Haruma’s sister. And it’s the same for you, right? As long as I’m his sister, it doesn’t really matter who I am, right?”

She’s venting all of her frustration right now, so I’ll just shut up and listen.

“That’s why I’ve always wanted to become myself: Ike Touka, not just ‘Ike Haruma’s sister.’ Everything he’s done, I’ve done too—every sport, every activity. I’ve done it all, and I’ve tried my hardest doing it. I just want to be better at something than him, y’know?! Anything, no matter how small!”

Her grief pours out with each word she speaks; I can sense it. She's been suffering a lot.

"But it doesn't matter. No matter how hard I've tried, no matter how much time I've poured into anything, he's always, *always* better than me. So, in the end, I'm still just 'Haruma's sister.' Everyone's expectations are based on him, not me."

It feels like this is the first time she's ever poured her heart out to someone about this. She's been bottling it up deep inside.

"So then I thought, 'Hey! I could try getting better grades than him!' I studied my ass off to get the best grades I could. I even cut back on sleeping just so I could study. But, in the end, that didn't work either. Sure, I ended up getting the top marks in my school on the entrance exam, but how could that possibly compare to my brother, who got the highest marks in the *whole country* on his?"

She's been facing these feelings of inadequacy and inferiority every single day for years now.

"And the worst part is, no matter what I do, no matter how hard I work, he'll always be better than me. I'll be busting my ass, and he just comes in and does it in a flash, no problem. Like he's pulling a miracle or something. And then he has the balls to approach me with that smug face of his and tell me not to force myself. How dare he!"

She's been facing it all this time.

"I realized it during middle school: how could ever I win against my brother? I just can't, but still I refused to give up. If I did, I'd just end up being 'Haruma's sister' in high school, too. So I tried my hardest again to end up in the same school he was in."

How heavy is the burden that's been weighing on her heart all this time? I can't even imagine what she's gone through.

"And then when I ended up attending this school, my brother was the first person who came to me. He came up to me with that stupid smile of his on his stupid face, and he started talking to me about you, his best

friend. I didn't give a shit back then, but something occurred to me—I thought that, even if I wouldn't win against him, maybe I could at least make his life a little harder. I could try souring your relationship with him.”

She gives me a bitter glance.

Wait, so that's what I am to Ike? I'm happy to know that he considers me his best friend, but I guess now's not the time to think about that.

“In the end, even that was a bust. Whenever my brother asked you for help, you always prioritized him over me anyways. It makes sense, though—of course you'd rather help your friend than your rude bitch of a fake girlfriend.”

I look at her pained expression, and everything seems to click in place.

“Well—you might be a rude bitch sometimes, and you might call Ike things like 'shithead,' but I don't think you've ever actually said that you hate him. Deep down, you do love him, don't you?”

“I don't even know if I like him at this point. I do think he's amazing, though. I respect him. I know a lot of people in his same grade would follow him to the ends of the earth, no questions asked. I know he's handsome and super nice. Unlike me, he's been lucky. That makes me feel even more miserable.”

She takes a deep breath and continues.

“My brother's good at sports, good at school, and good at getting fans. Everyone loves him. And then there's me, his 'cute' and 'amazing' sister whose only special attribute is being a huge bitch. I'll never be better than him at anything. I'll always be 'Haruma's sister,' no matter how much time passes. I'll never be 'Ike Touka.' That's the sad reality I live in, and it kinda hit me like a truck earlier this month. It's just depressing, y'know? If I knew this is how everything would've ended up, I would never have even come to this school in the first place.”

She averts her eyes from me.

“Like, look at me now: I'm getting angry at you, even though I'm the one who dragged you into this whole mess in the first place. I'm hopeless...”

She sinks into silence after getting all of that off her chest, leaving her looking incredibly pained and fatigued.

She's always lived in Ike's shadow. Despite this, she's always tried her hardest, hoping that, maybe one day, she could surpass him at something. But it's always been a fruitless effort. And to add insult to injury, seeing her brother breeze through whatever she was struggling with made her lose any pride she had in her hard work.

Would any other girl be able to endure what she did for as long as she has? I don't think so.

I wouldn't be able to do it. Actually, I probably wouldn't have even tried to be better than Ike in the first place. How could I? He's the protagonist of the story, not me. I mean, I do wish I were him. Deep inside, I do want to become someone like him. It's just that, somewhere along the line, I just convinced myself that it was impossible and gave up. That's why I don't feel like I have the right to tell her anything—I gave up; she didn't.

In the end, I'm still just the side character. Helping the girl with her problems is something the protagonist, like Ike, is supposed to do...

...But if I just sit here passively, I don't think I could go on being his friend either; so I steel myself and look straight at her.

"When we agreed on this whole fake relationship, I told you I'd go along with it because no one else had ever relied on me before... but that's not the only reason I said yes."

She raises her head.

"I also did it so the two of you would get along better. I wanted you guys to mend your relationship. That's why I accepted."

"...So in the end, even you just went out with me because I'm his sister, huh? I guess I was wrong to expect any different from you."

She's not even hiding her anger at this point. I'd like to know exactly what those expectations were, but I decide to drop it for the time being. I'll just continue to explain my reasoning.

“I’ve always looked up to Ike. I’ve always wanted to become someone as reliable as he is. But, eventually, I came to accept the fact that I’d never be like him, and I quickly gave up. If I couldn’t be like him, the least I could do was give back to him for all the times he helped me out in the past.”

“Are you trying to call me stupid? Like, I’m stupid for trying as hard as I did to become better than him? I should’ve just given up quickly like you did? You’re the worst, Senpai,” she says, nearly laughing in self-derision.

“The total opposite, actually. I just resigned myself to the fact that I’d never be better than him from the get-go. I saw how amazing he is and gave up then and there, but you didn’t. No matter how amazing Ike was at something, no matter how other people gawked at him, you still tried your best. You tried to reach him without ever giving up. I think that’s amazing in and of itself. I don’t think anyone else could do that.”

“Are you trying to console me or something?”

She looks pretty fed up with me.

“No. I’m just one of the many people who look up to him, and that’s why I know how hard you’ve worked, how much you’ve struggled, how far you’ve come, and how amazing you are in your own right. Even if no one else wants to acknowledge you...”

Man, I really hope I don’t choke up in the middle of this. I’m not even sure if I should be telling her this, but I feel like it’s something I should do. I want to, if anything.

“...I still think that you’re a wonderful person, Ike Touka, and I’ll always have my eye on you.”

Touka seems surprised by my answer, and even more surprised that I’m staring straight at her as I say that.

Maybe she found my whole speech stupid. Well, whatever. I guess I can’t blame her—I know better than anyone how worthless my opinion is. Still, deep down, I’d like to help her and others out, so I can’t help myself. I continue.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with trying to be better at something, failing, and then giving up. But if you’re so keen on winning against your brother, I’ll support you. I’ll help you find something you’re better at than him. Even if he doesn’t want to lose against you, I’ll still pick you over him. Seriously, if I can help out at all, just lemme know.”

She stares at me silently, her expression and body stock-still. What's she thinking about now? I can't read her at all. At the very least, she doesn't seem as desperate and pained as she was before.

“Also, lemme clear something up: I’ll admit, I initially went along with your plan because of your last name. But you’ve never just been ‘Ike’s sister’ to me. All the time I’ve spent with you, I’ve spent it with ‘Ike Touka, the bitch.’ I won’t lie, it’s been a hell of a ride so far, but it’s also been really fun. So please don’t say something like ‘it’d be better if I never came here.’ It hurts to hear you say stuff like that. I mean, I’ve had so much fun spending time together during our fake relationship.”

I know I’ve said everything all out of order... and I also kind of let it slip that I don’t just see her as the “protag’s little sister” anymore. How could I? I consider her really important to me. After all, she’s the first student outside of Ike who actually gives a damn about me—just like how her brother reached out to me the year before.

Touka remains silent, but she seems confused. Her eyes have been downcast, but now she looks up at me with damp eyes and blushes. I return her gaze, but she goes an even deeper shade of crimson when our eyes meet.

She looks like she’s about to say something, but she suddenly stops herself. Instead, she gives me her classic death glare and shouts, “I’m going home!”

Huh... here I was, trying to cheer her up, but it looks like I’ve just ended up making her upset.

I guess I’ll think about what I did wrong later; for now, I should go after Touka, who’s making a big show of stomping as loudly as possible toward the door.

“I’ll tag along. If Kai sees you going home alone, he’ll just be a big pain in the ass again.”

“Don’t talk to me!” she shouts.

Well, at least she didn't tell me not to follow her. That’s a good sign.

I tag along silently by her side. I don't say anything, like she asked, but I try to check on her from time to time. She’s as red as a tomato right now, and everytime I try to look at her, she gives me a nasty glare and turns her face away. To be honest, it's pretty annoying.

“Man, I'll never get to be even remotely like Ike, huh?” I think to myself with an internal shrug.

I guess there are multiple ways to deal with reality: you can fall into a depressed slump, like me, or get angry about it, like Touka.



We walk all the way to the train station without saying a single word to each other. Actually, if I remember correctly, this isn't the first time that's happened.

“See ya,” I tell Touka before we go our separate ways.

She’s still giving me the cold shoulder. Oh well, I guess she’ll be back to her usual self tomorrow.

“...See you tomorrow,” she whispers.

I heard that. I wasn’t expecting her to answer, but she did. At least, I'm pretty sure I heard her whisper. I’m surprised she even answered me, but she doesn’t even bother turning around as she heads inside the train station.

“Huh?”

Maybe I just heard something else and mistook it for her voice?

I take a deep breath and head toward the platform for the train home.

Chapter 15: Her Smile

Golden Week has started—for many, it's a holiday. For me, though, it's the furthest thing from a holiday. I'm going to be helping out with organizing the event for the first years. I don't have anything to do 'till 1:00 p.m., though.

I'm just about to start preparing my clothes and anything else I need before I go out, but my phone starts buzzing on the table before I can start. I grab it and see a few new messages I haven't read yet flash on the screen. Meh, it's probably just junk mail... Oh, wait, no—it's from Touka. I wasn't expecting her to text me. Maybe she wants to talk about what happened yesterday?

“Meet me at school roof pls.”

Wow, that's pretty cold. At least the message is easy to read, though it kinda hurts that she's being so blunt.

Whatever. I guess I'll head to school, then. I have to go there eventually, anyway, so going a little sooner won't make much of a difference. I don't really know exactly when I should be leaving, though. She didn't really specify a time for me to go, after all. I guess I should ask her.

“What time?”

I send her the message, and she reads it almost immediately. I wait for her to answer. 10 minutes pass, but nothing. Has she left me on read or something? I know it takes a while to write a text, but 10 whole minutes? Come on.

Wait... don't tell me she wants me to go now? Ugh. Whatever, man. I guess I'll get going now.



Once I arrive at school, I immediately head toward the roof. The door's

still busted, so I just burst in. Touka's already there, and she's looking down at the courtyard. She probably heard me busting the door open, because she turns around to face me. She looks around cautiously to check if the coast is clear before she says anything.

“Hey there, Senpai,” she says. There's a noticeable breeze, so she holds down her fluttering skirt with her hand as she speaks.

“Hey. What's up? What did you want to talk about that's so urgent?”

I approach her slowly, and she stays still, merely watching me get closer.

“Oh, yeah... I didn't tell you why I wanted you to come here. My bad. I just wanted you to come.”

“No problem. So what's up?”

“...Would it be so bad if there wasn't a real reason? That I just wanted you to come?”

I don't answer, since there's definitely something on her mind that she's struggling to tell me. Finally, she takes a few deep breaths and faces me.

“Senpai! Um... I'm sorry about yesterday.”

She bows her head.

Huh, she sounds totally sincere. This is a far cry from her usual teasing and bantering. Impressive.

“What do you mean?”

“Just wanted to apologize for getting so mad yesterday, and for dragging you into that mess with Kai. That's all.”

Wow, she's so embarrassed that she's not even looking at me.

“I told you yesterday, didn't I? Don't worry about it.”

“Well, I do, okay?! That guy was seriously such a dick to you yesterday,” she says indignantly.

Well, she's not wrong there—Kai definitely seems to have a “holier than thou” attitude, and he's quick to judge someone without listening to what

others tell him; at least, judging by what happened yesterday.

I recall yesterday's events in my head, and Touka starts fidgeting from my silence. I finally glance over and ask, "What?"

"Um, j-just one more thing. It's super embarrassing even just remembering it. Um... wh-what you said yesterday was... It was the first time anyone's ever told me that."

Her face turns beet red, and she looks up at me with puppy eyes.

"Yeah... That was the first time anyone had ever opened up to me like that, so it was kinda out of my field. I wanted to try cheering you up, even though I'm the king of giving up. So yeah... I don't really know. Sorry, I was kinda pulling it out of my ass 'cause I didn't know what to say."

"Yeah, that's what I figured too—that you were totally talking out your ass."

"Y-Yeah."

Wow, she doesn't mince words. It's pretty embarrassing being told upfront like that that you were totally bullshitting, even if I was thinking the same thing.

"Well, your little speech still made me happy, though. Having you acknowledge all my efforts, and knowing that you have my back... it really, um, really encouraged me. Like, a lot."

She gives me a sheepish smile, her cheeks flushed pink with embarrassment.

I'm speechless—I didn't actually expect her to appreciate my efforts.

She takes my silence as disbelief. Discontent with my answer—or lack thereof—she tilts her head and says, "I mean it, y'know?"

"I'm glad you liked it."

"Well, if that's the case, I'm glad, too. Actually, there's one more thing... Could you repeat what you said yesterday again?"

"I said a bunch of stuff, so you'll have to be a little more specific."

“Um, I remember you said you'd totally help me find something I could beat my brother in,” she answers, still smiling.

“Yeah, I did say that, and I mean it.”

Her smile widens at my response.

“Um, I know it's probably too early right now, but I actually found something that only I can do. Something I can't lose against anyone.”

“Oh, you did? Mind telling me what it is? I'll try to help out any way I can.”

So she found something she can use to fight against Ike, huh? Let's see what it is...

...Uh, okay, she's not saying anything. With an impish grin, she shakes her head and creates an “x” with her fingers.



“Nope, my lips are sealed! Mainly ‘cause I don’t need your help with it!”

“Huh? Oh, so you wanna do it yourself without relying on others, right? I get it.”

That'd make sense. I get why she wouldn't want to tell me.

...But she shakes her head again.

“It's not something you can help me with... er, actually, it'd be pretty counterproductive if you tried. Anyways, it's something I gotta do on my own!” she exclaims, and her eyes light up with determination.

Her face is still visibly flushed, but I think now it's because of her excitement rather than embarrassment. She's exuding such a powerful aura right now, that I find myself unconsciously taking a step back.

“I... I see. Well, in any case, it'll be nice if you can win against him this time.”

“Yeah!”

Given how upset and frustrated she seemed yesterday, the fact that she's up and ready to face Ike again today is really admirable. She should be very proud of herself.

“Oh, right—can you do me a big favor?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Well...”

She takes a deep breath and looks right at me.

“Could you please keep pretending to be my boyfriend? Until you're fed up with it, that is.”

And here I was expecting something big. I feel kind of deflated after hearing her say that.

“Do you even need to ask? I already told you—it's fun for me, so don't worry about it. I'm totally up for it.”

She puffs her cheeks in annoyance with my answer

“Oh, right... Sorry, my bad. You don't really like going along with it yourself, do you?”

I should've expected that she wouldn't like it. Not that I can blame her.

We don't have any feelings for each other right now, but who knows about the future? A month from now, a year from now, maybe things might start to change. But I'm guessing Touka only wants to keep this up until she's ready for a real relationship. It makes me kinda sad, actually... I wouldn't mind staying as her real boyfriend, but I'm sure she'll eventually leave me for someone she likes. But that's okay.

“Yep! I've always hated that fake relationship crap!” she exclaims as she flashes me a brilliant smile. It's one of the brightest smiles I've ever seen in my life.

Chapter 16: The Classmate

Touka flashes me the most endearing smile. Looking at her makes me a little sad—I never would've expected that she'd hate the idea of continuing this fake relationship so much.

"Oh, yeah! Senpai, have you had lunch yet?" Touka asks, interrupting my train of thought.

"Nope."

She asked me to come here as soon as I could, so I didn't have the chance to eat anything. I was actually just planning to grab something from the convenience store, to be honest.

Touka breathes a sigh of relief and places a hand over her chest.

"Nice. I didn't say anything about eating together when I texted you, so I wasn't sure if it was possible for us to do it today."

She retrieves some sort of wrapped package from her bag and hands it to me.

"What's this supposed to be?"

"A bento. I made it, by the way."

"...Wait, really? Why?"

Out of all the things she could've handed me, I definitely wasn't expecting a handmade lunch to be one of them.

"Yep, really. After all the trouble I got you into yesterday, I figured I should make this as an apology. Wouldn't I make the best wifey material? What d'you think, huh? I mean, a girl making you a bento and all. Happy, ain't ya?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't really get the whole 'wifey material' bit, but I'm definitely happy about it."

Touka is taken aback by my response.

“W-well good! You're super lucky, Senpai! You get such a cute girl to make you your very own bento! I betcha couldn't find anyone else on this whole planet who's luckier than you are!” she sputters out quickly, her cheeks flushed.

“Yep, I am. Thanks.”

She blushes even more, and her complexion rapidly changes from rose to crimson. She's probably not used to me being so upfront, so it's no wonder she's so surprised.

“Hmph! All right, I'm heading back to class! As much as I'd love to stay so we could feed each other the lunch I made, I can't really bring myself to do that just yet. Too bad, huh?!”

She picks her bag up and sprints toward the door.

“Sure, Touka. Good luck with your studies.”

She stops just before the door and turns around.

“And you do your best with organizing the rest of the event, Senpai!”

She waves her hand at me with a big grin, then leaves the rooftop.

Once she leaves, I look for a good spot to sit down and eat the bento. I settle down in a comfortable spot, open the lid, and inspect the contents. There's a variety of colorful foods packed inside that catch the eye. It's really pretty. Man, just look at all this... maybe Touka wasn't off the mark with her “wifey material” comment.

My first choice is the karaage—the fried chicken she made. I take my chopsticks and dive in for it.

“Hmm... delicious.”



I finish Touka's bento and loiter on the roof for a while. I just need to kill some time until 1:00 p.m.; that's when I can head to the gym and help with the event.

As soon as the time arrives, I head to the gym. There are people from

all sorts of sports clubs bustling around and helping tidy the place up. There's a guy in front of the stage who's giving out orders to everyone else. He's probably the head guy from the volleyball club that Ike told me to talk to.

I don't know why I need to be here, though—these people seem to be doing just fine without me already. Well, I'm here anyways, so I might as well help. I head over to the volleyball guy.

"Ike asked me to come help out, so here I am. If there's anything you need me to help with, just lemme know."

The guy's busy looking at some papers for the layout of the room, and so he answers without looking at me.

"Hm? Oh, cool, so you came to help out, too. Well, there're people getting the chairs and tables out of the basement, but it looks like they need another hand. How about you go help them out? There's another guy from the volleyball club over there who'll tell you what to do."

"Sure."

Once I answer, he finally raises his head and looks at me. He goes to reply, but the moment our eyes meet...

"Okay, thank-Agh! T-Tomoki... kun? Uh, err, well, the basement is, um..."

He starts stuttering like crazy, clearly nervous.

"What?"

"N-Nothing. Do your best, ahaha..."

"Oookay."

I head down to the basement. It's pretty obvious why he got so nervous after he saw me—remember how my face is scary as shit? Yeah, that's still a thing. Apologies in advance to the poor souls I'm going to be helping in the basement. Well, I guess it's better to work down there with only a few people than to have everyone in the gym freak out and suffer. It's a small sacrifice for the greater good.

So anyway, I get to the basement. Asakura Yoshito is there. He's another guy from the volleyball club, and I guess he's the one the captain was telling me about earlier. Looks like he's all alone... Are they acting like he can carry all the chairs and tables alone? No wonder the guy said he needed help.

“Your captain told me to come and help, so just lemme know what to do.”

He continues working and speaks without facing me.

“Oh really?! Nice, always good to have an extra set of hands! Could you help me get these pipe chairs to the gym, then?”

He finally turns around and looks at me.

“Whoa! T-Tomoki-kun?!”

“Oh, so these chairs, right? I got it.”

I feel pretty bad for Asakura right now—my face is already scary enough as is, but the poor lighting and dark basement atmosphere makes things even worse. I’m sorry, dude. I really am.

I'll just shut up now, since I don't want him to misunderstand me somehow and get even more freaked out. I'll just ignore him and get to work. I’m sure he’ll be scared at first, but hopefully, he understands that I’m just here to work, and nothing else. I don't have any bad intentions or anything like that.

He doesn’t say anything else, either; he also keeps working without saying a single word. I’m lucky, to be honest. I get to work down here without worrying about scaring anybody else, and this guy seems to be tolerating my presence okay.

Well done, volleyball captain—you did a good job choosing my task for me. Big thumbs up.

“Damn, Tomoki-kun, you sure are taking this seriously.”

A voice speaks up from behind me. I know for a fact that it isn’t Asakura’s voice, so I turn around to see whose it is. Lo and behold, it’s

Tanaka-senpai... and Suzuki's here, too.

“Oh, it's you two. What happened to those lectures you guys were supposed to give to the first years?”

“Well, Tanaka-senpai and I are just taking a break, y'know?” Suzuki replies.

Why the hell are they even here, then? Maybe they should actually be, you know, resting instead of coming all this way.

“Yup. That's why we decided to come down here on our break and say hi to you since you're helping around so much,” Tanaka says with a smile on his face.

“You wanted to come say hi to me?”

“Yeah. I think Ike-kun wanted to come, too, but he just didn't have the time. That's why Tanaka-senpai and I came here, since we've got some free time now and all.”

“Well, I don't exactly have free time, but yeah...” Tanaka-senpai interjects. He's still smiling, but he also looks a bit troubled. He continues, “Well, anyways, thanks to you and Asakura-kun, things are progressing pretty quickly at the gym, so thanks.”

Asakura flinches a bit at the mention of his name, and he gives a curt, “S-Sure.”

“I'm just helping around because I have the free time to. There's no need to thank me or anything like that.”

Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki answer with a smile.

“Actually, Ike said something similar—that we wouldn't need to thank you since you'd just brush it off.”

“Not gonna lie, it's pretty funny that you acted exactly the way he said you would.”

I'm trying to hide how embarrassed I am, so I keep working silently with my head down. I guess the reason for my silence is pretty obvious, though, because they start grinning after watching me for a bit.

“It’s not nice to interrupt others while they’re busy working, Tanaka-senpai,” Suzuki says jokingly.

“Right. We just came to check on things. Now that we know everything’s going according to plan, I guess we should head back.”

He heads toward the exit, and Suzuki promptly follows.

I look at them as they’re leaving. I’d like to say something to them before they’re gone, but I don’t know what I should say. But before they leave, Tanaka-senpai suddenly turns around.

“Oh, right,” he says, “If you have some time later, let’s talk, okay?”

“See you around, guys!” Suzuki says with a wave.

Later on, I have some “business” I need to take care of with Kai, so I don’t know if I’ll be available to chat with Tanaka-senpai, to be honest.

I’m happy that they care about me, though—I mean, they used the small break they had to come check up on me and see how I’ve been doing. Not counting Ike and Makiri-sensei, these two are the first people who’ve actually gone out of their way to do something like that for me. It makes me very happy, to be honest. Well, how else would I put it? I guess I’m just glad more people are starting to look past my scary appearance.

I nod to Suzuki, and they finally leave.

“...Hey, Tomoki-kun.”

Asakura breaks my train of thought.

“Hm? What?”

He thinks for a moment about how to choose his words before speaking.

“Um, Ike’s told me that you’re not being forced to help around here or anything like that, and that you’ve actually been helping the student council for a while now. He also said something about you helping out a lot for today’s event, I think?”

“Well, yeah, more or less.”

“So, uh, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but I wanna ask you something.”

“Depends on the question, but go ahead.”

He tenses up at my words, but continues after a short moment of hesitation.

“So, are you actually a criminal like everyone says, or...?”

“...Not really, no.”

He lets out a huge sigh of relief, probably because I didn't get angry like he was expecting.

“Okay, so that's how it is. I've always figured you were a criminal or something like that... But after hearing people from the student council talk about how you're always helping out and that stuff, and seeing you helping out here, well, it makes me think that we were just freaking out over nothing, I guess.”

“So you're not scared of me?”

“Very scared, actually. Dude, you could be the star of any horror movie.”

“Eh... can't say I'm surprised.”

“S-Sorry about that. Did I make you mad?”

“Not really.”

I'm not really surprised by his response, honestly.

“So, ummm... even with your creepy face and all that, at least now, I get that you're not a bad guy or anything like that... Well, um, what I'm trying to say is, I guess I don't really need to be so scared, you know?”

At least he's trying to soften the blow.

“You're a good guy, Asakura.”

“Nah. I'd never be able to help the student council, since I'm not part of

it. Wait, so... are you in the student council?"

He tilts his head in confusion. I'm about to tell him I'm not, but he cuts me off before I can answer.

"Hey, Tomoki-kun—I wanna ask you something."

I nod to let him know he can continue.

"Are you actually going out with Ike's sister?"

"...Yep."

He asks me so seriously that it leaves me in a bit of shock. It takes me a few seconds before I can collect myself enough to nod. Even though we're not a real couple, it's still pretty embarrassing to confirm it.

"Tsk. Aaaah, man! So it's actually true? Fuck, man! You know, I'd totally help the student council out if there was a super cute girl like her there! Duuude, I'm so fucking jealous of you! I wanna get me a super hot girlfriend, too! Like, imagine if she asked me to have lunch together! 'Asakura-senpai, let's have lunch♡!' Aaah, man!"

Damn, now he's all fired up.

"So I'm guessing you don't have a girlfriend?"

"Of course I fucking don't!"

He looks depressed now. Oh, man.

"Really? You look like the kind of guy who'd have girls all over him."

"Wait, for real?" he asks, hopeful yet confused.

"Yeah. I mean, you've got guts, and you seem pretty outgoing and cheerful. Plus, you do sports, so..."

I actually brought up that bit about him "having guts" because he's able to talk to me.

"Y-You're a nice guy, Tomoki-kun. This is the first time anyone's told me all that," he says, looking away and rubbing his nose in embarrassment.

“It's not exactly every day I get told I'm a nice guy, either. Call me Tomoki, by the way.”

He jerks his head back to me, clearly surprised. Oh... maybe I'm being overfamiliar with him here? He's still too scared to act all chummy with me, isn't he?

I definitely screwed up. Oh, man...

“Oh, right, Tomoki—I know it's kinda late now since we're already a month in, but since we're in the same class, I hope we can get along!” he exclaims with a cheerful smile and a hand outstretched toward me.

I suddenly remember what Makiri-sensei told me a while ago: that there are a lot of people who have their eye on me, even if I don't realize it. And before I know it, I'm smiling. I'm happy about this. I mean, how could I not be? I don't want him to see me like this, though. A creepy grin plastered on my face is the last thing I need right now—that'll just make him shit his pants and ruin the whole moment.

I try to suppress my happiness and the resulting smile as much as possible as I reach out for his hand. We shake hands, and I finally reply, “Sure, dude. Here's to hoping we get along.”



It takes us around three hours to set up. Everything's ready to go, more or less. Most of the people who were working in the gym are now heading to the other building to fetch the food made by the cooking club. The people from the music club, hidden away behind the curtains on stage, check over their instruments one last time. Once they're done, the first years start bustling noisily into the gym. I see Haruma follow behind them.

The party's finally started.

As for me, I'm on the second floor watching all the happenings from the balcony. This way, no one notices me. Asakura felt pretty bad about leaving me alone, but it'd be pretty rude of me to insist on sticking with him. He's probably hanging out with his volleyball pals right now and

enjoying the party he helped set up.

I see Ike get up on stage, and everyone immediately shuts up and turns to him. Man, Ike was born to grab people's attention—they're all focusing on him like someone's got a gun to their heads.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good work today! So, first years, how was the study meet? Your Senpais have been working hard to organize this event for you. If you guys think it's worth it, that's enough of a reward for us. Well, that's all I wanted to say. No more formalities—let's enjoy the music club's concert, the cooking club's food, and each other's company. Why stop at classmates? Feel free to talk to people from the other years, as well. As long as we don't get too crazy, we can basically do whatever we want, so break a leg!”

He didn't even have to use a mic to be heard across the whole room. He's got a great set of lungs. Everyone's paying attention to him, anyway—there's a gaggle of freshmen girls who're absolutely entranced by Ike, and a lot of guys are looking at him with respect.

“Well then, guys, let's have a blast!”

Right on cue, the curtains behind him open and reveal the music club; Ike leaves the stage. They start playing, and the entire gym's enveloped by lively music. Things start picking up quickly, and it soon feels like a proper party.

Now that everything's in place and going smoothly, I should probably head toward the roof. I don't know if Kai's already there waiting for me, but I don't want to stick around here too long; I'll only sour the mood. Suddenly, I hear someone calling my name.

“Good work today, Tomoki-kun.”

I turn around and see Makiri-sensei.

“Why are you even here?” I ask.

“Well, I'm still required to supervise the entire event and make sure everything goes fine. It's me and all the other young 'fresh meat'

teachers,” she answers with a shrug.

I knew that much. What I want to know is, why'd she approach me of all people? I mean, I'm all the way up here, as far away from the action as possible.

“Here, this is for you. Take it.”

She reveals a can of black coffee, meant for me.

“What's this for, again?”

“It's your reward for today. You like coffee, don't you? I remember Ike-san buying some for you the last time I was in the printing room.”

I really admire and appreciate her attention to detail. She really cares about the little things, like this, for example. It's something that I really appreciate about her. I take the coffee, and she bumps her plastic bottle of tea against my can in a mock cheer.

“Thanks for all the work you've done for this event. I'm really grateful, Tomoki-kun.”

“No need to thank me, really... and thanks for the coffee.”

Her smile gets me all embarrassed and forces me to look away from her. I'm the one who should be thanking her, right? I take a sip from my coffee before I say anything.

“It's just like you said, Sensei.”

“What do you mean?” she asks with a gulp of her tea.

“That there're people around who actually have an eye on me and what I do. I just realized it today, so thanks.”

She's surprised at first, but she quickly replaces that expression with a smile.

“There's no need to thank me for that. You should be proud of yourself.”

I am really happy that what Makiri-sensei said is coming true, that people are realizing I'm not actually a thug. But it wasn't just me—I wouldn't have been able to pull this off alone; not by a longshot. It was

thanks to those two that I was able to do anything. Ike's the one who gave me hope in others, to begin with, and Makiri-sensei always watched over me, making me feel secure enough to actually give it my all. That's why I'm having a hard time feeling proud of myself—like, what have I done to deserve it?

Anyway, that's why I feel obligated to thank her. Unfortunately, my awkwardness strikes again, and I can't manage to choke out what I really want to tell her.

“...’Kay,” I manage to mumble, “Well, I've got some stuff I gotta take care of, so please excuse me.”

Her smile, her gentle look... I want to run away from it all. I'm already embarrassed enough from her praises, and her kindness isn't helping. Plus, I feel terrible that I can't thank her properly, since she's so dead-set against it and all. All of it makes me feel restless.

“Okay, see you around then,” she says while I avert my gaze.

I bow my head a little bit to say goodbye and head straight out of the gym.



I head toward the main building, where the access to the rooftop is. It's almost our time to meet—I'm sure Kai's already there waiting for me, or close to getting there.

“Yuuji!” someone calls out behind me.

“Hm?”

I already have a good guess of who it is, judging by the voice, but I turn around to see who it is anyway.

“The party just started, man. Where're you even going?” Ike asks with his usual friendly smile.

“I gotta take care of something, so I'm going home early.”

“...You're holding back too much, man. You should try to ease up and have a little more fun, y'know?” he says with an exasperated sigh.

“Um, I’m not holding back. I actually need to take care of something.”

I’d totally kill the party's vibes if I went, so I wanna get out of there ASAP... even if that just means going to the rooftop to meet that guy. Obviously, I can't tell Ike about that, though.

“Oh, right—I was supposed to talk to Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki later, but it turns out I can't make it today. Could you tell them sorry for me?”

“Just do it yourself next time you see them,” he retorts. He's looking pretty tired... I guess he's getting pretty sick of me.

“Sure, will do. And, well... I couldn’t tell you this before, but thanks. I had fun doing this.”

“Huh? What're you thanking me for? I just asked for your help because we were short a few hands, and you were the first person I thought of. Since you're my friend and all, I knew you'd get the job done properly.” he says incredulously, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

I disagree, but I’m glad he worries and cares about me so much.

“Oh, yeah, you still owe me for helping you back then, right?” I ask.

Ike grins and answers, “Yep, right. I'd even go as far as saying your help with this event should be added to the tab. So the next time we hang out, I'll treat you big time. Though, to be totally honest, I can already picture Touka glaring daggers at me for daring to butt in between the two of you, so...”

“Would it be so bad if the three of us went together?”

He's a bit surprised by my suggestion, but he quickly laughs and returns to his usual grin.

“It's up to you to convince her, then,” he says.

“No promises, but I’ll try.”

“Sure thing, dude.”

I don't think that Touka would have any issues with having him around. I mean, she's back to normal now and looking for a way to “beat” him.

Hopefully, they can actually get along and have a good time—that's all it'd take to make me happy. And if I'm there with them, that'd be the cherry on top of the cake.

“Okay then, see you later man.”

I turn around and head toward the building.

“Sure, see ya,” he replies to my retreating figure.

As I walk toward the building, I recall meeting Tanaka-senpai and Suzuki in the student council room and meeting Asakura today. Maybe if I just act sincerely, like I did with the others, I can get through to Kai. Maybe if I'm genuine, and I just tell him the truth, he'll understand that I'm not a danger to Touka.

I'm still optimistic about this.



I arrive at the rooftop, where I'm greeted by Kai the moment I open the door.

“I've been waiting for you, Tomoki Yuuji!” he roars my name out and glares at me with bloodshot eyes.

Uh, on second thought, I'm not so optimistic about this anymore. It doesn't look like he'll even give me a chance to explain myself. Oh well.

Chapter 17: The fight

“Hey...” I begin. Kai doesn't so much as flinch, and he remains silent. Eventually, he speaks up.

“I don't plan on sitting here and talking to you. I just have one thing I need to make very clear,” he says.

I'm pretty sure I already know what he's going to say, but I'll just shut up and listen. He already looks angry enough.

“What is it?”

“Promise me you'll leave Touka alone.”

Bullseye.

“Why? Does it bother you that we're dating? Do you like her or something?”

I'm not budging an inch against this guy. If I do, it'll make the whole situation a lot worse.

He bites his lips and replies, “I already told you—I've seen what you're capable of. I saw what you did last year.”

“Oh, right. That.”

“Back then, all I could do was sit back and watch. My fear got the best of me, and I was totally frozen in place. I couldn't do anything. I could only watch you hurt them,” he says, his voice tinged with regret. “I couldn't help them, even though I wanted to. I didn't even know their names. Their faces, wracked with pain and suffering, still haunt my dreams. It reminds me of how powerless and cowardly I was on that day. It's the same, even now—I'm still afraid of you.”

He clenches his fist, but I realize that, if I look hard enough, I can see him trembling slightly. He's trying his best to hide it, though. So he is scared of me, after all.

“But still! Even if I’m scared, even if I’m totally powerless against you, I just can’t let you be any longer! I don’t want you to steal Touka’s innocent smile away! I don’t want to feel like a piece of shit anymore!”

Man, this guy is definitely hard-headed and quick to jump to conclusions. Looks like he totally blocks people out when he's convinced himself of something, and as a result, he ends up totally misunderstanding the situation, just like now.

But considering he saw what I did a year ago, I'm not surprised that he's so strongly against me. From his point of view, I was the “bad guy,” and the “good guys” had tried to stop me. In reality, the situation wasn’t anything close to that.

That’s probably his view of the situation. Well, I also remember that day. I remember being forced into that situation, and I remember telling myself I wouldn't give a crap about what others thought of me because of it.

...In the end, he just wants to stroke his own ego. He thinks he has the moral superiority here because he needs to right what was wronged.

“Just curious about one thing, actually,” I say as Kai takes a step forward, “Why'd you come here alone, again?”

I was expecting that he'd bring company. When I got to the rooftop, I tried to look for other people, but I didn’t really see anyone else. He’s alone. If I'm so dangerous, why wouldn't he bring other people to help him out? I don’t get it.

“I already know that it doesn't matter how many people I bring to help out—you'd wipe them flat anyway. I’d just be making others suffer for no reason. I’m alone because I don’t give a damn about myself. If you keep turning a deaf ear to my pleas to leave Touka alone, then I’ll risk everything—even my own life—to try and stop you.”

Wow, he seems pretty determined in his own convictions. Willing to risk his own life if this turns into a brawl, huh? Can’t he and his self-righteous ass follow the path of justice somewhere else and leave me alone? I wish I could tell him that, but it'd just add fuel to the fire.

“I get you.”

“So you get it, huh? In that case, promise me that you’ll leave her alone!”

I can tell he’s under a lot of stress right now, judging from the way he’s shouting.

“I’ll pass. I’m her boyfriend, so, yeah, no.”

His emotions vanish the instant I say that.

“I could tell from the very beginning that she doesn’t like you, you know.”

He’s sharp to have been able to pick up on the insincerity of our relationship.

“You’re just taking advantage of her. I bet you just coerced her to say what you wanted to hear and forced her to date you. She’s suffering, and she can’t escape.”

I wish I could tell him just how wrong he is on that front, but it’s not like he’s going to listen to me or believe anything I’m going to say at this point... so whatever.

He’s seething right now. I hear someone else coming up the stairs toward the rooftop. Kai hears them too, and he’s facing the door, so he can see the person coming up. He gets flustered and angrily cries out, “No way... How dare you!”

He looks pretty desperate now that someone else is coming. Tough luck, dude.

The footsteps stop in front of the door, and the door slowly opens with a creaking sound...

“Ahhh, there you are, Senpai! I’ve been looking all over for you, and...! Wait, what?”

It’s Touka. She sees me, but instantly notices Kai as well. Understandably, she looks worried.

Time stops for the three of us, and no one utters a word for a moment. Kai's the first one to break the silence.

“...So, you got Touka involved in this too, huh? You COWAAARD!” He screams, pouring out all of the anger and resentment he had kept pent up inside him. It's like he unleashed hell itself.

Touka startles at his response.

So now he thinks that I brought her here as a hostage or something? Man, I knew this wasn't going to end peacefully.

Looks like there's no other choice now but to fight; I give up trying to reason with him.

I curl my fists, ready to fight.

“What the hell's going on?” Touka asks, frightened.

“Negotiations have failed.”

“Negotiations? This isn't the time for your jokes, Senpai. You couldn't negotiate to save your life, not with how hopelessly introverted you are.”

...That hurt. I don't really have the time to focus on her, though—Kai's my main concern here.

“So this is your answer, huh?! You're never going to let her go!”

Kai, the douchey wolf in sheep's clothing, has finally revealed his true colors.

“Huh? Seriously, dude; what's the hell's wrong with you?” Touka asks. Despite her response, she's still frightened, and she approaches me slowly while throwing disconcerted glances at Kai.

“I don't get it. What's up with this guy?” she whispers to me.

I don't think I have the time to explain the whole situation to her right now. Instead, I need to tell Kai something.

“Seeing that I'm ‘hopelessly introverted,’ I don't know how to deal with these kinds of situations. What I do know is explaining the situation to you would be like talking to a brick wall. It doesn't matter, since all you'll do is

twist my words like always. You'll never get that you're the one who's in the wrong.”

Kai looks at me suspiciously.

“That’s why I don’t really care about what you think about me. I’m sorry, but no matter what you say, I don’t plan on leaving Touka.”

I know my way of handling things isn't the best—I never really expected people to understand me, so I just gave up on trying and kept them at an arm's length... but I'm rambling, I guess. I won't worry about people who try to frame me a certain way, since now I know there are people who'll try to understand me. Ike, Makiri-sensei, Tanaka-sensei, Suzuki, Asakura, and Touka have shown me that.

They've shown me the truth—that there really are people out there who have their eye out for me, who care about me. Even if there are some people who're scared of me, who make me out to be the 'bad guy,' I know that there are others who support me, and I want to cherish them.

Kai's eyes pop open at my response.

“...Huh?” Touka says, confused at the situation. Well, that's obvious—she doesn't really know what's going on.

I can’t help but smile. I want to protect my relationship with Touka, who’s always watched out for me and cared about me. I face Kai once more.

“Touka is *my* girlfriend.”

Our relationship may be fake, but it’s still a relationship that I personally cherish. No matter what others tell me, I don’t really plan on letting go of it.

“You... you piece of shit!” Kai cries out in anger.

I thought Touka would get scared again from his intense screaming, but she looks embarrassed instead.

“Wh-What the hell are you even saying?!” she says. Her cheeks are bright pink, and she's averting her eyes. She's talking to me, not Kai... I

guess he's not really a concern right now.

...Please stop looking so flustered, Touka. You're going to make me blush, too.

"Get away from him, Touka. Don't worry, I'll come save you now."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, dude... but, like, I'm actually going out with him. Y'know, for real." she replies, her gaze as cold as ice.

He's looking way too confident now. I wonder if he has something up his sleeve?

"You're a nice person, Touka, but I've already made up my mind."

He whips out a pocket knife and cries, "Tomoki Yuuji, I'm for real here! Prepare yourself!"

His knife looks like it's about 10 centimetres long. It seems likely that it's the only weapon he has on hand.

"Hey! What the hell are you thinking?! That's dangerous!"

"I'll help you! I'll free you—right here, right now. I won't kill him, obviously, but no promises on not injuring him."

His intentions are clearly malicious now. He grabs his knife, ready to lunge at me. His hands are trembling... This is probably the first time he's ever held a knife against someone before. Still, he seems pretty damned determined to hurt me with it.

"Run away, Senpai. He's just crazy at this point!" Touka cries out, scared. She tries to grab my hand and pull me away from the roof.

"Take your hands off of heeer!" Kai roars.

Uh, Kai... I should note that she was the one who took my hand, not the other way around. Now's not the time for jokes, I guess.

He makes the first move and rushes at me. Looks like there's no going back now.

"This is going to be dangerous, so back off."

I remove Touka's hands and get her to back away from me so she

doesn't get hurt.

“Senpai?!” she shouts.

I'm glad that she's worried about me.

I face Kai now. He's steadily closing in on me. He quickly gets into melee range and starts swinging the knife at me. He's ready to hurt me—if I don't do anything to deflect the attacks, he's definitely going to end up stabbing me eventually. I want to spare Touka from that kind of scene, if possible.

So I figure the best defense is offense. I swing my hand at the one holding the knife. I manage to hit him, and he recoils, cries out, and drops the knife in pain.

In this opening, I try to give him another chance.

“I respect you, Kai.”

He looks at me, puzzled.

“Even though your anger's unjustified, and you tried to make a move on Touka, you still have guts. You still came here alone and managed to overcome your fear so you could fight me face-to-face. No one else has ever tried to do that before. I think it's quite amazing.”

“What the hell... are you on about?”

“Don't tell me you're already finished just because I made you drop your shitty knife.”

This isn't over. I don't know why he looks so surprised about this.

“Show me what you've got, Kai Rekka!”

“Ugh! AAAH!”

He cries out in anger and lunges his fist toward me. He's not holding anything back; if I take that punch, I'll be badly hurt. But he's taking his sweet time to attack, so it'll be easy for me to dodge.

However...

Thump!

I've decided to take his punch head-on, and my head is ringing thanks to it. It was a hard blow—his strongest hit, filled with his sense of morality and courage.

I try to withstand the pain, and, after a groan, I prepare my fists. It's my turn to attack.

My blood's boiling. It's been a while since I've been in a one-on-one fight. I'm pumped up and ready to go.

"Not bad, dude. That hurt. I won't hold back now."

I grab his arm and pull him toward me. He topples, losing his balance, and I take the opportunity to strike him.

"Use your fists from the very start! Don't rely on some wimpy weapons!" I scream as I hit him.

He looks confused, unable to react to so many things happening at once. I smash my fist into his face, and he flies back and hits the ground. He's not moving, and it doesn't look like he'll stand up anytime soon.

...There are bubbles frothing around his mouth. Looks like he's passed out.



I stare down at Kai, who's lying unconscious on the ground.

I don't think I've injured any vital parts... just his face. Still, it doesn't seem like he's going to be waking up anytime soon. I guess I'll leave him be for now.

I finally let my guard down. As I do, the pain from Kai's punch slams into me at full force like a truck.

"Ouch..."

That was some impressive handiwork. It freakin' hurts.

"A-Are you okay, Senpai?!" Touka shouts as she runs over to me.

"I'm fine. It's no biggie."

"It is a biggie, Senpai! Your nose is bleeding!"

She retrieves a handkerchief from her pocket and tries to wipe the blood off of my nose, but I don't let her. I take it and clean up my face instead, then I push it slightly into my nostril to stop fresh blood from flowing out.

"I'm fine. Thanks."

"Don't 'thanks' me! What the hell?" she exclaims while looking down. She seems genuinely worried about me. "There's nothing you'd like to tell me, Senpai?" she asks.

Should there be something? Nothing comes to mind right now... Oh right, that.

"You were right about being wifey material. I mean, you even have a handkerchief ready and everything."

She looks saddened by my response.

"Are you for real right now?" she asks.

"Nah, just kidding."

Was she expecting me to say something else, though? If that's the case, I have no clue what she's talking about.

"The reason he went totally batshit just now was because of me, wasn't it? If I hadn't agreed to do this whole fake relationship thing with you, this never would've happened."

"Nah, not really. He already thought I was some kinda threat and a dangerous person, so this would've happened sooner or later."

"You're just such a nice person, Senpai. You could've tried to talk some reason into him before it escalated to this, right? There must've been something you could have done."

I shake my head.

"Hell no. There wasn't any chance to talk it out. I have this bad habit where I give up on talking things out and let my fists do the talking instead. In the end, it just makes my situation worse—people have proof I'm the violent criminal they pegged me as. Weren't you also scared,

seeing me fight?"

"I was."

I can barely hear what she's saying. I wouldn't blame her if she called off our deal right now, considering what she just saw.

"Why didn't you just run away when you saw that knife? Why'd you decide to take his punch head-on instead of easily dodging it? I know you could've! I didn't want to see you get hurt, Senpai. What if he knocked you down, Senpai? There'd be no way to recover things if that happened. I was really, really scared!!" she cries out.

I thought it was only a small outburst, but she continues, "And what d'you mean, 'you let your fists do the talking'?! You only got this strong so you could defend yourself from people who found you scary and attacked you, didn't you, Senpai?! I know there's no way you caused those fights on your own! Why d'you even bother trying so hard to sympathize with these people in the first place?! You don't need to try so hard, okay?! These assholes are the ones to blame—if they actually had the decency to give you a chance, they wouldn't get themselves in these kinda messes! Why d'you blame yourself all the time? I hate it! It's seriously depressing!"

Tears begin to well up in the corners of her eyes.

"You stayed with me even after you found out the real reason behind our relationship! You encouraged me to try again, and I even decided to give it my all because of you! You're such a sweet, considerate guy, why would this...!"

Oh, so it's my fault after all. I finally realize what she means, and she's right. How could I not see that before?

"Enough, Touka."

I pat her head and ruffle her hair around.

"Thanks."

She goes silent, and, after a moment, she grabs my hand and removes

it from her head. I'm ready to withdraw my hand, but she doesn't let go.

"You always use your hands to protect yourself and others. Your hands are warm and tender. Remember—you're the good guy, not them," she says, her cheeks flushed red. She's clearly embarrassed about the sappy bit she just gave me, but she's trying her hardest to encourage me.

"Okay."

Once she hears my answer, she smiles... but it lasts only for a second. She glares down disdainfully at Kai.

"This goddamn idiot's just going to go postal again eventually. You realize that, right? We should just strip him and take some nudes to use for blackmail material. Y'know, just in case he wants to do something nasty to you again."

Damn, Touka, that's pretty scary coming from you.

"No need. Next time, I'll try to be more patient and talk it out."

"Talk it out? Okay, but I call dibs."

"Huh?"

She walks over to Kai. What's she planning? He can't be very interesting to look at, being out cold and all.

"Augh!"

She kicks him in the stomach. Damn, what's up with her? I never thought she'd go that far.

"Wh-What...? Ugh... my face hurts..."

Kai wakes up covering his face with his hands, but Touka quickly manages to grab him and hoist him up by his collar.

"You never bothered to listen to me! You went ahead and decided on your own that Senpai was some kinda criminal, and it was all up to you to play the hero and fight him. How'd that turn out, by the way? You were no match for him, even with a knife! He took your punch 'cause he felt bad for you, and you got your ass wiped flat with a single punch. Damn, dude,

some hero you were! You're just the freakin' coolest, huh?" she says, her voice absolutely dripping with venom.

Kai seems genuinely scared of her now, but she continues, "You just judge people by their looks. That's why you ended up creating this situation. Yeah, *YOU*. You're the one who made this mess, by the way, not Senpai. Yuuji-senpai is a nice guy, so he might forgive you and all. But me... I will *never* forgive you for this."

She takes a deep breath and shouts, "Don't you ever... *EVER* lay your hands on my boyfriend again!"

Kai nods wordlessly, and she lets go of his collar and tosses him to the ground. She runs up to me and whispers, "That was for real, Senpai."

She's not even looking at me as she speaks. Damn, she must be embarrassed about what she just said.

"Okay, got it."

She throws a couple of playful punches and exclaims, "What d'you mean, 'got it'? Huh? You dummy!" she's probably trying to hide her embarrassment, but her little punches are tickling me more than anything. C'mon, Touka.

I look at Kai, but he's staring blankly up at the sky. He looks pretty dumbfounded. Well, after what Touka just said, I should probably leave him alone. We should probably just go.

"Okay, let's go home."

"Yeah," Touka replies.

We leave the rooftop, but as we go down the stairs, I remember something.

"Oh, right—there's something I wanted to tell you, Touka."

"Huh?!" Touka exclaims. She stops dead in her tracks and looks at me worriedly.

It's not really that big of a deal, but I'm still getting all nervous thinking about it. Oh well, whatever—I'll just blurt it out all at once.

“Thanks for making that bento. It was delicious.”

Her mouth gapes open in surprise, and her face quickly turns a bright red. She grabs the hem of my shirt and says, “N-Now you wanna thank me?!”

“Well, I just remembered that I never told you how good it was. Better late than never, right?”

“Hmph! You idiot! Idiiiiioot!” she answers, puffing her cheeks. She quickly changes her tune, though—she soon smiles, looking up at me with puppy dog eyes, and says, “You’re just so funny, Senpai.”

We look into each other's eyes, and her cheeks turn even redder. Man, she looks just like a tomato.

“I’ll make you another one one day,” she says.

“Sure. I'm looking forward to it.”

“Let’s eat together next time, though.”

“Sounds good.”

She smiles at me, and my spirit's lifted just like that.

Chapter 18: An Amicable Settlement

Golden Week's over, and it's back to the usual grind. On my way to school, I remember the good ol' days when I did absolutely nothing. Man, school blows. Students around me seem to echo my sentiments—we look like a hoard of depressed zombies.

One quick glance at me is all it takes to change their attitudes, though.

“Hey, isn’t that Tomoki?”

“Don’t make direct eye contact—not if you value your life, anyway.”

“What a crappy way to start the first day back to school.”

I sigh as they scamper to get away from me. Looks like nothing’s changed around here. Of course, the people who didn't help out or participate in the study meet would still view me the same way.

“Hey there!”

Touka emerges from the dispersing crowd, looking cheerful as always.

“Hey.”

“Going to school's a freakin' drag, as usual. But at least with you, I don’t have to commute with everyone else... Y'know, 'cause they’re too busy avoiding you,” she says with a smile on her face.

The main reason she wanted to be with me was because she wanted people to leave her alone, especially the hordes of guys who were constantly pestering her.

“Oh really?”

“Yup!”

I force a smile while Touka grins at me.

Soon enough, we reach the school gate. There’s a crowd around it, but there's one guy in particular who stands out. Everyone's giving him a wide berth as they make their way through the gates to the school. He's

bald, and he's got a gauze pressed up against one of his eyes. Weird... Did he get into a fight or something? He looks like the poster boy for an old-school criminal.

“Damn, and here I thought you were the only criminal in town, Senpai. Looks like you’ve got competition now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—I’m an upstanding, law-abiding citizen, after all.”

“I know; I was just kidding.”

She sticks out her tongue playfully, and I sigh in response. I figure I should just avoid that bald guy like everyone else on my way to the school building.

“...Good day to you, Tomoki-senpai. May I have some of your time, please?”

For some reason, he talks to me.

“Oh god...” Touka groans.

“Sorry, but classes are about to start. Can we talk during lunch break or something?”

“Right, how careless of me. I wasn’t thinking about your situation, as I tend to do. Let’s meet at lunch break, then. I’ll be waiting on the rooftop.”

The guy leaves to enter the main building. Who is he again? I don't think I've seen him around here before.

Maybe he’s a freshman looking for a fight? I mean, that’s the only thing I can really think of off the top of my head. He did just brazenly tell me to meet him at the rooftop and all.

Touka looks at me with a concerned expression as I ponder the situation.

“It’s fine—I'm not planning on fighting him. I’ll try to talk it out. If he still wants to go, I’ll just avoid fighting back.”

“I’m going to the rooftop too, okay?” she says while looking away.

I'm grateful that she's worried about me. I gotta be careful, though: I don't want this guy to go crazy on me and hurt Touka in the process.

"Sounds good."

"See you during lunch break, then!" Touka says as she heads for her classroom.

I enter my own and take my seat.

"Hey, Tomoki."

Asakura comes over and greets me as soon as I sit down in my chair.

"You sure disappeared quickly once the party started. I was looking for you all over the place, man. I was hoping we could hang out some more."

"Sorry. I had something else I needed to take care of."

"So you helped out, even though you knew you wouldn't be able to participate in the party later? Damn, dude. You're a nice guy, all right."

He looks at me with respect. It's pretty embarrassing, to be honest. Like, how am I supposed to look at him with a straight face when he keeps fawning over me like that? I'll just leave out the part where the thing I needed to take care of was kicking a freshman's ass. That probably wouldn't go over so well.

"I'm sure we'll have more chances to talk. See ya later, man."

He returns to his seat. It makes me happy that there are more people approaching me to talk. It makes me feel like I'm a normal student. Today, I've managed to talk to not only Asakura, but even that bald dude. Hopefully, I can convince him that I don't want to fight, and he'll leave me be.

Now Ike's approaching me.

"Hey, Yuuji. You okay, dude?"

He smiles at me. Doesn't seem like he's depressed at all about the holidays ending, unlike the others. Anyway, is he asking me because I look worried or something?

“Nah, just the usual stuff.”

“Which means... you’re in trouble, huh? Want me to give you a hand?”

Looks like he read my mind. He sounds pretty worn out, though, so I force a smile to try to reassure him.

“It’s fine. Thanks anyways.”

“Oh, okay. If something happens, and you need my help, just gimme a call.”

“Sure, will do.”

The bell rings, and classes start. Ike quickly returns to his seat.

I begin to zone out as our teacher begins to ramble about something. Probably about returning classes or something like that. I try to reassure myself that everything will be fine during lunch. I’m sure I’ll have no issues... At least, I hope not.



“My sincerest apologieees!”

It’s lunch break, and I’ve headed to the rooftop with Touka to meet up with the bald guy. The moment we get there, though, he kneels down on the ground and starts apologizing.

“...Wait, what?”

“Wait a sec... uh, Senpai? When’d you get the chance to beat up another poor, innocent soul? I swear, you wipe ‘em out quicker than I can keep up.”

“This isn’t really the time to joke about that. I haven’t beaten anyone up, by the way.”

Touka and I start whispering to each other as we glance over at the bald guy. Damn, what did I do to this guy to get him to grovel like this?



Dude...



“Wait a second, dude—I don’t even know why you’re apologizing to me. Please, at least raise your head.”

“I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t accept my apology.”

His face droops, and he gives us just about the most depressed and dejected look ever.

...Actually, the more I look at it, the more familiar it seems.

“Wait a second, Touka. Have you seen this guy before? Doesn’t he look like someone else?”

“Uh, not that I remember, no. Can’t say I know any baldies, to be honest.”

“...Huh? Oh, I get it. You guys don’t recognize me. It’s me, Kai Rekka,” he says while pointing at himself.

“Oh, right. Kai...”

Oh, yeah, I thought he was familiar. So it's Kai, huh... Wait, *he’s* freakin' Kai?!

“WHAAAT?!” Touka and I shout.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised, Touka. I mean, we’re in the same class, after all. You definitely must’ve noticed me at some point.”

“I... I, uh, was too busy daydreaming about Senpai, so I didn’t really pay attention to anyone in class today, and...!” She flinches almost immediately after she realizes what she’s just said, and she covers her mouth with both her hands. Her face turns beet red as she awkwardly looks at me.

Wow, she was really that worried about what would happen to me today? Damn, that’s nice.

“Thanks, Touka.”

“Huh?”

Her expression turns to anger. She’s just trying to hide the fact that

she's embarrassed, so I smile in return.

"Nevermind," I say, and she just sighs in return.

"I've been wrong this whole time, Tomoki-senpai—you're not the bad guy I thought you were, and I can see that Touka really loves you."

It actually *is* him. I still can barely believe it, but, sure enough, that's his voice, and that's his face. Plus, his face is all bandaged up where I hit him the other day.

What's up with him, though? Why would he do this? And what's up with him saying that Touka really loves me? I look at her for a response, only to be met by the side of her head—she's blushing and looking away. Maybe she's pissed by what he said, but can't bring herself to counter to keep up appearances? She remains silent.

"Sorry, Kai... Did your head hit the ground too hard when I hit you? If that's the case, I'm sorry for not helping you out."

I'm just worried about him; he's not being himself at all. I mean, he just owned up to his mistakes and accepted that he was wrong. Clearly, either that fall did a number on his head, or something else happened.

"No, my head wasn't damaged by the fall. When you took my punch head-on, I realized how great you really are. Then you knocked me down... That gave me time to really think about the whole thing. I thought to myself that maybe, just maybe, I was the one who'd been wrong this whole time; that maybe everything Touka had said was the absolute truth."

"Took you long enough!" Touka exclaims, looking down at him.

"Please go on," I urge him.

Kai looks like he's on the brink of tears, but he continues his explanation.

"I realized how wrong I was about everything. I even attacked you with a knife. I'm a coward, just a pathetic coward. I know it's too late to make things right. Once I'm done here, I'm leaving the school. That way, you

guys will never have to see me again.”

Man, I actually feel bad for him. It looks like Touka doesn't feel the same way, though.

“Yeah, dude, you're seriously too late. You wanted to hurt Senpai so badly, you just pulled any excuse you could out of your ass to misunderstand the situation. You're a hypocrite. You think 'sorry' is gonna cut it? You think that's gonna make you feel better?”

“...It's just as you said—I'm just a hypocrite who wants to make myself feel better by doing this,” he says, hanging his head in shame.

His reply only makes Touka angrier. She's about to roast him again, but I step in.

“Enough, Touka. Thanks.”

“You don't really need to thank me for that...”

“It's fine. Just leave it to me now.”

She nods silently. I'm sure there are lots of things that she wants to tell him, but she's holding her tongue for me.

“There's something I wanna tell you, Kai,” I say.

“...Yes,” he replies and braces himself for the worst.

“Don't judge a book by its cover. Instead of deciding what's right and wrong by yourself and making up all that self-righteous crap, just listen to what other people tell you.”

“...Yes.”

“And that was a good punch you threw at me.”

“...Yes. Wait, what?”

“Now we're even. We've fought, we've cleared everything up, and I've said my piece. Now let's just go back to being normal students. There's no need for you to leave—I mean, all the teachers would just get the wrong idea and come after me for bullying you, anyway. That'd be a huge pain to deal with. I'll help you if you need anything, so just give me a call.”

He raises his head at my words, surprised.

“Wh-What are you saying, Senpai? Are you an idiot, or have you just conveniently forgotten what he did to you?! Is *your* head all right, Senpai?!” Touka shouts at me.

I get why she can't understand why I forgave him. She got dragged into this, too. She warned him over and over again about what would happen, and she worried like crazy about me, as well. The fight really scared her. I get it, but...

“Even if he was completely off the mark, he still faced his fears and risked his own life to try to help someone else out. He tried his hardest to leave you out of it. I wouldn't have been able to forgive him if he'd somehow hurt you, but he decided to face me alone. I don't even really care about the knife. Besides, Touka...”

I scratch my cheek bashfully and say, “I'm a fucking idiot.”

Touka and Kai react at the same time.

“Senpai!”

“Senpai!”

Touka glares over at a teary-eyed Kai, who, in contrast, is looking at me with admiration.

“Tomoki Yuuji-senpai! I admire your sense of honor! Your greatness! Please, become my Senpai! No, please become my boss! My don! I beg of you!”

He throws himself on the ground and grovels once more. I don't really know how to react... I'm glad he feels that way about me and all, but I'm also kinda at a loss here.

Chapter 19: Her Secret

“Even after I told that baldie to stay away from you, he has the guts to get all frickin’ buddy-buddy with you...”

“Uh, what? Are you sure you're not making some kinda mistake?”

It's after school, and Touka and I are walking to the train station together.

We're discussing what happened with Kai earlier today. Touka's been complaining about how he was getting a little "too close" to me during our conversation.

In the end, I accepted his apology. He was very adamant on me being his “boss,” but that wouldn't have really done any favors for my reputation at school—I'm trying to show people I'm not a criminal, remember? So instead, I just told him to act like a normal student at school around me. He accepted, but he didn't seem too happy about it.

Touka's all pissed about all this, too—she wants me to be harsher on Kai, but that'd be kind of like beating a dead horse.

“I’m not making a mistake! Did you see the way he was looking at you?! I'm telling you, the guy looks freakin' thirsty as hell! He's just waiting to snatch you up 'cause he's clearly head over heels for you. You better watch your back.”

“You’re just imagining things.”

She sighs.

“Man, looks like everyone's been ignoring me lately. Oh well, I guess it's up to me to protect you from lover boy,” she says with a serious expression.

She's definitely making a mountain out of a molehill. 'Watch my back'? Yeah, I can see that he's interested in me and admires me and all, but I think it's more like someone he respects rather than prospective

boyfriend material.

I figure I should just change the topic.

“Anyways, midterms are coming up. You think that study meet was helpful?”

“Hm... I don't really think it mattered. Even if I hadn't gone, I'd probably still end up getting the best scores in my year. But since I did so many of those mock exams, I'm pretty confident about taking that top spot.”

Damn, look at that confidence. She said that with a straight face, as if it were totally natural for her.

“That's some confidence you've got there. What if you don't take that first place, though? That'd be pretty embarrassing after bragging to me about it, huh?”

“Nah, I'm serious. I've always been a top student, so I'm pretty sure I'll get it. I'll even make a bet with you right now, no problem—I bet you I'll end up with the top marks.”

I smile. I'm really impressed with her. No one else is as self-assured and gutsy as she is. Sure, I'll “gamble” with her. Game on. But what should we bet on? I don't want to put any real money on the line, especially since she's younger than me. Oh wait... I have a good idea.

“Sure, let's do it. If you get the top spot, I'll treat you to whatever you want. But, if you don't... you'll have to make me a bento.”

Her cheeks redden.

“Oh my god, Senpai. I didn't know you liked my bentos that much! So that's your prize, huh? Wow, what's next? Asking for my hand in marriage? Like, should I be worried here?”

“Chill. I'm just asking for a bento, not your hand.”

“...J-Jeez! It was obviously a joke! And I'll make you a bento whenever you want. You don't need to bet over it!”

She puffs her cheeks.

“Oh, well, if that’s the case, how about we forget the results? You make me a bento, and I’ll treat you to something. How’s that?”

“Huh? Seriously?! Nice! I’ll feel way better about making you one now! Man, now I feel kinda bad. I wasn’t really planning on actually doing it, but if you’re going to treat me to whatever I want, then...”

“One question, though: I know the bento you gave me the other day was an apology and all, but wouldn’t it just be easier to buy me something from the cafeteria from now on? Why would you go out of your way to make lunch for me?”

She looks me in the eyes and gives me a mischievous, little smile.

“Well... it’s just 'cause my precious boyfriend asked me to do it!”

“...Uh, your fake boyfriend, you mean.”

I know she’s just joking, but it still embarrasses me when she says stuff like that. I can’t even look her straight in the eyes when she does.

She looks confused for a second. Right when I’m about to ask her what’s wrong, she sprints off, leaving me behind. She keeps going until she reaches a railway crossing gate. The gate’s arm is descending, and she quickly stops in her tracks and turns around to face me.

Right on cue, a train passes by us; it envelopes us in a loud, rhythmic thunking sound.

She smiles over at me and says, amid the din, “Althou—... fake... my... real... ago.”

The train travels further and further away, and the gates eventually rise again, but the only thing I’m really paying attention to is her smile.

“Uh, sorry. I didn’t really hear what you just said.”

The train kinda came at a bad time. It was making too much noise, so I couldn’t really make out what she said.

“Nuh-uh. It’s a secret!”

Uh... No, for real. What’d she say?

Oh well, whatever. At least she seems to be in a really good mood now, so I'll just forget about it.

Epilogue: My Feelings

The past 15 years of my life have been a living hell, to be totally honest.

I bet the people who think they know me would never believe what I just said—they'd just tell me to count my blessings. I mean, I was born in the Ike household, where I could unlock my full potential. You know what they say: success breeds success. Thanks to my upbringing, I've been able to excel at anything I wanted: studies, sports, anything, really. That's why anyone who knows me would call me a spoiled little brat for saying that.

They don't know what I've been through, however. I've always been compared to my brother, who's able to effortlessly reach the highest points I couldn't reach, who's able to do anything I struggle with with absolute ease. He's someone I haven't been able to defeat. Not even a single time, no matter how hard I've pushed myself.

At some point, I felt my will breaking, and all I could do was fall into a depressed slump. It was like no matter what I did, I just couldn't beat him. I just gave up and accepted defeat. I reluctantly accepted my role as "Ike Haruma's sister," as if there was no other choice for me at all.

That's why I decided that once I got to high school, I'd make one last attempt to get back at him for all those years of misery. I thought that by ruining his relationship with his best friend, I'd somehow feel better about myself.

Yeah, I know. I was nothing but an ungrateful bitch. A pitiful child who relished in the misery of others.

Haruma always spoke of this guy as being the most amazing and reliable person. I thought that since my brother approved of him, he must've been totally harmless. And then I got the greatest idea ever: I'd get close to his best friend and monopolize him by pretending to be his girlfriend. That way, Haruma wouldn't get to be around his friend, and I

could keep all those creepy guys away from me. Haruma did mention that everyone stayed away from him, for some reason. It was perfect—two birds with one stone, y'know?

So, yeah, I initially approached Tomoki Yuuji with the intention of getting back at my brother. I didn't really expect much from the relationship—I figured I'd set my expectations too high and would just end up disappointing myself when he didn't meet those lofty goals. I figured he wouldn't be able to understand me, and our relationship wouldn't last long.

But I know now that my plan is a total bust. After all, he told me what I'd been wanting to hear the most: that he had his eye on me from the start, that he acknowledged how hard I'd been working this whole time.

Of course his warmth and kindness would gradually warm my heart. How could they not? Ever since then, it seems like I've gotten “the wrong idea” about our relationship—I value it more than anything in the world.



It happened on our first day back at school after Golden Week. We were returning home and chatting.

“Sure, let's do it. If you get the top spot, I'll treat you to whatever you want. But, if you don't... you'll have to make me a bento.”

He just proposed a bet, totally out of the blue, with a slight smile on his face. He looked straight at me with his clear, beautiful eyes, and I couldn't help but blush.

Ahh, c'mon! Whenever I'm around him, my heart starts beating like crazy!

And what was up with him asking me to make him a bento again?! I swear, he was gonna make my heart explode!

I wouldn't have been surprised if he was able to hear how loudly my heart was thudding in my chest. I mean, it was going full throttle... Wait, what if he did hear it?! He was super close to me, so it's possible! Oh god, I really hope that wasn't the case!

“Oh my god, Senpai. I didn’t know you liked my bentos that much! So that's your prize, huh? Wow, what’s next? Asking for my hand in marriage? Like, should I be worried here?”

“Chill. I'm just asking for a bento, not your hand.”

“...J-Jeez! It was obviously a joke! And I'll make you a bento whenever you want. You don't need to bet over it!”

If he really wanted me to, I could make one for him every single morning. But since I couldn’t really tell him that, I just dropped it.

“Oh, well, if that’s the case... how about we forget the results? You make me a bento, and I'll treat you to something. How's that?”

“Huh? Seriously?! Nice! I’ll feel way better about making you one now! Man, now I feel kinda bad. I wasn’t really planning on actually doing it, but if you’re going to treat me to whatever I want, then...”

He’s amazing! Just the sweetest!

I looked at him, and he gently smiled in response. Then, he asked,

“One question, though: I know the bento you gave me the other day was an apology and all, but wouldn’t it just be easier to buy me something from the cafeteria from now on? Why would you go out of your way to make lunch for me?”

Wait, what? Seriously, dude? That’s your question? I take back what I said before. Isn't it totally obvious why I'd make them, you dumbass?!

“Well... it’s just 'cause my precious boyfriend asked me to do it!”

It took me a second, but then I realized I'd essentially just confessed, hadn't I? Had I come on too strong?

“...Uh, your fake boyfriend, you mean,” he replied calmly, looking over at the horizon. He was the total opposite to me—I was about to have a heart attack.

Okay, Senpai—I know it was kinda forced, but is that seriously how you reply to a maiden’s confession? That’s cold, dude.

I mean, I know it might've sounded like a joke, but still... That's when I realized I should think about it some more.

I do love Senpai. Actually, I really love him. Like, a lot. I know it sounds kinda fake, but I'm serious. I'm, like, head over heels for the guy. I know he just sees me as "his fake girlfriend" and "a freshman he cares about." And I was fine with that kind of relationship until just the other day. Yeah, I was fine with it...

Not anymore, though—I don't want us to just be a fake couple anymore. I want us to be real. I want him to like me as much as I like him.

He's a nice guy, and super reliable. I feel safe whenever he's around, and it's always fun being with him. He's also super dangerous when he lets loose. How should I put it? It's just, like, if I left him alone, he'd just revert back to his old ways.

More than anything, though...

He's the first one who saw me as who I was. He's the first one who called me by my name—Touka, not just "Ike Haruma's sister."

So ever since that day, I haven't been able to stop the aching in my chest.

I'd started running before I'd even noticed; I'd left Senpai behind. I found myself stopped in front of a railway crossing gate right as it was going down. The train was about to pass through... Perfect. It gave me a great idea.

I turned around to face Senpai.

As the train approached, it enveloped us in a loud, rhythmic thumping sound. I decided I'd tell him right when the noise was at its loudest, when the sound of the tracks dominated everything else. Would he hear me? I didn't know.

It'd be fine.

I wanted to express my feelings out loud, but I'd rather he didn't hear it.

He looked so confused. His expression was so cute that I couldn't help

but smile.

I faced him and prepared myself. I needed to unleash everything that I'd had bottled up inside of me.

And when the train passed by...

All sound vanished.

“Although our relationship may be fake, my feelings became real a long time ago.”



Just like Senpai sees me and accepts me for who I am, I do the same for him.

He's reckless. He always tries to shoulder his own burdens alone, bottling up all the pain he has deep inside. Before he realized it, he'd become used to the pain, and his insides were covered in scars. He thinks there's nothing he can do about his situation, so he's just given up. But I want to protect him from whoever tries to hurt him.

Hey, Senpai... You might not know it, but I have feelings for you. I love you. You might think that what we have is fake, but...

Yeah. My feelings are real.

"Uh, sorry. I didn't really hear what you just said," he said, looking at me perplexed.

Of course he hadn't—the train had drowned out everything I said. I was fine with that, though.

I hadn't seen him in over a week, and I had all of these feelings bottled up inside of me. So when I finally saw him, I just kinda lost control. I'd just been a bundle of nerves, and before I could stop myself, I ended up confessing! But I think that was the best way to do it... I wanted to let everything out without letting him know. I'm scared of our relationship changing, of destroying everything we've built up. I like what we have right now too much.

I wanted to tell him how I really feel, but it's fine if I have to wait a little while longer. I mean, in the end, it's just another one of my stupid whims. I'm the only one who has anything to gain from it.

I looked at him and sank into thought again.

What if I just repeated myself without having the train drowning me out? What would happen? Would he reciprocate? Would he be happy? Would he be weirded out?

I mean, there's a chance he might accept my feelings. Maybe. Then again, I'm nothing but a bitchy, cocky, crude girl. There's also a pretty

high chance he wouldn't share my feelings.

In the past, I asked him to continue being my fake boyfriend until he was tired of it. I did because I was hoping that, eventually, he'd get tired of this and want to move to the real thing.

I know it's nothing more than the small, silly dream of a naive girl who barely knows anything about love or the world in general.

I know I'm being unfair to him, that I'm just taking advantage of his kindness. That I'm just dragging this relationship on so I can pretend that we're real, even though that's nothing close to the truth.

Please forgive me. One day, for sure, I'll tell you about my feelings. Until then, let me just have a little bit more time. Let's just stay like this for a little longer, okay?

Well, that's how I feel. I'm not brave enough to say them out loud yet, but until the moment I can...

"Nuh-uh. It's a secret!"

I can keep them hidden inside for just a little longer, can't I?

Afterword

For those of you who've just read this story for the first time, it's nice to meet you! For those of you who've been following the story from the web novel and also got your hands on the book, hi there! Sekaiichi here.

Ever since May 2018, I've been writing, uploading, and updating this novel, chapter by chapter, on the site “Shousetsuka ni Narou.” It's thanks to the huge amount of support it gathered that it got a proper official release. I'm truly thankful to everyone for this.

Well, then—for those of you who've come from the web novel version, you might have noticed how I sound more relaxed and less hyped-up than usual. No need for alarm; I actually did it on purpose. I just figured that if I went with my usual over-the-top prose in the afterword and went by my full pen name, it'd just feel really out of place... especially after reading the novel. Thus, we have this more serious afterword as a result.

If you're interested in reading the unaltered version of my afterword, I invite you to give it a gander at my bulletin board in “Shousetsuka ni Narou.” I'll post an update June 25th, for those who are curious. (If you're only sorta serious about it, though, I don't really recommend it—it'll definitely leave a bad taste in your mouth.)

Just trust me on this one, guys. I don't really care about going all out on the internet, but, after reading that last scene with Touka confessing her feelings, I'd only be doing you guys a disservice by writing something less serious.

Anyways, let's skip ahead to thanking people now.

To my editor, the one who encouraged me and gave me lots of advice: thank you. I don't think that I would've been able to make something people would've liked reading without you. Here's hoping we can continue working together.

I want to thank Tomari-sensei for creating those amazing illustrations.

I'm madly in love with Kana-chan (gotta love her big boobs) and Harumakun, who looks exactly as I imagined. He's your stereotypical good-looking guy. That doesn't mean that I don't like the other characters, either—I think they're charming, as well! Here's hoping you can keep up the good work!

I also want to thank the sales staff, the bookshop retailers, the book designers, the QA team, and everyone else! Thanks to everyone, we've managed to make an amazing novel! Thank you!

Last, but not least... I want to thank YOU, the one who purchased this book. Thank you so much! I've given this volume my all, so I hope you like it! I intend to keep working on this, so here's hoping you like future volumes as well!

I hope we can meet again in the next volume! Nothing else would make me happier!

Sekaiichi.

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